

**The Marshfield (Wisconsin) Fire**  
**As Recollected by**  
**William Douglas Wheeler**

I was born at No. 206 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, within the present City Limits of Marshfield, on March 17, 1880. By the time of the fire, June 27, 1887, I was able to sense and retain a vivid recollection of the Marshfield Fire.

On June 27, 1887, shortly before noon, I was playing ball with a school mate on the vacant lot across the street, which is just east of the present Shoe Factory site. Shortly before noon the whistle from the Upham Power Plant sounded the fire alarm, enhanced almost immediately by the Saw Mill Whistle which meant that the fire was in their plant. I saw clouds of black smoke billowing and then flames showing higher than the Grist Mill (on the present site), between it and the Wisconsin Central Railway. Two small boys beat it for home, ordered out of the way as the first fire fighting was done on Second Street in the second block west of Central Avenue. Every available man was a fireman that day. The fire drove them back continually, and increased in speed.

Lumber had to be dry when shipped, and the permanent lumber yard, southwest, was congested; the lumber had been piled along the switch track back of the Grist Mill and the fire started there. It spread quickly to the Grist Mill and ran west destroying the Power Plant, Saw Mill and Lumber Yard. There was a water system for summer protection with a few hydrants around the plant and perhaps a small part of Central Avenue. Both the Power Plant and the Saw Mill could pump into it for pressure. But both were afire so soon and the heat was so terrific that some of the hose on Second Street was destroyed before it could be moved. It was small loss as no pressure or water in any quantity was available.

I had a clear view from our house and Aunt Mary Upham's next door. It was hot and tinder dry, and there was some wind in addition to that developed by the fire. Soon there was a fire along what is now West Second Street almost to Oak Street, running south gradually increasing in width almost to 4<sup>th</sup> Street, and to the Wisconsin Central Railway on the north. Millions of feet of white pine lumber and buildings went up in smoke. It made the hottest, quickest fire imaginable.

Dinners were ready in most homes, it being noontime. Anybody who could get to one ate it. People carried staple supplies home, and in our neighborhood everybody started to prepare food to help feed the community. Although the fire swept within 200 feet of us we did not burn out. (The house, and the house next door of Governor Upham, are still there) Some of the older children were manning baby buggies ready to retreat hurriedly, but I was not in that class so I helped to pack up and carry out household goods into a small patch of green standing oats covering the south half of our lot, running from 3<sup>rd</sup> Street south to 4<sup>th</sup> Street. People who had, or could get horses and wagons loaded up ready to move out of the path of the fire. I heard of a case where a wagon load was removed from an unattended house and the owner never did see it again. At this point the north panes in the Upham house were too hot to touch.

I could see boards aflame, blowing high ahead of the fire. It soon jumped north on a change of wind across the Wisconsin Central Railway, running along West Depot Street to Central Avenue and then south along Central Avenue almost to 5<sup>th</sup> Street, and to the width of the alleys on either side. This threatened the entire town again and we moved east across Central Avenue to the home of friends on 3<sup>rd</sup> and Cherry Streets. Nobody was much excited by that time because there was nothing to interfere with a retreat to Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

I did not see much fire from this location, but buildings were low and we could see smoke and hear the dynamiting on Central Avenue. This was an attempt to keep the fire low. It was stopped at about 5<sup>th</sup> Street. In the afternoon help arrived from Stevens Point and Chippewa Falls. They sent small fire engines, but with no chance for water they were of little use. The fire couldn't be stopped until it had nearly burned out. I have seen many fires since, but nothing to compare with the Marshfield Fire.

The night of the 27<sup>th</sup> some people stayed in the two-storied school building on the site of the present Washington School. It was a horrible firetrap. It did not burn and was later moved into the vicinity of the permanent City Hall on South Maple Street, and used for that purpose. It is too bad that the present school building can't be moved somewhere too (Washington School).

I doubt that anyone went hungry that day, and on the following morning there were a few carloads of provisions on the track from Stevens Point and elsewhere. I had driven Aunt Mary's quiet old nag around town before on a few commissions, and the next day I surely was proud to drive Aunt Mary in a light wagon with two men for unloading to various designated distribution centers. We had barrels of crackers, barrels of corned beef and barrels of pork. There were also smoked meats and ordinary staples. I could drive but was not big enough to unload. Aunt Mary and the local Catholic priest seemed to be in charge of seeing that an assortment was left at each place. There was little food in town aside from this as there was almost nothing saved from the stores.

We went home about dusk across Central Avenue and then down Third Street, between the rows of red hot ashes. Our yard was a mess with stuff that had been carried out of the house, some damaged or broken. Back of the Upham house we saw a large dump cart containing the books, records and the safe of the Upham Manufacturing Company. This was all that was saved from the office. On top of this cart there were two young men fixing up to sleep on top of the load having just salvaged a dummy wooden safe the contents of which were about a thousand of Uncle Will Upham's favorite cigars. (W.H. Upham later became Governor of Wisconsin).

The next day white ashes with scrap protruding marked the outlines of each building destroyed, until disturbed. Close to the alleys, next to Central Avenue, were one and sometimes two little square piles of ashes. One or two people that morning short cut across them to their sorrow, in ignorance as to what was under the ashes.(Former Chic Sales?)

My Father was manager of the Upham Store and Secretary of the Company. At that time we had a little black and tan terrier, Jeff, who followed him to the store every day. When Father left to

fight fire, he left his coat on his office chair and never got back there. The little dog must have burned or have been dynamited guarding the coat. The fire traveled so rapidly that people had to move quickly to get out of the path. After the fire, large piles of smoked grain were left on the site of the elevator. It was free for the taking. My older brother, Herbert, fed it to some fine chickens he owned. They died.

There were no signs of panic, and the people treated the fire as a community catastrophe. I saw the flag flying the next morning which signified that the Upham Plant, upon which the town depended, would be rebuilt.

— End —

Will Upham: Wounded first battle Bull Run; prisoner; exchanged; met President Lincoln who granted his request to attend West Point; graduated just in time to be assigned to guard Jefferson Davis at Fortress Monroe; thence in Indian Wars and came out a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. Returned to family home and business in Racine. Married Mary Kelley, sister of Cora Adelaide Kelley Wheeler - moved to Marshfield. First High School graduating class in 1892 numbered three persons, one married girl and two boys, including Herbert Merrill Wheeler.

