

The Faull House Arson

by
Gary Dielman

In the early hours of October 6, 1908, the Faull house, one of Baker City's most elegant homes, burned to the ground, apparently the victim of an arsonist's match. The story of the Faull house touches me personally, since the house I have lived in the past 27 years arose ten years later out of the ashes of the Faull house. In its day, the Faull house dominated the northeast corner of the megablock that was bordered on the east side by Fourth Street, Faull (now Estes) Street on the north, Sixth Street on the west, and Carter Street on the south side. The house, which was constructed in 1887, had a huge front yard with a semicircle driveway that led from Fourth Street to the steps of the front porch and back to Fourth Street.

Today the footprint of the Faull House is now the site of the house, backyard, garage, and driveway of the author of this article and his wife, Eloise, who reside at 1515 Fourth Street.

As may be seen from the photo, the house was not meant to be just a residence, it was built to make a statement about the owner, James P. Faull. Faull was a partner in the Basche-Sage Hardware business. Faull died in 1894. According to the 1898 city directory, Emma S. Faull was widow of James P. Faull and living at 1503 4th along with her son Carleton W. Faull.



The East Side of Faull House Faced Fourth Street

In 1898 Carleton W. Faull was listed as working as a clerk at Basche and Co. But by 1901 the city directory referred to him as Dr. Carleton W. Faull, physician, with an office on Washington between First and Second. In 1903 he was working out of an office at 2016 Front (Main). By 1905 Dr. Carleton had turned his mother's residence into a hospital with a sign above the front porch pillars advertising the "Baker City Sanatorium". After the fire, the 1908-1909 city directory showed Dr. Carleton residing at the Elk Hotel. By 1910 Dr. Carleton had probably left Baker City, since later city directories do not list him or his mother.

Myra Belle Palmer Hendricks, in her 1983 memoir *Growing Up in Baker City*, remembered the Faull house as "a lovely big home set back from the street on a large lot." Hendricks grew up in two different houses located just across the street from the Faull house. She wrote of the fire, "I vaguely remember all of us watching the fire from our parlor windows, the glass was so hot we could not put our noses against the panes." After the ruins were cleared away, "the Faull lot became a favorite playground for the children of the neighborhood. The boys used it for a baseball field and the stones of the foundation made caverns which became forts, dungeons, palaces or what ever fantasy prevailed at the moment. Mother told us tramps might hide in the weed-covered ruins, so we gave it a wide berth when it began to get dark, but in the sunshine it was a playground again."

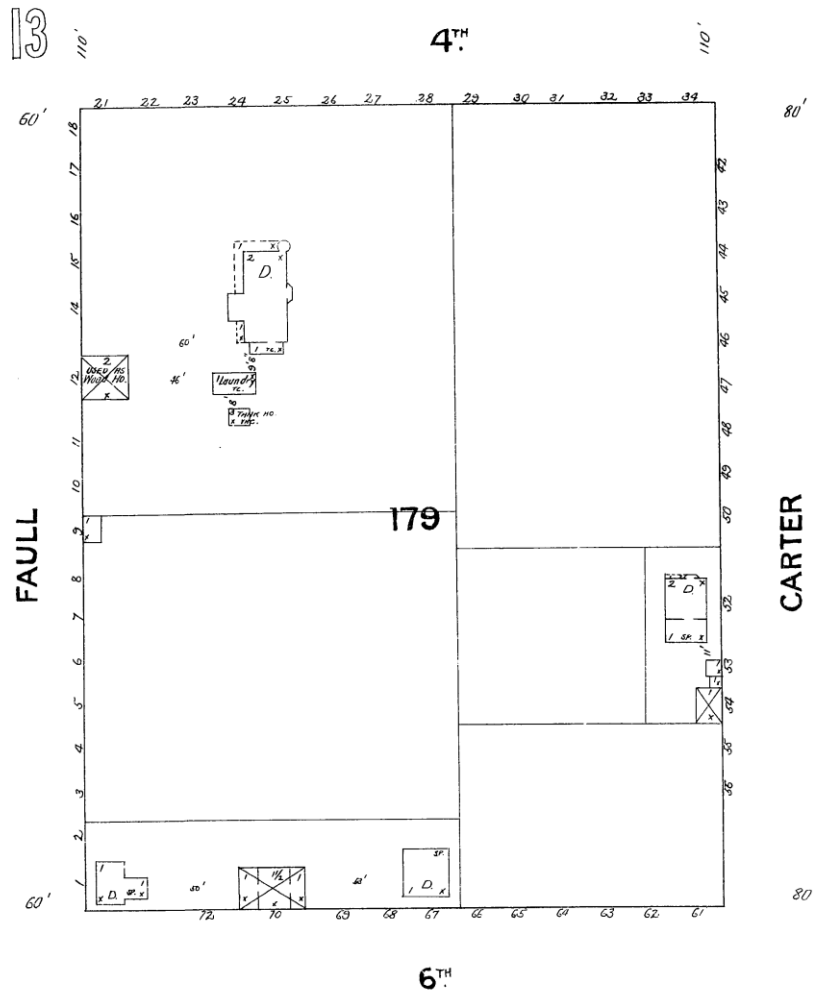


Faull House, East and North Sides

Hendricks also recounted a near tragedy that happened on the Faull lot. "There was an irrigation ditch about a foot and a half wide and a foot deep which ran along the other side of the street. We children were cautioned and cautioned about playing it, but it was such a wonderful place to sail sticks, leaves, or bits of paper, we could not resist." Hendricks and playmates could not stay away from the ditch even when told by adults that the water was contaminated by cyanide from the mines. The near tragedy happened in the ditch when "Babe Koehler (son of Connie and Hazel Koehler) fell into it

once, and was snatched out just before she drowned. Mother helped revive her. It was eventually filled in and no sign of it remains today.” Actually a slight depression in the grass of the parking along the 1500 block of Fourth Street still gives evidence of the former existence of the narrow ditch that once carried water for lawns and gardens of the neighborhood.

As mentioned, the inferno that turned the Faull house into a pile of ashes may have been the work of an arsonist. The front-page headline of the *Baker City Herald* read, “Three Incendiary Fires at Early Hour This Morning,” and the subhead proclaimed, “Firebug is Working His Trade in a Way That Requires Prompt Attention—Five Years Ago a Negro Tried to Burn the City.” Besides the Faull house, two other early morning fires were turned in within a short time after the fire crews responded to the Faull fire. Two barns belonging to the Estes family burned on Church Street between Sixth and Seventh and an old creamery building located at Campbell and Sixteen, used as a mattress factory at the time, also succumbed to flames.



1895 Sanborn Insurance Map Showing Site of Faull House

Proximity in time was not the only reason fire department officials suspected arson. Residents in the area of the Faull house reported smelling coal oil. In addition, Wesley Parker's wife tried to awaken her husband early that morning. They lived in the former Sheriff Harvey K. Brown house two blocks south of the Faull house on Fourth Street. Parker's wife thought she had heard a noise on their back porch. Parker pooh-poohed her concern and they went back to sleep. But the next morning they discovered a pile of twigs and leaves on their porch. Then, three weeks after the fires of October 6th, North Baker Elementary School burned to the ground with arson as the suspected cause. The building was brand new, having replaced the old school, which had burned just the previous year.

Fire Chief William Ellis recalled that five years ago a black man had set fire to the Baker City High School and several residences. He was sentenced to five years in prison and had just been released in September. He was considered a prime suspect. A week after the Faull fire, Fire Chief Ellis discovered a black man loitering around the railroad yards. Since the man "was unable to give a good accounting of himself," Ellis turned him over to the police. Further investigation determined that he was not the arsonist from five years ago. Since authorities could not connect him to the fires, the police released him.

The culprit of the October 1908 arson fires was never discovered.

[Several years after I wrote this story, I learned that in November 1908 fifteen-year-old Goldman Anthony was arrested for starting the Faull house fire and several other fires. He was sentenced to reform school for truancy, not for arson, since his confession to several arson fires could not be corroborated.]

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