

Two Edwards Fires: (1)School (2)Village

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"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory..."

The following account is not guaranteed to be historically accurate. At age seven I was not a trained observer and reporter, but I was so frightened that the event made a lasting impression that remains vivid today, more than seventy years later.

According to Velma Hall's diary, it was February 17, 1922 a minus 40 degree day, when the schoolhouse caught fire. It was early forenoon when Eddie Beach, the janitor, appeared at the door of Mrs. Petrie's third and fourth grade classroom. He had just come back to school from an errand, probably getting the mail, and had seen the fire on the roof. There was a class bell in the lower hall just outside our door, and Mrs. Petrie pushed the bell long and hard. The principal, Mr. Bacon, came running, and there was instant evacuation of the building. Later the third graders said, "Mr. Bacon was white as a sheet; Mrs. Petrie was red as a beet!" There was a back door to the two rooms at the back, and the first four grades were sent out into the snow. The teachers then quickly gathered our coats, toques, and overshoes and dumped them from the back porch. We scrambled to find our wraps while pupils were leaving from all doors.

When I went around the corner of the building, some of the older boys were coming from the front, and I was amazed to see Olney Boulet jumping around with glee, shouting, "The schoolhouse is burning down!" Then I could see the fire on the roof. It looked about the size and shape of a 9'x12' rug, covered with hundreds of tiny birthday candles. I don't remember any big flames. I don't remember any firemen, nor ladders, nor hoses, but after a short time we were allowed back in the schoolhouse to pick up our books and other possessions. I saw Lucille Ward put her geography book on the desk, neatly stack her other books on top, and calmly leave. My arithmetic book was on top of my desk (it nearly always was, but not because it was my favorite), and I grabbed that and started for home carrying my overshoes, my coat unbuttoned, weeping and disheveled. Gladys O'Neil met me on the street and bundled me up for that bitterly cold day. To this day I marvel that the firemen (whom I don't remember), with very little equipment, were able to put out the fire with minimal damage and no injuries. We had two or three days of vacation.

On that same frigid day the home of the superintendent of the mines, Mr. Wade, also burned, and the house of Sammy Morris caught fire, but did not burn.



The old Edwards High School, circa 1915

"All Edwards Is Afire!"

A little more than five years later there was another fire which was potentially much more dangerous. Our parents had gone to Gouverneur, and my sister, Helena, and I were supposed to do the dishes before we turned to our own entertainment. It was April 15, 1927, a very windy day. As we dallied over the dishes, we glanced out the kitchen window and saw a huge billow of black smoke rise up in the direction of the village. I was always alarmed at the thought of fire, but I decided the smoke came from the freight train. After the dishes were done, we played "dress up", and forgot all about the smoke until Mabel Meldrim and Lucille Ward came, out-of-breath, with the news that there were fires all over town, and that Mabel had already saved Sadie Brown's chicken house. They said that there was a fire on the other side of the hill from our house so we started for that area. We found a small grass fire. Ernie Tinney was watching it, letting it burn itself out as it approached a rocky outcrop. By that time, most of the scattered fires had been extinguished, but the idle Woodcock sawmill on the riverbank, where the fire had started, continued to burn for days. This is the entry in Velma Hall's diary: "Old sawmill burned today, an awful fire, but they saved the house and barn. Mrs. Hooper's house, the blacksmith shop, Dr. Adams', Willie Woodcock's houses all caught, but was put out. Nearly all the grass in the village was burned over. A truck with hose was up, and the fire engine from Gouverneur was here, came up in fifteen minutes. I was over there and the hill back of the house burned over."

When my parents came home they said they heard in Gouverneur that "All Edwards is afire", and that the Gouverneur firetrucks had been requested.

The cause of the fire was presumed to be the freight train which had delivered coal or grain to the Woodcock feed mill, and could have set the dry grass afire from a burning cinder. According to rumor, the New York Central offered to settle, but Milo Woodcock wouldn't accept their assessment of damages. Litigation went on for years with a final settlement less than the original offer.

