

Schmeling Building Fire – April 24, 1978

The story of the Schmeling Building fire is told in the April 27, 1978, issue of the Edgerton Reporter:

Fire Destroys Downtown Edgerton Landmark



This is a view of the former Schmeling building on N. Henry Street in downtown Edgerton which was destroyed by fire early Monday in a pre-dawn blaze which resulted in the destruction of three business locations: The Pottery, managed by Helen Knudson; The Spa

operated by Dorothy Brown and Dobbins Enger; and Motor Parts Service, owned by John Vesek and managed by Ken Wescott. The building was owned by Miles Durfee, Janesville. Cause of the fire is still unknown.

Firemen from Edgerton, Janesville and Stoughton were called to a fire in Edgerton's downtown section about 12:21 a.m. Monday morning to battle a blaze which resulted in the total destruction of what formerly was known as the Schmeling building on Henry Street.

The three-story brick building built at the turn of the century by Henry Schmeling, in its day, was a popular dance site, drawing many well-known bands. The dance hall was situated on the third floor, remembered now by older residents as Academy Hall. Later, from about 1924 to 1940, the top two stories were used by the National Guard until they were called to duty.

The building was sold to present owner, Miles Durfee, Janesville, about 10 years ago. He converted the top floors to apartments, which recently were vacated before the fire.

Destroyed on the ground floor by the fire were The Pottery, owned by Helen Knudson; The Spa Tavern, operated by Dorothy Brown and Dobbins Enger; and Motor Parts Service, owned by John Vesek. The two-story Jensen Furniture store on the north side of the building suffered minimal smoke damage and a little water damage to the second floor, according to owner Robert Jensen.

Over a million gallons of water were poured into the building, according to Fire Chief Norman Yeske. Yeske said the cause of the fire is unknown, but that it was believed to have started between the second and third floors. He explained that at one point after initially arriving it was thought that the blaze had been extinguished. However, he added, the fire then erupted in the

false ceiling, igniting the whole structure.

Three major snorkel units were used by the three departments around the fire, which could be seen for many miles around. By the time most city residents were aware of what had happened, both the Stoughton and Janesville units had gone home, leaving the home department to handle flare-ups. The fire still smoldered Tuesday as a wrecking crane from the Janesville Construction Company ripped apart the structure.

The Pottery, which makes and sells porcelain wares, was to have been moved to its new Henry building location by May 1. According to owner Helen Knudson, moving would have started that day.

"Four more days and we would have been out," she said.

Even while firemen worked to save their store, employees of Motor Parts Service were arranging for their new site on North Main Street where business continued out of the firm's mobil parts van. (See adjoining story.)

About 45 firemen from all three departments listed were involved. Yeske said he couldn't say enough about Rock County's mutual aid agreement and the local mutual aid agreement with Stoughton.

The Fire Department Auxiliary stood by with coffee and other food for the local crew of firefighters, who battled the blaze for over 20 hours. Bar owner Jeff Schultz, owner of the Red Baron on W. Fulton Street, provided breakfast of eggs, bacon, potatoes and other items to firemen.

The Rock County Sheriff's department also assisted all night by helping to re-route traffic in the city.



The Janesville Construction Co. was called to the burned-out structure late Monday afternoon and began demolition work. The back of the building already had caved in, and, because he feared the front may do the same because of the large amounts of water poured on the building, Edgerton Fire Chief Norman Yeske ordered everyone to stay clear. A few items were recovered at the businesses.

Photos by Tom Thrun

The EDGERTON REPORTER

VOLUME 104 NUMBER 31 EDGERTON, WI 53534 SINGLE COPY 20¢ THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 1978

The Edgerton Reporter, Thursday, April 27, 1978

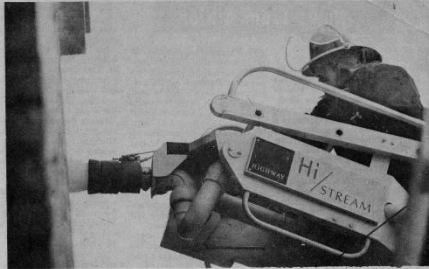


Henry Street Fire



Over a million gallons of water were pumped into the Schmeling building on N. Henry Street Monday by the Edgerton, Stoughton and Janesville fire departments. Top left: Firemen, from left, Gary Trulson, Jim Zabonek and Mark Backes fight the blaze from the roof of Mimmo Pizzeria. Bottom left: Firemen, from left, Dennis Harzid, Mike Reynolds and Steve French man the deluge gun from the middle of Henry Street. Top right: Fireman Tom Anderson directs a powerful stream of water from high on top of the Hi-stream ladder. Bottom right: Firemen Mike Reynolds and Ken Crandall use a fire escape for positioning on the rear of the fire.

Photos by Tom Thrun





After more than two months, the burned-out remains of a building belonging to Miles Durfee, Janesville, still stands as an eye-sore -- not to mention a health hazard in downtown Edgerton. The City served Durfee with a 30-day notice June 9, telling him to remove the mess and fill in the basement with gravel. Since then, the City has had to hire an exterminator to take care of a rat problem reported by local businesses on Henry Street. Monday evening, the City Council told City Attorney Stanley Slagg to begin preparing legal paper for a suit against Durfee, who will have 20 days to take action. Alderman Ron Semrau urged the council to consider a \$100 fine per day until the mess is removed.

City Condemns Durfee Building

The Edgerton City Council Monday night ordered the city building inspector to inspect and condemn the former Schmeling building, presently owned by Miles Durfee, Janesville, which burned on Apr. 24.

The council decided to give Durfee 48 hours to clean up the rubble which had been heaped on Henry Street for a week after Fire Chief Norman Yeske ordered the building demolished. Yeske said he notified Durfee during the blaze to tear the building down because of the hazard it presented but that Durfee failed to take action himself.

City Attorney Stanley Slagg said he also notified Durfee last week to clean up the demolished building and that Durfee promised to have a crew in on Monday. Aldermen reported that a couple men and an old ton truck appeared Monday to clean the mess and that at the rate he (Durfee) was going "it would take two months to clear the street."

Concern was expressed by many local businesses which use a nearby alley to supply their stores. They said trucks were not able to use the alley and had to back down the street to unload, creating a traffic hazard. Concern also was expressed about liability in the event that youths attracted to the pile may be injured.

"We were concerned to get it down, especially since he (Durfee) had no liability insurance," said Yeske, stating why he ordered the building demolished.

Attorney Slagg noted that if Durfee failed to comply with the notice that the city could remove the building and charge the cost as a special tax against the property.

Attorney Paul Merkle, Beloit, representing the Rock County Tavern League, appeared and asked the council whether or not the recently approved referendum defeating the sale of liquor in Edgerton on Sundays applied to the Towne Country Club, which has been selling drinks to members and guests on Sundays. "The Country Club is operating under the same license so they're in violation," said Attorney Merkle.

City Attorney Slagg said, "In my opinion, the council has the right to grant that exception if it wants to."

Alderman Henry Stockwell noted that the referendum was only an "advisory referendum" and that the ordinance granting the club the privilege of selling from noon to 8 p.m. on Sunday was still in effect.



Tuesday morning, the former Schmeling building in downtown Edgerton still remained in a heap in the middle of Henry Street. Owner Miles Durfee, Janesville, was given 48 hours to remove the rubble upon condemnation.

the taverns," said Yeske. "You have to be a member or guest. We've had a lot of people come up there and told them they couldn't drink. It's a private club."

Alderman Ron Semrau said the issue was over whether or not the taverns should be open on Sundays and that the Country Club had been drawn into the referendum only as a second thought. He said residents are not concerned over whether or not the club remains open on Sundays.

Since legal council for the club had requested to be notified if any discussion came up on the issue, the matter was tabled until the May 15 meeting.

The first reading of an ordinance to increase the Cable TV rate from \$6 to \$7 per month was given.

During discussion, aldermen asked why, if the ordinance had not been approved, they had been paying the increased rate since Feb. 1. Alderman Semrau noted that the company Total TV, Janesville, had misunderstood the approval for an ordinance to be drawn up on Nov. 7 for the go ahead with the increase.

Semrau continued that the first reading of the ordinance had been held up, pending the company's providing service to Earl Halverson, but that the company already had set about to reprogram its computers for the increase, which started in February.

City Clerk Norman Burdick, noted he received a call from Attorney Ken Buhrow this week

he paid only \$6 on the recent bills and wrote on them that the council had not approved the rate increase. He added that he had not been bothered for the extra dollar.

A proposed ordinance to prohibit underground utility work in the city from Nov. 1 until the frost goes out in the spring was withdrawn by Alderman Norman Yeske, who had made the suggestion at a prior meeting.

The council heard from Dave Buchholz of the Industrial Commission and from City Engineer George Weir, both of whom opposed the ordinance. They noted that the ordinance would hinder the city in planning for projects and that restrictions could be placed in existing ordinances which would provide for more quality control during construction of water and sewer mains.

Attorney Slagg and Weir both indicated that such restrictions as requiring certain types of back fill and tamping around pipes would be more costly. Yeske, however, noted the costs which the city has covered in repairs to damaged and broken pipes this last winter

and said it was worth the increase.

It was noted that federal money was available through the county to replace the Saunders Creek Bridge. The project cost was estimated at \$17,000, of which only \$6,000 would have to be paid by the city.

The council decided not to take advantage of the offer as there wasn't enough money left in the budget to cover the expense. Alderman Yeske noted that the budget initially had allowed for the project but that other projects not budgeted had been taken on, as well as over spending on others.

Engineer Weir said the money would be available for

Continued on Back Page