

Sterling Hall

Aug. 24, 1970:
A day of change
for the world
as we know it

By PATRICIA SIMMS

Most people in Madison old enough to remember know where they were when a Ford Econoline van exploded outside Sterling Hall on Aug. 24, 1970, killing a young physics researcher and ripping the soul out of anti-war activity.

It was almost 4 a.m. — most folks were in bed, some awakened by what they thought was thunder. Instead, it was a bomb — more than a ton of ammonium nitrate fertilizer soaked in fuel oil. Targeted at the Army Math Research Center, a Defense Department project on the second through fourth floors, the blast decimated the UW-Madison Physics Department in the basement and first floor.

The city had been in the throes of intense protests against the Vietnam War, its diurnal rhythm marked by rallies at noon and tear gas in the night. UW-Madison matched the University of California-Berkeley on the political Richter scale.

The bombing changed what had been edginess to fear.



Officials sift for clues in the rubble after the bombing at the Army Mathematics Research Center at UW.

Bruce Fritz

bombing

For one thing, Robert Fassnacht, a 33-year-old researcher working in the lab in those wee hours, was killed. The anti-war movement, linked to the 1960s battle for civil rights, balked at murder.

Four people, two of them homegrown Madisonians and three of them students, were fugitives.

As part of the radical New Year's Gang, Karl Armstrong, then 23, and his brother, Dwight Armstrong, then 18, had firebombed the Old Red Gym, unsuccessfully bombed the Badger Ordnance Works near Baraboo from the air, and bombed the university's primate lab in a misguided attack on the Selective Service office.

This time, the brothers, together with David Fine, 18, and Leo Burt, 22, built one of the most powerful vehicle bombs in history.

Dwight and Karl Armstrong and Fine were convicted for their roles in the bombing, served time in prison and have been paroled. Burt has never been found — some think he was an FBI plant, some think he's dead, others think he is cruising toward Social Security under an assumed name.

In 1995, Fred Harvey Harrington, the embattled president of the university from 1962 to 1970, said the explosion was a response to increasing repression by authorities against protesters.

"There's a sharp . . . difference between protesting, even vigorous protesting, and violence," he said. "In like fashion, you can also have repression, you can crack down too hard."

Not 48 hours after the bombing, Michael Jaliman, president of the UW

student association, told reporters the student body was stockpiling weapons.

In 1968, much of the country had been shocked when police beat protesters outside the Democratic convention in Chicago.

Karl Armstrong was one of those beaten by Chicago police, Harrington said.

"That was a use of repression which was not only bad, but it was counterproductive, just as the bombing of Sterling Hall was bad and was counterproductive," he said.

For many in this mild Midwestern town, an age of political innocence ended. ■



Dwight Armstrong



Karl Armstrong



Leo Burt



David Fine