



# Brown County Journal

August 15, 2013

## Events:

Brown County Historical  
Society meeting  
September 2

Brown County Genealogical  
Society meeting  
September 10

If you no longer wish to receive this  
e-newsletter send an e-mail with the  
word "unsubscribe" in the subject  
heading to: rhonda@  
browncountyhistorycenter.org

The material contained herein is  
copyrighted.

Rhonda Dunn

## From the Ashes Arise

'Like a Phoenix rising from the ashes' as the old saying goes. The phoenix was used as a symbol in Early Christianity also as in other religions to symbolize renewal in general. The phoenix was a mythical bird with fiery plumage that lived up to 100 years. Near the end of its life, it settled into its nest which then burned in an all-consuming flame, reducing the bird to ashes. And from those ashes, a fledgling phoenix arose – renewed and reborn. The human spirit is like this - resilient and wants to find its way back to wholeness. Life throws us one obstacle after another, but we plod on. Then one day you realize that you're happy again, and soon after you realize life had taught you another lesson with doors opening in so many new wonderful ways. When a fire actually happens to your home or neighbors you discover that life goes on after a fire. You pull yourself up and rebuild or help your neighbors rebuild. That is what communities do, they come together in tragedy and help each other.

### **The Courthouse Fire**

Fires are a common occurrence in the life of a community. Most are accidental from either unsafe heating materials or unsafe handling by humans. A few of the more infamous fires have been known or suspected to have been set intentionally. The first fire that is still in our county's memory only because it affected one of Nashville's government buildings. The Brown County courthouse was burned on November 3, 1873.

In the fall of 1853 the county commissioners contracted to build a new brick courthouse. The old log building they had been using was dismantled and moved to become a stable. For over a year while the building was under construction the courts were held at the



## Courthouse in 1909

Methodist Church. At the end of the construction the cost of the totally furnished building was \$7000. During a session of the Circuit in 1873 the courthouse caught fire. Since none of our local newspapers survive from this time we do not have a good account of the fire. We do have a short mention in a Morgan County newspaper. "The Court House at Nashville, Brown County, was totally destroyed by fire, Monday night. All the court and county records were destroyed. This is a severe blow to Nashville and Brown

County. It is not known how the fire originated" (Morgan County Republican, Thursday, Nov. 6, 1873). There are short notes of the fire happening in some of our court documents explaining the lack of documents from that era.

As many of us know not all of Brown County's records were destroyed. The greatest loss was that by the Recorders' office with the big Deed books. Most of the year's marriage records for 1873 were lost also. As for the origin of the fire, rumors still abound that it was set intentionally by someone that had a bone to pick with the local government. A new courthouse was soon rebuilt the following year using some of the original walls and foundation. The final cost was \$9000 for the new building which still stands today.

## The Helmsburg Fires

Helmsburg has been the subject of a couple of noted fires in the past. In 1925 a major fire swept through downtown Helmsburg and destroyed several businesses. A newspaper article recalls the event.

"HELMSBURG VISITED BY DISASTROUS FIRE.

Three Stores, Creamery Station and Dwelling House Destroyed.

Fire of an unknown origin, starting about one o'clock Tuesday morning in Helmsburg destroyed the store building and stock of goods belonging to Baughman Brothers, the stock of goods and building owned by J. Stout, Williams Hughes' store and dwelling house combined, and Schlosser Brothers'

Creamery station. For a time the fire threatened the Rains Hotel and other buildings on the south side of Main Street.

The fire was first discovered in the east corner of Baughman Brothers' store by Frank Swisher, night watchman for C. H. Marsh's saw mill. He gave the alarm but before help came the fire was beyond control. A call was sent to Nashville and Morgantown for help. Jimmy Davis responded immediately with Nashville's fire engine and gave splendid aid. However, in spite of all that could be done, and owing to lack of water, the fire spread until all the above named places were in ruins.



## **Helmsburg in 1906**

Baughman Brothers' loss, between seven and eight thousand dollars, partially covered by an insurance of \$3000. William Hughes' loss, \$5000, with \$2500 insurance. J. Stout has insurance of \$3000 and his loss of \$8000. Schlosser Brothers' Creamery Station was insured for \$400.

Jimmie Davis is said to be commended for his promptness in answering the telephone call to Nashville for help. Always on the alert, he, within five minutes after the alarm was sounded, was guiding Nashville's fire engine on the 'wings of wind' to the scene of the conflagration. Hats off to Jimmy. Later - Suspicion is rife that the fire was the work of incendiaries."

(Brown County Democrat, June 11, 1925)

Actually a series of fires occurred within a short amount of time. A lot was happening during this time that made all these fires look very suspicious. At the time several businessmen were trying to get the county seat changed to Helmsburg leaving Nashville out in the cold. This signaled suspicion on the part





## Helmsburg in 1923

ashes at 1 o'clock this morning. The fire of unknown origin was first noticed by a night watchman at the Marsh Lumber mills and was beyond control when first noticed. Everything in the store including his Coroner records, a part of his undertakers supplies and a coop of young chickens were destroyed. Mr. Bond estimates his loss at \$2500 with about \$1000 in insurance. It is thought the store was robbed and then burned. Some time ago a flouring mill owned by Mr. Bond was destroyed by fire of unknown origin and on June 9 the bigger portion of the little town was destroyed by fire of unknown origin. All three of these fires started about midnight. In an interview with a representative of this paper Mr. Bond says, 'I cannot understand it. I will try to get back in business, though I've suffered a heavy loss. My undertaking establishment will be located at Nashville.' (Brown County Democrat, July 23, 1925)

From a personal account in an Oral History it is related that 'there

of the local townfolk. Could some of Nashville's citizens have tried underhandedly to put a stop to this? Joshua Bond's restaurant and his undertaker supply store was another victim of the fires. The following article from the local newspaper tells of the next fire.

### "FIRE AT HELMSBURG.

Store and Restaurant Owned by Joshua Bond Destroyed by Fire at 1 O'clock Today.

Joshua Bond again suffered a heavy loss by fire when his store and restaurant were reduced to



**Helmsburg Depot**



### **Helmsburg Depot after the fire**

previous. Helmsburg was the closest train stop for travelers that were going to Nashville for various business and pleasurable pursuits. Helmsburg thrived during the early years that the train came to Brown County. In fact, the town of Helmsburg was built for this purpose, to serve train passengers and visitors to Brown County. The formation of Helmsburg came just prior to the completion of the railroad later that year in 1906. A local newspaper reported on the fire.

“I.C. Station at Helmsburg Burns.

The Illinois Central Railroad Station at Helmsburg was destroyed by fire at the noon hour Tuesday. The blaze was first discovered while Jack Cullum, ticket agent, was home to lunch. The building and contents were a complete loss except for a few records and the money drawer. A considerable amount of freight which was in the freight room was a complete loss as were all the fixtures and furniture. Today no official information had been received as to whether it will be rebuilt but indications are that it will not be. According to rail road men where similar things have happened

was a feud going on between Joshua Bond and Dr. Selfridge who was a mean drunk. He arrested the doctor one night when he was drunk and the doctor vowed to get even. He was the one that was blamed for the fires. It was thought that he hired an outsider to set the fires to throw suspicion off of himself. It could never be proved that he was involved and he got off scott free.’ (L. Chitwood Oral History)

The next memorable fire that occurred in Helmsburg was quite a bit later in 1942. The Helmsburg Train Depot which was built about 1907 was the last one still operating in the county. Earlier ones in Fruitdale and Trevlac closed down several years



**Helmsburg residents watch the Depot fire**

elsewhere, a discarded baggage car has been used for an office of the station master. The station is the last one in Brown county. Trevlac and Fruitdale having been discontinued several years ago. It was built 35 years ago.” (Brown County Democrat, April 16, 1942)

The cause of the fire was determined to be from a self-igniting coal fire. A shanty was put up temporarily until a larger structure could be built. It met a bad fate when it collapsed. The final structure was moved from Trevlac because that train depot was no longer in use.

## **School House Fires**

School house fires as well as house and barn fires were quite common in the early part of the century. Due to the fact that heating was by wood, oil, or coal this was the primary cause of most fires. Some school house fires have been known to be a little suspicious also. Some of the older children might not have liked going to school or might not have liked their teachers. One such rumor is still told today by local residents about the Taggart school. A short article follows from 1930 about the Taggart school.

### **“SCHOOL HOUSE DESTROYED BY FIRE.**

**Makes Ten School Houses That Have Burned in the Last Twelve Years.**

The Taggart school house in Hamblen township was destroyed by fire last Friday evening about seven o’clock. This is one of the largest schools in the county and is being taught by Walter Waltz, of that township. Roy Keaton, Trustee, has rented an empty store building near by and is having it repaired. School will start next Monday morning. This makes ten school buildings that have burned in the last twelve years. They are: Cravens, Beatty, Lily Ridge, High Knob, Ritter, Cook 2, Huber, Upper Schooner and Taggart.” (Brown County Democrat, Feb. 6, 1930)



Fires are a part of life albeit a bad part. New and better circumstances can result from a fire though. As one that appreciates the past we usually hate to lose an old church or a historically significant building. Wouldn't it be nice if for every aged building we saved we could also save the memories that went into the life of the building.

Stay tuned to next month's Journal for Part 2 of Brown County's most memorable fires.

## **The second Taggart Schoolhouse**