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## THE STORY OF THE FIRE CENTENNIAL

MARY ENSIGN PARDEE

**I**N EXTANT newspaper accounts and personal letters written in April, 1845, Pittsburgh is described as suffering from the effects of a long drought and as having its share of March-like winds. Such conditions were conducive to the catastrophe which struck the city a little past noon on April 10, 1845. High winds fanned the flickering flames of the backyard fire of an Irish washwoman into a great holocaust. Starting at the corner of Second Avenue and Ferry Street the conflagration spread rapidly among the wooden warehouses and business establishments along the Monongahela River. Seven hours later the blackened ruins of the greater part of Pittsburgh stood smoldering, resembling modern, war-blasted cities.

April 10, 1945, was quite unlike that notorious tenth of April a century ago. The day was warm and sunny, with no hint of the great and disastrous winds of 1845. In fact, spring had come prematurely and the cloudless day was like a perfect day in June. On that fateful day one hundred years ago there probably was no anticipation of disaster, but there was a definite air of excitement and expectancy in 1945, for this was the centennial day of commemoration. On this day, Pittsburghers would pay honor to those citizens of a previous century who, undaunted by a great calamity, rebuilt their city.

A few minutes past noon on this day of commemoration the great fire

bell hanging before the Historical Society building tolled out its message in strokes of 1-8-4-5, proclaiming the one hundredth anniversary of the great Pittsburgh fire. In accordance with a long established custom, Mr. Thomas L. Pfarr, former county fire marshal, struck the sledge hammer blows in commemoration of the historic event. The resonant tones of the old fire bell, the largest ever cast and hung in Pittsburgh, travelled over a wide area. Though no flames crackled and no smoke billowed upward quite a group of curious and interested spectators gathered around the bell, on the steps of the Historical Building, and on the sidewalk below. Certainly no press photographers were seen scurrying about eager for the most advantageous "shot" of the ringing of the alarm in 1845. Yet one hundred years later such was the case.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the focus of interest shifted from the bell before the Historical Building to the auditorium of the Twentieth Century Club next door. There, interested friends and members of the association of Descendants of Pittsburghers of 1845 gathered for the first formal meeting of the commemoration day. The Honorable Robert Garland, president of the Historical Society, presided. Following his introductory remarks regarding the anniversary of the Big Fire and the purpose of its commemoration (see page . . . for the text of his remarks), Mr. Garland introduced the Honorable Cornelius D. Scully, mayor of Pittsburgh. At this time it was the pleasant duty of the mayor to present a memorial plaque to the oldest member of the association of Descendants of Pittsburghers of 1845. Miss Anna Mary Johnson, born in Pittsburgh on December 18, 1845, was the recipient of this honor. Miss Johnson's father, the late Edwin C. Johnson, owned a printing establishment which was destroyed in the great fire of 1845. Anna Mary helped him re-establish his business. Miss Johnson is also the granddaughter of John Westfall Johnson, a member of Pittsburgh's first city council under Ebenezer Denny in 1816. Mayor Scully had personally conducted Miss Johnson from her home on the North Side to the Twentieth Century Club in one of the large city cars, with an impressive motorcycle police escort. Accompanying Miss Johnson was her niece Mrs. Walter Shepherd Wright. In the course of his remarks the mayor asked Mrs. Wright to read a poem which she had composed in honor of her aunt and the occasion. An attractive aluminum plaque, suitably engraved, was presented to Miss Johnson with the best wishes of the mayor, the Historical So-

ciety, and the members of the association of Descendants of Pittsburghers of 1845 for a long and happy life.

Following the presentation a group of well-known songs of Stephen C. Foster were sung by Mrs. Anne Woesthoff, accompanied by Mrs. Beulah Marston at the piano. Mrs. Woesthoff wore a beautiful pink satin and lace hoop skirt of the 1845 era and carried an old-fashioned garden flower bouquet. It might be mentioned here that Foster songs were selected in particular since Stephen, then a young man of nineteen, was residing in the city and actually aided the fire fighters in 1845.

The speaker of the afternoon was the Reverend Dr. Clarence E. Macartney, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. His address, "Prominent Pittsburghers of 1840-1850," was of real interest to those present, many of whom were descendants of those former Pittsburghers and all of them interested to hear more of the founders of the city. A complete text of Dr. Macartney's remarks is to be found on page . . .

At the conclusion of the afternoon program many persons went from the Twentieth Century Club to the Historical Building to see the century-old household furnishings and fire fighting apparatus on display in the auditorium and two exhibition halls of the Historical Society. Also exhibited were paintings and portraits of and by persons whose names are associated with Pittsburgh's life during the decade of the fire. One of the exhibition halls was devoted to fire fighting equipment of the 1845 period: small models of the horse-drawn hose carts and fire wagons, large axes, silver and brass trumpets used by the fire chiefs, hats of the various volunteer fire companies, water buckets, a wooden alarm rattle, and even a red flannel fireman's uniform complete with cape and hat worn by the chief engineer of the Niagara Fire Company. Pittsburgh silver, lovely shawls, quilts, miniatures, china, and glassware were shown in museum cases, while around the walls lovely pieces of furniture were interspersed with portraits and paintings. Those items which were actually saved from the great fire were marked with red sun-burst stickers and the printed markers briefly recounted their history. For further details concerning the exhibition see pages . . . . The exhibit, open to the public for three days, April 10, 11, and 12, drew many visitors, indicative of the wide interest such an exhibition had created.

For an hour before the evening program crowds gathered along the

streets in the Oakland district. To the strains of martial music, the shuffle of marching feet, and the sharp whine of sirens an impressive parade proceeded from McKee Place up Forbes Street to the Carnegie Institute building, along Bellefield Avenue to Bayard Street, and down that street and Bigelow Boulevard past the Historical Building to the Sailors and Soldiers Memorial Hall. The parade was arranged and directed by Colonel George E. Fairley, director of public safety in the city. Leading the procession were units of the city and county motorcycle and mounted police, followed by service men and women of both World Wars. Among these was a contingent of the Washington Infantry, organized in 1792, and groups of the women's services, smartly marching WACS, WAVES, SPARS, and Marines. Two military bands provided the music. Fire units, headed by Chief William H. Davis, came next with groups of marching firemen, followed by their modern equipment. There were gleaming engines, great long ladder trucks, ambulances with glowing red lights and shrieking sirens. At the rear of the parade, contrasting sharply with the preceding display of modern apparatus, came the old time horse-drawn fire pumper, and a large conestoga wagon with a team of white horses, a familiar sight in the era of the great conflagration. As the procession came past the Historical Building another bell ringing took place with the former fire marshal, Thomas L. Pfarr, striking the bell in strokes of 1-8-4-5, and, after a short interval, 1-9-4-5.

The parade disbanded before Memorial Hall prior to the start of the evening program at eight o'clock. Again Mr. Garland presided, opening the meeting and introducing the principal speakers, Charles F. C. Arensberg, Esq., and Henry Oliver Evans, Esq., both prominent lawyers of Pittsburgh. Mr. Arensberg gave a vivid account of the actual events of April 10, 1845, while Mr. Evans described life in Pittsburgh, contrasting our modern activities and interests with those of a century ago.

To stimulate interest in the centennial commemoration among the citizens of Pittsburgh and also with the hope of uncovering further information concerning the Big Fire, the Historical Society sponsored a contest, offering a fifty-dollar war bond for definite information, substantiated by proof, as to the identity of the person who actually started the fire. Who was the "Mrs. O'Leary" of Pittsburgh? In the numerous re-

sponses no real evidence was given, but three of the letters advanced very interesting and plausible theories. As chairman of the contest Mr. Henry Oliver Evans awarded consolation prizes to Louis Weiblinger, Daniel Behrenger, and William F. Brophy. For some of their letters and others which were submitted in this contest see pages . . . . .

The eventful centennial day came to a close with the presentation of an historical sketch. Mr. Charles A. McClintock, president of the association of Descendants of Pittsburghers of 1845, introduced this colorful pageant. Prepared by the Pittsburgh Drama League, written by Miss Margaret Townsend Scully and Miss Madge Miller, and staged under the able direction of Mrs. Elmer D. Harshbarger, the two-act sketch, with a prologue by Henry King Siebeneck, was very effective. Pittsburgh of 1845 came to life on the stage. A large cast of both young people and adults portrayed actual characters living in Pittsburgh at the time of the fire. Stephen C. Foster and several of his young friends, Mrs. Jane Swisshelm, and Mayor William H. Howard were among the many represented. Beautifully costumed, the cast entered into the action with spirit, rendering dances popular in the Pittsburgh of that day and singing songs by Stephen Foster. Between the two acts an amusing and effective action took place in the aisles of the auditorium. Young boys of the cast hawked newspaper extras proclaiming the great disaster which had befallen the city. The acts might be labeled "before" and "after" for the first scene was that of a French dancing master's studio on the morning of April 10, and the last scene took place one month following the fire. The Pittsburgh Relief Committee and citizens gathered in the old Market Place and reported on the fire and the action which had been taken to reconstruct the city. The curtain descended on a note of enthusiasm and optimism. Pittsburgh's citizens had started life anew with confidence in the greatness of their future.