

## SOME CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS AND FAMILY TRADITIONS OF THE FIRE

ONE of the earliest accounts of the fire is to be found in a letter on file at the Historical Society, or in print in this magazine on pages 62 and 63 of its January, 1927, issue (Vol. 10, No. 1). It was written by thirteen-year-old John R. Banks, a student at the Western University of Pennsylvania, and the original includes a rough map of the city showing the burned district.

On April 27, James H. McClelland wrote a letter (now in the possession of his granddaughter, Mrs. W. S. Sutton) to his sister in Ireland, in the course of which he described the catastrophe as follows:

The general Trade & business of this country is improving slowly but soundly & safely. The unparalleled calamity which has befallen our City has brought great demand for all kinds of labor, at somewhat better prices than had been going—and I hope to be able to make a new start in my old business of Building. Although I have suffered heavily & grievously, I think that I am not broken in either body or spirit, and I hope to rise again. I had no Real property to lose by the fire in our City, although four 3 storied bricks which I once owned were burnt, and I did not reside in that part, and of course escaped all loss & inconvenience. The fire was one of the most wonderful & destructive, if not the very most, that ever happened in the Records of Cities. The weather had been exceedingly dry for two weeks, & when the fire broke out the wind was blowing strong, & it increased to a gale. Pieces of burnt wood were carried 15 miles, & pieces of partly consumed books & papers have been picked up at the distance of 30 miles from the City. The effect of so great a wind was to produce in the burning buildings the greatest degree of heat, so intense generally as not to leave a particle of wood unconsumed in the whole district over which the fire passed; and the Iron in the warehouses were melted down like lead & much of it burnt to a mere cinder. The flames spread so rapidly that scarcely any of the moveable property was got away from the parts which lay in the straight direction of the wind—the women & children barely escaping with their lives. Two men & two women were

actually burnt in houses in consequence of staying too long, laboring to save some of their property. And the wonder is that hundreds were not burnt. But it was in the day time between the hours of 12 Mer. & 6 ocl<sup>k</sup>. If it had occurred after midnight, it is believed that hundreds would have perished.

At the head of the letter is a printed map of Pittsburgh showing the burned district and accompanied by comments in the writer's own hand. This map is the basis for the one shown here in the foregoing frontispiece, and the comments are quoted in the preceding editor's note.

The reaction of distant relatives of Pittsburghers of that day is illustrated by the following excerpts from a letter written by Mrs. James Lee of South Camden, New Jersey (grandmother of Miss Lily Lee Nixon, owner of the letter), to her sister Ann Barker in Pittsburgh on April 22:

I should write to let you know we have heard the dreadfull intelegance of the great and ruinous fire that has almost destroyed your city we have been very uneasy ever since as we do not yet know who are burnt and who are not I fear Lewis is gon and William Barker and perhaps Wiley in Third Street O My dear friends it is realy dreadfull Poor Lewis he will be no doubt ruined at the preasant it is well they did not live were the store was I hope they would at least save their goods I suppose Wiley had gon away as I do not see his name in the papers or perhaps he was out at his farm you must send all particulars about it for we are in great suspense. . . . I am afraid the glass houses are nearly all burnt down now James is now gon to work at Kensington he will get 10 dollars per week their he only got 6 on this side and part in trade. . . . James has built himselfe a waggon he made it in his leasur hours he intends to take us in it some time when we go west I should rather go that way then by the canal. . . . I do not always write as bad as I do now I am in a hurry a young man is waiting to post it for me. . . .

Listen, now, to one whose words epitomize the spirit in which Pittsburghers set about rebuilding and improving their city. The Rev. Dr. David H. Biddle, pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church at the time of the fire, is speaking on the subject, "Sound and Sanctified Scholarship," at the dedication of the new building of the Western University of Pennsylvania in Allegheny on September 8, 1846. Here are his opening remarks, taken from a pamphlet published the same year but now very rare:

We cordially felicitate you, fellow citizens! especially of the Faculty and Board of Trustees of this Institution, on the occasion, which has called us together this evening—THE RE-OPENING OF THE WESTERN UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

The 10th of April 1845, was a fatal and never to be forgotten day, in the annals of Pittsburgh! The morning sun, you well remember, looked down upon a busy, contented and happy population, engaged in the various pursuits of life. The minister was in his study; the lawyer in his office, or in the halls of justice; the physician on his errands of mercy; the merchant employed in honorable traffic; the manufacturer in superintending or elaborating the processes of princely wealth; the sturdy laborer was joyously sweating at his toil; even the car man, cracked his whip with glee, rejoicing in the flourishing state of business; and gentlemen of leisure, chatted at the street corners, all inapprehensive of coming peril!—the meridian, even, gave no intimation of danger. Yet that evening moon lighted a scene of almost unparalleled desolation!—Millions of property destroyed; thousands of families homeless; and one third of our city in ruin! Though months and almost years have passed, it appears to us yet, in frightful freshness: like the scenes of a terrible dream, burned in on the memory, its fearful incidents come back, whenever, circumstances, association, or duty, lead us to dwell upon the event!

Amidst the varied ruins of that day, the seats of science, and the temples of the most High God, were not exempted. Literature and religion, contributed their ample quota, to the holocaust of that occasion. After demolishing warehouses and dwellings, the depositories of prosperous commerce, and the appliances and results of useful manufacture, not a momentary pause was seen in the fiery career of the conqueror, when his torch of desolation, touched, like so much tinder, the edifice devoted to the service of God, or the quiet pursuits of science! The University was consumed as remorselessly as the Monongahela House, or Bridge; the library, apparatus, lecture room, chalk and blackboard, as the hogshead of tobacco, or the bale of cotton, the bag of coffee, or the tierce of brandy!! As the youthful student, the alumni, the President and professors, alive to classic reminiscences, walked where but yesterday the massive walls stood in their gloomy glory, they realized all that Aeneas felt, when he said of his native city, "*Fuit Illium*," There was the University!

But why should we or they say, There was the University, or allow at all that the University was consumed! The wood and stone, costly indeed, as we all have bitter reason for knowing, were consumed,—the mere brick and

mortar, were in ruins; but the University, in the true sense of the term, was made of no such perishable materials, and was dependent on no such uncertain contingencies. The intellect, taste, and educational resources of the instructors, the energies and affections of the corporation were untouched. The soul of the Institution, survived the desolation of that day, like the Psyche of ancient fable, and as our present circumstances delightfully attest, has made for itself already another and a better tenement. The Phoenix has risen from the fire! Alas! since then we have lost *a Stone*,—an ornament of the University, and of society at large, inexpressibly precious to a chosen circle of friends, worth far more than the building which the 10th of April took from us. Could we bring him back we would cheerfully give this edifice which we have erected and are about to use, associated so vividly in every apartment with his memory and our incalculable loss!

*The old University Building* was consumed! But as in numerous other instances in this world, good has come of the evil. The apparent calamity, after we recovered from its first stunning effects, has proved a blessing. The great fire has accomplished a result, which many have frequently and fervently desired. It has removed our institution, from a contracted street, and most unfortunate locality, to the airy and beautiful situation where we are now assembled! On the banks of the beautiful Allegheny, affording a panorama of singular interest and variety; presenting a prominent object, in both directions, to the eye of the approaching traveller, and though possessing indeed no very great claims to architectural elegance, (we are too poor to offer sacrifices to the Genius of architecture,) yet altogether better adapted to the purposes of instruction, arranged and furnished under the eye and special direction of the Instructors!

### THE "WHODUNIT" CONTEST

About ten days before the centennial commemoration, Henry Oliver Evans, Esq., a vice president of the Historical Society and a member of its 1845 Committee, announced in the local newspapers that the Society would present a fifty-dollar war bond to anyone who could supply the name, with convincing proof, of the person responsible for starting the Big Fire of 1845—one thus far known to history only as an Irish washerwoman.

Some of the newspaper accounts of the offer referred to the unknown quantity as "Pittsburgh's Mrs. O'Leary," and some ten of the contest-

ants turned in the familiar story of Mrs. O'Leary's cow and the Chicago fire of 1871. None of the contestants settled the real question conclusively, but three of them were awarded prizes for "brave tries," and the pertinent portions of the letters of two of these head the following group of sample entries:

From Wm. F. Brophy, Mr. Washington, Pittsburgh:

The undersigned, has the answer to your \$50 question, "Who dunnit?" So just bear with me a little, until I give you a little of the background of the little Lady, who made it possible for me to supply you with it.

She was a direct decendent of Ethen Allen, the Hero of Ticonderoga, her name was Sarah Allen. Born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1820, was married to Joseph McQuade, in 1841. They lived in what was then the old borough of Birmingham, on the South Side. He died in 1854, during the Cholera Epidemic. They had two children; one my Mother, the other died in infancy. This Lady was my Grandmother; she was a lover of history, an inveterate reader of it, but never a recorder of it. She delighted in regaling any of us who found time to listen to it. As a boy, on several occasions, I heard her relate the story of the conflagration, and the last time I heard it was after my advent into the Fire Department, of which I am a present member. Having entered it in the beginning of this century, 1900. And now, here is the plain, unvarnished story, as related to me by my Grandmother.

My Mother had an Aunt, a sister of her Father, whose name was Elizabeth, and was lovingly called "Betsy" by everyone. She was married to a man by the name of Joe Blankensop. They had one son, Joe, Jr., and in a short time Joe, Sr. died. In time, Aunt Betsy married again, to a man whose name was John Brooks. It was his Mother, who was washing in the yard at the corner of Ferry Street and Second Avenue, where the Conflagration of 1845 had its inception. History, such as we have of it, was compiled by the Police Department in 1889. It just mentioned the death of two people, a Samuel Kingston, a prominent member of the Bar, and a Mrs. Maglone. But tradition says (and that is my Grandmother) that Mrs. Brooks also lost her life, as she was never seen again.

Of course, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have no record; it is purely tradition, but it came to me from, next to my Wife and Mother, the grandest person in the world to me, my Grandmother, who passed away at the age of eighty-two, in 1902.

From Louis Weiblinger, Mt. Troy, Pittsburgh:

I have been saving old clippings from the Press paper, and have one about the fire of 1845 and how it started, and the lady's name.

The lady was doing her washing in her back yard, when a wind blew a spark from under the kettle and landed on a wooden house, and that is how it started. Her name is Mrs. O'Mallery.

The fire started on the morning of April 10, 1845. She lived at Ferry Street and Second Avenue.

From May Beale, Wilkensburg:

My father's cousin, Miss Henrietta Murphy, daughter of Mr. Grattan Murphy, who was in the linen business here at the time, and was one of "The Vigilante", told us the following:

A woman who did her Mother's laundry work built a fire for her wash boiler in an open lot near Bruce's Ice House. It was the tenth of April, 1845, an extremely windy morning. There was a great deal of loose straw from the Ice House blowing about, and some of it was blown into the fire, ignited, blew away and ignited more, which in turn set fire to a house, that house to another, and then another, until it was feared the whole city would be in flames. About noon the wind changed and subsided, which was all that saved the city. In 1843 when the diocese of Pittsburgh was created, Bishop O'Connor brought four Sisters of Mercy from Ireland to open a school. It was a private school, which they conducted in a residence on Penn Avenue, just about opposite Horne's present location. My father's cousin, Henrietta Murphy, and my grandfather's sister, Pauline Beale, were pupils there. On the day of the fire when they went home for lunch to my great-grandfather Beale's house, they found it burned to the ground. All that had been saved had been carried from there (lower Market Street) to Trinity Church yard. Cousin Henrietta told us many, many details—I have heard her tell the story many times. She never varied any of the facts, and so of course we have always held that as the first-hand true story of the "Big Fire," as she always alluded to it. As children we were always thrilled to have her tell us about it. She always said "she could remember it as though it were yesterday." As my great-grandfather lost not only his home, but his brush factory as well, and she was an inmate of his house at the time, and knew the washer woman personally, as she was employed by her mother, I think her story most probable.

From B. Frank Bell, Homestead:

Am sending along the following story handed down to us boys by our

father, Robert Bell, who came to Pittsburgh in 1849, and heard the story many times around the wharf where he worked as fireman on the river steamers.

According to father's story, which he certainly believed to be true, there was an engineer on one of the boats tied up at the wharf, who became annoyed at a large wooley Newfoundland dog which had become a pest around where the engineer had to do his work, and he became so riled at the dog one day that he poured oil over his shaggy coat and set it afire, the dog taking off (a mass of flames) and ran up to Ferry Street and got under one of the many old buildings there at the time, setting it afire, and thereby starting the great fire of Pittsburgh. The only building left standing was one next to where the county morgue now stands, and which is now used as a parking lot.

From Alice V. Brown, Oakmont:

The story told me when I was a little girl was that a tailor was dyeing some materials and forgot about them as he went to look at a parade. I may be wrong about why he forgot the boiling kettle, but the materials caught fire and set the building on fire, and it spread to other places. I used to know the tailor's name, but I can't think of it now.

From Mrs. E. Riehm, Mt. Oliver:

The real cause of the big fire at the early date was rendering fats to make soap, in a large black kettle used for that purpose. Katie Mogan was the name of the woman. Tree wood and shavings started the fire, being used to make fire for boiling out fat, also a large bake oven to bake bread, for boats coming up and down the river. Captain Elwood, who later moved to Verona, told me most of the houses had a ladder to get to the second floor bedrooms. He had a wholesale feed and grain place at 963, Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Annie Brighton lived near the point bridge with an old aunt, who was a washwoman. Annie work at Marvins on, Liberty Avenue. She was a kin to the old Lady who was the cause of the fire, the high wind did the damage.

That was over 50 years ago. I worked in the Fancy Cake Shop at that time I met Annie Brighton. Few of the girls talked to her as they said her kin was the cause of the big Pittsburgh fire.

From Mrs. Maude Rombach, Saltsburg:

I remember of some of the older people telling me the lady's name was

Mrs. Horne that started the fire when the kettle upset and spread the fire. I just can't remember her first name.

### OTHER DESCENDANTS' COMMENTS

From Hervey Allen, Miami, Florida:

I had a good many ancestors in Pittsburgh during 1845 and long before. The two ancestors I am putting down as my claim to membership in the Descendants of Pittsburghers of 1845, are my two great grandfathers, Edward Allen, who was a contractor, and John Gill, who had a china store on Wood Street. The store burned, and I remember as a child seeing some dishes which the family still had which had been melted together and had been kept as mementoes of the great fire. John Gill afterward went into the hat business in Pittsburgh, and the present famous hat store on Wood Street—at least it was there some years ago, I forget its name—was a direct descendant of his business.

From Ida Brown, Penn Township:

My grandmother, Mrs. John Porter (Maiden name Eliza Duneseth) lived in the Smithfield Street District or near Hoggs' Pond, where the Court House now stands.

She was to attend a carpet rag sewing party that day. However, when she arrived at the party, the house was on fire and the carpet rags were thrown out. She also told me how the people took their household belongings along the canal and the wind was so strong that she saw a stack of plates lift up one at a time and fly into the canal. She was about fifteen years old.

My grandfather, Thomas Brown who lived out Penn Avenue, warned his daughters who stayed in the house (for the fire was not coming in their direction) "not to take any packages or loot from any one wanting to leave it at their house." The people were stealing so.

From Dr. E. P. Cuthbert, Titusville:

I have heard my dear Father tell several times about the beginning of that fire and how easily it might have been put out at the beginning. He, with other boys going home from school at noon for their lunch, saw the start of the fire. I think it was a woman with an outside fire washing, and wind blew embers to a shed. The group of boys ran to a volunteer fire hose house and helped one man, a member of that fire company, to run out the hose cart. When they got to a hydrant, a member of an opposition company squatted



on the big cap over the hydrant and prevented them attaching their hose until his company arrived. By then the fire had gained considerable headway.

From Mrs. W. W. Dartnell, Gibson Mine, Bentleyville:

My great grandfather, Rev. A. M. Bryan, and a great great grandfather, Martin Rahm, both lost houses in 1845. The former came to Pittsburgh in 1830, married Elizabeth Rahm, and preached on the streets until after 800 conversions he built a small brick church (Cumberland Presbyterian) on the corner of Diamond and Smithfield. A copy of a painting of this is in Rev. David Lang's Shady Avenue Presbyterian Church, loaned by my Mother. A picture of him painted by his friend Alfred Wall was rescued from the fire and carried to the river. This is owned by James Redmond Murphy, P. O. Box 132, Mayview, Pennsylvania. Rev. Bryan made many public appeals for money for fire sufferers. One judge handed him \$1,000 after a speech. He also was influential in having Pittsburgh arsenal retained.

From Mrs. J. C. Heile, Library:

My mother's parents, Mr. and Mrs. George West, lived near Third and Ferry Street. The family consisted of my mother, a brother and an infant a few days old, and their parents. At first it was thought the fire might be extinguished before it touched their home, but as it came nearer it was decided to move Grandmother West and her new baby to her brother's home in Allegheny. The home was not burned, but the moving was fatal to the mother and her baby. My mother was five years old at the time. When I was a child I remember hearing the fire bells that rang on that date in April, and mother reviewed her history for that time to us children.

From J. D. McClelland, Pittsburgh:

My mother's father, James Sproat, lived on South Avenue on the North Side, formerly Allegheny. He was a volunteer fireman and his company went to Pittsburgh to help fight the fire.

From Henry Asher Phillips, Pittsburgh:

Referring to a silver sugar bowl loaned for exhibition, Mr. Phillips described it as "one of a five-piece service given to owner's grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. John Palmer Bakewell, as a wedding present in 1829. As their dwelling was threatened (but not destroyed) by the Fire, as a precaution, the service was put in a pillow case and taken to Grant's Hill for safety. The pillow case and contents remained there overnight but were recovered intact the next day."

From notes of Frank Semple (1841-1908), contributed by Frank Semple, Jr.,  
Sewickley:

At the time of the "great fire" April 10, 1845 we were living in one of Mrs. Burgess's houses on the south side of Penn Street the second house east of Evans Alley. Semple & Barker's Dry Goods store was consumed and I can remember our parlor being piled up with goods that had been brought up from the store. I had been at the store the previous afternoon and lost a little wagon filled with apples which I had been playing with and Father did not bring home for me.