

State Capitol at Salem Smouldered in Ruins One Year Ago Today

By A. L. LINDBECK

Salem, April 25.—(Salem Bureau of The Journal)—The siren atop the city hall shrieked its ominous warning to be followed immediately by the wailing of lesser sirens on speeding fire trucks as one after another the entire downtown equipment responded to the alarm. Quickly the news spread as neighbor called to neighbor: "The capitol is on fire!"

That was just one year ago this date—April 25, 1935.

Where a year ago a dignified old building of monumental design with its lofty dome towering above the stately trees that surrounded it, today only the ragged shaft of a smoke stack remains to remind residents of Oregon of the glory that was contained in the old capitol.

It was shortly after 6:00 p. m. that the first alarm of fire was given by a janitor who detected the smell of smoke coming from the basement of the building. Only a few minutes before other employees had been at work in that section of the basement with no suspicion of the disaster that pended. With almost lightning-like speed the flames spread upward, drawn by the flue-like construction of the girders that supported the copper dome on its lofty perch 180 feet above the ground level. Within an hour after the first alarm the flames were eating their way through the roof of the building 100 feet above the place of origin and 30 minutes later, its supporting girders melted away by the intense heat, the dome which had dominated the landscape of the capital city for more than half a century bowed to the will of the fire demon, and sank within the charred shell of what only a few short hours before had been Oregon's capitol.

The fire, apparently the result of spontaneous combustion, cost the life one volunteer fireman, Floyd McMillen, 19-year-old Willamette student from Hermiston, and a property damage estimated at \$1,500,000, including many old documents and trophies with a historic and sentimental value, not to be computed in dollars and cents.

Temporary Housing First Consideration

Much has transpired since that eventful night which will long remain as a mile post in the history of this state.

The first problem to confront officials charged with responsibility for the state's welfare was that of temporary housing of the departments left homeless by the fire. Governor Martin, receiving his first information of the disaster while attending a banquet at Klamath Falls, cut short a projected tour of Southern Oregon to rush home for a conference with State Treasurer Holman and Secretary of State Snell the following day. For a few days business in many state departments was at a standstill while clerks labored frantically to salvage such records as had been rescued from the flames and to bring order out of chaos. But the interruption was a brief one. Withing a week the orphaned activities had been taken in by friendly neighbors and the wheels of government were grinding, effectively if not as smoothly as usual.

Razing of the walls of the burned structure was the second problem to be tackled by the board of control, a problem that was fraught with many obstinate angles. Threats of legal complications on the part of those who believed that the old walls could be saved and remodeled into a modern structure materialized in an injunction suit when the board indicated its readiness to begin the work of demolition. A week's delay ensued while Circuit Judge Lewellyn pondered the issue presented by Ed Jory and his colleagues in their petition for a writ to enjoin the razing of the capitol walls. His opinion, released on May 15, upheld the hands of the board of control and cleared the way for the board's program. An offer of help from the State Emergency Relief administration was accepted by the board and a crew of men immediately set to work under the direction of F. G. Leary, Portland contractor, clearing away the debris left by the flames. But even this task, experience proved, was not so simple as it appeared. The brick walls, product of honest workmanship and of builders who evidently took pride in their work, stubbornly resisted the efforts of the wreckers. To expedite the razing the services of an expert powder-man was called in. His first blast, a puny one, only served to shake down a few loose fragments from the top of the wall. His next one, many times more powerful, not only accomplished the purpose intended but shattered windows in buildings for blocks around and sent skyward a shower of brick, rock and mud that threatened the lives of the scores of curious bystanders who had ventured forth in the early dawn to witness the experiment.

Thenceforward more conservative methods of razing were resorted to and the work continued without interruption to completion four months after the fire.

Opening of the cornerstone of the old building on July 31 and resurrection of the relics that had been implanted therein 60 years before was the occasion of a solemn ceremony participated in by high officials of the state and the Masonic lodge.

In the meantime plans had been going on for replacement of the burned building. The state planning commission, called in by Governor Martin, had centered its attention on this one problem. Studies were made of the buildings erected by other states for capitol purposes, of present and future needs of the state with respect to office space, and of the possibility of an enlarged site for the new building, if and when erected.

Special Session Authorizes Capitol

Preliminary reports of the commission, later confirmed in its final report, recommended the expenditure of \$3,500,000 in the construction of a single building with Willamette university campus as the choice of the capitol planners as the new capitol site. Alternative site proposals in the commission's report included residence property to the north of the old capitol site, Willson park, adjoining the capitol site on the west and a 90-acre undeveloped tract occupying a slightly hill-top overlooking the Willamette river just south of Salem.

Then came the special legislative session, convened by Governor Martin on October 21 for the specific purpose of authorizing construction of a new statehouse. Rendered homeless, also, by the destruction of the capitol, the lawmakers assembled in the makeshift legislative chambers in the Marion hotel and the Salem armory, where for 20 hectic days and nights the 90 members wrestled with the problem. From the outset there was apparent a firmly entrenched opposition to the administration program of a \$3,500,000 capitol located either on Willamette campus or Candalaria Heights, with the governor's spokesman in the house and senate as well as outside the two legislative bodies displaying a strong preference for the hill-top location.

The session is yet of too recent date and the developments therein of too vivid memory to require elaborate review. While the house, strongly dominated by administration supporters, was willing to follow the governor's lead even to the acceptance of Candalaria, the senate was adamant in its refusal to acquiesce in any such program. On the contrary, it insisted on a much more modest structure as more in keeping with the financial position of the state, and refused to support either Willamette or Candalaria although at one time approving purchase of two blocks of residential property to the north of the capitol site. The divergent views of the house and senate, as reflected in the measures passed by the two branches, led to a conference in an attempt to reconcile the differences which resulted only in an impasse that threatened for a time to tie up the entire program.

Only the 11th hour surrender of the house to the will of the senate prevented adjournment without any progress toward a solution of the problem. As it was the administration had to be satisfied with only half a loaf, which in the opinion of many, including the governor, was worse than no loaf at all. Instead of a \$3,500,000 building the session approved a building to cost not more than \$2,500,000 with no additional land for site purposes except Willson park, and that only on condition the city should be willing to donate it to the state for capitol purposes.

Responsibility for construction of the new capitol was vested in a commission of nine members, three to be appointed by Governor Martin, three by President Corbett of the senate and three by Speaker Latourlette of the house. Even now plans are well under way for the new structure with more than 200 architects entered in a competition that is to select the firm which will design the new building.

A year has passed since the old capitol was destroyed. The passing of another year should see the new structure at least well under way.

