

The Women Saved the Day: The De Kalb Village Fire of 1894.

By Bryan Thompson

Monday morning May 28th, 1894 dawned sunny and clear with a cool wind blowing out of the Northeast up Canton Street. The population of De Kalb Village then numbered about 80 souls. There were three churches: Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian. Businesses included a blacksmith shop, two general stores, a hotel, cheese factory, Town Clerk's Office and feed store.

By coincidence most of the men of the village left to do out of town business that Monday morning. Ara Moore went to Potsdam to visit relatives leaving his new clerk, 22 -year -old Homer Day in charge of his store. C. E. Westurn was in De Peyster attending to trade.

About 10:20 it was noticed that the Gardner and Murphy Cheese factory was on fire. Two women ran to the churches and began to ring the bells to bring in help from the country. The bells were heard as far away as Richville.

Not waiting for help to arrive the women of town gathered sheets, quilts, and blankets and soaked them in water to quench the flying sparks. At the time all the houses had very flammable wood shingle roofs and wood siding. The wind became quite strong and the fire was sending a shower of sparks up the street from the flaming cheese factory.



Moore's Church old DeKalb

**De Kalb Village Congregational Church
One of the churches whose bells rang.**

Abrigail Westurn lived in the house next to the factory. The 65 -year -old woman was not going to give up on her house despite the neighbors' pleas to evacuate. Instead, she soaked every piece of fabric she owned in water and plastered the walls of her house with them. When neighbors came to help, she sent them onto the roof with wet fabric to quench the flames.

Within a few minutes sparks were igniting the roofs of every house between the factory and Moore's store. Women stood on guard and as soon as new flames appeared they saw that they were quenched with wet fabric.

Homer Day took to the roof of Moore's store with wet clothes to extinguish the flaming embers there. He made a serious misstep and fell from the roof onto the telegraph wires along the side of the building. The wires stretched near to the ground before flinging him 30 feet into the air. On his second descent he slipped through the wires falling to the ground. He was reported to be at work the next day a little sore but none the worse for the wear.



Moore's Store with telegraph wires.

C. E. Western, who was out of town, sustained the most damage to his property. His neighbors had proceeded to remove all of his belongings from his house where they were damaged by flying embers. The reporter for the *St. Lawrence Republican*, reported, "Many left the scene of the fire holier than when they went, for flying brands left their mark on many victims." Yet thanks to an early warning and hard work every house and business was saved except the cheese factory.

Fifty tubs of butter were saved from the flames but most of the cheese was lost. The entire years' supply of ice from the ice house was undamaged by the fire.

On June second work commenced on a new cheese factory. The work was supervised by Byron Barringer of De Kalb Junction. On Saturday, June 16, 1894, the new factory opened for business eight days short of a month after the fire.

Sources:

Town Historian De Kalb Scrapbook 1864 to 1912.

St. Lawrence Republican Fire At De Kalb May 30, 1894.

The Ogdensburg Advance De Kalb May 31, 1894.



The factory that was built in 14 days to replace the one destroyed in the 1894 fire.