Fighting Capitol Fire Recalled By 13 Firemen 18 Years Later

By PHIL SLOCUM
Staff Writer, The Statesman

Eighteen years ago tonight Oregon's capitol was destroyed by the most spectacular fire in the city's history.

At 6:43 p.m. April 25, 1935, a fireman in the city hall station picked up the telephone and heard Henry Weslowski, capitol janitor, shout "fire."

Black smoke was puffing from the huge copper dome which rose 187 feet from the ground, fire trucks rolled up minutes after the call and firemen began their futile 15-hour battle.

Flames rocketed to the first floor about 7 p.m. and 20 minutes later burst through the east wing roof, then roared throughout the attics of the three-story building to the copper shielding of the dome.

Janitor Weslowski said the fire probably started in the waste paper room in the basement—a maze of rooms which hampered firemen's efforts to get at the inferno.

One Life Lost

The fire took the life of one fireman, destroyed nearly a million dollars worth of property and fed on irreplacable documents and state records.

Salem's first aid ambulance was given in memory of the dead fireman. He was Floyd McMullen, 22, of Hermiston, a Willamette University sophomore and call fireman.

Capt. Ray McCauley, one of the 13 firemen still on the Salem fire department who fought the capitol fire, was manning a hose line with McMullen and three others.

Recalled McCauley this week:

"The Chief (Harry "Buck" Hutton) came up and encouraged us to work closer in to a basement window.

Dome Thundered, Falls

"Suddenly we heard a crash and a rumble. We older fellows had a pretty good idea what it was.

"The chief hollered to us to get out and we moved to the left. I looked up and saw a cornice crashing down on top of us. McMullen, the last man on the hose, ran to the right and the rest of us ran to the left.

"He ran right under the cornice. I remember only his head and shoulders were sticking out. They had to pull the bricks off him with a truck."

There were 37 men on the Salem fire department April 25, 1935. Today only 13 are still on the force. Eight are dead, six have retired and the rest quit over the years.

All 13 remember the fire as if it had happened yesterday.

Chief Ellsworth Smith a fireman in 1935, now wears the same badge Chief Hutton wore that night 18 years ago.

Almost Killed

"I came as close to getting it that night as I ever will," said Chief Smith the other day. "I came down off a fire escape where I'd been manning a hose and a hunk of the building landed right in front of me.

"But a lot of other guys had close calls too that night—probably a lot closer than mine."

Chief Smith said he dragged himself home with other fire fighters about 10 o'clock the next morning—15 hours after they first got to the fire.

Battalion Chief Robert Mills was a captain at the North Salem Station in 1935.

"I was driver of a 1,000 gallon pumper. I ran that engine from 7 o'clock at night until 3 o'clock the next afternoon, sitting across the street from the fire in front of Willamette University.

Fire Brings Crowds

"The whole area was a solid mass of people. They came from all over the valley. And when the copper dome went up it made the most beautiful colors you ever saw. Some of the colors I'd never seen before."

Capt. P. L. Clark, drill master had just come on duty when the alarm bell rang in. He stayed at central station several hours answering the phone.

"Boy the phone was really jumping," he said with grin.

Clark recalled how scores of volunteer firemen from towns near Salem came in and offered to help. "They showed their badges and I just pointed to the fire."

Battalion Chief William Hunt had an unequaled view of the dome when it collapsed—from the top of the aerial ladder where he was manning a hose.

Other firemen now on the department who fought the fire are Battalion Chief Glenn Shedeck, First Aid Capt. Charles Charlton, Capt. Fred Hunt, Capt. John Stettler, Sr., Capt. Walter Edwards, Capt. Arthur White, Capt. Walter Mills and Ellis Hughes.

By dawn only blackened and empty walls were standing—all that remained of the 60-year-old brick and wooden capitol with its giant two-story columns.

The heart of the government of Oregon had been paralized. But not for long, as the magnificent capitol now standing on what were once ruins attests.

Broom Freed From Pen on Habeas Corpus

Martin Caswell Broom left the State Penitentiary Friday after serving a little more than a 10-year sentence issued prior to a life term which since has been voided by the courts.

Final order in the case was issued Friday by Circuit Judge Rex Kimmell of Marion County, ordering Broom's release. This followed the State Supreme Court's confirmation of Kimmell's Feb. 27 decision that the prisoner was being held illegally. That had been appealed by the state.

In the habeas corpus proceeding, Broom challenged the life sentence issued Jan. 11, 1943, in Polk County because of four felony convictions, rather than for a specific crime. Kimmell ruled that the habitual criminal act requires that the extra sentence be given for the final crime, rather than for the theoretical offense of being an habitual criminal, and that any previous sentence for the crime must be vacated. Broom had been sentenced to 10 years for statutory rape on Oct. 29, 1942.

SMELT CURING
Guaranteed Work
Salem Custom Curing
Phone 3-7005
2 Blks. of S. P. Depot on 12th

ALUMIN
ROOFING - ENAMELED SIDING - SCREENS - AWNI
GARAGE DOORS - INSULATIO