



A Nightmare Remembered

It was a nightmare that none who were there would ever forget—the University of Oklahoma campus’ greatest tragedy. In the early morning hours of December 3, 1949, the massive, frame, men’s dormitory—the converted Navy Bachelor Officers Quarters—the BOQ—burst into flame. Within minutes, all five wings of the two-story, south campus structure were engulfed, many of its 349 residents leaping from windows and ledges to the ground below.

Three of the young men failed to make it out of the inferno. Others suffered burns, broken bones and injuries ranging from minor to critical. Nearly all who escaped did so with only what they wore, though a few managed to throw out armfuls of belongings as they exited the windows.

In the midst of this chaotic scene, a *Daily Oklahoman* photographer snapped the signature image of the disaster, a shoeless student, arms loaded with salvaged possessions, against a background of the raging flames. That photo has been reprinted for more than half a century, every time the BOQ fire is recalled. No one thought to get the young man’s name.

Then in February 2004, Robert M. Wynne, of Midland, Texas, called *Sooner Magazine* to update his address, mentioning casually that a friend had shown him an old issue containing the now-famous picture that he never knew existed. “I’m the fellow in the photograph,” Wynne said.

Wynne responded to a request for an account of that night with a moving letter that is now on file with the photograph in the OU Western History Collections.

A Texas junior college transfer, Bob Wynne arrived at OU in fall 1949 and checked into a second-floor room in the BOQ, a room he had to himself when his roommate transferred. Next door, through a connecting bath, was Don Hadwiger, from Alva, and a fellow whose name Wynne has forgotten.

After studying for a physics exam,



OU Western History Collections

The now-identified Bob Wynne, still wearing the new suit he saved from the blazing BOQ, was captured by a *Daily Oklahoman* photographer in the tragedy’s most memorable picture.

Wynne fell asleep about 1:30 p.m., awakened a short time later by shouts and the popping of exploding light bulbs. Already his door was burning.

“I went through the adjoining bathroom to check on my neighbors, who were both still in bed asleep,” Wynne recalls. “After waking the nearest person, I ran back to my room. Ignoring the fact that my billfold, watch, class ring and money were on the desk near the door, I went to my closet and grabbed my new blue suit. As I headed to the window, I realized there was no movement in Don’s room. Don was still asleep, but his roommate apparently had panicked and ran out of the room down the burning hall. I was told later that he was severely burned.”

Not fully awake, Hadwiger tried to get his accordion from the closet next to a burning wall before Wynne pulled him through the bathroom and out the window onto a fire escape ledge. “Don and I only had our underwear on, and I was carrying my blue suit.”

Wynne and Hadwiger banged on win-

dows and yelled into rooms as they made their way along the ledge to the end the building, then jumped to safety. “The photograph was taken of me while I was trying to help move clothes, bedding, etc., to the parking lot area to be retrieved later by the rightful owners,” Wynne explains. “You may notice from the photograph I am wearing a suit, no shirt or shoes, and possibly socks.

“We were advised to go to Hester Hall, where the girls had moved out and they were going to assign us rooms. I was absolutely amazed. They had opened up the dining room for us, and it was full of food. The Red Cross provided me with \$250-\$350 for immediate use. That money and help from OU was the only way I was able to finish the semester.

“Needless to say, that night was the most memorable experience of my college career. It was many years before I felt comfortable spending the night in a motel or hotel above the second floor. Even to this day, the first thing I check out is the fire escape.” —CJB