

FIRE!

By John S. Halbert

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At Florence State, (now *The University of North Alabama*) along with ROTC, all male students had to take "Art" or "Music," along with Physical Education. As I had taken care of Phys Ed most enjoyably with two semesters of ballroom dancing; knew little or nothing about music; and since I couldn't draw a straight line---I decided to try my hand at photography, which was under the heading of "Art." The class met in a white, elongated 1920's-era frame building that perched precariously on a steep embankment at the edge of the campus.

Before long, I had learned how to process film in the school's photo lab, and was completely hooked on the subject. Since I could only develop my pictures during school hours, and was impatient to try out some ideas of my own, I went to a camera shop and bought a Minolta 35-millimeter camera, along with tanks, trays, chemicals, lights, an enlarger, and a set of back-drop curtains for portraits. Soon, I was happily taking loads of pictures and processing the films and prints in the bathroom at home.

Before long, however, I ran into a problem. Other family members wanted to take baths and such, and there I was, hour-after-hour in my jury-rigged darkroom, sloshing around with leaky tanks and trays of smelly chemicals. Sometimes, they could overhear me click-clacking an enlarger that resembled an enormous, vicious-looking metal insect standing on its hind legs. Weird-colored lights flickered under the closed door. ("Look, it's our bathroom, too!")

Faced with an in-house revolt, it was obvious I would have to either find another place for the darkroom or cut back on my pictures. I decided to move the photography setup to the upstairs hallway, where I had more room and no interference from fellow-householders.

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Not long after the move upstairs came one of my most wild and scary escapades.

As I was printing pictures on a cold, snowy, January midnight, dad arrived home from work in a state of excitement. "You're missing the big news story!" he called up to me as he stamped through a foot of snowfall at the back door. "'Nyhoff Corners' is on fire!"

"On fire!" I grabbed my coat and camera and dashed outside. Almost from the time I jumped into my car, I could see a furnace-like orange glow pulsating on the low-lying snow-clouds. In a few minutes, when I slushed up to "Nyhoff Corners", a well-known wholesale warehouse district, about a mile from our house, I found that Dad's story about the fire was no invention. A dozen or more pumpers were hooked up to fire hydrants; thick, turgid hoses snaked over the snowy streets and steady streams of water played on the big, two-story triangle-shaped showroom-warehouse, where flames licked out the upper-floor windows.

As I stood there in the snow, snapping pictures of the burning building, watching the fire devouring the structure's insides at the second-story level and along the roofline and at clouds of black smoke billowing upward, backlit by the orange flames, an hysterical elderly lady elbowed her way up next to me. "My ledger book!" she cried frantically, wringing her hands. "Help me! Somebody save my records from the fire!" As I turned and looked at her, she grabbed my

shoulders, her pleading eyes bulging in desperation. "Please! Get my ledger out of there!"

"Where is it?" I asked, more curious than anything else.

"In the office at the back of the first floor by the stairwell!" the woman fairly screamed, pointing at the rear of the flaming structure, "it's on the desk!"

On impulse, I handed her the camera and whipped off my overcoat. In a few moments, I had pushed past the police lines and was making for the darkened entrance. Before anyone could stop me, I pulled open the front door and rushed into the shadowy, smoke-filled showroom.

Inside, I ran down an aisle toward the back of the place where the woman had said the office was situated. As I dashed along, weird waves of heat radiated downward from the white-painted tin ceiling, along with crackling and snapping noises that came from somewhere above me on the second level. Streams of runoff water from the fire hoses cascaded down the inside walls and support columns onto the display floor. Sloshing through big puddles of water, I nearly lost my balance a couple of times on the slippery surface. There was a loud "boom" overhead and a big burst of smoke billowed down the staircase at the rear of the big open showroom. As the acrid cloud enveloped me, my eyes smarted and my lungs erupted in a spasm of coughing. Above me, on the upper level, a massive heavy object fell, shaking the entire building. The juddering vibrations dislodged a big wall-mounted ceramic display that crashed to the floor, sending chunks of pottery flying all around me. By now, I had almost reached the far end of the of the display area at the foot of the stairs, yet---except for the smoke---there was still no sign in the showroom of the actual fire. It was eerie to realize that an inferno raged only a few feet above me.

BA-LOOM! A mighty upstairs explosion rocked the big building from end-to-end, shaking loose a light fixture that fell from the ceiling onto a nearby showcase with a shattering smash! Gasping, I ducked and dodged my way through the choking gloom, found the office door and tugged it open. Groping about, my fingers encountered the bulky ledger book on the desk. Just then, I happened to glance out through the open doorway and was horrified to see a flickering orange reflection suddenly appear on the opposite wall. *The fire!* The flames had now reached the staircase's upper landing, undulating crazily in a macabre death-dance of destruction. Above me, another great crashing noise shook the ceiling, sending a sizzling shower of sparks shooting down the stairsteps. A searing heat wave burst through the door opening, singeing my unprotected hands and face. I had to get out of there---*fast!*

With one motion, I snatched up the huge book and madly pushed my way out of the doomed office, back onto the rear of the murky display floor. A mere second after I fled the room, a slithering tongue of flame lashed down the stairwell and hungrily probed into the cubicle that exploded in a booming ball of fire! Turning about, I ran with all my might for the front door, a hundred feet up the main aisle. Right behind me, the infuriated inferno veered and bounded across a row of displays, trying to block my escape!

Desperately casting about for the shortest route out of the burning building, I saw---for a split-second through the big picture windows---the incredible sight of a dozen silver streams of water shooting upward toward the floor above me. The flashing red lights of the fire-engines, and the gyrating orange flames shooting out the roof and the second-story windows reflected weirdly on the ghostly buildings across the way, and on the snow-covered ground. Gripping the heavy book, chased by the enraged tentacles of fire, and gasping for air in the choking showroom, I splashed along as fast as I could up the aisle of the of the now rapidly-disintegrating building.

All at once, I heard a rolling, bumping sound that quickly grew louder, as if something had

given way. There was an earsplitting tearing, splintering noise in the ceiling above me as one end of a huge flaming wooden ceiling beam burst shrieking through the overhead and fell in a rain of sparks into the aisle where I had been just a moment before! A jagged column of fire shot downward onto a nearby display counter that disintegrated with a loud crash into zinging shards of flying glass and metal.

WHAM! A sudden searing shockwave slammed against my backside! Spinning around, I tripped over something in the aisle and pitched onto the floor, gasping in consternation as the ledger scooted out of my arms and slid underneath a nearby counter! Frantically feeling about for it on my hands and knees in the torrid gloom, I lost precious seconds retrieving it.

Grasping the big book again, and struggling for balance, I staggered back to my feet and resumed my race against the flames. By now, my breathing was coming in frantic gasps, as the greedy, thundering fire consumed the remaining breathable air. "Keep moving!" I gasped to myself. My lungs ached from the heat and the lack of air. The roaring conflagration at my heels had seemingly become a pulsating, living *'thing'* that somehow sensed it now almost had me trapped in its howling maelstrom of flames.

The hellish inferno, with victory nearly in its grasp, now redoubled its assault. A booming orange fireball exploded through the overhead just behind me and in horror, I saw the ceiling directly above suddenly blossom into a crackling checkerboard of fire! A blistering blast of heat engulfed me, and, as I lurched forward, an awesome pressure wave tried to shove me to the floor. Just then, I became aware of a new sound above the uproar---a diabolical groaning, ripping noise that grew louder than the fire itself. The floor once again shook, almost throwing me off balance. The whole place was about to cave in!

Then, thankfully, I spotted just ahead of me in the dense, swirling smoke, the vague, welcome outline of the front door, still standing partially open. Somehow summoning the last of my strength, I lunged through the shuddering door to the outside. Holding on to the ledger as if in a death-grip, I ran and stumbled as fast as I could to get away from the doomed building.

Just then, a fireman yelled, "Get back! It's going!" There was an earsplitting crash behind me and the ground shook, as with a thunderous roar the whole roof and the second floor collapsed down onto the showroom and office! The entire city block erupted into a gigantic ball of fire, as flames and sparks shot a hundred feet into the orange night sky.

I bent over for a long minute, coughing and inhaling the sweet outside air. Still cradling the big book, I then made my way back to where I had last seen the owner of the warehouse. "Oh! My ledger! My precious records!" the lady sobbed as I placed it into her outstretched arms. "My hero! How can I ever thank you, young man?"

Until then, I hadn't actually considered rescuing the ledger as a heroic act. But as I stared at the thundering inferno where I had been only moments earlier, I realized how foolhardy it had been for me to have gone into the burning building in the first place, and what a miracle it was to have escaped being trapped inside when it collapsed. Shaking with relief, she handed me my overcoat and camera, and only then did I notice how frigid was the midnight air.

For a long time, the tearful businesswoman and I and all the others in the crowd of spectators stood mutely in the snow and watched the raging, roaring flames consume the entire block-long building.

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A few days later, as I was finishing my mid-day radio program, the receptionist came to the

door of the control room. "You have a guest in the lobby . . . someone wants to see you when you get off your show!"

Mystified, a few minutes later I went up the hallway to the front of the building. Sitting near the entrance was the same lady I had seen at the fire several nights before. In her lap was a big white box. As soon as she saw me, she arose and grabbed my hand. The woman blushed. "My reward to you for saving my ledger from the fire."

She lifted the cover.

Inside was a huge apple pie!