

Salem relives Statehouse fire

EDITOR'S NOTE — Chris Kowitz, a Portland investment salesman and freelance writer, was born in Salem and lived here for 27 years. He once was sports editor of the Capital Journal newspaper, and his father was Salem city attorney for 42 years.

By CHRIS KOWITZ
For the Statesman-Journal

Fifty years ago in Salem — on April 25, 1935 — all theaters locked their doors for the evening, a professional boxing card was cancelled, curfew for Willamette University co-eds was lifted, bowling alleys and pool halls closed, churches called off evangelistic meetings, and only the pianist showed up for her recital.

Nothing could compete against the most spectacular event in Salem's history — the burning of the 80-year-old Statehouse. Police estimated the crowd at the fire at more than 20,000, close to the population of Salem at that time.

I was one of the more than 20,000.

Anyone who was there can remember details of the fire. Most can tell you where they were and what they were doing when they first heard the cry that swept through the city: "The Statehouse is on fire!" (We never called it the capitol building; it was always the Statehouse.)

Salem residents dropped whatever they were doing and rushed to the fire. Dinners were left half-eaten. Lawns remained half-mowed. Ball games were dropped, half-played.

Bruce Williams, now a Salem attorney, was a high school student,

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playing softball on Sweetland Field on the Willamette University campus.

Williams recalls, "I was catching and Vern Gilmore was pitching. We had a two-and-one count on the batter when an outfielder yelled, 'The Statehouse is on fire!' We halted the game immediately and ran to the fire in our softball uniforms."

Harry Carson, a former Marion County commissioner now retired in Salem, was in his father's drug store in the Senator Hotel building, one block from the central fire station, which was in the City Hall at Chemekeeta and High streets. As the fire trucks pulled out from the station onto the street, a fireman yelled, "The Statehouse is on fire!" Carson and his father hurriedly closed shop and ran to the fire.

Geraldine Parker, now a Salem homemaker and retired waitress, was a child (Geraldine Oleson), living in a Victorian home near downtown. She had gone to bed early. She remembers her mother shaking her and saying, "Wake up, Jeri. The Statehouse is on fire!" They went to the fire.

Al McRae, a former detective and juvenile specialist on the Salem police force who is now retired and living near Salem, was a 14-year-old boy romping with friends on the playground at Highland School.

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When they heard the cry "The Statehouse is on fire" McRae and his friends hopped onto their bicycles and raced to the fire.

McRae recalls that coffee and doughnuts were available for firemen at a pumper parked on Court Street. There seemed to be more than an ample supply of refreshments, so McRae and his pals helped themselves to doughnuts several times through the evening.

Travis Cross, now an assistant administrator at St. Vincent Hospital in Portland, was playing catch with a friend in front of the Cross residence, a few blocks from the Statehouse. Cross recalls that they saw smoke before they heard the fire engines, and ran toward the Statehouse.

Cross watched the fire while he stood beside Waite Memorial Fountain, which spewed hundreds of gallons of water a minute skyward. Cross recalls that at the time he thought it was a shame for all that water to go to waste; it was too bad it couldn't be sprayed onto the fire. Cross, who was 8, didn't realize that the water in the fountain was recycled by a pump and did not affect the volume or pressure of water in the fire hoses.

Several giggly girls had gathered at the home of Evelyn Johnson (now the wife of Richard Page, vice president of Standard Insurance Company of Portland) to celebrate her birthday. It was a pleasant evening, so the party was outdoors. The girls were about to go inside to light the candles on Evelyn's cake when a neighbor yelled, "The Statehouse is on fire!" The party broke up abruptly as the celebrants dashed to the fire.

Mel Lambert, a rodeo announcer who operates a used car lot in Salem, first arrived in the capital city on the day of the Statehouse conflagration. The five-member Lambert family, including teen-ager Mel, had left the Chiloquin Indian Reservation in southern Oregon that morning to move to Salem. It was dusk when the Lambert car, an Oakland touring sedan weighted down with all of the family's belongings, chugged over the hill on highway 99E south of town.

Lambert peered through the windshield for his first glimpse of the city that was to become his home for the next 50 years. "Smoke was pouring from the Statehouse dome," he recalls. "Before we could shake the travel kinks from our legs, the Statehouse was in flames. The next morning, my brothers and I found some cancelled State of Oregon checks, charred around the edges. At first, we thought we should turn them in. Then we decided to keep them and see if anyone would offer a reward for them. I still have them."

Robert Steeves, operator of Pacific Car Wash in Salem, was a third-grader who frequently detoured on his way home from school to visit the Statehouse and admire a toy logging train on display in the foyer. On the evening of the fire, Steeves was near his home on State street. When he heard the cry "The Statehouse is on fire!" Steeves' first concern was for his favorite toy train.

He ran to the Statehouse, entered the burning building, rescued the toy train and deposited it gently on the lawn, alongside sundry items carried out by persons of all ages.

While helpful citizens rescued such items as desk-pen sets, ash trays and waste baskets, nobody thought to remove the oil paintings of former Oregon governors, which hung on the foyer walls.

A rack of antique guns had been on display in the foyer, near the front entrance. Someone dragged the gun display to safety on the sidewalk in front of the Statehouse. In the excitement of the fire, the guns were unguarded. Several were sto-

len. Others were borrowed, and returned, by small boys who played cops and robbers with the valuable antique guns during the evening.

I can vividly recall events of the entire day.

I was an 8-year-old boy, living with my family in an old, stately residence at 1961 Center St., N.E., the house in which I was born.

From the sidewalk in front of my boyhood home, the massive copper dome of the Statehouse, about a mile away, dominated the skyline.

April 25, 1935, was a Thursday. As on every school day, I walked on the sidewalk along the north side of Center Street toward Washington School, which was on Center street, between 12th and 13th streets. As I walked, I gazed fondly at the Statehouse dome.

The dome was especially magnificent that morning, because the sun was bright and the glistening copper dome was framed by the pink and white blossoms of trees along the curbs of Center Street.

For several blocks, Center Street ran from my home directly toward the Statehouse. At the City Ice Company, the street took a slight bend to the right, just enough to put the Statehouse dome out of sight.

As I approached the ice works, I heard the school bell ring its five-minute warning. I took one last look at the copper dome, shining down upon me in the morning sun.

I turned the corner and ran the last three blocks to school.

That evening after dinner, as my two brothers and I were playing outdoors, we heard sirens from several directions. We knew that trucks from Salem's four fire stations were converging upon what must be a big fire.

A few moments later we were jolted by a neighbor's shout: "The Statehouse is on fire!"

Dad drove us to the fire in our 1927 Pontiac. He detected my concern for the building that I loved so well, and told me not to worry. He remarked that perhaps there was a fire in the Statehouse, but it most likely was a minor one, and the fire trucks had been summoned as routine precaution. As city attorney, Dad was familiar with fire department procedures. I was somewhat relieved.

As we drove on Center Street, it was reassuring to see the copper dome in all its splendor in the dusky sky. However, as we neared the ice works, I saw a wisp of smoke emerging from the dome. It was about 6:45 p.m.

We were among the first to arrive. We took up a vantage point at the base of the Circuit Rider statue on the Statehouse grounds.

Firemen were opening basement windows. Smoke began to pour out of the basement. That was the beginning of the end.

The fire gained in intensity minute by minute. Within a half hour, flames found their way to the base of the hollow pillars that ran vertically through the three-story structure. More flames crept into the elevator shaft, following the smoke that had drifted up earlier. Meanwhile, firemen had gone through the building and opened windows because of the dense smoke.

This caused a suction, and the blaze spread rapidly.

When they reached the top of the elevator shaft, the flames licked away at the woodwork and oiled floors, then shot through the roof. By then it was dark, and the inferno could be seen for miles in every direction.

The valiant firemen fought against great odds. The brick exterior was fireproof, but the interior was chiefly wood and other flammable materials. This made the structure a giant firebox, and the dome acted as a chimney.

Bricks, timber, glass and other debris fell treacherously as firemen from several cities, including Portland, tried in vain to subdue the flames. Eventually firemen were forced to retreat. One of them didn't make it. He was Floyd McMullen, an

18-year-old Willamette student from Hermiston who earned his room and board by doing odd jobs at the East Salem fire station. He also was a local fireman — one who was called to fight fires in extreme emergencies. This was his last call. He was killed by a falling cornice.

At precisely 8:04 p.m. by my one-dollar pocket watch, the copper dome collapsed through the roof. The dome, 100 feet tall and weighing many tons, came down in a torrent of sparks. The crashing, crunching, splintering, groaning sound of the collapsing dome lasted perhaps 20 seconds. It has reverberated through my memory for 50 years.

When the dome fell, it was evident that the splendid old Statehouse was doomed. My childhood friend was dying — and it was a horrible, violent death.

When you're eight years old, the loss of something dear to you is especially traumatic. If you're a little younger, you don't really feel the impact. If you're a little older, you can accept it. I was eight, and I took it hard.

Fifty years later, I still miss the old Statehouse. The present capitol building, with its white marble dome, topped by the 24-foot statue of a pioneer covered with gold leaf, is beautiful. But somehow it doesn't seem to have the stateliness, the warmth, the dignity and the charm of the old Statehouse of my youth.

The past 50 years has brought about other changes in my boyhood haunts. The family homestead is gone; an apartment stands in its place. Many of the trees along Center Street have disappeared. A few trees remain; or are they newer ones, planted within the past 50 years? The ice works has disappeared. Washington School is gone; it yielded to a supermarket 30 or 40 years ago.

Recently I retraced my steps of April 25, 1935. As I walked on the familiar sidewalk alongside Center Street, the sun was at my back, just as it was on that morning 50 years earlier. Looming ahead was the white dome of the capitol building, topped by the golden pioneer.

As I approached the site of the old ice works, I slowed my pace to that of an eight-year-old boy on his way to school. I gazed up at the marble dome, in the same spot where I had seen the copper dome as a child. I realized then, more than ever before, how much that old copper dome had meant to me as a youngster.

I paused for perhaps a minute or more, recalling fond memories of the old Statehouse.

Morning dew still was on the blossoms, and somehow a couple of dewdrops got into my eyes.

I squinted to squeeze the moisture from my eyes. As I did so, my vision blurred. The capitol dome became a shapeless mass. Sunbeams bounced off the gold leaf. This gave a bronze-like luster to the scene.

For one fleeting moment — through my distorted vision, the bronze-like glow, the longing memory of a childhood friend, and an imagination spurred by nostalgia — I saw the magnificent copper dome of my youth, in all its splendor, shining down upon me in the morning sun.

I turned the corner and ran the last three blocks to school.

Snow may fall in Cascades

Mountain travelers in the northern Oregon Cascades may expect snow showers this afternoon with heavy snow at times tonight and Monday, the National Weather Service said.

The Oregon State Police had not issued travelers warnings as of Saturday evening, but warned of icy patches in the Santiam Pass and packed snow at Government Camp.