



This appeared in the Rolla, ND newspaper in 1987

As if it were yesterday

Sisters remember devastating storm 63 years ago.

She respects storms even today.

Senia Halone of rural Rolla was only five years old when her home was destroyed by fire caused by lightning on June 21, 1924, but she and her sister Edna Hoyhtya, who was eight remember it as if it were yesterday.

It was a Saturday evening and Senia and Edna's parents had gone visiting at the neighbors' taking their youngest son with them. The five oldest brothers and sisters had gone into Rolla, leaving Senia and Edna, their two year old brother and another sister home at their farm north of Perth and in the charge of their 13 year old brother.

At about 8:30 p.m. an electrical storm came up. The children all gathered in their parent's bedroom and the older children hung army blankets in the windows so the younger ones wouldn't see the lightning.

"The bedroom was way in back of the house and we were all in the folks' bed," remembered Senia. "All of a sudden we heard a bang. We ran out through the living room and it was already in flames."

The lightning had come through the telephone and had ignited the paper walls, but the children got out to the barn before the gas lamp, which had been hanging in the living room, exploded.

"The bottom of that lamp flew probably a quarter of a mile," said Edna.

Because it had been a hot evening, the children were dressed in short nightshirts made out of flour sacks. The nearest neighbors, the Aldrish Fallses, lived about a mile away, and the children were forced to wade through a waist deep slough to get there.

"We didn't have any clothes or anything to put on our two year old brother," said Senia. "So we put him in a feed sack; one held him and one put him in. We had to carry him through the slough."

When they got to Falls' home, the children were given clothes and beds.

"I had to wear Emma Falls' dress for two weeks," said Senia. "It was too big for me; it was like a nightgown."

After arriving at Falls', the 13 year old brother set out the Kapo Hemming's farm where he got a horse and rode the next mile to where his parent were visiting.

"They had driven their 1923 Ford to the neighbor's and on the way back it was very muddy," said Senia. "Some of the people found it just as fast to run."

When they got to their farm and found the house in flames, Senia and Edna's mother was beside herself with worry for her 11 children.

"She was hysterical," said Edna. "She was upset until she knew everyone was all right. We kept counting to reassure her."

The family lost everything in the fire, the second one in four years.

"Mother said there was not even a spoon left," said Senia. "But Dad said there was nothing to use a spoon for anyway."

One of the older brothers was to be confirmed the next day, an event which the entire family had been looking forward to.

"Edna and I had gotten brand new black patent leather shoes to wear to church," said Senia. "We were so proud of those shoes. Just that day we sneaked them out of the closet and tried them on outside. But we lost them, too."

Because their family was so large, there were always other kids welcome in their home as well, indicated Edna.

"There was always room for extras," she said. "So there was personal property of other people's that burned too."

Although they lost everything in the fire, the terribly harsh reality was softened by the goodness of their neighbors, remember Senia and Edna.

"People brought food and clothes and even a Singer sewing machine," said Edna. "The neighbors brought so much that there was no need for anything."

The family lived for three months in a cook car and a granary with makeshift beds before they moved into a house.

"Our neighbor Andrew Johnson moved a house onto our land and we moved into their house," said Senia.

Senia's story was recounted in a letter which appeared in July's North Dakota REC ?? magazine.

"We just don't get old fashioned thunderstorms like that anymore," she said. "That farmers say they need the lightning for nitrogen."

"But I still think about that storm when the weather gets bad."

