



This was Nevada Series

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Great Pioche Fire of 1871

Although Pioche had a reputation as one of Nevada's toughest towns during the boom days of the early 1870s, the community shared many of the problems of other settlements on the mining frontier. Among these was an inadequate water system and a consequent problem with fire. The crowding of wooden houses on the hillsides near the mines was part of the problem, as was haphazard installation of stovepipes, the practice of discarding hot coals out the doorway and the storage of blasting powder and other explosive materials right in town. Water hauled from Floral Springs in the Highland Range sold for ten cents a gallon and many residents constructed tanks and cisterns to catch rainwater, but little thought was given to adequate supplies for fire protection purposes.

A forty-man volunteer fire company, the Lightner Hook & Ladder Company, had been organized in April 1871, but the men had neither equipment nor a hydrant system when the town was hit by one of the most tragic conflagrations in the history of the state on September 15, 1871. The members of the town's Mexican community were celebrating Mexican Independence Day and fireworks, drinking in the saloons and a general revelry on the streets went on all day and into the evening. Just after 11:00pm, a fire broke out in the rear of Lagrue's Restaurant. Fanned by a stiff breeze, the flames quickly spread to an adjoining saloon and on up Meadow Valley Street.

As men fell all over each other exiting the saloons and boarding houses, the volunteer firemen hastened to the scene, but they could do little more than help evacuate nearby neighborhoods and stand around and watch. Several saloonkeepers were able to roll heavy barrels of whiskey out of their establishments before they caught, but one of them realized that he would soon have no place to reenter the liquor business, so he set up his barrel on the street and began serving any and all who happened by.

Several others did likewise, and their largess considerably buoyed the spirits of those who were losing everything they owned, but there was soon another problem facing the community when word spread that storekeeper Phillip Felsenden had three hundred kegs of explosive powder stored in his cellar.

Fire fighters, merchants, saloonkeepers, and spectators deserted the downtown section at that point, even though the storage areas were supposed to be fireproof. As the inebriated men and their hysterical wives and children watched from the hillsides, flames reached the Felsenden building, and the explosives went up with a blinding white flash and a deafening roar. Stones, timbers, and debris showered down upon the hapless townspeople as they fled in a panic. Many people were injured, but the only deaths took place in town. Initial reports put the death toll at six and numbered the injured as forty or more, but a later account listed thirteen fatalities.

Property losses, some \$600,000 included ten business buildings, eight restaurants, five lodging houses and every saloon in town. Only two attorneys found their offices still intact, but some 2,000 residents were homeless. The offices of the Ely Record, the local newspaper, burned to the ground but Editors Pat Holland, and Robert W. Simpson rescued enough type and paper to put out a special edition the next morning since the press sustained slight damage. The County records and the prisoners in the jail saved, shortly after the fire broke out.

The citizens of Hamilton and Eureka responded to the first reports of the human tragedy and two wagons laden with food, blankets and medical supplies arrived the next day. Editors around the state took note of the fire in Pioche and another in Virginia City, which broke out at noon on September 19, 1871. They recounted similar disasters in their own communities and urged readers to inspect their chimneys, clean up their yards, and otherwise do what they could to save themselves from another such occurrence. There was a bill introduced into the Nevada State Legislature two years later, would have banned the storage of explosives in any community over ten dwellings, but it never got out of committee. The lessons of Pioche and Virginia City did not last long, and townsmen were soon storing their powder and dynamite in town again, dumping coals in a hazardous manner, insulating homes with filmy cloth and newspapers, and allowing flammable materials to accumulate in their yards. Pioche residents did get a water line laid in from the springs in 1872 and when ahead with a fire hydrant system the next year.

As to the 1871 fire, rebuilding got underway almost before the ashes had cooled. Within six months, Pioche had increased in size and the population almost doubled, but the inevitable Borrasca period was just three years away. Pioche had survived it all, however, fires, floods, and boom and bust.

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