

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

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By Fred Maxwell

During the rainstorm the electric power was interrupted and I was some distance from a candle or flashlight. One of my guests remarked, "Gee, It's as dark as Egypt in here."

This comparison on extreme or acute darkness I do not remember having heard since World War II, although it was a common expression around 1900-1910. The comparison is peculiar to Tuscaloosa and the University and no where else, according to my knowledge. Would you like to hear of its origin?

After the burning of the University in April 1865 the first building erected was Woods Hall (1870). It was a very substantial building, but compared to present day standards it was very austere. There were no electric lights, no central heating system, no plumbing and it was devoid of telephones, mechanical air conditioning and such present day necessities.

Each dormitory room had an open grate and for heating each student operated his own wood or coal fire.

For bathing the bath house was in a brick building near Marr's Spring. The spring water was noted for its low temperature which accounted for its being used more for hygienic reasons of bathing than for pleasure swimming.

I do not know whether the "specialist" Chic Sales was the architect and/or contractor for the frame building that was so necessary for the convenience and comfort of the dormitory dwellers, but it was worthy of his talents. It was a multi-holer.

During daylight this building was generally called the "library," but it was well known and referred to a

"Egypt" at night. Why? Don't ask me. Maybe because it was because Egypt seemed so far away under certain circumstances.

Having no electric lights and located down in the hollow, it was considered the epitome of abject darkness. Usually

a lighted match furnished emergency illumination although in extreme bad weather a lantern was brought each trip from the dormitory.

When any place was in utter darkness it used to be said that it was "dark as Egypt" even in polite society.

An example of how legend dies with age was seen not too long ago when a U.S. senator was scheduled to speak at the University and he desired to make some remarks regarding the early days of the institution. He wrote that he had plenty of information on the burning of the University library by federal troops in 1865 but he had no information on the burning of the "library" in 1907 and he requested some date on the subject. The request caused great consternation, since official records did not reveal the slightest mention of the subject. And that's where I was able to contribute to Alabama history.

In about 1907 a freshman from Coker matriculated at the University. He developed into such a fine football player that Auburn accused him of being a "ringer" and it was the main cause of the break in athletic relations between Alabama and Auburn. This player used the "library" or "Egypt" as a study hall until one day some students decided to smoke him out and set fire to the "library." The fire got out of control and "Egypt" was destroyed.

For some reason the senator failed to recount the burning of the "library" in 1907 in his speech.