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INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ROSA OAKES HUFF.
SOPER, OKLAHOMA.

FIELD WORKER, HAZEL B. GREENE HUGO,
OKLAHOMA.
April 26, 1937

WHAT I REMEMBER ABOUT "NEW" SPENCER ACADEMY BURNING.

I am nearly forty-eight years old, Will be in August. I was six years old in August before Spencer Academy burned in the fall. My father, Thomas Oakes, owned a store at our home, at what is, or was later, named Atlas. There was a Post Office in his store, and I believe it was called Oakville. We lived about three miles south of the Academy. It was a school for boys only. My Uncle, J. B. Jeter, was Superintendent. It was Friday afternoon, and he had brought my brother, Thomas, home for the week end to make some purchases at the store. He took me home with him for the week end to visit with my aunt and cousins.

That day Uncle had whipped some big unruly boys, and Saturday midnight they saturated both the back and front stairs of the Main building with coal oil, and set fire to them. I don't know the boy's names; there were three of them, and they were sent to prison for the crime they had committed and died there years later.

Uncle and family and the teachers lived upstairs in this building and it was supposed that they wanted to burn up Uncle's family out of a spirit of revenge for having been whipped. The dining room and kitchen were in this building too.

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Upstairs was a ward for little boys, aged from about six to twelve years. A big boy, about 20 years old, took care of these smaller boys, saw that they were up and dressed and ready for breakfast, and all such. He slept up there with them. There were about fourteen in his charge. (When that building was burning, I saw the most heroic and the most tragic sight I ever witnessed. These little boys were afraid to jump from the windows to the ground. So another big boy I don't know his name, but I can still see him in my mind's eye as he placed a mattress on the ground, and called to the boy up in the ward to pitch the children down to him. He caught them in his arms, and slid them to the mattresses until he could no longer hold his arms up, and then stood there and permitted himself to break their way downward to the mattress till he was bleeding from nose, ears and mouth from those little fellows hitting him so hard on the chest. He fell from exhaustion and died before morning from loss of blood. He just gave his life for those children.

When the fire drove the boy-nurse from the ward upstairs, he slid down the rain pipe.

Of course the poor children were frightened almost to death, and nearly crazy.

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They scattered in every direction in an effort to get as far away from that horror as possible. Neighbors gathered them in and cared for them. They took a number of them to my father's home. Several who were so badly burned that they died a few days later. Among them was poor Pat Springs, son of Mr. and Mrs. Joel Springs, at Goodland. I'll never forget his screams and groans as he lay on a mattress out in our yard for a while. In the emergency, all beds were full and we were making room for all as fast as possible. It was about three o'clock in the morning when they got some of them there, and of course they kept on bringing them in. Pat had gotten out safely, when he returned to his room for some money his folks had sent him that day, I believe. As he came running out through the fire, his clothes caught on fire and they say he inhaled the flames.

There were no telephones in those days,. The only way to send a message was by a runner, so runners were sent out to the parents of the unfortunate children all over the country. They came, mostly horseback as that was the quickest way. No good roads then. It was 12 or 14 miles to Goodland, where Pat's parents lived. They got there about noon, with a hack, covered the back of it with bows and a sheet, and loaded him in, Dr.

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John, or another doctor there, gave him a shot in the arm to alleviate the pain, but even then his screams were heart rending. He died in a day or so.

Dr. W. N. John, now of Hugo, was house physician at the Academy. I don't remember the names of any of the others who were burned to death. Some were burned to ashes. They were picked up in shoe boxes and given to the heart broken parents who carried them, usually on horseback, sorrowfully to their homes for burial. Some of them were many miles away, away back in the mountains. Sometimes it would be just a few handful of little bones, and ashes, that would be all they could find of one.

It was due to the watchfulness of Professor Appleton that I did not burn, too. That night my uncle had given me some chewing gum he had bought at the store. It was while I was standing out on that hot roof, waiting to be helped down, when I thought of my gum and began to climb back through the window. When Professor Appleton saw me he caught me by my little gown and pulled me back. The roof of the porch was of sheet iron, and was so hot that some one had stood me on a pillow. It caught on fire and my feet were blistered before we got off of the roof.

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Green (Tubby) Walker, who lives out near Kent, spliced two ladders together and brought them around there and Professor Appleton started down with me in his arms. When nearly down, the building began to collapse, and he had to jump. We were the last ones out. He had used a small grass rope the kind that was used to tie around trunks to let the women down with till his hands were cut to the bones. His own wife and daughter happened to be away for a visit.

Some one had told my mother that everybody had burned, and she had gone from one faint into another, till Father placed me in bed beside her,. She had thought her "Baby" was among the dead. It was horrible, I can still see those little boys clinging to the larger boy, afraid to jump, and he'd have to tear them loose from him to pitch them down. But he saved all in his ward, and then slid down the rain pipe. I dream of it often even yet after 42 years.

My sister's son has a lovely home on the old site, Sometimes I visit there, but believe me I do not sleep much, and not up stairs at all.

The old barn is still standing. Just like it was. The land was allotted to my sister, Mrs. Howard Morris, of Soper, Oklahoma.

My father went to his store and passed out flour, sugar, coffee, and just anything that the neighbors needed to take care of the refugees till they could be taken to their homes. And of course cared for a lot of them himself.

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The dormitory for the big boys, the laundry house, nor out houses did not burn.

That was about 1895. The Academy was re-built and ready for use the next fall, and I believe Gabe E. Parker took it over, as Superintendent, but it burned again and was never re-built.

It might have been several years from the time it burned the first time, but anyway they were fumigating things, preparatory to beginning school and it caught fire by accident.

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