

# TRIAL BY FIRE

Thirty years ago, in the early morning hours of March 27, 1975, fire broke out in Pacific University's main administration and classroom building, shocking a campus already struggling for survival.

*By Steve Dodge*

*I see a bad moon arising,  
I see trouble on the way,  
I see earthquakes and lightning,  
I see bad times today.*

– “Bad Moon Rising”  
John Fogerty, Creedence Clearwater Revival



According to the U.S. Naval Observatory, at 3:36 a.m. March 27, 1975, a full moon spread its silvery glow over Forest Grove. Approximately 30 minutes later, an attorney taking his son to an early morning gathering at Forest Grove High School, reported seeing 15-foot high flames streaming out of a first floor window of the Marsh Hall administration building at Pacific University.

Other records show the early morning hours of that Thursday were icy cold and dry, hovering in the upper 20s. But in the first floor Registrar’s Office about midway on the east side of the building, it was getting hotter by the second. It was the third major fire on campus in five years, but this one threatened the very existence of the University.

### CAMPUS ICON

Some 82 years earlier, on a considerably warmer and cheerier day in June 1893, ground breaking for Marsh Hall took place. According to *Splendid Audacity*, the University’s official history by Gary Miranda and the late Rick Read, the project involved an extraordinary fund-raising effort which began with \$15,000 pledged by Dr. D.K. Pearsons of Chicago (later upped to a \$50,000 matching gift), a national search for funds during the Depression of 1893, and a pledge of \$4,000 by the students of the University – all 22 of them.

The campus and Forest Grove’s finest turned out to watch Joseph and Eliza Marsh, brother and widow of Pacific’s first president Sidney Harper Marsh, the building’s namesake, ceremonially turn over the soil. Two years later, in May 1895, the building was occupied, though it was officially dedicated later that year on Sept. 27.

Over the years, particularly as Pacific’s other stately buildings (see sidebar) fell victim to fire, Marsh Hall became the most prominent building on campus. Its castle-like, heavy stone and brick construction, complete with round bell tower, was deliberately reminiscent

LEFT: Marsh Hall, Pacific’s 1890s signature building, burns in the early morning hours of March 27, 1975. Photo courtesy of Forest Grove City and Rural Fire and Rescue. RIGHT: A devastated Brighton Chapel. The chapel space was replaced by the smaller Taylor Auditorium and administrative offices. Photo courtesy of University Archives.



of Eastern colleges. Marsh's ivy-covered walls housed vital functions, including all admissions and student records, several faculty offices and the president's office. Original oil paintings and castings of Greek Classical art, the latter on loan from the Portland Art Museum, graced walls and corridors. The basement housed a print shop and a bowling alley.

In the center of the building, dominating much of the second and third floors, was Brighton Chapel, a towering space with two-story high windows, ornate woodwork, and art. The chapel was used for numerous campus events, religious services, even a speech by famed orator William Jennings Bryan.

By 1975, though, the 80-year-old Victorian-era building was showing its age. Dark, drafty rooms, rickety stairs, and bare light bulbs contributed to an atmosphere described by one faculty member as "Dickensian."



Sociology Professor Byron Steiger's office was destroyed in the fire.

two years of work, were in his office on the second floor. So were all of his notes and most of his books, with crucial passages painstakingly marked. So Steiger, a newly hired sociology professor, did what most people would do: he got dressed and went to watch.

Meanwhile, in another part of town, an alarm box awakened volunteer Forest Grove Fireman Robert Mills. "When I

left the house I could see the glow in the sky, so I knew there was a pretty good size fire going," he said.

Mills, now the chief of the Forest Grove City and Rural Fire and Rescue Department, said the fire escalated quickly. When he arrived, some crews were already on the scene. Even that early on, the stone and brick exterior of the building was so hot it was spitting bits of rock and moisture at the firefighters, a phenomenon known as spalling.

Three more alarms were soon added to the first, each one calling for more firefighters and equipment. Some 100 firemen from seven local fire departments responded and poured an estimated one million gallons of water into the building. Thanks to a partial sprinkler system installed six years earlier, and quick action by fire officials, the fire was contained in less than two hours. No one was killed in the blaze, though several firefighters came close when a portion of the roof collapsed.

There was more good news: firefighters had tried to knock down the outer walls with their hoses as one strategy to contain the flames, but the sturdy old building refused to tumble, leaving the shell mostly intact. But, as the sun rose on a gloomy gray spring morning, Pacific's signature building was otherwise in ruins.

### THAT SINKING FEELING

As he watched Marsh Hall burn, Steiger said he remembers musing that this must be what the pilots of crashing planes feel like.

"I was more calm than I could have been. You sort of just sit there and cry on the inside. There's nothing you can do." At one point he could see a portion of the second floor collapse, the part where his office had been.

Other faculty members report similar experiences. "As I got to campus I realized that water was flowing in all directions from Marsh Hall," recalled history Professor Emeritus Marshall Lee. "There was fire equipment everywhere for blocks

## A legacy of fire

As I watch the construction of the new library, I cannot help thinking about all of the beautiful buildings that the campus community has gained and lost over the years.

In its more than 150 years of history, Pacific University has experienced its share of fire, including the relatively small fire in Walter Hall in 1967, and the completely destructive fires that took both Herrick Halls in 1906 and 1973.

The fire that gutted Marsh Hall in 1975 was the last in a long line of campus fires that shaped the Pacific University campus.

The first Herrick Hall, built in 1881, burned to the ground on a cold March day in 1906. The fire originated from sparks from a chimney fire. Most of the occupants were in church and came running with the sound of the alarm. Since the fire started on the roof, most of the contents were safely removed. Fire departments from Forest Grove and Hillsboro worked together to save the other buildings on campus. As if foreshadowing what was to come, a burning umbrella from Herrick blew into the Marsh Hall basement and ignited the wood stove. Luckily, it was discovered and extinguished.

According to *The Index*, students doused the roofs of the other buildings with water which quickly turned into sheets of ice as it was thrown on the shingles. Some people on campus felt that the structure could have been saved if overzealous workers on the first floor had not torn out the doors and windows, causing a draft to sweep through the building. Its replacement, the second Herrick Hall, would later suffer a similar fate.

On Oct. 26, 1910, the Academy Building, twin of Old College Hall, also caught fire and was destroyed. The fire was thought to have been caused by a faulty furnace. As at the Herrick Hall fire, students put out any fires that started on the moss on the campus oaks. According to *The Index*, when students heard the alarm, they rushed into the



Academy Hall, the twin of Old College Hall, perished in 1910.

Academy building's first floor and saved books and band instruments.

Not all campus fires have resulted in total loss. In November 1967, the residents of Walter Hall were treated to an early morning wake up call. Fire had broken out in the boiler room. According to *The Index*, the fire resulted in lots of smoke and not much more. The cause was not known and thankfully there was little damage.

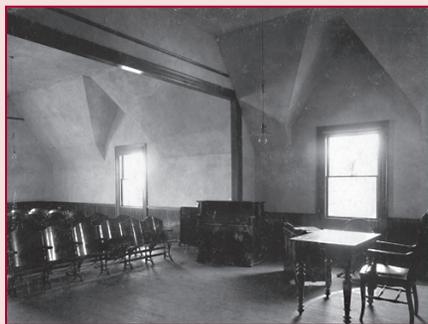
Some fires at Pacific were more traditional than destructive. The Rook homecoming bonfire was an event of pride among the freshmen class. Students went to homes and businesses in the surrounding towns gathering fuel for the fire – tires, wood palettes, and other flammable material. The bonfire built by the class of 1971 hit a school record of 78 feet.

The 1970s proved to be a difficult decade for Pacific's buildings. On June 18, 1970, the University lost the newly-acquired Lincoln Junior High School to fire. Considered a loss, the remaining structure was torn down. The second Herrick Hall, rebuilt in 1907 after a major fundraising effort, succumbed to the same fate as its predecessor on Jan. 2, 1973. One third of the building, vacant at the time, was destroyed. There was significant evidence that pointed towards arson.

In 1975, 75 percent of Marsh Hall was gutted by fire. Through a major fundraising event that brought the community together, Marsh Hall was returned to its original splendor.

*By Jennifer Utter '00 of the Pacific University Archives*

Photos courtesy of University Archives and Forest Grove Fire and Rescue.



A Marsh Hall classroom before the fire.



Lincoln School ablaze, 1970

around campus, all pumping water through a maze of hoses in the direction of the fire." As he watched from tennis courts where the Physical Therapy building now stands, he could see the glow of the fire through his office window on the northeast side.

"The central part of the building had already perished and it appeared my office and that of Professor Joe Frazier would be next. As luck would have it, however, the firemen stopped the fire just as it had burned a small hole into my office from the adjoining offices of the political science department." Until Lee's retirement in 2000 he had file cabinets that showed the burn marks from the hole in the wall that had delayed the fire from spreading more quickly into his office.

On the day of the fire, Roberta "Bobbi" Nickels '70, now the director of the University's Upward Bound program, was awakened in her home nearby by the commotion. "I got dressed and walked to campus to check my office. When I arrived at Pacific it seemed like all of Forest Grove was there, encircling the building as it burned. It was scary, and I remember feeling very sad."

Sadness and shock were two of the leading emotions of the day, according to most accounts. Scott Pike '68, O.D. '70, who was teaching on campus, said he watched the fire wondering how the school would survive. "There was a real sense of 'what are we going to do now?'"

The Washington County *News-Times*, in its April 7, 1975 edition, noted that some in the crowd were crying: "Jane Walker, director of placement, grieved that just as the university seemed to be on an upward curve of confidence and hope this tragedy had to strike. Then a moment later, she smiled through her tears and said perhaps what seemed to be a tragedy would result in everyone pulling together."

## AFTERMATH

According to the *News-Times*, "Moments after the fire recall was sounded at 6:53 a.m., faculty members, staff and students

## Forest Grove in flames

Fire has not only haunted Pacific University, but the City of Forest Grove and the Forest Grove Congregationalist church (Now United Church of Christ) as well. The church's earliest records were destroyed when the Thomas Naylor house burned in September 1852.

The church's first building, built in 1859, was destroyed by arson on July 13, 1901. Then on July 20, 1919, fire broke out in downtown Forest Grove and again destroyed the Congregationalist Church, the city library, and more than a dozen businesses and homes.

Over the years, the church and University have swapped space in times of need. Church services were often held in Pacific's Brighton Chapel. When the chapel and the rest of Marsh Hall burned in 1975, offices and equipment from the University were temporarily housed in the church adjacent to campus.

pitched in to carry out furniture, equipment, books and priceless records."

The campus reaction to the fire "was one of Pacific's finest hours," said physics Professor Emeritus Tom Griffith. "The entire campus community pitched in to help clean up the mess, salvage colleagues' books and other office effects, and make relocation plans for those displaced."

When chemistry Professor Jim Currie arrived on campus that morning, the flames had been doused and the clean up begun.

"My initial reaction was a combination of disbelief and the thought 'how could we possibly survive this loss?' It was a devastating blow to the school, absorbing this kind of loss. It was not like we were going to close because of it, but (we wondered) how we would cope?"

Art Professor Jan Shield remembered coming upon a chaotic scene that morning. "I got here at 8 and it was just crazy. (Marsh) was still smoldering – they had pumped tons of water into the building."

To Shield's horror, among the considerable debris were oil paintings and the Greek castings. "Somebody had taken everything out of the building that they could get their hands on. . . . Some



Art Professor Jan Shield with remnants of Marsh Hall art salvaged from the fire.

had been taken off the wall; others had been on stands. It was just a total mess.”

Shield and several art students hauled what was left of the Greek art to the art department and cleaned them up. The castings remained there for some time before being returned to the Portland Art Museum. Other art wasn’t so lucky. Much was destroyed by fire, smoke, and water.

### OPERATION SALVAGE

Alice Davis Hoskins ’56, one of several in the Pacific community who live near campus, also heard the early morning sirens and came to watch. When it was over, Dean of Students Charles Trombley was on the scene, organizing people, she recalled. President James Miller was out of town and had not yet been reached. In his absence deans, vice presidents, and faculty members directed the search for records and materials that had survived the inferno.

Fairly early on it was clear the University had been very lucky. Except for papers left out on desks, most records had made it through at least partially intact. File cabinets and a large walk-in vault, still in use in Marsh Hall, had preserved most key microfiche and paper records. However, noted retired registrar Gloria Wulf, many of the paper records outside the vault were singed or soaked and had to be dried on the veranda of the University Center.

Hoskins, who at the time ran the print shop from the basement of Marsh and later served as alumni director and assistant to the president, was intent on seeing what could be saved from her department.

“The basement that morning had water up to here,” she said, gesturing to her knees. “I had the summer school program on my desk and wanted to go in there to see if I could get it.” Hoskins was told, “You’ll need hip waders for that.” So she went home and got her husband’s fishing waders and proceeded to go down into the basement. With the help of several students and others on the scene, the printing press and paper that had not been soaked or burned was hauled out and set up in the basement of Walter Hall.

Similarly, other functions which had been in Marsh were dispersed: the business office and president’s office to the nearby United Church of Christ, admissions to Old College Hall, the registrar to the Washburne student center. Marsh Hall faculty members set up temporary offices in empty Walter Hall third floor dorm rooms. Some administrative functions were moved to rented trailers placed between Marsh and the present-day science building.

Despite the conflagration, only morning classes were missed that day, at least officially. In reality, many students and faculty were busy helping haul debris out of the building.

However, recalled H. Joe Story, economics professor emeritus, “There were a few of us who would never cancel a class under any condition. I had a nine o’clock class. I took my students and found a room and taught.”

### THE DISSERTATION

Others on campus that morning, particularly faculty members who had offices in Marsh Hall, sifted through the ruins for anything that might have survived. Without a doubt, the most anxious among them was Steiger.

As Lee tells it: “My most vivid memory of the fire and its aftermath is of our hunt for Byron’s dissertation. Once the building cooled enough to let us in, Byron and several of us spent hours searching in the swampy ruins of the basement, trying to find what remained of faculty members’ possessions.

“There were plenty of charred books and other effects, but the chief concern was to locate even the partial remains

of Byron’s dissertation. . . . At last, to everyone’s joy and Byron’s eternal relief, we came across one salvageable copy. Our elation more than made up for our completely ruined clothes and shoes.”

Nearly all of Steiger’s books and notes had been destroyed. But in a metal filing cabinet

that had papers so tightly packed that not even much oxygen could get in, one rough, slightly singed draft of his dissertation survived.

### Strangers in the night

Marshall Lee, history professor emeritus, has this remembrance from the Marsh Hall fire: “As daylight came, something strange appeared: earthworm prospectors. Amid the chaos and the water a handful of purposeful, determined people stooped and scratched. It was not immediately apparent what they were up to, until a passing fireman commented that at a large fire the heat and the water always drove the worms to the surface and that fire crews were always having to contend with the earthworm diggers who turned up to cash in. Altogether a surreal scene.”

## WHAT'S NEXT?

When President James Miller returned to Forest Grove late that day, he must have wondered what could happen next. Arsonists had torched Lincoln School, which had just been purchased as a possible music or science building, in June 1970 and Herrick Hall in January 1973. The University had been running deficits for several years and was reeling from declining enrollment and the 1970s recession. According to Story, there had been serious talk in the years before the fire of turning the school over to the state for \$1 or closing it altogether.

Miller, now 84 and living in Washington, said he and the Board of Trustees discussed a range of options in the fire's aftermath, including closure. The first order of business, though, was to simply carry on.

That wouldn't be easy. According to Kathie Thornton '75, an assistant to Miller at the time, "I remember going into the president's office and being astounded at the amount of smoke damage that had been done." The president's books and an old flag on the wall were covered in a layer of black film. Nearby, Thornton found her typewriter "melted into an almost unrecognizable lump on the top of my desk."

"Marsh Hall was an unusable, dismal hulk after the fire with roof caved in and all its timbers burned to stubs or badly charred," Miller recalled. "The stairways ended in rubble at the second floor. The center main floor was also scorched with the east central office spaces burned into the flooring."

However, on the positive side, fire inspectors soon ruled out arson. The official state fire report lists the probable cause of ignition as a "hot water pipe" and the initial material ignited as "a cedar block through which hot water pipe passed, tightly fitted." The fire appears to have started in a void below a partition on the first floor of the building in the present day Registrar's Office. Such spontaneous combustion is not uncommon, according to Forest Grove Fire Marshal Dave Nemeier.

There was other good news. According to several people associated with the University then and now, the fire brought an already close faculty group closer and galvanized the rest of the campus community. As the *News-Times* noted, "There is more esprit d' corps on the campus today than there has been in years."

Political science Professor Emeritus Russ Dondero, who lost \$5,000 worth of books as well as rugs, photos, and other personal items, said, "The response was never we can't do it, but how can we do it. The kind of spirit everyone took was 'we can make it through this tragedy.' The spirit of the college existed before the fire, but it increased after it."

## GREASING THE WHEELS

Part of that survival, it turned out, was tied to rebuilding what the *News-Times* called "the heart and soul" of campus. Almost as soon as engineers determined that the shell of the building was sound, Miller, and virtually everyone else from the alumni to the City of Forest Grove, advocated rebuilding.

"The decision to rebuild Marsh Hall was made by the Board of Trustees following much discussion," Miller said. "I argued for the rebuilding instead of leveling the burned hulk and building a smaller, less rugged structure, or of closing Pacific as a university. Marsh Hall had been a focal point of the institution and any such symbol of relationships of place and people is needed."

There was only one problem: money. According to Story, the faculty representative on the Board's rebuilding committee, Marsh Hall was insured, but the insurance wasn't enough to cover a modern rebuild and the various code upgrades required by law.

However, the campus community rallied around the project, much as it had in the 1890s. Story said nearly every faculty member made a contribution, most a two-year pledge. Alumni stepped up with the first \$2,000 and added more later. The student body, which had raised the final dollars in 1893 to make the

building possible, contributed thousands of dollars. Clubs such as the Concerned Black Students and Na Haumana 'O Hawai'i, led the way. Staff did their part, including an almost continual bake sale by the clerical staff.

Story recalls many meetings with Miller and the Board through the spring and into the summer of 1975. Discussions of closing the University quickly gave way to sticking it out with a new Marsh Hall. "The Board really stood up to this challenge," said Story.

One of the first board members to "step up" and the lead donor for the project was a no-nonsense businesswoman named Lucy Taylor. According to Story, Taylor had a fondness for thin, cigar-like cigarettes, which she smoked at board meetings to the chagrin of the non-smoking board chairman. But, no one objected when she put up \$50,000 at her first meeting and challenged other members to do the same.

Daughter Gail Taylor-Meade '70 and her husband Leon Meade '70, who were instrumental in the building of the modern performing arts complex that bears their name, said Taylor was a hard-charging real estate salesperson who had been very successful in Southern California. She also took over her late husband's seat on the WD-40 lubricant

## "Dirty books"

Paper that did not burn in the Marsh Hall fire was soaked, singed, or reeked of charcoal. Some University Relations donor records from 1975 or before have burned edges, as do some old grade reports now kept in the Registrar's fire vault.

Many admissions and other student records, which were soaked but not destroyed in the fire, were dried on the sunny veranda of the Washburne University Center, according to retired Registrar Gloria Wulf, who also saved several square nails from the original 1893 building.

Faculty members tell of books that smelled of fire for years afterward. In an attempt to dry and air out what was left of his books, political science Professor Emeritus Russ Dondero erected a tent in his back yard and left his books there all summer. When visitors would come, Dondero's young son would say: "Want to see Dad's dirty books?"

company's board and helped build it into a household name. "So," said Story, "you could say this institution is built in part on WD-40 money."

## A BUILDING REBORN

With \$660,000 in insurance money in hand and architects Martin Soderstrom Matteson of Portland on board for the rebuilding, the University set out to raise the balance needed for the \$1.5 million project. Key gifts came from the Collins Foundation, the Forest Grove National Bank, and the Autzen Foundation.

On Sept. 4, 1975, construction began on the new roof. The board and architects chose copper, though much more expensive than the original cedar shake roof, it was more architecturally correct and imminently more durable and fireproof.

"They were determined to rebuild the hall in a quality way, to have it historically correct, to put the outside of the building together like it had been," said Story.

The emphasis on quality work extended to the inside too, although it was decided it would be far too expensive to try to restore the building to its original Victorian authenticity. With architect Will Martin leading the way, master Scandinavian carpenters were brought in to craft the California oak stair railings, the oak accents and window frames seen throughout the building. The project included new electrical, phone, and plumbing systems, as well as a complete fire sprinkler system. An elevator was added, as were several new restrooms to supplement the one that had existed before. A new, smaller auditorium, named for Lucy Taylor, replaced the old chapel. And, the steam heat system at the heart of the fire was replaced by a modern forced-air system.

## MOVING IN AND UP

The rebuilding was, of course, not without its problems and controversies. The project took a year longer than originally planned. The move in was gradual as funds allowed. Board minutes note a meeting in the building as early as March

1977. Some sections were still incomplete and awaiting funds as school opened in early September. A faculty revolt over the original cubicle-based open design resulted in more private, professorial offices added to the plans. And, many on campus objected to the purple elevator (see sidebar below) and matching carpet on the first floor.

Still, by most accounts, the official rededication on Oct. 1, 1977, was a glorious day. While financial struggles did not dissipate with the reopening of the "heart" of campus, the University instituted new fiscal controls and had the momentum to soon after renovate Old College Hall, build a new science building, and improve the grounds. The experience with fire not only prompted full protection for Marsh, but sprinkler systems for Old College and McCormick Halls.

"The reconstruction of Marsh Hall

was a wonderful accomplishment," said Lee. "Many of the workers openly remarked that they took an extra sense of pride in working on this project, since they were sure that they would never again have the chance to practice their craft on such a lovely building and such a loving restoration."

Looking back, President Miller felt the deficits were as devastating as the fire, but recalled the Marsh rebuilding with fondness: "One benefactor who directed many thousands of dollars to Pacific once told me, 'I stop by the campus every once in a while, get a maple bar (they are always good) and a cup of coffee. I watch the students a while. Then I walk into Marsh Hall. It's almost like a holy place. I know there's lots of work going on, but in that place I find I'm refreshed.'"

*For more Marsh Hall fire anecdotes and information visit [www.pacificu.edu](http://www.pacificu.edu).*



## Legend of the purple doors

Among the positive outcomes of the Marsh Hall fire of 1975 were added restrooms, new carpet throughout the building, and the addition of an elevator running from the basement to the third floor.

However, according to sociology Professor Byron Steiger, when the campus got a look at the first floor carpet and matching purple elevator doors, there was, you might say, a strong reaction. The carpet color was changed but somehow the purple doors never were. The color was a signature color of rebuilding architect the late Will Martin, who went on to design Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland, famous, or infamous depending on perspective, for its purple tiled fountain.

Other Martin touches include visible ceiling ductwork in Marsh and the Murdock Science Building and the finely-crafted oak stairs and trim throughout Marsh Hall.

"He was very proud of Marsh Hall," said former colleague Candace Robertson, now a principal of Robertson, Merryman, Barnes architects. So much so, that on subsequent projects Martin pointed to the oak work as a standard on how such work should be done.



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