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1963

Principal dies in Moscow explosion

“Assistant Principal of Moscow school dies of burns,” read the startling headline of the Southwest Daily Times in the summer of 1963.

Keith Niles, the 38-year-old assistant principal of Moscow High School died of burns after trying to help out his father on the farm. The educator died as a result of a gas explosion in the basement of his father's farmhouse.

Niles had been helping his father, Walter, in the wheat harvest, when he came home for lunch and learned from his wife that the house smelled of gas. When he went to the basement to investigate, he noticed the pilot light in the heater was still on. When he reached in to extinguish it, “he disturbed a small pocket of accumulated gas, which exploded,” the paper reported. Niles was badly burned on his face, around his arms and upper chest, and died of the injuries.

Across state lines, a strange story related events in which a boy “Lives 40 days on Potatoes,” according to the headline. The 13-year-old son of a Missouri evangelist told reporters how he survived for 40 days on raw potatoes after his teacher died and left him alone and stranded on an isolated northern island.

Kenneth Youngman was the boy’s name, and he said he wasn’t scared. His father said he took Kenneth and his female school teacher to a cabin on an unnamed island in the Peace River about 80 miles south of Fort Smith, near British Columbia, the previous March.

“He stocked the cabin with food before leaving on an evangelical mission,” the article related, and “after his father left, the teacher and Kenneth went about everyday life for a month. Lessons and Bible studies were all part of Kenneth’s teaching.”

On May 1, everything changed when the river flooded. “The boy awoke to the sound of rushing water around the cabin. Ice chunks in the flooding scared him and his teacher, so they climbed on the top of the cabin. They had nothing to eat for two days and nothing to keep warm except the tar paper they tore off the roof. The teacher slipped into the river when their cabin became awash. Later he found her laying face down near the cabin. Kenneth lived on potatoes and potato peelings for the next 40 days. He waved a white cloth at passing boats but no one noticed him. Kenneth’s father returned to the cabin June 20 to pick up them both but he only found Kenneth.

Dorothy’s House did not exist in Liberal, but tourists still came through and the tourism bureau began to greet and honor them. One program was “Tourist of the Week,” which relied on local police to select a family by watching for out-of-state license tags, and then stopping them to be photographed for the newspaper. A Montebello, Calif., family selected as the tourists of the week, made an unexpected stop in Liberal when they were greeted by the police siren. The Barkleys were the guests of the Ranch Motel with food and fuel provided by the Champlin station and cafe west of Liberal.