History Uncovered
An Unexpected Awakening
Continued:

The Steinway Model L grand, made in 1922, sat in the music room on the first floor. The impact of the explosion tossed the piano, and had it hanging between the first floor and the basement. “It sure was a wreck,” wrote Mr. Stanley Schlosser of the Edmund Gram Co., Steinway dealers in Milwaukee, “but what a glorious piano it turned out to be after reconditioning.” We are reminded of the quote by renowned pianist, Arthur Rubinstein, “a Steinway is a Steinway and there is nothing like it in the world”.

Mr. Ray Daniels, of the H.C. Prange Company, provided an itemized estimate of the furnishings that were damaged. If not ruined by the explosion, they were embedded with plaster and concrete dust.

Two room-size Oriental rugs were shipped to Nahigian Brothers of Chicago for cleaning.

It was thought that the explosion was caused by the accumulation of coal gas in the basement being ignited by a spark from the hot water boiler. Coal dust suspended in air is explosive—coal dust has far more surface area per unit weight than lumps of coal, and is more susceptible to spontaneous combustion. As a result, a nearly empty coal bin is a greater explosion risk than a full one.

Coal replaced wood in home heating about 1885 and would remain the dominant method of home central heating until the 1940s when it was replaced by fuel oil. Forced air furnaces with duct work and an electric fan replaced coal burners, those giant octopus like ducts and floor registers.

Once thoroughly investigated, the mystery came back to old gas lighting pipes in the walls of the home. The pipes were never removed when the house was converted to electricity.
On the morning in question, Dr. Knauf was, by good fortune, called out on a house call. Once awake, he smelled the gas throughout the home and quickly evacuated his family. The gas ignited shortly thereafter exploding with great force. Although the Knauf family was hopeful the home could be saved, it was damaged too severely.

Christ Reimer, local carpenter and contractor, was granted a permit in September 1944 to demolish the house that once stood at 1215 North Sixth Street. Today an apartment building occupies the site.

Photo interior - damage done to the first floor rooms of the Knauf family
Photo, on web page - exterior damage to the home from the explosion
Photo - demolition of the Knauf home in September of 1944

Thanks to Chris Roenitz for the photos, etc.