Starke County 18a "Tidbits of Starke County History".....

Last time I mentioned the fire that destroyed the Center Township School on January 7, 1942. So many people wrote back and called with questions and comments about the school that I should add a little to the story. As I said, I was in the 4th grade and remember the "real" fire drill that day. One caller said she remembers that it was -6 degrees that day, the coldest day of 1942. Many asked, "how did the fire start?"

According to Frances (Windisch) Myers, the fire started because of an over-worked furnace. The wind was out of the west. A gym had been added on the west side of the main building, and the custodian was trying to keep it warm, also. The chimney just got too hot for the wooden frame-work near the chimney. But nobody knows for sure. Frances, a 4th grade teacher, talked about the fire very vividly when interviewed for the video which we produced about her teaching career. She remembered smelling smoke, and asking the custodian, George Stevens, to check it out. A few minutes later, George opened her classroom door and shook his head "no". About a half hour later, Frances still smelled smoke. She again asked George to see if he could find the cause. A few minutes later, he opened her door again, and shook his head "no". About 10 minutes later, the fire alarm rang, and all the children and teachers evacuated the building.

At the time, Frank Young, teacher and coach, was working out in the gym with the boys basketball team. When the alarm sounded, he came to the hallway, and seeing Frances, asked, "Why are they having a fire drill on a day like this? My boys are all sweaty." Frances calmly said, "Frank, this is **not** a drill, this is real."

After Frances got her students out of the building and lined-up in the parking lot, she strictly told them to stay in that line, "even if your Mom or Dad drive up to the school". She then took two of the bigger boys back into the smoking building to the cloak room, and told the boys to stretch their arms and grab as many coats as they could, then follow her back outside. (remember, -6 degrees)

When the fire was "out", the Center Township Trustee stayed at the site for several hours. (The trustees were responsible for the schools in the townships in those days.) The trustee got cold (at -6 degrees) and went home for a bite to eat. The fire started up again that evening. Frances said the sky was red in the west. Earlier, her mother had admonished her for not bringing her books and other personal items home after the first fire. When she saw the red in the sky, she knew her mother was right!

My Aunt Effie Shilling Johnston was also a teacher at Center. I remember watching her cry as the school burned. All of her precious books and other items were lost. A fire is a very devastating thing, especially when it involves the whole community. (see Attachment)

A copy of the DVD about Frances Myers' teaching career is available for loan at the museum. She tells about her first teaching job at Ober, about the politics at the time, and how a city girl learned what a privy is. The DVD can be checked out during regular museum hours.

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http://www.starkehistory.com http://www.scpl.lib.in.us/historical/

(If you do not wish to receive "Tidbits of Starke County History" in the future, please let me know.)

