The Day Baldwin Hall Burned

It was a calm day with snow on the ground of the Kirksville State Teachers' College. Students walked to class unaware of the tragic event that was about to take place on that Monday, January 28, 1924. One such student, Miss Pauline Dingle, now Mrs. Pauline Knobbs, was sitting in Dr. Joseph L. Kingsberry's classroom studying American Social and Economic History.

On May 17, 1871, the ground breaking ceremony for the first Baldwin Hall Building took place. In the middle of 1873 the building was completed and the following January it was utilized for classrooms and faculty offices. There were several classes in session in the new building, Sociology, English, Speech, and History.

The front of Baldwin Hall faced north with the Laughlin Building to its direct west. The Library Building joined the northeast corner of Baldwin Hall. Kirk Auditorium was east of the Library and Ophelia Parrish School was north of the Kirk Auditorium. The Laughlin Building, Kirk Auditorium, and Ophelia Parrish are still part of the college campus today. The Normal Lake was where the large grassy area, now known as the quad, is today.

At approximately 3:30 that afternoon, Mrs. Knobbs recalled a man running down the corridor of Baldwin Hall frantically yelling, "Everybody out right now! There's a fire on the third floor of Baldwin Hall and we don't think we can put it out!" Grabbing her books and running out of the building, she paused for a moment to look up and she saw a wisp of smoke coming out of one of the windows in the mansared roof. She heard Dr. Kingsberry say, "Oh my God we've been expecting this for days!" When recalling this incident with Dr. Kingsberry, Mrs. Knobbs chuckled and said, "Some of the students would slip up to the drama department and smoke and also try on clothes."

After saving their own books, the students helped carry anything out of the building they could get their hands on, books, papers, chairs, desks, anything on the first floor or in the museum which was located in back of the Modern and Medieval History room.

Dr. Kingsberry stopped by the offices of Mr. Eugene M. Violette and Miss Lucy Simmons to notify them of the fire in Baldwin Hall. Mrs. Knobbs recalled Mr. Violette saying, "When I'm finished getting my papers out of my desk, I want you to come in or you may go now and carry out what you can from the museum."
Baldwin. The burning beams in the auditorium weakened the ceiling and the second floor fell through. Mrs. Knobbs remembered hearing Dr. Kirk say, "No, we can't dynamite the crossway because it would cancel our insurance policy if someone should happen to take any books out of the library."

The hundreds of students and faculty were yelling and crying saying, "No, no, please don't let the library burn, it is such a marvelous piece of art work!" Dr. Kirk then said, "I can't help it, but we'll have to!" One young man did not pay any attention to Dr. Kirk and organized a group of about 50 young men to help him carry out books and collectables. They were stopped at the door of the library by Dr. Kirk, who spread himself across the library door saying, "No! You can't do this, we won't get any insurance on any of this if you carry anything out." Mr. Violette who was listening to all of this was crying because he knew all of the materials he collected in Europe were going to be destroyed by the fire. Mr. Violette had collected maps, coins, books, and artifacts while traveling through Europe after World War I.

Dr. Kirk did not know that there were a few students on the third floor of the library throwing out books, magazines, and newspapers, anything that wouldn't break, through the window. All of this happened in a short period of time. Suddenly the big mansared roof of Baldwin Hall fell through to the third floor and the 3,000 pound radiators brought the whole flaming mass of flames and wood down to the basement. Fortunately no one was injured during the fire.

The city fire department responded quickly to the call of the fire. It had just purchased a new pumper truck, a 1923 Stutz six-cylinder fire engine. The firefighters were not familiar with the new pumper truck and had to call the Moberly Fire Department for help getting it to start. The Moberly Fire Department had earlier trained the Kirksville Fire Department how to operate the pumper. In order to help them, the Moberly Fire Department had the railroad track cleared for a special train to bring a man to Kirksville.

Mrs. Knobbs recalled that when the fire department arrived and hooked up hoses to a fire hydrant, the water looked like what would come out of a garden hose, it would not even reach the top of the first floor windows. Unfortunately the fire hydrants were of no use to the firefighters so they had to use the water from the Normal Lake. The lake level went down quickly because the water was used to put out the fire which lasted 15 to 20 hours, even with the additional help from surrounding communities. The heat was so intense that even standing in front of the Ophelia Parrish Building people could hardly tolerate the heat from the fire.

Miss Elsie Shuman stood on her back porch at 805 South Florence Street and watched the fire. She described it as "high flames, intense heat, and a lot of smoke and flames." Her sister, Mae, sat on the back porch with Miss Shuman and drew a picture of the fire which can be found today at the Northeast Missouri State University Museum.

The flames extended beyond the rising tower of Baldwin Hall and people who lived outside of Kirksville were to have seen the flames for miles around.

Mrs. Knobbs said that she was standing in front of Baldwin Hall thinking of her senior year, intending to graduate in the spring, yet wondering what the outcome of
The campus of the Kirksville State Teachers’ College as it looked before the fire in 1924. The center building is Baldwin Hall. To its right is Laughlin Hall, which is still on campus today. To the left of Baldwin Hall is the Library Building. The lake was drained in fighting the fire and this area is known as the quad.

The fire would be with no library and not much left of the campus except the Kirk Auditorium, the south part of the Ophelia Parrish School and the Laughlin Building. The second and third floor fire doors saved the Laughlin Building.

Although the Baldwin Hall Building was beautifully constructed, Mrs. Knobbs said that the building was a fire hazard because the janitorial crew oiled the floors to keep them shiny and also to keep the dust down. She also said it could have been a fire hazard because of the tangled mass of wires on the third floor of the drama department.

The day after the fire was quite a day according to Mrs. Knobbs. The college administration asked everyone, faculty, students, and town folk, over to the Kirk Auditorium. Dr. Kirk spoke and several members of the faculty said a few words. Dr. Kirk then gave the floor to several of the students, especially seniors, who said that they would stay at the college and would not go to another school.

According to the Kirksville Weekly Graphic dated February 1, 1924, the fire “originated from the defective wire in the old Philemathein room in the northeast corner of Baldwin Hall.”

The estimated total loss of the building and equipment was about $240,000. Insurance covered $110,000 ($60,000 on Baldwin Hall and $50,000 on the Library Building). There were 40,000 volumes of books destroyed and only 1,000 books were saved, but many of these were in damaged condition. Among those lost were many one-of-a-kind magazines and books collected by Mr. Violette during his European travels.

The heat melted the ice off the Normal Lake that was in the middle of the campus and also blew out several windows of the Kirk Auditorium. After the Hall and Library burned, their remains were used to fill in the lake that was drained after the firefighters had pumped it dry fighting the fire. The only remains of the old Baldwin Hall are the sunken gardens which used to be its basement. The college campus changed its complexion completely on the day Baldwin Hall burned.

Photos courtesy of Pickler Library at NMSU.

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