

Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

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Plainfield Courier-News, February 7, 1929

Front Page Headline

Coaling Station Burned to Ground In Spectacular South Plainfield Fire; Thousands Speed to Scene

\$150,000 Loss Sustained; Service Disrupted; Eight Towns Join Fighting Flames; Employee a Suicide; Under Control After Seven Hours

South Plainfield, Feb. 7--During one of the most spectacular and disastrous fires in the history of this place, the Lehigh Valley Railroad coaling station burned to the ground last night with an estimated loss of more than \$150,000. One man, Paul Kaymowicz of 116 Delmore avenue, an old employee at the station, believed to have become despondent over the prospect of losing his job, committed suicide by gas this morning.

The flames were brought under control at 5 a.m. today, but firemen did not begin leaving the scene until 11 o'clock. A coal conveyor collapse over the four tracks of the main line soon after the blaze started and disrupted service, which was not resumed until a single track was cleared at 5:35 today.

Lehigh Valley trains were rerouted over the New Jersey's Central at Bound Brook. Commuters' trains were able to proceed, with little loss of time over the one clear track.

The blaze, unhindered by the downpour, but aided by the high wind, started in the tower of the 31-year-old structure from an unknown origin. Fanned by the strong Northeasterly gale, the flames spread rapidly through the upper timbers of the building. The fire was discovered at 10 p.m. by workmen in the station. The signal tower of the Lehigh was called and an alarm was sent in from there by Michael Moran.

The South Plainfield fire department responded, but although arriving a few minutes after the alarm found the building almost entirely enveloped in flames. The firemen turned their efforts to saving the water tower and engine room which stood close by. The passenger station was never endangered.

Other alarms were sounded and departments from Plainfield, under Chief Wesley J. Dunn; Dunellen, Oak Tree, Arbor, Beechwood Heights and Middlesex Borough responded. Little could be done in the way of saving the coaling station for the wind turned the structure into a raging furnace, the reflection of which attracted hundreds to the scene.

The oily and dust covered timbers ignited rapidly and it was not 15 minutes after the fire

was discovered before the building was in flames from the ground to the roof. Approximately 600 tons of soft coal were stored in the tipper and this burned swiftly as the long tongues of flame licked into the bunkers. As the fire progressed, the wind increased in intensity and the sparks were carried hundreds of feet onto roofs of houses and structures on the South side of the tracks. Firemen were stationed with chemicals to keep the shingles from igniting, although the rain did much to douse the embers.

The conveyors and other mechanical equipment remained on the flaming beams for about 45 minutes and then they crashed to the ground, sending out a shower of flame and sparks. Each time a coal bunker would be eaten away, the hot burning coals would pour down onto the tracks like molten metal pouring from a crucible.

The firemen braved the heat and flames behind makeshift shields in order to try and save the engine room and water tower. The roof of the tower fell in a short time after the fire started and was promptly extinguished. One of the first things to collapse was the steel bridge over the main tracks on which are the conveyors for carrying the coal out to the trains. The supports on the East side of this bridge were burned away, and the bridge fell onto the tracks with a loud crash.

The South Plainfield pumper was run down across the fields to a point near the water tower and beside the brook. Two hoses were laid from the pumper and firemen played the water on the exterior of the water tower.

South Plainfield police were confronted with a serious traffic problem which finally took care of itself. Hundreds of autoists from points all around this section sped to the blaze. Many more walked out from Plainfield as they believed the whole town of South Plainfield was burning. Other rumors had the Spicer plant in flames.

The Plainfield No. 2 engine was hooked up to a hydrant in Church street while the other companies pumped from plugs on the South side of the tracks. The Beechwood Heights and Middlesex Borough engines were sent home shortly after their arrival as there was no place from which they could pump.

Today a smoldering mass of twisted steel, charred timbers and cinders is all that is left of the structure.

Chief Joseph Delaney of the [South] Plainfield Fire Department was in charge of the full force of men who responded to the alarm. Many of the men were soaked through and had to return to the station for dry clothes during the night. Mrs. Elwood Johnson, wife of the assistant fire chief, served coffee and sandwiches to the out-of-town and local firemen.

Division engineers of the railroad were on hand this morning to estimate the damage and possible cost of rebuilding. Superintendent of the New York division of the Lehigh, W.W. Abbott and Charles Dorsey, chief train master, were at the scene of the fire shortly after they were notified. They remained at the fire all night.

Mr. Abbott stated that the officials would reach a decision this afternoon as to whether the coaling station would be rebuilt. He declared that it was rather doubtful, but no definite decision has been reached. Mr. Abbot spoke highly of the work of the various firemen and said that they deserved commendation for the way in which they handled the situation during the night.

Paul Kaymowicz, 57, employed at the station for more than 30 years, was found dead this morning in the gas-filled bedroom of his home. He has been despondent over the illness of his wife who has been in a sanitarium for some time and the combination of his wife's illness and the prospect of not having a job, are believed to have caused him to take his life this morning.

He was found by his 15-year-old daughter, Pauline, who went to call him at 7 o'clock. She found both the jets in the room turned on and her father lying dead on the floor. Coroner Charles Darling of New Brunswick viewed the body and gave permission for removal for burial.

He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Mary Kaymowicz of South Plainfield; four daughters, Mrs. Lucy Leach of this place; Mrs. Laura Murphy of 421 Madison avenue, Plainfield; the Misses May and Pauline Kaymowicz, both of this place; one son, Peter, of 127 West Fourth street, Plainfield, and a sister, Mrs. Anni Bori of Church street, this place. He was a member of the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Name Society in South Plainfield. Notice of the funeral will be found in tomorrow's paper.