

The Night the River turned red

By

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An explosion of flame! Popping like the staccato of firecrackers! One blast following another! The block from Prince Street to 205 Court Avenue was an eternity away! Mother's there! Mother! Not Mother! Not this way! First, thoughts of Mother and then the mill. The quickness of friends hastened with heroic breath to have Mother on her way out of the house before I even ran the block from Prince to Court! Immediate mushrooming of red flames engulfed Sevierville...our town....surely it would not be. Miles of hose laid quickly by our friends, the firemen.

On this night everyone was a hero! Jim Atchley was in command of 105 "Brave Men" laboring to save lives and homes....our town. Scared men, young men, alert men some we knew...many we did not know. Our thanks were blazed into their minds as we stood by watching their courage.

*Big Jim Atchley stood mighty tall
That night they saved the town.
When the rivers that forks turned red.
Yes! The river turned red just where it forked!*

The women at home were very brave to allow their partners to fight this fire. Many a tear was shed in fear! The TV stations interrupted to tell of the fire. It told friends and family "news" that we were not able to carry. There are so many things that flash into my mind about that night. Joe Thomas...so soon after burying his father, Lee Thomas. We brought Lee to town. We brought Lee to town with us in '34 from Boyd's Creek and Oak City Milling Company! Always our quiet friend and miller! Mother protected in a blanket at the funeral home on a cot! Many women would have been hysterical...not Mother. At eighty years, she still has more "calm" than all the rest of us put together! Our friends at Rawlings accepted Mother and the furnishings of her house within an hour's time. The Rawlings and the Catletts have always been true neighbors. Many changes have taken place on our street since our friendship began years ago.

Most of us were calling on God to keep the men safe from harm as they fought the blaze.

*Yes! Every man was a hero that night
Every wife and child was a hero that night
And into the next day.*

Maybe these prayers stilled the breeze and calmed the hands of the heroes on that October 20th in 1980.

We have always felt that our mill belonged to the farmers as they had invested so much into it throughout their lives. Many people have loved the invitation, "Come on, kids! Let's take the corn to the mill!" Many of those faces appeared to me that night of nights

*That the river turned red
And the courthouse stood strong
Because EVERY man was a hero!*

Isn't it strange how tragedy brings out the best in people? Makes them close and caring for each other? Did our town need this? Is this why it happened? I don't know. It's too soon! I just know that

*The rivers turned red
The night the town was saved.*



Luckily if it can be termed luck, the county court was meeting so Jimmie was there in moments! Frankie asked a man at the White Store... a stranger...to bring her because she knew she couldn't drive in the traffic. Her records were saved! But Oh! 40 years gone!

Marie, Patsy and Johnny were there as if on winged feet. Isn't it odd how nature gives you extra energy when necessary? Even the spectators were brave as they stayed out of the firemen's way.

*Yes! Jim Atchley stood mighty brave and tall on October 20
When every man, woman and child was a hero.
And the water in the rivers turned red
And the courthouse steeple glistened with reflecting fire!*

As the scorching fire told the passing of time by the Courthouse clock it occurred to me that the traffic on Court Avenue was orderly and respectful. All around Sevierville, the Policemen, the

Rescue Squad, and the Sheriff's deputies must have been skillfully handling their jobs because each seemed to keep his responsibilities manned to the hilt. I'm sure traffic control must have been tremendously hard, but mostly those of us were just observant of the skill of each participant in this awesome struggle. Our fears were a shift of wind or even a death! But, No!

*Because if ever there was a night
When EVERY man was a hero.
It was so...on the night that Sevierville was saved.
When the rivers that fork turned red
And the steeple of the Courthouse reflected the time
Of a passing era.
Yes every man was a "HERO"
As the people watching from the hills around saw
That the rivers turned "red"
And they cried with tears of fear.*

So many have already left heart prints on our minds: Russell, Daddy, H.A., Ed Thomas, Lee Thomas, Hollis...farmers who spat on the pot-bellied stove. The tobacco juice sizzled as it dried; farmers propped back against the counter around the red heat of that pot-belly. Many of those faces were in my thoughts during the blaze. My mind recalled Russell's fireman's uniform retired to the wooden box overlooking the beloved trucks at the fire department. He always had to "man" the radio after his first heart attack. He would rather have been a hero on the scene. But his friends, the firemen, helped me by standing tall in their red coats that day at Shiloh! All these thoughts came rushing back as I watched those firemen work together that night.

Cindy, Johnny B., the dog Blackie and I walked a million steps while the daylight came so the wreckage could be viewed. My grief was so great I thought my heart would shatter until a very odd happening occurred. While we stood in the yard at Mother's, every time that beautiful new fire truck called "the squirt" made an arch over the debris of blackened smoke...if you looked at the right angle toward the flag, there underneath the arch of water was the most beautiful rainbow through which you could see the Courthouse stately still and the red, white and blue of its flag. This beautiful scene came many, many times that day. Was it a promise to us as in the days of Noah...a promise of better days ahead? For those of us who saw the dramatic scene, it really was a promise! A mystery not quite solved but surely a promise!!! A promise for all of us.



*Yes Jim Atchley stood strong and tall!
In the town of Sevierville where the rivers fork.
That night the sky of red met the waters
And became one at the foot of the Smokies!*

Our family is grateful to every friend, fireman, his family and especially Jim Atchley.

*For that night they stood mighty tall
And EVERY man was a "hero."*