

Capital Journal

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Capital Journal writer Al Jones writes, "Once converted to ashes, historic relics don't mean much, but history 'bugs' today still wish there hadn't been a Capitol fire in 1935."

He relives the momentous incident on Page 6 and 11 of today's *Weekender*.

*The
day
the
Capitol
burned
down*



\$1 million si



Before . . .

Firemen fought futilely . . .

It already was a "lost cause" when Salem firemen arrived and started pouring 4 million gallons of water on the flaming Capitol on April 25, 1935.

Percy L. Clark, 950 18th St. NE, said this week that it was a "water job" from the beginning.

"Unless you had a river of water and a lot of men in the first five minutes, it was a loss," Clark said. This was because the Capitol, built in 1873 and without a dome until 1893, was "designed to burn like a furnace."

"Those redwood columns that held up the dome were hollow and open at the base and the top, to act like a chimney," Clark said, "and the dome was of wooden construction."

"So when the basement fire climbed up the columns it mush-

roomed and we didn't have the manpower at the beginning to cover it," he said.

Clark, later a foreman for 35 years until retiring June 1, 1963, was off duty in the watch room of the city hall station when the alarm came in.

Firemen then were working 12-hour days and 84-hour weeks and were subject to call whenever the "big whistle" (siren) blew.

"I was trying to take care of things while the others were at the Capitol and the phones were jumping off the wall, with wives of firemen calling in to see if their husbands were hurt."

At 11 p.m., nearly five hours after the first call, Clark replaced Paul Phillips in hauling gasoline from city hall to the pumps at the Capitol.

By that time the fire had reached

its sensational peak, when, as A. H. Currey of Eugene, then a 14-year-old boy, said in the Eugene Register-Guard this week:

"Now it (the dome) filled with an angry deep orange light which became increasingly ugly as the sky around it darkened. Before it eventually crumpled, the dome became an Olympian torch that flared blue, green, red and yellow — all at the same time — as its heavy copper and bronze components were consumed."

Salem's water supply was plentiful, he said, but what was lacking was the capacity of the water mains in the Capitol area. The Oregon Washington Water Service Co. then owned the system and stood the cost of the water, because the city only paid for the rent of the hydrants.

When the fire station telephone jangled loudly soon after 6 o'clock on a sunny Thursday evening, an eight-year veteran of the Salem Fire Department, Charles M. Charlton, answered.

Henry Wesolowski was calling from the Capitol: There was a fire in the statehouse, the janitor said. He had smelled smoke, then saw it coming from an elevator shaft on the first floor.

The Salem Fire Department responded promptly with all of its five bright red pumpers and both shifts of fire fighters in protective clothing of olive drab and dusky tan.

"We never thought too much about there being a serious fire there," Charlton said this week on the 40th anniversary.

"I was riding on the back of a LaFrance chemical truck and waving at Dewey Johnson, who was driving the big Seagrave pumper truck behind us."

They were charging east on Court Street to the 62-year-old structure of limestone, sandstone and brick walls five feet thick at the ground level. Under its 187-foot copper-coated dome (17 feet higher than today's gold Pioneer statue) had sat 18 governors and 35 legislatures.

Salem then was a capital city of 28,000 at the depth



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. . . and regretted it

It was almost midnight on April 25, 1935, when Floyd McMullen was tugging on a fire hose on the west side of the burning Capitol.

An 18-year-old sophomore, the Hermiston youth was working his way through Willamette University as a call fireman with the East Salem fire station.

Also manning hoses on that Willson Park side of the statehouse were Capt. Ralph Gesner of the East Salem station and Frank Friebert of the downtown station.

Flames already had scorched the Great Seal of Oregon centered over the west

porch and steps between the six Ionian columns.

A Salem fireman who recalled that night is Percy Clark, 950 18th St. NE.

"The station captain told Floyd to get out away from the building because of the danger of the parapet falling," Clark said this week. "He was quite concerned about the crew being in under it and he waited until the fire crews were out of the way."

When the parapet started to sag, he tried to get clear but was hit by one of the 14 brick chimneys which ornamented the west side of the roof, Clark said.

The debris crushed McMullen's head, pelvis and arm and he was dead before reaching the hospital.

McMullen was a 1932 Hermiston Union High School graduate, the son of Mr. and Mrs. J. W. McMullen of Hermiston and one of five children.

For him a Salem Fire Department Floyd McMullen Memorial First Aid Car was dedicated and used for many years before being replaced.

Injured also that night were Capt. Gesner, with a back injury, and Friebert, struck earlier by a bouncing brick when another chimney fell on the north side.

Decisions, decisions:



FRED PAULUS
Lost his law books

Fred H. Paulus answered his telephone at about 7 p.m. at his home at 1556 N. Church St. on April 25, 1935.

"Did you know that there is a fire in the Capitol?" his brother, William, asked because Fred was deputy state treasurer. The state treasurer, Rufus Holman, was in Curry County with Gov. Charles H. Martin.

Fred Paulus's long strides took him quickly to the Capitol, where he found that the original smoke in the basement had become a serious threat to those securities which a treasurer keeps around.

Paulus took his lawbooks across to the Charles K. Spaulding residence at 965 Court St., "and I've never seen them since," he said.

The valuable papers of the treasurer's office would have gone the way of the other irreplaceable treasures lost in that fire if it hadn't been for Paulus's adventuresome nature.

"I stayed in the Capitol, where the valuables vaults were," water began like a show hasty exit."

The Salem treasurer, Rufus Holman, was in Curry County with Gov. Charles H. Martin.

"Fortunately, he had move its \$40 in investment and place it in Bush Bank v

"After the panies all ov calling up to their bonds,"

"At 4 a.m. could go in—I found the (Earl Snell's into the base-er's office v

There was poured on

Stories by
Alfred C. Jones

Statehouse goes up in smoke

of a depression that caused, ironically, the laying off of some Salem firemen. The penny-pinching of those days also had caused the prior governor, Julius Meier, to veto a \$25,000 appropriation for a vault to protect all state records.

The vault was "unnecessary," Gov. Meier had said. On April 25, 1935, Meier was proved wrong.

As fire trucks geared down to stop and sirens silenced with breathy growls, Wesolowski had hunted for the fire. He found smoke so dense in the basement that he couldn't enter.

Evidence of a fire was apparent to fire truck chasers outdoors because of smoke which oozed out of windows at the base of the dome, and to anyone near the basement.

In between the basement and dome, though, there were enough built-in air passages to make an oven out of the \$1 million statehouse.

For one thing, the walls were hollow and the pillars which supported the rotunda and dome were hollow and open at the bottom in the basement — near the source of the fire.

Quite naturally, then, the fire seemed to mushroom from under the eaves and the blackening smoke began dominating the sky to the southeast.

Said Charlton, "Chief Harry Hutton came within five minutes and ordered me to put on a mask and go into the basement. Rollin Lewis and Emert Johnson pushed the hose to me, but I couldn't get any farther than the electrical panel because of flames swirling around in the basement."

Darkness came and made the fire a grand show visible as far as Silverton. The 13 tall windows just under the cap of the dome looked like a gas-fed kiln and as the roof was digested the flames lashed out to make the Greek Ionic columns look like Roman candles.

"I stayed there with that hose line in the basement and fought it until advised the fire was coming out the top of the Capitol," Charlton said.

"I was sent then up the fire escape on the State Street side to the attic until the fire got so involved that we were pulled out. Then I was assigned to hook up my truck and play the hose on the treasurer's office in the northeast wing of the first floor."

When the dome fell with its skeleton of metal ribs and buckling copper, tipping slowly to the southeast, it caused an air corps of sparks and embers to head toward the Willamette University campus.

There were university young men perched on roofs of the WU buildings to extinguish any airborne sparks.

Charlton retired Dec. 1, 1966, after 39 years with the fire department.

When at last the firemen were recalled late Friday morning, "we were mighty tired," Charlton said, "and we didn't feel like kicking up our heels much like we did in answering the alarm."



Loss was irretrievable

Once converted to ashes, historic relics don't mean much, but history "bugs" today still wish there hadn't been a Capitol fire in 1935.

Lost, among items too numerous to mention, were oil paintings of all Oregon territorial and state governors from Joseph Lane in 1845 to A. W. Norblad in 1929-31.

Also destroyed were paintings of missionary-founder Jason Lee and of John McLoughlin, Hudson's Bay Co. factor and "father of Oregon."

Gone too are the masthead of the Battleship Oregon on display in the rotunda in 1935, the stained glass windows in the base of the dome, records of income taxes, trade marks and budget and a piece of the George Washington Elm exhibited at the door of the treasurer's office.

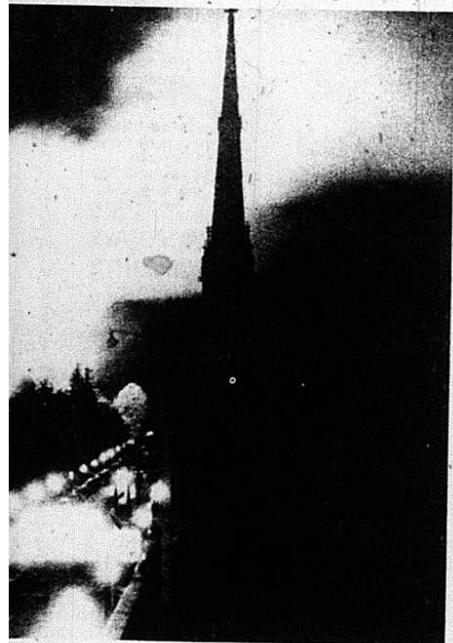
Saved, though, were fingerprints of all past Oregon felons. These prints had been removed for use in the penitentiary.



GOV. JULIUS MEIER
Served 1931-35



GOV. C. H. MARTIN
Served 1935-39



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What to save?

ight there with those showed them where were and where the he said. "When the dripping down inside er bath, I made a

attorney said that several years be- urged the state to nillion to \$50 million s out of the Capitol em in the Ladd & ult.

fire, insurance com- r the country were ee what happened to Paulus said.

I asked firemen if I t my own risk—and ecretary of state's office had fallen ent but the treasur- as intact," Paulus

so much water e wing with the

treasurer's office that there was only water damage done, Paulus said.

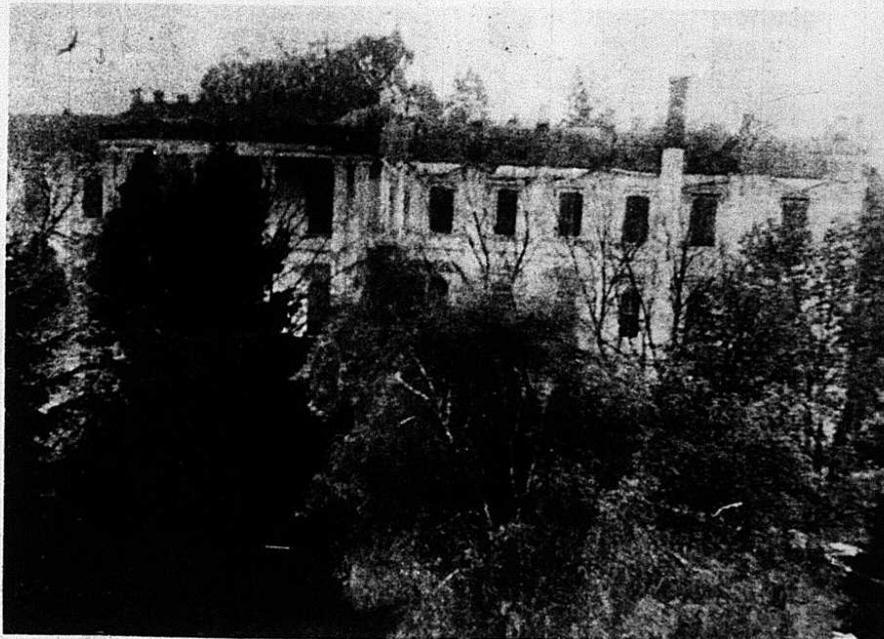
"When I opened the vault the next day all was in good order, but down in the basement the water was up to the ceiling."

How does a state, with its buildings uninsured, rebuild its Capitol during a depression? Holman pitched this hot potato to Paulus.

A special session of 20 days opened Oct. 21 and wound up using his plan to have a serial tax levy of three years, and with Public Works Administration (PWA) paying 45 per cent.

Paulus, too, wanted the Capitol facing Court Street rather than east and west, but the legislature cut the cost of the new statehouse from \$3 million to \$2.5 million.

"We could have got \$500,000 more building for \$275,000 more state money," Paulus said.



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