

## We Didn't Start The Fire: The Lehman Hall Fire and Other Fires in Hinman History

*We didn't start the fire  
It was always burning  
Since the world's been turning  
We didn't start the fire  
No we didn't light it  
But we tried to fight it.*

*-Billy Joel  
"We Didn't Start The Fire"*

It has been the great luck of this residential community that very few fires have occurred here. Unfortunately for Hinman, the greatest blaze in the history of not only Hinman College but all of Binghamton University occurred in the fall of 1978 within Lehman Hall. This inferno would cause large amounts of damage, but hurt no one seriously or permanently. It would forever be a textbook case for Binghamton students on why they should take every fire alarm seriously and always shut their door before they leave their room. More than that, it would be forever seared into the memories of those who lived through it. The people who lived in Lehman Hall, and every Hinmanite of that era, would forever remember where they were and what they were doing at the time of Lehman Hall fire.

As early as 1970 Hinman had been having problems with fires and the fire alarm systems in the buildings. In the December 8, 1970, issue of *The West Harpur Other*, a series of false fire alarms were reported in Hinman. Apparently, it was becoming a popular prank for people to pull the fire alarm when there was no fire. The large number of these false alarms occurring led to complacency on the part of residents, many of whom did not even bother to leave the buildings. Around this time a Christmas tree in Cleveland Hall caught fire, but when the alarm went off, not a single person left the building. Luckily, the fire was quickly contained and no one was hurt.<sup>1</sup> This is an early example of the complacency and the "it can't happen to me" attitude that many residents of Hinman possessed concerning fires. While for the next eight years there would be

only small fires that were contained with little if any damage, this early report was a dark harbinger of things to come in the Fall of 1978.

October 20, 1978, started off like any typical Friday night. Most residents of Lehman Hall were either preparing for a night out on the town or had gone out already. Those that did not were planning on a quiet, relaxing evening in. Absolutely no one planned on what would happen next.

At 9:51 p.m. fire broke out in Lehman's first floor lounge on the north or A-side of the building and an alarm was sounded. Moments later campus security responded and discovered a quickly growing blaze in the first-floor lounge. One of the first responders that evening was Gary Brown, a patrol officer with University Law Enforcement (the precursor to University Police). At the time of the Lehman Hall fire, Gary L. Brown was a young patrolman with the University Law Enforcement Division (ULED).<sup>\*</sup> His career would see many changes in university law enforcement including the issuing of firearms to officers (a contentious issue at the time). That night Brown had been in the Fine Arts Building on a special assignment. Over his radio, he heard news of a fire alarm going off in Lehman Hall. After monitoring his radio for a time he soon realized that the fire was rapidly getting out of control and he responded on foot from the Fine Arts Building to Lehman Hall as quickly as he could. Upon arriving at the scene, he saw heavy smoke coming out of the first floor windows. He quickly realized that this was not going to be an ordinary night.<sup>2</sup>

The fire department was called and some of the campus security officers heroically entered the building searching for people who may have been incapacitated by the thick smoke. About twenty minutes later, units from the Binghamton, Johnson City and Vestal Fire

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<sup>\*</sup> At the time of the writing of this chapter, Brown had achieved the rank of Lieutenant in the Binghamton division of the New York State University Police Department (UPD).

Departments responded and courageous firefighters strapped on their oxygen tanks and dove into the fire to search for people who might not have been able to evacuate quickly enough.<sup>3</sup>

As the fire trucks rolled up in front of Lehman Hall so too did Harpur's Ferry, the campus ambulance service, preparing to treat the victims. Luckily, the worst injuries were relatively minor smoke inhalation. Fifteen minutes later the Red Cross arrived on the scene to administer aid. "Over thirty qualified first aid workers were present before the ambulance arrived, but no-one was seriously injured."<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after the fire broke out and the emergency had vehicles arrived at the scene, on- and off-campus media flocked to document the inferno. WHRW, the campus radio station, temporarily suspended regular programming to bring live coverage of the fire to listeners. Steve Wertheim was broadcasting from Lehman Hall within minutes after fire broke out. Wertheim and his fellow WHRW news staff found out later that every radio station in Binghamton was listening in to WHRW for updates on the fire. Almost immediately after the fire was suppressed, allegations from both students and firefighters arose that Wertheim's coverage of the fire was far too sensational. Matthew Beck, WHRW's program director, defended his reporter by saying that they were constantly reminding listeners that the authorities had everything under control. In addition the WHRW station was flooded with calls from people offering food, clothing and other forms of assistance to the residents of Lehman Hall, who were increasingly being referred to as refugees.<sup>5</sup>

Many residents of Lehman had no idea what was going on until it was nearly too late. Barrie Hirsch and Meredith Savitt were hanging out in Hirsch's first floor suite when the fire broke out. Neither was aware that anything was going on until an alarm sounded and they opened the suite door to be confronted by a choking wall of thick smoke. Hirsch and Savitt were

able to grope their way through the blinding smoke to the side exit and they made their way out of the building and onto the Hinman Quad, where they saw other first-floor Lehman residents breaking windows in their suites so that they could escape the licking flames. Jack Davidoff was a third-floor Lehman resident as well as an equipment coordinator for Harpur's Ferry. Davidoff, like virtually every other resident in the hall initially believed it to be just another drill, so he lingered a moment in his suite. By the time he opened his door, thick smoke had already enveloped even the third floor of the hall. The smoke billowed out of the elevator shaft and the vents and made its way up the building's stairwells. Davidoff, like many others, felt his way down the stairs through the blinding and choking smoke to safety.<sup>6</sup>

Keith Balter was on the second floor at the time of the fire. He reported that there was smoke long before any alarm was triggered and no alarm went off until he and an RA went downstairs to investigate and discovered the blaze. Balter evacuated the building at first, then joined with some of the campus security police and reentered the building to search for residents who may have been trapped by the fire. As they approached the first floor they were blocked by a wall of smoke. They then decided to try to circle around the fire by crossing through the basement. They were stopped this time by the extreme heat, a heat so intense that walls around them began to drip and melt. This forced them to leave the building and wait for the firefighters.<sup>7</sup>

Susan Love, who was the President of Lehman Hall at the time, recalled shortly after the fire that when many of the students heard the alarm they refused to leave. Many of them groaned at the prospect of another fire drill and said that they simply could not be bothered by the tiresome practice. A very short time later, though, someone smelled smoke and Love and the

others realized that this time there was no drill. Love led a group of others around to many of the suites shouting that the fire was real and that everyone needed to evacuate immediately.<sup>8</sup>

Even though most of the residents in the building were out that evening, people still had to be evacuated, including two female residents who were trapped on the third floor of the building. A ladder was raised by Vestal firefighters who quickly rescued the two women before they could be overcome by the thickening smoke. Neither one was seriously hurt. They were given oxygen, but did not have to go to the hospital for additional treatment.<sup>9</sup>

Frightening and chaotic though the fire was, the management of the emergency by the Hinman resident assistants, professional staff, and its hall and area government helped make the situation better. Allan Eller, the Coordinator of Hinman, remembered the fire vividly. That night a fraternity was hosting a stag film in Lecture Hall One, so he and some of his friends decided to go see the movie. While they were watching the film someone came into the Lecture Hall and announced that one of the dorms was on fire. Allan asked which dorm was on fire. The messenger replied that it was one of the dorms right across the street, meaning Hinman. Immediately, Allan leapt from his seat and sprinted back to Hinman to survey the situation and to decide what to do next to help the beleaguered residents.<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Lecture Hall would have to be evacuated because of a fire set in the classroom wing.

Eric Pomerantz, a senior and three-year resident of Lehman as well as President of HCC, remembers the fire vividly. The night that the fire broke out he was studying for the LSAT exam in the Hinman Commons, of which he was also a night manager. While he was studying someone came in and told him that the building was on fire. Eric lived on the third floor of the A-wing, the same side that the fire was on. At the time he had no idea exactly where the fire had started or how bad it would be. Eric would help the RA's move the Lehman Hall evacuees

toward Cleveland and safer ground and helped perform a head count to see if everyone had gotten out safely. This was very difficult to do because so many people had gone out that Friday night.<sup>11</sup> Jim Greenlees also was on shift that night as a manager at the Hinman Commons. He remembers seeing a light and upon going out to investigate saw that the building was on fire. He saw the flames shooting out of the first floor lounge window and licking over the roof.<sup>12</sup>

The fire burned intensely hot and spread rapidly. It reached its hottest point in the northwest corner of the first-floor lounge. The fire was estimated to reach temperatures between 800 and 1100 degrees Fahrenheit. It was so hot that it melted the metal fixtures in the lounge and the hall. By the time the fire trucks arrived, flames were already leaping out from the floor toward the ceiling of the first floor. Thick, billowing smoke was beginning to encompass not only the first floor but also the second and third floors of that side of the building. Luckily, the fire was extinguished about two minutes after the hoses were turned on and water was applied to the flames.<sup>13</sup>

At first it seemed that tragedy had been narrowly averted and that everyone could begin to calm down. For the residents and staff of Hinman College as well as for the firefighters and officers of campus security that was not to be the case. Within a half hour of the blaze in Lehman hall, small fires broke out on bulletin boards in Smith and Roosevelt Halls as well as in the Fine Arts Building and the Lecture Hall. These were quickly contained and no major damage was sustained. Yet shortly after midnight, firefighters were called to combat blazes in two dumpsters at the Holiday Inn-Arena. This was approximately at the same time that some of the displaced residents of Lehman Hall decided to go to the Holiday Inn for the evening. Many students were disturbed and greatly upset that they had left the scene of one fire and had entered into another one. The fire in Lehman Hall appeared suspicious enough, but the subsequent fires

around the rest of campus along with the fire in downtown Binghamton led authorities to their worst possible fear: that there was an arsonist on the loose.<sup>14</sup>

At midnight, university administrators including President Clifford Clark and Vice President for Student Services Dudley “Doug” Woodard met with the Vestal Police Department and campus security to discuss what would occur during the rest of the weekend. It was agreed that given the severity of the fire in Lehman along with the numerous smaller fires that occurred both on campus and at the Holiday Inn, a 24-hour watch would be commenced until a thorough investigation into the fire could be done.<sup>15</sup> While mattresses and blankets were being gathered in Smith and Roosevelt Halls, a state of fear began to grip the student body following the rumors that arson was to blame for the fire. Several residents hastily packed small bags with some valued possessions and others slept fully clothed ready to evacuate their buildings at a moment’s notice. RA’s made sure that doors and windows were locked and that dorm patrols were organized to report and deter suspicious activity.<sup>16</sup>

Outside, residents of Lehman Hall still milled about as Hinman staff members desperately tried to perform an accurate head count. In the Hinman Dining Hall an information booth was setup to keep the residents informed of what was going on. At 11:30 p.m. it was announced that around 1 a.m. students would in small groups be allowed to return and retrieve essentials, though the first floor would have to wait till 4:30 a.m. to give the fire marshals time to complete their investigation. Once the fire was extinguished and the initial traumas had subsided, boredom began to set in. Some students intently watched as fire crews shoveled away some of the debris while others swapped crude jokes about whether the fire would be charged to their housing damage deposits. It was not until 1:30 a.m. that they were notified that students would be allowed back in for a few minutes so they could collect some essential or valuable items from

their rooms. Upon reentering the building some students noticed that their belongings and their rooms, aside from having a heavy odor of smoke, were not damaged severely. They had shut their room and suite doors before they had left, and this had been just enough to prevent the flames from entering into their rooms and destroying their property. Others who had left their doors open lost near everything they owned to the inferno.<sup>17</sup>

Inside everything was covered in so much black soot that it was difficult to tell what had been the door and what has been the wall. The extreme heat blistered both paint and wallpaper and metal exit signs and fixtures in the tub room had been bent and melted. Most of the carpeting had been consumed by the flames right down to the concrete. Where the doors had been left opened the smoke and soot ruined clothes and melted refrigerators, typewriters, bottles and dishes. The smoke level had been just an inch off the floor because bright new paint (the floor had been repainted just a few days previous) could be seen exactly one inch from the floor.<sup>18</sup>

The first order of business following the blaze was to figure out a temporary housing solution for the displaced Lehman residents. After meeting with university administration, Allan Eller gave the roughly 62 displaced residents of the second and third floor three options. First, they could stay in Hinman and move into other suites and receive a per week refund for being in a tripled room. Second, they could go off campus and be sent a weekly pro-rated refund. Third, they could be asked to be placed in doubles with resident assistants or resident directors with no refund. This was the short-term solution for the displaced residents of the second and third floors who were expected to be able to return to Lehman Hall within 10 and 14 days. The long-term solution for the residents of the first floor where the fire started would be more complicated. They were told that they would be placed in the nearby Colonial Inn and that their refunds would

be spent to cover the cost of housing them there. The Colonial Inn had rates that were usually higher than the student housing fee, but the proprietors of the Inn agreed that they would house the students for the reduced rate and suffer a loss. After a closed-door session all of the residents of the first floor, with the exception of one, agreed to be relocated to the Colonial Inn.<sup>19</sup> While the students who were tripled or moved off campus were supposed to get refunds, some reports state that students received no compensation from the university and were stuck footing the bill for living off campus or were crammed into triples at the regular housing rate.<sup>20</sup>

In the aftermath of the fire many questions emerged. First was the practical question for those who had lost property in the fire: would the university cover the cost of their burned property? The answer to that was no. While the university fire insurance covered the damage sustained to the building, it did not cover students' personal property. Some of the students were covered by their parents' homeowners' insurance, but some were not and were completely wiped out.<sup>21</sup>

The other question that filtered up out of the ashes of the fire was of course the question on everyone's mind: how did the fire start? Since the very beginning, with all of the fires that had occurred around campus that evening, arson was immediately suspected. However, the identity of the arsonist was up in the air. One theory centered around Vincent Bugliosi. Bugliosi was the prosecuting attorney in the Charles Manson case and was giving a lecture on campus the evening that the fire broke out. Some theorized that supporters of Manson were trying to either get at Bugliosi or at the very least make a statement about the case itself.<sup>22</sup> That rumor was quickly quashed as new information surrounding the Lehman Hall fire arose.

The police investigating the case were tight-lipped to the media about what they knew about the fire. The investigation went on for weeks. In the dumpster behind Lehman, a can of

flammable charcoal lighter fluid was found. This and other evidence suggested a certain individual who became the prime suspect in the fire. This suspect was known on campus and in particular in Hinman College. University Law enforcement had many dealings with him in the past. The suspect was very eccentric bordering on delusional. However, the suspect was never charged with any crime and because of potential legal ramifications this author feels that the details surrounding the case should remain undisclosed. The one fact that can be known, though, is that there was a prime suspect and after this suspect left campus the strange fires that had been occurring off and on for some time immediately stopped.<sup>23</sup>

University maintenance and work crews worked long hours to repair the damage to the hall so at least the residents of the second and third floors could return to their rooms. Under the supervision of Physical Facilities Director Eugene A. Gilliland, the second and third floors were repainted, a new fire alarm system had been installed, and all electrical, heating, and water systems were restored in under seven days, a full week ahead of schedule. Residents of the second and third floors of the A-side of the building were allowed to move back into Lehman late in the afternoon on October 26.<sup>24</sup>

Since many students had lost everything they had in the fire, and because the University insurance did not cover their lost or damaged property, many charity organizations jumped into help provide relief for students who suffered from the fire. David Klarman, the treasurer of Fly-By-Night (FBN), worked with both the Hinman Office and the Financial Aid office to insure that \$1,017 of Carnival funds that had been saved from the previous year could be given to students who suffered material losses in the fire. “Klarman said, ‘The most important thing is to get clothing and books for those students that need it.’”<sup>25</sup>

While the residents of the first floor were beginning to get settled into their new rooms at the Colonial Inn and the residents of the second and third floors slowly trickled back to their suites, tensions still remained high within the offices of the university administration. A suspicious fire broke out in Chenango Hall in Newing College but was confined to a tablecloth and did not appear to be connected to the fire at Lehman Hall.<sup>26</sup> Two fires also were reported in Seneca Hall in College-in-the-Woods. The damage was very limited and campus security assured worried CIW residents that the fire was completely unrelated to the Lehman Hall fire.<sup>27</sup>

The university, while not locked in a state of fear, was certainly on edge. Both students and administrators were concerned about the undeniable outbreak of supposed arson all over campus in the previous week and were concerned about the safety of their students. Vice President Woodard ordered that campus security be beefed up and that they operate on 12 hour shifts instead of the usual 8 hour shift. He also ordered that additional night guards be placed at every residence hall to add to security. Associate Vice President for Student Life Mary Richardson also suggested to the professional staff of the colleges that they should consider postponing or canceling Halloween festivities and reiterated the university policy that it was unlawful to set off false fire alarms or to discharge fire extinguishers without reason. The penalties for such actions ranged from judicial board action, suspension from residence hall housing, to arrest. No one, not campus security, not the local police, nor the university administration was playing around anymore. Playing with fire on campus at this time would get you burned in more ways than one.<sup>28</sup>

The blaze in Lehman Hall sparked many lectures and programs for students in Hinman and around campus on fire safety and the importance of both shutting your door before leaving the building and exiting quickly when you hear an alarm go off. Eric Rubin, a resident of Smith

Hall, remembers the numerous programs on fire safety and the seriousness of the situation in the aftermath of the fire. He also recalls seeing the gutted floor of Lehman and remembers it as being “very spooky” to look at.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Eric Pomerantz also remembers the spooky look of the floor hollowed out by fire. He was amazed that the doors that had been shut saved all of the items inside the rooms while the doors that had been left open saw items completely destroyed. In some of the rooms where the doors had been left open clothes that were hanging in closets appeared fine but when they were touched they crumbled into dust.<sup>30</sup>

Following the investigation, numerous reports compiled by the university fire marshals and other campus safety officials showed the importance of taking fire drills seriously and the need for the residential colleges to make it clear to their residents that fire safety was no laughing matter. One report in particular stated that at the very beginning of the year the residents should learn the importance of closing their doors and making sure that the hallways are clear of obstructions. It was suggested that the RA appoint one to two people from the floor to assist in evacuations should a fire arise and that the Resident Director be responsible for giving these individuals the necessary training at the beginning of each term. It was also stated that while each resident should leave the building via the closest exit there should be drills following a scenario in which one or more exits were blocked by fire. The report went on to state that both residence hall staff and campus security officers should not endanger themselves during a fire and that they should attempt to fight only small manageable blazes and if at any time the fire appeared to be getting out of control they should evacuate and wait for professionally trained firefighters to arrive. The idea of creating a student-run university fire department was even pitched. However, the biggest call was for a detailed contingency plan to be developed to respond to potential fires in the future. Detailed evacuation plans, a central location to assemble

the evacuated residents, a plan to roll call the residents in the assembly area were written in detail, as were arrangements for both short-term and long-term housing for displaced students. It also suggested that counseling and other services be provided for displaced students. The report ends by stating, "It is fervently to be hoped that such contingency measures need never to be utilized. As noted above, the Lehman fire and its aftermath were handled fairly well without any such plan. There were many times, however, when having established guidelines would have helped a great deal, it is foolish, after such an experience, not to establish them."<sup>31</sup> This report would be one of many initial documents that would develop in the coming years as both the university and society at large placed a greater emphasis on security and emergency management.

In the days and weeks after the fire it began to be recognized that certain individuals stood out as true heroes during the crisis. Obviously, the most heroic people were members of the various fire and police companies that responded to the scene as well as campus security who risked life and limb to enter the burning building to search for trapped students. The front page of the *Hinman Halitosis* newsletter also thanks the Hinman Head Resident staff as well as Coordinator Allan Eller for all their efforts in providing for the students needs. The RA staffs of Hinman were also praised for their quick thinking in handling the stressful situation and keeping their residents calm during the crisis. They were also thanked for going well above and beyond the call of duty by rushing to the pub, the Lecture Hall, the University Union, the gym, and many other places where students had gathered for the evening to get the word out. The RA's also had been participating in around-the-clock dorm patrols in an effort to deter further acts of arson and had opened their doors and shared space in their single rooms with displaced students. The greater campus community was also thanked. Every other residential college on campus as well

as Off Campus College generously offered assistance to Hinman in the aftermath of the crisis.

The article ended by saying:

The greatest thanks, however, goes to the residents of Hinman College. For a group of people that have the reputation of apathy, we did all right for ourselves. The offers of help from Hinman College students was nothing short of amazing. Blankets, clothing, even money was given in aid. We showed that Hinman does act as a community of very friendly and sensitive people.

For that alone we should be proud.<sup>32</sup>

Hinman College was not without its criticisms, though. In the very same issue of *Halitosis*, two Hinman residents wrote a letter expressing their disapproval that the night watch patrols (almost all of whom were students) were getting paid for their work. The letter basically stated that they were concerned that the money could be spent elsewhere, since the vast majority of those who signed up for the night watch were volunteers who would do it for free. The money should be used to compensate the residents of Lehman's first floor who lost virtually everything that they owned.<sup>33</sup> The editor responded by stating that while it was true that there were no problems filling the schedule, there were concerned that these volunteers would dissipate after the initial shock of the fire gradually wore off and that the money would be needed to entice them to stay in service. It was also clarified that the money was not part of the Hinman budget and that it came from an outside source. It ended by stating, "...it should be remembered that R.A.'s, Head Residents and other administrators are paid for their work: there is no reason why those undertaking the tedious, boring, and absolutely necessary responsibility of night guards should not be paid as well."<sup>34</sup>

A more critical letter to the editor was written by a first-semester freshman stating another view of the fire. The author of the letter, while mostly writing of his concerns about

general student apathy and his belief that Hinman College and SUNY Binghamton was too large and impersonal an institution, also stated clearly his views on the fire.

Here in Hinman, it took a quasi-disaster to bring out the people in people; the sense of humanity in us. For the moment of the fire, Hinman became a unit; people working in cooperation with one another. Given the cause, this grouping of “islands” became network, proving that an innate sense of comraderie [sic] does indeed exist here. The atmosphere was that of genuine altruism; the people of Hinman College united in an almost transcendental concern of their fellow neighbors.

I now pose the obvious question: Do the students living in an imposed type of family situation, require a disaster to bring out their basic human tendencies?<sup>35</sup>

While many believed that this view was out of line concerning the incident, there perhaps was some truth in his statement. The residents of Hinman College, like the residents of the other residential colleges at this time (and even to the present day), had been accused of apathy and neglect in many areas, including involvement in their community. The author of this statement, while perhaps being a little harsh in his assessment of the fire and its aftermath, did have a point. It took a crisis to bring people together, something that should have been going on regardless. Just as intensely passionate student involvement has been the hallmark of Hinman College since the very beginning, so too has student apathy. The problems that grew from student apathy were nothing new and have yet to be (and probably never will be) solved. However, this counterpoint to the general feeling that Hinman was a tight-knit community before the fire and even closer after the fire is an important one to consider.

There were differing opinions and perspectives on the fire. Yet perhaps the view of the vast majority of the residents of Hinman College was expressed in a letter written by Faculty Master Vito Sinisi. It was first published in the November 2 issue of *Hinman Halitosis* and later in the *FYI: For Your Information* weekly newsletter published by the university for faculty, staff and graduate students. The letter stated:

As Master of Hinman College, I wish to express my deep appreciation to all those who helped in coping with the fire and its aftermath.

The exemplary actions of Hinman students have shown that Hinman College is a real community of people ready to help each of us. The Resident Assistants and Resident Directors have performed extraordinary work with little sleep and rest. The patience and forbearance of the students residing in the north wing of Lehman Hall, especially those living on the first floor, have been commendable. The firemen and Security officers prevented, through their prompt and efficient work, a disaster from becoming a tragedy. The hard work and long hours of the maintenance staff restored the second and third floors of the wing so that we were able to occupy them at 3:25 p.m. on Thursday, less than a week after the fire. The advice, counsel, and assistance received from the Administration were promptly and generously given. Faculty members have given sympathetic consideration to students directly affected by the fire.

I am especially grateful to Al Eller, Coordinator of Hinman College, and Tom Truesdell, Assistant Coordinator. Often with incipient confusion, their calm and prudent actions quickly brought order and discipline. Sue Cohen, the Resident Assistant of the devastated first floor, devoted herself completely to caring for the students of her floor. Her stamina and affectionate warm concern for the students have sustained them immediately in meeting and dealing with a major crisis, and have been moving to witness.<sup>36</sup>

Ironically, though the fire was serious for the students who were affected by it, laughter is the best possible medicine. Saturday October 28, 1978, was Hinman's annual Co-Rec Weekend which celebrated the end of the Co-Rec football season in Hinman and was grand celebration for every player of Hinman's most popular pastime and for the general Hinman resident as well. That Saturday saw the playoff game between the top two teams, and the right to be called Hinman Co-Rec champions was duked out in the mud of the quad. The event, as usual, was huge, featuring a parade complete with floats that represented each building in Hinman. Everything was proceeding normally until Lehman Hall's float pulled away from the rest of the floats and rolled into the middle of the quad. The RA of the devastated first floor, Sue Cohen, then came running to the float with a flaming torch in her hands. The huge gathering of Hinmanites watched stunned, as Cohen touched the torch to the head of a human-like figure on the float. The head, which had earlier been soaked in lighter fluid, immediately burst into

flames. Four Lehman Hall residents then rushed out with buckets of water to extinguish the blaze before it got out of control. Realizing that it was all a joke, the crowd erupted into laughter and applause.<sup>37</sup> For the record, the Smith team “Slippery When Wet” beat their rival “Atomic Waste” in a very close and competitive match, the final score being 13-12.<sup>38</sup>

The first floor would remain closed for the remainder of the semester and the students would not be able to return until the following semester. The trauma of the devastated first floor would take a long time to heal in the minds of not only the residents of Lehman Hall but all of Hinman College. Today, the physical scars are mostly healed. If one were to walk through the affected area of Lehman Hall today it would hard to believe that a towering inferno once raged down its corridors. The Lehman Hall fire would be the constant example for decades to come of the reasons why fire safety and prevention should be taken very seriously.

While Lehman Hall would be the largest and most devastating fire in the history of Hinman College and of the university as a whole, it would not be the only fire to sweep through Hinman. Just over twenty years later another fire, thankfully not as devastating, started in Roosevelt Hall. It was early one morning in the middle of the Spring Semester of 1999. It was like any typical cool spring morning in Binghamton except that the bulletin boards in the lobby and Main Lounge had caught fire. Scott Bennett was the Resident Director of Roosevelt at the time and remembers the incident. The building evacuated quickly and the fire was put out. Even though there was fair amount of damage, none of it was serious or lasting. The odd thing about this particular fire was that the arsonist who set the fire was there at the scene of the crime. As the students evacuated the building he began to brag in front of Scott and many other residents that he had been the one to set the fire. The police questioned him, but he was not brought up on charges. The arsonist did not live in Hinman and was probably not even enrolled at the

university. Luckily, no one got hurt, though the fire upset a lot of people partly because of the grandstanding nature of the arsonist. What is interesting to note is that at this time in Roosevelt Hall and in virtually all of the other halls in Hinman a very light blue carpet covered all of the walls in the building. This comparatively small fire in Roosevelt Hall launched the removal process of this carpet from not only Roosevelt but all of the other residence halls that had it.<sup>39</sup>

In the fall of 2006, Cleveland Hall also suffered a small fire. Early one evening, around the time when most residents were heading to the dining hall for dinner, fire alarms went off in Cleveland. Upon investigation it was discovered that the kitchen area in the basement had caught on fire. It was later discovered that a resident of the building had left a pan on the stove. This resident then left the room and forgot about the pan, which overheated and started the fire. Jimmy Galante, a senior resident assistant at the time, who had ambitions of becoming a firefighter himself, leapt into action and went through a number of fire extinguishers in an attempt to knock out the blaze. Units from the Vestal Fire Department responded and ultimately put out the blaze. Without the heroic and quick action of RA Jimmy Galante, the fire would have been much worse. As news of the Cleveland Hall fire spread, Jimmy became a Hinman hero of sorts and stories about his actions began to grow and compound much like the proverbial fish story. One story had Jimmy rescuing two girls, an old lady, and a litter of puppies while single handedly fighting off the fire with a squirt gun. Quite obviously these stories are grossly exaggerated, but the courageous deeds of Jimmy Galante can not be denied and he has earned himself a place in Hinman history as the hero of the Cleveland Hall fire. Shortly after the fire, the Cleveland Hall E-board, seeing the commercial opportunity that the fire offered, began selling hooded sweatshirts as a hall fundraiser with the words, “We Didn’t Start the Fire”

stenciled across the front. Needless to say, these hoodies were one of the more successful fundraisers in Cleveland Hall history.

The Lehman Hall fire would not be the first fire in Hinman history nor would it be the last. In all probability the 2006 fire in Cleveland Hall will not be the last fire to blaze through Hinman. The Lehman Hall fire is an important chapter in the overall history of Hinman College because it shows a number of things. One is that it became the constant example used by fire marshals when explaining the importance of fire safety. More importantly, though, it showed the community of Hinman coming together like never before in a time of crisis. Not only were the students of Hinman very cooperative during the fire, but in its aftermath both the residents and professional staff of Hinman came together like never before. The fire made everyone in Hinman realize not only how fragile life is, but also to not take anything or anyone for granted. No lives were lost, but that possibility was forever engrained into the minds of those who lived and worked in Hinman.

Just as the newly renovated first floor of Lehman rose out of the ashes of devastation to be reborn as a place to live and learn and build community, so too, in an abstract way, did the rest of greater Hinman. The end of the 1970's decade was approaching and that decade's style of thinking and feeling were beginning to fade as well. For better or for worse, the Lehman Hall fire symbolically cleansed Hinman of some of the student radicalism and activism in areas as rich and varied as social regulations and community development and programming that had been hallmarks of Hinman's early years. What was rebuilt in its place was a new Hinman with a few new faces and some new attitudes and perspectives. The one thing that fire could not burn up, though, was the feeling of community and the involvement of not only the college's staff but

of its residents as well. No fire, regardless of how hot or how large it becomes, can burn away the indomitable Hinman spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> "Fire Alarms In the Dorms," *The West Harpur Other*, Vol. III, No. 5, January 8, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Lt. Gary Brown, e-mail message to author, February 22, 2007 and Richard Green and Michael T. Fiur, "Lehman first floor gutted," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Green and Michael T. Fiur, "Lehman first floor gutted," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Pace, "Students and staff react in shock at scene of fire..." *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Green, "They thought it was a fire drill and didn't want to be bothered," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Schroeder, Mary Stillwell, Sylan Sobel, and Jeff Share, "Fire rages through dorm at SUNY," *The Press and Sun Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 14, October 21, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Eller, "Hinman in the 1970's," Group Discussion recorded on April 23, 2003, Hinman Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Pomerantz, telephone conversation with author, December 28, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Greenlees, e-mail message to author, January 26, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Green and Michael T. Fiur, "Lehman first floor gutted," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Schroeder, Mary Stillwell, Sylan Sobel, and Jeff Share, "Fire rages through dorm at SUNY," *The Press and Sun Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 14, October 21, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Jill Pace, "Students and staff react in shock at scene of fire..." *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Green, "...and when the smoke cleared," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Green and Michael T. Fiur, "Lehman first floor gutted," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Greenlees, e-mail message to author, January 26, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> George Basler, "Fire leaves jolted dorm wondering," *Press and Sun Bulletin*, date unknown, clipping in Hinman Archives.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Lt. Gary Brown, e-mail message to author, February 22, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Michael T. Fiur, "Fire aftermath: Residents housed, investigation continues," *Pipe Dream* Vol. XVII, No. 15, October 27, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Green and Michael T. Fiur, "Lehman first floor gutted," *Pipe Dream*, Vol. XVII, No. 14, October 24, 1978.

<sup>27</sup> Michael T. Fiur, "Fire aftermath: Residents housed, investigation continues," *Pipe Dream* Vol. XVII, No. 15, October 27, 1978.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Eric Rubin, telephone conversation with author, January 25, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Pomerantz, telephone conversation with author, December 28, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Report on Lehman Hall fire, on file in the Hinman Archives.

<sup>32</sup> Lehman Hall Statement, *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. X, No. 6, October 26, 1978.

<sup>33</sup> Ed Lee and Michael Taub, letter to the editor, *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. X, No. 6, October 26, 1978.

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- <sup>34</sup> Editorial Response, *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. X, No. 6, October 26, 1978.
- <sup>35</sup> Dylan Jeffries, letter to the editor, *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. X No. 6, October 26, 1978.
- <sup>36</sup> Vito F. Sinisi, "The Fire," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. X. No. 3, November 2, 1978.
- <sup>37</sup> "Lehman laughs," *Pipe Dream* Vol. XVII No. 16, October 31, 1978.
- <sup>38</sup> Co-Rec report, *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. X No. 3, November 2, 1978.
- <sup>39</sup> Scott Bennett, interview with author, January 26, 2007.