

# LANDMARK INTER OCEAN HOTEL RAVAGED BY FIRE

By Richard T. Ammon

Cheyenne's most serious fire resulted in the deaths of a family of six and destroyed a downtown landmark on December 17, 1916. The blaze that devastated the old Inter Ocean Hotel apparently started when wires shorted in the lady's third floor bathroom on the north side, center of the building. Although the fire was contained mostly to the third floor, water and smoke damage to the first and second floors rendered the building and its furnishings a near total loss.

Roy White, an overnight guest with his family, fearing no way out of the inferno and gripped by panic, flung himself through an open window at the back of the building, even after being told not to do so by another hotel guest. White fell onto a network of 2,300-volt power lines less than five feet below the window and was electrocuted.

Succumbing to the smoke and flames were the other members of his family to include his wife Lily and his children, Francis, age 7, Donald, 5, Guy, 3, and infant Hubert, 9 months. All five were found on the fire-ravaged third floor. Although the baby was found alive, it later died at St. John's Hospital (now Cheyenne Regional Medical Center).

Firefighters withstood extremely cold weather to battle the blaze from the first alarm about 10 o'clock that Sunday night until the fire was extinguished at 4:30 the next morning. By daylight, ice four inches thick surrounded the hotel and ice sickles hung from every remaining part of the building.

Prior to the fire, the aging Inter Ocean had serious structural problems. The Sixteenth Street wall of the building had an outward bulge of over a foot and workers had placed a scaffold across the front and up to the roof in order to repair the situation. By using this scaffolding, firemen were able to train hoses on the flames from various angles.

Initially, an off-duty employee discovered the flames on the third floor and immediately notified the night clerk. In turn, the clerk reported he dispatched the bellboy to warn everyone in the hotel while he called the fire department and then called all the guests by telephone. Nineteen-year-old C. W. Scidmore, the bellboy, said he took command of the situation, running the elevator to the top floor, and yelling for people to get in. He indicated he carried several packed loads of scantily clad and panicky patrons to safety, all "shouting and screaming". "They fought like wild men to get into the elevator," he reported to authorities.

On what Scidmore said was his last trip to the third floor, he was told there were babies in a rear room. Leaving the elevator, he told reporters he rushed down the hall and broke open a door to the room occupied by the White family. There, he was quoted as saying he found an infant lying on a bed nearly suffocated by smoke. Wrapping the baby in a blanket, Scidmore detailed that he staggered out of the room in the dense smoke with flames coming ever closer. He reached the elevator and took the last two or three people down with him. The elevator equipment, he said, was so hot, it burned the palm of his hand and later required treatment at the Plains Hotel, where a temporary infirmary was set up. However, it should be noted firemen found that same elevator parked about a half a foot below the sill on the *third* floor.

Early in the commotion, the hotel proprietor, Ed Brown, said he got to the third floor and used several fire extinguishers in an attempt to bring the lady's bathroom blaze under control. He told officials the chemicals would not reach the base of the inferno, which soon swept over the entire ceiling above him. He left the area and began hurrying guests out of the building.

Interestingly, it was determined from the hotel registry that only ten guests, six of whom perished, were on the third floor at the time of the fire and only fifteen more in the entire hotel. Far fewer than the number the bellboy had reported.

The fire spread rapidly. By the time the firefighters arrived from less than four blocks away, the fire's glow could be seen in most of the third story windows. In one of those windows, a man was yelling for help. As the flames got closer, he attempted to jump, but was coaxed back inside. Through the use of a ladder lifted onto the roof of the large canopy on the east side of the hotel, the man was soon rescued.

The fire department's aerial ladder was used to bring down a lady with her young baby and a man from the third floor. This was the second fire she and her infant had gone through in less than a week! She'd been rescued from a serious fire at the Chugwater (Wyoming) Hotel where she'd lost all her belongings just days before.

Ironically, at the same time of the Inter Ocean fire, there was a major shop fire in the Union Pacific yards three blocks to the southeast. The cause of the blaze was initially determined also to have been bad wiring, but there was speculation that ashes from the hotel inferno might have sparked the U. P. shop fire. Although there was enough

water pressure from the year-old Round Top pumping facility to fight both infernos, city fire chiefs determined there was eminent danger to Cheyenne's entire business district should the blaze at the Inter Ocean get out of control. So, at the railroad's urging, they let the railroad paint shop burn down, keeping it contained to the single building.

Newspaper reports told of over 2000 curious on-lookers crowding the downtown area, many placing themselves on the Union Pacific viaduct, which afforded the best view of both fires. My father, Don Ammon, who was on that overpass, told me he and other sightseers put out dozens of hot ashes that fell onto the mostly wooden structure, averting yet another fire.

Curiously, December 16<sup>th</sup> was the one-year anniversary of a devastating fire in the Capitol Theatre across the street to the east of the Inter Ocean. Though the theater, then used for vaudeville, was destroyed, no one was killed in that fire. As a footnote, the same theater was gutted by fire in the late 1970s as a cover-up for a burglary. At that time, it was called the Paramount and was never rebuilt.

During the coroner's inquest held two days after the hotel fire, the afore-mentioned heroic Scidmore description of the chaotic fire scene was found to be inconsistent with that of the fire authorities. Apparently, the night clerk and the bellboy upon smelling smoke decide to personally inspect the situation on the third floor instead of sounding the alarm. As taken from the *Wyoming Tribune* newspaper of December 21, during the inquest, "Scidmore said that about 9:15 or 9:20, more than a half hour before the alarm was turned in, he had told S. H. Campbell, clerk of the hotel that he had smelled smoke and that they two (sic) had gone to the third floor to investigate. No fire was found in the building at that time."

Quoting again from the inquest testimony and the *Wyoming Tribute*, "That C. W. Scidmore, bellboy at the Inter Ocean, and according to his own story – prominent in the rescue of a number of guests of the house, did not bring the White baby from the building as he had claimed in his testimony of the morning, was a fact developed by further investigation late yesterday evening.

"Following the examination of city firemen Michaels, Wade, Murphy, and Federlien who declared that they had assisted in bringing the child from the third floor down the ladder, Scidmore was recalled to explain the connection with the alleged rescue. He first insisted that he had carried the child from the hotel out to the scaffolding in front of the building and to safety below. Questioned more closely, he admitted that he might have started to take the child out, and, on account of the heat and smoke have left it in the hall where it was found later by B. F. Michaels of the city fire department and carried to a window and down the ladder."

The woman with the baby and the man who were rescued by fire fighters from the third floor told the jury they received no danger warnings of any kind, not even by telephone. The proprietor of the Inter Ocean refuted that claim, saying his staff had made every effort to warn everyone by phone. Yet, another guest said she never heard her phone ring in her third floor room.

The coroner's report finally placed the blame for the deaths on a number of problems within the hotel. No red lights were used above the doors designated as exits and all the fire extinguishers were located only on the first floor. The fire hose on the first floor wasn't connected or ready for use. There were two lines of hose on the second floor but neither had been touched during the fire. The hose on the third floor was "still in its rack and unused on Monday morning".

But the biggest contributor to the deaths at the Inter Ocean was the lack of fire escapes. The fire chief told the inquest the Inter Ocean had been condemned for more than twenty years for the lack of escapes! Laws in Wyoming had yet to be written demanding the use of such equipment, but the Inter Ocean inferno helped legislatively move things along. The chief said there were at least twenty more buildings in Cheyenne without the safety escapes where the public was dangerously in peril. In fact, most of the third floor rooms of the ill-fated hotel didn't even have escape ropes, which was typical for the times and could have been used easily to climb down to the ground.

Ed Chase, the hotel's owner from Denver, carried only \$20,000 insurance, which would not have covered the entire loss of \$35,000. Chase, his lawyer, and his architect called on City Hall four days after the fire and ask to have a meeting with the city commissioners. He wanted to start repairs on the old site as soon as possible.

From the *Wyoming Tribute*, "The commissioners informed these gentlemen that they would allow no repairs to the building. The attitude taken by the commissioners was that the building would have to be torn down and rebuilt and conform to the code and ordinances now in force. Chase made no comment except to state that the city was perhaps right in its contention."

Although a story about the history of the Inter Ocean appeared in the *Wyoming Tribune* a couple of days after the fire, it was obviously incorrect. A later article cleared up the misinformation that the hotel was built before the railroad reached Cheyenne and over the years was expanded to what it was in 1916. It stated in the original article that somewhere along the line a Negro..."Charlie Ford"...bought the hotel. The second article set the record straight.

Barney L. Ford, the Negro to which the story referred, did come to Cheyenne in September 1867 before the railroad laid tracks into town and built what was constantly touted by the *Cheyenne Leader* newspaper as the city's finest restaurant. Soon, Ford added a small hotel next door. Both facilities in the three hundred block of west

Sixteenth Street had concrete walls, but when the massive two-block fire of January 1870 burned to the ground the majority of Cheyenne's business district, it did little to save Ford's buildings and both businesses were consumed. Ford's two structures were two block further west from the site of the later Inter Ocean Hotel.

Ford left for Denver where he bought another hotel, also called the Inter Ocean in the area today known as "Lo Do". He returned in 1873 to start construction of Cheyenne's 56-room Inter Ocean. It cost Ford either \$38,000 or \$65,000, depending upon which Wyoming State Archive records one wants to believe and was completed in 1875 with the official opening on September 1st. Undisputedly, it was the finest hotel between St. Louis and San Francisco with all the very best amenities.

Because of the influence of very rich cattle barons in the city, the Inter Ocean had many "firsts". In 1883, it was the first hotel in the United States to be lighted by alternating current electricity, using 16-candle power bulbs, and the first hotel to have telephone service in the lobby. It was the first in Wyoming Territory to have bathtubs and flush toilets. In 1887 P. S. Cook installed the toilets in separate bathrooms on each floor. Cook was told to complete the construction as fast as possible to not inconvenience customers. He and his crew worked three days and nights without sleep to get it done. The hotel was first in the Territory to have an illuminated sign.

All rooms, the barbershop, and the billiard room had running water from a large tank on the roof. The dining room was famous for its cuisine to include wild game as a specialty. Fresh oysters and fish were packed in ice on the Coasts and raced across the continent by the Union Pacific to Ford's hostelry.

After owning the business for only a few years, Ford sold it to John Chase of Denver to satisfy creditors. He then, again, went back to Denver and made a lasting name for himself in Colorado politics. Upon Chase's death twenty years later, ownership was transferred to his brother, Ed, who had it leased to Brown at the time of the fire.

A popular watering hole in town was the bar at the Inter Ocean. In his 1901 conversation with Denver Marshall Joe LeFors, the infamous killer Tom Horn observed, "If you go to the Inter Ocean to sit down and talk a few minutes, some one comes in and says, 'Let us have a drink,' and before you know it you are standing up talking, and my feet get so [expletive deleted] tired it almost kills me. I am 44 years, 3 months, and 27 days old, and if I get killed now I have the satisfaction of knowing I have lived about fifteen ordinary lives." Not long after Horn's comments to LeFors, he was arrested in the Inter Ocean's saloon and charged with the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy. He had only minutes earlier in a drunken stupor admitted to LeFors he had killed young Willie Nickell. Actually, Horn was only 41 years old at the time!

The bar was in the front of the hotel on the southwest corner along Sixteenth Street. It sustained no fire damage, very little damage by smoke or water, and was reopened for business two days after the fire, although the hotel was still closed!

The Inter Ocean was truly a genuine landmark of the Wild'N'Wooly West! It was the scene of gambling for high stakes, Deadwood gold and shelter for many nobles. In the early days before the Capitol Building was constructed, the Territorial legislature would meet in the parlor and inauguration balls were held there. In over 40 years, many dignitaries and eight Presidents stayed at the hotel including U. S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, William McKinley, William H. Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson.

Most artists who entertained at Cheyenne's Opera House stayed at the Inter Ocean. Some of the most famous were Shakespearean orator Edwin Booth, brother of Lincoln's assassin John Wilks Booth, Sara Bernhard, who spoke and sang only in French, Lily Langtry who was scorned by those who attended her vocal performance, and Army scout-turned-actor Buffalo Bill Cody. For the opening of Opera House, the famous Comley and Barton Opera Company from New York's Fifth Avenue Theatre stayed at the hotel. Special trains from Fort Collins, Colorado, and Laramie, fifty miles to the west, brought in an opening night audience. Many of them took lodging at the Inter Ocean, a block north of the train depot and a block south of the Opera House. It was said owner John Chase deplored actors in his hotel and preferred they stay somewhere else, but always accepted their money.

The Plains Hotel was built a block to the east in 1911 as a replacement for the aging Inter Ocean. Many visitors were loyal to the old hostelry, but there was little doubt it had lost much of its luster. At the time of the fire it was being repaired and remodeled to help correct its sagging character.

After several years as a vacant lot, the Hynds' Building was completed in 1922 where the old hotel once stood next to Capitol Avenue at 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Harry Hynds stated, "No one will ever die in a fire in one of my buildings!" Only steel, stone, and concrete make up his structure, as there was no wood used in its construction. However, what appears to be wood in the lobby is actually stone, skillfully painted by artists.

The Inter Ocean Hotel, with all of its grandeur and celebrity, passed in one fateful night, taking with it the glitter and glory of the true Old West.