

The Great Fire of 1900 Accident or arson?

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Fire protection was a constant source of concern for many in Sandon, particularly because in the narrow valley with so little building space, most of the stores and houses were quite literally built wall-against-wall. As well, many of the streets were extremely narrow, ranging from about 30 feet (9.14 metres) on major thoroughfares like Reco Avenue, to as little as 20 feet (6.096 metres) on some of the side streets.

Like so many other early mining communities, all the buildings in town were constructed of wood, which meant any fire had the potential to tear through the entire community. To counteract this threat, by 1897 Sandon had a large two-storey fire hall with tower constructed in the downtown core, as well as a number of smaller fire sheds scattered throughout the community at various strategic locations. These sheds housed fire-fighting equipment such as hose reels, axes, shovels, ladders, buckets, and so on. As well, large triangles were hung throughout the city, to be sounded by anyone who discovered a fire.

Expensive fire hydrants were installed at regular intervals, which were hooked into the water supply of J.M. Harris' Sandon Waterworks and Electric Light Co. The system was fed by a large 60,000 gallon (227,124 litre) water reservoir located high above the city on the south side of the valley. The reservoir supplied a water pressure of 180 lbs., and with an organized and practiced team of volunteer firefighters, residents felt the city was well prepared to meet any emergency. This confidence was soon to be proved wrong.

On May 3, 1900 a performance of "The Bitter Atonement" was playing at Spencer's Opera House in the downtown core. Just after midnight - long after the play let out - the alarm was raised. A fire had been spotted in the lot beside the opera house, and had spread to the adjoining buildings. By the time the fire department had been mobilized, the fire was already

spreading, leaping from roof to roof, and even across the narrow gap of Reco Avenue. In short order the citizens were pressed into service, and the entire community fought valiantly to save their city, but it proved to be a losing battle.

The fire spread so fast, and the heat was so intense that much of the city's expensive fire-fighting equipment had to be abandoned as the firemen were driven backwards. To compound the difficulty, it was not even possible to organize a bucket brigade from Carpenter Creek, as the decision had been made two years earlier to build the flume and boardwalk that covered it over. Soon, it was obvious to all that the fire was totally out of control, and threatening to consume the entire city. Desperate citizens tried to save what they could from the flames, and in the confusion the manager of the Bank of British Columbia was able to run, unnoticed, uphill to the "Argo" mine portal, where he stashed a fortune in sacked cash.

At that point, a fateful decision was made that was to save the upper gulch from destruction. A wagon loaded with dynamite was rolled into the CPR train station and detonated, which created a fire break and deprived the flames of fresh fuel. Because of this decision, as well as wind direction, both ends of the city, the "red light" district and the upper gulch, were spared, but nearly the entire downtown core was levelled.

