The editorial below appeared in the "Honorable and Mentionable" column of the July issue of Alumnus magazine (see cover above).

She was a magnificent old queen, dominating a campus and symbolizing a University. Thousands passed through her halls and learned to love her. For eighty-plus years she stood, noble and proud, confident that the burgeoning campus around her could not erode her position of eminence.

She was hard to bring down. Raging flames could gut her but could not topple her mighty walls. The razing crew found her a formidable foe. Her stone and brick, erected by careful craftsmen to stand for generations, yielded reluctantly to the steel of the headache ball. She groaned and shuddered in her final anguish, the roar of her falling extending on for days.

Her loss is not the death of an institution, nor even a lasting cripple. But it is a scar, deep and painful and permanent. It showed that day on the faces of students, faculty members, alumni, townspeople. It showed most of all on the face of a weary president who felt the loss in a most intimate way.

Old Main died hard—if in fact she can ever really die. For the coward or cowards who lit her flame our words are spare: pray for a "pure and gentle deed of mercy." Justice would indeed be severe.

—R.G.H.

Dear Alumni,

For those of us at any time in our lives associated with Southern Illinois University, the burning of Old Main last June 8 was a deep-felt, tragic loss. Old Main truly symbolized the University. It is difficult even yet to envision that serene section of the "old" campus without its stately tower pointing upward through the trees.

Old Main was a splendid building. Over the years, many thousands of students passed through its halls and learned to love it. Its loss is not alone the loss of the institution or even the campus community; it is a loss shared by alumni and friends of SIU across the nation and around the world.

For the benefit of those of you who are not current members of the SIU Alumni Association and thus do not receive Alumnus magazine, we are publishing this special issue of Alumni News which includes reprints of some of the material on the Old Main fire from the July issue of Alumnus. We feel that each of you will be interested in this report, especially for its historical value.

As you may already know, both a reward fund for information leading to apprehension and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the fire and a fund for a suitable memorial to Old Main have been established. The Alumni Services Office has been designated the depository for contributions to both.

Precise form of the Old Main memorial has yet to be determined; this information will be carried in various alumni publications as soon as it is available.

It is extremely difficult, of course, to find good in an experience so terrible as the wanton destruction of the most beloved of all our campus buildings. However, some of the most vivid scenes reported on June 8 were those of hundreds of students volunteering their courageous efforts throughout the day to help salvage what could be salvaged and to help fight the blaze itself.

This same spirit of common cause now seems to pervade the alumni body. Many, many persons have expressed sentiments indicating their personal desires to be a part of a memorial to Old Main. We are confident that alumni and friends of Southern Illinois University will respond wholeheartedly in support of this effort.

The negative effects of tragedy often are offset by the positive effects such an event can generate in the form of renewed concern and dedication. This, we hope and believe, will be the ultimate effect of the burning of Old Main.

Andrew H. Marce, President
SIU Alumni Association

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Old Main looked like this after an 1883 fire which could have proved disastrous for fledgling Southern Illinois Normal University. The building had been in use only nine years.

Early photograph shows the "new" Old Main, reconstructed on original foundation and ground floor walls after the fire of 1883. Reconstruction was completed in 1887.

The fire which struck down SIU's historic Old Main burned out of control for four hours, despite efforts of firemen from seven communities.

Much of the material on the lower floors was rescued from the burning building during early stages of the fire, primarily through efforts of hundreds of student volunteers.
Early on the morning of June 8, fire was discovered in Old Main, Southern Illinois University's oldest and most symbolic building. Despite quick response and great effort by firemen from Carbondale and a half-dozen other southern Illinois communities, the building was lost.

Word soon spread that arson was suspected. Firemen said three separate fires had been burning on the third floor at the same time that the major blaze was beginning to engulf the attic of the splendid old structure.

The following Wednesday, SIU President Delyte W. Morris told an afternoon commencement audience that investigating authorities had announced only minutes earlier their decision that the fire was deliberately set. In somber tones reflecting a deep sense of personal loss, the president went on to bid farewell to Old Main.

Destruction of Old Main resulted in the loss of two-dozen classrooms, offices of the English and history departments, the SIU Museum, a foreign language laboratory, a faculty lounge, and an attic rifle range. In all, the venerable old building housed nearly 72,000 square feet of floor space.

Personal loss among many faculty members and graduate students was heavy. Lost in the fire, for example, was one graduate student's only copy of a doctoral dissertation which had been three years in preparation. Grade books, graded and ungraded final examination papers, and exams yet to be given were lost.

Only the efforts of hundreds of student volunteers who helped remove material from the lower levels of the building in early stages of the fire—particularly valuable Museum exhibits—kept losses from being even greater. The students' "heroic" work drew high praise from Chancellor Robert W. MacVicar.

But Old Main was far more than a collection of classrooms and offices; its significance could not really be measured in square feet. Old Main was a landmark, the symbol of an institution. It had a history all its own.

For many years, Old Main was the University. Even as late as 1950 it had quartered seventy percent of the classes on campus. It had undergone extensive remodeling in recent years, but its outward face of red brick and weathered sandstone remained the same.

Old Main had tasted fire before. At mid-afternoon on November 26, 1883, a blaze broke out on the mansard floor of the building, then only nine years old. By sundown Old Main was a smoldering ruin. As in the more recent fire, much of the building's contents was saved by heroic efforts of student volunteers.

The 1883 fire could have been a catastrophe for then Southern Illinois Normal University. Before completion of its first decade of classes, the fledgling institution's only building lay in ruin. But students and faculty members determined to stay on. A crash community

A Landmark Falls

By Robert G. Hays, Editor, Alumnus
project raised $6,000 for temporary quarters.

The Illinois legislature in 1885 approved funds for reconstruction of Old Main. It was re-built from the first floor up, retaining original stonework. From completion in February of 1887 until that disastrous Sunday last month, Old Main stood as Dowager Queen of campus buildings.

President Morris expressed the feelings of countless persons at the evening commencement program three days after the fire.

“We have tied up in Old Main ninety-five years of love, affection, and penetration into the lives and hearts of thousands of people who have been in the building and been on this campus and taken away a bit of it with them in their hearts,” Dr. Morris said.

“The reactions that have come in from Old Main, of poignant sadness and regret, are very moving, and represent of course the kind of loss of something that’s died in everyone who had a spot of deep love for this building.”

Morris also cited the students who volunteered to help carry what could be saved from the burning building and also to help fight the fire:

“The spirit of these students exemplifies the kind of students that we have traditionally had in this University—the kind who treasure; those who see themselves as a part of it and desire to protect, defend, and sustain it.”

The president continued that plans for rebuilding Old Main again did not seem wise. "The fire was sufficiently hot," he said, "the wind was sufficiently strong . . . the internal burning was so great, that all the basic great timbers were destroyed, the walls weakened and cracked and bulged until it was deemed necessary by the specialists in fire protection that the upper levels be removed . . . ."

President Morris went on to explain that remains of the building would be leveled “piece by piece,” with all materials possible salvaged. He said much of this would be used in “a fitting memorial” to Old Main, after which other materials could be made available to those who had sufficient affection for the building to want them.

He invited contributions toward the memorial, designating the Alumni Office as depository.

“We’re doing this so that every person who has a feeling of a stake in Old Main and what it stood for, what it means to people and what it has meant to this school, this part of the state, will have a chance to—by your contribution—help with it and have a feeling that you’ve contributed when it comes about,” he said.

Then, President Morris announced a guaranteed reward of $10,000 for information leading to apprehension and conviction of the arsonist or arsonists responsible for the Old Main fire, contributions to the reward fund also to be accepted by the Alumni Office. The reward would be more if contributions exceeded $10,000.

“We feel it is important to know who committed the arson and why,” he said, “There’s one very clear and obvious reason, and I shall state it. It is quite obvious from reactions that are coming in that there are those, particularly upstate, who feel that in the climate of student unrest throughout the country that this is simply some bad-adjective student who has done it.

“I do not accept this thesis. I do not believe it to be true; it’s not the attitude I see in students on this campus. But it is necessary that we identify to make clear that this was not the case, because if people believe that students today do the kind of things that are bound up in arson—violence—then we are going to have, inevitably, restrictions placed upon the freedoms to which universities have been accustomed.

“And if a university does not have intellectual freedom, if it doesn’t have freedom of expression or freedom to study all the works of scholars all over the world, whatever they may be, it is no longer truly a university.”

To the graduates, Morris issued a final charge. “I can think of no group to whom it is more important to speak of the paramount, over-riding importance of this matter,” he said, “than to you who carry the label of this school.

“Help us keep it free. Help us keep it good. Help us keep it a place where young people may come and, as have you, study without restraint, investigate without barrier, express yourself without holding back, and have here a university of which you can always be proud for the rest of your life. It is going to be sullied in some degree from now on unless we clear it.”

At a meeting the following Friday, the SIU Alumni Association board of directors adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, the Association of Alumni and Former Students of Southern Illinois University, its members and board of directors, express their deep sorrow and tragic loss over the senseless act of the burning of Old Main, the historic symbol of our University.

Further, the Association condemns the act of arson and the person or persons responsible for it and commends the many students, faculty, administrators, firemen, and others who fought to save Old Main.

Finally, the Association invites contributions from the graduates, former students, students, faculty, and friends of the University to be used for the reconstruction of the building or the establishment of a fitting memorial to Old Main if reconstruction is determined to be impractical.

The next day was Alumni Day, and President Morris attended various sessions during the day. He reiterated before the Alumni Association Legislative Council the belief—based on extensive consultation with architectural and construction experts and others—that it would be impractical to attempt to rebuild Old Main.

He outlined again the reward and Old Main memorial funds, and invited both contributions and suggestions from the alumni body. Speaking at the Alumni Banquet that evening, he talked of campus turmoil around the world and called upon alumni to rally against tides of extreme reaction that could hurt basic freedoms important to higher education.

At its regular June meeting, the SIU board of trustees approved a formal resolution requesting replacement of the lost classrooms and other facilities through the Illinois Building Authority. Estimated cost is $4,988,000. An additional $738,000 was requested for razing, site restoration, and provision of temporary space.

Such action already had been initiated in the state legislature, in line with an established policy of self-insurance on state buildings.

Present plans call for space lost in Old Main to be replaced through an addition to the planned Humanities Building. Meanwhile, the University is faced with a severe shortage of classroom space. Classes scheduled for Old Main this summer were quickly shuffled to other campus locations, but the outlook for fall is cloudy.

At press time, no significant leads into the arson had been reported by investigating authorities. Their work goes on.

Work also continues at the site of Old Main—now an ugly, blackened scar on the face of a beautiful campus.