



## **#8: The Downtown Humble Fire of 1912**

A little over a century ago, the young town of Humble suffered a devastating fire. In the early hours of February 14, 1912, a fire started in the fruit stand of the Kattar Brothers on the south side of Barrett Street (now known as Main Street). Fanned by strong winds, the fire swept down both sides of Barrett Street. By the time an alarm in the town was sounded, the fire had spread to such an extent that bucket brigades had little effect upon it. At the time, Humble looked like a small village, with many wooden buildings and homes in the downtown area. The townfolk realized that the entire business district was in danger, and quickly asked Houston for assistance. A telephone call was made to the central fire station in Houston. The man who made the call said his time was limited as the phone he was using was located inside a burning building.

The Central Fire Station crew quickly awoke Houston Fire Chief Reginald Ollre. After a quick conversation with his boss, Houston Fire Commission W. J. Kohlhauff, the Houston firemen were on their way to Humble. Chief Ollre took some men with him in his automobile, while the rest of the crew traveled in the fire department's auto chemical truck. As the firemen left the City of Houston, they could clearly see the light from the fire 18 miles away in Humble. It took only 25 minutes between the time of the phone call and when the first firemen arrived at Humble. The firemen immediately began tearing apart two small frame buildings that were in the path of the fire. They also went to work spraying water and chemicals onto roofs of buildings close to the fire. No effort was made to put out the buildings that were on fire. Their immediate concern was to stop the spread of the fire.

On the south side of Barrett Street, the fireman demolished a small blacksmith shop which was across a narrow street from the two-story Knights of Pythias hall. The flames on the north side of the street never advanced once the fireman showed up. Fortunately, the fire was prevented from spreading to the opera house building (now known as the Jewel Theatre). The fire was out by 3 a.m. The Humble citizens were very grateful for the work of the Houston Fire Department. The entire business district of Humble would have been lost without their intervention. Every fireman was given dry clothes and plenty to eat. Several donations were even made by the Humble citizens to the fireman's relief fund. By 5 a.m., the Houston fireman were on their way back home.

Unfortunately, the damage and financial loss was extensive. At the time, Humble did not have an adequate water system for such events, causing insurance companies to either refuse to provide coverage for the businesses, or offered prohibitive prices for the insurance. While most of the large merchants plan to rebuild immediately after the fire, many of the smaller merchants (without insurance coverage) were never able to open their shops again.

On the south side of Barrett street, Pangburn's Drug Store, S. Kattar's Dry Goods, J. Goldstein Dry Goods, Sandlin's Pharmacy, J. Grossman Dry Goods, W. M. Kiser's Post Office building, and Mrs. Chapman's millinery store suffered over \$17,000 in losses. Ross Sterling's Humble State Bank Building was one of the first destroyed with over \$8,000 in losses, although it was fully covered by insurance. The General Hardware Store of County Commission J. W. Hall suffered \$8,500 in losses, and three boarding houses operated by Andy Sayers, Mrs. Callas and Mrs. Nooner (all located behind Pangburn's Drug Store) together suffered \$5,000 in losses. On the north side of Barrett Street, five businesses suffered losses of over \$17,000 (including the Kiser & Jamison Grocery Store). Destroyed along with them were the two telephone exchanges and all of the equipment.

Over the next two years, the downtown Humble area was rebuilt, but the new buildings were made of brick instead of wood. These are the same brick buildings you will find in downtown Humble today.

---

*This article originally appeared in the Humble, Texas newspaper: The Tribune, 24 October 2018.*

---