



Postscript: Fire(s) in Benkelman

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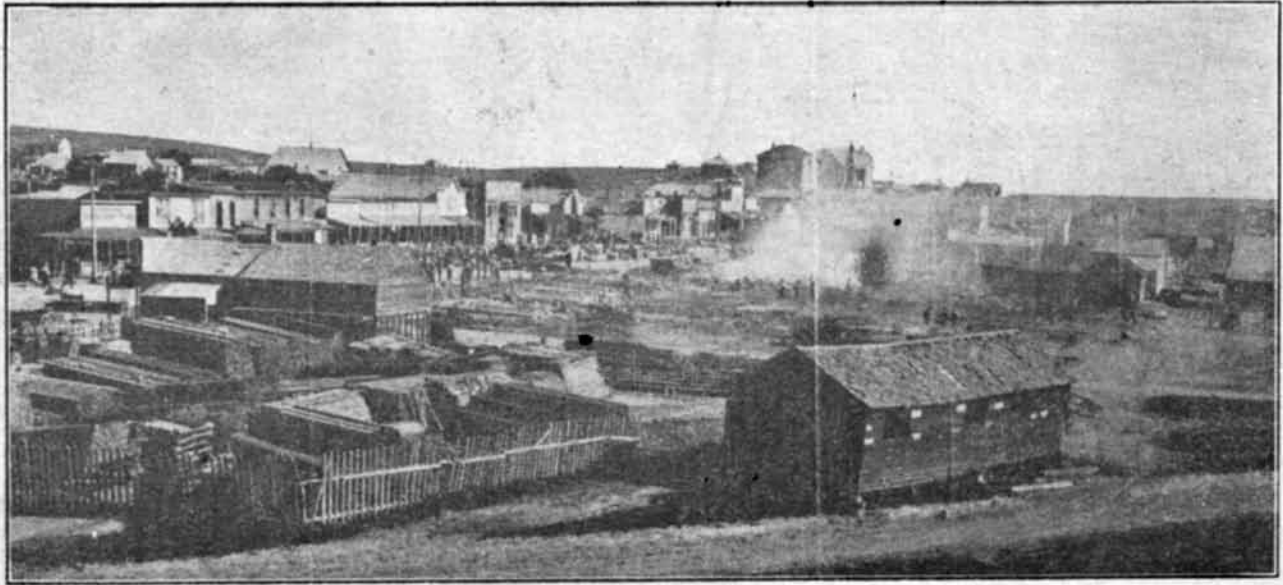
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Full Citation: David Bristow, editor, "Postscript: Fire(s) in Benkelman," *Nebraska History* 94 (2013): 108

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: souvenir card "Benkelman in Flames, June 7th, 1906"



BENKELMAN IN FLAMES, JUNE 7TH, 1906.

From Mrs. [redacted]

Printed for Earl Dobbs, Benkelman, Nebr.

NSHS RG3907-1-3

An article on p. 90 discusses a fiery Dundy County disaster that *didn't* happen. Here is one that did. On June 7, 1906, a livery barn caught fire, killing fifteen horses and spreading to an entire city block, destroying a restaurant, shoe store, implement house, meat market, feed store, printing office, furniture store (though the furniture was saved), and a private residence.

Though it isn't known how the fire started, there was talk of a lawsuit against the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. "The manner in which every freight train throws sparks . . . is almost sufficient evidence in itself that the fire was started by an engine," the *Benkelman News-Chronicle* complained on June 22.

In the same issue, the *News-Chronicle* called for investment in "reliable fire protection" and a "good system of water works within reach of every house." In its role as town booster, the paper extolled the community's advantages and insisted that once

rebuilt, "the fire district . . . will no doubt surpass any other in town from a point of beauty and quality."

Such optimism may have been the point when Earl Dobbs, a local barber, ordered these cards to be printed. One doesn't print souvenir cards for something that will be the death of the community, but rather for hardships that people might want to commemorate having survived and overcome.

Though his business wasn't harmed by the 1906 fire, Dobbs wasn't so fortunate on July 29, 1911, when fire swept another commercial block, including his barbershop. Starting in a restaurant, the fire caused about twice the damage of the earlier blaze. Only about half of the losses were insured, a surprisingly low figure in a town that had suffered a major fire just five years earlier. Dobbs was probably relieved that his \$100 in damages were covered, though to our knowledge he ordered no souvenir cards. ☒

DAVID BRISTOW, EDITOR