Furious fire finds fuel in timber yard

Blaze causes extensive damage: Jobs losses in city after timber yard fire

Sharon Slater
Email: sharon.slater@limerickleader.ie

UNIL recently received in Limerick history the city centre was destroyed by a fire which gutted many well known businesses including O’Callaghan’s tannery in 1950, Todd’s in 1959 and Newsome’s in 1974.

Another of these fires struck on Thursday June 1, 1911 when a fire broke out at Messrs James McMahon and Sons, Timber and Saw Mills, Alphonsus Street, causing extensive damage and the loss of over a hundred jobs.

The fire, which originated in the machine room, was rapid in its ferocity and all devouring. Overnight, it reduced a large industry to a huge black smoking pile of debris.

McMahon’s timber merchants were founded in 1830. The fire did not put a damper on this local business. McMahon’s has grown to become one of the largest independent builders providers in Ireland, with a network of 12 stores nationwide.

In 1892, Slater’s Directory carried the following description of the business:

“Mr. McMahon’s large and finely equipped establishment forms one of the chief industrial centres of Limerick, affording employment to about one hundred and fifty workers. A variety of manufactures are carried on in the factory.”

Although the efforts by both the fire brigade and the army were heroic, they were hampered by an insufficient water supply and the fact that the yard unsurprisingly was littered with wood, which was quickly ignited. As the flames reached the opposite side of O’Connell Road, where tons of timber the situation was considered desperate.

“Once the flames reached the large piles of timber in the yard all hope was lost. These burned like tinder, and the flames reached to the opposite side of Alphonsus Street, where tons of timber were also deposited, the anxiety was considerably heightened.”

After an hour, all hope of saving the building was abandoned. There was extra panic as there were gas points and an electric power station near to McMahon’s yard.

The attention soon turned to the houses in Clare View Terrace, Frederick Street and the St. Vincent’s School on Henry Street, which were in imminent danger. The residents of these houses began to empty them and some the streets were strewn with furniture. Thankfully, through the efforts of all involved the houses were saved.

At 9 o’clock the fire was at its greatest fury. The streets converging on the burning building were thronged with people. There was no other option than to let the fire run its own course through the railway yards on both sides of the road.

The members of the Black Watch fought with such vigour that several of the non-commissioned officers and men were injured and one hundred and thirty pounds worth of their clothing was destroyed.

“The dashing fellows never relaxed their efforts for a single instant, and it must be said that were it not for their herculean labours the story of the damage done to property, serious as it was, would have been far blacker. They were the very saviours of the situation. In fact, in the face of the sea of flames that stretched over a considerable area, the soldiers carried on their work of saving the houses threatened in the configuration, and finally succeeded in their task.”

As morning broke the following day, the disastrous scene was revealed. Everything was burnt out, saws and boundary walls, which were blackened by the extreme heat. The houses on Clare View Terrace and Frederick Street were battered at the rear. There was a much damaged cause to the St. Vincent’s School, Henry Street, that they remained closed.

The Limerick Leader estimated the damage at fifty thousand pounds.

In the weeks following the fire many groups came to support of those who found themselves suddenly unemployed. The roller rink on the site of the Church of the Holy Cross where the concert was held, put on a special concert. This concert included Agnes Tracy from Dublin, Mrs. Whitehead, Kitty Ryan, Miss O’Grady Delmeege, John Cahill, Daniel Lyons, and Miss Griffith.

The Harbour Board met on June 13, 1911, to discuss the fire. The outcome of the meeting was published the following day in the Chronicle:

“At the Harbour Board meeting yesterday, arising out of the recent fire at Messrs. McMahon’s timber yard, Mr. McElroy made the important and eminently practical suggestion that a committee should be appointed with a view to the purchase of a fire manual for the protection of the dock premises.”

The fire showed the Board how unprepared they were for blaze in the area. It also showed how water pressure contributed to disastrous outcome and they quickly set to work to rectify this.

One of the former workers Michael O’Brien, St. Joseph Street would recall the fire in the 1996 bicentennial issue of the Chronicle:

“The flames were so high that they could be seen from Ennis. The fire brigade might as well be throwing lolly-pops on it so great was the heat.”

The aftermath of the 1911 fire

---

RINK CONCERT.

(In aid of the Sufferers of the Recent Fire).

Friday, June 9th.

At 8 p.m.

MISS AGNES TREACY (Dublin).
MRS. WHITEHEAD.
MISS KITTY RYAN (Castletownbere).
MISS O’GRADY DELMEGE.
MISS SENIOR.
MR. JOHN CAHILL.
MR. DANIEL J. LYONS.
MR. ROBT. EVANS, JR.
MR. E. WICKHAM.
MR. ARCHIE GRAHAM, "THE SWELL."

MUSICAL CONDUCTOR:
MR. C. KENDAL IRWIN, I.S.M.

New Up-to-Date Pictures:

Tickets from—Biggot & Co., Guy & Co Ledger & Son, Miss Smiths, Rink Office, etc.

Reserved Seats.... 3s. and 2s.
Admission Back Seats (Limited) 1s. and 6d.

The Rink was among those that assisted the employees of McMahon’s timber yard who lost their jobs following the fire, hosting a sold out concert on June 9, 1911.