

“Local Holocaust Of ’36 Left Lasting Legacy”
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Sometimes we learn things the hard way.

Such was the case 50 years ago today when a horrible accident in Ottawa not only stunned our community but alarmed people all over Kansas. The lesson so bitterly learned? It was the terrible danger of allowing flammable materials to be transported through populated areas.

It is an issue that does not seem novel amid the safety consciousness of today, but in 1936 that issue had not been addressed, and was simply waiting to explode.

On July 26 of that year, the explosion came, literally.

It was a typically quiet and drowsy early Sunday afternoon in Ottawa. Church was over, ties had been loosened, but many dinners were not yet on the table. Lack of rain had parched lawns and flowerbeds, but the heavy heat was stirred by a brisk southwestern breeze.

The tranquility of the hour, however, was suddenly broken at 12:49 when a small gasoline truck, heading north on Main, suddenly swerved out of control at the intersection of Ninth and Main. It broke off a street light on the northeast corner, rolled over back into the street, and burst into flames.

The driver and his female companion, both in their 20's, had no chance to escape and were killed in the inferno.

The scene was horrible enough by itself, but in seconds the accident became even more bizarre and frightening. Ripped open in the crash, the tank sent 2,163 gallons of gasoline gushing down the east gutter of Main Street. In moments a wall of fire followed, shooting down the three blocks to City Park “almost as fast as a person could run,” one witness later recalled.

The drought conditions quickly had yards in flames, with over a dozen homes immediately threatened with destruction.

The double alarm brought out not only the fire department but thousands of Ottawans as word of the spectacular inferno swept through town.

The fire department bravely fought the blazes despite having only one pumper and one “antiquated truck.” Firemen strung out 3,000 feet of hose to utilize nearly 223,000 gallons of water during the long afternoon.

The wind carried embers from burning trees and shrubs to porches, roofs, sheds and garages. Some citizens formed bucket and kettle brigades, used garden hoses, and beat out rooftop blazes. Others saved personal effects from endangered homes and even moved automobiles to relative safety in backyards.

Their efforts, however, were not enough for some of the residences. Four houses were destroyed, five others badly damaged by fire, water and smoke, and others had paint blistered by the flames. Many fine trees were also lost.

Embers ignited and burned down several outbuildings and garages as far away as the 700 blocks of Princeton and Hickory.

The four homes that were destroyed were the Weinheimer house at 825 Main, the Wisdom house at 829 Main, the Pettit house at 833 Main and the Cartzdafner house at 839 Main.

Back at the blazing truck, the gathered crowd would scatter momentarily each time one of the tires exploded. The wreckage burned for two hours before it cooled sufficiently to remove the charred bodies, the driver's corpse grimly being visible the whole time. The remains were

taken to McVey Mortuary, and the truck was dragged to the courthouse grounds where it drew more crowds of curiosity seekers.

Although the flames of the tragedy were extinguished, the flames of anger and alarm over the incident continued to burn and sweep over Kansas in the days that followed. Other communities worried if such a conflagration would strike them next.

Just two weeks before, Ottawa had been the scene of another gasoline truck accident and explosion, which killed a man at 18th and Main. The city commissioners therefore responded quickly by consulting state highway officials and promptly banned gasoline transport trucks, carrying more than 600 gallons, from the city. Other trucks were routed over the Seventh Street bridge and given load limits.

Other towns in Kansas, such as Iola and Newton, quickly followed Ottawa's lead in battling the "potential death demons."

A flurry of court actions followed which challenged Ottawa's authority to impose load restrictions and fines for offenders. While Ottawa's position did not always win, the momentum for tighter controls on the transportation of flammable materials in Kansas had begun. It is the one positive legacy of one of the worst and most bizarre fires in our city's one of the worst and most bizarre fires in our city's history.