

# TIDBITS

December 2015  
Volume 3 Issue II

## 100 YEARS AGO....FIRE!

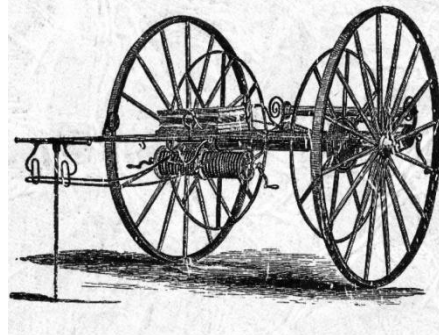
By Linsay Darnall, Jr.

On Thursday morning, February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1915, the citizens of Omaha were greeted with the news on the front page of The Omaha Daily Bee with a headline, "Boys' Dormitory At School for Deaf Destroyed by Fire". It had occurred at the Boys' Cottage, a two-story structure with double bay windows in the front and a long stairway that leads up to the first floor. Previously, the Main Building housed both boys and girls on the opposite wings and the Boys Cottage was built in 1880's several yards southwest of the Main Building as a response to the increase in the school's attendance.



At that time, the city of Omaha has grown and NSD was comfortably situated in a bustling new neighborhood with streetcar running north along the 45<sup>th</sup> street past NSD campus that stopped at the intersection of 45<sup>th</sup> and Bedford before turning around and ran down south again. NSD's water pipe was connected to the city and had its functioning fire hydrants. There was one a little west between the Main Building and the Boys Cottage. In the History of the Omaha, Nebraska Fire Dept. (1917), it was mentioned that in 1915, Fire Chief Charles A. Salter reported Omaha Fire Department had 285 officers and men. Twenty-one fire stations spread all around Omaha and that they had "six steam fire engines (one of which is held in reserve), five hook and ladder trucks, four automobiles, hose wagons, etc., and the city has over half a million dollars invested in its fire department." At the end of the report, Salter added that, "During the year 1915 the department responded to 1,131 alarms."

According to the 1923 Omaha map, there were one fire station on the southwest corner of 30<sup>th</sup> and Spaulding. The next logical choice for the nearest fire station would be at Benson, but it was built in September 1915, seven months after the fire at NSD. If, in fact it was the fire crew from 30<sup>th</sup> and Spaulding that responded to the fire, then they had to travel approximately 20 blocks before arriving. Given the mode of transportation that existed at the station, it would probably take about 20-30 minutes between the first alarm and the arrival of the firefighters. During that time, NSD boys were trained to handle the hose cart, to attach the hose to the fire hydrant and to keep the fire at bay. The hose cart, similar to the one NSD had, is being displayed at Nebraska City Museum of Firefighting donated by the blind school.



As Omaha Daily Bee reported that the fire had started the day before, on Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup> at 6pm. It was suspected that faulty wiring had caused the fire. Apparently, the trip from the fire station to the campus was not fast enough and the damage was at \$2,000. However, nobody was harmed in the fire. Obviously, the boys had attached the hose to a nearest fire hydrant that was between the cottage and the Main Building. In the Nebraska Journal, the boys were credited for fighting the fire before Omaha Fire Dept arrived that probably saved 45 boys whom were displaced afterwards. Arrangements were made for them to move into the Main Building as a temporary shelter.



Apparently, the fire was fresh in the mind of the officials and in 1933 the new Boys Dormitory (later renamed to the Thompson Dormitory which is a current location of the Nebraska Deaf Heritage Museum and Cultural Center- NDHMCC) were constructed about 50 yards east of the location of cottage. The school boasted that the new structure was

"fire-proof" since it was built with poured concrete instead of wooden frames with brick veneer that was destroyed in the fire 18 years prior.



The remnants of the story of the fire are gone today except for a picture and archival newspaper articles. The fire cart has disappeared from the school inventory and everyone who was there has passed. But there is a glimmer of hope to this story that will carry on to the newer generation about deaf boys' heroism on that cold February night battling against the heat of the cottage's fire. Regardless the fact that the newer fire hydrant had replaced the original hydrant after the campus was sold to the Turning Point in 1999. It was tracked down immediately and was extensively restored. Currently, the original fire hydrant that contributed to the fight against the Boys Cottage fire one hundred years ago is being displayed at the NDHMCC.

### Notes:

<http://history.rays-place.com/ne/dou-omaha-fd.htm>  
[http://www.nebraskahistory.org/histpres/report/s/omaha\\_1.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/histpres/report/s/omaha_1.pdf) -Page 14  
[http://digital.omahapubliclibrary.org/galleries/maps/map\\_1923.jpg](http://digital.omahapubliclibrary.org/galleries/maps/map_1923.jpg)  
*The Daily Omaha Bee, Thursday, February 1915, pg. 1*  
*Before and after pictures of Boys Cottage courtesy of Nebraska Deaf Heritage Museum and Cultural Center*

## SAVE THE DATE



Nebraska School for the Deaf Alumni Association  
Conference/Reunion in Omaha

July 21-23, 2016

Details and information are forthcoming, please check  
[www.nsd1901.org](http://www.nsd1901.org)

Merry Christmas and  
Happy New Year!

