

The Samaritan Hospital Fire

By Will Hohm 2020

I have previously related that nephews of Dr. John Tschetter lived and worked at the Samaritan Hospital (The historic Campbell House) while attending high school and college. This is my personal story as it relates to the fire and its effect on my life.

Kenneth Tschetter, a second cousin, and I lived on the third floor at the hospital in 1943 when the fire occurred. There were several other rooms on the third floor which were occupied by nurses.

It was late evening and Ken and I were downtown for an ice cream treat when we heard fire trucks with sirens screaming heading south. As we were walking back to the hospital, we suddenly realized that the trucks were at the site of the hospital! The shock of it is still vivid in my memory. I could pick out the spot within 5 feet where we were standing and watching the firemen work to put out the 3rd floor blaze that was coming through the roof near our room. The blaze was extinguished and that was the end of the Samaritan Hospital at that site. The cause of the fire was thought to be an electrical malfunction.

An elderly nurse perished in the fire. When the alarms sounded, the nurses on the 3rd floor all came out of their rooms. The elderly nurse told the others to leave and said she wanted to retrieve something from her room. That was the last heard from her. She died of smoke inhalation.

Ken and I found our lives greatly disrupted. We were part of the relocation crew to the new hospital site. The hospital was moved to the building that is now the Welter Funeral Home and then to an apartment building on the east side of the street several blocks north of the Campbell House site.

In hindsight, that was the beginning of a downward trajectory in academics for me. That disruption coupled with missing school to help put in the crops in spring and harvest the corn in the fall caused academics to take a back seat. My father's broken leg made it necessary for me to drop out of high

school the second semester of my sophomore year. The confluence of those events resulted in my BARELY graduating from high school.

Ken was also in bad straits academically. He did not graduate from high school although he did get his GED. Ken became a successful Sioux Falls business man. He had Thermo King Refrigerated Truck Maintenance and Repair shops in Sioux Falls and Storm Lake, Iowa.

Ken and I remained close over the years. When I traveled to visit my parents in Huron, I often stopped in Sioux Falls for dinner with Ken and Shirley. Each year at Christmas until Ken died, Ken and Shirley sent us a delicious box of homemade candy. When Ken needed rectal surgery, he came to St. Charles; I operated on him and he stayed at our home for a week while he recovered.

One thing Ken and I NEVER talked about was the fire. I think it was too traumatic to even talk about. We both knew we were in quite a downspin during high school. Did we feel overcome with guilt because the fire had started near our room and someone had died? I do not know. I do know that both of us turned our lives around and had full successful lives afterwards.