

Josephinum: The Fire This Time

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But around 5:15 p.m. a private plane, following the Olentangy River north, spotted the smoke. The pilot radioed Don Scott Airfield. The airfield called the local fire department. The fire department called the Josephinum. The alert was on. All signals were go. Someone pulled the alarm.

Students poured out of the buildings for another humdrum fire drill. But this time they heard real sirens. Suddenly the shouting spread. *The woods*

speakers, water.

"Where's the fire, chief?"

He pointed, and the line of students snaked through the tall grass. "Hurry before they put it out. There's a flame. Keep away from it. I saw it first." Womp.

The students outnumbered the firemen three to one. And since they too were volunteers and liked a little excitement now and then, they just kind of stood there with that *Students-please-We'd-rather-do-it-ourselves* look.

I took a mighty swing with my shovel to knock over a burning stump. The shovel twanged. The stump stood there spewing sparks. And my arm hurt all the way up to the flu shot we'd all gotten that afternoon. I kicked dirt

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John J. Fritscher (Jack Fritscher)

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Students poured out of the buildings for another humdrum fire drill. But this time they heard real sirens. Suddenly the shouting spread. *The woods are on fire! Take off your cassocks! Get shovels!* Well, I mean, that sounds like a raging inferno if anything does: trees with flames forty feet high, people gasping in the smoke, the moment of truth that wrenches out the last bit of heroism.

I wondered if I should bring my camera. Forget it. To the woods. Doors in the building were slamming; good clothes were being thrown on the floor; old clothes, pulled on. The theologians in the showers came down wet.

"Get a move on. Run. A truck will pick you up when it passes. Get shovels."

The shovels we got.

In the woods the firemen had loud speakers, water.

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The students outnumbered the firemen three to one. And since they too were volunteers and liked a little excitement now and then, they just kind of stood there with that Students- *please*-We'd-rather-do-it-ourselves look.

I took a mighty swing with my shovel to knock over a burning stump. The shovel twanged. The stump stood there spewing sparks. And my arm hurt all the way up to the flu shot we'd all gotten that afternoon. I kicked dirt at it more out of spite than safety and let it sit there in its own charcoal.

Over a ways one of the deacons was down on his hands and knees, blowing mightily on the embers.

"What are you *doing*?" one of the Fathers yelled.

"Uh. Lighting a cigarette?"

Sometime later in the evening the supper we'd missed at school arrived in a station wagon. "Look. The Red Cross."

"What we really need to make these sandwiches good is some singing and a nice fire."

Nearly everyone else rode back up to school on the rear of the fire trucks. They left us two tanks of water, some shovels, and sent us into the gutted area. "Help stamp out sparking."

"I can't see anything. Do you have the water? Here's some embers. Phil? Hey, Phil. Where are. you?"

"Oh, shut up. I'm down here. I fell down the gully."

"Hey. Hurry up. Get back up here. There's one blazing up way across. Come on."

We raced through the darkness, branches slapping us in the face, tripping over logs, breathing deep of the smoky damp air. "There it is. Hose it down."

Well, that was how the end began. The other stamping party didn't appreciate getting soaked along with their one red-rimmed flashlight, and they started squirting back.

It really happened this way. But I know it'll get back to the forty-foot flames by the time we write letters home next week. And really that will be mild. Because if you come back to a Josephinum reunion in about twenty years, you'll hear the alumni bragging about the really wild Forest Fire of '63.

I think I'll just save this clipping.

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