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## KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING

Episode Number: 1882-21

### KNOWLEDGE PACKET

**Date:** 1868-1878

This episode analyzes various newspaper excerpts from Kansas and surrounding areas between 1868 and 1878, detailing numerous accidental burnings. The sources consistently highlight the prevalence of such incidents, the common causes, the severe and often fatal outcomes, and the limited means of intervention.

#### I. Main Themes:

**A. Pervasive Danger of Fire in Daily Life:** The sources reveal that fire, while essential for heating, cooking, and land management, posed a constant and significant threat. Incidents occurred in a wide range of settings, demonstrating how easily everyday activities could turn deadly.

- **Cooking and Stoves:** Multiple accounts describe dresses catching fire while individuals were cooking or tending to stoves. Examples include:
  - A "little girl by the name of Kolb" whose "dress caught fire, and she was so badly burned that her life is despaired of" while "attending to some cooking about the stove" (The Daily Atchison Patriot, Oct 7, 1870).
  - Edwin Carter's 6-year-old daughter who "undertook to stir the soup, when her dress caught fire" (The Wichita Weekly Beacon, Feb 4, 1874).
  - Joseph Vincent's daughter, "frying doughnuts," whose "dress caught fire and burnt clear off her" (The Independent, July 4, 1874).
  - Mrs. F. Patterson, who "was cooking at her stove when her dress caught fire" (The Hays City Sentinel, Oct 5, 1878).
  - A "9-year-old Russian girl" whose "dress caught fire while she was emptying cow chips into the stove" (The Jewell County Monitor, May 30, 1878).

- **Open Fires and Rubbish Burning:** Intentional fires for land clearing or waste disposal were also major hazards.
- R. D. Lender's daughter "ran thro' the cinders, when her dress caught fire" while Mr. Lender "had been burning some rubbish on his lot" (The Fort Scott Weekly Monitor, March 25, 1868).
- Mr. James Buckminster's daughter's "dress caught fire" while she was "playing about the edges of a fire which had been kindled for the cleaning out of sand burs" (The Republican Daily Journal, Aug 18, 1876).
- Mrs. James "set out fires in the immediate vicinity of their house" to "protect their residence from the ravages of prairie fires," and her "dress caught fire" (The Olathe Mirror, Nov 27, 1870).
- **Carelessness and Proximity to Flames:** Several instances point to proximity to flames, often due to "carelessness" or unexpected movements.
- An "unnamed vagrant woman" whose "dress caught fire" while she and companions "had kindled a fire in the brush" (The Leavenworth Daily Tribune, Oct 28, 1868).
- "Miss Ella Terry's dress caught fire from a gas jet in the dressing room" (The Junction City Union, Oct 18, 1873).
- Mrs. George Alfred Townsend's "dress having caught fire from the parlor grate" (The Daily Atchison Patriot, Dec 19, 1874).
- A "colored woman" whose "dress caught fire" when "a coal of fire fell on her clothing from a pipe that she was smoking" (The Republican Daily Journal, Jan 28, 1876).
- The wife of Alphens Level, "standing with her back to the fire," whose "dress caught fire" (The Kansas Chief, Feb 10, 1876).

**B. Vulnerability of Women and Children:** A striking commonality across the incidents is the disproportionate number of women and young girls who were victims. Their clothing, often long and flowing, combined with their roles in domestic duties and proximity to household fires, made them particularly susceptible.

- Numerous "little daughters" and "little girls" are mentioned (R. D. Lender, James Buckminster, Kolb, Edwin Carter, Joseph Vincent, Judson Kerr, Russian girl).
- Adult women are frequently victims while cooking, protecting homes from prairie fires, or in their own homes (Mrs. James, unnamed vagrant, Miss Ella Terry, Mrs. George Alfred Townsend, colored woman, Mrs. Alphens Level, Mrs. F. Patterson).

**C. Severe and Often Fatal Outcomes:** The descriptions consistently emphasize the horrific nature of the injuries and the high mortality rate. Survival, when it occurred, often involved "untold agonies."

- "burnt so severely that she died the same evening." (R. D. Lender's daughter, The Fort Scott Weekly Monitor, March 25, 1868).
- "before assistance reached her, she was almost burned to death...it was the opinion of those who saw her that she could not live." (Unnamed vagrant, The Leavenworth Daily Tribune, Oct 28, 1868).
- "clothes were completely burned off...hope of her recovery was given up by her friends." (Mrs. James, The Olathe Mirror, Nov 27, 1870).
- "so badly burned that her life is despaired of." (Kolb accident, The Daily Atchison Patriot, Oct 7, 1870).
- "burned to a crisp and only lived about 3 hours." (Edwin Carter's daughter, The Wichita Weekly Beacon, Feb 4, 1874).
- "dangerously if not fatally burned...The child still survives but suffers untold agonies." (Joseph Vincent's daughter, The Independent, July 4, 1874).
- "so badly burned that she died." (Colored woman, The Republican Daily Journal, Jan 28, 1876).
- "so badly burned that she died in a few hours." (Mrs. Alphens Level, The Kansas Chief, Feb 10, 1876).
- "burned to death." (Judson Kerr's daughter, The Neosho County Record, Jan 20, 1877).
- "burned so badly...that she died next day." (Russian girl, The Jewell County Monitor, May 30, 1878).
- "lingered until 7 o'clock and died in the greatest agony." (Mrs. F. Patterson, The Hays City Sentinel, Oct 5, 1878).

**D. Limited and Desperate Interventions:** The sources illustrate the rudimentary and often ineffective methods of extinguishing flames, highlighting the lack of readily available fire safety equipment or trained responders.

- **Tearing off clothes:** "A negro at last succeeded in tearing the burning clothes from her person" (Unnamed vagrant, The Leavenworth Daily Tribune, Oct 28, 1868).
- **Rolling on the ground/smothering:** "Mrs. George Alfred Townsend...threw herself on the floor, rolling over and over into the next room, and having thus partially smothered the flames, tore off her burning dress" (The Daily Atchison Patriot, Dec 19, 1874). Mrs. F. Patterson also "rushed out of doors, rolled upon the ground, and succeeded in extinguishing the flames" (The Hays City Sentinel, Oct 5, 1878).
- **Lack of water:** "There being no water at the house, she tried to smother the flames by getting into bed, but was unable to do so" (Edwin Carter's daughter, The Wichita Weekly Beacon, Feb 4, 1874).

- **Dashing water:** Mrs. F. Patterson "dashed a bucket of water over herself" (The Hays City Sentinel, Oct 5, 1878).

**E. Societal Response: Warning and Empathy:** The newspaper accounts often served as public warnings and expressions of communal grief. Phrases like "a sad affair, reminding parents that they cannot be too careful with fire" (The Fort Scott Weekly Monitor, March 25, 1868) and "We are pained to learn of a most distressing accident" (The Olathe Mirror, Nov 27, 1870) underscore the newspapers' role in both informing and cautioning the public.

## II. Most Important Ideas/Facts:

- **Leading Causes:** The most frequent causes of dress fires were proximity to cooking stoves/open fires, burning rubbish/prairie fires, and accidental contact with gas jets or embers from smoking pipes.
- **Victim Demographics:** Young children (especially girls) and adult women were overwhelmingly the victims of these incidents.
- **High Mortality:** A significant majority of documented cases resulted in death, often after hours or days of extreme suffering.
- **Nature of Injuries:** Injuries were consistently described as severe burns, often leading to clothes being "completely burned off" and skin detaching.
- **Limited Prevention/Intervention:** Beyond general "carefulness," there were few effective or readily available means to prevent or quickly extinguish such fires in the home or open environment. The accounts highlight desperation and the lack of immediate effective aid.
- **Public Awareness:** Newspapers functioned as a primary means of informing the public about these dangers and advocating for greater caution.

## Thought-Starters

### 1. What were common circumstances leading to accidental burns in the 19th century, particularly involving clothing catching fire?

The sources indicate several recurring scenarios where clothing, primarily dresses, caught fire, leading to severe burns or death. These include:

- **Proximity to outdoor fires:** Children playing near rubbish fires or fires set for clearing land (e.g., sand burs, prairie fires) were at risk. Adults, like Mrs. James, also suffered burns while attempting to control such fires.
- **Domestic cooking and heating:** Women and children frequently sustained burns while cooking at stoves, stirring soup, frying doughnuts, or attending to fires in grates. One incident involved a woman standing with her back to a fire while attending to a sick child.
- **Smoking:** At least one instance notes a woman's clothing catching fire from a lit pipe.

- **Gas lighting:** A dramatic performance saw an actress's dress ignite from a gas jet in a dressing room.
- **Stirring fires:** A child's dress caught fire while attempting to stir a fire with a hot poker.
- **Unusual fuel sources:** One tragic case involved a 9-year-old girl whose dress caught fire while she was emptying "cow chips" into a stove.

## 2. Who were the most frequent victims of these burning accidents?

The victims were overwhelmingly women and children. Numerous accounts specify "little daughters," "little girls," or "children" ranging from young ages (e.g., 5, 6, 9 years old) who were involved in play or domestic tasks. Adult women were also frequently victims, often in domestic settings or while engaging in outdoor activities like controlling fires. Men are largely absent from these particular accounts of clothing fires, suggesting a gendered pattern related to dress and activities.

## 3. What were the typical immediate outcomes and reported injuries from these incidents?

The outcomes were often severe, ranging from "badly burned" to "almost burned to death," or "burned to a crisp." Many victims "died the same evening," "lived 3 or 4 hours," or "lingered until 7 o'clock and died in the greatest agony." Descriptions of injuries are vivid, including "clothes were nearly burnt off," "clothes were completely burned off," "left side was burned from the hip to the arm so that the skin fell off," and "burned clear off her, save a small strip about the neck." Even when not immediately fatal, the injuries were often considered life-threatening, with "hope of her recovery was given up" or "life is despaired of."

## 4. What specific dangers did 19th-century clothing, particularly dresses, pose in relation to fire?

The repetitive phrase "her dress caught fire" highlights the inherent danger of the long, flowing garments common in the 19th century. These materials were evidently highly flammable, easily ignited by open flames from stoves, gas jets, outdoor fires, or even stray coals. Once ignited, the volume of fabric could quickly engulf a person, making extinguishing the flames difficult and leading to extensive burns. The sheer amount of clothing is emphasized by phrases like "clothes were nearly burnt off" or "burned clear off her."

## 5. What measures, if any, were taken to extinguish the flames, and how effective were they?

Attempts to extinguish flames varied in effectiveness. Some involved:

- **Tearing off burning clothes:** A "negro" bravely tore burning clothes from a vagrant woman, burning his hands in the process. Mrs. George Alfred Townsend also tore off her burning dress.

- **Smothering/Rolling:** Mrs. Townsend demonstrated presence of mind by throwing herself on the floor and rolling over and over to partially smother the flames. Mrs. F. Patterson also rolled on the ground outdoors.
- **Applying water:** Mrs. F. Patterson dashed a bucket of water over herself.
- **Seeking help:** A little girl tried to smother flames by getting into bed, then ran out screaming for help, but it was too late.

While some attempts, like Mrs. Townsend's rolling and tearing, resulted in survival with injuries, others were insufficient to prevent fatal outcomes due to the rapid spread and intensity of the fire. The lack of readily available water in one instance further hindered effective response.

## 6. What kind of societal or community reactions are evident in these news reports?

The reports often convey a sense of public grief and concern. Phrases like "pained to learn," "most distressing accident," "sad affair," and noting the "terrible suffering" or "greatest agony" of the victims underscore the emotional impact of these events on communities. Some reports offer cautionary advice, such as "reminding parents that they cannot be too careful with fire," or commend quick thinking, like "A good example" highlighting Mrs. Townsend's actions. The detailed descriptions of injuries and the rapid dissemination through local newspapers suggest these incidents were significant, impactful, and often served as somber warnings to the public.

## 7. Were there any notable acts of assistance or bravery mentioned in these incidents?

Yes, there are a few instances of assistance and bravery:

- In the case of the "unnamed vagrant," "A negro at last succeeded in tearing the burning clothes from her person, though in doing so he had his hands badly burned," demonstrating a selfless act of intervention.
- Mrs. George Alfred Townsend is highlighted for her "presence of mind" and quick thinking in throwing herself on the floor and rolling, then tearing off her burning dress, which is lauded as "A GOOD EXAMPLE." While she acted to save herself, it's presented as a courageous and intelligent response worthy of imitation.

## 8. What larger implications or themes can be drawn from these accounts about life in 19th-century Kansas (and surrounding areas)?

These accounts reveal several significant themes about life in the 19th century:

- **Pervasive fire risk:** Fire was an ever-present danger in daily life, both indoors (from stoves, grates, gas jets) and outdoors (rubbish burning, prairie fires).
- **Vulnerability of women and children:** The clothing styles of the era, combined with women's and children's roles in domestic settings and their presence near outdoor activities, made them disproportionately vulnerable to fire accidents.

- **Limited emergency response and medical care:** The rapid fatality rate and severe nature of burns, even when assistance was rendered, suggest that immediate medical intervention for severe burns was either limited or ineffective in saving lives. Victims often "lingered" for hours in agony, indicating a lack of palliative care.
- **Community awareness and caution:** The repeated reporting of these incidents and the inclusion of cautionary notes ("reminding parents that they cannot be too careful") indicate a community-wide awareness of the dangers and a desire to educate the public on fire safety.
- **Harshness of pioneer life:** The descriptions of people setting fires to protect homes from prairie fires or children performing domestic tasks like stirring soup or frying doughnuts, underscore the self-reliant and often dangerous realities of daily life in these developing frontier areas.

## Study Guide:

### I. Comprehensive Review Questions

1. **Causes of Fire Accidents:** What were the most common ways people's clothes caught fire as described in these reports? Identify at least three distinct scenarios.
2. **Demographics of Victims:** Who were the most frequent victims of these accidents based on age, gender, and social status? Provide examples from the text.
3. **Severity of Injuries and Outcomes:** What was the typical outcome of these accidents? Describe the range of injuries reported and the ultimate fate of the victims.
4. **Responses to Accidents:** What actions did victims or bystanders take to extinguish the flames or provide aid? Were these actions generally successful?
5. **Geographical Scope:** While many reports are from Kansas, are all the incidents confined to this state? Provide examples to support your answer.
6. **Reporting Style and Tone:** Analyze the tone and style of these newspaper reports. What emotions or messages do they convey?
7. **Parental Responsibility:** How is parental responsibility or care, or lack thereof, addressed in some of the reports?
8. **Household Activities:** What specific domestic activities were frequently associated with these fire accidents?
9. **Public Awareness/Warnings:** Do any of the reports suggest an intent to warn the public or raise awareness about fire safety?
10. **Unusual Circumstances:** Identify any accidents that occurred under particularly unique or less common circumstances compared to the majority.

## **II. Quiz: Short Answer Questions**

1. Describe the circumstances surrounding the death of R. D. Lender's daughter.
2. What was the reported social status of the woman almost burned to death on the Government Reserve, and how did she get injured?
3. Explain how Mrs. James's attempt to protect her home from prairie fires led to her own severe burns.
4. What specific domestic task was Ella Terry engaged in when her dress caught fire, and where did the accident occur?
5. How did the daughter of Edwin Carter attempt to extinguish the flames after her dress caught fire while cooking?
6. What unique element contributed to the death of the colored woman in Atchison?
7. Summarize the "Good Example" set by Mrs. George Alfred Townsend when her dress caught fire.
8. What was the presumed cause of the five-year-old daughter of Judson Kerr's fatal burns?
9. Describe the initial actions Mrs. F. Patterson took to extinguish the flames after her dress caught fire while cooking.
10. What specific chore was the 9-year-old Russian girl performing when she was fatally burned in Wamego?

## **III. Quiz Answer Key**

1. R. D. Lender's little daughter was playing near rubbish Mr. Lender had been burning. She ran through the cinders, causing her dress to catch fire, leading to severe burns and death hours later.
2. The woman was described as a "vagrant" who plied "her nefarious calling on the Government Reserve." Her dress caught fire due to carelessness while she and companions had kindled a fire in the brush.
3. Mrs. James set out fires in the immediate vicinity of her house to protect it from prairie fires. While attempting to control these flames, her dress caught fire, burning completely off and leaving her with injuries from which recovery was not expected.
4. Ella Terry's dress caught fire from a gas jet in the dressing room. This occurred during a dramatic performance given by the Fort Scott Egotistical Club, burning her badly about the neck and shoulders.
5. After her dress caught fire while stirring soup, the little girl first tried to smother the flames by getting into bed. When this failed due to lack of water, she ran outside screaming for help.



6. A coal of fire fell on her clothing from a pipe that she was smoking, leading to her dress catching fire. She was so badly burned before it could be extinguished that she died.
7. Mrs. Townsend's dress caught fire from a parlor grate, and she immediately threw herself on the floor. She rolled over and over into the next room to partially smother the flames, then tore off her burning dress, sustaining only minor injuries to her hands.
8. It is supposed that during her mother's temporary absence, the five-year-old attempted to stir the fire with a hot poker. This action likely caused her dress to catch fire, as she was discovered engulfed in flames.
9. Upon her dress catching fire while cooking, Mrs. Patterson first dashed a bucket of water over herself. She then rushed out of doors and rolled upon the ground to extinguish the flames.
10. The 9-year-old Russian girl was emptying cow chips into the stove when her dress caught fire. The resulting burns were so severe that she died the following day.

#### **IV. Essay Format Questions**

1. Analyze the role of household technology and daily activities in the frequency and severity of fire accidents during the 19th century, drawing specific examples from the provided texts.
2. Compare and contrast the narratives surrounding child victims with those of adult victims in the given excerpts, focusing on reported causes, public sentiment (as implied by the reporting), and outcomes.
3. Discuss how the newspaper reports portray attempts to extinguish fires or aid victims. What do these descriptions reveal about the immediate responses to such emergencies in the period?
4. Examine the recurring themes of carelessness and a lack of parental supervision as causes of accidents in the provided texts. How do these themes reflect societal attitudes or concerns of the time?
5. Beyond the immediate tragedy, what broader social or safety implications can be inferred from these accounts regarding life in 19th-century American communities?

#### **V. Glossary of Key Terms**

- **Cinders:** Small pieces of partly burned coal or wood that are no longer flaming but still retain heat; often associated with outdoor fires.
- **Government Reserve:** An area of land designated or set aside by the government, often for military or other official purposes, potentially indicating a less settled or supervised area.

- **Nefarious Calling:** A term used in the text to describe the "vagrant women's" activities, implying that their occupation or lifestyle was considered wicked or disreputable by societal standards.
- **Prairie Fires:** Large, uncontrolled fires that spread across grasslands or prairies, often started by natural causes or human activity, posing a significant threat to homes and settlements.
- **Gas Jet:** A nozzle through which gas is released, typically for lighting (as in gas lamps) or heating, and a potential source of ignition for flammable materials like clothing.
- **Despaired Of (Life is despaired of):** A medical prognosis indicating that there is no hope of recovery; the person is expected to die.
- **Smother the Flames:** To extinguish a fire by cutting off its supply of oxygen, often by covering it with a blanket, heavy clothing, or by rolling on the ground.
- **Coal of Fire:** A glowing ember or piece of burning coal, particularly from a pipe or stove, capable of igniting flammable materials.
- **Tarkio Bottom:** Refers to a flood plain or low-lying area along the Tarkio River, indicating a specific geographical location for the accident.
- **Hot Poker:** A metal rod used to stir or adjust coals in a fire, which can retain significant heat and pose a burn risk.
- **Cow Chips:** Dried cow dung, often used as fuel for fires in areas where wood or other resources were scarce, particularly in agricultural or frontier settings.
- **Enveloped Her Person:** A descriptive phrase indicating that the flames quickly and completely surrounded or covered the victim's body.

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