

36 Dead, 40 Injured In Oklahoma Fire 33 Years Ago This Christmas

The biggest Christmas party ever in the community was in progress at Babbs Switch's frame schoolhouse.

Almost everyone from the surrounding Oklahoma countryside crowded the building to capacity—about 150 men, women and children.

Entertainment, under the direction of a teacher had started at eight o'clock. A Christmas tree, trimmed with cotton and colored tinsel decorations and beautifully lighted with small wax candles, stood in a corner of the one-room school.

There had been some difficulty in decorating the tree. Earlier it had toppled over from its insecure base, but it was righted again, and fastened in the same way.

High point of the evening's festivities came when one of the men appeared as Santa Claus. Dressed in a cotton suit, trimmed with cotton and tinsel, and wearing cotton whiskers, he distributed candy and presents and laid other gifts on the floor around the tree. He then began to strip the tree of still more presents.

By then, it was about nine-thirty o'clock.

In reaching for a present near the top of the tree, Santa Claus pulled down a decorated branch. It brushed a candle flame and instantly caught fire. Jokingly, several persons told him to look out, he'd get burned.

Santa heard the warning. He picked up a small toy chair and threw it at the burning branch.

Instead of putting out the blaze, he knocked over a kerosene lamp on a near-by table. The lamp exploded!

Panic resulted. The crowd stampeded for the door.

Santa Claus tried to smother the flame with a coat. Then he grasped the cotton stage curtain. Anything to smother the flame.

In his excitement he knocked over the tree. In that instant his clothes caught fire.

Now fire reached the ceiling. It had been freshly painted. The fire flashed over the entire surface!

Twelve minutes after the fire started, the building collapsed.

Some of those who had escaped through the narrow doorway had tried to re-enter to rescue others. They met head on—completely blocking the exit.

On the outside, others tried unsuccessfully to pry the window screens from their fastenings.

Then the bodies were removed from the ruins of Babbs Switch School that Christmas Eve in 1924, they counted 33 dead. Three other persons died later. In all 18 children, 18 adults.

The teacher was among them. Santa, too. Forty others were injured or burned.

Thus, Babbs' Switch biggest Christmas party became one of the most tragic.

Yet from the tragedy many lessons were learned. The National Board of Fire Underwriters points out.

The schoolhouse had two doors, with only one in use. That door opened inward—against the direction of travel. The other led to a coal bin, added after construction of the building. The seven windows, in effect were barred. Each floor crowd had packed the aisles fastened in each corner with a bolt running through the casement and secured with a nut inside. Wire staples fastened the screens to the window frames.

The building itself—20 feet by 36 feet—was too small to hold the assembled crowd. Desks and additional chairs had provided seating space for about 100. The overflow crowd had packed the aisles and all available floor space.

Other facts, such as lighting by oil lamp, the insecure Christmas tree with its flammable decorations and lighted candles, the freshly-painted ceiling, the absence of even so much as a bucket of water to extinguish a possible fire and Santa Claus' clumsy attempts to do so, all further contributed to that large-scale disaster.

But out of that disaster came many improvements. For that fire had underlined the need for fire safety precautions in all places of assembly. It had served as a grim notice that special precautions are needed during the Christmas season if Babbs Switch never is to

Keep Christmas Religious Holiday

Now it is again the season of the year that we call Christmas, the most joyful and most universally celebrated of all our holidays.

The observance of Christmas may differ among nations and peoples which stretch from the lands of snow and ice to the sunny Southern hemisphere, but in every corner of the world the true meaning of the holiday is ever the same.

As our world has changed through the centuries since the first Christmas, so have we taken the customs of Christmas and adjusted them to our changing environment. The origin of many of these customs have been lost in the passing of time to the extent that today many burn candles in the window and adorn firesides and homes with holly and mistletoe without a passing thought as to why we use candles rather than kerosene lamps and holly or mistletoe in preference to other winter greenery. It is custom, and we believe in following customs, in one fashion or another.

Customs have their place in the scheme of things, so let us keep them and, if need be, give them new meanings of our own. Yet, with it all, let us remember that customs and traditions are only a part of the observance of Christmas. We do not keep the Christmas merely because we observe the customs.

Let us keep Christmas in our hearts. Let us remember that it is a religious holiday, a time of joy and peace and faith and hope. More particularly, it is time to be humbly grateful for mankind's greatest birthright—the hope of eternal salvation. Such was God's gift to the world that night at Bethlehem.

With the spirit of Christmas in our hearts we shall find deep and significant meanings in the customs and traditions we associate with this great holiday.

Real progress will be made in safeguarding life and protecting property, says the National Board of Fire Underwriters, if precautions are taken to minimize the danger of fire and to provide for safety in case fire occurs.

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