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## The Destruction of Packer Hall

ERIC WEISS '39, '40

The accounts of the destruction of Packer Hall have been so varied, contradictory, and sensational that I feel impelled to tell my own story, adhering strictly to the rule set out for himself by Thucydides, to describe only events at which I was present myself, only departing from this rule for events about which I heard from eye-witnesses whose stories I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. As a consequence, it may well be that my story will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element, but it will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.

On the evening of the disaster, just between daylight and dark when the night was beginning to lower, I got into my Porsche in the Sigma Alpha Mu parking lot. To the east the sky was black while to the west the sun, flattened by atmospheric refraction into an orange oval, was sinking into the permanent haze above the Blue Mountain. I put my Starbucks in the cupholder, hunched into my seat, started the engine, and punched "Maginnes" into the GPI course control. I left the lot for my 6:30 seminar at precisely half-past six as the Beardslee Chapel bells finished *Neaver My God to Thee* and the Packard Hall Faraday-Watt carillon started on *We'll Pay No Toll Tonight*. On the road, I shifted to neutral to coast down Sayre Park drive, put the top down, turned the radio up to full blast getting Rosina and the Useless Precautions doing *Seville Sucks*, and prepared for my seminar by ruminating on the assigned subject: the length, breadth, height, width, mass, and depth of the liberal arts. I had barely made my first mental measurement of the concept and was concocting a *bon mot* to express it, when I was startled by a sudden sound which was louder than the radio. First there was a blast of a trumpet which was followed by a Giant's laugh, "Ha, ha!" The sequence was repeated several times, making me think at first it was some novel variety of an automobile theft alarm.

The words seemed to come from Packer Hall. Looking that way I saw a frightening display. Great clouds of white smoke were boiling up from the building. I imme-

diately punched 3911 into my cell phone to connect to the *Brown & White* TV News Channel, and said, "Fire! Packer Hall is on fire! Put it on the air!" Within seconds my phone came back with the canned voice of a mechanical responder, "What did you say?" I switched off the course control and repeated my announcement several times while swinging down the hill, avoiding other cars, sounding my horn, drinking my coffee, and heading toward Packer Hall.

I discovered later that my announcement had been put on the Campus TV News instantly, backed up with a digitally enhanced tape-library picture of a building engulfed in smoke and flames. Unfortunately, the picture used was of Packard Lab which led to the later reports that both buildings had been destroyed.

As I came past Trembley Park and skidded to a stop at the curb in front of the President's House, I saw the magnificent source of the sound and smoke. There, rearing up on its pedestal between Library Drive and Packer Hall, was Leonardo da Vinci's Great Horse, the twenty-four foot high bronze sculpture presented on that very day to the University by the Great Class of 1939 in memory of the instigator of the sculpture, Charlie Dent. Its eyes gleamed alternately red and green, clouds of steam issued from its nostrils, and it repeatedly chanted "Ha, ha! Ha, ha!" in a great trumpet challenging voice.

I had neglected to attend the dedication of the Great Horse that afternoon, and thus was not aware that every evening at 6:39 p.m. *Il Cavallo* would steam and speak. But by now the truck of the WePutEmOut company, which had won the contract for campus fire service by underbidding the South Bethlehem Fire Company, had reached the site, hooked up to a hydrant, and had two streams of water playing on the horse. This proved to be a mistake for the water penetrated into the hollow head and body of the Great Bronze Horse, going through the as-yet unsealed joints in the bronze shell. There, the water short-circuited the statue's internal high voltage lines, setting fire to the piles of trash left inside by the workmen. The steam pouring from the nostrils of the horse was first supplemented by clouds of black smoke and then replaced with licking red tongues of flames.

Quickly the roadways around the Great Horse became clogged with cars filled with thrill-seeking students waving six-packs, chanting, "Burn. Burn. Burn!," and charming each other with funny remarks. Enterprising TV news crews drove their vehicles around the jam by going off the roads, up over the grass, and directly to the horse itself. The first crew to arrive, encouraged by its studio editor to, "Stick the camera right up its ass!," managed to hit and break the near hind leg of the horse, just below the fetlock. This destroyed the statue's structural stability and, it was discovered later, opened a valve just below the hoof which released the full flow of a two-inch water line up the leg and into the body of the horse.

After only a few minutes, the weight of the water trapped in the body of the Great Horse made it slowly tip over to its left, towards Packer Hall, and then, with a splendid crash, the horse's head, now blazing with real flames fed by the two tanks of

welding gas also left in the horse by department workmen, crashed into the center of Packer Hall's left tower.

That did it. The firemen switched their water from the horse and turned it on Packer Hall, but the second TV truck on the scene, blocked from the horse by the first arrival, managed to put its wheels directly on the firemen's hose, reducing the flow to a pitiful, tiny stream. Although Packer Hall, built in 1868, was a wooden fire trap for many years, its interior had been completely gutted in 1958, and it was rebuilt with a steel frame considered to be completely fireproof. But the Great Horse's head had struck a vulnerable spot, breaking the lines connecting the liquid propane tank that had been installed to heat the rebuilt Hall, replacing the elderly system fed with steam from the campus Central Heating Plant. Propane, heavier than air, gradually filled the basement of the Hall until the flammable mixture was ignited by the flames and sparks and the entire insides of Packer Hall went straight up in a dramatic fiery fountain.

The explosion was accidentally caught by the Brown & White video camera crew as the backdrop for a B & W reporter fatuously asking President Mencken how he felt. It is that picture, the president of Lehigh University stuttering his awkward answers to ridiculous questions while behind him Packer Hall goes into the sky like a volcano that was shown every fifteen minutes on every news channel around the world for the next 24 hours.

I returned to my car, already ticketed for parking by the campus police, and went on to my now cancelled seminar. The subject for the following week was posted on the board: Consider how the Book of Job applies to job performance. While I was preparing for this next session, I discovered that the words from the Great Horses' mouth, "Ha, ha!" are those assigned to this creature by God himself in His Book.

The Great Horse and Packer Hall are both gone, never to return. Proposals to leave the west tower of Packer Hall as a jagged shell like the west tower of Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm's Gedachtniskirche to remind students, faculty, and administrators of the tragedies of the past were rejected in favor of using the insurance money to build the faceless thirty-nine story slab, Heckman Hall, that replaced it. The remains of the Great Horse were cut up with welding torches and shipped to Italy to make cannon. But Lehigh University had its twelve minutes of fame and glory on the TV screens of the world, publicity and recognition that no amount of money could have bought. And the previously unresolved question of a nickname for Lehigh sports team was solved. The Lehigh teams are no longer called "Engineers," but are the "Horse Burners," often shorted to just "Burners."

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