

# DUSTY ROADS®

## STORIES OF

## KEWANEE

## PAST & PRESENT



Dean Karau

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### *The Painful Death of Margaret C. White*

*A Fiery End to the Life of a Kewanee Grandmother*



The headline and first paragraph of the above-the-

fold, front-page story in the May 20, 1897, *KEWANEE STAR* was ominous, a warning of what would follow:

*“One of the saddest tragedies that has ever shocked the community occurred Saturday night shortly after eleven o'clock when Mrs. M. C. White lost her life in the flames.”*

The death of Margaret Charlotte Leybourne Buckley White was indeed a tragedy, a heart-breaking end for a mother and grandmother's long life.

As downtown businesses began closing up on a Saturday



*Margaret C. White*

night around eleven o'clock, Albinus Smith was one of the many folks who began heading home. As he passed the house of Thomas W. White on the 200 block of North Burr St., he saw flames bursting out of an upstairs window and beginning to come through the roof. Smith yelled “Fire!” and soon the downtown fire-bell began clanging.

Smith's yelling aroused Mr. White, as a large crowd of those leaving downtown hastened to the scene. When White opened his front door to Smith and learned of the fire, he told Smith that his mother was upstairs in the west bedroom. The two men ran up the stairs and tried to break down her locked door. Smith was finally able to kick it in, but



they were not able to enter because of the intense fire, sheets of flame, and smoke. White knew at that moment that his mother was dead, and told Smith so.

White and Smith went back down the stairs to join a number of other men frantically moving out furniture in the hope of saving it if the fire spread. Soon, the front yard was filled with White's belongings.

With more bells a-clanging, the fire department's hose carts arrived from the fire house on Tremont St. next to City Hall. Kewanee Chief of Police Edwin Swain also arrived, and learned that Mrs. White was in the burning room.

The hoses were attached to the hydrants and water was poured into the room. The firemen gained control of the flames, and in a short time the fire was put out.

Swain and firemen Jack Barnes, James Finley, and John McKeon climbed up the outside of the building to the second story windows and finally were able to enter the bedroom. After a short search, they found the body in the bedroom's closet on the north side of the room. It was covered by clothes which had fallen upon it. The body had been terribly burned, especially the head and upper parts. The remains were taken to the porch and subsequently to the undertaker.

The origin of the blaze remained a mystery. The



*Edwin Swain*

most generally accepted theory was that the flames started from a small night lamp which Mrs. White was in the habit of burning throughout the night. It was thought that in some way the lamp's flame reached the curtains or some article of clothing.

Some people wondered why Mrs. White was not able to escape when she discovered the fire. But it was likely that she did not awake until the fire was well under way, and in the smoke and fire groped for the door leading to the stairway. Unfortunately, there were two doors close together in the northeast corner of the room, one opening to the hall and the other to the closet. Mrs. White chose the wrong door and fell to the closet floor where the flames quickly reached her.

The newspaper believed her death must have been very painful, as the heat gradually increased in intensity. When the clothes hanging in the closet burned, they fell upon her body, adding to her torment.

Dr. W. H. Day, the deputy coroner, impaneled a jury. After testimony and deliberation, the jury found that the fire was the direct cause of Mrs. White's death.

Margaret Charlotte Leybourne was born in 1833 in Bishop Auckland, in the county of Durham, England. At the age of eighteen she married Edward Buckley and they had two children. In 1852 the



*Early Kewanee paid firemen*



family emigrated to America, but in 1855 went back to England. In 1856, they returned to America and settled Wisconsin. After the death of her husband, Mrs. Buckley married John White, and in 1871 they moved to Kewanee.

The well-attended funeral services started at Mr. White's house and then moved to the Primitive Methodist Church. Mrs. White's remains were escorted to the church by 75 employees of the Kewanee

Boiler Company, where Thomas White worked.

Mrs. White left behind at least two children and at least 14 grandchildren. Unfortunately, there was no headstone for Mrs. White when she was buried in Pleasant View Cemetery.

It was a very sad ending to a very sad tragedy in our hometown.



*Margaret C. White, center back row, with grandchildren, two years before her tragic death.*