

## 1941 Seward Fire

On November 23, 1941, a short time before noon was to leave Seward there was a devastating fire down town. Mary Barry said: "Around eleven-thirty that evening, the proprietor of the Second Chance Barber Shop on Fourth Avenue tried to light his oil stove. Some fuel spilled on the floor and it ignited when he lit the match. He immediately called the fire departments. By midnight it appears that the fire was out, with little serious damage. The firemen and the group of spectators that usually accompanied every alarm left for their homes and their



belated sleep." (1995:142)

Mom remembers this fire. Dad took six photos and asked her what she remembered. She said that when they heard the commotion during the night, they went down town to see what was going on. It must have been around 2:00 a.m. Mary Barry said that the temperature was 18 degrees above zero and there was the usual wind so it was bitterly cold. After the towns people and soldiers from Fort Raymond determined that there was a great risk that the fire would spread to the homes, people were told it would be wise to evacuate their homes. Mom and dad didn't.

You can see the stream of water from a firehose in this photo. Some brave soul climbed a ladder and tried to quell the blaze this way. Mary Barry reported that the water main broke during the firefighting operations so bucket brigades were set up to try to fight the fire, a pretty ineffectual action against fires that consumed three-story buildings.

Fort Raymond sent hundreds of soldiers to assist in the operation. These guys were eager beavers and wanted to try out a fire-fighting technique that they'd learned in fire-fighting school. They decided that they would put the blaze out by dynamiting it. Mary reports that one soldier ran up to the blaze several times and threw a handful of dynamite into the blaze and "repeated this action several times during the night."

The results were mixed. In one case, the explosion blew burning embers



across Fourth Street onto the three-story Arcade Building that was not burning at the time. The embers started a blaze that gutted the place.

The temperature dropped further, reaching 12 degrees above zero. That is cold. I remember it. My mouth would get so numb I could hardly move my lips and my tongue got cold. It burned like fire in my nostrils to take in a deep breath. No surprise that the hoses froze and that ice formation became another problem.

These guys are basically watching what's going on, pretty horrible thing for a tiny town. The aftermath was as bad as the blaze because there was no lumber to rebuilt, there was no money to do it with and so on. There was a land rush to get steamer tickets back to the "Lower 48" as soon as possible. That was a problem because the construction of Fort Raymond needed more, not less, workers.



The next morning things were still smouldering but there was now a heavy layer of ice over everything. The long building in the background of this photo is the Seward train station. It was not harmed during the fire but the building in the foreground was destroyed and then buried in ice.



Odd how the building on the corner was totally destroyed with the building on the right survived. There must have been brick or concrete to preserve that building. Smoke hangs over the town because Mt. Marathon should have been visible in the background.



In addition to the devastation caused by the fire, the presence of armed soldiers stands out. He was making sure that no one looted the barber shop of things pulled out during the fire. One of the many strays is checking things out.

