



## Cut off from the rest of the world...

### FRIGHTENING INCIDENT LEFT PART OF HAYMARKET'S BUSINESS DISTRICT IN ASHES

by John T. Toler

On the afternoon of Sept. 1, 1945, the Town of Haymarket suffered what is likely the second most destructive fire in its history. Two important structures in the center of town – the U.S. Post Office and the building housing the Tri-County Telephone Co. and the Western Union offices – burned to the ground. While this was happening, Haymarket was cut off from the rest of the world.

At the time, Manassas attorney Stanley Owens owned the local telephone company and both of the structures that were lost, as well as the nearby Haymarket Bank building.

According to a report in the Sept. 6, 1945 edition of *The Fauquier Democrat*, "Considerable delay in getting firefighting apparatus to Haymarket was caused by the fact that the telephone exchange, housed in the building where the fire originated, was immediately paralyzed.

"It was necessary to drive to The Plains to call the Warrenton fire department, and to Manassas to summon the fire department from that town. Both buildings were practically a total loss when the firemen from those towns arrived on the scene."

Also lost in the fire were two apartments in the telephone exchange building. Clyde Pearson (c. 1910-1963) and his wife, Ella (1907-1992) and their three children occupied the upstairs apartment, and the downstairs unit was rented to a Mrs. Foley. Clyde Pearson was a housepainter, while both Ella Pearson and Mrs. Foley worked at the telephone exchange as switchboard operators.

The Pearsons moved to Haymarket from Kalarama, their long-time family home about one mile east of The Plains, in 1942.

Also known as "Beulah," c. 1837 Kalarama was the home of Ella Pearson's mother, Mrs. Mary Margaret Lunceford (1864-1966), who had moved there a few years after the death of her husband, Henry Franklin Lunceford (1850-1930).

Kalarama was owned by Dorothy L. W. Archibald (1898-1977), the widow of Teller Archibald (1879-1936), who lived nearby at Archwood Farm. The rent was \$6 per month, and Mrs. Lunceford's stepsons also provided labor for the farm.

All of Clyde and Ella's children were born at Kalarama: Betty Jane (better known simply as "Jane," born in 1937), Lee Shirley (born in 1938) and William Nelson (1942-1984).

Although she was very young when the family moved from Kalarama, Jane remembers the house well. "It was so

*Kalarama, a large old house east of The Plains, was the family home of Clyde and Ella Pearson. All three of their children were born there. The Pearsons moved to Haymarket in 1942.*

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big that we would take tricycles and ride from the upstairs all the way through there," she recalled. "I loved that house. It was so big and interesting. Years later, we wanted to go back and see it, but it had burned," in March 1985.

Arriving in Haymarket, the Pearsons stayed briefly at Burnside, north of town, which was owned by a relative, Irvin "Bud" Creel at the time. Soon afterward, they rented the upstairs apartment in the telephone exchange building.

The children attended the nearby Haymarket Elementary School. Jane recalls that when she was in Mrs. Helen Clark's first grade class, there were four girls named "Betty." In order to avoid confusion, only Betty Jarman got to keep "Betty;" the other three girls were called by their middle names – in her case, "Jane."

Visiting their grandmother back at Kalarama was no problem for the Pearson children. A Trailways bus ran between Haymarket and The Plains every day, and they could ride for 15 cents.

The telephone exchange building was an interesting place to work, and live. Jane recalls that the switchboard operators knew everyone on the party lines, and often went beyond the call of duty to help out.

A typical example was when legendary Haymarket citizen Brownie Bass was on her way to the beauty parlor or shopping, she would stop by the

telephone exchange and inform Mrs. Pearson or whoever was on duty that she wouldn't be home for a while, and to tell any callers to try later. Long before answering machines were invented, the message was personally handled.

## THE BIG FIRE OF '45

On the afternoon of Sept. 1, 1945, Mrs. Foley came in to the office to start her shift. "She went into the break room to make coffee in a percolator on the stove, and somehow it fell over or blew over, and set the house on fire," recalled Jane. "It was a frame house, so it didn't take much for it to go up. I was there when it happened, but I don't remember the smoke and flames... maybe I just blanked it out.

"My mother had been to Melton's store, and brought in a bag of groceries. When she saw that the building was on fire, she grabbed her groceries and an alarm clock, and went out the door."

The hot fire spread across Washington Street to the Roland house, where some of the siding was burned.

"Our was father working in Falls Church that day, and on the way home he stopped at a gas station, where he heard about the big fire in Haymarket," said Jane. "But he didn't know that it was *his* house that had burned down until he got there."

At the time of the fire, Lee was with his grandmother at Kalarama, and became aware that something was burning east of the house. "We looked out the front door, and saw the smoke coming over the mountain," he recalled.

"We didn't know what it was until the next day, when they told us that our house had burned down."

Finally, the fire was put out, but both buildings were a total loss. "When I saw what was left of the house, it was just a tin roof on top of a pile of debris, only about two feet high," said Lee.

According to the report in *The Fauquier Democrat*, efforts to fight the fire were also hampered by a lack of water, but remarkably, no mail was lost when the post office building burned. "All telephone and telegraph service out of Haymarket was completely disrupted, with the exception of a telephone in the residence of Dr. Wade C. Payne, which was connected by the C&P Telephone Co. with The Plains, and furnished the only outside telephone communication with the town."

## AFTERMATH

The Pearsons spent the night of the fire in the house owned by Henry Utterback in Haymarket (also known as the Hulfish House, and today the location of The Very Thing for Her), before moving into an apartment on the second floor of the Haymarket bank building the next day.

According to Jane, they never entered the first floor of the old bank, but through the glass doors, they could see telephone equipment, wire and supplies stored there.

Access to the second floor was through a door at ground level on the west side of the building. It wasn't long before the telephone exchange was relocated to the bank building, and back in operation.

Jane recalls that the switchboards and related equipment were in the rooms at the front of the bank, and the apartment in the rear. Setting off the town siren, which was located on the roof of the building, was the duty of the switchboard operators – or by the Pearson children, if they were home.

"We blew the siren every day at noon," Jane recalled. "And if there was a fire in town, it was blown one time, or if it was out-of-town, it was blown two times. We would fight over who got to blow the siren every day."

*This photograph, taken around 1910, shows the building (at far right) that was later used as the Haymarket telephone exchange. Partially visible at the extreme right is the east wall of what was once the Haymarket post office.*





Jane Pearson Brown and her brother Lee Pearson share a moment in front of the Old Bank Building in Haymarket, where they lived from 1945 to 1948.

Lee remembers that his father planted a vegetable garden in the narrow space between the west side of the bank building and the street, where large bushes now grow. "He would raise tomatoes that were so big that one slice would fill a sandwich," recalled Lee. "Whatever we didn't eat, he gave away or sold to the store."

Both Jane and Lee agree that it was ironic that the Haymarket Firehouse was built on the site of the lost telephone exchange the following year.

In 1948, Mr. and Mrs. Pearson bought the old Tyler house on Jefferson Street above the railroad tracks from W.S. Melton. It was purchased "on time" for \$1,000, with payments set at \$20 a month. Jane still has a collection of receipts for the mortgage. The Tyler house has the distinction of being one of the three structures in Haymarket that wasn't burned by Union troops in Nov. 1862.

In the early 1950s, Mr. and Mrs. Pearson bought the unused Haymarket depot for \$100, with the requirement that it be removed from its site along the railroad tracks.

"My Dad and I took our tools and tore it down, and we used the materials to build another house on Fayette Street," noted Lee. "We used the big beams, the rafters, the flooring... even though it was a cinderblock house, it had a lot of wood from the depot in it." What wasn't used in the construction was cut up for firewood.

Completed in 1955, the house was veneered with stone, and is known by the family as "the stone house." Once the work was completed, Clyde and Ella and their children moved into the stone house, and Mrs. Lunceford moved from Kalarama to the Tyler house, where she lived until her death in 1966.

Both the Tyler house and the stone house are still owned by the family, and

are currently rented out. Lee notes that Jimmy O'Brien, a tenant who occupies one of the basement apartments, has lived there since 1968. "He started renting the placed from our Mom!" said Lee.

Ella Pearson was active in Haymarket affairs, and served a term on the town council. She also acquired other properties in the town, which she rented. "If it had a door, she could make a rental unit out of it!" said Jane.

After completing seventh grade at Haymarket Elementary School, the Pearson children made the long bus ride to Osbourn High School in Manassas. "There wasn't a thing on Sudley Road back then, just a farm or two," recalled Jane.

After graduating in the 1950s, Jane joined her mother working for the U.S. Army at Vint Hill Farms Station. In 1958, she and Mosby Jackson "Jack" Brown were married at the Haymarket Baptist Church, and had their wedding reception at St. Paul's Parish Hall. The newlyweds moved to Fairfax, where Jane started a 37-year career working for the U.S. Government.

After retiring, Jack and Jane Brown returned to the area, and for the past nine-and-a-half years have lived in a new house built at Vint Hill. Today, Jane works part-time at the Long & Foster Real Estate office in Gainesville.

Lee's first job after high school was as a "blaster," planting dynamite charges for two construction companies. He later served on active duty in the U.S. Air Force, and in the Air Force Reserve.

He returned to Prince William County after his military duty, and set up a car rental business in Triangle, and began a successful career as a real estate investor in Prince William County, Fredericksburg and Suffolk. For the past 35 years, he has lived on Park Avenue in Manassas.



In 1955, the Pearsons built "the stone house" on Fayette Street, using materials salvaged from the old Haymarket depot. Visible behind the house is the old Tyler house, the first property the Pearsons owned after moving to Haymarket.



Author John Toler is a writer and historian and has served Fauquier County for over 50 years, including 4 decades with the Fauquier-Times Democrat. He has written and lectured about many legendary characters in Fauquier County's history. Toler is the co-author of 250 Years in Fauquier County: A Virginia Story, and author of Warrenton, Virginia: A History of 200 Years.