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The Hughes Hotel

For most people, the month of July is all about 4th of July picnics and fireworks galore. This year, I was thinking about a different kind of fireworks. Because of all the fires that happened on the 4th around Fresno and Clovis, my mind went to what was probably the most famous fire day in all of Fresno history...the day the Hughes Hotel was set aflame.

But let's first talk about the Hughes Hotel. Have you heard of it? The Hughes Hotel was built at the southwest corner of I street (which ultimately would be called Broadway) and Tulare Street in downtown Fresno. It was built in 1887 for the tidy sum of \$300,000. Thomas Hughes, a wealthy investor and real estate businessman of the late 1880's, and his brother built the hotel in the Victorian Renaissance Revival style, with 200 rooms, a dining room, a reading room, a billiard room, a saloon, and a steam laundry. The center of the hotel was a 100 by 100 foot open air courtyard. It was the largest and most opulent hotel between Los Angeles and San Francisco. It was the first building in Fresno to have an elevator, and first to have electric lighting in every room, which was powered by a power plant in the basement. It also was the first to offer telephones in each room.

Hughes invested in a horse drawn streetcar system (the predecessor to the Fresno Traction Company) just to have the street cars stop in front of his hotel.

For many years the Hughes Hotel hosted the apex of society. But after 1894, Hughes would go broke in the financial panic of that year, and would be forced to declare bankruptcy. In 1897, the Hughes Hotel was taken over by the San Francisco Theological Seminary who were some of Hughes creditors. After

that, the Hughes Hotel would never be the same. Year after year it fell further and further in quality, ultimately becoming a home for prostitutes and other unseemly characters.

In 1934 the hotel was renovated and modernized, losing the attic portion of the building and having its turrets removed. It was a sad new look for such a stately old building. But, it had a fancy new neon sign on a tower on its roof.

Fast forward to July 10, 1953. It had been hot in Fresno for several days, over 102 degrees. At 1:45 pm, a fire alarm (ultimately a three alarm) went off for the Hughes Hotel. Nine minutes later, at 1:54pm another alarm went off, this time at the Adams Hotel and Golden Hotel near Broadway and Kern Streets, half a block from the Hughes. At 2:06, Gottschalks Department store one block over at Fulton and Kern was ablaze. At 2:07, The Californian Hotel, behind Gottschalks was set on fire. At 2:29, the Sequoia Hotel, two buildings away from the Californian was on fire, followed at 2:40 by the Alta Apartments at Kern and M streets. At 3:27 the Brix Apartments at Fresno and M street were set on fire, followed by the First Christian Church at Tuolumne and N Streets at 3:49 pm. At 3:54 the Mission Hotel and the Roslyn Hotel, both on Broadway north of the Hughes Hotel, were both on fire. At 3:55 the Fine Arts Gallery one block over on Fulton Street near Merced St., was on fire, followed by the JC Penney building at Fulton and Tulare Streets at 5:19 pm!

One last fire was set at Hammer Field just before 6 pm.

The Fresno Fire Department was completely overwhelmed. Every off-duty fireman was called back into service. Firemen from throughout the valley were called to assist. The water system in Fresno was nearly completely useless. Every available firetruck was called into service, including several that were from the 1920's. Over 70 pieces of fire apparatus were on the scene, from Merced, Tulare, and Visalia. The biggest fire was at the Hughes Hotel, and it required several ladder trucks to help extract people from their rooms on the upper floors. The streets of Fresno were

literally awash with water and fire hoses, many looking like a huge bowl of spaghetti was dumped over.

The fire at the Californian Hotel was extinguished by hotel staff because no fire trucks were available to assist.

With the temperature at 102 degrees, 26 firemen were treated for smoke inhalation, heat exhaustion, and other heat or fire related injuries. Fortunately, no lives, either civilian or fire personnel were lost.

The Hughes Hotel was so badly damaged that it would be torn down, over \$300,000 in estimated damages in 1953 dollars. The Brix Apartments was badly damaged at an estimated \$120,000, the Fresno Christian Church basement was gutted to the cost of around \$10,000. The remainder of the fires caused minor damage to the various structures.

Theatres were closed, and every other public building was put under guard, as it was felt that the fires were deliberately set. The police and fire department did not want the arsonist to strike again during the night. As the fire investigators continued their work, they were certain it was all at the hand of an arsonist, who probably walked the entire route setting fires as he went. At some points he may have stopped and watched the firemen arrive to put out his handiwork, as the timing seems to indicate some extra time spent between certain locations.

Surely, the arsonist was caught and punished, right? Well, the night of the fire, seven suspects were questioned, and they were released. After that, there was no news. No one was seen setting the fires? It was the middle of the day! People were out and about, doing things, in a busy downtown area. You mean to tell me that no one saw anything??? I find that hard to believe.

And then I read a theory that, although unproven, makes perfect sense to me. The arsonist was supposedly the son of a high ranking Fresno official, who was seen starting the fires.

Witnesses were told to keep their mouths shut. The arsonist was sent to a mental facility near the Central California coast, where he was kept for something like 40 years before being released due to old age.

And what of the Hughes Hotel? Well, it was torn down after the fire. It became a parking lot for many, many years. But now it finds new life around third base and left field of Grizzlies Stadium downtown.