

The Fire that Destroyed the Solar System

by
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As I drove by the ruins of my alma mater, half a dozen dump trucks stood waiting to receive the rubble of the halls and classrooms in which I had spent three years of my life and which had served the educational needs of several thousand other high school students over a span of 38 years.

Unlike most of those students who probably never stepped foot inside the school after graduation, my ties to it have continued. Not only did my two younger sisters graduate from BHS, but also my daughter and son are BHS alumni. And my wife, Eloise, has taught there for the past 16 years. Even I taught some classes in my old school as a substitute teacher a few years ago.

And, of course, I feel a close involvement with the fire, since it was my wife who discovered the fire, which had its origin in the attic above her room. She lost many years of teaching materials and other things when the ceiling came crashing in just minutes after the room was evacuated. Many teachers, administrators, other school employees, and students lost many thousands of dollars of personal property in the fire.



East Wing of BHS Where Fire Began
February 14, 1989

I suffered a personal, private loss of sorts in the burning of the chemistry/physics room. It wasn't until three weeks after the fire that the thought popped into my head that my science project had gone up in smoke. For 33 years it had hung from the ceiling of that room educating students about the proportions of the solar system and the universe.

In Allan McCullough's class in 1956, I constructed scale models of the nine planets. Mercury wasn't much bigger than a marble, but Jupiter, Uranus, and Saturn, made of chicken wire, papier-mâché, and plaster of Paris, approached the size of volleyballs or basketballs and were rather weighty globes.

Not only were the planets to scale but also the distances between the planets were measured out to scale. On the wall at the back of the room was a little-noticed card telling the students how far it was to the nearest star measured by that same scale.



McCullough says whenever he asked students how far away they thought the nearest star would be, they would guess it might be a couple of classrooms away or perhaps in the middle of "E" Street in front of the High School. Occasionally a student would risk a reckless guess that it was as far away as the Post Office Building. They were always amazed that the scale of the project placed the nearest star in Huntington.

McCullough, finding the project instructive (or being too lazy to climb up and take it down), left it hanging in his room until he retired three years ago. And his successor, Laura Miller, had not gotten around to getting rid of it either.

So the planets, suspended from their single wires above the students' heads, hung there year after year. That is, most of them remained suspended. McCullough tells the story of Jupiter's fate. It seems my science project one day served the unintended purpose of a physics demonstration of the power of gravity. Jupiter, positioned as it was in front of a heat vent, rotated back and forth on its wire until by 1962 metal fatigue took its toll and the biggest of the planets, to the utter shock of teacher and students, fell from the sky and shattered

between the feet of a chemistry student.

After watching a dump truck rumble off carrying the remains of my high school, I drove on saddened by the sight but retaining many memories, including a simple science project created so many years ago.

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