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THE 1910 BENTON FIRE

I. DESCRIPTION OF BENTON

- A. Daniel Hartman who started the first store in what is now Benton was appointed by the postal department the first postmaster for the community in 1852.
- B. Hiram Hess in 1872 built the Exchange Hotel which became a landmark in Benton.
- C. By 1886 there were sixty some dwellings in Benton and two churches in the community by this time.
- D. The completion of the Bloomsburg & Sullivan Railroad in 1887 would stimulate economic growth for Benton and the Fishing Creek Valley.
- E. Benton had its own newspaper, the *Argus*, founded by William H. Smith in 1889. It was staunch Democrat paper.
- F. By the end of the nineteenth century the Rohr McHenry Distilling Company was experiencing a great deal of success.
- G. Benton had its own bank, the Columbia County National Bank, established in 1902, and now known at Columbia County Farmers National Bank.
- H. From this small community in 1906, one of its sons, John G. McHenry, was elected to the United States House of Representatives
- I. In 1907, J. D. Sallade opened the Benton Shirt factory

- J. R. T. Smith ran a planing mill, which was one of the largest in the county.
- K. Benton's population in 1900 was 635 and ten years later it increased to 719 with 196 family dwellings. In these ten years the community experienced a 13% growth in population.
- L. At the time of the 1910 Benton fire, a Wilkes-Barre newspaper, *The Wilkes-Barre Record*, gave the following description of the borough:

“The town was nicely laid out and was a delight to the eye, for the large majority of residents owned their homes and the utmost pride was felt in keeping both buildings and lawns in good conditions.”

II. DISCOVERY OF THE FIRE

- A. The Fourth of July 1910 was a typical summer day to celebrate the nation's independence.
 - 1. However, this would be a much different July 4 – one that would be etched in the history of this peaceful community.
 - 2. It was as if a thunder bolt from a clear blue sky struck an unsuspecting, as well, as a defenseless community resulting in great misfortune. What happened was a terrible fire.
- B. A fire broke out mid-afternoon between George B. Crossley's blacksmith shop and his barn on Center Street, just east of the Borough Hall.

C. Clyde Hirleman, living near-by and a borough councilman, gave the following account of the fire starting:

1. "I was in my yard mowing the grass when I noticed the fire first start in the barn. It was only a small affair then and I quickly ran to the town hall to ring the alarm.
2. "In a few minutes I was back and had 100 feet of garden hose attached to the faucet and in those few minutes the three barns in the proximity of the fire's origin, the Crossley blacksmith shop and my home were ablaze.
3. "Nobody had time to act. The town was doomed from the first."

D. The fire alarm sounded at 3:20, and it suddenly disrupted and brought to a halt what people were doing. On hearing the alarm, they had no idea what was about to befall their town.

E. How did the fire start? Nearly all of the accounts of the fire refer to one or more young children setting off firecrackers. Apparently, the firecrackers went off and ignited some hay or straw in or near the barn.

F. In researching this topic by reading various sources, not one of these identified a person or persons responsible for causing the fire.

III. WHAT WERE THE DIFFICULTIES IN FIGHTING THE FIRE?

A. The fire spread very rapidly and was quickly out of control.

B. There was a wind from the north that fanned the flames, moving the fire toward the southern end of the town.

- C. Many the buildings had roofs of wooden shingles that were sucked into the air by the fire and blown onto other roofs. There created a situation of masses of embers blowing toward other buildings
- D. Benton did not have fire protection except for a chemical engine that was useless against a large and fast spreading fire.
- E. The only fire fighting apparatus in the town was an old-fashioned pump, which had so long been in disuse and could not even be primed
 - 1. The small about of hose available was useless, since it was basically rotten.
 - 2. Only buckets and a garden hose here and there were the only means of fighting the fire.” There was also a lack of organization in fighting the fire which hampered efforts to contain the fire.
- F. There were too few men to fight the fire. Benton and Bloomsburg were playing a double header baseball game on the Fourth.
 - 1. The first game was in the morning at Benton. After lunch, the teams and the fans boarded the Bloomsburg & Sullivan train to Bloomsburg for the second game. In addition, some of the Benton residents had gone to Grassmere Park for holiday picnics.
 - 2. When the fire broke out in the afternoon, at once it became serious, not just because of the entire absence of fire fighting apparatus and the lack of a town water system, but because of the few men who were in the town.

- G. There was criticism of the Bloomsburg & Sullivan railroad in being so slow in getting people to Benton to help with the fire.
1. Bentonians at Bloomsburg had to wait for the regular passenger train of the B & S that left Bloomsburg at 7:00 in the evening.
 2. Assistance from the timbermen from Jamison City was delayed in getting to Benton due to a log train.
- H. It was reported “the fire fighting agency that proved most effective was two large trees close to the dwelling occupied by Harry Long. The dense foliage of these trees stopped the cinders, which flew in showers from the burning buildings, and saved the remainder of that end of the town.”
- I. The lumber yards of Pennington & Seely on the east side of Main Street where 200,000 to 300,000 feet of lumber burned was where the fire spent its final fury.
- J. The scene in Benton encompassed faces of despair, men exhausted from fighting the fire, women weeping, and children screaming. These lamentations and cries of fight mingling with the roar and crackling of the flames producing clouds of choking smoke.
- K. In two and one-half hours the fire had destroyed four and half blocks containing homes and businesses.
1. Size of the fire, amount of property destroyed, and the number of people made homeless became the worst that occurred in Columbia County.

2. 200 people were made homeless, and 56% percent of Benton's businesses were left in ruins.
 3. There were about 60 buildings (including all types) destroyed by the fire. 36 of these were people's homes.
 - a. A majority of the homes destroyed were on Market and Two & Half Streets
 - b. Market Street suffered the most damage – there were 22 places either homes, business, or barns that were destroyed
 - c. The fire consumed 15 barns.
 - d. The monetary damage of the fire was put at \$300,000 which in today's dollars would be equivalent to \$5.2 million
 4. The boundaries of the "fire zone" were: Center Street to the North, east side of Third Street on the west down to Colley Street, Colley Street on the south, and the west side of Main Street down to Market, and the area from Main Street over the Presbyterian Church.
- L. Fortunately, there was not one death in the fire. Only two people had serious injuries.
1. Rosa Hess, an elderly woman, was injured while removing some of her household goods from her home on Two & Half Street. She was badly burned and was hospitalized in the Joseph Ratti

Hospital in Bloomsburg for over a month. The Benton Fire Relief Committee paid for the Rosa medical expenses, \$55.55.

2. Samuel Harvey was badly burned about the hands and neck.

IV. BLOOMSBURG FIRE COMPANY RESPONDED TO THE BENTON FIRE

- A. When Bloomsburg learned of the Benton fire and the need for assistance, officials decided to send its steam pumper from the Winona Fire Company to Benton.
- B. Paul Z. Harman, who was a member of the Winona Fire Company, recounted how Bloomsburg firemen came to Benton to help fight the fire.

“When word came of the fire the B & S furnished an engine and crew and a low side gondola, and we loaded the old steam pumper and a handcar of hose on. Then everyone who could get on the gondola did so and we sure made a fast trip to Benton.”

- C. Unfortunately, it took some time for the assistance from Bloomsburg to arrive in Benton. By the time the Bloomsburg firemen arrived, the fire had practically burned itself out.
- D. The Bloomsburg firemen with their pumper basically directed their efforts to the smoldering ruins and be in readiness to fight a fresh outbreak should it occur. They remained at Benton until middle of the next day.

V. THE AFTERMATH OF THE FIRE – BENTON NEEDED HELP

- A. Fire had destroyed one-third of the borough, \$300,000 in property damages, and left scores of people homeless.
- B. Many people in Benton did not have their property insured or it was under insured.
 - 1. Fire insurance rates were thought to be too high at a rate of \$27.50 per thousand. The rates were high because the borough did not have any fire protection.
 - 2. The amount of insurance carried was comparatively small. The total amount of insurance to be paid out, according to the *Argus*, was \$100,000, which represented about one-third of the loss sustained.
- C. The economic consequences of the fire would have a significant impact on Benton.
 - 1. Home owners had lost the monetary value of their property or if they were renters, their household goods. The same would be true for the businessmen.
 - 2. The economic impact of over half of the businesses lost meant many people were out of jobs.
 - 3. Property owners faced the costs of removing the rubble left by the fire.
 - 4. The borough's property tax revenues would be substantially reduced.

- D. Two days after the fire, Wednesday, July 6, there was a large public meeting at the Methodist Church.
1. The meeting approved a motion to take \$500 from the poor fund to meet the most urgent cases requiring attention, and if this was insufficient, to take an additional \$500 from the same account.
 2. In addition they adopted several resolutions stating:
 - a. Bentonians would confront their calamity bravely and we are committed to rebuilding the borough
 - b. Expressions of thanks to the people of the surrounding area, kind people of Jamison City, and our highest sense of appreciation to Bloomsburg Mayor Townshend, the Council and the fire department.
 - c. Appointment of a "Relief Committee" consisting of the following:
 - Three borough officials: J. B. Laubach, Burgess, A. R. Pennington, President of Council, and Dr. M. McHenry
 - Three ladies, one from each of the three churches: Mrs. Abbie Krickbaum, Miss Nora Albertson, and Mrs. John W. (Josephine) Winley
- C. The Town Hall was made available to the fire victims: It became the *Argus* business office, Hess' Meat Market, Post Office (John J. Mather, postmaster), upstairs portion of the town hall partitioned off as

apartments for Mr. & Mrs. Boyd Gibson and Dr. & Mrs. Bruce Hess, and for the United Telephone Company.

- D. The Columbia County Commissioners came to Benton on July 7 to provide some tax relief: All taxes for county purposes were abated down to a valuation of \$50.00 on each lot upon which the building had been destroyed.”

VI. BENTON RELIEF COMMITTEE – THE PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE FIRE

- A. The establishment of the “Relief Committee” became very important in helping the fire victims to start their recovery. Twenty-nine families were left homeless, and some of them had nothing left but the clothes they were wearing.
- B. In the Benton Relief Committee’s final statement made near the end of September they reported \$3,896.91 in cash contributions. In today’s dollars this would be equivalent to \$67,686. The *Argus* described the responses having been liberal and what has been received has been of best quality.
 - 1. In Columbia County, twelve communities gave two-thirds of the amount raised.
 - 2. Various communities in Columbia County established committees to raise funds and articles of clothing, bedding, and food for victims of the Benton fire. Lightstreet and Orangeville held festivals to raise money.

3. Cash contributions from the four highest communities were:
Bloomsburg \$837, Berwick \$674.75, Benton \$555.55, and
Catawissa \$201.70.
- C. Besides the various committees, individuals on the own initiative sent money and articles to the Benton Relief Committee.
- D. Bloomsburg & Sullivan railroad decided not to impose any charges for handling articles sent to Benton for the aid of the fire victims. The railroad also contributed \$100 for relief of the sufferers.
- E. The Benton Relief Committee established three classes for fire victims to receive aid. Financial aid was more or less evenly distributed in each class.
1. Class A: there were four recipients with average cash assistance ranging from \$260 to \$160 or on average \$197.50 (\$3,422)
 2. Class B: there were 21 recipients with average cash assistant ranging from \$85 to \$61 or on average \$82.43. (\$1,424)
 3. Class C: there were 18 recipients with average cash assistance ranging from \$40 to \$30 or on average \$36.66. (\$625)
 4. Average cash assistance for the 43 fire victims came to \$75.55. (\$1300)
- F. The *Argus* reported in its July 28th edition that “from the day of the fire, not a person has been left without a place to sleep and something to eat. The people have responded splendidly to the needs of their fellow men.

VII. BENTON ENACTMENT OF FIRE PROTECTION ORDINANCES

- A. Unquestionably, the magnitude of the fire and economic loss facing many Benton's citizens prompted a call and receptivity that something must be done to prevent a similar recurrence.
- B. One week after the fire the Borough Council meet on July 11 to enacted two ordinances which sought to reduce the potential of another devastating fire.
 - 1. Ordinance No. 35 created the office of building inspector.
 - a. It required any person or persons, firm or corporation planning to construct or repair building or buildings to obtain a building permit.
 - b. Before any building permit shall be granted, or work begun, the plans and specifications shall be subject to examination and approval by the building inspector.
 - 2. Ordinance No. 36 had two parts:
 - a. Prohibited the erection of any wooden barns, stables, carriage houses or other out-buildings fronting upon the streets of the borough.
 - b. It also stipulated that roofs must be constructed of fire-proof materials. It made it illegal for the erection, reconstruction, or remove within the limits of the borough any building or

buildings which shall be composed of other than fire-proof materials.

3. Then on October 12 the Council authorized the sending of notices to owners, cited by the building inspector, of defective flues and that they must be repaired.

VIII. EFFORT TO GET A PUBLIC WATER SYSTEM

- A. In looking back at the disaster that resulted from the fire on July 4, 1910, would it be fair to argue that the magnitude of the fire could have been prevented?
 1. I am going to venture an answer to my own question, knowing full well the risk on being a non-Bentonian and that the fire occurred ninety years ago.
 2. My answer would be yes. Now, let me explain why I think the scope of the fire could have been less. Please note that I did not say the fire could have been prevented; I am only referring to its scale.
- B. The Benton Borough Council on February 20, 1904, voted to authorize the construction of a “pumping system and water works” with the cost not to exceed \$11,000, in today’s dollars it would around \$180,000.
 1. In order to proceed with the project, the Borough had to submitted a petition to the Columbia County Quarter Sessions

Court in May requesting permission to increase the borough's indebtedness to cover the cost of constructing the water plant.

2. The Court approved the petition with the requirement that the Borough must give the citizens the right to vote "yes" or "no" to increase the indebtedness.
3. The referendum held on July 12, 1904, and by a vote of 104 yes to 35 no approved the water works project. 75% of the voters clearly wanted to build the water works.

C. Construction of the water works commenced on September 27.

D. The next day the project abruptly stopped. The reason being that a group of Benton citizens, eighteen, had gone to court and secured an injunction to stop the construction project.

E. Not to get too involved in all of the legal details of the case, I would simply summarize the plaintiffs' argument by saying the grounds for the injunction rested on a number of procedural points which the council failed to follow.

1. The argument did not encompass whether or not a water system was needed.
2. Instead, the Borough had not followed the law of authorizing the construction of the water system.
3. For example, Council's actions of to authorize the water system had not been submitted to the chief burgess (mayor) for his approval or disapproval.

4. Let's not forget that procedural objections to Council decision to built the water plant were raised because these eighteen people did not want their taxes to increase from by paying for the water plant.
- F. Consequently, the litigation over the injunction became tied up in the courts, and with no legal settlement in sight, the Council decided to abandon the project in March 1905.
- G. As we all know, when the July 4, 1910, fire erupted, there was no public water system to fight the fire. If there had been a public water works and there would have been mostly a fire department. There would had been the means to fight the fire before it got out of control.
- H. It is interesting to note, that Dr. J. B. Laubach, a dentist and Mayor at the time of the 1910 fire, had been one of the individuals that sought the court injunction to stop the water works project.
1. In an address to the Benton citizens when he was about to leave office in 1911 he wrote a letter that was published in the *Argus*: "I appeal to you not to forget the lesson, you have learned. Let us learn to set aside our own prejudices as we did in the hour of trial, and enter with heart and soul into every good project for the improvement of our town, even if things are not done exactly our way."
 2. It also interesting to note, that four of the eighteen Benton citizens that secured the injunctions against the water works project lost either a home or a barn in the fire.

- Samuel S. Harvey lost his home and barn in the fire
- Lee Kessler, lost his barn in the fire
- Noel. T. Smith, lost his home and barn in the fire
- Dr. I. E. Patterson, lost his barn in the fire.

I. Seven months after the fire, the Borough Council at its February 1911 meeting voted to authorize the construction of public water works. However, after a couple of false starts, Benton finally succeeded in getting its water works established in 1914.

IX. ONE YEAR AFTER THE FIRE (1911)

A. Benton was clearly on the way of rebuilding.

1. Of the 30 residences destroyed in the fire, 22 new homes had been erected in the place of those destroyed.
2. In addition, 6 new homes were built outside the fire zone.
3. Instead a row of unsightly barns on Center Street, there now stood two fine homes.

B. Although much of the Benton's business section had not yet been rebuilt, a good start had been made with three business places under construction, including a new Columbia County National Bank building, and two more under expected.

- C. The *Argus* observed that the rebuilding is resulting in a better class of buildings than those destroyed.
- D. The *Argus* editor, Percy Brewington, predicted that within “five years a greater and better Benton will be a reality and there will not be a vacant burnt spot in the town.”

XII. THERE WERE FOUR OTHER SIGNIFICANT FIRES THAT OCCURRED IN BENTON IN THE NEXT THREE YEARS

- A. 1911 the McHenry Distilling Company Warehouse containing 17,000 barrels of whiskey
- B. 1913 the Presbyterian Church
- C. 1913 R. T. Smith & Son Planing Mill
- D. 1913 Benton Shirt Factory

XIII. What can we learn from the Benton fire?

- A. Have insurance and the proper amount
- B. Value of building codes
- C. If borough would had been successful in getting a water works in 1904
- D. People responded to those who were need