

Fire in Beaver County

By Jane Eden



For 62-year-old Helen Newman, February 22, 1995 began like any other frosty rural morning in Beaver County, Pennsylvania. She rose at 4:00 a.m. and between frequent trips downstairs to wash dishes and throw in laundry, she put the finishing touches on her granddaughter Heather's Easter dress unaware a fire smoldered overhead in the attic of her nearly 200 year old log home.

At 8:00 a.m., when Helen answered a phone call from her sister, a peculiar sensation hit her. "I told her I smelled heat," Helen recalls. She hung up and shouted for her husband, Dick, a retired steel worker, who was out feeding the cattle.

Together they checked every room, then went outside and stopped in the backyard near Helen's flower beds to look at the roof.

"Is that smoke or steam?" Dick asked, pointing to a thin plume rising from near the chimney.

"Oh, no!" A chill ran through Helen. She clutched Dick's arm. "It's smoke. You find Ashley! I'll call 911!"

While Dick searched for the couple's 15-year-old tabby cat, Helen rushed back inside, made the call, then ran upstairs to the bedroom frantic to see what she could save.

"I saw flames behind the wall near the woodstove in the upstairs hall," Helen recalls. She tried to put the fire out with water from the bathroom, but despite her efforts it continued to spread at an alarming rate.

Realizing she needed to get out quickly, Helen snatched up the Easter dress, a daisy kingdom pattern Heather had picked out herself. After spending hours attaching lace, Helen wasn't about to lose it to fire. She also grabbed the photo albums from a shelf in the living room.

"I always said if anything happened they would be the first thing I'd saved," says Helen.

The Independence Township fire department arrived in a burst of sirens shortly after Dick found Ashley. To escape the cold, Helen watched from the barn after warning firemen to keep an eye on Dick for fear he would run back into the house. Marie, one of Helen's 5 grown daughters, joined her there.

"I didn't think about losing my possessions. At the time, all I could think about was how tragic for such an old log house to burn," says Helen.

Built by Henry Strouss in 1805, Dick's parents purchased the house in the 40's when land acquisition for the Pittsburgh International Airport forced them to sell their goat farm. Helen came to live there shortly after her marriage to Dick in 52'.

"We didn't have a lot growing up, but we had fun," recalls Marty, the Newman's oldest daughter, now a managing editor at a Texas University. "When we were small, my mother liked to play Ladies of Spain on the piano, and we would twirl around the living room in our slips pretending to be beautiful ballerinas."

"All you can do is make memories," says Helen.

But during the fire Helen realized memories wouldn't bring Dick back if he did something foolish. She felt a tremendous sense of relief when he finally retreated as far as his truck parked alongside the house. The last person to tend the woodstove, he blamed himself for the fire.

An hour and a half later, their home stood roofless, gutted, and smoldering in a puddle of mud and debris. Because of its age, the log construction and woodstoves, the Newmans had been unable to purchase insurance. Dick's retirement paid the bills, but

provided few luxuries--certainly not enough to rebuild.

"To think about starting over at their age was pretty scary," says Marty. "Mom and Dad tried not to show it, but they were pretty shook up."

Word traveled fast as it does in small towns. Soon neighbors and friend began to congregate. Helen was grateful for their moral support, but by evening the strain had taken a toll. When Marie suggested her parents come home with her to nearby Hanover Township, Helen agreed. However, fearing looters, Dick refused.

When neighbor, Ernie Hufnagel, heard Dick planned to sleep in the barn, he offered the use of his travel trailer. Someone else brought over a pump so Dick could water his cattle. An excited mummer passed through the crowd, when one group of young men mentioned rebuilding. But Dick didn't take them seriously.

He was shocked when he awoke the next morning to find cars lining both sides of Newman Lane and people already at work.

Helen was even more dismayed when she drove up with Marie, expecting to find the house deserted and instead found a beehive of activity.

"People just showed up with 2x4's, plywood and a smile," says Roy, Marie's husband. Despite snow and rain, people brought ladders, trusses, shingles and nails. A grill appeared complete with cook--Bonnie Kinney, and before long it felt like a party. Sam Eaton furnished a truck and backhoe. Joe Calderone, a bridge rigger by day, waltzed over bare roof trusses laying plywood. A local newspaper photographer came to take pictures and stayed to nail shingles. In all, more than 150 people showed up. Together, they laughed and joked and rebuilt the Newman's home. "Never saw such cooperation," Dick sniffs.

"Losing the house was hard, but the way the people came moved me more than anything I lost," says Helen. Her voice trembles.

And they kept coming.

By church time Sunday, the Newman house had a new roof, and by Monday an old-fashioned barn raisin' was in full swing.

One group of men in particular helped organize the project and stayed so long the family named them the Dream Team. Kurt Joyce, Billy Rankin, Bob Dogis and Greg Eaton did whatever needed doing. Dave Calderone donated a furnace--no more woodstoves for the Newmans.

Five weeks after the fire, Helen and Dick moved back into the house. Fortunately, not everything was a total loss. A fireman managed to save Dick's false teeth, his "pocketbook" and a few other items. The piano, veteran of many an afternoon's entertainment, survived.

A spokesperson for the fire department says a spark from the stovepipe ignited the blaze in the attic which spread across the roof. But no one can explain what sparked the tremendous outpouring of human kindness that rebuilt the Newman's house.

How do you thank people for giving you back your home? The Newman's plan to start by inviting everyone who helped to their next family reunion where they intend to dedicate a plaque.

Our Home
Built by Henry Strouss 1805,
Destroyed by fire 1995,
Rebuilt with love.