



THE MONTHLY STATEMENT

February is the hottest

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

AS OF TODAY, the first chunk of winter is over and done with. As of tomorrow, let us greet February with foreboding and the grim realization that we are in for it.

If the class—please—will turn to page 12 of the 1970 edition of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin Almanac*, you will note that February is real mean. The month has the lowest mean minimum temp.—21.1 degrees—, the lowest mean monthly temp.—29.2 degrees—, and the lowest temp. ever recorded here by the weather bureau, 17 degrees below zero on 9 Feb. 1934. Prepare to shiver. And, if you can, get the hell out.

Garry Byrnes is one of seven surviving founding members of the New Vernon, New Jersey, Volunteer Fire Department, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last weekend.

Now, class, please turn to one of the most readable sections of the *Journal-Bulletin Almanac*. It is headed "Fire Disasters in 'Rhode Island'" and I propose to demonstrate from the evidence here that February may also be called Rhode Island's hottest month.

If you want to equate temperatures with major fires, the coolest months in Rhode Island are June, August and September, in that order. And, as you might expect, those months when Boreas compels us to put more logs in the fireplace, shovel more coal into the furnace or turn up the thermostat really take the cake for dreadful fires. The 1971 edition of the *Journal-Bulletin Almanac* will say that when it comes to major fires, December with 23 is bad, January with 28 is worse, and February with 38 is the worst of all.

Fires of any kind are bad. They destroy property, often they maim or kill people. They put insurance rates

up. Yet such is the perversity of human kind that many of us — those of us who haven't grown up, those of us who still love to chase the engines — are disposed to rate fires by their entertainment value.

THE MAJOR FIRES of February in Rhode Island have been, in this box-office context, a series of sell-outs. To mention all the hits would add up to boredom. But it is interesting — isn't it? — to recall that the old Union Station on Exchange Place, where Abe Lincoln spoke in Railroad Hall, was burned out on February 20, 1896, bringing about a major change in the appearance of downtown Providence, and that the freight office building of the present Union Station burned "like a bonfire" on February 18, 1941.

The old State Pier on Allens Avenue went on February 25, 1931, destroying a landmark where thousands of immi-

grants came ashore from the Fabre liners. Three people died when the Lorraine Hotel on Aborn Street was burned out on February 18, 1920; earlier it had been the Newman House and had a gaudy reputation.

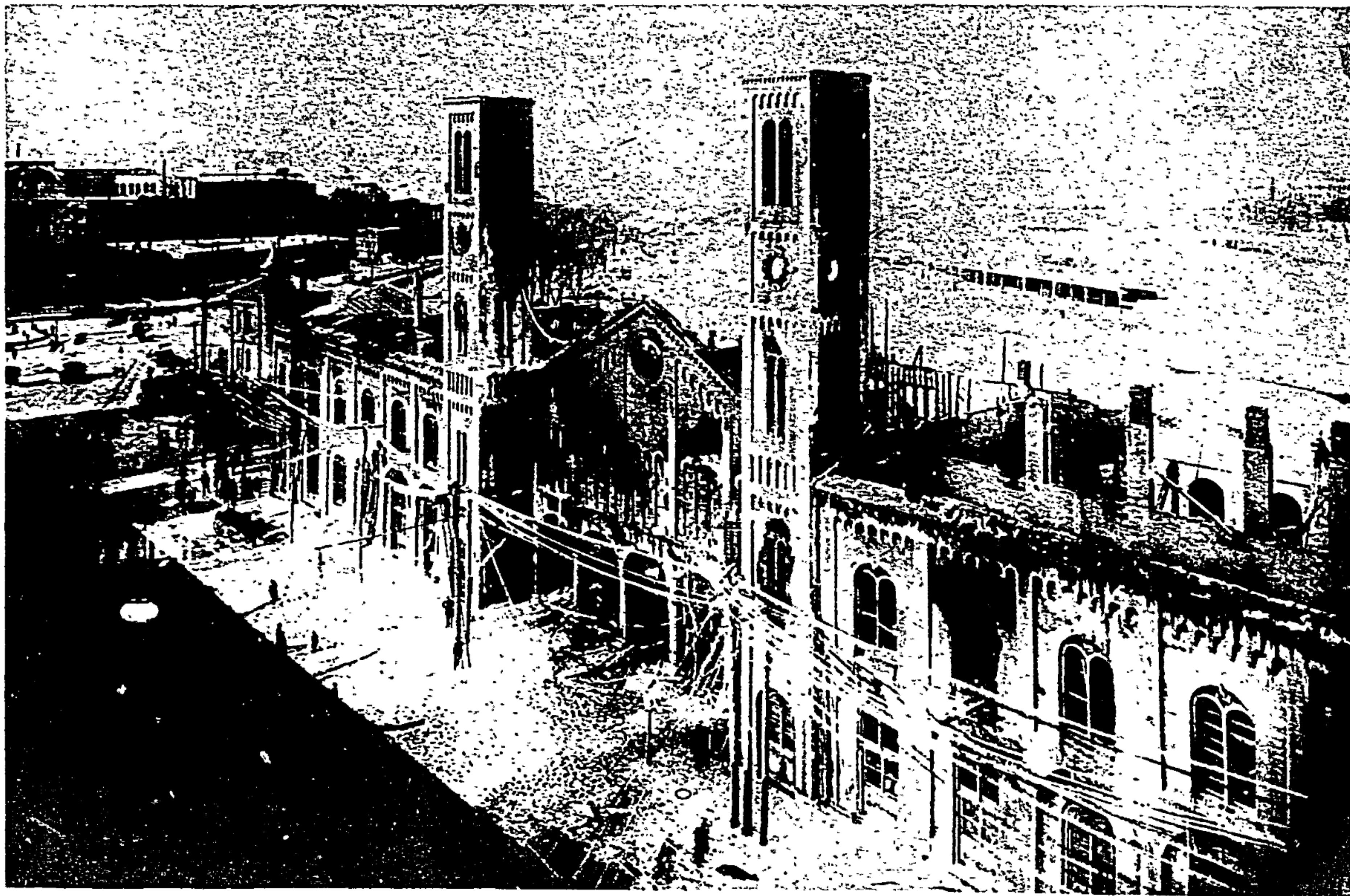
Connoisseurs of fires remember the Providence Coal Company fire, which began February 3, 1889, for its cursed longevity. The company had towering coal pockets on a wharf at the river end of Dorrance Street. The buildings in the yard burned nicely and so did the coal and the many companies of fire laddies were as black as soft coal miners before their work was done.

The *Journal* of Monday, February 4, on its back page — where they printed the local news in those days — gave a column and a half to the fire, noting that hundreds of Sunday rubbernecks went down to look. Across the top of the page was a shallow, eight-column ad put in by the Providence Coal Company, offering large quantities of coal for sale at reduced prices because it had "been damaged only by water."

A month later, the *Sunday Journal* on March 3 ran a story about the Providence Coal Company fire. It was still burning, and grimy fire laddies were still pouring tons of water into it. That report suggested the battle would be won in a few days, but legend persists that the final recall of the Providence Fire Department was not sounded until early in May. Whenever the last smoulder was extinguished, the coal company fire on the river was a long-lasting lollapalooza.

TO STRESS the point that February is a peachy month for fires, look at the month in 1888, a year most people associate with *that* blizzard. Rhode Islanders ought to think of it as the year when, in a brief span of February time, we had more spectaculars going on than in the big show's five rings.

It started at 15 minutes before midnight on Wednesday, February 15



UNION DEPOT on Exchange Place the morning after February 20, 1896.

Photos from Journal-Bulletin News Library

month

when Box 23 at the corner of Union and Washington Streets was rung in. The fire began in the Chace Block at the corner of Eddy and Fountain and before the night was over, the block bounded by Fountain, Eddy, Washington and Union Streets — where the parking garage next to the Biltmore is now — had burned down. The Chace Block went; so did the Billings Block and the Aldrich House, a hotel at the corner of Eddy and Washington. So did a lot of smaller structures. In all, it was a half-a-million-dollar fire. The Providence firemen had help by companies from Pawtucket, East Providence and Woonsocket and a telegram had gone to Boston, asking the firemen there to stand by. Fire Marshal Jenckes, riding a large gray horse, directed the battle. Sparks threatened other downtown buildings but these potential fires were quickly put out. The only things salvaged, apparently, were the horses and carriages from the Billings and Crandall livery stables.

The embers of what always is referred to as The Aldrich House Fire were hardly cold and heavy icicles still hung from the telephone and telegraph wires in Washington and Eddy Streets when one W. H. Gudgeon Jr., walking down High Street in Westerly toward Broad and the Dixon House Square, smelled smoke at three o'clock on the morning of Friday, February 17. The smell of fire came from Louis Cella's candy and peanut emporium in the Wells Block on Broad Street, hard by the bridge over the Pawcatuck. The East Side and West Side fire departments were quickly at work but before that fire was over, the entire Broad and High Street corner of five buildings was consumed. It was Westerly's biggest or, if you will, best fire up to that time. In addition to the business establishments at street level, numerous offices used by doctors, lawyers and dentists were ruined. When things were at their hottest, even the fire company from distant Stonington lent a hand.

The alarm bells in Providence rang



FRENZIED FEMALES made midnight moan to the fire laddies on February 18, 1888.

again at 12:05 a.m. on Saturday, the 18th, this time from Box 121. The Theatre Comique, built at the corner of Weybosset and Orange Streets and opened in November, 1874, was burning nicely when the first fire laddies arrived. Many members of Lillie Clay's Burlesque Company, all female, were still at the theater and they made loud moan about the destruction of their costumes which, according to the mode of the day, were ample and not very revealing.

The firemen managed to get out many trunks full of costumes worn by the gals the *Journal* referred to as "frenzied females," plus some water-soaked clothing which had been hanging in the dressing rooms. All of this finery was heaped up on the steps of the nearby Arcade. The theater itself was completely wrecked and on the location they built the Swarts Building, still there. The total loss — theater, scenery, stores on the ground floor, a shooting gallery and a billiard parlor — totted up to more than \$25,000.

BOX 121 rang again on the pleasant afternoon of Sunday, February 19, for a fire in the Daniels Building on Custom House Street. The blaze attracted a record crowd of spectators, many of whom had come by steam train and

steamboat to gaze upon the Aldrich House and Theatre Comique charcoal and got a real live fire as a dividend. The police closed off lower Weybosset Street, Dyer and Pine Streets, and the firemen, responding to three alarms and working from tall ladders, finally knocked the blaze down. The big loss was sustained by Daniels, Cornell & Company, wholesale grocers, whose stock alone was valued at \$125,000. On the upper four floors, the oddly assorted tenants — brokers, bankers, insurance firms, a gymnasium, two Brown University secret societies and a printing plant — were damaged but the Protectives managed to get in and put tarps over some of the furnishings.

Firemen pouring water onto the Daniels Building fire from the roof of the adjacent Vaughan Building at about 6:15 that Sunday evening noticed a glow in the winter sky way off to the northeast. That was a burning mill in Lebanon Village on the banks of the Ten Mile in Pawtucket. The mill on fire was an old one and it was destroyed; Pawtucket's firemen managed to save the adjoining new mill building, even though their efforts were hindered by a poor supply of water. The loss on that fire was \$150,000.

About 8:30 that Sunday night, just as the Providence firemen had the best of the Daniels Building fire, an alarm

came in from the wool waste building of the Riverside-Oswego mill complex on Manton Avenue in Olneyville. It was a lovely blaze, fought by companies which hardly could be spared from their work on the Daniels fire on Custom House Street.

Next morning, *The Providence Journal* wound up nearly seven columns of fire news with a hot dope story. It went on for several paragraphs and was pretty dull; after you read the headline, you didn't have to plough on. The head read "Is There a Fire Bug?"

That question, as far as I can determine, never was answered.

THERE IS no question that, if you have to hang around Rhode Island during the month which starts tomorrow, you are taking the risk of frost bite, chilblains and frozen toes. The last should be thawed out in cold water, slowly and painfully; if you are impetuous and try to work them free with bending, they'll simply snap off where the toes join the metatarsals, and who wants to go through February without toes?

Stay indoors this February and gather what warmth ye may. Gather added warmth by recalling that in Februaries past, Rhode Island had some damned hot times in the old towns them nights. □