

FIRE WAITS FOR ENGLISH LESSON

By John S. Halbert

Looking through a photo album recently, I came across some pictures of the school I had attended from the second through the eighth grades, back in my home town of Sheffield, Alabama. At the time of the pictures, the school was about to be torn down-to be replaced with a new, up-to-date building.

That would date the photos as having been taken in late-1967, and depicted a solidly-handsome, three-story brick-and-stone structure with the year "1918" in two-foot high stone-carved numerals over the main entrance.

The building had been a high school, a junior high school, and was ending its days by schooling elementary kids. In the forty-nine years of its existence, a whole lot of learning had taken place in there.

Originally built as "Sheffield High School" in the year carved in stone on its front exterior, it served as the town's high school until the spring of 1937, when a fire gutted the structure just before the end of the school term.

Those who remember the occasion say that when the fire bell rang, one English teacher, who was obviously a stickler for classroom procedure, insisted on completing the main point of her lesson, even though the building was on fire! And so they stayed, students and teacher while smoke curled around them. Then, just in time, all dashed for the exit. Fortunately, everyone escaped, but the 1918 structure was left with only the solid-masonry exterior and interior walls still standing.

Some of those same people---who were now quite along in years as they told me the story some years ago---could still recall the trials and tribulations of the Tuscumbia Fire Department and its efforts to get to the scene of the blaze. In those days, the fire department of the city of Tuscumbia, next door to Sheffield, consisted of an antiquated fire truck with no muffler. In case of fire, anybody who happened to be around jumped aboard and rode it to the blaze of the moment. When the Sheffield High School fire broke out, there was the usual scramble to board the machine. This time, however, the combined weight of the zealous volunteer firefighters proved too much for the venerable pumper, and about a block short of its blazing destination it wheezed to a halt, unable to go any farther.

Happily, the Tuscumbia Fire Department has come along way since those days, and now operates the latest firefighting equipment.

When the gutted building was rebuilt as the town's junior high school, the large auditorium that had reputedly been the biggest in the area at the time was left off, and instead they substituted a smaller auditorium. A new high school of "Art-Deco" design was constructed a few blocks away, and with constant improvements along the way, is still going strong, today.

The Atlanta Avenue School, along with the 1923 "Annapolis Avenue School" behind it, formed a complex with instruction ranging from the first through the eighth grades.

In 1960, the town built a new junior high school on the high bluff overlooking the Tennessee River, and they tore down the Annapolis Avenue building. The veteran Atlanta Avenue School building carried on alone for a few more years as an elementary school.

The successor to the Atlanta Avenue School---a modern concrete-and-glass structure---was erected behind the old building and is still in use today. Taking advantage of the latest advances that now include computers and the like, it is, of course, a great improvement over the old building, but I always thought it never quite matched the charm and history wrapped up in the old Atlanta Avenue School.

Today, those dignified dark-red bricks and carved stonework likely repose at the bottom of some nameless landfill, probably still in perfectly usable condition. Today, if they could be located, as "restoration" materials they would likely command a small fortune.