

“A Week of Great Sadness” The BOQ Fire of 1949

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Sam K. Viersen Jr. Presidential Professor

photos courtesy OU Western History Collections
and *The Daily Oklahoman*



One of the few student residents of the flaming BOQ to escape the fire with an armload of belongings staggers away from the burning men's dormitory.

Exactly 50 years ago this past December, a great tragedy occurred on the University of Oklahoma's South Base. During World War II, when the Navy occupied the grounds, it constructed a dormitory called the Bachelor Officers Quarters. When the war ended and the University inherited the base, that building was converted into a dormitory for male students, one of the extraordinary measures taken to accommodate the flood of students, many of them under the GI Bill, who invaded the campus to take up new opportunities. Sometime after 2:30 a.m. on December 3, 1949, the building—five wings housing 349 young men—burst into flames.

December 5, 1949

All the eyewitnesses agree that the fire spread with devastating speed. Shouts aroused the residents, and in minutes the scene turned chaotic. There was practically no time to get out—some grabbed a few belongings, but most fled into the winter night with nothing but their pajamas. In order to save themselves, many had to leap out their windows.

Of course there were casualties: some were badly burned, others broke arms, legs or ankles jumping to safety, 20 required hospitalization, two of them in critical condition. And when it was all over, three young men had not made it out. Two of the dead were quickly identified as Maurice Ahearn, a 26-year-old engineering junior from Connecticut, and Sammy LaRue, age 20, a fine arts junior from Clinton. The third body was burned beyond recognition.

President George L. Cross, who had been in Enid, hurried home. He found that Glenn Couch, his trusted assistant for student affairs, already had organized an efficient operation for handling the emergency; by noon Couch was handing out Red Cross checks, finding rooms and distributing clothing.

The most agonizing task for President Cross involved the third body. Frantic parents of missing students had gathered at the Cross home on Boyd Street. One by one, as their sons were accounted for, they left relieved and grateful. The last two were the parents of Price D. Starks, a 20-year-old sophomore in business administration. The fact that the Crosses knew the parents personally did not make things easier. At 4 p.m. Couch called to say that all of the missing had been accounted for except for young Starks.

Years later, Cross recalled that terrible moment: "I then realized that I must face up to the responsibility of telling the Starkses that there was no longer any doubt—that the unidentified dead boy certainly was their son. I think it may have been the most difficult responsibility that I faced during my nearly 25 years as president of the University. The Starkses accepted the news with remarkable composure. They may have begun to suspect the inevitable, as all the other waiting parents left the house. After sitting with us for a few quietly tearful moments, they too went on their way homeward. . . . It was a week of great sadness."

Somehow, during the next day, Cross found time to dictate a long letter to the parents of the boys who had lived at the BOQ, explaining to them, as clearly as he could, what had happened and what was being done. And somehow, he or Couch had rounded up enough typists to send individually tailored letters to more than 300 sets of parents. This was a monumental task in the days when each letter had to be individually prepared.

The first document printed below is Cross' letter to the parents. Before long, the responses from some of the parents began to arrive. Some of those are printed here as well. They are, under the circumstances, generous in their understanding, dignified, poignant and extremely touching—and none more so than the two from the parents of Sammy LaRue and Price Starks.

Mr. and Mrs. Pete Adams
1003 East Thirty-Seventh Street
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Adams:

I want to give you a direct report on the University of Oklahoma dormitory fire since your son, George Adams, is one of the 349 men students who were living in the building or its annex this semester.

First let me say that your son has been assigned a room in Residential Halls, a permanent masonry building on the main campus, where he may continue to live for the remainder of this school year....

The fire started shortly before 3 a.m. Saturday. A University watchman in a patrol car drove close to the building about 2:30 a.m. and saw no evidence of fire at that time. Boys who discovered the fire used two of the fire hoses maintained in the building for such emergencies, but were unable to get the blaze under control. Fire fighting equipment from the fire station maintained on the South Campus by the University arrived quickly but could not save the building.

The entire University community is shocked and grieved that three occupants of the building lost their lives in the fire. One student apparently failed to awaken, in spite of the ringing of the fire alarm bell in the building, the shouted cries of "fire" and the heroic efforts of many students to see that all were awakened. Two others were known to be awake, but apparently were overcome by smoke or heat.

Cleveland County officials conducted a four-hour hearing the day after the fire in an effort to determine the cause. Some fifty students and University staff members contributed all available information. The coroner's jury returned a verdict finding that the origin of the fire was unknown, and also that there was no evidence of negligence on the part of anyone.

Thanks to quick and generous aid from the Red Cross, government agencies, student organizations and hundreds of interested persons, the students' emergency needs for clothing and personal necessities were promptly met. Girls living in Hester and Robertson Houses (women's dormitories) vacated their homes on a few hours' notice and doubled up in rooms in the Women's Quadrangle, thus providing good housing for the men from the BOQ.

It appears today (Monday) that in addition to the substantial immediate assistance being given by the Red Cross, sufficient cash contributions will be raised from numerous sources to insure that not a single one of the boys from the burned dormitory need drop out of school for financial reasons.

I sincerely hope that if there is any special need for your

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son that is not taken care of promptly, you will immediately notify me.

Sincerely,
G. L. Cross
President

Dec. 5, 1949

Dear Sir:

As your records will show, our son, Wallace Laughlin was rooming in the B.O.Q. when it burned. He lost everything he had, getting out in only his pajamas. We realize that this was the plight of practically all of the young men who were staying there, and we are very thankful that Wallace got out without injury.

However, much against our will, we find that it is necessary that we withdraw him from school because of financial reasons. We simply cannot see our way clear to re-outfit him completely and keep him in O.U. You see we have other children in college and this just makes it impossible for us to continue sending him away. He has already made arrangements with the Arkansas City Junior College to pursue the same courses he was taking at O.U. . . . providing your institution would send his grades he has made so far during the semester in the various subjects he was taking. If you will do this, it will enable him to stay at home and finish out the semester in those courses. He will then endeavor to secure work and work through the second semester of this year....

Very truly yours,
Charles H. Laughlin,
Chiloco, Oklahoma

8th Dec. 1949.

Dear Dr. Cross

The following is an excerpt from a letter I received from my son yesterday.

"Things have settled down now, more or less, and are all under control. I have made a lot of comments, mostly derogatory, about the University Administration, the Red Cross, and the American Legion. I am now shamed into rescinding all that denunciation, and throw them all a posy. I have never seen things so well organized in an emergency. . . . We are all being well taken care of, so don't worry. How . . . can a person be cynical, when every one responds in the . . . manner in which they have. None of my friends were injured, . . . and everything is strictly O.K."

I am very thankful that George was uninjured, and am very sorry for the parents of the boys who were not so fortunate; and I know you also are.

Yours sincerely,
(Mrs. Geo. H.) Ann A. Clulow
1229 S. Rockford,
Tulsa, Oklahoma

December 9, 1949

Dear Doctor Cross:

. . . . I am one of the fortunate mothers whose son did not suffer the perils of experiencing the actual fire. In addition to being most thankful that Bill was spared this ordeal, I am deeply grateful that the results of this tragedy were minimized materially by the intelligent organized assistance which was given our boys and this in no small measure was due to your outstanding leadership and humanitarian ideals which inspired confidence in all good people to respond so generously to the needs of these students.

Thank you again for your sincere interest in the welfare of my son and all other Oklahoma University students.

Respectfully yours,
Lois N. Bowles
1106 N.W. 12th Street
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

December 9, 1949

Dear Dr. Cross:

. . . . It was splendid of you to take the time and personal interest. We are very grateful for every assistance which has been rendered to our son, Tommy, by the University, Red Cross, and others.

We join with all in deepest sympathy to the parents of the boys who lost their lives or were injured. We are so very thankful that our loss is negligible compared with that of some of the parents.

Cordially yours,
J. H. "Tarz" Marsh

December 9, 1949

Dear Dr. Cross:

We received your letter telling us of the fire and deeply appreciate your concern. From all that we have heard and read and especially from Ewell Jr's letters we learned that the people of the University and of Norman were as swift and unlimited in their generosity as the fire was in its destruction. We want to express to all of you our heartfelt gratitude and thanks for the beautiful way that you came to the aide of our son and many others who were less fortunate than he.

With our best wishes for a Happy Christmas, we are,

Sincerely,
Ewell and Ethel Martin



An injured survivor of the BOQ fire returns by daylight to examine the smoldering remains of the massive, five-wing frame dormitory that housed 349 Sooner men.

[Note: letter undated, envelope postmarked December 10]

Dear Sir;

We wish to thank you very much for writing about Clifford. We heard of the fire but not until we received the telegram from Clifford did we realize his danger. Then when no mail has been forthcoming we thought surely something was wrong and with your letter you can understand how relieved we were.

So with sincere thanks we hope everything will turn out all right

Thank you
Mr and Mrs Jos. Kiley
159 Maple Street
Fall River, Massachusetts

lula, O.K. 12.8.49

Dear Mr Cross

I Received your letter in regard to J.W. fortner my grand son. I was glad you were mind full of him. I will say I think he will make it o.k. Sure thank you for Riting me.

Yours truly
J M Brooks

Dec. 12, 1949

Dear Sir:

. . . . It was indeed re-assuring to know that Russell selected an efficient University to study; and I am sure he cannot fail after the interest shown to all students in Norman.

Russell to me has been not only a son, but a pal and therefor I wonder if he realizes the interest I have in his well being and success. I do miss him and wish he would write more often. I have to wonderful children, a daughter too, two years younger that Russell. Both have been excellent and obedient children. I'm very proud of that fact.

Again thanking you for interest, and with best wishes for your continued, and the members of your faculty and school, I remain

Sincerely
Kenneth C. Buckingham
392 Prospect St.
Bridgeport 4, Connecticut

December 12, 1949

Dear Mr. Cross:

. . . . It is indeed gratifying to know that most everyone survived the disaster, nevertheless, a terrible thing to realize that the three boys lost their lives. . . .

I am particularly thankful that he is comfortably housed in

12/9-49

Dear Mr Cross.

Mrs Plank and I want to thank you very kindly for the report of the disaster of the fire at the campus where our son Ned had quarters.

We are very glad he escaped injure to his body. His personal belonging can partly be replaced

The \$75.00 watch his dec[e]ased wife had given him is [a] loss [that] can not be replaced.

Thank you very much for your help and int[e]rest in our son Ned. May God Bless you in your work at the University.

Lovingly
Mr [&] Mrs Perry E. Plank
Harper, Kansas

Treasures from the Archives

the home of Dr. Gustav Mueller and shall also write and thank him for his kindness.

I do not think there is any special need for my son, he will take care of himself, I believe.

Again thanking you for your letter and hoping that you will never again go through with a disaster that this one was, I am,

Sincerely yours,
Richard S. Redmond
7823 East Highway 80
El Paso, Texas

12 December 1949

Dear Dr. Cross:-

... Naturally, our first thoughts go to the parents of those students who lost their lives. It is only fitting to invoke God's consolation for those in need. We pray that He may lighten their burden.

Our reaction to your report of the fire and the measures taken to house and comfort the boys adequately brings to us a sense of relief and confidence in the responsibility of those who are guiding the affairs of the University of Oklahoma. . . .

Surely, it is a good feeling to learn, in the light of disaster that many hands are lifted quickly to help those in need. We are grateful to you, the Red Cross, government agencies and students for such material response. Our confidence and good will is assured.

Sincerely,
M. B. Egar
2753 Post Street
Jacksonville 5, Florida

December 16, 1949

Mr. T. P. Starks
428 Northwest 21st Street
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Dear Mr. Starks:

Enclosed is check in the amount of \$67.00 constituting a refund of a credit balance in the room and board account of your son, Price D. Starks.

Price had paid the University \$6.00 to reserve a copy of the 1950 Sooner Yearbook. We can either refund this amount or can deliver the 1950 Yearbook to you when it is issued next spring. I find that Price had not had his photograph made for the yearbook and therefore his picture will not be in it. Under the circumstances, you may not care to receive the yearbook.

I hope that time is beginning to ease your burden of grief a little.

Sincerely,
Roscoe Cate
Financial Vice-President

“Our reaction to your report of the fire and the measures taken to house and comfort the boys adequately brings to us a sense of relief and confidence in the responsibility of those who are guiding the affairs of the University of Oklahoma. . . .”

[Note: This letter was undated, but received on December 23]

Gentlemen:

Thank you for the refund of \$67.00 on board and room account of my son Price D. Starks.

I would appreciate it if you would refund the amount Price paid on the Year Book.

Mrs. Starks and I are deeply appreciative of the many wonderful and sympathetic letters we have received from the University personnel.

Sincerely,
T. P. Starks

[Note: This is a translation of a letter originally in Spanish]

Dec. 16, 1949

My estimable Dr. Cross:

We appreciate very much your letter of the 5th of December concerning the fire in the B.O.Q. We are also appreciative of the work of the Red Cross, as well as all of the charitable people who took an interest in the victims. We regret very much the loss of human lives, for which no one can be blamed because such things will happen. Please let me know what expenses were incurred for our son Isaias Eidelman and to whom we have to return it and we'll do it at the first opportunity. We also take this opportunity to offer you our services, if needed.

We again wish to thank you for your help and interest shown our son.

We are

Sincerely yours
The Eidelman family

Cordial greetings to Mrs. Cross.

January 12, 1950

The Eidelman Family
Box 3102
Panama, R[epublic of].P[anama].

Dear Friends:

... Since the Red Cross acted independently of the University we are not able to tell whether or not the Red Cross assisted your son. Therefore, I am unable to give you any

information about that. At this time, however, the University has not given your son any funds from the donations which came in from people all over the country, so you do not owe the fund anything. Your son probably did borrow some books from the University Book Exchange, which are loaned to him until the end of this semester. He understands that he is to return them at that time.

It was very kind of you to make this offer, and we want you to know that we greatly appreciate it.

Cordially yours,
G. L. Cross
President

December 16, 1949

Dear Sir:

Perhaps I should have written earlier to give your office the information concerning my son, James H. Dunlap who received injuries in the B.O.Q. fire of December 3, 1949.

In jumping from the second floor, James sustained a crushed vertebra, a broken right heel and a fractured bone in his left wrist. We removed him from the University Hospital at Norman to St. Johns Hospital in Tulsa on December 3rd. His back was set and placed in a cast this week. His right leg and foot, and his left arm are also in casts. Dr. John E. McDonald, who is caring for him, indicates that he will not be able to return to University work before early in April. . . .

Yours very truly,
Hughey E. Dunlap
2435 East 25th Place
Tulsa, Oklahoma

December 17, 1949
Re: Kiyoshi Takasaki

Dear Mr. Cross,

We thank you for taking such interest in the welfare of the men students who were left homeless as result of the fire recently. We make reference to the kindness shown to our son who was a victim of the fire but who was fortunately a safe student. Your letter of December 5 on the fire makes us feel at ease.

If it is possible will you extend our thanks and appreciation to the Red Cross, government agencies, student organizations, the girls in Hester and Robertson Houses, for their most generous and substantial assistance to our son, Kiyoshi.

Kiyoshi writes that he is amply taken care of and we do not believe that there is any special need for him just now.

Thank you again, Mr. Cross, and we wish you a very MERRY CHRISTMAS and a HAPPY NEW YEAR.

Sincerely yours,
Mrs. Tome Takasaki
1083 So. Berentania St.
Honolulu, Hawaii

Clinton, Okla.
Dec. 27, 1949

Dear Mr. Cross.

Some time ago I heard something on the radio that the parents of the boys who lost their belongings in the fire, could collect a percent of the loss if they carried a paid up fire insurance policy. I was so shocked and grieved at the time that I didn't think of it any more. . . .

Sammy had so many classical record albums, music, a \$160 trombone, and his new tuxedo besides all his clothing and other things. We would appreciate it very much if you could inform us on this matter.

Sincerely yours
Mr & Mrs Sam LaRue
R. 3. Clinton, Okla.

December 28, 1949

Dear Dr. Cross:

. . . . Our son Glenn was not hurt physically. We have asked him since he came home, if the fire preyed on his mind. He said it hadn't at all. We believe the most outstanding impressions he retains of the whole disaster are the generous acts of the folks who came to the boys' assistance. He was greatly impressed by everybody wanting to do something for them. Clerks in the stores gave them things; taxi drivers gave them free rides; folks sent clothes, razors and other personal items.

Sincerely yours
G. L. Buck
P.O. Box 85
Gulfport, Mississippi

December 29, 1949

Dear Dr. Cross:

My son, Richard, was in the fire there at Norman and while he suffered several hundred dollars loss of personal effects, we find that it was entirely covered by insurance. Even had it not been so insured we would not want to accept a contribution from the Red Cross since there are those who really need it. Dick did receive the enclosed order for clothing which he wants to return to the Red Cross for cancellation. He does not know the representative there at Norman and asks that you see that it gets into the proper hands.

We are very thankful that Dick came out safely and are deeply sorry for those who lost so much.

Sincerely yours,
Ross Warner
1409 Philtower Building
Tulsa 3, Oklahoma

[SOURCE: George Lynn Cross Presidential Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Box 60, Folders #2 and #3]