



At left: The fire at the Commercial Hotel, April 1, 1951. Above: The original Thurst Kjome music store (Submitted photos)

Decorah's historic downtown

In the fall of 2014, the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission (DHPC) began a lengthy process to nominate the city's business district to the National Register of Historic Places. The district consists of some 130 buildings, mostly on Water, Washington and Winnebago streets

Over a period of seven months, a group of about 15 volunteer researchers gathered information and photographs of the buildings. It was turned over in May to project consultant Jan Olive Full of Iowa City, who is incorporating it into the formal nomination and hopes National Register status will be granted by the U.S. Department of Interior by the end of 2017

DHPC member Judy van der Linden has coordinated a series of Decorah Newspapers articles on particular buildings written by volunteer researchers. The next article in the series, below, was written by volunteer researcher Ed Epperly and edited by van der Linden.

A near thing

Thurston (Thurst) Kjome opened a music store in Decorah during the 1920s. His business prospered and by 1930 he was selling his sheet music and band instruments out of a two-story building at 126 E. Water Street. One can still see a "K" at the top of the building's brick facade, which almost certainly stands for "Kjome."

Whether Thurst's building was totally new at that time, or was actually constructed around an earlier wood frame building, is still the subject of research. Upstairs was

an apartment that was occupied for many years by Thurst's family. This building now houses a portion of Kephart Music Store.

When constructed, Thurst's building was directly

west of the Commercial Hotel, a 3-story brick and frame structure. The hotel faced State Street, which intersected and ended at Water Street at that time.

On Sunday, April 1, 1951, one of Decorah's saddest days, the Commercial Hotel burned to the ground. It was sad not for the loss of a building that could easily be replaced, but for the loss of three elderly residents who perished in the fire.

As the fire roared that morning, Thurst feared it would soon jump to his building. Enlisting helpers from the large crowd of spectators watching the fire, he struggled to save his business records and merchandise. Out went the band instruments, out went the sheet music, books and display cases. Even the pianos were rolled up Water Street a block to the Winneshiek Hotel, where they took shelter in the lobby.

Tragic as the fire was, it did not spread to Thurst's building. Back came the display cases, back came the sheet music and books and back

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came the pianos. Later, after the hotel lot was cleared, there was talk of extending State Street through to north of Water Street. When that did happen, Thurst's building stood at the newly-created corner of Water and State

streets

With the fire long past, Thurst sold his music business to Russ and Lynne Kephart in 1960. After owning the business a number of years, the Kepharts bought the building from the Kjomes and began a major renovation of its interior.

Lynne Kephart said that when they tore off the old lath and plaster, they found that the studding on the east wall of the building was blackened and charred. Had the hotel fire been a bit hotter or burned a bit longer, Thurst's building likely would have burst into flames. And, had that happened, it is uncertain where the fire would have stopped. It was a near thing that the Commercial Hotel fire was confined to that one building.

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