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1943 Victory Theater Fire Ignites Salt Lake City Firestorm

Utah's capitol city has been spared the type of conflagration that have ravaged huge swathes of other major cities such as Boston, New York, Chicago and San Francisco. Reasons may include Brigham Young's design of wide streets that also act as effective firebreaks. A good water system, relatively new buildings, effective fire and building codes and an efficient fire department are likely also important factors. This is not to say that Salt Lake City has not experienced some disastrous fires in both economic and human terms. A huge downtown fire and explosion in 1883 destroyed most of the block just south of Temple Square housing half a dozen businesses and precipitated the establishment of a paid fire department, replacing the volunteer force that had served the city for 30 years.¹

The 1980 Avalon Apartments fire claimed the lives of 12 Vietnamese refugees becoming the worst fatality fire in state history and spurring the strengthening of fire codes in the city.² But perhaps the fire that had the most profound effects on the city and the fire department itself occurred in 1943. That fire shared front-page headlines with the major battles and issues of World War II almost daily for months. It destroyed a Salt Lake landmark, killed three, ruined careers and damaged many lives.

The World War II years were difficult for Salt Lake City Fire Department for a host of reasons. Truck parts, tires and gasoline were rationed and in short supply. Several fire stations were left over from the horse drawn apparatus era and in danger of collapsing. Eleven members were serving in the military in 1943 and the pool to hire replacements shrank because of the war. Turnover was high as young men came and went. Adequate training and experience were lacking.³ Wartime added extra duties including organizing and training civil defense units and collecting scrap metal. The two platoon (shift) system with 24 hrs on-duty and 24 hrs. off-duty scheduling resulted in an 84 hr workweek with pay that was considerably less than most war-related industries

¹ Jeffrey D. Nichols, "1883 Blaze Spurred Creation of Salt Lake City's Professional Fire Department,"

http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/mining_and_railroads/1883blazespurredcreationoffiredepartment.html 1995

² "Probers Sift Ashes of Avalon Fire," *Deseret News*, December 22, 1980, p.B3

³ "City Upholds Ouster," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 18th, 1943, p.19

were paying. Although Mayor Ab Jenkins fought the City Commission to raise fire and police pay, he found little support for the proposal.⁴ 1942 had seen the highest dollar fire loss in city history with \$828,026.73 in damage. While 1943 losses dropped to \$355,984, the human cost was much higher. Four firemen were killed in two downtown incidents. The Annual Report of Salt Lake City simply states, “The Fire Department lost four efficient members”. The Annual Fire Department Report put it another way, “...To the memory of their efficiency, courage and comradeship, we pay humble respect.”

Morale on the fire department had been declining for some time. One reason was that the city’s civil service commission was considered hostile to the fire and police departments and often seemed to delay hiring or promoting public safety personnel. A number of experienced firemen simply quit.⁵ When Harry Christensen, Melvin Hatch and Theron Johnson died in the line of duty, discontent on the department boiled over. Within days the City Commission demanded investigations into the Victory fire and the workings of the department.

No other incident in the history of the Salt Lake City Fire Department caused as much upheaval and discontent as the Victory Theater Fire. No other structural fire incident in Utah caused more firefighter deaths. No other firefighter fatality incident received more public attention.⁶ No other fire incident became such a hot political topic in Salt Lake City Hall.

Less than a month later, fireman Paul Hamilton died after the department’s pride and joy, the 100 ft American Lafrance ladder truck affectionately known as “Big Dan” collapsed at a fire on the 7th floor of the “fireproof” Hotel Newhouse on the city’s Main Street.⁷ This tragedy added to the toxic atmosphere that seemed to permeate Salt Lake City politics, which often pitted flamboyant Mayor Ab Jenkins against the four other City Commissioners on a variety of issues. The drama that unfolded at City Hall was worthy of the stages at any of Salt Lake’s theatrical palaces.

The Victory Theater was located at 48 E 300 So. According to the Utah Theaters website, it was originally called the Colonial Theater then the Pantages. It was renamed the Casino and Loew’s State Theater before being finally renamed the Victory in 1924. It was built in 1908 at a time when there were really no effective building or safety codes in effect in Salt Lake City. The famed theater was the venue for stage shows and plays for several years before the equipment was installed to also show silent films. Twenty five years to the day before Fireman Harry Christenson was laid to rest after dying there, the Theater showed the first “talking picture show” in Utah. Al Jolson starred in “The

⁴ “Jenkins Renews Pay Fight for Firemen and Policemen” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 2, 1943 p.18

⁵ “Ouster Defended,” *Deseret News*, November 12, 1943, p. 14

⁶ James Berry, Captain, SLC Fire Department, retired, conversation with author, June 2006

⁷ “Newhouse Hotel, Two Rooms Destroyed, Fireman Killed” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 12, 1943, p.1

Singing Fool.”⁸ This event was touted across the intermountain west although the “talkies” were thought of by many people as a fad that would not last.⁹

The Victory was a typical theater of its time, built of ordinary masonry construction. There was an upper and lower balcony and a stage with a brick proscenium and a small basement below the stage. A projection booth with a concrete floor had been added to the lower balcony. A great deal of heavy projection and related sound equipment had been installed in it. This extra weight would become a major problem in the later fire.¹⁰ The theater auditorium was 130 feet deep by 80 feet wide. The main entrance was through a large two-story atrium on the north that opened onto the south side of 300 South. The auditorium itself was behind other occupancies that directly fronted 300 South. These included Economy Shoes, Hughes’, Reed’s and Edwards’ stores and the St. George Hotel and a basement Rathskeller restaurant. At the north end of the auditorium the 30 ft. deep lower balcony extended over the ground level seating area. The front of the balcony was well supported by a steel I-beam and steel posts. The rear of the balcony and projection room were supported by wooden joists set into pockets in the brick north wall that separated the Theater from the other occupancies. The main floor seating was supported by a wooden structure resting directly on the ground with a tiny crawl space containing wiring and ductwork. There was a narrow alley on the east side between the Theater and the Keith O’Brien Company and on the west the Theater abutted the Paris Millinery Company. There was a short alley in the rear with fire exits and metal stairs from the auditorium opening into it.¹¹

At the time of the fire, the theater had been closed for about two weeks while remodeling work was taking place. It had only been six months since a small fire in a neighboring shop caused another shutdown due to minor smoke damage.¹²

On the morning of May 19, 1943 the first workman, Bert Berch, showed up just before 8:00 AM, unlocked the front doors and made his way through the darkened Theater to the stage where he unlocked the stage exits so that the rest of the crew could come in. He climbed up to the fly loft, which was the highest area into which the curtain and stage backdrops were hoisted, and began his work.

Other workers came in and were constructing scaffolding they needed for the stage remodel. Berch had been working up in the loft for about 15 minutes when he first noticed the smell of burning rubber. He did not see any smoke or fire in the cockloft or anywhere else until he made his way down and saw several seats in the auditorium burning about sixteen rows from the front. He pulled the alarm box near the stage and grabbed a fire hose line from one of the wet standpipes and tried to extinguish the fire in

⁸ “The Singing Fool Still Scoring at Victory Theatre,” *Salt Lake Telegram*, October 8, 1928 p.11

⁹ Utah Theaters Information, “Colonial Theater”
<http://utahtheaters.info/TheaterMain.asp?ID=133>

¹⁰ “Stevens Clears S.L. Fire Officials,” *Salt Lake Telegram*, August 17, 1943 p.1

¹¹ Short, George and Roberts, Benjamin and Reichman, Owen “Report to the Salt Lake City Commission on The Victory Theater Fire” Salt Lake City Corporation, August 11, 1943

¹² “Victory Theatre Slates Reopening”, *Salt Lake Telegram*, November 11, 1942 p.18

the seats. The Salt Lake City Fire Department headquarters station¹³ received the alarm at 8:24 AM. When the first alarm companies arrived, (Engine 1, Ladder 1 (known as Big Dan) Engine 2 and a rescue car), acting Battalion Chief¹⁴ Don White quickly saw the flames in the seating area and directed workmen to play a stream from a second standpipe line onto the area. The first-in crew of Engine 1, under the supervision of Lt. Melvin Hatch laid fire hose and airlines to supply the breathing air masks into the structure and knocked down the fire in the seating area. Breathing apparatus of that period consisted of a hand-cranked air pump with long hoses attached to facemasks. There never seemed to be enough of these apparatus to equip all crews and since they were tethered by the hose they were really only usable by crews staying in one place within reach of the hose. A fireman needed to constantly crank the machine, which tied up resources. Ed Phillips and Theron Johnson used the masks as they played a hose stream onto the seating area with Lt. Hatch.

Lt. Limb and the Ladder 1 crew were sent to the St. George Hotel to check for fire extension and life safety. There was no problem there so they then went to the roof of the Theater in an unsuccessful attempt to manually open the ventilators but they were nailed shut. Limb ordered a hose line to be taken to the roof and he ordered forcible entry of the vents on the roof but nobody carried out these orders.

Engine 2 took the hydrant west of the Theater and then ran hoses down the alley towards the exit on the southeast corner. Lt. Abelhausen from Engine 2 had his crew relieve Berch's workers who were still using their small standpipe hose. While the Engine 2 crew cooled the seating area with their hose, Abelhausen went with Berch to the basement to try to access the area under the auditorium floor. From an opening in the air conditioning system they could see fire but by the time they got a hoseline downstairs, conditions in the basement deteriorated to the point that they could not make an attack. Abelhausen's plan B was to cut a hole in the auditorium floor and insert a cellar nozzle, which is a rotating nozzle on a pipe that could be lowered through a hole. His crew never accomplished that objective because of deteriorating conditions of smoke and heat developing overhead. Abelhausen saw a dense layer of smoke mushrooming down from the balcony and could hear fire roaring but could see no flames. He directed hose streams up towards the ceiling and balcony areas to cool down the superheated gasses and keep them from igniting.

It also soon became clear to Battalion Chief White that there was fire beneath the auditorium floor and that a great deal of smoke had developed in the balcony area and this was rapidly mushrooming across the ceiling some 70 feet above the auditorium floor.

¹³ A description of the city alarm system is contained in *Annual Report Of the Salt Lake City Fire Department, 1941*, P. 29. It is available on-line at: <http://slrfa.org/images/History/SLCFD%20Annual%20Reports/SLCFDAnnualReport1941.pdf>. Parts of the original system are preserved for demonstrations at the Utah Museum of Fire Service History in Tooele County.

¹⁴ A battalion chief in Salt Lake City at that time had command over all firefighting resources in the city during typical operations. The Chief and Assistant Chief were primarily administrative leaders and rarely responded to emergencies. An organizational chart can be found in the *Annual Report Of the Salt Lake City Fire Department, 1941*, p.4.

At 8:35 AM he called for a general alarm, which summoned all of the City's fire forces. Assistant Chief Lloyd Egan got the call on the radio in his car and quickly responded. Egan arrived within a few minutes, did a quick size-up, assumed command and ordered ventilation by opening doors and windows. Water supplies and more hose lines were also deployed. Egan's efforts were hampered by the fact that several of the arriving companies were undermanned, had no officer in charge or the officers were directly engaged in firefighting operations. No one on the scene could see that fire had spread upwards beneath the seating area towards the foyer and then had traveled up through hollow decorative columns built around 8"X 8" posts and up into the floor of the balcony. No crews went to the balconies. Lt. Hatch's crew continued to fight the fire that continued to spread through the seating area and they were joined by later arriving crews some of whom advanced farther into the building. Ed Phillips was taking a beating on the nozzle from the smoke and heat and asked to be relieved. He gave his mask to Harry Christenson and went outside to help on the pumps. The Engine 4 crew laid lines from the rear to the northwest exit but didn't enter and instead stayed in the doorway while applying a stream on the flames inside.

Other crews were sent up into the neighboring buildings where they were the first to observe fire and smoke pouring from the roof and the nailed-shut ventilator openings on the Theater. By this time fire had spread into the cockloft constructed of heavy timbers to support heavy curtains and backdrops. Egan ordered crews to force open the ventilators and the upper exit doors on the fire escapes to allow the escape of heat and flammable gasses.

Fire crews from the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, led by chief mechanic "Big Dan" Cunningham and a crew from the Utah Ordnance Plant, led by former City Fire Chief Walter Knight, helped at the scene and two crews from Salt Lake County arrived to cover the rest of the City

Radiant heat ignited the edge of the roof on the Paris building and crews quickly attacked that extension of the fire. These crews, from their high vantage points observed the worsening conditions of the Theater but could do nothing from their positions but protect the Kieth O'Brien and Paris Co. buildings.

By his own account in the Stevens Report, when Chief LaVere Hanson arrived at 8:50 AM he went to the lobby and then walked quickly around the entire structure, a journey of 1,100 feet, to see what was being done and to do a complete size-up of conditions. He arrived back at the lobby at 8:58 just as the rear of the balcony collapsed onto the crews working under the balcony near the foyer.

Hatch, Christenson and Johnson were pinned under the rubble and died of burns, crush injuries and smoke inhalation. Lt. William Limb seriously injured his back when he fell from a ladder. Capt. A.R Ward fought his way part of the way out of the collapsed area through ten feet of burning timbers, suffering burns and smoke inhalation in the process. Chief Egan desperately pulled Ward from the building and both were taken to the Emergency Hospital. Egan told reporters that there was no warning of the collapse, "Usually there is some creaking or some signal that a roof or balcony is about to collapse, but this time there was nothing. It just collapsed and came straight down."

Fireman Luther Stroud was struck by a falling pipe as he attempted to reach his trapped comrades. Lt, Evan Hansen, firemen George Killpatrick, F.E. McKinnon, George

Kilpatrick, Glen Crowther and Elmer Hansen sustained various non-life threatening injuries.¹⁵

Stroud's apparently lifeless body was dragged from the wreckage and carried to the street, covered with a sheet and taken to the morgue at the old Salt Lake General Hospital. According to his grandson, Roger Stroud, (also a retired SLC Firefighter) when his grandmother arrived to identify the body, she found her dear departed husband, Luther, sitting up on the gurney wondering just where he was and why he was there. He recovered and lived to be 93 years old.¹⁶

The tragedy was not without a humorous incident that appeared in the Deseret News, "As the flames roared a third of a block into the sky, a bald headed gentleman appeared on the roof of one of the nearby buildings threatened by the fire. He had a small bucketful of water that he calmly poured down the side of the building. The bricks were hot so the water evaporated immediately." Undiscouraged he reappeared with his bucket and a bunch of rags which he soaked and placed on top of the wall, thereby maintaining a three foot cold pack on top of the wall. His building didn't catch fire."

The day after the fire the Keith O'Brien Company ran quarter page ads in the Salt Lake papers that said, 'A Tribute to the Firemen of Salt Lake City, Unselfish, fearless, daring, without thought for themselves, the firemen battled the flames in the fire catastrophe...'

Two days after the fire, 50 year-old Harry Christensen was honored at a funeral and his casket was carried on the bed of a fire engine to the cemetery. Two more funerals followed.

In the aftermath, even as funerals were still being arranged, someone claiming to represent the Firemen's Relief Association began collecting money, supposedly for the fallen men's families. Police searched in vain for the perpetrator of the fraud. The same type of shocking fraudulent behavior was seen after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, when fake charities sprang in to action for the alleged relief of fire, police and other victims.¹⁷ The actual Relief Assn. was successful and raised enough to provide \$1202.45 for each victim's family.¹⁸

Chief Hanson formed an investigation committee to find the cause of the fire and what precipitated the collapse. This committee consisted of a police detective, an investigator from the National Board of Fire Underwriters and a Salt Lake City fire investigator.¹⁹ Despite their efforts and those of the Fire Prevention Bureau, no definitive cause of the fire was found. Rumors swirled concerning possible arson or sabotage but nothing evolved from these speculations. Circumstantial evidence pointed at accidental under-floor electrical or plumbing torch origins. On the other hand, reasons for the collapse became clear rather quickly. The balcony was never designed to hold the weight

¹⁵ Short, George and Roberts, Benjamin and Reichman, Owen "Report to the Salt Lake City Commission on The Victory Theater Fire" Salt Lake City Corp. August 11, 1943

¹⁶ Roger Stroud, SLCFD, Retired, conversation with author September 6, 2010

¹⁷ "Special Report on Possible Fraud Schemes - Solicitations of Donations for Victims of Terrorist Attacks," Fraud Section, Criminal Division, U.S. Department of Justice, September 27, 2001

¹⁸ "Benefit Checks Ready for Firemen's Kin" *Salt Lake Telegram* June 12, 1943 p.16

¹⁹ "S.L Probes Disastrous Theater Fire" *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 21, 1943 p.7

of the projection room and its equipment. The hollow columns provided a perfect pathway for fire spread from under the auditorium floor up into the floor of the balcony. The fire burned there undetected in the concealed space while the attack crews concentrated on the lower fire and the fire showing above the balcony until the wooden floor joists burned through allowing the collapse. Without a complete understanding of the unique construction features, firefighters and officers had no good way of knowing the extreme hazard they were in. If the recently formed Prevention Bureau knew of the problems, there is no record of that information being relayed to the fire combat personnel.²⁰

Curiously there was no discussion in the newspapers that theater owners were in any way responsible for operating in a building that clearly had contributed to the disaster nor were there any comments from the owners at all.

The tragedy of this fire and a series of other events gathered energy into a perfect storm that broke against the beleaguered leadership of the department. The father-in-law of dead firefighter Theron Johnson, a print shop owner named James Giles, decided to launch his own inquiry.²¹ He talked to some of the firefighters who were at the scene and then filed a complaint alleging that Ed Phillips, a sixteen-year veteran of the department, had warned Lt. Hatch that the balcony was in danger of collapsing but that he was ignored and sent outside to help on the pumps. He further charged that the fire department had known for years that the building was defective and presented unusual dangers in the event of a fire. He went on to allege that the department was run by a clique of hard-drinking officers who were not responsive to other members of the department. He stated that another person came forward to tell him that a Battalion Chief's car was frequently parked at a nearby bar. The allegations included provocative wording such as incompetence and recklessness in regards to command at the fire. These charges prompted the City Commission to launch an inquest while Mayor Ab Jenkins was absent.²² The Mayor, whose responsibilities included oversight of the public safety departments, strongly objected to this process and offered his own plan to bring in fire experts from other states. His proposal was rejected. The Commission appointed some prominent citizens to a committee to conduct the probe. None of those appointed had any fire expertise. That prompted more objections from the mayor and the Fire Department. The Salt Lake Telegraph published an editorial questioning the wisdom of an investigation by non-experts.²³ This seemed to have no effect on proceedings. The committee changed membership as the probe progressed but never included fire experts.²⁴

Mayor Jenkins was a man who was used to getting things done his way. He was a successful building contractor and a phenomenally successful race car owner/driver who had built a superstar image by driving his "Mormon Meteor" Duesenburg race car to more records on the Bonneville Salt Flats than anyone in racing history. His endurance, unflagging optimism and kindness to competitors on the racecourse and off of it gave him

²⁰ "Expert Approves Fire Handling" *Deseret News*, August 17, 1943 p.1

²¹ "Theater Blaze Brings 'Politics' Cry" *Salt Lake Telegraph*, June 28, 1943 p.13

²² Minutes, Salt Lake City Commission, June 15, 1943

²³ "Do a Thoroughgoing Job", *Salt Lake Telegraph*, June 16, 1943 p.6

²⁴ "Fire Death Probe Group Gets New Member," *Salt Lake Telegraph*, June 16, 1943

such a reputation that in his quest to become Mayor he conducted no campaign at all. No speeches, no advertising, no proverbial baby kissing, yet he won handily. As mayor he approached the job like he approached racing, Bonneville style. At the speedway you didn't really race against other people, you raced against the record, It didn't matter what anyone else did or thought.²⁵ When he lost his reelection bid in November following the fire, he told Time Magazine "I'm not used to running a race against someone else."²⁶

In response to the appointment of the Citizen's Committee over their objections, the Chief and the Mayor requested that Jay Stevens, a widely respected authority on the fire service from the National Board of Fire Underwriters in San Francisco, conduct an independent investigation into the fire and the response of the department. Stevens traveled from the west coast several times to conduct 85 interviews, examine the fire scene and to review procedures.²⁷ He went so far as to set a bonfire in the ruins of the Theater and pull the nearby box alarm. This false alarm was said by Stevens to be a common procedure to determine response time and was necessary in this case to determine actual department response time since the details of the original response were in dispute and had not been recorded. The exercise resulted in an Assistant Chief arriving in two minutes with a ladder company a few seconds later. This test of the system was, to say the least, disconcerting for arriving crews who had also been on the response to the fatal fire.²⁸

This was not the first time that Stevens had a role in Salt Lake City affairs. As far back as 1925, when he was also the California State Fire Marshal, he testified in a hearing concerning a dispute between the Salt Lake City firemen's union, Local 81 of the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) and Chief William Bywater. "The men have no respect for the authority of their superiors," he told the hearing officer.²⁹ That inquiry had led to mass resignations, the retirement of Chief Bywater and a strike when the resignations were withdrawn but the Commission refused to reinstate the men in an attempt to destroy the union.³⁰ The conflict had not led to particularly good feelings between the firefighters and J.W. Stevens. Asst. Chief Walter Knight succeeded Bywater and served until more department unrest in 1940 led to his resignation and the appointment of Lavere Hansen as chief. This transition also occurred with substantial input from Stevens.³¹

The parallel investigations continued throughout July and into August until final reports came to very different conclusions. The Citizen's Committee investigation lambasted the Chief on numerous fronts while the Stevens report exonerated him.³²

In the mean time, Chief LaVere Hanson pleaded with the City Commission to hire more firemen and two more battalion chiefs to supplement the two existing positions in

²⁵ "Ab Jenkins: Son of Salt" *Barracuda Magazine*, # 11 p.15

²⁶ "Salt Lake City: Ab Loses", *Time Magazine*, November 15, 1943

²⁷ "City Upholds Ouster," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 18th, 1943, p.19

²⁸ "Test Decides Victory Theater Time Factor" *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 28, 1945 p.9

²⁹ "Salt Lake Firemen's Strike of 1925 Part 1," *Backdraft*, July 2002, p.12

³⁰ "Salt Lake Firemen's Strike of 1925 Part 2," *Backdraft*, November 2002, p.31

³¹ "Stevens Urges Outside Fire Expert for S.L." *Salt Lake Telegram*, May 17, 1940, p.1

³² "New Fire Probe Sought" *Deseret News*, August 18, 1943 p.1

order to provide better command and control at big fires. The Commission responded by appointing three new battalion chiefs. The Chief himself did not fare so well. Following the investigation by the Citizen panel and a closed door report to the Commission, Hanson was demoted on August 12th despite his passionate plea and refutation of charges against him and one of his Assistant Chiefs, Lloyd Egan.³³

The Citizens Committee report drew heavily on what it saw as digressions from Standard Operating Procedures in the department drill manual based on its interviews of various witnesses. Most of the testimony to the committee was information volunteered behind closed doors by various department members, much of which centered on issues having nothing to do with the fire and instead concentrated on mistrust of department leadership. There were no transcripts made of the committee's proceedings so there is no record of the questions asked or the context or details of the responses. A testament to the wide interest in the proceeding was that the final report of the Committee was made public and the entire text was printed in the *Deseret News* in parts over a period of five days.

Mayor Ab Jenkins was quoted in the papers and Minutes of the Commission the day of the demotion, "I have heard of individuals being railroaded and today I saw it."³⁴

The conclusions of the investigation committee were also strongly disputed by Jay Stevens, who concluded, following his parallel investigation, that the tragic fire was indeed handled properly by the officers who could not have known of the collapse potential. He went on to refute a number of the other charges against Hanson and Egan and accused the Commission of a "cowardly action," by not allowing the chiefs to defend themselves. Nevertheless, the decision stood.³⁵

Hanson believed that his ouster was a political blow by the Commission against the Mayor. The day of his dismissal, Hanson was quoted in the *Deseret News*, "Mayor Jenkins is doing a fine job and he has contributed more of his own time and money to promoting the welfare of Salt Lake than any other official I know of. In my opinion the whole affair is being thrown at the mayor. The controversy does not worry me, but I am very concerned about him."

Despite this brave statement, Hanson was personally devastated by the blame placed on him and what he felt was an unfair process, driven by politics. It is quite likely that there was politics involved, after all it was an election year. Mayor Jenkins, Hanson's supervisor, was strong willed and often clashed with his colleagues on the Commission. Jay Stevens clearly felt that there was politics at work. After delivering his report to the Commission and commenting that Salt Lake was "The whisperingest town I have ever been in, you can hear anything you want about anything you want about anybody in Salt Lake City," Stevens told the Commission, "The time has come to investigate the investigators...to determine what interest may have been served by them."³⁶

The complainant, Mr. Giles, had been the campaign manager for Commissioner Matheson, the target of numerous jabs by the Mayor. Giles insistence that Hanson be punished, probably influenced events, although Matheson publicly favored making

³³ "Hanson, Egan Deny Fire Probe Charges" *Salt Lake Tribune* August 13, 1943 p.13

³⁴ "SL Fire Chief Ousted Following Probe" *Deseret News* August 12, 1943, p. 5

³⁵ "City Upholds Ouster," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 18th, 1943, p.19

³⁶ *Ibid.* 19

Hanson's demotion temporary. Internal fire department strife, even before the fire, also contributed significantly to the outcome. An addendum to the citizen's committee report expressed concern about a "clique of officers" who drank excessively and would not consider input of those outside of the clique.³⁷ Responding to public outcry against the conclusion and results of the investigation, Commissioners stated that they were reacting more to the low morale and internal fire department problems than to the specific actions during the Victory Theatre fire.³⁸

Nevertheless, Mayor Jenkins felt that the Chief had been wronged and attempted to promote him to Chief of the Prevention and Arson divisions. Hanson, in turn told reporters that he "Feared for the Mayor". Hanson returned to duty as a Captain but within a week went on medical leave for a heart condition and then took a medical retirement, ending a career that began in 1926.

Ultimately, even Stevens accepted the removal of Chief Hanson, whom he said "Did a good job on the Victory fire but so far as his other actions as fire chief were concerned, fell down. Hansen betrayed the confidence of Mayor Jenkins. The first year he was fire chief he was fine. Then prosperity apparently went to his head and he couldn't take it."³⁹

Asst Chief Joseph Knowles Piercey, known universally as J.K. replaced Hanson as Chief and set about rebuilding the battered and divided fire department. His orders from the Commission included "cleaning up the department."⁴⁰ Piercey had joined the department in 1919 at the age of 18 and worked his way up the ranks.⁴¹

The turmoil seemed to publicly overshadow the private sadness and grief felt by the families and colleagues of the dead. In August the Commission authorized a total of \$16,269.71 and burial expenses be paid to the families of Johnson, Hatch and Christensen. A firefighter's life in 1943 was thus determined to be worth just \$5,423 and 23 cents.

26 year-old Theron Johnson had been with the department less than a year. He was previously a baker, born and raised in Huntington. He joined the Department at the same time as his brother-in-law Grant Walker. Walker was on the Victory Theater fire and undoubtedly was deeply affected by the disaster. Walker became Chief of the department in the 1960's and after retiring from Salt Lake, became State Fire Marshal in the 1970's. As State Fire Marshal he fought hard for the adoption of statewide uniform fire and building codes. Johnson's father had also died at age 26, while working for the State Road Commission. Theron Johnson left his widow, Shirley, a son, Dahl, a brother, a sister and his mother.

Harry Christenson was a World War I veteran and a seasoned fireman with 19 years of fire experience. He was born in South Dakota January 24, 1893 into a large

³⁷ "Jenkins Demands Quick Action on Fire Death Report" *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 12, 1943 p.13

³⁸ "SL City Commission Stands Pat on Motion Ousting Chief Hanson," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 18, 1943 p.13

³⁹ "Ouster Defended," *Deseret News*, November 12, 1943, p. 14

⁴⁰ "Piercey Heads Department" *Deseret News*, August 12, 1943, p.1

⁴¹ "Important Shoes to Fill," *Deseret News*, August 12, 1943, p.16A

family with two brothers and five sisters. He left two sons, a daughter and his widow Zoa.

Born in Payson, Utah on January 29, 1903, Lieutenant Mel Hatch was a seventeen year veteran firefighter who had enthusiastically taken on the responsibility for all civilian and fire department rescue squads in Salt Lake City. His death left a daughter, a son and a widow to mourn with his parents and three brothers. Mel Hatch was posthumously promoted to the rank of Captain by the Commission.⁴²

Hatch's widow, Maud, strongly disputed the Citizens Report conclusions. She told Commissioners in a letter, "Through constant effort and diligent application of his experience, he (Hatch) won promotion to lieutenant and had been qualified as a captain and would have been made such, had his life not been taken by the fire. He did not get his promotion through a clique. This is not only untrue but it is extremely unfair. These men work and study for advancement. I know, for it was my job to know as the wife of a fireman who lived for his job. The stigma of 'negligence' is equally unfair, for it infers that my husband was also negligent. Had there been any physical indications of the collapse I know he would have seen them." She went on to pass on her husband's praise of Egan as his role model and Hanson as "the most naturally inclined fireman ever affiliated by the Salt Lake Department".⁴³

As bad as the Victory 7:39 AM Theater fire was, it could have been much worse. A year before the Victory disaster, the Strand Theater in Brockton, Massachusetts collapsed during a fire killing 13 firefighters and injuring 20 more. The deadliest single building fire in US history was Chicago's Iroquois Theater fire on December 30, 1903. An arc lamp shorted, igniting a curtain. Flames and smoke spread quickly and in just 20 minutes 602 of the 2,400 audience members and performance troupe in the building were dead. These and scores of smaller amusement venue disasters spawned a host of fire and building code improvements.⁴⁴ Just a few months before the Victory burned, new codes were adopted in Salt Lake City that improved building and fire safety.⁴⁵ If provisions of those later codes had been in effect when the Victory was built and modified, the structure would have been less likely to burn or collapse and just maybe, the most deadly and divisive incident in Salt Lake City Fire Department history might have been avoided.⁴⁶

Even if the theater hadn't burned, the other issues on the department would likely have continued to fester until City officials were forced to take action. Whether or not Mayor Jenkins would have dealt with internal problems himself or waited for the Commission to act as they ultimately did, remains a question that will never be answered. Another question that we can only speculate upon, is whether Jenkins would have been reelected if the Victory Theatre controversy had not exacerbated the hostility between

⁴² "Hatch Posthumously Promoted To Captain, *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 25, 1943 p.18

⁴³ "Widow's Letter Blasts Report on Fire Deaths," *Salt Lake Telegram*, August 11, 1943 p.1

⁴⁴ "A Tragedy Remembered". *NPFA Journal* (National Fire Protection Association) (July/August). 1995

⁴⁵ "City Drafting New Fire Prevention Code" *Salt Lake Telegram*, December 2, 1942, p.17

⁴⁶ "Expert Approves Fire Handling" *Deseret News*, August 17, 1943 p.1

him and the commission. Since Salt Lake City had not reelected a mayor since 1912, it would appear that an anti-incumbent mood had influenced the public for a long time but certainly public bickering did not contribute to public confidence in the Jenkins Administration⁴⁷.

We do know that the Fire Department was well served by their new chief, J.K. Piercey. He served as chief for 16 years and took the department through significant modernization and improvement in terms of equipment, training, organization, staffing and facilities, using his quiet firmness to achieve progress. His initial requests for more equipment, firemen, officers and stations were received favorably by the Commission but it took patience, time, money and persistence to bring the entire department up to his desired standard. The City had a lot of needs to balance but for a time the squeaky wheel needing the most grease became the fire department. Piercey instituted a new employee evaluation process. He reorganized the department so that three battalion chiefs were on duty at all times providing supervision in three newly delineated districts so that command at fires would be adequate. Unlike what occurred during the Victory fire, it would now be unlikely that no battalion chief's duties would exceed a reasonable span of control. New fire engines and replacement stations were approved along with staffing to man them. Department morale improved and so did relations with the Commission.⁴⁸

Piercey's tenure as chief, the longest in Salt Lake City history, was unusual in its length for any fire chief and a tribute to his ability to weather the storms that are bound to rock any organization. Following his retirement in 1959 he continued to use his political savvy to gain election to the City Commission he worked under for so long. He oversaw the Water Department and then the Public Safety Division until he died suddenly of a massive heart attack on April 17, 1961 at age 60, thus ending his 42 years of service and a long and eventful chapter in Salt Lake City history.⁴⁹ Perhaps the editorial in the *Deseret News* printed the day after his death provides the answer to why he succeeded where others failed, "(He) was a rugged, plain-spoken man with no great flair for the niceties of public relations. But he had the confidence of his men and of all others who worked closely with him. In the long run, that proved to be the best public relations of all."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ "Salt Lake City: Ab Loses," *Time Magazine*, November 15, 1943

⁴⁸ *1943 Annual Report of the Salt Lake City Fire Department*, Salt Lake City Corporation, January 1944

⁴⁹ "Funeral Honors J.K. Piercey" *Deseret News*, April 18, 1961, p. B1

⁵⁰ "Important Shoes to Fill," *Deseret News*, April 18, 1961, p. 16 A