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.
School Completely Destroyed By Fire Saturday Afternoon

Firemen and deputies stood outside the smoking ruins of the Baker High School. This picture was taken about 6:30 after fire destroyed the entire school just before dark on Saturday evening. The fire started was on the top floor in the kitchen area of the building. The fire was discovered about 5:30 and when the firemen arrived, the damage was estimated at about $30,000.

Open Letter to Community

With the loss of the Baker High School, all families and students will feel the loss of a part of their community. We know the need to rebuild will be enormous. We ask you to consider donating to the school rebuilding fund.

We will begin reconstruction immediately. We are working with local contractors to get the job done as quickly as possible.

Just a Memory

The old school building is a memory of the past. The new school will be a symbol of the future. We are grateful for the support of our community.

Carter County 4-H Show Ends 5

The Carter County 4-H Show ended on Saturday with the conclusion of the horse show. The horse show was a great success and the weather was perfect.

Services Held Feb. 18 For Gus Crawford

The funeral services for Gus Crawford will be held on Wednesday at 2 p.m. at the First Baptist Church in Baker. Mr. Crawford was a long-time member of the community and will be greatly missed.

Sounding Off

By Mabel L. Johnson

It's hard to believe that the Baker High School has been destroyed by fire. This school has been a part of our community for over 100 years. It's hard to imagine it being gone.

Spartans Take 19th Victory

The Baker High School Spartans took their 19th victory of the season on Saturday. The team played a great game and showed their determination.

Fire Destroys Trailers Home

The trailer home in the Carter County 4-H show was destroyed by fire on Saturday. The fire started in the kitchen area and quickly spread to the rest of the trailer.

The fire was discovered about 5:30 and when the firemen arrived, the damage was estimated at about $30,000.

It's Finished

The Baker High School is gone. It will be a long time before it is replaced. But the community will rebuild. We will make it better than before. We are grateful for the support of our community.
Figure 3. Fire report of Baker High School fire obtained from the Baker Fire Department.

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<th>Time</th>
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| Companies Responded, Co, No. and Type | 2       |
| Time Arrived | 3:15 PM | Time Dismissed | 7:40 PM |
| Hours of Service | 3:45 | Miles Traveled | 2 |
| Kind of Building or Property | School Phipps, Bakes School Dist. 12 |
| Street Address or Location | 51st St. |
| Owner | Baker School Dist. 12 |
| Occupied by | School |
| Purpose Used for Fire | To limit spread to other buildings: Yes or No No |
| Part of Building Where Fire Started | High above floor |
| Cause | Unknown |

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| Extinguished by | B—Booster 14 | 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 2.63 |
|                | H—Hydrant Streams  | Gallons of Chemicals Used 2.63 |
|                | P—Pumper 7  |
|                | S—Sprinklers  |

**INSURANCE RECORD**

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**SPECIAL NOTES**

Signed 

Officer in Charge

Form No. 156—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.
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.
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.