

The Riverfront Fire of 1849

Gentlemen, I can still smell the smoke, feel the heat as the fires burned all around me. I tell you, it was a tragic night, one I've never forgotten, one I hope is never experienced again by any man. This same wind you feel now, this constant breeze fueled by the river itself, it blew even harder that night. If you stood on the deck of one of those steamboats, you'd have to hold your hat down tight to keep it from ripping straight off your head and flying into the middle of the Mississippi.

I know. I was there.

Boats of all kinds used to line the shore. Steamboats. Flat boats. Barges. It was a constant source of activity. Work was hard. Pay was light. You showed up before sunrise, didn't leave until dark. Sometimes I'd catch on to a boat, float down to Memphis or New Orleans then jump another one back. Pay on a boat was a little better than the docks but you earned what you got.

I loved the open air. Watching tall trees and small towns pass slowly by. But my heart was always here. No matter where I ended up, I always found a way to return.

I remember the smell of hemp stacked along the docks. The hurry to load a ship so we could clear space for the next arriving boat. Such was life on the St. Louis riverfront back then. I started following my father to the docks when I was fourteen. I think my mother just wanted me out of her hair. I wasn't a bad kid, but I did occasionally find myself in some strange situations.

Once I borrowed the neighbors shovel to bury a rooster I'd popped with my hunting rifle. Got accused of stealing his tools. Guess I was lucky they didn't realize their prize bird was missing until a few days later.

Set fire to my mother's laundry. She had it all hanging on a line to dry. I thought a small campfire below it would help the process along. Wind kicked up, next thing I know mama's outside banging on the clothes with a broom. I kept telling her I was only trying to help but she wouldn't listen. Dad got me a job at the docks the next day. Probably saved my life because I think mom was ready to ring my neck with what was left of her favorite dresses.

You'd probably be surprised at the number of things a scrawny kid that age can do at the docks. I couldn't tow rope or lift supply boxes, but I could slip into tight spaces that most of the huge armed sailors couldn't dream of reaching. Me and my friends became a commodity, jumping from ship to ship, grabbing this, stowing away that.

And that's how the night started. I'd been assigned to the *White Cloud*. It was a steamboat that arrived earlier that day. Most of the bigger supply crates had already been removed but there was something packed away in a tight corner of the hold that required my special abilities. The day was May 17, 1849. It's the day the direction of St. Louis changed forever.

I've never told a living soul what happened in that hold. Guilt. Shame. Scared of my mama. Don't know why I kept my mouth shut for so long. Pretty obvious why I didn't say anything at the time. I was afraid I'd be hauled off to jail if anyone found out. Even though years passed and

memories faded, I kept my secret. Until today that is.

We sit here at the steps of the Old Cathedral, the only riverfront building still standing from that day. Heck, this building is probably the only reason the entire city survived. They were so dead set on saving it that they risked everything.

But all this is already known. The fire. The destruction. The history of St. Louis has been well documented. So what's my secret? Why is this day so important to me? Why have I counseled you gentlemen to have this ground preserved as a monument?

You folks know me as a businessman. You've probably wondered why I'd advocate, even push for something that will ultimately lead to the destruction of many of my own buildings. It all starts with what happened in the belly of that ship. My mother's laundry already knew I had a propensity to start fires. On that day, I found myself in a situation that I couldn't wiggle out of.

It seemed the captain had a stash of something hidden away behind a row of crates. I didn't ask what it was. He offered me twice the normal amount I usually got to unload stuff so I figured it'd be best to keep my head down and eyes straight ahead. I grabbed the sleeve of a friend and dragged him onto the ship. Only promised to share the normal amount. He didn't need to know my secret just like I didn't need to know the captain's.

We crossed the landing stage and found a bit of a commotion. A couple of sailors were beating the heck out of a filthy old mattress. Every time they hit it, a spark would fly out. As you can imagine, an uncontrolled fire aboard a wooden ship was not a good thing. None of the sailors would say how the mattress caught fire but they sure didn't want the captain to find out about it. After they'd beat the poor thing to death, one of the sailors kicked the remnants and asked me to stow it away in the hold. Well, he didn't actually ask me and I didn't feel like I had much of a choice in the matter. I grabbed one end, my friend grabbed the other. We weaved through some hallways and down a bunch of steps until we found a good place in the hold to fling it.

A row of crates stood against the back wall just as the captain had said. I remember inspecting them carefully, feeling around in near darkness to find the niche he claimed existed. I couldn't find it. My friend said we needed a little more light so he went to get a lantern.

I can't say his name. Haven't said it since that day. Everyone thought he died fighting the fire with the rest of us. I figured it was best to let his memory rest with that.

I heard him return but by that time I'd wedged myself so deep into a crack between two crates that I couldn't see anything. Once I'd squirmed as far as my skinny chest would allow, I reached my hand blindly along the wooden boxes until my fingers bumped into the wall of the ship. I felt up and down but couldn't find whatever the captain wanted.

My friend asked if I needed the light. He kept trying to shove the lantern into the crack with me. Somewhere between reaching for the wall and pushing him away, I got stuck. I wiggled and pushed. I'm ashamed to say but I believe panic set in. The harder I tried to free myself, the more the crates stacked two or three high started to wobble. I may have been too scrawny to lift those boxes but I could make them move.

It sounded like thunder. The boxes on top fell in an avalanche of wood and beans. Suddenly free, I threw my arms over my head and ducked. The main flow pushed my friend backward. When the crashing ended, the hold was dark again. I can still hear him moaning under the layers of all those supplies that came spilling out. I dug in the dark, trying to locate his voice while yelling for help. In a few seconds a dim light appeared. I didn't think to wonder where it came from, just knew I could see a little better. His voice grew quiet. The light grew brighter. I saw a

foot, then a hand, then his bloody head and closed eyes.

I didn't mean to do it. I didn't try to pull those boxes down on top of him. But there he was, still as a tombstone. Mama always said it didn't matter what my intentions were if everything went up in flames. He was pinned under a crate. The light kept getting brighter. Somewhere during his fall that lantern must have jumped out of his hand and landed square on the mattress. The same mattress those sailors had already beat the devil out of. Before I could react it was fully engulfed.

I honestly can't tell you what happened next. I know I ran. I know I left Seth under that pile to burn. Whatever was in those crates lit like a bonfire. I didn't realize what was really happening until I hit the deck but by then it was too late to return. Sailors ran in from every direction. I remember backing away, watching the flames build, watching the panic in everyone's eyes. I thought it was a bad situation but seeing grown men who'd spent their lives on the water flash that look of terror... I knew I'd done it. Lighting a few dresses on fire was nothing compared to burning down a boat, killing a friend.

It didn't take long for the whole ship to catch fire. By this time it was well past sundown. That glowing light against a pitch black backdrop must have caught everybody's attention.

Bells started clanging. More people charged onto the ship only to turn around and run back to the docks. It's like they gave up on trying to save her without even doing anything. They all just backed away and watched her burn.

The firemen showed up. Back then they didn't have fancy red fire trucks with ladders and hoses. They didn't even have a real fire department. It was all volunteer. They had a few hand engines and hose reel wagons but nothing to fight what was coming.

The *White Cloud* fell apart. It was at the bottom of the river within minutes of that first spark. If that had been the end then it still would have been tragic and I still would have been responsible for a death. The history books know it didn't end there. The *Eudora* on her right and *Edward Bates* on her left caught the flames before the river could put them out.

You may wonder how I remember those names after all these years. I've forgotten a lot of stuff in the course of my life but nothing about that day has been erased. I can recite a list of every steamboat lost that day.

The *Acadia*, *Adams Jacobs*, *Alexander Hamilton*, *American Eagle*, *Belle Isle*, *Boreas No. 3*, *Eliza Stuart*, *Endors*, *Eudora*, *General Brooks*, *Kit Carson*, *Mameluke*, *Mandan*, *Martha*, *Montauk*, *Prairie State*, and of course the *Edward Bates* and the *White Cloud*. More than that were damaged. More than I care to remember.

The *Eudora* sank pretty quickly, just like the *White Cloud*. The firemen were more concerned with keeping the flames that now shot ten, twenty feet into the night air from landing on rows of wooden warehouses lined along the waterfront. You'd really think with all that water just a few feet away that they'd be able to control things better. They tried. They didn't have any ladders that could reach the tops of those buildings. The hoses barely carried enough pressure to pump the water that high. But for a while it looked like they would win. That's when the *Edward Bates* started its death march.

We saw the hawser holding it in place catch fire. I remember someone saying the ropes would burn through. At first we didn't care. They would only keep the ship above water that much longer. Better to let it sink as quickly as possible. But it didn't sink. Something about that cursed boat kept it afloat. The moorings snapped with a loud crack. It started to float down the river, pushed by the currents and this same wind.

One-by-one, it touched every boat lined up along the riverfront. Ship-by-ship it spread the flames. We all ran down the shoreline in a panic, yelling to anyone who could hear us to cut all boats free. Let them float away on their own.

Some did. Some caught a favorable current and pulled away from the mayhem. Others... well, they got caught by the swirling water from the sinking ships. For them, the currents and winds worked to push them back to shore, only feeding more fuel to the expanding fire.

And those poor firemen, every time they'd put their attention to saving a building or cutting a ship's ropes, something even worse would be brewing behind their backs.

I remember watching the little flakes of light passing over my head. They danced on the river wind, flickering and dying just out of reach. That's when a horrible situation became much worse. Smoke preceded light which preceded a lick of flame which led to the roof of a warehouse becoming the first land based victim.

By the time hoses could be turned it was too late. We all knew what would happen next but it was unthinkable. Bales of hemp stood in stacks along the riverfront. Tons of other goods were packed into those warehouses. Every building for blocks was made of wood. It was that moment when you see the future and know there's nothing you can do to stop it.

For me it was worse. I knew how it all started. Over the years I quietly followed the investigations. They said sparks from the smokestack of a passing riverboat somehow landed on some fresh paint. Everyone agreed including me. How could I say anything different?

In the course of one night the entire business district of the town disappeared. And I watched it burn. I watched those brave men do everything in their power to stop it. I tried to help but at first they shooed me away, after all, it was no place for a kid. A few hours later they stopped caring who helped. I ran from building to building, untangling hoses, dipping the ends into the river when the city's water supply ran dry.

The further into the night we went, the more dejected we became. I slumped into a corner between two unburned walls. I wanted to die. I wanted the fire to eat my bones just like it did to my friend. I waited for someone to confront me. Somebody had to know it was all my fault. I must have been crying something fierce when a hand landed on my head. I knew it had to be the police, my father, or worse, my mother.

The hand belonged to a tall thickly built fellow. I'll never forget his face. It was smudged with soot and sweat but he had a strong jaw and kind eyes. He looked tired but not panicked like so many of us. He introduced himself as Captain Thomas Targee of Volunteer Company Number Five. I bowed my head, ready to confess. I never got the chance.

Hot ash rained all around us. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight. All I could smell was the thick smoke coating my lungs. Captain Targee grabbed my arm and lifted me out of the hole. He said I shouldn't despair. As long as anything in the city stood, there would be something to fight for.

I emerged from my darkness to see the truth. Entire city blocks were in ruin. People staggered around, lifeless shells devoid of reason or purpose. Captain Targee rallied them all. He pointed toward this Old Cathedral and said we had to save it. If the fire passed this spot then it would reach out from the business district and into our homes. He drew a line. Market Street.

A second fire had started to the south, another victim of the *Edward Bates's* drift. It moved toward the north through one of the poorer sections of town. I had friends that lived there. Just another example of the pain I caused.

As the main fire moved south and the smaller one burned north, it looked like they would

meet at Market Street which would lead to the Old Cathedral and then to the wealthier parts of town. More poor houses can always spring up but burn the rich folks to the ground and you might as well pick up stakes and find someplace new to live.

Captain Targee had a plan. He wanted to blow up a line of buildings along Market, make a kind of fire break there. He argued that if the fires met but didn't have anything else to burn then they could surround it and save the rest of the city. Most the other captains didn't like it. The idea of intentionally blowing up buildings after we'd already lost so much seemed anti-intuitive but nobody had any better ideas.

I was with Captain Targee when he gave his speech, standing a few feet behind him, watching the faces of those other men as they reacted to his idea. I was numb. Raw. I felt like the entire city was falling on my head. Captain Targee made all of us believe.

Riders were sent to the Federal Arsenal to get gunpowder. When they returned we all grabbed a barrel and took a building. I told one of the firemen that I wanted to help. Getting into and out of those buildings while pieces of burning roof falls down around you can be difficult. Everyone was tired but my legs were young. I was quick. I could get in and out faster than anyone else. It was the same reason they gave me a job on the docks in the first place. Besides, I had to do it. I had to do something to save the city my actions threatened to destroy.

I took a barrel into a clothing shop. The front window was full of mannequins draped in fabric of all different colors. I remember thinking how bad my mother would react if she found out I blew up a whole shop of dresses.

The next building was an office used by some of the supply traders. My father had an office just like it a few blocks north. It was probably already in ashes.

Flames from both fires got closer. There wasn't much time left. Other men were scrambling in and out of buildings, seeding their little packages of destruction. I took the last barrel I saw and ran into Nathaniel Phillip's Music Store. By then the walls of the room started to smoke. Time had run out. I gave the barrel an underhanded toss toward the offending flames that started to lick their way through the wood. I was as mad at them as I was at myself.

When I left the building, I didn't return to the firemen, instead I ran toward these steps. If this didn't work then I would burn with the city. That's when I saw Captain Targee run up to the music store. He must not have known I'd already been there. He had another barrel in his arms. Fire completely covered the roof of most of the Market Street buildings. The south fire was only a block away. As Captain Targee threw his barrel into the music store window, the one I'd left in there finally blew.

His plan worked. Their efforts to save this building allowed the city of St. Louis to continue on to this day. But it cost Captian Targee his life.

That night fifteen city blocks, at least two souls, and dozens of ships were destroyed because of me.

Do you see why I never told anyone? Do you understand why I've dedicated my life to rebuilding this land? Why I've solicited you gentlemen to make something great out of this riverfront?

Mr. Smith, Mr. Dickmann, Gentlemen, I'd like to thank you all for allowing an old man to ramble. They started digging a hole for me at Bellefontaine back when the World Fair came to town. I've kept that grave empty for the last thirty years. It won't remain empty much longer. I turned ninety-nine this year. The good Lord has allowed me to walk these grounds far longer than I should. Now I have to be content to sit and watch the world pass me by.

President Roosevelt has found it fit to add another great American monument to our landscape. The Washington Monument is a beautiful work of art, reaching high into the sky. I found business reasons to get me into the city so I could see it with my own eyes after it was finally finished. I'd love to go back to see the Lincoln Memorial but my wheelchair won't roll that far. I won't see this one either but to know that you prevailed, to know that one day a bright gleaming beacon to all our sacrifices will stand here, it makes an old heart jump.

If I close my eyes I can see it. A field of smooth green grass. People lining the waterfront, soaking in the history and beauty. The wind that brought so much destruction now providing a gentle lift to the hair of all its visitors. And in the middle of it all, a shaft, a building, an arch, something equally beautiful as those great monuments in Washington right here along the bank of our river to celebrate this hallowed land.

Tomorrow you'll meet with civic leaders to spell out our plan. For me, Seth, Captain Targee, and everyone else who lost a piece of their life that day, I want to thank you. Know that you'll always have an old man's deepest respect and appreciation.

May God be with you all.