

Wierd Causes Were Behind McPherson's Biggest Fires

By Ed Weillepp

Every small town, while it is growing up, has its share of major fires. McPherson had its share, too.

But it is doubtful if any city in the United States can produce the weird causes and contributing factors of its big fires that McPherson can.

Take the time in 1883 when a solid block of Main Street burned. The fire started in a pool hall and got out of control when the pool hall hangers-on carried out the tables instead of fighting the blaze.

And the time in 1893 a mill caught fire and burned down because the water was turned on before the hoses were connected.

Or the time the city failed to pay its water bill and the water company refused to turn on the water and the First National Bank burned to the ground in 1898.

Then The Plant Burned

And the time the water and light plant burned in 1910 and no one could locate the fire because they couldn't call the water and light plant to find where it was.

Or the time in 1911 when the Colburn Mill burned and there was no water pressure to fight it because the light plant was still being rebuilt and repaired.

Or maybe you like the time when the Maltby Building burned in 1932. All the firemen were at a fireman's convention in Wichita and no one knew how to run the equipment.

The list is long, the incidents rare.

First One In 1883

McPherson's first really big fire, not counting houses and livery stables, occurred on Friday, March 3, 1883. At 10 o'clock that night a small fire broke out in the rear of a pool hall between Marlin and Euclid streets on the west side of Main. According to the McPherson Republican:

"There are various reports as to how the fire originated but from what we can learn it was caused by someone going out into the back room of the billiard hall and throwing down a lighted cigar or in some other careless way setting the room on fire. When the fire was discovered the people in the billiard saloon, instead of giving the alarm and trying to put out the fire, which could have been done with a few buckets of water, set at work carrying out the tables. This idiotic performance resulted in the loss of the block."

Everything Went

And indeed it did, for the frame buildings of that day went up like tinder. A strong north wind fanned the flames and at times the heat was so great that buildings on the other side of the street broke out in flames. The county courthouse, located in the McPherson Town Company building, was on the site of the McCourt Hotel. When it became apparent that it, too, must go, all the records were saved.

At first the volunteers were going to blow up the building, then they decided to pull it down, but both plans were abandoned.

In a short time every building in the block facing Main, and some on Marlin and Euclid were a pile of ashes. The loss was estimated at \$55,000 to \$60,000, a lot of money for 1883.

On April 12, 1883, the first fire company was organized with J. C. Hamilton as chief.

Eagle Mill, 1893

The next great fire broke out at 1 a. m. in the Eagle Mill on August 8, 1893. The cause was unknown but before the volunteers could get their hoses connected, someone turned on the water. The delay in getting the error corrected allowed the fire to get out of hand and the mill burned to the ground.

Loss was estimated at \$25,000 by the owner, A. F. Brulin.

For the next five years the fire front in McPherson was fairly quiet. But trouble was in the making.

On June 7, 1898, the city owed the Western Water and Electric Company \$1,650 in back water and light bills and the company discontinued service.

First National Bank

Shortly before midnight, July 3, 1898, a fire was discovered in the third floor of the majestic First National Bank building which stood on the present Grand

Building site. The hose cart was hastily brought to the scene but there was no water.

After a bit of arguing and the use of a pistol, E. H. Heithecker and F. D. Entriaken convinced W. E. Stout, plant engineer that he should turn on the water. By this time the building was a mass of flame.

The building and all the offices and shops in it were destroyed. The loss was conservatively estimated at \$75,000. The building itself, built in 1887, was valued at over \$43,000.

Loss was incurred by Laderer's Clothing store, the abstract office of Allison and Champlin, the Citizens' State Bank, Broughton's Music Store, Larimer's Tailor Shop, E. W. Hulise and Co., real estate; Lindsay and Russ, M. Bradley, Allison and Wright, Dr. G. H. Matchette, and a wall fell into the G. L. Conn bakery.

A heavy rain was falling, which helped prevent the destruction of the entire block.

But the merchants and professional men found new stores and offices, the building was rebuilt, and life again settled into the old routine.

March 4, 1908

It was shattered, however, on the night of March 4, 1908, when fire and explosion swept through three buildings at the corner of Euclid and Main. Badly damaged were the Sorenson Bros. Grocery, C. W. Engborg Drugs, and Hawley Brothers Hardware. Although the fire was confined to the second floor of the buildings, losses ran over \$10,000.

Three firemen were injured in an explosion of unknown cause and two firemen were overcome by smoke.

The Water Works Burned

In 1908 the city had shelled out \$52,000 to purchase the water and light plant. On July 23, 1910 it burned to the ground.

The fire was discovered about 9:40 o'clock and the night engineer tried three times to call the telephone operator to report the fire. Failing in this, he started blowing the light plant whistle. Firemen rushed to the fire station, got out the hose cart—and couldn't find the fire. Five minutes later the telephone operator called the water and light plant to ask where the fire was.

By the time firemen arrived flames were shooting 15 feet into the air. In an hour and a half the plant was a pile of rubble. During the course of the fire a thrashing machine was hooked into the water system to maintain pressure, since the plant's machinery was out of action.

The city figured it lost \$20,000 in the fire.

While the new light plant was being rigged up, the Colburn Brothers Mill, formerly the Queen Bee Roller Mills, chose an extremely bad time to catch fire.

Colburn Mill 1911

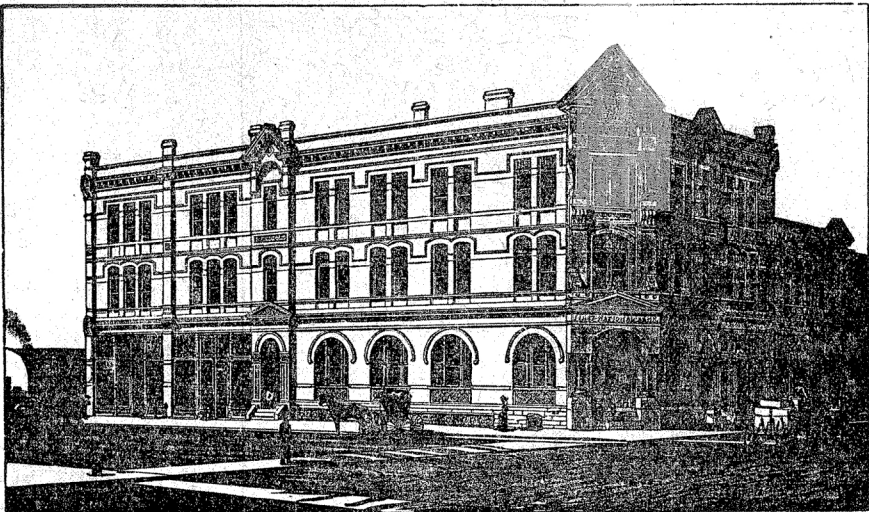
The mill was built March 31, 1880, and stood on the site of the KBR Mill. On March 8, 1911, at 7:10 o'clock at night, fire was discovered on the second floor. For a long time the first just burned inside the walls but suddenly it broke through the roof and the night became "light as day." Cinders and sparks were carried hundreds of feet into the air.

For a time the Santa Fe Depot and warehouse, the Colburn office and the McPherson Lumber Company were threatened.

Twenty-five thousand bushels of wheat in a steel elevator were damaged but the metal bin held up. Five thousand bushels of wheat and 2,000 barrels of flour in the mill burned. The loss was estimated at over \$100,000.

And while all this was going on, the firemen were trying to get water pressure enough to reach the second floor of the towering mill. For at this time the three old water pumps at the water and light plant were out of order and only one small pump was working. Try as it might, the small pump couldn't keep up with the streams of water being drained out of the standpipe by firemen. The water level went down, the pressure went down, and the mill went down.

An attempt was made to turn the standpipe valve for direct pressure, but the valve was so clogged that it couldn't be worked



THIS IS THE First National Bank Building, an imposing structure which stood on the site of the present Grand Building. During the night of July 3 and early morning of July 4, 1898, this building burned to the ground when the water and light plant manager was "difficult" about turning on the water.

free.

Of course, the firemen were at a disadvantage in that they had only enough hose to run three streams of water.

A Death Occurs

The only death known to have occurred in a fire in McPherson (other than in a home) was on April 12, 1933, when Mrs. Mary McGowen burned to death in the Grand Building fire. The fire started in the Union Bus Depot and before it had burned itself out it had destroyed the depot, Morris and Sons, Stanley's, all offices on the second floor and had done smoke and water damage to Lawson and Sweeney's, next door.

Those who lost offices included Drs. L. H. Quantius and W. C. Heaston, owners of the building, A. H. Dyck, C. A. Lytle, V. C. Price, and L. R. Reiff; attorneys James Galle, Archie MacDonald and Russ Anderson, George Allison and Ralph Moore.

Lindsborg's fire department was called to give assistance and by 7 o'clock the next morning the fire was conquered. It cost \$200,000.

The Lumber Yard Goes

Every town must, at some time or another, have its lumber yard fire, and McPherson had its on June 13, 1933.

A truck parked in the Lake Superior Yard, located on the corner now occupied by the Safeway Store, caught fire about 10 p. m. In a short time the lumber yard was ablaze and the fire had spread to the Maltby Building. The furniture store of Quiring and Quiring was gutted and other businesses damaged included the Pearson Millinery Store, Bridgeport Supply Co., Nelson Grocery, Shafer's Bakery, Family Barber Shop, Boots Bootery, Nu-Way Cleaners and Joy Cafe.

Fire departments from Hutchinson and Lindsborg were called in to save the downtown area. So intense were the flames that the McCourt Hotel and the Talbot Building caught fire and windows were broken in the McPherson and Citizens State Bank. Damage was estimated at over \$150,000.

Most of the members of the volunteer fire department were in Wichita attending the State Firemen's Convention and great difficulty was experienced in getting the department's pumper truck into operation.

A Paid Department

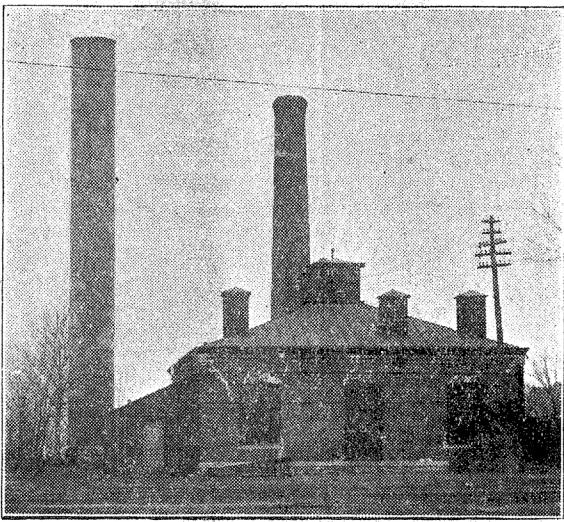
After these two disastrous fires within a few weeks, feeling ran high in McPherson for a paid fire department. H. G. Lindgren was brought in, new equipment was purchased and a full time, paid fire department was organized.

Since Chief Lindgren took over, there has been only one serious fire in the business district and that occurred at the Daily Republican on Jan. 16, 1940. Principal damage at the Republican resulted from smoke and water rather than from the actual fire. The paper's largest and most expensive linotype machine fell through the weakened floor and part way into the basement.

However, "the show must go on," and through the help of other printing firms in town, the Republican continued publication without missing a single paper.

Perhaps some big fires in the city's past history have been missed. The years are long and after a while one fire begins to look like another. These few examples are probably the outstanding and most spectacular in McPherson's history.

With modern buildings and a modern fire department—there should be no more.



THE McPHERSON WATER AND ELECTRIC PLANT, pictured above, was purchased by the city from the receivers on Nov. 24, 1908. It burned to the ground on July 23, 1910, ending a long and financially unsuccessful life.

Last Buffalo Died In McPherson City On East Euclid In Hunt In 1873

Just about 74 years ago, the last buffalo was killed within what is now the city of McPherson. The story of the buffalo hunt is told in a letter written in 1909 by Mrs. C. M. Kinblade, telling of the exploit of S. C. Kinblade in his words:

"One day in the spring of 1873 . . . a large buffalo came stalking along not so many rods from the house . . . Of course, we all rushed to see so unusual a creature. I grabbed my navy revolver and started for the sod stable for a horse. Petrie said for me to take his pony as it was all ready to mount.

"By this time the buffalo was 40 rods away, but I lashed the pony and kept after him. I succeeded in turning the buffalo in a southeasterly direction towards McPherson. The pony soon abandoned the chase."

"The next day more buffalo came in sight from the direction

where the county farm now is located. I jumped on one of my horses and with my navy revolver, I and my brother Charlie succeeded in steering the whole bunch onto the town site. There every man and boy armed with everything imaginable joined the chase.

"One big fellow broke from the rest in the south part of town and ran northeast. Requesting that I might deal with him alone, the boys turned their whole attention to the other six. I followed the seventh one and when ever I would get close enough to shoot he would turn on my horse which, not being used to that kind of stock, would wheel and dart away. I finally got near enough to shoot and my bullet went clear through him, just behind the shoulder. After a few gave out and the chase was abandoned."

"The next day more buffalo came in sight from the direction

The Grass Grew Tall In '70s

A newcomer to McPherson not so long ago, seeing young wheat in the fields, commented, "My what pretty grass." When McPherson was founded it was grass that grew as lavishly as does the wheat today.

In 1866, grass seven feet high covered the land in many places. Early settlers seeking corner stones couldn't find them in the tall grass and B. F. McGill, early McPherson city settler, came to McPherson because a traveler told him the soil was good because the grass grew so thickly.

Southwest of McPherson blue-stem grass grew four to six feet high and the sod houses in which the early settlers lived had roofs covered with long grass. North-east of McPherson short, velvet-green buffalo grass covered the fields.

Other early settlers tell of seeing the fields around McPherson bright green with new grass shoots that rippled in the wind as it began to grow again after a prairie fire.

In the early days of county's history the bluegrass was thick throughout the county and early records tell of wintering 3,000 head of cattle in the western part of the county without feeding a single ton of hay.

Perhaps the only area in the county where grass was not abundant was among the rocky rises of Battle Hill township, but the rest of the county was well supplied with the long bluegrass and the shorter buffalo grass, even as it is now well supplied with the grasslike young wheat crop.

Who Needs Bridges?

When Mrs. T. J. Darrah, then a small youngster, came to McPherson County from north of the Smoky Hill river, it was at flood stage and couldn't be forded. There was no bridge.

Her father solved the problem. Emptying provisions out of a large wooden washtub, he put Mrs. Darrah and two younger children in the tub on the river. Then, unhitching a rope from the oxen, he and two older boys in the family swam the river, towing the tub and three children behind them.

Who needs a bridge when he has ingenuity?

Money Meant Little Then

Money? What's that? Seventy-five years ago many of the McPherson pioneers might have asked that question. They did get three to five dollars a load for the bleached buffalo bones they gathered on the prairie and sometimes received some money for their crops. But there was little money in circulation.

A great deal of the trading was the trading of raw materials. Farm products could be traded for cloth to be made into clothing. Much of the clothing was sewed by hand in the home. When some of the neighbors bought sewing machines, the rest of the neighborhood was allowed to use them. About the only clothing the women did not make, were the overcoats for the men bought from the Army for about three dollars apiece.

No News Was Bad News

Miss your newspaper last night? News is pretty old when it's a day late but day-old news is fresh compared to that which the earliest settlers in McPherson got.

The news of the outside world found its way to them in weekly papers. Sometimes those papers were three weeks old or more before they got around to the last persons in the neighborhood and the papers were almost worn out.

The early settlers read those papers at night around their coal oil lamps when they read at all. Their reading was quite seldom and coal oil was scarce. Besides, coal oil cost 75 cents a gallon.

But the old settlers did get their news.

Cowboys, Cattle Went Through But Without Stops

While the wild west of the 1870's was noted as a cattle country, McPherson County and particularly McPherson city was never in the heart of the great cattle range.

Marquette did see many Texas cattlemen drive their herds through there on the way to Abilene and later to Ellsworth. The Santa Fe trail, too, was a popular cattle route.

Alex Hendry, who settled near King City in 1872, said, "It was no uncommon sight to see several thousand Texas cattle driven by Texas cowboys through to Abilene on the Trail. These cattle were big, longhorn steers. . . You could hear a constant rattling as they moved along, knocking their horns together when they were crowded. They were a wonderful sight with eight or ten cowboys driving them."

"These Texas cowboys maintained a rendezvous on Turkey Creek with the frontier life corresponding to that of Dodge City several years later. They made it their stopping place . . . and many noted frontier characters stopped there, especially bandits."

Texas feuds were common, several men being planted on the prairie."

A number of settlers bought Texas cattle from passing herds, broke them for oxen, used for milk cows or butchered for meat. At one time more than three thousand head of cattle wintered in the western part of the county.

Thomas Finam, who settled in Turkey Creek township, had there a huge ranch and thousands of cattle with the Finam brand over the land. Other cattlemen often rove through.

So although not in the midst of the storied Wild West of the cowboys, McPherson county in the 1870's, as now, saw its share of cattle.

Simple Furniture Then

Furniture, in the homes of the early settlers, was extremely simple. Beds were of the type called cord beds made by boring holes in the side and end boards and weaving cord or rope back and forth both ways to hold up the home made, grass filled ticks.

Slabs of wood, cut and split from logs, with axe and wedge, were used to make stools, benches, tables and other furniture. The heart of a young cottonwood tree made a good rolling pin. Over the bed was a framework to which was attached netting to protect the sleepers from mosquitoes.

Custer Stationed At Stone Corral

Just at the close of the Civil War, when Indians were still troublesome in the new Kansas country, McPherson county's protection from the Indians was built on Little River just over the present border of Rice county.

The protection was what came to be called the Old Stone Corral. There in a huge stockade was stationed the United States 7th cavalry.

By 1872 the fort was abandoned but the stones which formed a square rock wall were used by settlers to wall up their wells.

But in 1866-67 the Old Corral was surrounded by a stockade of large cottonwood logs set end upon end. The 7th Cavalry built huts there in which to live while they guarded the settlers on the Smoky from the Indians. Just 10 years later a Lieutenant Colonel who had been at the Old Stone Corral was to lead that cavalry Regiment to its death in Montana. The Lieutenant Colonel, a general in 1876, was George Custer.

Historian Tells Stories Of Pioneers And Early Days In McPherson County

By Jessie Hill Rowland

The McCormicks were early pioneers and were in the Marquette cyclone. He was a cripple and in the storm landed on a feather mattress in the cellar. She became a cripple by the cyclone. They lost everything. In excavating they found silver spoons in the debris. They often interited a large sum of money but squandered it and then were in want. In their old age a pension was their means of support, and their kind friends, among them the Maxwells, often remembered them. Mrs. McCormick was great on social life. She played her part in pioneer days by helping with recreations.

When my husband was fifteen years old he, with others, was freighting from the Missouri River to Santa Fe New Mexico and Denver. He was on duty to watch the cattle. After supper he pilloved his head on the rump of a steer and was certain if anything happened he would be awakened. The steers made a stampede for water and owing to the cloudy weather they could not be found. He wandered about for four days without anything to eat. He came across some scattered corn and knew that he must be getting close to settlement. He turned in near Salina and obtained food from a kind farmer. At Junction City he fell in with General Blunt who was enroute for Fort Leavenworth.

The Darrahs located a ranch on the Smoky in '69. Shortly the land became homesteaded and they moved their ranch to Cow Creek in Rice County, a couple of miles from Lyons. Mrs. Potwin's grandfather, Mr. Lowrey, was called back to Ohio and left her father with the Darrahs as they were neighbors.

In November of '71, a terrible blizzard swept the country. The streams froze and the buffalo grass was snow covered. Carcasses of cattle would make bridge-like paths across the river where steers had gone for water and were too weak to move farther. The Perdue and Howard firm turned out 3,600 head of cattle and the next spring only 1,800 head were alive.

Mr. Howard in '73 married Miss Hodson, a cousin of J. W. Jenkins. She went to Salina to get her wedding outfit. Not the ready kind we buy today but spent a week on her return making her clothes on his Singer sewing machine.

Miss Belle Larimore, a high school teacher here, later married Judge Earl. She and her brother, on a claim near Chase, lived entirely on corn meal one winter. A lady I met after coming to McPherson who said she worked for a family in early days that lived on boiled potatoes for three weeks.

Claus Lindell was cook at Jim Byron's ranch. The house consisted of three rooms planked up and down and lined with muslin. A party of us went to the wonderful sandhills for plums—the only fruit besides wild grapes and elder berries obtainable then. We stopped at this ranch. He had made four cream pies and the best biscuits I have ever eaten. In the afternoon they killed a veal for the party.

The social life was not neglected. As early as 1874 a club consisting of 12 couples was organized in McPherson by Thomas E. Simpson and Mattie Day Murphy. It was named by Judge M. P. Simpson "Koinonke Saphrasunt," a Greek phrase which means "Temperance in all things." I have been told that all the members were college graduates. Of that company there are only two members left. Dr. Murphy of Los Angeles and Mrs. Carrie Davis of this city. I was a guest at a banquet in the first hotel in Lindsborg built by Mr. Henry. Of that guest list only two are left, Mrs. George McClintock and myself.

We had neighbors who attended the Centennial '76. They brought home a \$300 Studebaker buggy. It was remarkable in those days for most of us were fortunate in those days if we had a seat in a lumber wagon. Tom Darrah also attended the Exposition and visited relatives in the east.

Dan Heath who built the house which George Allison lives in was to have been married at Newton but because the streams were swollen they were unable to cross. They sent for John R. Wright who was a justice of the peace at that time. At their tenth anniversary, J. R. Wright told me that his shoes were so full of holes that he blacked his socks so that the holes would be less conspicuous. That was before the days of black socks.

Several years ago when I attended a Congregational State As-

sociation in Leavenworth I talked with O. B. Taylor a wholesale grocery man. He spoke of my husband being his schoolmate when they went to school to H. D. McCarty. He was the first state superintendent. Every evening for six weeks the boys got licked for not having their arithmetic lessons. They had taken up three part arithmetic against McCarty's wishes and the boys were not sufficiently advanced for it. However he made them stand by it and take the consequences.

Grasshoppers Came In 1874

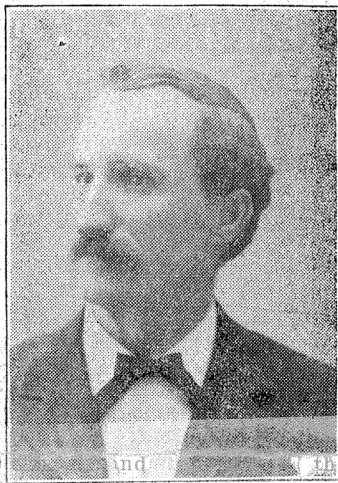
In August, 1874, a great black cloud came out of the distance and settled hungrily on McPherson county. The cloud was millions of grasshoppers.

The pests came one morning and as they advanced through the county left barren ground behind them. They fell like a heavy snow on everything—crops, tools, clothes, anything that was visible.

The young crops disappeared before the ravenous horde which left not even the stems of plants behind. Hoe handles and wooden tools that had grease on them were eaten until they were so rough they couldn't be used. One woman's sunbonnet was eaten off her head. The bark was eaten from young trees. The noise of the grasshopper's wings rose above that of the threshing machines.

The grasshoppers stayed just a few weeks but when they disappeared they left behind destroyed orchards, damaged harnesses for the horses, ruined fields.

From throughout the country food and clothing were sent to the early pioneers to see them through the winter after the grasshopper plague. This relief from the east was sent not only to McPherson but to many portions of Kansas where the nests struck.



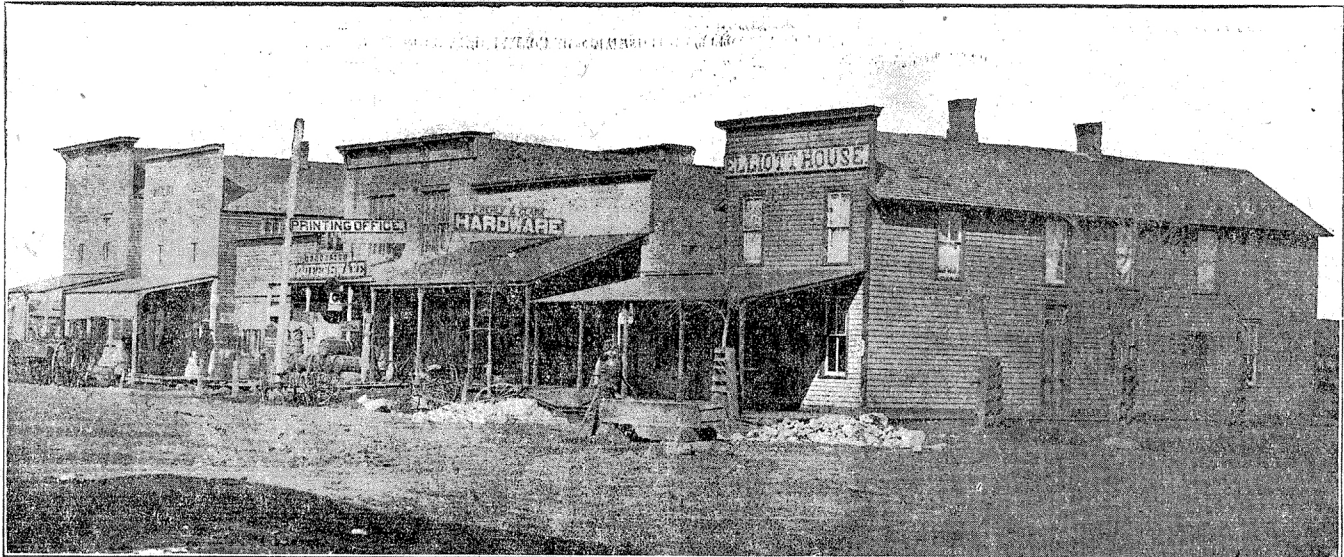
G. L. McCourt, 1874—Harness and saddle maker, councilman for years and mayor of McPherson. owner of Union Hotel now the McCourt.



A. SELLERS, 1895—30 years a pioneer editor in Kansas then hardware dealer in McPherson.



M. T. FLETCHER, 1881—Farmer, stock shipper, banker, mayor of McPherson.



WHEN TREES STARTED TO grow on Main Street. This picture is a section of Main Street on the east side between Marlin and Euclid in 1880. In front of and to the side of the Elliott House can be seen newly planted trees. The store marked "Printing Office" is the site of Walker's Cafe and is one of the oldest stone buildings in McPherson.



IF YOU LOOK HARD ENOUGH you can find the McPherson Meat Market in this picture of the east side of Main Street between Kansas Avenue and Marlin back in 1880. Wagons and saddle horses found plenty of hitching posts for their convenience in those days. That's the Farmers & Merchants Bank next door (to the right) of the Meat Market.