

FIRE DESTROYS SHERFICK MFG. CO. HERE THURSDAY MORNING

The large brick and concrete block building, housing the Sherfick Manufacturing Company, was completely destroyed by a fast moving fire early Thursday morning. The flames, fed by lacquer, varnish and other finishing liquids spread so rapidly that the entire plant was in shambles within forty minutes after the fire started.

The fire was discovered about 9:20 a.m. Thursday. In less than two minutes it was out of control. Garnett Prior, plant manager, said that the blaze started in the spray booth on the second floor. Jack Boyd was at work in the booth but escaped uninjured. When first seen, the entire top of the booth was aflame. A fire extinguisher had no effect on the flames. The employees on the second floor fled down the stairs to safety, only seconds ahead of a number of explosions.

Mr. Prior stated that a short in the wiring of the booth was the probable cause of the fire. The townspeople were first aware of the fire when repeated short blasts of the factory whistle sent everyone burying into the streets. By that time huge clouds of black smoke and roaring flames covered the entire roof of the plant. Almost at once there occurred numerous explosions of the paint and lacquer, which sent debris and balls of fire high into the air. The explosions were almost continuous, shooting burning fragments over a wide area.

A storage building, one hundred yards away, caught fire and burned. The home of Ott Turner, about three blocks away, caught on fire from the flying embers. The French Lick Fire Department, arriving at that time, stopped and put out the fire. The damage to the roof was estimated about \$75.00.

Fire departments from Loogootee, French Lick, Bedford, Mitchell, and Crane came to the aid of the Shoals Fire Department, but the water mains permitted only two pumpers to pour water on the fire. Trucks from French Lick, Bedford, and Crane used booster tanks to fight the flames. At no time did it seem possible to save the plant. The firemen devoted all energy towards saving surrounding buildings, but still poured enough water into the burning building to keep a 1,000-gallon tank of naphtha in the basement from exploding. This was an uneasy job for all concerned.

Fire Chief, John Norris, of the Loogootee Fire Department, received the alarm at 9:30 a.m. The Loogootee department was the first to arrive and Mr. Norris said: "the entire plant was a-fire from one end to the other."

The plant was owned by Thomas D. Sherfick, who purchased it about six years ago from the Hincer Manufacturing Company. The brick building was built by the Hincer Company about forty years ago. Two wings had been added by Mr. Sherfick and two large drying kilns.

The plant manufactured radio and television cabinets and dining room furniture. At peak production two hundred people were employed at the plant. At the time of the fire sixty-nine people were employed and all escaped safely.

The main part of the plant was a 150 x 80 foot, two story, brick building with two large wings of concrete blocks. One wing was 80 feet square and three stories high. The other was 120 x 60 feet and was two stories high. All of this part of the plant is now a tangled mass of smoldering ruins. Two large drying kilns filled with lumber were saved by the firemen.

Smoke from the fire was visible for many miles. A salesman said he saw the smoke from a hotel in Louisville, Kentucky, before coming to Shoals Thursday morning. It was also visible in Bedford, Mitchell, Loogootee, and other cities over a wide area.

The destruction of the plant was a hard blow to Shoals and the surrounding community. It was the main industry in the town and its loss will be felt by all.

A strong wind from the southwest drove the flames away from the business section of Shoals, which was a lucky thing for everyone. The heat was intense and was felt for many blocks away.

Mr. Sherfick estimated the loss at well over \$300,000. It was only partially covered by insurance. Plans for re-building of the factory are very indefinite.

Nearly all the employees of the factory fled from the building without their coats or pocketbooks. All lost small sums of money which they had brought to buy lunches and the like.

Archie Tolbert, one of the employees, thought he heard screams coming from the rest room and turned back to investigate. There was no one in the rest room and Tolbert was forced to fight his way out through smoke and flames to safety.

Robert Ross was first to see the fire. He screamed "Fire! Fire!" and everyone reached for fire extinguishers, which were within twenty feet of each employee. However, the fire was spreading so rapidly that employees fled before the menace. The back stairs of the building was life saver, as only four employees used the front stairs to get to safety.

Manager Prior started blowing the small whistle and then John Emmons blew the steam whistle. Mr. Prior and Robert Ross were the last ones to leave the office. Prior was trying to save various papers. He and Ross were both yelling at each other to get outside. They had just rushed from the office when the back wall caved in.

Furniture stored in the plant, and destroyed, was estimated to be worth several thousands of dollars.

Harry Bowling, of the Public Service Company, estimated the loss to that company as between \$5,000 and \$6,000. Another lucky break for the Town of Shoals was the fact that Ernest Sargent and Louis Pennington, Public Service Company employees, were working just behind the B. & O. Station when the fire started. They immediately cut off the power bank and pulled all power from the factory. Had they not been on hand to cut off the power, the lines would have burned and short-circuited all the town, cutting off water power as well as all other electric power.

Another factor in favor of the Town was that the Sherfick Factory was on the end of the power line.

The residence of Lee Ervin is directly across the street from one wing of the factory. It was believed that the house would certainly go, as the heat was intense. All furniture was carried out of the house and a number of windows were broken in the excitement. Water from garden hose was poured onto the house and it did not catch a-fire.

Fred Sleight also used garden hose to keep his garage wet in order to lessen the danger of embers starting a fire there.

The Shoals fire truck was manned by Walstine Griffin and Garry Winkel. They were aided by Austin Hart, R. G. D. Gerkin, Cecil Bledsoe, Junior Ross, C. E. Homberger, Jack Tredway, and a number of others whose names were not learned.

It was feared, for a time, that two large gasoline storage tanks of the Phillips Petroleum Company, located across the railroad north of the factory, might be ignited by the heat or the sparks, but that danger did not materialize. Several electric light posts along the south side of the railroad caught fire, but were extinguished.

All the office furniture, files, desks, typewriter, etc. of the factory were saved by volunteers carrying out the equipment to a safe distance.

News of the fire spread to surrounding towns and hundreds of sight-seers, reporters, and photographers were soon on the scene. Stories and pictures of the fire appeared in both Indianapolis newspapers, the Louisville newspapers, and the Bedford and Washington papers. A number of State Police were on hand to direct traffic and aid in any way possible.

Walstine Griffin, Superintendent of the Shoals Water Plant, stated that the capacity of the reservoir was 140,000 gallons, and when the fire alarm was given, the reservoir was full. Jack Tredway immediately rushed over to the pumping station, and found the small pump was running. He turned on the big pump, and then rushed back to help fight the fire.

When the fire was over, they found that there was still 90,000 gallons of water in the reservoir. They estimated that between ten and eleven thousand gallons of water could be pumped per hour. At that rate the fire fighting could have continued for five to six hours longer than it did before running out of water.

The various fire departments from the surrounding towns were summoned by Roy Salmon, at the Sherfick Music Company.

Lowell Hendrix and H. P. Piatt proved themselves good fire fighters, and would make good prospects for a volunteer fire fighting brigade.

The fire occurred on Thursday, April 17, 1952. The plant was a total loss.
Sixty-nine employees escaped uninjured.
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Shoals, Indiana.