

Looking Back: The Great Shelby Fire of May 1979



By Melissa R. Lentz

“It’s a bad block, isn’t it?” This question from Everett Hoyle, Jr. of Shelby, N.C., sums up the plight of West Warren Street over the past century. On Feb. 23, 1928, a fire blazed its way through Shelby’s Central Hotel, claiming the lives of three people who selflessly put themselves in danger to awaken those inside. Six months later on Aug. 28, six more lives were claimed when the building temporarily housing the First National Bank collapsed. Fast forward to March 7, 1950, and the same street experienced another catastrophic event — Kendall Drug was completely destroyed by what was called one of the worst fires ever in Shelby, and all but one building on that block was destroyed. With the occurrence of these three tragedies, anyone would agree that the 100 block of West



Photos courtesy of Lem Lynch and Lem Lynch Photography.



Warren Street deserves the nickname “Disaster Alley.”

The evening of May 25, 1979, heralded further misery for the firefighters and citizens of Shelby. As the townspeople walked the streets of downtown browsing in the numerous stores and eating dinner at the local diner, disaster struck in the form of another fire. When the smoke finally cleared, four devoted firemen and a city gas employee had died, 31 other bystanders sustained injuries and thriving

businesses were in complete ruin. An entire block was taken within a matter of hours; J.E.’s Department Store, Geoffrey’s Men’s Clothing Store, the Bible Book Store, Wonderland Toys, Butler’s Shoe Store

and Eleanor Shops

(located around the corner on South Lafayette Street) were completely lost. A \$5 million price tag in damages faced Shelby, and priceless lives lost included Max Bowling of the City of Shelby Gas Department, Nathan Carroll Hall, Donald Gene Melton, George Magness and Floyd P. “Nick” Sharts, all members of the Shelby Fire Department. Their deaths hung heavily on the hearts of family members and friends in the city and throughout the state.

Shelby’s chief of police, J.D. Fish, reported that the initial call for help came from J.E.’s Department Store where two employees

continued working after six that evening. The same two employees also reported smoke and an unidentifiable, suspicious smell.

Around 6:15 p.m., the townspeople began to notice a blanket of smoke hovering over that cursed 100 block of West Warren Street. Fire trucks arrived soon after the smoke was detected. Apparently, the seemingly routine fire was contained in the rear of Geoffrey’s Department Store, but the fire proved to be deceptive, and 30 minutes later, the bystanders watched as an explosion rocked the store and fire and smoke began to roll out abundantly from the rear of the building. The walls in the front and rear of Geoffrey’s, as well as J.E.’s Department Store, had collapsed during the explosion. Chick Jacobs, a staff writer for the local newspaper, stated that the scene looked like something from the evening news — an IRA bombing or an act of PLO terrorism from overseas. Jacobs later wrote, “But it wasn’t Belfast or Tel Aviv — and it certainly wasn’t television. It was West Warren Street.”

The bystanders sought cover while the firemen on the scene were showered with debris from the explosion. Rush Hamrick, Jr., the owner of Kendall Drug that had burned 30 years earlier, and townsman Aubrey Beam watched as rubble buried the firefighters. The two men pushed aside their fear of being engulfed in the raging blaze and rushed in to help firefighters dig the fallen men from the debris with their bare hands. With the assistance of Hamrick and Beam, the firefighters were able to successfully remove nearly a half dozen firemen who were trapped in the wreckage.

Shelby firefighter Chris Norman lost his uncle, city gas worker Max Bowling, during the explosion. Norman, like other men, worked for numerous hours trying to extinguish the fire and did not find out about the death of his uncle until later.

Upon discovering his family’s loss, Norman rushed to the hospital and met his parents who were inquiring about his own whereabouts. Despite the heartache of losing a family member and the threat of injuring himself, Norman returned to the

continued on page 7...

disaster scene with a renewed desire to put out the flames that had destroyed a large portion of downtown Shelby.

Cars parked along the street were heavily damaged or completely destroyed from the flying debris during the blast. A fire engine, recently repaired from a previous collision, was destroyed, and surrounding trees were snapped in two. Bystanders looking on in morbid curiosity were now seeking medical attention for themselves or others injured from the airborne debris and were sifting through the rubble to find others who were possibly dead. The injured were rushed to the local hospital, and a disaster plan was quickly established and executed. Dr. Page Hudson, chief medical examiner of North Carolina, flew from Chapel Hill to assess the injured.

The American Red Cross provided assistance in the form of first aid stations where Red Cross nurses, some who worked full time at Cleveland Memorial Hospital, treated the injured. The stations also provided firemen with a place to rest, as well as food and drinks to replenish their strength throughout the battle to put out the flames. First National Bank provided telephone access to police officers, firemen and rescue personnel.

Nearly 239 firefighters from the surrounding communities of Cleveland, Boiling Springs, Boiling Springs Rural, Grover, Kings Mountain, Oak Grove, Shanghai, Waco, Fallston and Polkville valiantly assisted in containing the blaze; many provided equipment that was crucial in combating the blaze. Even local businesses offered aid; for example, Holland Outdoor Lighting Service provided a 40-foot bucket truck.

The Shelby fire and police departments worked diligently to uncover the mystery of the devastating blaze using fire inspectors and detectives. Additionally, local, state and federal agencies sent out crime scene investigators, arson experts, evidence and lab technicians, photographers, artists and interview teams to comb the area in search of clues as to how and why the fire started and what triggered the explosion. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) sent a 13-member national response team to assist in the investigation, and the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) provided expertise with lab

technicians, a mobile crime lab and two arson investigators.

Each group began the investigation by obtaining information about the types of businesses that occupied the buildings. They also obtained building diagrams that had detailed descriptions of the gas and electrical systems and poured over photographs taken before and after the explosion. A majority of the evidence collected was sent to the SBI crime laboratories in Raleigh to be analyzed. Interviews were conducted with witnesses of the tragedy to provide a better time frame for the evening's events.

Local detective Lt. Dale Ledbetter commented upon the positive aspects of such a tragic event — he believed the experience that he and the other investigators were gaining would prove invaluable if another fire of this magnitude were to strike Shelby in the future.

A gas leak was eliminated as the explosion's possible cause; Chuck Weems with the Shelby Gas Department reported that investigators with the American Gas Association and the North Carolina Utilities Commission performed extensive surveys and tests that concluded gas was not leaking during the time of the explosion. Furthermore, Shelby Fire Chief Glenn Barrett discovered that Max Bowling disconnected the gas prior to the massive

explosion. Later, officials determined that a back draft, perhaps from heat buildup above a false ceiling, could possibly have been the culprit. Shelby Fire Inspector Charles Doty also noted that fire inspections had been conducted on all portions of the occupied businesses; the inspections had taken place in January, and subsequent walk-through inspections had been conducted in April.

After days of sifting through the rubble, analyzing photographs of before and after the disaster and pouring over evidence, the ATF and SBI concluded that the fire and subsequent explosion were no accident. Someone had to forfeit his freedom to pay for the destruction of a thriving downtown area and for the lives of five men that were simply executing the duties of their jobs. A man was arrested, charged with the crime, and convicted.

John Ingram, North Carolina's insurance commissioner at the time, visited the site of the catastrophe on his way to the memorial service for the fallen firefighters and the city gas employee. "Our only hope is that we can learn from this experience," he said. Commissioner Ingram also commented on Cleveland County's citizens' tenacity and his belief that their

resolve would enable them to rally and rebuild for the future.

Chief Barrett praised his community's resilience and reported that despite the loss of four firefighters, three individuals had requested interviews with him to fill the vacant full-time positions with the department. Although many wanted to join the department's ranks, some existing members were discontent and wanted more incentives to compensate for the dangers they faced as firefighters. The group prepared a petition requesting higher pay and more positions.

Stores along the street that sustained little or no damage began to operate as usual on Saturday and Sunday, and Bill Shope of the Shelby Merchants Association was pleased with the business owners' ability to return to business without capitalizing on the tragedy. Hill Hudson, Jr., owner of Hudson's Department Store, hired a Charlotte-based company to assist in eliminating his store's smoke damage; other store owners followed and helped to bring a sense of normalcy to the devastated downtown area. Storeowners banded together to make their stores inviting for people who may have been apprehensive to return to downtown and everyday life. The Shelby Merchants Association also set up a disaster fund to aid the families of the five men that perished.

In the 26 years that have passed since fire ravaged West Warren Street, the downtown area has been revitalized and thrives as it once did, but firefighters who remember that day carry images of their fallen brothers — images that remind them of the danger they faced and still face today. They grieve for the lives lost and applaud the bravery of those men who perished for the sake of getting the job done. And while the physical wounds were tended to on May 25, 1979, the emotional scars still remain. Nevertheless, after every fire that is extinguished, the dust always settles and the smoke always fades, and those firefighters know that it was just a part of the job.

Thank you to Lem Lynch of Lynch Photography for the photos of the Shelby fire. For more information about the fire or for a DVD made from film shot during the fire (available to fire and rescue departments for free), contact Lem at 1-800-963-9963 or P. O. Box 1560, Shelby, NC 28151.

