

Hinkley Fire Hero

BY CATHLENE N. BUCHHOLZ

The Minnesota Historical Society has archived a collection of Blair's personal account and the speeches of those rescued by Blair in their entirety in the John W. Blair Papers.

A children's book, *John Blair and the Great Hinckley Fire*, by Josephine Nobisso was published in 2000 and is available for purchase on www.amazon.com.

To learn more about the Great Hinckley Fire or to schedule a group tour or school field trip of the depot, contact Sandy Hinds, director of the Hinckley Fire Museum, by visiting www.hinckleyfiremuseum.com.

On September 1, 1894, John Wesley Blair, a 27-year-old African-American porter for the St. Paul and Duluth Limited Train No. 4, became a hero. As he helped the 150 passengers board the train in Duluth, bound for St. Paul, Blair no doubt thought of his home on Case Street. His wife, Emma, and their two children would be waiting for him. Although the afternoon sky held clouds of smoke, Blair didn't think the day would be any different. Minnesota had suffered a two-month drought; small forest fires burned constantly throughout much of the state.

As the train headed toward Hinckley, the sky grew dark and fires sprang up to the left and right. Blair walked the aisles, reassuring frightened passengers as he lit the lanterns. Within a mile and a half of Hinckley, the smoke became overwhelming and the fire roared on both sides of the train. Fleeing from the nearby woods, Hinckley residents, their bodies singed and scantily-clothed, flagged the train and related the news of the town's devastation.

Blair set his step stool on the ground and extended his hand. While the panicked people boarded the train with his assistance, Engineer James Root made the quick decision to back the train up four miles to Skunk Lake, a five-acre swamp. With the engine in reverse, the 300 passengers crowded the smoke-filled cars, their faces turned to Blair and his calming voice. He distributed wet towels from the ladies' restroom and instructed each passenger to place the towel over their face. Soon the

windows shattered from the heat and flames entered the cabin. People screamed and cried

as Blair grabbed a chemical extinguisher and put out the spot fires. By the time they reached Skunk Lake, the entire train was in flames. Blair sprayed each passenger with the extinguisher before helping them to the ground. He was the last to leave the train. As Blair splashed water on the children and encouraged everyone to lie down in the two-foot deep water, the firestorm swept over the lake. He stood with his back to the flames and continued to spray his extinguisher, dousing the women's dresses that caught fire. According to a speech given by Hon. C. D. O'Brien, a surviving passenger, "Everywhere we went Blair was between us and the fire, risking his own life in order to save ours."

After the storm passed, Blair noted the location of each passenger and the severity of their injuries, and he tended to their wounds. When help arrived seven hours later, he immediately gave a full report.

When the *Duluth Evening Herald* interviewed Blair on September 7, his comment was, "I thought of wife and babies and said to myself, 'John, if there ever was a time you need to be cool and clear-headed it is right now,' and I just resolved I would not lose my head and if I had to die I would do so without making a fool of myself." According to the St. Paul Pioneer Press, amid speeches given by those rescued, Blair was presented with a gold medal on September 13 by the African-American citizens of St. Paul. Its inscription reads "in recognition of his heroic conduct." He was also given a gold watch by the railway authorities "for gallant and faithful discharge of duty."

A year after the horrific four-hour fire, the St. Paul and Duluth Railroad rebuilt the Hinckley depot to its original specifications. It now houses the Hinckley Fire Museum where a portrait of Blair and several fellow railroad heroes are displayed. Many of Hinckley's reconstructed streets are named after these brave men—one being Blair Avenue.

