

St. Michael Historian



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Independence Day Blast Still Reverberates 53 Years Later

by Bob Zahler

In a town where not much happened, a group of mischievous young men pulled a prank that made the Fourth of July, 1960 one that many would not forget. Meant to create a little noise in the spirit of Independence Day, a little tomfoolery ended up causing serious damage to local businesses. It's a story that people have been laughing about ever since, but mostly because of the characters involved and the fact that nobody was hurt. Three of the five "boys" were interviewed for this article along with a few others who were around at the time. Recollections of the specific details of that night differ from person to person and so what follows is a piecing together of the events as best as can be compiled. With the permission of the pranksters the story is published here for your amusement and edification now that all can look back at the incident as one of "youthful indiscretion".

The bulk of this story comes from Tom Dehmer, one of the participants, who recalled that he hung around with a group of guys that just liked to have fun. Tom's regular companions in his salad days included his brother Jerry, cousin Joey Dehmer, and good friends Gordon "Butch" Barbeln and Jimmy Marx. In the summer of 1960 the young men were all between the ages of 17 and 20. Preparations for the Fourth started with an expedition a few of them made to South Dakota with the intent to smuggle fireworks into Minnesota. The trip itself was an adventure since Minnesota cops were on the lookout for fireworks "importers", but they stealthily alluded the police all the way back to St. Michael. Included in the "trunk full" of pyrotechnics were Silver Salutes: a flash powder explosive, each about an inch and a half in length and a half inch in diameter with a green wick sticking out of the side. Packing a punch much greater than the typical firecracker, a person could lose fingers if just one of these exploded in your hand.

The guys attended a dance at the St. Michael Dance Hall (on the corner of Central Avenue and First Street) on or about July 4th. Around 10:30 PM when the bands took their usual break, they went over to the cafe on Main Street for burgers as was the routine for many dance goers. It was here that they hatched their plan to set off an entire box (one gross or 144) of the Silver Salutes. They crossed the street and from Oscar Dehmer's meat market (Joe's dad's business) they took an empty, wooden meat casing keg, about the same size of a nail keg (approximately 18 inches tall), and loaded the Silver Salutes, along with some paper, inside the wooden keg. As they envisioned it, once the paper was ignited each Silver Salute would explode independently creating a rapid report like a really loud machine gun. After quickly assembling their homemade pyrotechnic, they hopped into Joe's car, pulled out onto Central Avenue, stopped in front of Clarence's Texaco (now the parking area between Domino's and the Corner Bar), opened the passenger door and set the keg on the road. They quickly ignited the paper, set the keg cover loosely on top and then slowly drove away to avoid attracting attention. After going past Kilian Hardware (Domino's building) and Schumm's Bar and Store (site of the Liberty Restaurant), they took an immediate right on 1st Street, drove to the end and turned right again on Chestnut Avenue; and when they got about halfway down the block toward Main Street, they heard an enormous explosion. Instead of going off one at a time as hoped, the entire keg of Silver Salutes exploded like one huge bomb. With that kind of blast the boys immediately knew that they could be in huge trouble; however, they quickly agreed among themselves that if they continued driving slowly back to the scene of the explosion as if they were as surprised as everyone else, no one would suspect that they were the culprits. After all, from what they could tell, nobody had seen them light the keg. The impact of the blast became evident as they approached the intersection by the Corner Bar. Even though it was now about 11 PM, streetlights illuminated the downtown area. A huge cloud of smoke drifted over the Catholic school playground heading west. The smoke was so black that it obscured the view of the church steeple.



Central Avenue in St. Michael as it was in the '60s. The only structures remaining in this block on the South side are the Corner Bar (far Right) and Kilian's Hardware (now Domino's Pizza) to the left of the Texaco Service station.

Photo Courtesy of Bob Zahler

Customers of the cafe, Corner Bar and Dance Hall had all emptied onto the streets. Luke Georges and Frankie "Snowball" Aydt had left the dance hall just as the keg exploded, causing Luke to shout in German, "Das war ein knall!" or "That was a bang!". Luke asserted that he saw Alex Dehmer's 1960 Nash Rambler, which was parked in front of Victor Schumm's Bar, lift right off the ground. Alex could not verify if his car had moved at all, but he did affirm that his car's fenders, which had been caked with mud at the start of the evening were now blasted clean. Luke Georges, who was not known to hide his thoughts and theories on any subject, was adamant that the explosion was the result of "at least two sticks of dynamite!"; and so some people started forming hypotheses regarding the intent of the perpetrators, suggesting that perhaps someone was trying to rob the stores. The more reasonable people in town, however, quickly deduced that it was likely the result of an ill-conceived prank. It was clearly the most excitement the town of St. Michael had seen since the Great Fire of 1946.

As the perpetrators sheepishly approached the now smoke-filled scene, they saw the results of their mischief: the splinters from the keg and paper were scattered all about, but most significantly, the huge picture windows of Kilian's Hardware store along with all of the windows of Victor Schumm's Bar and Store were shattered. It looked more like a scene out of war-torn Europe than tranquil St. Michael. Instinctively, the boys picked up remnants of the cover, which had been labeled "Dehmer's Meat Market", along with anything that might have lettering on it; and tossed the scraps in the narrow gap that ran between Vic's Bar and the hardware store, eager to hide any evidence linking them to the blast. Within an hour the Kritzeck boys arrived: Wright County Sheriff Willard "Bill" Kritzeck and his brother, Deputy Lawrence "Brownie" Kritzeck. Being fellow Catholics, both Sheriff Kritzeck and Brownie were well liked in St. Michael and they knew everyone in town on a first-name basis, including the boys involved. Nonetheless, afraid of what might happen if they were caught, each kid slinked home that night with pinched lips hoping this would all pass without anyone suspecting their involvement.

The next day the guys tried to go about their usual business as if they knew as much about the previous night's excitement as anyone else. Tom was working with his uncle Lambert Eicher laying a brick front on Roman Friendshuh's house. He said that he was so nervous that day that every time he heard a cap gun, it made him jump. Within days Deputy Brownie Kritzeck was back in town asking more questions. Presumably to gain favor with the police, someone who had overheard the boys plotting their prank in the cafe, ratted on the guys. Now armed with incriminating information,

Brownie drove over to the local gathering spot, Allen Jaeb's filling station, where Butch Barbeln happened to be listening in on the town gossip, which no doubt included discussion about the explosion that occurred just down the street. Brownie started talking with Allen Jaeb about the investigation and so Butch nervously stated that it was time for him to get home for dinner when suddenly Brownie stopped him and said "Gordon, is there anything you want to tell me?" Now, the fact that Brownie was using his given name instead of his nickname, indicated that Brownie had more information than what he was letting on. Butch tried to be evasive for awhile, but seeing that Brownie had obtained the names of everyone who was involved, Butch finally caved in. The next evening the police cruiser came by each of their homes so that Brownie could speak to the parents (there is disagreement among the guys as to whether or not they were hauled to the court house in Buffalo). Although they could have been charged with a crime, the boys were let off the hook with just restitution, which came to \$283 to replace the broken windows, or \$57 apiece. In other words, they got off with a slap on the hand considering what could have happened to them.

Although there was definitely some shame with getting caught; it didn't take too long for the guys' reputations to recover. After all, nobody was hurt and, as they said, "boys will be boys". For the parents, though, it was a different matter; especially for Laura Dehmer, Tom and Jerry's mother. On one of the mornings after the blast, but before the delinquents had been identified, Laura was at Blom's Store talking with others about how thoughtless and malicious the prank was when Laura added, "And where were the parents?!" (suggesting that better parenting could have prevented the whole terrible event). The fact that two of the five "delinquents" were her own kids, made her comment one of the most memorable parts of the whole story. Rudy Dehmer, Tom and Jerry's dad, was a little more sensible about the whole unfortunate ordeal. Rudy had heard that his boys were involved before the police showed up at the house, and so Rudy prepared Laura for the news by first telling her that she "had better sit down". It was a good thing she sat down for as Tom relates, the news "didn't set too well with her". Tom and Jerry's recollection is that their mother was so mortified and upset that she didn't say a word to them for the next three weeks, tossing plates of food in front of them without comment. And on every Fourth of July thereafter, the memory of that day could bring her to tears. Of course, if she hadn't made that comment down at Blom's Store, it wouldn't have been so bad.

As is the case with many small town stories that get told and retold, that one prank became more legendary as life continued to pass in it's typical humdrum and ordinary way. It's no wonder that we look back to that summer of 1960 with a smile and a chuckle and remember a time when not everything was taken so seriously.

The Day "Time Stood Still" in St. Michael

By Sheldon Barthel

This story began last winter, when Mike Bertek, Director of Maintenance for St. Michael Parish was shoveling snow from the front steps of the Historic Church. As he looked up, he noticed that one of the hands was missing from the clock on the church steeple. After

notifying two members of the parish preservation committee, a thorough search was initiated for the missing hand. Digging in the snow near the south entrance they came upon a large weathered wooden object. The rest is now history. That large object turned out to be the wooden hand from one of the ancient clocks mounted on the church steeple. It's been quite a while since the clocks kept accurate time anyway, but this incident was enough of a shock to get the Historic Church Preservation Committee involved immediately.



*Left photo: Clarence Eull holds two wooden hands from the old church clock.
Right photo: Clarence giving an idea of the size of one of the original clock faces.
All photos in this article courtesy of Linda Elkie*

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We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.stmhistsoc.org

Meetings held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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Fast forward to August 27th, 2013. That's the day that "time stood still" in St. Michael, as the old clock faces and mechanical dials were removed from the church and new, LED illuminated electric clocks were installed to replace them.

The actual removal and installation took a period of three days, August 26, 27, and 28th, with two large cranes from the Armstrong Crane Company in Minneapolis doing most of the heavy lifting. Verdin Clock and Restoration Company out of Cincinnati, Ohio, a company in business since 1842, was the manufacturer of the new clocks.

For you history buffs, the original clock faces were installed when the church was built in 1892, however church records indicate the rest of the original clock mechanism was probably not installed until the year 1911 at a cost of \$764, according to Bob Zahler, author of a book on the history of St. Michael entitled *Faith, Family, and Farming*.

The cost to replace the old clocks with the new back lighted ones came to \$60,000.

If you wish to help support the preservation of the Historic Church of St. Michael you are encouraged to do so.

Please make out your check to: **St. Michael Historic Church Preservation.**

Mailing address is: St. Michael Catholic Church; 11300 Frankfort Parkway, NE; St. Michael, MN 55376. All donations are tax deductible.



*"Out with the old"
Removal of one of the old clock faces.*



As for the old clock faces and dials, they were auctioned off in September at silent auctions held at the annual fall parish festival and at a special clock fundraising event at the Liberty restaurant (American Legion) in St. Michael. All four of the old clock faces now reside as decorations in various homes in the local area.

*"And in with the new"
Photos left and right showing final installation of the new clocks.*

