

The first 100 years

Cause of fire was not 1st concern

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Battalion Staff Writers

Recall that last week we began "The Mystery of Burning of Old Main." Before we tackle the exciting conclusion, it is necessary to correct some minor errors that have little bearing on the outcome of the case. However, for the sake of perfection, the facts should be clarified.

The fire took place on Monday, not Sunday. Some of you sharper readers would have noticed that mistake right away. After all, what good Aggie would be burning the midnight oil on a Saturday night?

And secondly, the studios Cadets, Ashford and Church, lived in Foster Hall rather than Ross Hall. Old Main, Ross Hall and Foster formed a triangle, with Old Main at the apex pointing toward the Chemistry Building. The Chemistry Building stood where the Cushing Library now stands.

The reflection of the fire in the Chemistry Building windows could have conceivably been seen from either Ross or Foster halls. But it was from the window of No. 32 Foster Hall that Ashford spotted the blaze.

Taking up where we left off, on Tuesday, not Monday, the day after the fire, we find the Investigating Committee installed in the Civil Engineering Building, hearing testimony in regards to the time, origin and nature of the fire.

C.O. Watkins, the second witness to be called, was questioned primarily about the prevalence of gambling among the students and staff members. He testified that several times he had found rooms in the Main Building in a state of disorder. Once he had found some candles and a deck of cards in a dormitory room during a summer when no students were at the college.

It might have seemed to an observer that the Committee was trying to establish the fact that there had been a card game going in Old Main the night it burned.

When Clyde Threkel later testified that he had heard the noise of chairs being shuffled on an upper floor, it seemed even more likely that participants in a midnight poker game could have accidentally caused the disaster.

But the possibility was not pursued by the Committee. As witness after witness was questioned as to the amount of gambling and drinking that went on among the cadets, it slowly became clear that the Committee was after something else.

English Professor W.W. Wood was asked if he had any information regarding the subject of gambling. He replied that it had been mentioned in several assigned compositions dealing with campus life.

"I remember one theme that described a dice game," Wood testified, "and another student having been told to count off in ranks, he responded 'Three-Jacks.'"

Y.M.C.A. Secretary F.D. Steger was a close friend of many cadets. They often took him into their confidence about personal matters. Gambling was a subject that was frequently discussed by the students with Steger.

The Investigating Committee

questioned Steger almost viciously regarding the students who had talked to him about gambling. Eventually Steger was persuaded to give names.

The questioning went on, the fire never being mentioned. The subject of drinking and gambling among members of the faculty was broached. Steger became hesitant and apprehensive.

He was criticized by the Committee for not reporting students guilty of gambling and drinking to the Commandant or President. He answered that he did not wish to violate the students' confidence.

He also stated that it was the opinion of some students that, "Members of the Faculty are guilty of the same thing of which they (the students) are accused. Further testimony indicated there were some ill feelings between the students and faculty for some unstated reason."

Steger was dismissed. The hearing went on.

Witness after witness was called, and it was eventually established that the fire began on the fourth floor. But Ashford and other cadets, who had made it up to the top floor before the fire became too dangerous, insisted that there were three separate fires with no possible connection between them.

Each witness in turn, students and staff alike were questioned about their knowledge of gambling and drinking on campus. The Committee invariably asked: "Is gambling more prevalent this year than last? Is drinking more prevalent this year than last? Have you heard of anyone drinking or gambling? Have you witnessed a card game? Where do the students get liquor and beer? Which dormitory has the most gambling?"

The answers ran like this: "There

is less drinking and gambling this year than last."

"There is more." "I have heard that students gamble but have never seen it." "I have suspected that some of my fellow faculty members drink but can not say for sure." "There is more gambling in Legett than any other dormitory." "Milner Hall has more gambling than other dormitories."

On Wednesday, head yell leader J.E.L. "Lindy" Millender was called to testify. Like the other witnesses, he was asked, "Is it your impression that there is more or less drinking this year than last?"

Millender answered, "Taken altogether, I don't think there was, but within the last week, since all this investigation by the Discipline Committee I think there has been a great deal more."

"In other words, you think it had not gotten to light before?" he was asked.

"I think so," he replied. "Sometimes I drink myself."

Millender was later asked, "What is your impression of the origin of the fire?"

"I think somebody walked up there and set it afire. Mr. Burleson accosted a man out here (after the fire) and talked to him, he gave me a description of the man and he has spent this afternoon looking for this man."

"Witness dismissed." Millender was the first to mention the investigation of students' drinking and gambling habits by the Discipline Committee. He was also the first student to admit that he himself drank.

Slowly the cloud of mystery and uncertainty surrounding the Fire Committee's intention began to lift. On Thursday the Committee called T.G. Huth to the stand. Huth was Cadet Colonel of the Regiment.

Huth was first asked routine questions concerning the fire, almost as a formality. Then the committee turned to the subject which they seemed to be obsessed with—drinking and gambling.

They asked Huth the same questions they had asked all the other witnesses, to which Huth gave the now standard answers.

Then Capt. Chauncey Fenton asked Huth, "Do you think there is any widespread feeling in the corps, such that any boy or group of boys would go to the extent of burning a building on the campus?"

Answer: "No I don't!"

But the Committee didn't seem satisfied with Huth's answer. They asked the same question of three other witnesses, including Professor J. C. Nagle. All answered, "no."

The hearing of testimony was ended. In the report the committee made to President Milner and the State of Texas they simply stated that the fire was "of incendiary origin."

Faulty wiring was ruled out on the basis of the testimony given by Professor of Electrical Engineering F.C. Bolton.

In arriving at their conclusion, the committee seemed to ignore testimony that Lindy Millender gave in which he stated that a friend had seen two obviously drunk men leave the Old Main Building about 1:30 a.m.

A gasoline can found in the rubble caused no great concern to the committee and was not mentioned in the official report.

They also chose to think that the man who Millender had mentioned as having been observed loitering around Legett Hall after the fire was out, laughing about how pretty it had been, had no bearing on the possible origin of the fire.

And even though an instructor whose classroom was on the fourth floor, where the fire began, admitted smoking in an area where the floor was covered with oiled sawdust, a smouldering cigarette butt was ruled out as the cause of the fire.

To hasten the end of Old Main, explosives were brought in to topple its still rigid walls. Numerous charges were used to no avail. Not to be defeated, college officials and cadets rolled up the battalion cannons in an effort to raze the walls by concussion.

Out of the slowly growing crowd of watchers, Lindy Millender emerged with a lasso. Without waiting for approval he lassoed one of the 60 foot towers, had the cadets grab the rope and within minutes they had pulled the tower down. At commencement exercises in June, Governor O.B. Colquitt announced that he had authorized \$200,000 for the construction of a new main building. The building, known today as the Academic Building, was built on the site of Old Main. Constructed under the direction of college architect F.E. Giesecke '86, it was completed in 1914.

The plans for the new building called for concrete and steel to add reinforcement to the massive new structure. Unfamiliar with these relatively new materials, Giesecke used double concrete and steel to insure a sturdy building.

Upon granting the money to A&M for construction of the new structure, Colquitt cautioned the administration on their plans: "Build a building that will last at least 50 years," he said.

So be it, 62 years young and still going strong. It was never discovered who burned Old Main.



The Battalion

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