

A & A FIRE

Peter Woerner (via email July 13, 2020):

The night of the fire I was working in the small area of the 5th floor at the corner of Chapel and York, building a model. This area was set down from the 5th floor by several feet.

I left quite late, close to midnight, possibly later. The next morning, perhaps about 9 am I walked back up Chapel, intending to finish up the model. As I got to York Street Felix Drury was standing there. I don't think I really looked at the building. I asked Felix what was going on. "The building burned last night on the 4th and 5th floors."

I was shocked.

I said to him, "I was working there on the 5th floor until late last night."

My immediate concern, which I did not share with him, was that I had inadvertently set the fire with a cigarette as at the time I smoked.

I can't remember exactly but within a day or two I was able to get into the building and went to the area where I had been working. To my relief that area was untouched and my model was intact.

A few days later I was in Vermont and got a call from the Fire Marshall. He said that he had been told I was in the building the night of the fire. (Undoubtedly by Felix). I told him that was true.

"I want to talk to you."

I said I was in Vermont working. "Either you come down and talk to me or I'll get a subpoena."

I went down, met with him and told him what I knew, and that I didn't recall seeing anyone else in the building when I left.

The first suspects of course were the black students. This was pretty absurd because a Yale degree was their ticket to the future.

As we all know, the place was a tinderbox ready to go. I remember in 1st year coming in late at night to the 4th floor. On one of the desks there was a piece of tracing paper. About an inch above it was lit Luxo lamp. The trace was just beginning to smolder. A moment later it would have been in flames.

Last December I spent several days with Charlie Brewer (age 94), my really good friend and quasi mentor at his place in Bequia in St. Vincent, and the Grenadines. My partner, Kathleen Tillett and I went and hung out with Charles and Cornelia (Jim Righter's old girlfriend!).

As an aside note, he has always been a role model for me.

Although a first class provocateur, and perhaps partially because of that, I have a tremendous respect and admiration for him. He is fearless - going back to World War II in the Pacific when he was the Captain of a gasoline tanker at age 20 delivering gas to the beachhead of island still held by the Japanese. One hit to the ship and it would have been an inferno.

Charles is in great shape and his mind and memory are sharp and incisive. We spent a lot of time talking about his role (major) in the Black Workshop. Essentially he made that happen and that is a whole other interesting story.

Eventually the A&A fire came up.

Charlie had a feeling, with no proof, that the fire might have been set by two young women who he described as A & A groupies - peripheral types.

Does this bring up any remembrances for any of you?

I have no recollections of who they might have been, or on a lighter note the name of the Mousetransaut that Tom Platt and I sent up in the payload of a 3 stage rocket?

We obtained the mouse from the Biology Department after questioning one of the professors if the ride would be harmful

to the mouse. The answer was "All systems GO!" We sent up the rocket, the parachute opened and the mouse glided safely to earth.

In today's world we would probably be shot by a P.E.T.A sniper.

John Jacobson (via email July 13, 2020):

Peter, a small need for adjustment to your story. The 5th floor has (had) no level changes. The 4th floor, however, has 3 different levels and the Chapel York corner is indeed steps lower than its adjacent level. So perhaps you were working on your model on the 4th floor or you misremembered the lower level. Not a big deal either way - a 50 year old memory can be tricky - something I know only too well.

Charlie Brewer was a good person. I remember (?) being worried about getting into graduate school as I faced the Vietnam draft. I called the School and spoke to Hazel explaining my situation. Soon thereafter Charlie, head of Admissions, was kind enough to send me a telegram that I got in. Forever grateful.

Bob Knight (via email July 13, 2020):

Phillip Monteleoni and I were coming back from a trip to NJ where we thought we might have a client. Turned on the radio in his car and heard the backend of the LEAD item on the news broadcast -something like "major building in downtown New Haven has burned". So we left radio on. At next news broadcast on the 1/2 hour there was NO MENTION OF THE STORY! That's how long it took Yale to effect a news blackout!

I was also working on something in the same corner with Peter W. -maybe the same project and we wanted to get into the building to see if anything survived.

Building was sealed of course.

CWM wasn't around I dont think, so I called Dean Weaver, and he said he would introduce me to the Fire Marshal and see if he could get me in.

We met on York St. right outside the entrance. Fire Marshal comes up, and Dean Weaver says " Fire Marshal Lyden, this is

ummmmm errrrr...Torch Knight—he didn't know my real name!!!
Fire Marshal was a bit taken aback but got it pretty quick.
Very smart guy. He and I became friends.

He took me through the building—took me to the corner where
Phillip and PKW and I were working —and said “If you had been
sleeping here, how long do you think it would have been after
the fire started, that you wouldn't have been able to get out?”
I guessed something like 1/2 an hour. He said—“My estimation is
3-4 minutes!

He also said that Yale had put pressure on him to say it wasn't
arson, then next day had changed and wanted it to be arson. He
shrugged and said “For me to call a fire arson, I need
evidence of arson, or an arsonist. In this case I found
neither. ”

He showed me right where the fire started (over on south side —
chapel street— where the chemical guys were working.

I took a bunch of black and white shots that Yale has —via John
Jacobson.