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More "Fires of Huntsville"

Elise Stephens

The 'fires of Huntsville' have occurred on an annual basis. Certain years, however, stand out in memory for their devastation. In 1850, the heart of downtown blazed helplessly as wind carried sparks and flame northward two and one-half blocks from the Square, igniting a parade of destruction. *The Southern Advocate* (May 8, 1850) described the scene:

"The North side of the square, between the street leading out by Meridianville and by the Bell Tavern (north) out to the open fields, is one smoking mass of ruins—not a house left standing. The centre of the northern half of the town is gone—vanished in smoke."

The *Advocate* had rushed to press and literally by the light of those flames put out an Extra whose headline read: HUNTSVILLE IN RUINS!

The Caldwell House, a large three-story hotel, caught early and fed the night sky. The Bell Tavern, another landmark, received repeated lashings but survived for another fire another day, finely bowing out in 1855, to a roar of flame. Large, expensive town houses owned by wealthy planters and merchants crackled into thin air; even brick chimneys were unable to withstand the heat.

Huntsville's growing number of trades and small business augmented by a growing influx of German and Irish immigrants to the county, was especially hard hit. George H. Warwick's furniture warehouse (where the fire began); Thomas Cain's shop; J. D. Cross and L. G. Figg's saddler's and silversmiths's shop; Dr. Wilkinson's dentist office; J. Johnson's grocery; Parker & McKenzie dry goods; Terrill & Robinson's (free Blacks) barber shop and bath; J. A. Slaughter's grocery store; Mr. Schandies shoe shop; Mr. Callahan's large carriage shop, livery stable, and dwelling; several structures owned by Thomas Brandon; and the homes of Dr. P. B. Robinson, Dr. Francis Newman, J. B. Trottman, George H. Warwick, J. Gaston, D. M. Bradford (occupied by A. B. Jones), Mr. Rebman, Charley Jones, B. Ferguson, Mrs. Robert Graham, Britt Franks, and the large Holmes Street mansion belonging to Mrs. (Dr.) Moore.

The final insult, perhaps, although fully understandable in the light of the fires' extent, is that the engine house and accompanying market house also gave up the ghost. *The Huntsville Democrat*, owned by A. J. Withers blazoned its would-be headline into the night sky as it too went up in flames. Withers may

have been the only victim with insurance; thus insuring that a strong editorial voice would continue to be heard calling for greater safety and fire prevention efforts.

The fires of the twentieth century generally have been more readily contained and quickly doused. They have almost taken on the aspect of spectator events, flickering to the ooh's and ah's of a fire-crazed crowd. But long after the pyromania ceases, the blight of destruction lingers. The urban and rural landscapes at any given time take on a tattered, layered look, as history pursues its inexorable course.

Of all the fires witnessed locally in the 20th century, one stands out for its poignancy and idiocy. The flick of a cigarette, carelessly tossed into a long feeding troth filled with hay, ignited a conflagration, a living hell, not likely to be witnessed here again.

A little nine year old boy, Howard Harbin, carried vivid memories of the fire that seared his soul for all his days. The joy and excitement of coming to town to see a circus parade ended in nightmarish tragedy. Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus had come to Huntsville. It was the last Saturday in October 1916, a year already noted for tragedy in Madison County (Probate Judge Lawler's grisly murder followed by a suicide). Thousands gathered to see "the Greatest Show on Earth" and forget their cares. After the parade ended and people pushed down Washington Street toward the circus site near the Southern Railway depot, a counter-current bolted through the advancing crowd. Billowing smoke, a cacophony of crackling straw and screaming horses broke the air. Then Howard Harbin saw them, thirty-seven of them: "The most beautiful horses" he had ever seen, ablaze, many with eyes burned out, squealing and rearing in all directions.

And then the most amazing thing occurred. The horse trainer blew on his bugle, and those panicky horses, their skin falling off, "stopped dead and ran to their trainer, lining up just like they were ready to perform. Just like they were trained." (*Huntsville Times*, interview, July 11, 1975). Mounting his horse, the trainer took his gun and shot "each burning animal as he passed. Mercifully, the animals dropped dead."

One hundred and thirty horses died in that fire or as a result of it. As we get older we tend to forget some things, This is not one of them.



Huntsville Hotel built in 1860.



Huntsville Hotel fire, 1910.



288 Sutton Road

April 6, 1996

Margaret Anne Goldsmith Hanaw

**I knew
the house was dying
a skeleton
rafter bones stripped
exposed to elements
it was prepared to go
having lived its time**



**I burned the house
on Sutton Road
it was hard to destroy
the growth of trees
that were the house
where Jim Nunn lived
who built the house
dogtrot style
like his father's
where he grew up
on this hill
years ago**

**Jim Nunn
reared his family
in this house
then lost it
in the depression
to pay the note
covered by my ancestors
who took the house
and farmed the land
with tenant help
for thirty years**

**That was before
cotton pickers
and big machines
worked the land;
displacing people
who moved to town
for Arsenal pay**



**There were renters
with welfare checks
they left at night
without paying rent
then vagrants came
to assume the lease**

**Insurance canceled;
the corpse house
I offered
to movers
to preservationists
to the farmer
who rents the land**



**After vandals
took the mantles
I gave away
the roof
the doors
I gave away
porch columns
and cornerstones**

**Before the burning
by Big Cove
Fire Department Volunteers
early morning
April six
on the porch
a babg carriage lay
ouerturned**



**In the attic
clothes and mattress
lay memory of naked lovers
beneath bare rafters
open to sky
where mountains stretched
through broken windows
above red fields
plowed for
spring seed sowing**



**Firemen came
executioners
to do my work
to break ceiling holes
to spread gasoline
to light the fire**



**Then smoke began
rising slowly
thin at first
then thick and black
with leaping flames
bright yellow and orange
hot so hot
they singed my face**



**Out the chimney
smoke billowed
one last time**



**Flames leapt
through doors
through rooms
engulfing all
rafters and doors
walls and floors
the growth of trees
that were the house
and memories past
of many years**



**I drew back
away from heat
burning my face
scorching my hair
watching the inferno
deuour remains**



**Left behind
a root cellar
two chimneys
silent markers
and foundation stones
above smouldering ash
and lone stairs
leading nowhere**

**The house
could have sheltered
or its remains
built warming fires**



**Those thoughts
haunt me -
but
I had
no choice
but to burn it,

or did I?**

A resident of New Orleans, Huntsville native Margaret Ann Goldsmith Hanaw spends as much time as possible in Huntsville where she can often be found at her desk on the first floor of the I. Schiffman Building.