

Appendix B

An Old Flame: The Baker High School Fire Case

On February 18, 1967, Baker High School burned down from around 3:30 to 7:00 p.m. The fire was reported at 3:15 p.m. by Bertha Hutchison. The fire department arrived five minutes later. The wind was blowing northwest. According to reports, it started near the stage in the rafters above the gym, which was on the south side, and spread to the rest of the high school in 30 minutes. The firefighters could not access the fire at first because it was in the rafters and was out of control. The fire alarm was also delayed, so the fire went unnoticed until a flame was seen.

At the time, the fire department consisted of 30 members. The fire department was plagued with mechanical difficulties. Members were in charge of maintaining the trucks. Three trucks were dispatched to the fire. Two of the newer trucks had a faulty governor. The engines started running too fast and pumping water faster than hydrants could supply, causing the water pumps to fail. Those two trucks were then deemed unusable, and the older truck was the only one that could be drawn from. They used a “wall of water” to stop the fire from going to nearby buildings. The nearby Vo-Ag building had roof damage but was not significantly burned. The storage building was not affected by the fire. No one was injured. During the fire, the bell at the top of the bell tower became red hot and suddenly dropped. The bell is now located at the front of the current high school. The school was heated by a natural gas boiler in the basement and there were two chimneys.

The science research class set the case in 1970 as the statute of limitations for arson did not extend to 2021. The fire was assumed to be an accident, but according to the fictitious case

written by the students, new evidence opened up the case to further investigation. Four suspects were developed for the case:

1. Roger Charles, a recent high school dropout and known troublemaker, now a mechanic and electrician's assistant
2. Betty Richards, a home economics teacher who worked in the building
3. Gerald Harding, the janitor for the high school who had worked there for several decades
4. Peter James, a local volunteer firefighter that helped put out the fire

The science research class began building the case by interviewing a local rancher who had served on the fire crew at the time and helped fight the fire. Students met with him at the O'Fallon Historical Museum where he shared artifacts, sketched out a blueprint of the school, explained photographs, and showed students the actual fire truck that was used on the fire. Students used the old truck to develop their case and later plant evidence. He also shared that there was a bathroom next to the boiler room. He would sometimes play cards with his friends in the boiler room and one of them would keep watch for teachers or administrators in the bathroom to warn the other students. This story was also built into the case. Melissa Rost, the museum curator, also showed students old photographs of the inside and outside of the school, and of the building burning. She had a brick from the building showing char marks and other artifacts. She even had photos of the fire trucks and firemen used.

Though the cause of the fire is unknown, students developed a narrative around two possible locations: the electrical box and the boiler in the basement. They wrote the case to provide evidence for both. For evidence, they included ink chromatography, detailed blueprints, a high school yearbook from 1967, photographs, journal entries, school and county records,

rosters from the actual fire crew, suspect and witness statements, and a 911 call reporting the fire. After the chemistry class compiled their evidence, they presented their case to Hoversland's government class and recommended that "Gerald Harding" be tried for committing arson.

The case opened because Barbara Harding (Gerald's ex-wife) found a journal claiming that Roger Charles, a dropout student since 1967 and known troublemaker, placed him at the scene before the fire started and incriminated him. This was actually Gerald's attempt to cover himself in case they found out it was arson. He thought everything was fine because it had been three years. They opened the case to investigate.

According to the students' narrative, Gerald was the one who caused the fire. The fire started in the electrical box near the gym. He short wired the electrical box to cause a spark when the boiler kicked on. He knew that if he started it there, it would be trapped in the trusses above the gym. He also tampered with the fire alarm so that it would not go off, and students found his fingerprints on it. The delayed alarm caused the fire to burn more. However, he wanted to frame Roger by leading investigators to the boiler and not the electrical box.

Peter James was friends with Gerald and saw him as a father figure. Gerald gave instructions to Peter to tamper with the governor on the fire engines, though Peter thought he was fixing them. Gerald did this so that the firefighters would not be able to put the fire out. The governors on two engines took off, unchecked, and the flow of water could not keep up. This ruined the pumps and the two newer engines were out of commission. Gerald also had Peter tamper with the third engine, an older one, which had Peter's fingerprints, but it was a different model and the engine didn't run as fast. Peter was an unknowing accessory. Betty Richards, of course, had nothing to do with the fire. Roger was a troublemaker, but overall a good kid and had nothing to do with the fire.

Gerald's motive was that he was tired of students like Roger Charles vandalizing the school and everything being in disrepair. He was grouchy and disgruntled, and was the only custodian cleaning and providing maintenance. He was mad at the school, mad that no one was disciplining students for running amok and vandalizing the school, and wanted to prove a point.

Hoversland's senior government classes were tasked with the trial of the case. The juror class spent their week preparing for the trial by watching the movie "12 Angry Men" to understand what takes place in the jury room, and learning about the responsibilities and purpose of jury duty. Both the prosecution and the defense classes spent part of the week learning about the steps of a trial and pre-trial motions. The Montana Code Annotated is available online and certain students were tasked with finding the correct code to prosecute someone for arson, the subpoena documents to subpoena each witness, and the jury instructions that the judge would need to read to the jury before deliberations. The prosecution class was responsible for proving beyond a reasonable doubt that Gerald Harding was guilty. The burden of proof resting with the prosecution made for a much more difficult and tedious development of the case. The prosecution had to make sure they could disprove every theory the defense may have weaved. It required the students to presuppose the defense's arguments and use the evidence and statements to discredit the theory. The defense class was representing Gerald Harding. Much of the evidence was circumstantial against the defendant Harding, so the defense team had a plethora of ways to poke holes in the prosecution's case.

Both the prosecution and defense attorneys spent the week developing their line of questioning and determining which evidence they would be entering as exhibits. They also had to prepare both opening and closing statements as that is the only time each side is allowed to directly talk to the jury and weave the narrative of what "actually" happened. On the day of the

trial, students went to our local county courthouse to put their trial skills to the test. After each side had finished closing arguments, it was time for the jury to deliberate.

The jury room was a tenuous place of discussion, as it should be. The students played devil's advocate with one another and really took their roles as jurors seriously. They held several preliminary votes, debated the evidence, read the jury instructions, and finally reached a unanimous decision of guilty. Following the guilty verdict, students went over to the O'Fallon Historical Museum for snacks and treats, a photo booth, to look at artifacts from the fire, and to tour the museum.

Figure 1. Meeting with Carl Hepperle, one of the firefighters who fought the Baker High School fire, and the science research class to learn more about the event, floor plan, and possible causes. Meeting was held at the O’Fallon Historical Museum. Curator Melissa Rost gathered artifacts and facilitated the meeting.



Figure 2. Fallon County Times article about the Baker High School fire.

Split Shift Sessions Will be Shared By 5th, 6th and Junior High Students

The business ends and shift sessions started back to school in the Baker High school yesterday, Feb. 22 starting with the junior high students.

Alfred Kalland Gets Promotion



Alfred Kalland has been promoted to director of education of the Fallon County School District. He was born in Sweden and is a graduate of the University of Montana.

SOUNDING OFF

Baker has lost one of its oldest landmarks with the burning of the Longfellow School last Saturday and with a heavy academic program has been to the surface.

Many evinced a jump in the air when they heard the news and fell and lower tumbled through the rising flames to the basement.

The fire itself was one of the most spectacular that ever have ever occurred in Baker and was watched by a large number of the town's people.

We realize this fact is not complete but to name some we include the following: Mrs. J. C. Braggeman, Mark Braggeman, Ray Grew, Tom and Dick Throckmold, Mrs. Quincey Stedman, Mrs. Adeline Irvine, Les Malone, Mrs. C. E. Hadden, Mrs. E. E. Kinnear, Mrs. Knapp, Mrs. M. J. and Mrs. W. J. Kinnear.

School Completely Destroyed By Fire Saturday Afternoon



Fire department and the rooming house had to be replaced by an other lot.

Firemen had decided from their first examination of the building that there was no chance of saving the Longfellow School. This was the opinion of the fire department.

The fire started in the granary and while a very short time had elapsed to the main building, the fire had spread to the main building.

"It Is Finished"



The fire is subsiding as this picture was taken at 8:30 p. m. and night will be falling. It is finished. The two chimneys are standing but the south side of the building is gone.

Services Held Feb. 18 For Gus Crawford

Funeral services for Gus Crawford, 62, Baker, Mont., were held at the Methodist church, Baker, Mont., on Saturday, Feb. 18, 1931.

Just a Memory



The late picture of the Longfellow school was shown to us early Monday by Mrs. Martin Gumperson, who said it brought the fire back.

City Election April 3rd

The election will be held on April 3rd, 1931. The candidates for city clerk are J. C. Braggeman and Mark Braggeman.

OPEN LETTER TO COMMUNITY

With the loss of the Longfellow School the students and citizens of Baker to suffer have an immediate remedy, a school where women are educated by competent students and teachers from 1913 to 1915.

Fire Destroys Trailer Home

The trailer home of Mrs. J. C. Braggeman was destroyed by fire on Saturday, Feb. 20, 1931.

Carter County 4-H Show Mar. 5

The Carter county 4-H show will be held on Saturday, March 5, 1931, at the school building in Carter county.

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Figure 3. Fire report of Baker High School fire obtained from the Baker Fire Department.

2-18-67

Date ~~5-12-66~~ Time 3:30 Alarm by { Phone A.D.T. _____
Box No. _____ Radio _____
Verbal _____

Companies Responded, Co. No. and Type 2 Pumpers
Time Arrived 3:35 PM Time Dismissed 7:20 PM
Hours of Service 3:45 Miles Traveled 2
Kind of Building or Property School Longfellow
Street Address or Location 5. 1st. St. N.
Owner Baker School Dist. 12
Occupied by School
Purpose Used for School Spread to Other Buildings: Yes _____ or No No
Part of Building Where Fire Started in attic above stage
Cause unknown

Extinguished by { B-Booster 4 No. of Hydrants Used 2
C-Chemicals _____ Hours Pumper Worked 2
E-Extinguisher _____ No. of Lines Used 2
F-Fog _____ Size and No. of Ladders Used 2-24ft
H-Hydrant Streams _____ Gallons of Chemicals Used 1
P-Pumper 3
S-Sprinklers _____

INSURANCE RECORD

Buildings	Contents
Estimated Value 50,000.00	Estimated Value ?
Insurance Carried 35,000.00	Insurance Carried 20,000.00
Estimated Loss _____	Estimated Loss _____
Insurance Paid _____	Insurance Paid _____

SPECIAL NOTES No. 102 alarm cause of loss

Signed W.A. Officer in Charge

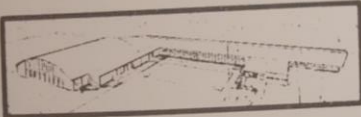
Form No. 146—Cairns & Bro., Clifton, N. J.

Figure 4. A brick from the Baker High School after it had burned. Burn marks are evident. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



Figure 5. Student-generated report card of Roger Charles, one of the suspects. The blank report card was obtained from old files in the Baker High School office.

BAKER HIGH SCHOOL



Report of
Roger J. Charles
12 GRADE

FOR THE SCHOOL YEAR 1964 to 1965

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR GUARDIAN

1. Lue Charles

2. Lue Charles

3. _____

4. _____

TO PARENT OR GUARDIAN
Reports are sent out at the end of each nine weeks period. See that your children bring them to you. Please examine, sign and return the next day.

EXPLANATION OF MARKS

A equals 95 to 100
B equals 90 to 94
C equals 81 to 89
D equals 70 to 80
F below 70

	1st Sem	2nd Sem	3rd Sem	4th Sem
DAYS BELONGING	45	45	90	
DAYS PRESENT	30	28	58	
DAYS ABSENT	15	17	32	
TIMES TARDY	24	29	53	
ENGLISH	C	D	D	
GENERAL MATH	F	F	F	
ALGEBRA	-	-	-	
GEOMETRY	-	-	-	
TRIGONOMETRY	-	-	-	
ADV. MATH	-	-	-	
CONS. ED.	-	-	-	
MONTANA HISTORY	-	-	-	
AMERICAN HISTORY	-	-	-	
WORLD HISTORY	-	-	-	
SOCIOLOGY	-	-	-	
PAD	D	D	D	
ACCOUNTING	-	-	-	
COMMUNICATIONS	-	-	-	
TYPING	-	-	-	
SHORTHAND	-	-	-	
OFFICE PRACTICES	-	-	-	
MARKETING	-	-	-	
CO-OP WORK EXPERIENCE	A	A	A	
PHYSICAL SCIENCE	-	-	-	
COMPUTERS	-	-	-	
BIOLOGY	-	-	-	
PHYSICS	-	-	-	
CHEMISTRY	-	-	-	
GERMAN	-	-	-	
SPANISH	-	-	-	
ART	-	-	-	
GENERAL SHOP	B	B	B	
VO. ED.	B	B	B	
HOMEMAKING	-	-	-	
VOCATIONAL AG.	-	-	-	
WOODWORK	-	-	-	
MECH. DRAWING	-	-	-	
CONSTRUCTION	-	-	-	
LIBRARY	-	-	-	
DRIVER'S TRAINING	-	-	-	
BAND	-	-	-	
CHOIR	-	-	-	
PIANO	-	-	-	
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	-	-	-	

Figure 6. Student-generated journal containing evidence from the janitor, a suspect in the case. Journal was obtained from the Baker High School office.

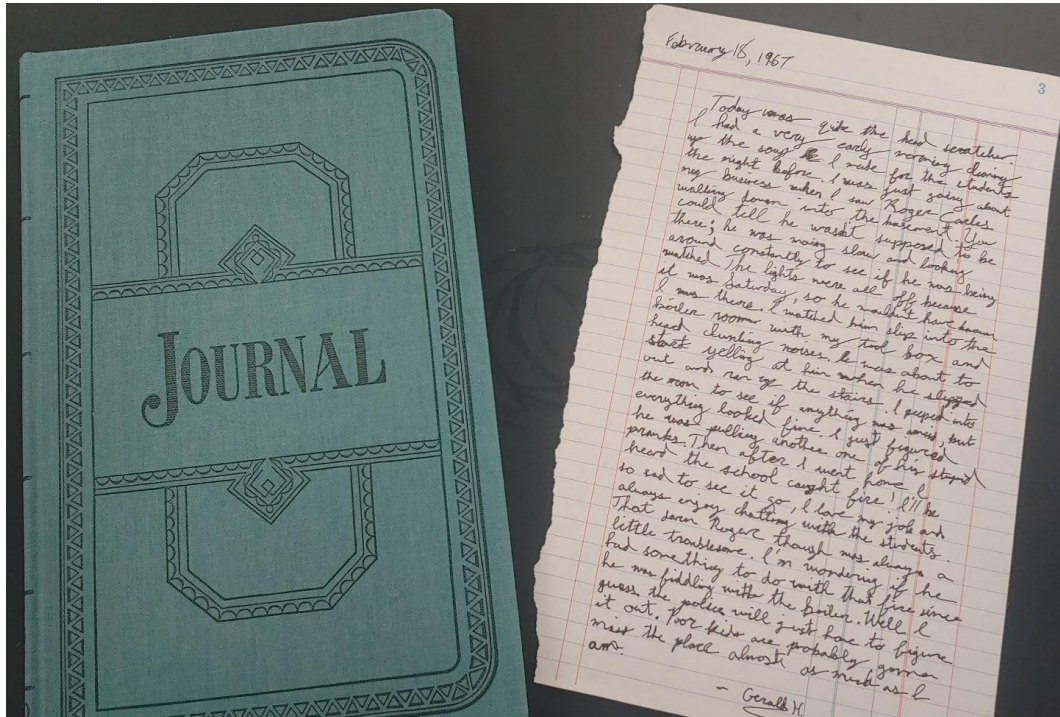


Figure 7. Fingerprint evidence planted on a screwdriver in the boiler room.



Figure 8. Fingerprint evidence planted on the janitor's toolbox in the storage room.



Figure 9. Undated photo of the old Baker High School. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.

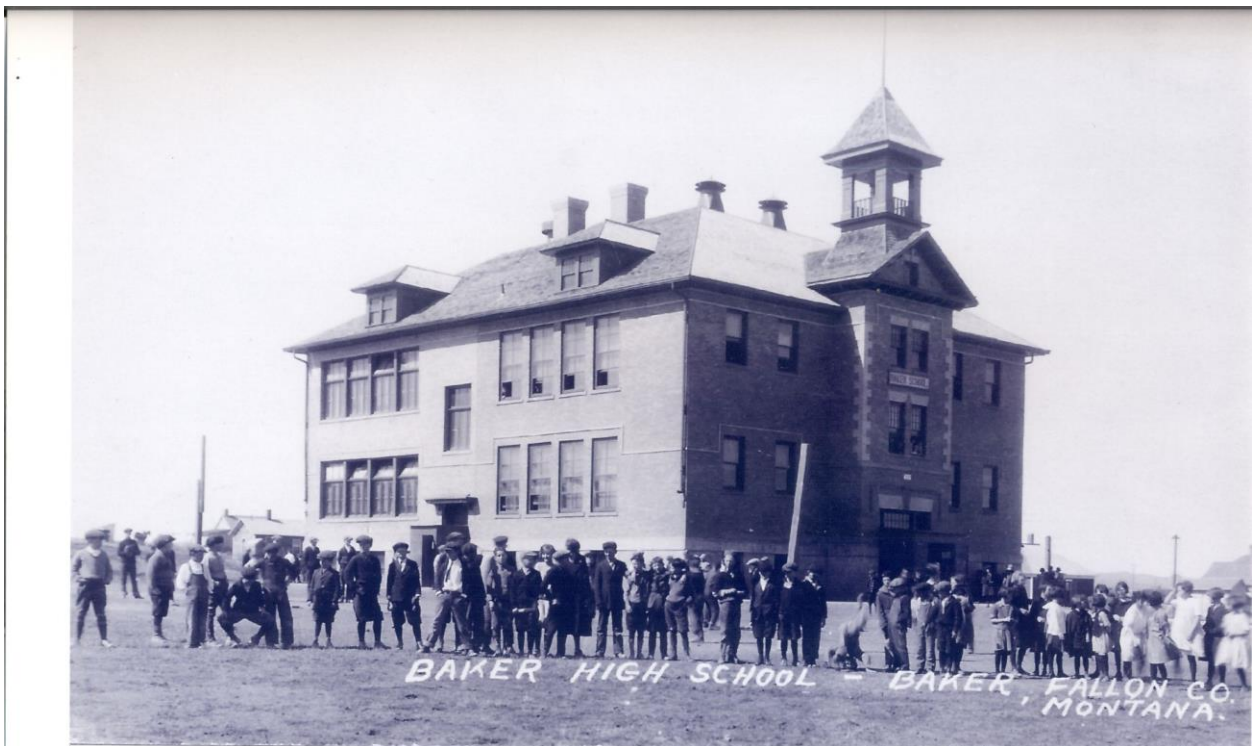


Figure 10. Photo of the fire at the old Baker High School. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



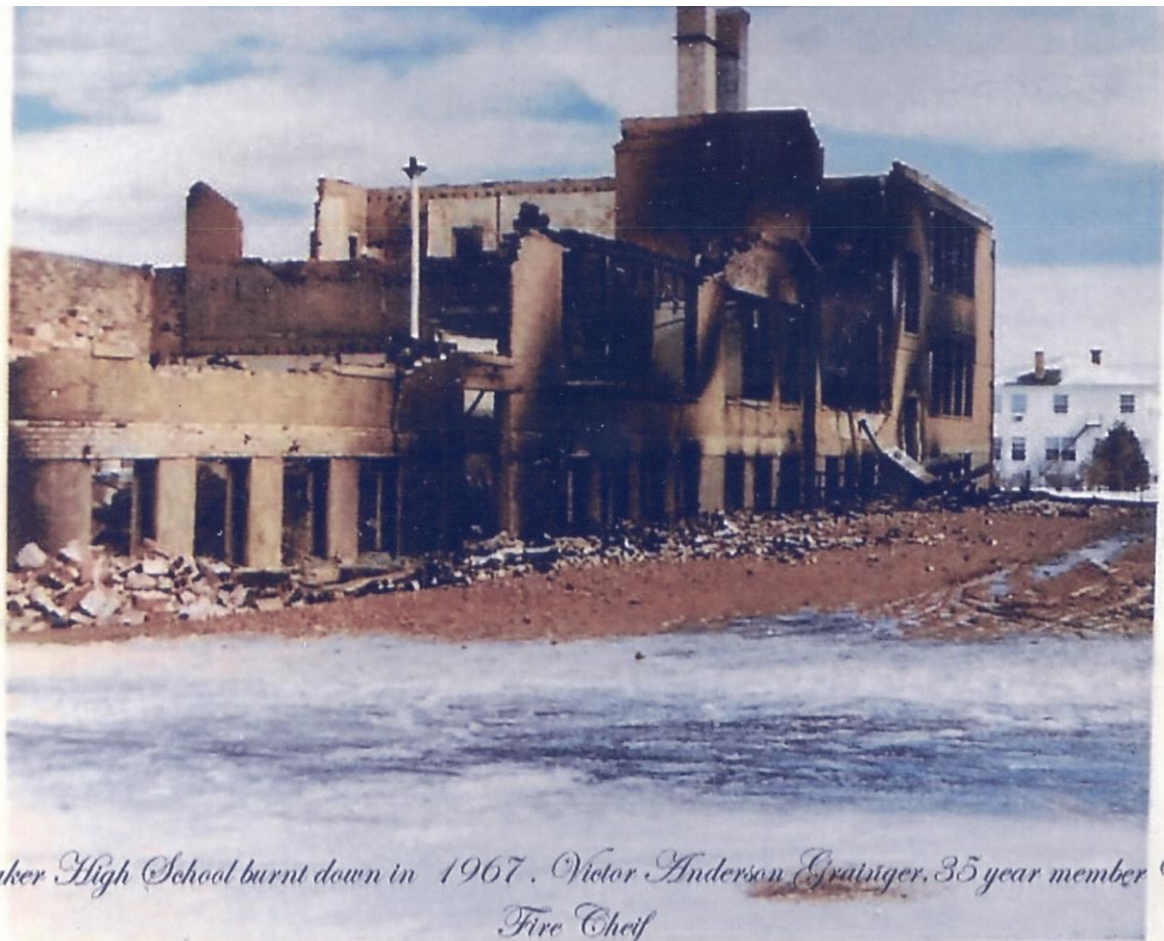
Figure 11. Photo of the fire at the old Baker High School. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



Figure 12. Photo of the fire at the old Baker High School. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



Figure 13. Photo of the old Baker High School following the fire. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



*Baker High School burnt down in 1967. Victor Anderson Graetger, 35 year member
Fire Chief*

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Figure 14. Photo of the Baker Fire Department, fire trucks, and firefighters that fought the old Baker High School fire. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



Figure 15. One of the fire trucks that fought the old Baker High School fire. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.



Figure 16. Science research student studying the governor on the fire truck, which malfunctioned while fighting the fire. Artifact from O'Fallon Historical Museum.

