

## **The Bull Run Fire, Jan. 7, 1972**

**by**

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I was entering my first week of the last year of my tenure as Chief of Department. Shortly after midnight on this fateful day, when the personal alerting devices in each firefighter's home went off, activated from the 911 Center, announcing a fire discovered at the "Bull Run Inn and Bowling Alley. When we as the first responders arrived at the scene we discovered fire shooting out of the entire front of the building.



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Someone shouted that there were people living in the apartments above the Inn. I immediately dispatched three firefighters to inspect the entire second floor to make sure, if there was entrapment, to notify me immediately. As it turned out there were no folks in residence at that time.

Readers should note that this was not the building where the present day Bull Run Inn at 6<sup>th</sup> and Market is located. The building that burned was located on

Market Street between 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> streets, and Bull Run Creek actually ran under the building. The restaurant and bar portion of the building fronted Market Street, while the rear portion was a bowling alley. The national fire fighting practice in describing buildings uses "A" to denote the front of the building (in this case the side facing Market Street) and then proceeds clockwise with side "B" facing 5<sup>th</sup> Street, "C" the side along the alley paralleling Market Street, and "D" facing 6<sup>th</sup> Street. I will use these letters in what follows.

The first engine on the scene took the hydrant located in front of 518 Market Street to feed the elevating platform known as a "snorkel" with a reach of 65 feet. It was placed near the corner so it could reach two sides of the building. The second engine took the hydrant at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Market streets next to the Town Tavern. Two heavy attack lines were placed in service and advanced to the "D" side of the building. This was done to stop any extension of the fire from the rear of the apartments.

At this time I personally made an inspection of the bowling alley and did not find any fire, and only a light drift of smoke was visible. When the deputy chief and I went to inspect the other two sides of the building we discovered heavy smoke pushing out under the eaves of the roof with some force behind it. This told us that there had to be another empty space somewhere above the bowling alley. Being a native of Lewisburg I remembered that many years ago there was a public laundry known as the Peerless Laundry. When that went out of business the building was sold to a car dealer and used for storage and repairs, etc. At this point the ceiling was lowered, which left a void of about 3 feet. Somehow the fire had crept across from the apartment and had ignited the timbers holding up the upper roof. At that time, seeing what was about to happen we had the "snorkel" move to the "D" (West) side of the building to stop any spreading of the fire across the street.

Originally our 1000 GPM engine was sent to a hydrant located on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Saint Louis streets and had dual 3-inch supply lines laid to protect the "C" side of the building. But, when the suction hose was connected and the hydrant was turned on, there was no water coming out. The engineer immediately notified me of this situation. I cannot repeat here what I said to myself.

There was supposed to be a 12" water main installed to feed this hydrant. Our water map showed this, but the line was not installed until the next spring. This meant that we had to move to another hydrant a block away and had to leave the 3" supply lines lying in the street. This operation was going to feed one of our master stream devices to protect the "C" side, which was the rear of the structure.

Across a small alley at this point were three weather-beaten residences that would have gone up in minutes if the fire had reached them. Also, only fifty feet away, were the Busser warehouse and Heimbach lumberyard that we were very much concerned about. I had a crew place a ladder on the corner of the "B" side to try and ventilate the room and try and relieve the pressure that had build up very quickly. The latter had just been placed to make the ascent to the roof when an explosion blew the entire rear of the building out. We had hose lines in place so there was no spread of the fire to the structures mentioned above. The fire was held at this point with no further extension to any other areas.

We were on the scene till mid morning of the next day. Cameron Fire Company handled the fire without mutual aid from any other company. The fire brigade from the U.S. Penitentiary was held at our station and were ready to respond if needed. They were well trained and many times had responded with us. That unit does not exist at the Penitentiary any more.

I was well pleased with the effort that all of the firefighters displayed for so many hours and that there were no injuries. As with any major incident, there are always unexpected problems that arise that you have no control over.

