

My name is Bill Miller. I, along with the rest of my family and 167 college women, survived the drastic fire that gutted the North Hall dormitory of Slippery Rock College on Homecoming Day, October 16, 1937. I was thirteen years of age at the time of the fire.

With the rest of the family, I lived in North Hall, a section of which was made into the president's residence when my father, Charles S. Miller, became president of the college. The residence was quite large -- three full floors which consisted of a library and three bedrooms on the second floor and two bedrooms on the third. I shared a room on the third floor with my oldest brother, Charles, who at the time of the fire was a student at Allegheny College. My older brother, Bob, shared a room with my younger brother, Stephen. Martha, the only girl in the family, among the four brothers, had her room on the second floor along with my parents' room. A guest room also was on the second floor.

It was about 5:25 a.m. on the morning of October 16 that I remember Martha coming up to the third floor and telling us she heard fire alarms and even smelled smoke. Our family was never subject to fire alarms in the dormitory and my brothers discounted the need for any worry. But the smoke smell continued, and it was not long until we could hear fire engines approaching from the street.

I got up, hurriedly put on some clothes, and headed toward the rear of North Hall. The fire evidently started in the ovens in the kitchen, where cooks were preparing an ox roast for the returning students and alumni who would be coming to attend the Homecoming activities.

I remember seeing firefighters with many hoses pouring water on the flames as I sat on a bank near the kitchen area. Many other fire companies soon joined in the attempt to put out the fire.

After a relatively short period of time it appeared the fire was contained and I, along with a number of people, thought that the fire was completely out. I went back to my room. I remember asking where my mother was (who all the children called, "Pet") and learned later that she was on the fourth floor where my father had a storage room. She was going through boxes of pictures that she wanted to preserve and not lose in the fire!

Shortly after, the big blaze started up again. Flames of the fire in the kitchen, which a number of people thought were contained, evidently crept up the inside walls of the building between the plaster and brick and literally exploded with a burst of flames. The flames had a field day in view of the fact that North Hall was an old building constructed, I believe, in 1889.

I hurriedly put on a pair of pants and went out on a slope of grass and watched the dormitory burn. Before leaving, I put some of my "valuable" coins in a box. The coins and the clothes on my back were my only possessions that survived the fire. It was tragic watching our home, with all its memories and possessions, go up in flames.

Our home in North Hall was on one side of the dormitory near the Main Building. During the course of the fire, flames also erupted in the tower of the Main Building, where administrative offices and classrooms were held. The fire in the Main Building was situated in the tower on the roof above the clock. As a boy, I

often could see the clock from my bedroom. Fortunately, the firemen were able to contain the fire in the Main Building. This particular fire in itself was another great concern.

My father, unfortunately, was not present when the fire occurred, but was in Pittsburgh on business. As soon as he was notified, he obtained a police escort and drove quickly as soon as he could to Slippery Rock. I am sure many speed laws were broken on this trip.

As I mentioned above, none of our family or the 167 college women who survived the fire had any possessions other than the clothes on their back. I had a "stocky" physical build at the time, and no clothes that Bard's (a clothing store in Slippery Rock) had in stock would fit me. I remember my father telling me that he called the Joseph Horne store in Pittsburgh and ordered trousers for me and had them placed on a bus and sent to Slippery Rock!

These are most vivid memories that I will never forget.

William B. Miller
02/16/09