

2006

## 18 Daily Local News coverage of the September 11, 1931 Goose Creek Fire

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### Recommended Citation

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# DAILY LOCAL N

WEST CHESTER, PA., SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1931

## ROARING OIL BLAZE PERILS CROWD HERE; THREE ARE INJURED

Flames Leap Hundred Feet Into the Air When Giant Asphalt Tanks Are Engulfed in Fire at Service Company in Southeastern End of Borough; Goose Creek Transformed Into Ribbon of Fire When Huge Containers Fall From Supports.

Origin of Fire Undetermined, But Believed to Have Been Caused By Discarded Match or Cigarette; Flames Play Along Quarter-mile Front, Endangering Homes and Property.

### UNDERWRITERS TEST FORTUNATE FOR TOWN

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### OIL-SOAKED DOG A FIRE HAZARD

Jonah, Jackie McCallin's Pet, Had to Be Kept Out of Reach of Flames During Big Blaze.

Jonah is a dog. Originally he is not a dangerous animal, but during the fire here last evening he acted in the same category as a stick of dynamite.

The reason for this was that Jonah fell into flames.

West Chester -- at least the southeastern end of the borough -- rubbed elbows with catastrophe last evening and came off scared by the contact but free of any irreparable damage.

Confronted by a roaring fury of flames and enveloped in billowing clouds of dense black smoke, fear-stricken householders, property owners and volunteer firemen from every end of town and every walk of life, battled into submission one of the most spectacular and dangerous fires in the history of the borough."

The fire broke out with awe-inspiring suddenness along a quarter-mile stretch of the oil-covered surface of Goose Creek, and in an instant engulfed five giant asphalt tanks of the Bituminous Service Company, Inc., at East Union street railroad crossing.

At once the mid-evening calm of the borough was shattered by the wailing shriek of fire sirens, the panic-freighted cries of men and women and the rush and confusion as thousands, in automobiles and afoot, converged upon the section threatened by impending tragedy.

## SIDELIGHTS ON THE BIG BLAZE

Exploding oil drums seriously menaced property and lives for several hundred yards on all sides of the blazing pyre, and stampeded an immense throng of people who crowded the intersection of Union and Matlack streets to watch the progress of the flames.

Orders were given by Fire Chief George J. Moses to disperse the crowd, but hundreds of men, women, boys and girls, and even little children, packed the sidewalks and a solid portion of Union street from the intersection of Matlack almost to the railroad tracks, within thirty yards of the fire. They watched the hissing fury of the flames with fascinated eyes.

Suddenly there was a deep-toned, reverberating "boom" from the oil tanks. A pillar of livid flame leaped several hundred feet into the air, rolled over in a billow of dripping oil sparks, and swept in a towering wave of heat towards the crowd. A gasp went up from the watchers. For one split second they were motionless. In that interval, someone screamed, and with one accord the mob turned and fled. In the tremendous rush, several people were knocked down, and at least one, Mr. Ashton B. T.

The blaze leaped into being at 6.50 o'clock and stubbornly resisted the efforts of firemen for fully three hours though within an hour it was driven back to within the limits of the oil company's property. Outside aid finally arrived with chemicals required to check the flames.

A match, a cigarette or a spark from a brush fire falling on the usually placid waters of Goose Creek, a small stream running the length of the eastern end of town, set off the conflagration. The creek had an hour or so previously being (sic) transformed into a stream of oil when two 10,850 gallon tanks at the Bituminous Company service year, fell from the supports and breaking, leaked into the water.

Flames shot upward from the creek to a height of fifty feet and above these rolled billows of smoke, visible for miles around. Frame houses on Magnolia street and a row of brick and frame houses on South Franklin street were seriously threatened by the fire. Sparks also flew across the railroad to the coal shed of J. Leon Haggerty, the P. R. R. freight station and the lumber yard of Hoffman and Baldwin.

The buildings in greatest danger were those along the creek on South Franklin street. Wooden fences bordering the stream were set ablaze and the fire worked towards the houses with unbelievable rapidity. Volunteers, old and young, tore down the fences and established a breach which the flames could not cross. Sparks however, set fire to the rear kitchen roofs of the homes of Lawrence Hamilton, William Montgomery and Nathan Shur. Chemical streams checked these fires before they could spread to a dangerous extent.

A small building in which were housed twenty-five or thirty chickens at the rear of Nathan Shur's home was destroyed in the first rush of the fire. The chickens perished in the blaze.

The Atlantic Refining Company sub-station on South Franklin street, less than 100 yards from the creek, was carefully guarded by employees and firemen until the fire was safely under control. Local officials of the company called their Philadelphia headquarters for aid, and within an hour an engine, especially equipped for fighting oil fires, was in town.

The Pennsylvania Highway Department equipment shed, the Escocabinet Company and the Borough Stables, all within a

Smith of 619 West Miner Street, was hurt.

Smith was caught in the crowd, and tripped over a rope when he attempted to flee, sustaining a broken right arm, badly fractured at the elbow. Another man, Claude B. Brubaker of Chatwood, was thrown into the gutter by a wildly excited group who plunged directly into him in the mad scramble for safety. An elderly man suffered injuries to his wrist when he was trampled in the middle of Union street, and a small girl, was knocked down as she attempted to flee, pushing a bicycle ahead of her. The bicycle was hurled to the road, and trodden under foot. George Newlin, Borough Controller, and assistant cashier of the First National Bank, was knocked down and trampled by the crowd, and suffered a severely cut arm and bruise.

The rush lasted for perhaps fifteen seconds. It was halted when several men shouted, "Stop running. Are you beside yourselves?"

Slowly the crowd subsided; women and children kept at a greater distance, and the street was cleared. Several persons, who had wildly sought shelter in some of the houses, which fronted Matlack street, came out into the open again.

The pillar of flame had shrunk to half its fury, but was still

hundred yards of the blazing creek, were for a time in danger. An old chicken house on the Adams property along Magnolia street was reduced to a mass of smoking beams and timbers before firemen could reach it and quench the fire.

Every piece of fire-fighting equipment in town was called into service, Water and chemicals were used in protecting properties and in checking fires along the course of the creek and in the neighborhood of the oil plant.

After the fires along the creek had been put out and that on the water had burned out, local firemen could do no more to stop the flames at the plant. At 10.000 (sic) o'clock Longwood Fire Company came with a supply of foamite and with this chemical quickly smothered the fire.

Ray Radbill, secretary and treasurer of the Bituminous Company, this morning set the damage at approximately \$20,000. No insurance was held on the property. Howard Worthington is president of the company.

Company officials explained that the oil first ignited was that used for "cold patch" in street repair work. It contains an inflammable solution not hard to set off. This fire heated the asphalt containers, causing two of them, the two which fell from their supports, to burst into flames. The remaining three, each containing a smaller quantity of the fluid, were far enough away from the flames to be able to withstand the heat.

Levi Lamborn and William Saunders, employees of the plant, were on duty when the fire broke out.

Telling of the experience, Mr. Lamborn said: "We did not see the fire until it was upon us. It came up the creek like a blast and seemed to cover the whole plant in flames and smoke."

"I rushed to take the cap off of one of the two tanks which were down, to prevent an explosion, the other one being already open, and then helped Saunders run our five trucks out of the garage, about twenty-five feet from the burning tanks. When the small oil drums began to explode we were forced to run to safety."

Lamborn and Saunders were sprayed with hot oil, but

blazing furiously. In the backyard of a house which stands on the corner of Matlack and Union streets lay the tank lid which had blown off and sailed through the pillar of flame, across the heads of the crowd, to light in a small garden.

Officers of the fire police were on the scene and helped calm the mob and direct traffic, and Patrolman Monaghan and Patrolman Dorsey kept the middle of Union street clear from Matlack to the tracks. The Fire Chief again warned the people of danger and ropes were sent for to establish a safety zone. Before the ropes arrived people had regained their confidence and drifted back into the street again. In a short time the crowd had swelled to almost its former size, although the people stayed farther from the blazing tanks.

Pandemonium broke out a second time, not many minutes later, when an oil drum of 250 gallons capacity, exploded with a loud bang and sent a shower of smoke and fire into the air. The crowd prepared to bolt again, but recovered in a few seconds, before widespread panic conquered them. Later still, a third loud explosion shattered the calm of the crowd, and dispersed a few. Gradually the mob began to drift away, and as the lateness of the hour advanced they broke up into

fortunately were not scalded.

Fire Chief George J. Moses is today investigating the cause of the blaze. "We will try to find out what started it," said the Chief, "but we don't have much hope of learning anything definite. We feel sure, however that it was not started deliberately. Anyone might have tossed a match or a cigarette into the creek without expecting it to have such a disastrous result."

The Bituminous Service Company is a new company in West Chester. Early last spring it bought the property on East Union street, adjoining the railroad, from the borough. This land was formerly the East Union street playground.

A little later in the year this company was awarded the contract for supplying West Chester with the asphalt and oil necessary for its street repairs.

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## **OIL-SOAKED DOG A FIRE HAZARD**

### **Jonah, Jackie McCallin's Pet, Had to Be Kept Out of Reach of Flames During Big Blaze.**

Jonah is a dog. Originally, he is not a dangerous animal, but during the fire here last evening he rated in the same category as a stick of dynamite.

The reason for this was that Jonah fell into Goose Creek just before the fire started and quite naturally was saturated with the highly inflammable oil. When the flames broke out, he rushed along with the crowd, but his little master, Jackie McCallin of 222 Lacey street, caught him in time and imprisoned him a safe distance from the fire until after it was put out.

Had Jonah got within striking distance of the fire, it would have been "hot dog" -- and no foolin'.

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## **UNDERWRITERS TEST FORTUNATE FOR**

little groups and stolidly watched from a distance.

Ropes arrived, and firemen from the First West Chester Company put up a barrier, with two red lanterns, near the corner of Union and Matlack streets, and on the opposite side of the railroad tracks. This left a large portion of Union street clear.

At the Market Street Station of the Pennsylvania Railroad Passenger Agent J. Walter Keech turned off the power of the electrified line, which was exposed to the fire at the point where a siding juts out to connect with the Bituminous Company's big tanks. Insulation on there (sic) wires began to blaze a few minutes after the tanks burst into flames, and it was feared for a while that the intense heat might melt the wires, and endanger the lives of the crowd if the current was not shut off.

When the danger was past, the current was turned on again, and traffic on the electric line was continued, with a loss of only about ten minutes. Trains arriving from Philadelphia unloaded passengers at Niels street, below the station, and passengers who wished to embark were taken from the station to the trains in taxis. Extra cars, uncoupled at Niels street when the trains returned to Philadelphia, were permitted to accumulate on the tracks

## TOWN

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until they became obstructive. When the flames had abated a little a train of six of these cars, all empty except for the crew, were sent into the station, filing past the flames at a snail's pace.

Blazing insulation continued to threaten, and firemen took a hand extinguisher and quenched the flames on the overhead cables as soon as it was possible for them to approach that close to the blazing tanks.

Several airplanes circled above the crowd and took pictures of the fire before darkness settled. As night came on, the dense clouds of black smoke were less noticeable, and the sky became illuminated with a rosy glow that could be seen for miles. Explosion of the tank and the dozens of steel drums could be heard for more than a mile in every direction, and brought added hundreds to the scene from the outskirts of the town.

### GIVE DETAILS OF FIRE.

Thrilling accounts of the fire are told by eye witnesses.

One man watched the fire from its origin, seeing it tear up Goose Creek to the tanks and drums of road oil. He is William Patton, colored, of 507 South Franklin street. Patton was cutting wood in the yard at the rear of his home when his son, Devere, called to him.

"I looked up," Patton said, "and saw a huge pillar of black smoke. Down the creek was a flood of flame and gas, which rolled up with lightning speed. Boy, it sure was traveling! In less time than it takes to tell the whole creek was blazing, while wildings nearby had already begun to smoulder. Then it reached the tanks and soon after blasts began."

Patton said the flames on the creek alone were over twenty feet high. Every time an oil drum exploded a fiery tower of flames and dense black smoke would shoot up in the sky for over a hundred feet.

W. A. Faddis, 138 Niels street, an employee of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was in the watch box at the Union street crossing, which is within few yards of the field where the road building supplies were stored.

It started to get hot," Faddis said. "Hotter and hotter. The heat was so unusual I looked out the window. Man! I might have been looking through a furnace door! An inferno was across the street, blazing before my eyes!"

Faddis immediately took steps to handle traffic over the crossing.

Warren J. Conner, of Chatwood, manager of the West

Chester division of the Cities Service Oil Company, was one of the first to arrive. He was eating supper when his wife looked out the window and saw an immense cloud hundred of feet in length ending in a black funnel.

"Warren," she cried, "Your tanks are on fire!" (The Cities Service Company has two 10,000 gallon gasoline tanks mounted across the street from the Bituminous Service Company's lot).

Conner jumped into his car and sped to the scene. He parked his machine as near as possible and then dashed breathlessly across the fields to the gas tanks. He took precautions to prevent the sparks and flames from igniting the gasoline. His prompt action probably averted a catastrophe.

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**COUNTY FIREMEN TAKE ACTION ON RECENT OIL FIRE. Recommend State Require Owners of Such Property to Protect Nearby Places**

**SESSION IS HELD IN PHOENIXVILLE. Business, Social and Entertaining Features Make Up Program for Members from All Sections of the County; Reports Are Made By Officers.**

Just twenty-four hours after the big oil blaze in this borough Friday night, the Chester County Firemen's Association in its meeting in Phoenixville, went on

Among the reports of the officers, the Financial Secretary, George B. McCormick, referred to the delay of many members In

Secretary Elmer F. Schrupf, of Downingtown, who had called the roll of the officers and the companies, and had read the minutes of the

<p>record as recommending a State Act which will compel the owners of all oil tanks and similar property to construct and maintain "dykes" around their property so as to prevent the flow of any leaking contents to adjoining property. This action was taken after John W. Rhoads, Captain of the Fame Fire Company, No. 3, of this borough, had given a graphic account of the fire which alarmed the southern end of West Chester, at the request of John V. Nolan, President of the County Association,</p>	<p>the payment of their annual dues and death assessments, due in measure to the "hard times." President Nolan spoke on this same matter and urged the members to sustain the Association by the payment of their dues.</p>	<p>August meeting, held in Modena, called attention to a circular relative to the several fire companies taking some action with the State Public Service Commission, in securing lower rates for electric current, gas, water etc., from the local Public Service Companies. A hearing on the adjustment of rates is to be held in Harrisburg, on September 18th.</p>
<p>The visiting firemen were the guests of West End Fire Company, No. 2, and were heartily welcomed by Chief Howard J. A. Smith, William Bourton, John and Herman Doebllng, and other active officers and members of West End.</p>	<p>The Treasurer, E. Vinton Philips, of Downingtown, made his monthly report on the finances, showing the receipts and expenditures since the August meeting at Modena, and these balances now on hand: General Fund, \$229.83; Relief Fund, \$357, after payment of \$100 on the death of LaFayette C. Gilmore, at Avondale, on August 4th; the Special Fund, \$90.29; Relief Dues, \$149.80; total balance, \$826.92. The Trustees reported investments of \$1,500.</p>	<p>On motion fifty dollars were advanced to Edward H. Spence, of the Brandywlnre Fire Company, No. 2, of Coatesville, who was elected delegate of the Chester County Association, to attend the annual convention of the Pennsylvania State Firemen's Association, to be held in Wilkes Barre, Pa., commencing Monday, October 5th.</p>
<p>The meeting was called to order by Past President Herman Doebling, in the absence of the President of the Company, and then prayer was offered by Dr. John K. Evans, of Malvern. President Nolan, of Malvern, welcomed in his usual cordial manner, the firemen to the meeting, and introduced George W. Lee, of Royersford, the First Vice President of the Keystone Chiefs' Association, of which organization Mr. Nolan is now Acting Secretary, since the death of Secretary Fred Heed, of West Cheater, several months ago. Mr. Lee spoke briefly of the Fire</p>	<p>Chief Fire Marshal Frank E. Soule, of Coatesville, stated that he had no official report to make on the fires during the past month, because the Fire Chiefs of the county had not filed any reports with him. He took occasion to speak of the death of Squire Robert E. Long, President of the West Grove Fire Company.</p>	<p>Secretary Schruppf reported that he had printed 600 applications for membership, and the bill for said printing was ordered paid.</p>
	<p>Oscar Large, of Paoli, called the attention of the firemen to the use of streams of water in close vicinity to the many high-tension wires that are becoming so common in this</p>	<p>A vote of thanks was extended to Went End Fire Company for is hospitality, and after tho announcement that the October meeting will be held in Oxford, on Saturday night, October 10th, the meeting adjourned.</p>

Chiefs' Association, and invited the firemen to attend the annual convention, to be held in Royersford, on Saturday, November 7th. Brief remarks were also made by George Clemens, of Royersford.

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