

Fortress aflame...Nichols Gymnasium, commonly known as "the Castle," is silhouetted by light from flames which gutted the building.

# Blaze still rages 14 years after fire guts the 'Castle'

## Students chant, fire department loses battle because of inadequate campus water supply

By MICHELE SAUER

Collegian Reporter

"Burn, baby, burn" was the cry of "intoxicated students" who gathered around Nichols Gymnasium and watched it burn. That's what Manhattan Fire Chief Bill Smith remembers about the Nichols Gym fire of Dec. 13, 1968.

As the Manhattan Fire Department and the University Fire Department battled the fire, which gutted the fortress-like building, a large crowd gathered to watch. "This was an era of campus unrest," Smith said. "Campus fires were fairly common and this was one of the examples of this unrest."

On the night of the Nichols fire, the Manhattan Fire Department received three calls about fires on campus. Smith, who was captain in the fire department in 1968 and fought the Nichols fire, said each call identified a different building. One caller said Nichols was on fire, another call said Anderson Hall was ablaze and the third caller said Waters Hall was burning.

"At the time, we were supplying the university with limited fire service," Smith said. "We would send one truck and five people." They decided to go by Nichols on Anderson Avenue and see if the calls were false or not. If there was not a fire at Nichols, they planned to work their way across campus to the other buildings, he said.

"As soon as we got on Anderson (Avenue), it was evident that Nichols was involved," Smith said. "Upon arrival we were told there were people inside the building, but the first and second floors were burned so they could not get inside. Fortunately, there wasn't anyone inside." Smith said it was apparent an accelerator, such as gasoline or kerosene, had been used. He believed the fire started near the

main doors on the north side of the building.

A major problem in fighting the fire was the water supply.

"The water facilities on campus were severely lacking," Smith said. "We hooked up a large-diameter hose which was capable of handling 250 gallons a minute, but the water mains only supplied 150 gallons a minute."

Water mains on campus have been upgraded since then, Smith said.

The University Fire Department hooked up to a hydrant on the east side of Nichols where there was a better water supply, Smith said. But this limited what the city fire department could do.

"Since we couldn't use this other hydrant, we were limited to outside measures only," Smith said. "Ordinarily we take measures inside a building to stop a fire. We ended up basically trying to keep sparks from starting other fires."

Burning debris was drifting off the top of Nichols and starting house fires across the street and as far as two blocks away, Smith recalled.

"We had two more trucks come down and stay across the street to fight house fires," he said. "We started out with five people and eventually a chief officer and two more

(See FIRE, p. 16)

By SUE SCHMITT  
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The weather forecast came over the radio that December morning in 1968 — highs in the 20s and northerly winds were predicted. It was Friday the 13th, a bad day for the overly superstitious, and what started out as a normal day ended in tragedy.

Lyndon Johnson was the President of the United States, Richard Nixon was about to take office. The front pages of the day's newspapers were filled with news of the Vietnam "conflict." Peace talks were in

progress, but it didn't seem peace would come soon. The North Vietnamese promised to allow delivery of Christmas cards and parcels to American soldiers.

Astronauts were preparing for a flight around the moon in Apollo 8 on Monday. They were planning to study the surface of the moon, and to gather information that would perhaps one day make it possible for a man to walk on the moon.

There were only nine shopping days left until Christmas, merchants reminded shoppers. The semester was coming to an end. Students worried about papers and final ex-



University Photographic Services

### Flames leap through windows.

Recent controversy on campus centered on student dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching at the University.

MUCH OF THE TALK on campus that day was about a meeting the night before. Students and faculty met at what was called a "free-for-all" to air their complaints. The students complained about the methods and quality of teaching, while teachers countered with arguments of student apathy in the classroom. The discussion got out of hand. One student said he wouldn't mind seeing Anderson Hall burn down.

That Thursday evening, President James McCain placed University watchmen and patrolmen on special alert. A few small fires were discovered around campus, including one outside Anderson.

K-State was host to the first half of the Sunflower Classic Tournament Friday night, and the second half was to be played in Lawrence the following night. Five players, including two starters, from K-State's basketball team were out of the lineup because of an influenza virus that had been plaguing the nation and the University.

There had even been rumors that school would close temporarily because of the illness. The Collegian reported that 300 women in Ford and Goodnow halls were confined because of the virus.

MANY WERE GOING to the game that night. Those who didn't go were probably planning to attend a movie or spend an evening at home in front of the TV. "Coogan's Bluff," starring Clint Eastwood, was showing at the Wareham Theater. "The Boston Strangler" with Tony Curtis and Henry Fonda was at the Campus, and the Sky Vue

(See MOOD, p. 16)