

Lanesboro Minnesota's Infamous Fire

As told by David Hennessey

Lanesboro, Minnesota

Story Narrative:

"My name is David Hennessey, and I work at the Commonwealth Theater in Lanesboro. More than a decade ago, I stood across the street, near where The Bite restaurant is now and watched a major retailer burn to the ground. To explain, here are excerpts from an email I sent to my wife Linda on Monday, April 8, 2002. 'I'll give you the big news from Lanesboro. The Little River General Store, better known as The Bike Shop, burned down Saturday night. Firefighters from Lanesboro, Rushton to Preston and St. Charles, spent all night and the better part of yesterday fighting the fire. They did an excellent job of containment.

As far as I could tell, the neighboring Wendy Mesa's store suffered only water damage. Meanwhile, the 1895 building on the other side which houses VIS Plumbing and Heating, looks like it was saved too. We're lucky, we didn't lose the whole block. Mercifully, no one was hurt. The alarm went off shortly before midnight. The unofficial word I got was that they had battled the flames and had them under control in the wee hours of the morning. But then, a gas main caught fire. By 9:30 am, gray and black smoke still towered a couple of hundred feet straight up, and flames were still visible.

It was heartbreaking to see a main-stay business in town, literally, go up in smoke. There's already talk about working with a bank to get the Bike Shop up and running temporarily in the old cheese factory, next to the Theater. You can feel people itching to pitch in, do something, come together and rebuild. You can also feel the shock. A huge crane with a shovel on the end, lumbered around the charred parkway pushing down the walls of what was once a busy summer business. In just one night, a historic brick structure was reduced to a pile of brick and sogging splintered wood. Later as we trudged back up the hill, the crane rolled down the alley like some weird-looking tank to knock down the remaining shell of the building. I turned away. I didn't want to watch anymore.'

So, that's what I wrote in 2002. What I couldn't know then was that this economically and emotionally scarring event was caused by an arsonist, who just happened to be the Lanesboro chief of police. But, that's another story."

This story was collected as part of a collaborative effort to record the state of American lakes, rivers, and waterways as well as an attempt to uncover what water means to Americans. Listen to other stories recorded by storytellers from Lanesboro, Minnesota, for the "Be Here: Main Street" project on the [Be Here: Lanesboro](#) channel.

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