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The Best Fire He ever Saw

Riley Froh
THE BEST FIRE HE EVER SAW

by Riley Froh

Although his solitary means of transportation was a rusty bicycle and he worked only with a Bic lighter and a roll of toilet paper, a lone arsonist came close to wiping out the historic business district of Luling, Texas, by igniting the biggest fire in the town’s history on the last day of June 2000. The firebug set separate blazes in the three-block area about 2:30 a.m. and succeeded in destroying five businesses and damaging five others before firemen from Luling and eleven surrounding towns brought the conflagration under control.

Back in 1874 these three blocks were the town, for Luling had sprung up when the Southern Pacific temporarily ended its westward stretch in 1873 while workmen constructed a bridge across the San Marcos River. It took a year to complete the structure. Luling came to life in 1874 as a railhead community where the old wagon freight road from Chihuahua, Mexico, to San Antonio ended and where a branch of the Chisholm Trail joined the main path north to Lockhart and on to Kansas. There was no resident lawman until the 1880s, and Luling for a decade was a place of frontier justice where saloons outnumbered business establishments two to one, and as Mark Twain quipped about Virginia City, there was “some talk of building a church.” Professional gamblers and amateur card players destroyed each other with derringers and six-guns while dance-hall girls looked on or dove for cover. The den of iniquity run by Rowdy Joe Lowe sported the worst reputation of all, for Monte Joe, John Wesley Hardin, Ben Thompson, and his brother Billy dropped by occasionally. Pistol shots rang out so frequently up and down the single street that Luling became known as “The Toughest Town in Texas.”

The recent fire obliterated much of this priceless history. Nineteenth-century buildings, including the old Bowers Opera Hall, went up in smoke in that senseless act. It had been years since Luling’s pioneer citizens had enjoyed various entertainments in the old structure, but the Hall served as headquarters for the Luling Watermelon Thump, and irreplaceable records and memorabilia from the annual celebration burned. Who knows what was lost in the antique store two blocks down, but some of the valuable items on sale there were older than the town. On the positive side, firemen saved the Oil Museum, located in the historic Walker Brothers General Store that operated for a century before closing in 1975. The nearby discount drug store, which opened its doors under a different name in the 1880s, was also spared. It is a wonder how much survived the arsonist’s torch. The whole of the main street could have been consumed, and this is what the criminal had in mind. Luling police apprehended the arsonist a few days later as he tried to set fire to a business on the other side of town. He is now “doing time” in a Texas prison.

Local authorities also recently arrested two Luling volunteer firemen for setting fire to an abandoned grocery store located two blocks north of the old downtown district that fronts Davis Street. Their trial is pending, but at least

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they helped put out the fire they started. Apparently they do not simply admire a good blaze all that much – they just want to fight fires.

One does not have to be a pyromaniac to take pleasure in watching a sensational fire. A burning building draws a crowd. It is true, however, that some individuals relish the entertainment more than others. Luling’s greatest benefactor and most famous citizen, Edgar B. Davis, was just such a person.

Born in Brockton the same year Luling sprang to life, 1873, Davis grew up in a home where the old New England Puritan work ethic was very much alive. The family had made a modest living either farming or working in the local shoe factories for a generation. Edgar dreamed of Harvard, but financial circumstances determined that he would enter the shoe business after high school. He was a powerful physical specimen and his burning ambition to succeed matched his size. He began work running a leather sewing machine for the Walkover Shoe Company in 1891. By 1903 he was a vice president of the company and a millionaire.

He left Walkover when the president’s nephew was promoted to a position Davis believed he deserved. Despondent over the nepotism, he booked passage for an around-the-world tour in 1907 as a cure for depression. On this voyage he learned of the large fortunes British and Dutch rubber planters were making in the Far East. He studied the business, taught himself the basics, and upon his return to America he sold executives of the United States Rubber Company on the idea of owning their own plantations. Top leaders in U.S. Rubber hired Davis to develop and manage the first American-owned rubber plantations in Sumatra. Davis was so successful that company directors offered him a vice-presidency, but Davis resigned in 1919 because he believed U.S. Rubber Company should develop more plantations than the company would allow. Already a legend in international business circles in his own time, Davis had also earned a reputation as an eccentric. For instance, he refused to wear protective footwear against the deadly rice snake common to rubber growing properties. No one had ever survived a bite from one of these serpents; yet Davis strode about in his dress shoes. Furthermore, his generosity with the three million dollars he had earned in rubber made him something of a legendary figure in New York. He had a compulsion to share his wealth with colleagues, bellhops, taxi drivers, waiters and others.

Edgar Davis’ fateful rendezvous with Luling began in 1919 when his brother Oscar asked him to investigate some oil leases Oscar had bought sight unseen in Texas. Edgar Davis arrived in Luling, found that geologists had declared the area non-productive, and determined that he was destined to prove the experts wrong. Oscar gladly sold his little brother the leases and Edgar employed drilling contractors. Six dry holes later Edgar Davis was flat broke. Always a promoter, he persuaded the drillers and roughnecks to work without pay to put down the seventh hole, Rios #1. He hit oil on August 9, 1922, the Luling Field became a major producer, and it still provides oil to this day. Various companies have made millions of dollars on that field in the last eighty years.
Davis sold his holdings to Magnolia Petroleum Company in 1926 for twelve-and-one-half million dollars. It was the largest oil deal in U.S. history at the time. The profit sharing he practiced with his employees was unmatched in business history at that period. The two city parks, the golf course, and the million-dollar demonstration and experimental farm he bequeathed to the city of Luling are monuments to the man to this day.

Adopting Luling as his hometown, Davis continued to wildcat for oil in Texas until his death in 1951. He never married, never dated, and business seems to have been his sole mistress. Although he found other fields and made further fortunes, he showed the character of the true wildcatter by forever sinking his new money into the quest for more and more oil. He was not always successful, but he continued his eccentric spending habits, and his fortune was small when he died.

Curiously, although Davis sincerely loved Luling and would have mourned the loss of the historic structures in the recent fire, he would have enjoyed watching the inferno once it got started. He was fascinated by the consuming appetite of a large and destructive fire such as the one that nearly leveled downtown Luling in the summer of 2000.

Edgar B. Davis, a noted eccentric, was certainly no arsonist, but he was drawn compulsively to the scene of a fire, as are many people. In his long life in many locales, he was known to have chased fire trucks through the streets of Boston, New York, and San Antonio — anywhere there was a large blaze.

Although best known as a wildcatter and business promoter, Davis had a multifaceted personality with a complex nature. He delighted in putting on extravagant and ostentatious displays. For example, he once staged the biggest picnic in Luling’s history, openly inviting all the residents of three counties. He also provided fireworks to the public at every opportunity when he could afford such gestures. The correspondence between Davis and pyrotechnicians in his personal papers is quite extensive and revealing. Davis spent as much effort planning a “big bang” as he did putting together a million-dollar oil deal. Perhaps a key to his fascination for fires in general was tied to his great esteem for fireworks.

And perhaps it is fitting that the powerful conflagration that Davis called “the best fire I ever saw” occurred in his adopted town of Luling, the town that had renamed Main Street as Davis Street in his honor in 1926 in recognition of all he had done for the community. This particular combustion leveled the old wooden landmark First Baptist Church of Luling in 1938. Davis admitted that a sensational blaze that destroyed The Princess, Luling’s “picture show,” in 1947, came in a close second on his list of all-time great fires, but he always ranked the one at the church as the “best.”

There was something Davis did not know about this unfortunate incident that was the reason the flames were so spectacular. Arson was suspected, although why this suspicion was never investigated remains a mystery to this day. More than likely, local law-enforcement officials believed it was easier to
chalk the event up to accident or negligence rather than pursue the one clue that might lead to embarrassing revelations, particularly if some prominent citizens were involved.

The church burst into flames shortly after noon on an early fall Sunday. Members were sitting down to Sunday dinner, the noon meal in the South, after attending the morning service, when they heard the explosion. The weathered, wooden planks and timbers seemed to burn all at once as one great pyre. Flames leaped high into the sky spontaneously and from all directions. This was not a typical building fire.

Later, investigators sifting through the ruins found a space-heater jet turned fully open. The entire building had filled with gas before a pilot light on the far side of the structure touched off the violent outburst of noise and flame and the church ignited all at once. Yet authorities never discussed arson and no one conducted any formal inquiry into possible incendiarism. The excitement dwindled to an assumption of accidental fire.

But was it an accident? Rumor has it that it was not, and the circumstantial evidence is strong that either a single racist or an organization devoted to intolerance purposely destroyed the First Baptist Church. The suspected motive for arson was obvious at the time: a group from one of Luling's black congregations was going to use the baptistery after the night service on the day of the fire. Someone probably took matters into his own hands and prevented the cooperation between blacks and whites, for prevailing attitudes were strong that blacks should be "kept in their place." Any deviation from that norm was perceived as a threat to all whites. Moreover, the indulgence toward those who took illegal actions to maintain the status quo was customary throughout the South.

In short, several people suspected someone purposely burned the church and yet no one said anything. It was a social phenomenon, one of those peculiar situations one found in Texas in those days, and racial attitudes at the time dictated silence on the question. Besides, in the convoluted logic of the period the consensus often prevailed that the victim brought on the trouble. If the church had simply refused to allow the blacks to use the facilities, all would have been well. Doing the "right" thing in this case meant doing the "wrong" thing.

Given the segregation common to the times, it speaks well of the First Baptist leadership that they granted this request to allow the use of the sanctuary, for racial segregation in churches was just as strong as any Jim Crow law on the books. The blacks did not use the white church that night, and a promising beginning of better race relations was cut short.

What gave the leadership of the two churches the idea that the sharing of white facilities with black parishioners would work in the face of the strange cultural conditions of the day? Surely individuals on both sides knew there would be strong disapproval. I would suggest that the remarkable presence of Edgar B. Davis in Luling indirectly prompted this attempted break with tradition.
Davis arrived in Luling in the 1920s on his first trip to the deep South. A world traveler who had seen many groups of diverse peoples thrown together in remote and alien places on the globe, Davis was shocked by the legal racial segregation in Texas, and he was confounded by the intensity of the feelings dictated by custom and tradition. The exclusion of blacks from public facilities startled him. He and his friend and assistant, David Figart, were disturbed that even the breaking of bread between whites and blacks was forbidden by long-entrenched social practice. Cafes catered to whites only. Even in Thomas Wilson’s grocery store, where long tables were set up in one large room for customers who wanted to dine on the best pit barbecue in the county, the blacks sat at back tables reserved for them exclusively. Segregation existed in even the most informal situations.

Realizing that he could not change a century of habitual practice overnight, Davis chose to operate within the system. He made distinct efforts to end the exclusion of minorities with a form of equalization that really was proportionate, unlike the “separate but equal” facilities in public transportation and schools which was anything but equal. When he donated a clubhouse for Luling’s white citizens, he constructed a separate one for the black population. When he staged the biggest free picnic in history, he held an identical one on the black side of town. In his business dealings, the formula for his profit sharing made no distinction whatsoever between white and black employees.

Davis stepped into situations where no one else even noticed the unintended inconvenience to some of Luling’s black citizens. For example, invoking the right of eminent domain, Works Progress Administration officials moved six families from land needed for the construction of a new primary school. The homes vacated were rather run-down, so reimbursement was small. Davis personally financed much better homes for these black families at six per cent interest. These houses still stand in Luling as little-known monuments to an enlightened Yankee who was disturbed by cold-hearted government bureaucrats.

Surely these measures on behalf of the downtrodden made some positive impression on Luling’s citizenry, raised the consciousness level, and illuminated the wrongs being done. I know Davis’ markedly different actions affected me as an impressionable ten-year-old when, in his dignified way, he called attention to racial injustice. One experience stands out in my memory.

My mother, Inez Griffin, was Davis’ long-time secretary, and in 1948 she had been to New York City and New England on an extended vacation. She was returning by train to Austin, and Davis invited my sister Janell and me to accompany him to pick her up. Grant White, his black chauffeur, dropped us off at a swank restaurant, and Davis, with great courtesy and tact, asked his driver if could find a nice place to eat while we dined in style. White said it was not too good. Davis was most apologetic, expressing regret about a custom that separated a group that could have
remained together. I remember being impressed by Davis' questioning of a society that I had taken for granted. Surely, such gestures over a period of time had an effect, possibly even indirectly influencing a group of deacons to permit the use of white church facilities for a black baptismal service.

There is other evidence that many Luling residents tempered their customary bigotry in other areas involving social conditions and the rights of minorities. For example, Jewish families always enjoyed positions of prominence and acceptance in the community. Relations were quite amicable, and when a well-known San Antonio rabbi delivered the funeral oration for the last of these old-time settlers at the Jewish cemetery – located, incidentally, in the black section of town known locally as “The Flat” – he pointed out that Luling had been as free of anti-Semitism as any city in Texas. This was an important distinction in which local citizens could take great pride.

The general degree of racism in Luling, when compared to other cities throughout Texas, emerges as less harsh. The Lone Star State was the most dangerous place for blacks in the former Confederacy, according to James Weldon Johnson and Walter White, who compiled statistics state-by-state for their anti-lynching lobbying efforts in Washington between 1910 and 1920. Mobs in Texas led the nation in particularly gruesome acts such as the burning of victims alive, a hideous ceremony often conducted in front of large crowds. The people of Luling never lynched anyone, but this is not to say that Luling’s institutional segregation patterns were not humiliating, as, indeed, they were intended to be, or that these conditions did not act as a steady and effective oppression. In order to maintain the social distinctions demanded by the times, separate facilities were monuments to inequality.

As a fair-minded and moral man, Edgar B. Davis did much to call attention to the imbalance. The Northside clubhouse was not as large as the one for whites on the South end of town, but size of population ratios were represented by the disparity. The important thing is that Davis addressed the issues and made the gestures. Many modern critics of this day and age have insisted that people such as Davis did very little by recent standards. This judgment is not historically accurate, since it rates the past by measurements that are modern. Actually, Davis and others like him stand out as enlightened individuals by the standards of their own day. Any fair assessment of Davis’ equalitarian actions with an honest appraisal of conditions in the 1920s gives him high marks, for the early displays of humane progress between the races first entered Luling society by way of Edgar B. Davis.

However, the politics of race were not on his mind when he gazed in rapt attention as the First Baptist Church of Luling, Texas, literally went up in flames. The forces of blind hatred that he detested had caused the blaze, but to Davis, who never suspected foul play in the show, it remained to his dying day the best fire he ever saw.
EPILOGUE

As a descendent of original settlers of Luling, I grew up hearing tales about the community’s colorful past as it progressed from the “Toughest Town in Texas” to a rip-roaring oil-boom town. Whispered stories about the probable deliberate burning of the First Baptist Church also fascinated me.

I knew the legendary figure Edgar B. Davis personally, for my mother Inez Griffin was his trusted, long-time secretary. When I wrote Davis’ biography in 1980, I included his fascination with fires, but I did not analyze the question of church arson. Watching my hometown nearly burn to the ground in the summer of 2000 prompted me to write this account from memory of a little-known episode in Texas history. The arrest and trial of the modern-day arsonist received extensive coverage in several major Texas newspapers in July and August of 2000.