

County has long history of severe fires

Early 1900s prairie fires larger than last week's

Last week's T-Bar Ranch Fire may have been big, but it wasn't the biggest in Sherman County history.

The T-Bar Ranch Fire has been estimated at 15,000 acres, according to landowner reports and aerial surveys. A second estimate from Wallace County firefighters put the total at 5,300 acres.

In either case, a fire on March, 1916, likely trumps last week's blaze. Articles from the Goodland Republic and the Goodland News called it one of the "most violent and destructive prairie fires within the memory of pioneers." The fire started about 18 miles northwest of Goodland in Grant Township and was finally stopped at the city limits.

Wallace Hansen with the Sherman County Historical Society said several of the farms that burned were at least three miles apart. Though an estimated area of the damage was not given, if the fire burned an area 18 miles long by three miles wide, it would have burned 34,560 acres.

As with today, one of the main factors in the spread of the fire was high winds. The newspapers reported wind speeds up to 50 mph. It took the effort of 500 men - nearly every able-bodied man in town - to get the fire under control. It was stopped within a few feet of the west ends of 13th and 14th Streets. Along the way it destroyed several farm houses and out-buildings along with crops and livestock.

At the time, nobody knew the cause of the fire, only that no controlled burns were happening in the area at the time.

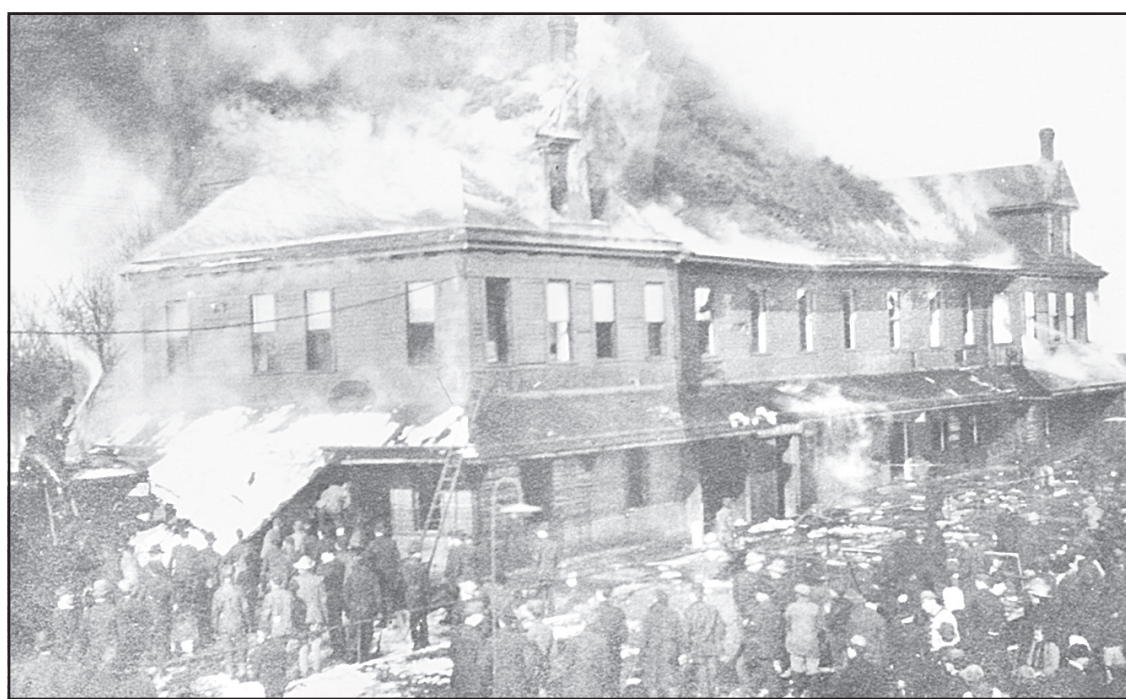
In 1907, two men were severely injured in a grass-land fire in the north part of the county. According to the Goodland Republic, high winds caused the fire to burn "as fast as a horse could travel."

It burned an area about 20 miles long by seven miles wide, or about 89,600 acres. It destroyed a bridge over Beaver Creek in Voltaire Township. Ed Ross and his father-in-law J.J. Phillips suffered severe burns while trying to fight the fire.

The fire was reportedly caused when a young boy - disobeying orders from his parents - burned a pile of weeds and other rubbish.

In March, 1910, two prairie fires broke out within two days of each other. The first, which started in Wallace County, burned north into Sherman County. The total burn area was nine miles by four miles, or 23,000 acres. Several buildings were destroyed, including a school-house.

This second was a controlled burn that escaped about 10 miles south of town.



The Rock Island Railroad Depot and Hotel (left) caught fire in 1909. The fire caused more than \$15,000 in damage. A devastating fire in 1949 (above) destroyed several buildings on Main Street between Ninth and 10th Streets.

Photos courtesy of the Sherman County Historical Society

Main street sees several blocks burn to the ground over 125 years

The city of Goodland has seen its share of fires as well, especially back when most buildings were made of wood. In 1894, a fire destroyed seven buildings on the west side of Main Street between 11th and 12th Streets. In December, 1896, the Palace Hotel at Eighth Street and Main caught fire, causing \$2,000 in damage. Some of the guests barely escaped with their lives.

In September, 1900, seven buildings on what was unfortunately known as "Smoky Row" the west side of the 800 block of Main Street, were destroyed in an early morning fire. The block included a saloon, apartments, a store-room, a paint shop and a law office. The only building on the block to be saved was a steam laundry.

Other parts of the town were in danger, but a passing rain storm helped quell the flames, though embers still blew as far as four blocks away.

The damage was estimated at \$8,000. None of the property owners had insurance. The Goodland Republic wrote that the fire was likely set deliberately.

"There is no question but that the fire was of incendiary origin," the paper wrote, "and was undoubtedly the work of the same party or parties who made an unsuccessful attempt only last week to burn the 'row,' but as yet no clue as to who set the fire has been found."

A \$300 reward was offered for the apprehension of whomever was responsible.

In 1903, a fire destroyed most of the west side of Main Street between Ninth and 10th Streets. The fire started in the back of the Harvey notion store in the afternoon of Jan. 7, and burned 12 frame structures including a hardware store, a meat market and a furniture store.

The 1937 Sherman County Herald called the one of the worst in the city's history. The damage estimate was \$60,000. The buildings were later replaced by brick structures, some of the first to be built in Goodland.

Though there were volunteer firefighters in town before then, it was shortly after these fires, the first Goodland Fire Department was organized. The first fire station was built near the Lincoln School by Main Street.

In 1949, four businesses and several homes in the same area - on Main Street between Ninth and 10th Streets - were burnt to the ground.

The fire destroyed Garrett's Pool Hall, White House Grocery, Frey's Furniture Store and the American Legion building as well as several homes.

The buildings were mainly wood frame with corrugated iron coverings. Firemen were able to save other buildings in the block, including the building that housed the Goodland

Daily News. The total damage was estimated at \$150,000, or about \$1.4 million in today's dollars.



Wood frame buildings burned to the ground along Main Street in 1903. The buildings were later rebuilt, some of the first brick buildings in the county. In the background is one of Goodland's earliest schools.



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In 1908, another block of Main Street caught fire, destroying several wood frame buildings.