

Macara's Wharf Blaze



Seventy-four Provincetown firemen fought the blaze that destroyed the 127-year-old storage building on Macara's Wharf. The fire, which the Police believe was set by an arsonist, was fanned by cold winds and a Coast Guard helicopter. The hot ashes blew over the firemen, causing burns like "thousands of tiny bug bites."

By Marylyn Donahue

Provincetown Police suspect arson in the raging fire which completely destroyed the 127-year-old storage building and vagrant hangout on Macara's Wharf in Provincetown last Saturday morning.

Police Chief James Meads said Tuesday he was working with Fire Chief Russell Perry in investigating the blaze which resulted in the loss of thousands of dollars' worth of fishing equipment stored in the building.

Meads said there were many reasons to suspect arson was the cause of the fire but would not comment further on the matter.

Perry, who defined the fire as having "suspicious origins," said it was most likely the result of "pot smokers and winos" breaking into the building during the night.

Meads, however, rejected the idea and said he was looking into other possible causes.

Three-Hour Fight

The two-alarm blaze, which broke out at 11:20 a.m. on December 8, was fought by 74 Provincetown firemen for three hours. The fire left three fire-fighters injured and nine others were treated for smoke inhalation.

By the time the town's five fire trucks arrived on the scene shortly after the call, the fire had already spread throughout the structure.

Perry said the tar netting in the building contributed to the danger and the intensity of the blaze which began in the building on the south end of the wharf. Firemen standing west of the building—the only space available—were forced to fight the fire as an easterly wind fanned the flames in their faces. One fireman said the flames, after being quelled by water, continually flared again because of the wind.

Fireman Vaughan Cabral suffered knee injuries when part of the burning building fell on him. John Crave cut his hand and district chief James Meads of Number 3 Pump

House got an electric shock from disengaged wires at the end of the pier.

An estimated 20 local fishermen who rented lockers in the building lost equipment as a result of the fire. One fisherman reported that gear not destroyed by the fire was looted in the days following. None of the fishermen contacted were protected by insurance.

The building itself was almost completely razed by the flames. The 100-foot wharf on which the structure stood remained intact.

The building was owned by Joseph E. Macara, who also owns the Land's End Marine Supply Store on Commercial Street in front of the wharf.

The wharf building was assessed by the town at \$3,400 in 1972. Town Assessor John Corea said the waterfront property was assessed at 55 percent of its value of about \$7,000.

Macara said he held a minimum insurance policy of a couple of thousand dollars on the property.

He said he was aware the building was a fire hazard due to the threat of trespassers careless with cigarettes.

"We would have torn the building down long ago. The only reason we allowed it to stand was because of the tenants who stored their gear there. But there was nothing in there that I knew of which would have started a fire," Macara said.

According to Perry there was gasoline in the building which caused three explosions during the course of the fire Saturday.

Macara said if there was gasoline it must have been stored in one of the lockers by the fishermen. He said he did not have any flammable items such as gasoline or paint in his area upstairs where extension ladders and repair tools were kept.

Vagrants?

Saturday's blaze was the fifth fire in six months at the

site. None of the previous fires flared beyond the smoldering stage. Perry said they were the result of people who had broken into the building and used the place for smoking and drinking.

The previous fires forced Macara to post the property in August with warnings to trespassers. He also put a chain fence at the opening to the wharf. Macara's efforts did not seem to stop the place from being used by vagrants.

"We couldn't have very well sheathed the building in steel," Macara said.

Both Perry and Police Chief Meads agreed the problem of vagrants was a constant source of trouble in town, and contributed to the possibility of fire in abandoned buildings.

Perry said buildings in town have been broken into by people who then live there and set small fires in the middle of rooms for heat.

"Cabral"

The idea is popularized in recent fiction. A novel written and published last year by Victor Wolfson called *Cabral* has a character who lives in an empty shack on Provincetown Harbor.

"The shack had been used to store rusty anchors, fish net, lobster traps. Cabral had known the place since boyhood. In the old days he had taken girls there and it was there, that he had smoked his first marijuana," the book says.

Perry said illegal tenants of the buildings are careful to disguise their occupancy by sealing the windows and gaining access through the bottoms of the houses.

Fire Prevention

Perry said the fire on Saturday reinforces the need of a full-time Fire Chief in Provincetown. He said he plans to present the idea in the form of an article at the next Annual Town Meeting.

"Fire prevention is 75 per cent of the work," Perry said.