

1928 Fire Destroyed

Fifty years ago, Feb. 2, 1928, fire devastated the center of this city.

It was 6:24 p.m. when two employees of The Herald News circulation department, leaving their office, spotted a blaze in the southeast corner of Pocasset Mill No. 2, situated across Pocasset Street.

Within 10 minutes, the flames had spread throughout the building in which a demolition crew had been working for three days.

A cold wind, roaring up Pocasset Street from Mount Hope Bay, whipped the flames through the windowless structure.

Fire Chief Jeremiah F. Sullivan sounded three alarms and called for outside assistance as the blaze spread.

The wind sent sparks across the narrow cobblestone street, and the fire consumed three buildings to the east of The Fall River Herald News office and recrossed the street to ignite the 84-year-old Granite Block opposite city hall.

The fire tore through the city center, sparing only the municipal building and the merchantile structure to the south.

In eight hours, it leveled 36 buildings. The loss was estimated at \$10 million, but that figure did not include the valuable personal property in numerous buildings destroyed in the blaze.

The fire's zig-zag course, after it swept back across Pocasset

Street, wiped out the three-plant complex of the Pocasset Mill, spread northerly for another half-block, then easterly and around the Fall River Globe Building to destroy the Beth El Synagogue and threaten the New England Telephone Exchange. All operators were ordered from their switchboard at 11 p.m.

As fire licked at the phone building, tons of water put all phone lines out of order, and the single link the city had with the outside world was a direct line from the Fall River Line office to its Boston headquarters at South Station.

Before the fire was out, fire fighting crews and apparatus had come to the city from Boston,

Providence, New Bedford, Lowell, Newport, Taunton, Brockton, Somerset, Swansea, Westport, Tiverton, Bristol and other communities.

The National Guard and the Naval Reserves were mobilized, and the state police came from many barracks throughout the state, including those in the far western reaches of the commonwealth.

President Calvin Coolidge offered help and placed at the disposal of municipal officials the facilities of Army and Navy bases in the area.

It was 2:30 a.m. before Chief Sullivan declared the fire under control, and it was four days later before the last fire vehicle was recalled from the

Much of Downtown

devastated and still smoking ruins.

In addition to the Pocasset Mill, Beth El Synagogue and the Granite Block, buildings destroyed included the Mohican and Wilbur hotels; Rialto and Premier theatres; Western Union and Postal Telegraph offices; seven cotton brokers' establishments; four banks; l'Independent, the French newspaper building; and a number of industrial, insurance, merchantile, lawyers' and doctors' offices.

No one was killed, but one city firefighter died of pneumonia, the result of battling the flames.

Hospitals treated 250 persons for injuries, but only 25 persons were kept overnight.

Investigators determined that the conflagration had its origin when a spark from a salamander, used by the mill-razing crew to keep warm during the day, had been swept by the wind and deposited on the oil-soaked floor of the abandoned mill building.

Fed by the oil saturated wooden floors, the fire spread with astonishing rapidity. As it blazed, the wind carried embers to various parts of the bare building until it became a mass of flames.

The center of the city

was rebuilt in the ensuing decade and in 1965 many of the new structures were razed again.

Not by fire, this time, but by wrecking balls as the state cut a gash through the area that is now Route 195.

Tonight, at 6:24 p.m. five decades later, motorists will speed at 55 miles an hour by the spot where the 1928 conflagration had its beginning.

And they will go under Gromada Plaza and the corner from which the first, second, third and

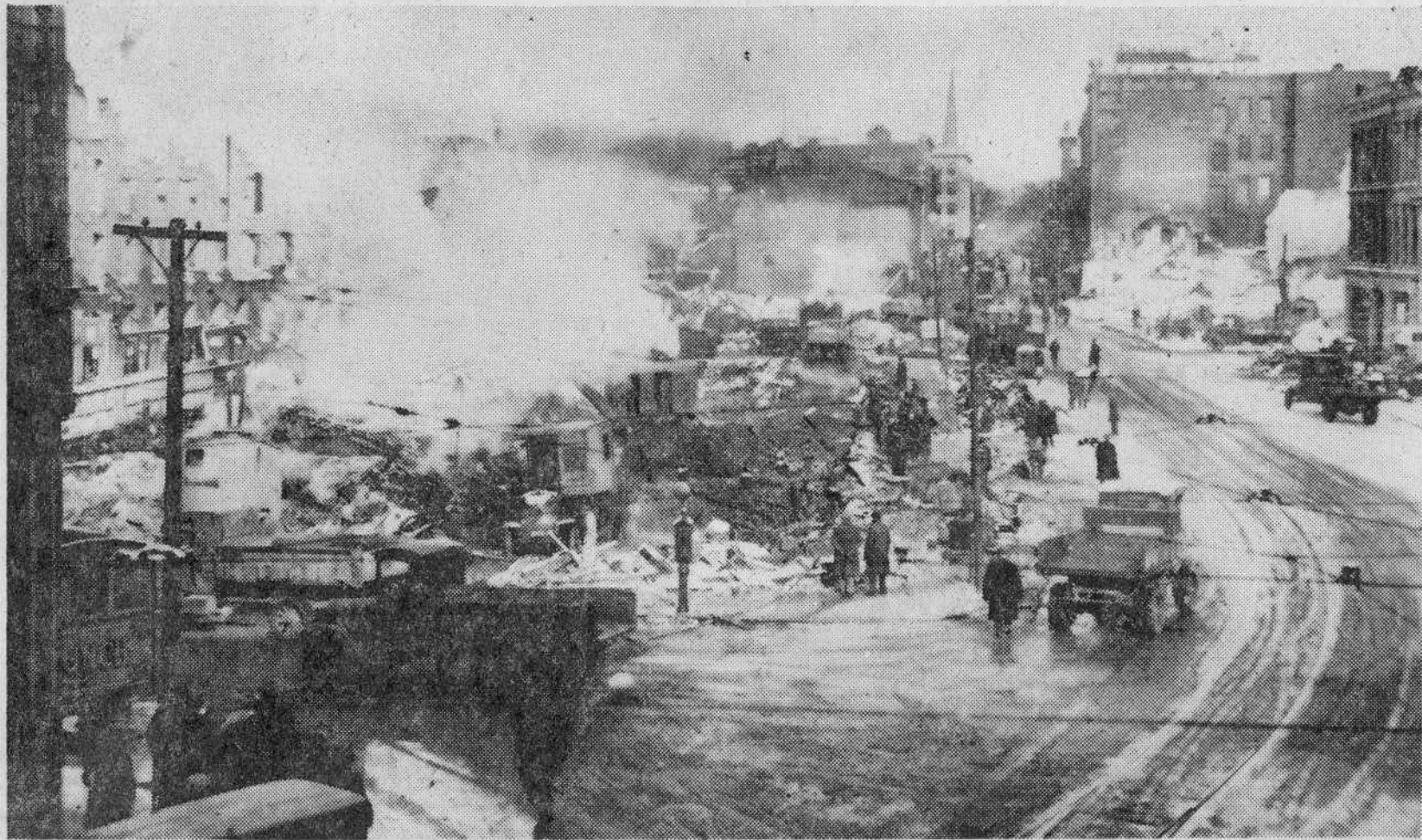
general alarms were sounded from a box that was destroyed by the blaze.

Because that box was leveled, the Fall River fire of 1928 was never officially rung out.

On the day that he retired in 1937, Chief Sullivan said, "Perhaps it is better this way. These new buildings, this active business district, these happy people, working and walking in the area of the fire are enough of a sign that the 1928 fire — with all its awfulness — was beaten."

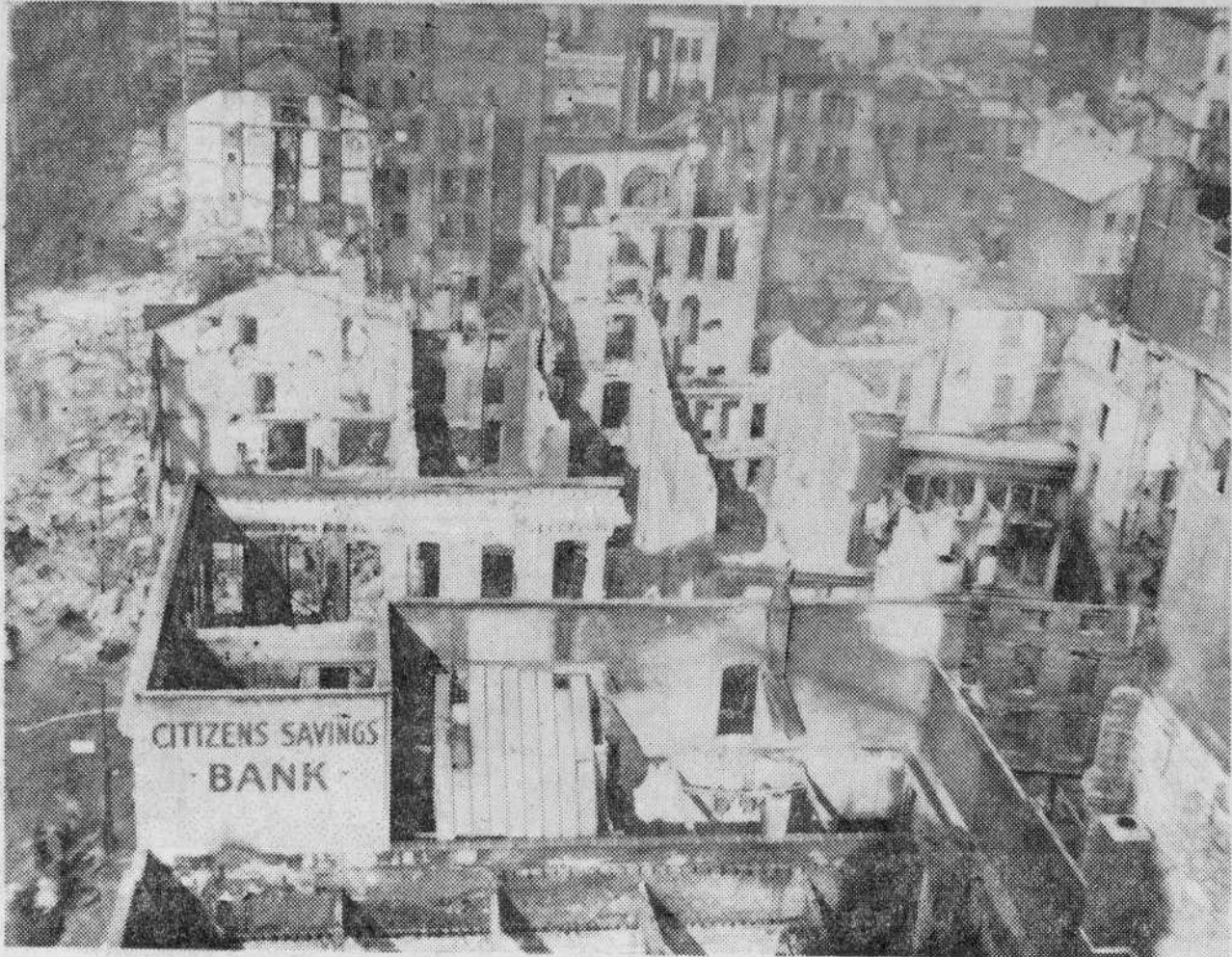


Congratulations
To The City of Fall River
On Your



This is the corner of Pocasset and South Main streets looking north the day after the great fire.

At left is excavation of what was the flourishing Granite Block.



The Union Savings Bank, at bottom, with the Citizens Savings Bank, Burke Building and Hotel Wilbur at top, were ruined when flames ate their way through roofs and took everything with them.