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Porter's Watch: The View from the Firehouse

by Lynn Niedermeier

“Bad Luck,” declared Porter Dodd, writing in one of two record books (now housed at Western Kentucky University’s Special Collections Library) kept during his long career as a Bowling Green, Kentucky fireman. He was summarizing the multiple mishaps of February 29, 1912, after the alarm came in warning of a house ablaze on east High Street. In the main fire station at College and 10th Streets, Wagon No. 1 prepared to respond. Fitted with a hose and a fifty-gallon tank of water with a chemical additive to create pressure, the wagon was pulled by Doc and Dan, a team of gray horses. At the sound of the alarm bell, the well-trained animals lunged from their stalls and “did all but buckle themselves into the harness,” recalled Dodd. Their driver pulled a rope to open the station doors, and the race was on.¹

At eighteen years of age, Dan was in the twilight of his working life, but in recording his first day of duty in 1902, an on-the-job injury in 1908, and even a vacation day in 1909, Dodd gave some indication of the regard in which he held his equine partner. Unfortunately, Dan’s tenure ended suddenly that morning in 1912 when, en route to the fire, the horse collapsed and died.²

That left Wagon No. 2, with its team of black horses, to step into the breach, but once again misfortune intervened. Carrying Porter Dodd, his brother Leslie, and two other firemen, the wagon hurtled around the corner of College and 6th Streets, skidded and overturned, scattering the crew and damaging the chemical firefighting equipment. By the time they recovered, it was too late to save the burning house, but as the newspaper headline “Mourning in the Fire Department” made clear, their greatest regret that day was the loss of “old Dan.”³

When he began his service in 1895, slightly built Euclid Porter Dodd seemed an unlikely candidate for what was then an all-volunteer fire department. Before the acquisition of horse-drawn wagons in 1898, the men had to use their own muscle to pull hose reels to the scene of a fire, then attach the hoses to the nearest fire plug and bind up any cracks in the rubber with rags in order to keep the water flowing toward the flames. Over the years, nevertheless, many young men, including the sons of Bowling Green’s best families, served as volunteers—attracted, no doubt, by both the excitement and the two-dollar fee (about \$50 today) awaiting those who answered the alarm.⁴



The 1899 Potter Opera House fire highlighted the need for a permanent force of salaried firemen. (Camilla Gerard Collection, WKU Special Collections Library)

It was thirty-year-old Porter Dodd, however, who managed to land a regular, \$35-per-month fireman's position in 1900, two years after the city established a salaried force. Perhaps his best recommendation was the grit he had shown during the Potter Opera House fire on July 3, 1899. Suffering what would be the only injury of his career, Dodd had helped to extract Chief Jim Wilkerson from

the building at College and Main Streets just as its roof collapsed.⁵

During his early years as a fireman, Dodd witnessed rapid changes in the department: the arrival of new recruits, including his brothers Charles and Leslie; the purchase of a hook and ladder in 1901; the establishment, also in 1901, of a second fire station at Main and Adams Streets, where Dodd became captain in 1904; his transfer in 1906 to the main station at State and 11th Streets; and the consolidation of both stations in 1909 at the new central firehouse at College and 10th Streets. Throughout this time, Dodd made notations on a variety of events having both local and national significance, including accidents, crimes and prosecutions, elections, record-setting temperatures, snow and floods. His record books methodically listed the death dates of fellow citizens as well as the demise of governors and presidents. Some deaths were dramatic: one Tom Wilson "went wild" on a December day in 1906, resulting in the fatal shooting of another man two weeks later in the mistaken belief that he was the rampaging Wilson. Two men were hanged in nearby Russellville early in 1907, and four men lynched there the following year. Dodd's entry about a "Mob gathered at jail" suggested a similar disturbance in Bowling Green on August 3, 1909.⁶

A disturbance of a political nature, unfortunately, interrupted Dodd's service before the end of his first decade. "Fired Dec 6 1909," he wrote beside his own name in his book's list of department personnel. The same notation appeared for John Moltenberry, an original member of the department and its chief since 1904. The high-level shakeup followed the election of Mayor Gilson E. Townsend, a physician and druggist whose interest in the workings of the fire

department proved so close that the second horse on Wagon No. 1, Doc, had been named after him. In 1911, however, two ghastly downtown fires, one of which required help from some of the cast-off veterans to save the courthouse, threw discredit on the mayor's reorganization skills, and Dodd and Chief Moltenberry were soon called back to their posts. Townsend's term expired in 1913 and, as Dodd recorded, Doc (the horse, not the mayor) was sold on July 27, 1914.⁷



(From left) Firemen Ernest Zoder, Dave Harrison, Alex Patterson, Porter Dodd and Bob Kennedy at the main Bowling Green fire station, about 1902. (Camilla Gerard Collection, WKU Special Collections Library)

Beginning with the purchase of an Ahrens-Fox truck in 1914, Dodd documented the creation, by 1918, of a fully motorized fire department. By noting an even greater transportation milestone, however, he preserved the factual ingredients for what would simmer, over the years, into a tasty tale of the paranormal. It began with "First aeroplane to fly to Bowling Green Ky Sept 2 1918," Dodd's entry for a highly anticipated exhibition by an army aviator at the Warren County Fair. In order to catch sight of the pilot's arrival from Memphis, a group of students at the Western Kentucky State Normal School (now WKU) had clustered on the roof of Van Meter Hall, the grand administration building that at the time featured a skylight over the stage of its

main auditorium. When rumor of the plane's approach caused the students to rush for a better view, Dodd recorded the tragic consequence: "Boy fell throu[gh] Sky light at State Normal and killed." The newspapers identified the victim as Henry Clegg, a twenty-year-old Bowling Green Business University student from Alabama, but over the years local memory recast the incident as one involving an unnamed workman perched on the roof during Van Meter Hall's construction in 1910-11. Thereafter, the fallen worker's spirit was said to manifest itself as a red glow on the auditorium stage during performances, making him the subject of one of WKU's best known ghost stories. For those who believe in such phenomena, however, Dodd's record book might just point the way to the "real" source of the haunting.⁸

After his retirement in 1938, Porter Dodd filled the position of "night watchman for life" with the department. From the unique vantage point of the Bowling Green firehouse, in which he claimed to feel more at home than in his own residence, he continued until 1956 to take note of a parade of events both great and small. Remarkably, over a long career in which he saw and heard of many dramatic moments, Dodd never had to make the entry he would have found most difficult: the death of a fellow fireman in the line of duty.⁹

¹ E. Porter Dodd Record Book 1, WKU Special Collections Library (SC 2078), p. 18; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Bowling Green, Kentucky, October 1914, p. 1; *Park City Daily News*, 16 November 1947, 11 October 1953.

² E. Porter Dodd Record Book 1, (SC 2078), pp. 18, 19, 49, 53. Dodd records the place of Dan's death as Chestnut and Second Streets, while an unidentified newspaper clipping reported it as College and Second Streets: see Camilla Gerard Collection, WKU Special Collections Library, quoted in Edward B. McCurley, "Bowling Green: History of a Fire Department," *Kentucky Professional Firefighter*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 49.

³ Quoted in McCurley, "History of a Fire Department," 49.

⁴ *Park City Daily News*, 12 February 1925, 16 November 1947, 11 October 1953.

⁵ *Park City Daily News*, 16 November 1947, 11 October 1953, 9 December 1958.

⁶ E. Porter Dodd Record Book 1 (SC 2078), p. 25-29, 34, 43, 55, 57, 58; *Park City Daily News*, 16 November 1947.

⁷ E. Porter Dodd Record Book 1 (SC 2078), pp. 18, 25; *Park City Daily News*, 11 October 1953; McCurley, "History of a Fire Department," 45.

⁸ E. Porter Dodd Record Book 2 (SC 2078), p. 35, 47. Reports of Henry Clegg's death can be found in the (Louisville) *Courier-Journal*, 3 September 1918, and *The (Bowling Green) Times-Journal*, 3 September 1918. Clegg was said to be a new student at the Bowling Green Business University, although no record of his actual enrollment has survived.

⁹ E. Porter Dodd Record Book 2 (SC 2078), pp. 13, 32; *Park City Daily News*, 16 November 1947, 9 December 1958. In 1930, Chief John Moltenberry told the *Park City Daily News* that he had never lost a man during his term as chief: *Park City Daily News*, 2 April 1930.