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Courthouse fires documented by State Historical Society

PIERRE, S.D. -- Fire destroyed the Corson County Courthouse in McIntosh on April 10. The 2-story wooden structure, built in 1910, burned to the ground.

The cement vaults of the courthouse were all that was left standing. The vaults did their job, though, as most of the records were saved, although a little scorched and damp. This was the last wooden-framed South Dakota courthouse still in use.

The Corson County fire prompted Carol A. Jennings, Government Archivist for the South Dakota State Historical Society at the Cultural Heritage Center, to research other courthouse fires in South Dakota. Jennings' research revealed that fire destroyed four other courthouses since South Dakota became a state in 1889.

The first courthouse to burn was the Hyde County Courthouse at Highmore. It was a large 2-story frame building completed in June 1886. The town of Highmore was awakened by the clang of the fire alarm at 3 a.m. on June 20, 1892. Townspeople quickly went to work to save what records and furniture they could.

All records from the register of deeds and treasurer's offices were saved. But the sheriff and county superintendent of schools were not as lucky, as the contents of their offices were totally destroyed. It was believed an arsonist started the fire.

Another fire occurred at the Grant County Courthouse in Milbank on July 30, 1895. The wooden building was built in 1881. The alarm was sounded about 5 a.m., but the fire burned quickly, with heat so intense there wasn't a chance for anyone to enter the building.

Miraculously, nearly every record of value was saved, although some were scorched and wet. The books and papers of the county superintendent of schools and the state's attorney were destroyed.

"It was a mystery how the Milbank fire started," Jennings said. "Some speculated that tramps may have started the fire while sleeping in the court room, as the front door was always left open. Subsequent developments soon dispelled this theory and public sentiment finally settled on the conviction that it was the work of an arsonist."

Several of the records from the register of deeds' vault were missing. Townspeople believed they were removed and then the fire was set by a loan company assistant expecting to cover a get-rich-quick scheme.

In the early morning hours of Oct. 6, 1901, fire consumed the Hanson County Courthouse in Alexandria. Within an hour of the alarm, the building had burned and the walls and

chimneys of the courthouse fell. The building, completed in 1885, had a wooden frame, veneered with Yankton pressed brick.

The treasurer and auditor's records in the vaults were safe. The school superintendent and sheriff's records were all destroyed. The heaviest losses were the valuable records of the clerk of courts and the probate judge. Their safe was not large enough to hold all the records.

On Nov. 11, 1910, the Tripp County seat was permanently located at Winner, following a bitterly contested fight with the town of Lamro, the temporary location of the county seat. Hoping to become the permanent site, Lamro residents built a courthouse in the summer of 1909. The courthouse building was moved to Winner after the county seat fight.

The courthouse, a 2-story wooden building, was completely destroyed by fire on Jan. 15, 1911. Since Winner had no fire protection, the townspeople were unable to do anything but stand and watch the courthouse burn. All of the records in the building were destroyed except those of the county attorney. Ironically, the county commissioners rented a vault for the auditor and the treasurer, but it was not being used.

"The fire in McIntosh proved that fire is as destructive today as it was in the past," Jennings said. "The safes did their job, when used, and saved most of the county records. Courthouses hold valuable legal and historic information. Corson County was not the first to lose a courthouse as a result of fire, but hopefully it will be the last."

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The South Dakota State Historical Society is an office of the Department of Tourism and State Development and strives to help the state meet the goals of the 2010 Initiative by enhancing history as a tool for economic development and cultural tourism. The society is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.sdhistory.org for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.