

in 1934 Blaze destroyed Chicago yards in brief afternoon



by Frank Harding

In 1934, Frank Harding, then a cattle buyer at the yards and now head of Harding & Harding, livestock insurers and importers, was an eyewitness to the burning of the Chicago Union Stock Yards. Harding's portrait was recently added to the Saddle and Sirloin Club gallery, once at the famed Chicago facility and now at the Kentucky State Fairgrounds, home of the North American International.

On May 9, 1934, I was a cow buyer working for Armour and Company on the Chicago Union Stock Yards. It was a Saturday and after the usual morning chores I went to the University of Chicago to watch a tennis match between Amos Alonzo Stagg Jr.,

and Scott Rexinger who was then the Big Ten champion. I was sitting in the stands facing west when I saw a tall pillar of very black smoke rising in the sky. It did not take much geographical knowledge to know this had to come from some part of the stockyards or "Packingtown."

After commandeering a friend to drive and drop me at 43rd and Emerald, about two blocks from the front gate of the yards, I found the streets were already tangled with fire hose and equipment. The blaze was going full blast, not unlike a prairie fire. It appeared as though the start of the fire had been in the far south end in the feeder cattle division. There was an overhead auto bridge spanning the area and probably someone had flipped a lighted cigarette butt which set off some dry fodder or bedding below.

The pens and sheds were wooden and flammable so the front of the fire spread south rapidly. There were very few cattle on hand, hold overs or pen holders. There was

Chicago's Union Stock Yards prior to 1934 fire. View is from the northwest corner looking south. The covered long buildings (1) in the foreground were for hogs and sheep. Beyond them toward the center is the Live Stock Exchange Building (2). To the upper left you can see the Independence Hall Tower (3) on the Livestock National Bank. The large building to the south of the bank (4) was the purebred record building, home of the Saddle and Sirloin Club. Beyond that the Stockyard Inn and beyond that the old amphitheater where from 1900, the Chicago International Livestock Exposition and show was held. Fire ravaged entire yards to (5) Armour Buyer's station.

nothing that could be done about them. They were unsightly grotesque balloons when the clean-up came. The only human life lost was an old watchman who was likely sleeping.

At once, I got in the act, as did many non-professionals, trying to move blocked equipment and hauling hose. There just did not seem to be much abatement and the southwest wind did not help. The fire had a very broad front but somehow it did bypass the Armour main office and some of the pens around it at the west side of the yards. The exchange building and peripheral buildings were entirely gutted, but the fire was checked at Exchange Avenue. The east front came down Dexter Park Avenue destroying out-buildings and the horse barns. It circled the old amphitheatre which had been built by my Uncle Samuel Barstow Harding. The fire resembled a big red caterpillar as it ate around the base until the whole structure collapsed like a pancake.

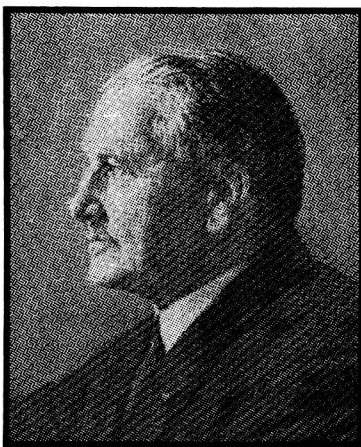
From there, the flames moved on to the Stockyard Inn, then made short work of the office building adjoining the purebred record building. My father, Frank W. Harding, was at the time secretary of the American Shorthorn Breeders Assn., so when his office went up with the blaze it hit me what a job of record reconstruction there would be.

At the time there was a group of 27 Polled Shorthorns destined for Australia that had been gathered and were laying-over at the amphitheatre. Homer Thieman had charge of the project. He had foreseen what could happen so he used all the quarters and small change he could put together to enlist kids and men to lead the cattle across Halsted Street and over two blocks to a playground on Union Avenue. There was no loss.

The next to go was the purebred record building on the top floor of which housed the Saddle and Sirloin Club. When I saw that burned out with all the paintings and memorabilia I really felt sick. The Livestock National Bank was next with the distinctive Independence Hall Tower. About then the wind changed and all the hundreds of pieces of fire fighting equipment seemed to get control and set up a perimeter.

I decided I would get out. All the watering holes, of which there were many across from the yards on Halsted were knocked out so I walked north until I found one that was

operating. I assessed the situation at the bar for much of the night. In fact, here is where I spent the night. I realized that the estimate for Monday's run called for 27,000 head of cattle and the numbers of sheep and hogs I can't recall. This was at the height of the



Frederick Prince ordered restoration as first priority in order that the International could be held at its traditional time.

great drouth liquidation and about 25,000 head of the run was expected. This would make about as large a total as the yards had ever handled.

At the light of day on Sunday, we started to gather at the Armour and Company cattle buyer's office which stood on Exchange Avenue just where the fire stopped. It was only singed. The fire had not jumped Exchange Avenue into the north end of the yards, a part which consisted of sections known as the Burlington, CuBa and the large two-decked hog and sheep houses at the north boundary and the railroad docks and unloading facilities. At that time the bulk of all cattle came in by rail and a lesser number by truck.

The railcars started rolling in and packer buyers, order buyers, speculators, commission men, drivers and all sorts were involved in getting the stock out to make room for the next line of cars. We packed every available pen below and above ground, sometimes yarding cattle on top of hogs. I don't

know how those old buildings kept from collapsing under all the weight. At least we knew we could sort hogs and cattle but we had to keep consignments separate and after all had quieted down it was amazing how orderly the job was done. Somehow, we kept track of where about everything had been put.

Only the men that worked for the yard were supposed to have keys for the big locks on the pens but there just were not enough 'keyhos,' as they were called, so somehow I got me a key and put it to good use. It still hangs on the wall behind my desk.

There was not much haggling in the trade at that particular time. If a salesman could get himself a buyer from Armour, Swift, Wilson, or any independent who could somehow move and find a home for animals, they traded. There was little or no sorting. Often one price went for the whole load which could be really mixed with cows, steers, heifers, calves and bulls. Some of the killing figures we got from the packing houses for a while were hard to analyze. Sometimes a seller and a buyer would look the load over in cars, agree on a price and we would unload that lot without yarding it, then weigh it and get in on the way to the killing floors or stash it some place until we could get it going.

There was confusion, but it was organized. The commission firms that had been burned out of the exchange building threw up shacks all along the main alley east of the exchange building. I forget where the Livestock National Bank set up for processing the money aspects of the trade but I think the Drovers Bank, which was outside of the yards, filled in. I did not leave the area for most of the week, just slept on benches and desks in the buyer's office.

The remarkable thing was we stayed in business, and more wonderful was the immediate reaction of Frederick W. Prince of Boston who controlled the entire Chicago Union Stock Yards and any activity inside that area or in the central manufacturing area. Mr. Prince gave Arthur G. Leonard, director-manager of the yards, an order that he wanted the amphitheatre complex rebuilt as a priority in the reconstruction so that the International Livestock Show could be held at its usual time in November. He also wanted the Saddle and Sirloin Club restored and as many portraits replaced as was possible. That is what I call some order, but in less than six months it was done. The International went off housed in its new and far better home. The Saddle and Sirloin Club was opened and serving, as was the Stockyard Inn. Over 100 of the portraits had been replaced and were hanging.

Perhaps you can understand my on-going enthusiasm which carried on for many years in the yards, the shows and the Saddle and Sirloin Club until finally various pressures forced the closing of the yards, and it's activities located elsewhere. **AJ**

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