

QDT 18/6/05

A poignant grave: four child victims of house fire

In a simple double grave on the edge of the Catholic section of Dunedin's Southern Cemetery lie the small bodies of the victims of a disaster in early Dunedin.

In these plots (11 and 12) lie four children, siblings Minnie Bischiski, aged 6 years; Martha Bischiski, aged 4 years; and Francis Bischiski, aged 8 years; and their cousin Thomas Kreft, aged 13 years.

They all died in a fire in their home in Smith St on February 21, 1882. The house, situated in a row of

wooden buildings belonging to E.B. Cargill, comprised four rooms on two floors.

According to Julius Bischiski (a native of Poland), one of the children had raised the alarm, but his efforts — and those of his wife — to save them from their burning bedroom were unsuccessful.

The Bischiskis and their 2½-year old did escape, although not without injury. The bodies of the four children were eventually recovered by two firemen.

The cause of the fire was uncertain but is thought to have been ignited by embers left in the kitchen grate. The fire also destroyed two houses on either side of that occupied by the Bischiskis, reflecting, of course, the tightly packed nature of some of Dunedin's

early housing and the lack of fire walls.

According to a report in the *Otago Daily Times* (February 22, 1882), "The Brigade were [sic] late in putting in their appearance, on account of the horses refusing to pull the gear up the incline of Stuart Street."

In the aftermath of the fire, the family resided with Mrs Gdanitz, Mrs Bischiski's mother. Thomas Kreft was a son of a Pine Hill dairyman and along with the two eldest Bischiski children had been attending the Christian Brothers School.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand from *Southern People, The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.



Block 41R Plot 13