

Mysterious fires at hotel baffled Springville in 1891

By D. ROBERT CARTER
Special to The Daily Herald

Springville's bizarre "fire mystery," a series of seemingly spontaneous fires that threatened to destroy the town's only hotel in 1891, was once big news all along the Wasatch Front.

"It is the most mysterious affair that ever took place in Springville," wrote J.W. Westwood to *The Salt Lake Herald*.

It all began Aug. 10, a warm Sunday morning, when the monotony of cooking, cleaning and other chores at the Boyer Hotel was interrupted by a fire in a nearby granary. The excitement settled soon after the fire was extinguished, but it rose again later that morning when curtains and blinds in the front room of the hotel mysteriously ignited.

These blazes also were put out before extensive damage was done, but they set the stage for a series of frightening fires at the hotel.

The two-story, 15-room adobe structure at First West and Third South was built by Philip Henry Boyer and his wife, Sarah Ann ("Sadie"), in the early 1870s. The building was large enough to accommodate guests, the Boyers with their 10 children and hotel help.

Historical records at Springville's Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum reveal that the town was without a hotel for many years. Overnight visitors stayed in the homes of the townspeople while visiting dignitaries were guests in the rambling home of Aaron Johnson, the local bishop.

But finally Springville became large enough to support a full-fledged hotel. Good food and clean rooms attracted various entertainment groups, salesmen and others as repeat customers. A separate building in which salesmen could display their wares was later added to the complex. The Boyer became a center of activity.

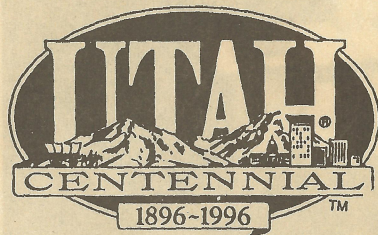
So it was that a mystery fire at the hotel attracted considerable attention, and repeated fires were a thing of great fascination. Even local astrologers and barnyard philosophers mulled over the phenomenon and sought a solution.

That Monday passed without incident, but on Tuesday there was another fire at the granary. Not much damage resulted.

But Wednesday, Aug. 12, was another story. No less than 12 mysterious fires in and around the Boyer Hotel seemed to have been kindled out of nowhere.

The first fire burst out in the morning near the east end of the now well-scorched granary. The

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next started indoors in a closet where clothing was burned. Philip Boyer quickly smothered that blaze with a blanket.

Then there was a fire in a bedroom where a Mr. Sumpson stood gazing out the window pondering the cause of the previous blazes. The window curtains next to him suddenly began to burn.

Next, clothing in the kitchen flared up, and in the yard, clothing in a laundry basket caught fire.

Then other fires began, damaging the floor, wallpaper, a bed, clothes hanging on a wall, towels, and dresses and coats hanging on a hat rack. There was even a fire in a flower pot.

In the salesmen's sample room, the cover of a table burst into flames while two men were sitting on another table nearby discussing the mysterious fires.

By now several hundred dollars worth of clothing and furnishings had been damaged or destroyed.

Fearing the whole house would soon go up in flames, the Boyers began moving undamaged clothing, utensils and easily portable furniture out of the hotel.

City Marshal James E. Hall and several other men took charge of the building on Wednesday evening. Only the brave and those who couldn't find another place to stay spent that night in the brimstone-scented inn. There were no more fires that night.

The next morning Hall sent samples of burned clothing to Provo for chemical analysis. Some

people, Philip Boyer included, suspected that a combustible ingredient had been scattered through the house by accident or possibly on purpose. This seemed to be the most favored explanation for the fires.

As a precaution, more furniture and household goods were hauled out onto the lawn while Hall and his assistants continued to guard the premises.

Everything seemed calm again, and normal activities were carried on as much as possible under the circumstances. People moved back into the hotel, including 15-year-old Nicolena Erickson, a servant girl who had been hired in June. She was a native of Norway who had no family in Utah.

The next day there was suddenly another fire followed by three more, including one that started on a dish rag hanging on a wall and another that blazed in a flower pot.

Hall and his men conducted a detailed inspection of the building. He and W.B. Johnston found evidence of burned matches in all the rooms. They agreed that the



Photo courtesy of Rell G. Francis

Sarah Ann Boyer helped manage the Boyer Hotel with her husband, Philip Boyer.

fires must have been set on purpose. Erickson was the main suspect, and Johnston watched her carefully as he set a trap.

That afternoon he carried a sack and some papers into the pantry in a pan. As he passed Erickson, he mentioned that the papers would be easy to burn.



Photo courtesy of the Springville Daughters of Utah Pioneers

This is the Boyer Hotel building in Springville just before it was torn down in 1967. The hotel was the scene of numerous fires in 1891. The building was torn down in 1967.

He then lay down on a sofa in the dining room where he could watch the kitchen and the pantry. Johnston pretended to be asleep. Soon Erickson passed through the dining room and asked Johnston if he were asleep. When he didn't respond, she went back to the kitchen and into the pantry, closing the door behind her.

Johnston heard the rattle of a matchbox and the striking of a match. When the girl came out of the pantry, Johnston could smell smoke. He rushed into the pantry, where he found burning papers. He grabbed the pan containing them and threw it outdoors.

When Johnston confronted the girl, she at first denied lighting the fires. Then she began to cry and confessed to setting all except the first in the granary. Erickson said she had seen the Boyers' 4-year-old son light that one, and she was overcome by the urge to set others.

When Erickson saw Sarah Ann Boyer, she cried and threw her arms around the older woman's shoulders, saying that she had not meant to set the fires.

The girl appeared before Justice of the Peace John S. Boyer on that Saturday, where she confessed. Her bond was set at \$500. It looked like Erickson would be sent to reform school.

Then events took a turn in her favor. J.W.N. Whitecotton, a Provo attorney, became interested in Erickson's case, paid her bond and announced that he was taking her to live with his family to await a

grand jury hearing.

On Oct. 1, the grand jury heard testimony from Hall, Philip Boyer, Johnston and the defendant. After little deliberation, the jury indicted the accused as charged.

Whitecotton represented Erickson at the trial, which began Oct. 14, 1891, and lasted two days. Tes-

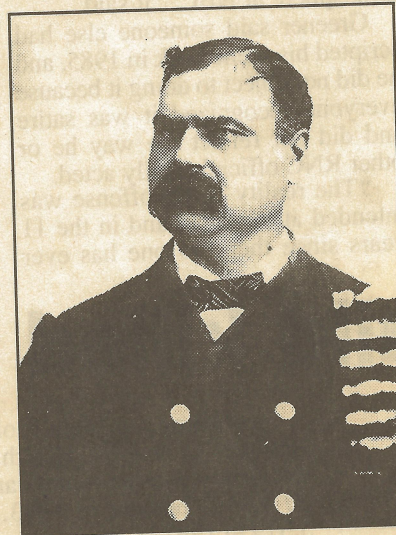


Photo courtesy of Rell G. Francis

Marshal James E. Hall helped solve the case of the mystery fires in Springville.

timony was introduced that seemed to establish the girl's guilt, even though she now denied making any confessions. Whitecotton helped establish that there had not been any malicious intent to burn the hotel down.

The *Daily Enquirer* in Provo summarized the conclusion of Mr.

Allison, the counsel for the people, as follows: "It may have been a morbid desire on her part to witness the excitement customary on such occasions. She had reached that stage of life when she was merging into womanhood, and counsel had known of just such instances with girls of her age."

After it had been established that Erickson had no criminal intent, the Boyers and Allison said they would not pursue the case further. The jury rendered a verdict of not guilty, and Erickson was spared time in reform school.

What Erickson's life was like after the trial is lost to history, but the final fate of the Boyer Hotel has been recorded in newspapers and family histories. When Philip Boyer died in 1905, Sarah Ann Boyer left the management of the hotel to others and spent part of her time with her daughter in California. The hotel was operated for years as a boarding house and was sold in 1917 to Frank H. Celventra, who turned it into apartments.

The building remained occupied until 1965, when it was abandoned. It was unused for two years and was finally torn down in 1967.

Today, the corner lot remains vacant, and many of the memories that were formed there have flickered and gone out like the last blaze of Springville's once-notorious mystery fires.

D. Robert Carter is a retired history teacher and local historian residing in Springville.