

Gasoline Station Fire in Colebrook Center

Very few people alive remember when Colebrook had not one, but two filling stations in the Center, and one of them very nearly was the scene of a real tragedy. It was in the summer of 1933, when the nation was in the depths of the Great Depression. Colebrook in those days was the destination of a large number of "summer people", who either owned or rented homes here to enjoy the quiet of the Foothills of the Berkshires. It was not uncommon for them to bring their servants with them. I vaguely remember being in doubt as to which was which, lumping them all in my child's head as simply "summer people". I'm sure that this would have been an unpardonable sin in an adult!

On the weekend of August 26 and 27, 1933 the normal quiet of the summer afternoon was shattered by an out of control auto. What follows is the account as it appeared in *The Winsted Citizen*:

"Fire, which was started in a unique manner, burned the exterior of the front of W. W. Cooper's home and store in Colebrook yesterday afternoon and but for the quick response of a neighborhood bucket brigade and the Winsted and Norfolk fire trucks, the blaze might well have destroyed the entire building.

The fire started when a car operated by Paul Coquerin, about 30 years old, New York Negro, crashed into and uprooted a gasoline pump in front of the Cooper building. Gasoline was showered over the car and the front of the building. It became ignited almost immediately and shortly the entire front of the building was in flames. Whether the electrical apparatus attached to the pump or the car caused the fire is not known.

With Coquerin in the car, a small sedan, was Miss Solange Bilot, 22 years old, a maid at the summer home of Mrs. Henry Hodge in Colebrook. Gasoline, which poured over Miss Bilot's legs and arms became ignited and caused her to be badly burned. She was later taken to the Litchfield County Hospital, where her injuries were treated. Her condition, while most painful, was not regarded today as serious.

Coquerin was operating a car, which had been rented by Andre Regal of New York from the Square Drive Yourself Co., Broadway, New York City. Regal left the car in Colebrook and Coquerin, it is claimed, took the car without permission. Coquerin was arrested by State Policeman George Remer of the Canaan Barracks and is now free under \$500.00 bonds provided by Mrs. Hodge. He is to appear before Judge Homer Deming [of Robertsville] to answer to a charge of violation of motor vehicle laws.

Coquerin and Miss Bilot were on their way to Winsted and came out of the Colebrook-Norfolk highway [Rockwell Road] at too high a speed to make the sharp turn in the center of Colebrook. The car careened across the main highway, over a portion of the Colebrook church lawn and directly into one of two gasoline pumps in front of the Cooper store.

The force of the impact may be estimated by the damage to the front end of the car and the fact that the uprooted pump was carried several feet on the bumper of the car, coming to rest on the porch in front of the main entrance to the Cooper store.

Mr. Cooper was sitting in his home, which contains the general store and post office, when he heard the noise of the crash. He rushed outside and saw the car and the spreading flames, but no one appeared who might have been passengers in the car. Miss Bilot and Coquerin were located later at the Hodge home by officer Remer. They left the

scene of the accident and had walked the entire distance to the house, which is more than a mile distant from the scene of the fire.

A call was sent in at once to the Norfolk and Winsted fire departments. The Ford truck from here and one of the Norfolk trucks responded in quick time, the Norfolk truck arriving first. The fire was extinguished by Colebrook residents and the firemen before it had gained access to the interior of the building. Mr. Cooper estimated the damage at approximately \$2,000. Portions of the front of the building had to be ripped away to extinguish fire that had worked into the partitions.

The car that struck the pump was damaged about the front end. One wheel, fender and axle were damaged.

Several hundred persons gathered at the scene of the fire. Many from Winsted and Norfolk followed the fire trucks to the blaze and practically every summer resident of the vicinity was on hand.

Coquerin was scheduled to appear before Judge Deming at 7 o'clock this evening. He was burned and cut about the side of his face, but refused medical aid.

Both he and Miss Bilot are native West Indians.

Mr. Cooper carried sufficient insurance on his property to cover any loss. And it is understood the auto was insured in New York City."

That was the end of the gasoline pumps in front of Cooper's store. With the country in the grip of the depression, and the reminder of how dangerous the pumps were so close to the house, Mr. Cooper decided to eliminate that part of his business. The store and Post Office continued for another decade, and then quietly went out of existence, leaving what little business remained in town to the Colebrook Store, located across the street. The Post Office was established in the small lean-to on the store, where it remained until finding a new home in the former fire station, now between the Historical Society and the New Town Hall.

The Cooper fire provided a powerful incentive to establish our own fire department and resulted in the formation of the Colebrook Center Fire Department in 1938. The name of the new department defined the geographical area to be served; it was not until 1950 that the wording was changed so that the department protected the entire township.

Next time you are in the Center, walk over in front of 474 Smith Hill Road and observe how little room there is between the front door of the house and the maple tree at the edge of the green. This area had to provide space for vehicles traveling over the road, the customers who were in the store and those who needed fuel. It is a classic study in why communities need zoning regulations.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg