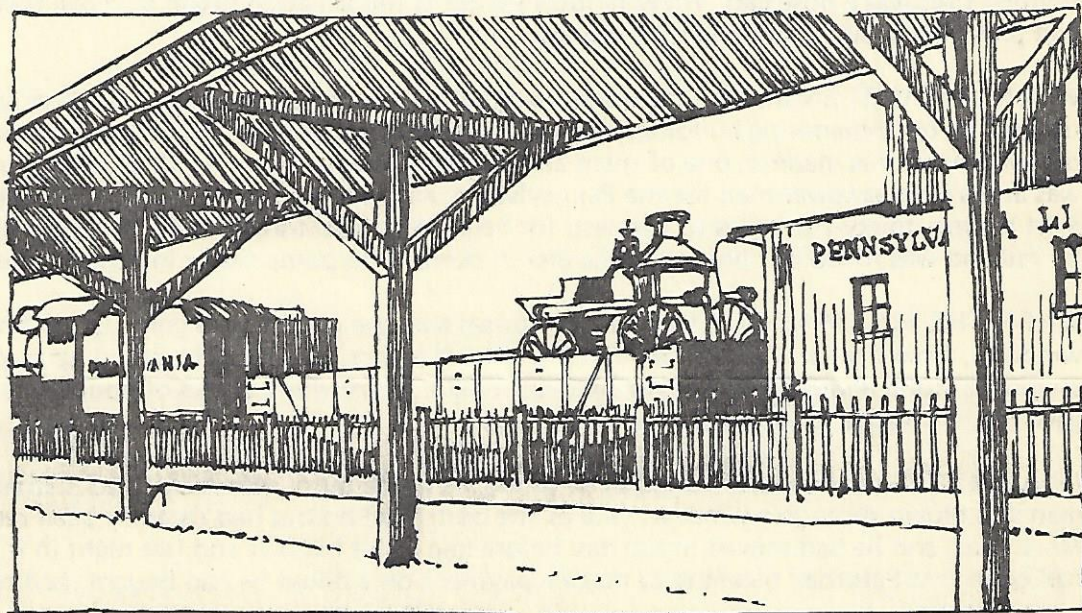


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THE GREAT 1914 FIRE AT WINONA LAKE



AT THE SOUTHEAST EDGE of Warsaw, Indiana, lies Winona Lake, along whose eastern shore is the town of Winona Lake. At the north end of Winona runs the main line of the Pennsylvania (now Amtrak) Railroad, between Chicago and New York. The principal streets in Winona are Park Avenue, paralleling the lake and, back of Park, Chestnut Avenue.

BY 1914 WINONA WAS FAMOUS for Chatauqua, church activities and celebrity appearances. Heard there, or yet to come, were such notables as Madame Schumann-Heink, Amelita Galli-Curci, Louise Homer, violinist Albert Spaulding, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony, statesman William Jennings Bryan, humorist Will Rogers and, the greatest attraction of all, evangelist Billy Sunday.

THOUSANDS ARRIVED each summer to attend conferences, hear recitals and performances, and enjoy the lake. Owners of cottages came from as far away as Minneapolis and Philadelphia, and every rental accommodation was filled. Transportation facilities were extraordinary. The 1914 schedule of the Pennsylvania lists fifteen trains daily. On the north-south line of the Big Four through Warsaw were six more. Interurbans ran from Warsaw to Winona thirty minutes apart from six in the morning until ten at night, and twice that often on summer evenings when the season was at its busiest.

IN THE NORTHEAST PART of Winona was the Winona Lake Hotel and the residential beginning of Chestnut Avenue. (Although they were called cottages, because of the resort atmosphere, many Chestnut Avenue houses were of imposing design and construction, with numerous fireplaces and spacious rooms). At the lakeshore was a long, wide pier with a pergola at its end. This was the setting for a tragic fire that was to sweep through the area only a few weeks before the summer season was to begin.

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL in inhabited, wooded sections that winter-blown leaves get a final raking in the spring, and on the Saturday morning of April 18th, 1914, men were raking and burning leaves near the Winona Lake Hotel. Unfortunately, a wind had sprung up and before any danger was realized part of a bonfire was carried aloft, and dropped to set afire a nearby house. An alarm was spread but within half an hour, at eleven o'clock, five more houses were in flames.

THE TRUTH, soon unhappily realized, was that Winona Lake was less an organized town than a settlement of houses. While there was a municipal water supply the pressure was weak and the only equipment for fighting fires was a hose cart. Householders taking in the situation began to move their possessions outdoors and pray that their homes might be spared.

WHEN IT WAS SEEN that the measures being taken would not extinguish the fires already burning, it was decided to try dynamiting buildings that might feed a further extension of the flames. Two buildings were demolished in this manner, one of them already beginning to burn. At 12:30 a man named Howe, who was at his post as tower-man for the Pennsylvania, and who was watching his own home catch fire, wired Fort Wayne, thirty-five miles to the east, for help. In an astonishing forty-minutes a steam pumper arrived by rail and was rolled out onto the lake pier in position to pump water into hose lines running ashore.

WHEN THE FIRE WAS OUT twenty-two houses and one garage were gone. Other houses sustained broken windows, from heat and explosion, and scorched interiors. Flights of steps led up to piles of cinders and chimneys stood about, like obelisks on a battlefield. Everywhere stacks of books and out-of-place furniture gave the impression of an auction about to begin.

IN ADDITION to Mr. Howe's anguish at seeing his home burn, others suffered distress in curious ways. A man was blown through a window. One of the destroyed houses had recently been rented to a Reverend Mr. Lyons, and he had moved in the day before and spent his first and last night in it. Still another man had gone that Saturday morning to make a payment on a house he had bought, and returned to find it burned down.

AS CROWDS CAME to look, the citizens of Winona Lake met two days after the fire to vote for the purchase of the most efficient fire engine obtainable. On April 21st the United States occupied Vera Cruz, Mexico, and the fire at Winona Lake mercifully disappeared from the pages of the newspapers.



Reference: The Warsaw Daily Times/1914
Photographs in the collection of
the Kosciusko County Historical Society