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1914 fire destroys college building

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

A little over 103 years ago, Arkadelphia's Southern Standard newspaper's front-page headlines screamed, "College Building Destroyed by Fire."

Sadly, Henderson-Brown College's largest structure had burned.

The February 5, 1914, issue of the newspaper observed that "One of the most destructive fires with which our city was ever visited occurred early Tuesday morning when Henderson-Brown College was almost entirely consumed by the angry flames."

On that fateful day, building superintendent James Garrett discovered a small fire in the college's kitchen as he made his morning rounds at about 5:30 a.m. It is believed that had Garrett had a water supply or any assistance at the time of his initial discovery, the building

could have been saved.

But, the flames spread quickly, going out of control. Garrett immediately sounded an alarm, and everyone in the building made it out safely. And, much of the furniture was removed as well. Students finally arrived with a water hose and were able to save the Key Hall annex.

The origin of the fire remained uncertain, although "Mrs. Johns, the college matron" speculated that "it started in the storeroom next to the kitchen, and that it must have been started from defective wiring or from matches lighted by the rats." Insurance in the amount of \$40,000 was carried on the structure.

Even as the fire raged, school officials made the decision to continue the current session. Arrangements were made for the students displaced by the fire. Girls moved in with local citizens. Boys stayed at the Caddo Hotel until other accommodations could be made.

At a gathering at the Methodist church, citizens contributed \$2,000 for to help with the school's immediate expenses. School administrators and supporters vowed to construct a new and even "more magnificent" building where the damaged one stood.

Even with plans for the continuation of classes and a positive outlook to the future, the Southern Standard stated: "Yet to those old friends and graduates and former students of the college, it was a sad, sad day when the ravishing fire swept away in an hour the building which had stood there for twenty-four years, and where had been the scene of their joys and ambitions."

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230.1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245.5332).

