Fire guts old Cecilia school

by Henri C. Bienvenu

Cecilia -- A fire of undetermined origin completely gutted the main administrative building on the Cecilia Sr. High School campus Saturday. The damage was so extensive that the brick walls of the 58-year-old building were ordered razed Sunday.

Volunteer firemen from Cecilia, Arnaudville, Henderson, Breaux Bridge and St. Martinville, as well as firefighters from Lafayette responded to the 10:20 a.m. alarm with seven pumpers, Lafayette’s snorkel unit and three auxiliary vehicles.

Wall Blown Out

Firemen seemed to be holding their own against the fire, which apparently started in the vicinity of the principal’s office on the ground floor, until a portion of the building’s rear wall was blown out, slightly injuring two firemen. Barry Coco and Randy LeBlanc, both of Breaux Bridge, were preparing to enter the second floor library via an exterior fire escape when the wall collapsed around them. Coco suffered second degree burns on his hands as he helped LeBlanc, who was dazed from the concussion, but from under hot roofing tar but neither man required hospitalization.

Six other firefighters who were in the school when the wall blew out were not injured and were immediately withdrawn from the building.

After firemen pulled back from the building flames quickly spread to the upper floors and were soon roaring from the roof and windows. After the top floor burned the flames worked their way back down to the ground floor. By 4 p.m. Saturday, only a few small flames were evident in the jumbled debris.

Firemen were able to keep the flames from spreading to nearby science classrooms and the school gymnasium. Portions of the east and west brick walls also collapsed, causing some damage to the covered walk leading to the gym.

The old building, originally constructed in 1922 at a cost of $120,000, housed the principal’s office, guidance department, commerce and home economics departments, the school library, 11 classrooms, a teachers’ lounge and storage facilities.

Allen Stelly, CSH principal, and District 8 school board member Gary LeBlanc, were among the first on the scene. They helped organize efforts to get important school records out of the building and Stelly said they were able to save the transcripts of all past graduates, but the records for students now in school were destroyed, as were all the furniture and equipment in the school.

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Insurance Coverage

The building was insured for $405,000 and the contents for $150,000. Patrick Huval (See No. 1, Page 2)

Stelly said he had gone to the school at 9:30 a.m. and noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He did not go into the school, however. He also said that he had personally checked every window and door before leaving the school Friday around 5 p.m.

Vandals apparently broke into the nearby Cecilia Jr. High School during the night Friday, causing minor damage and setting off several fire extinguishers.

The state fire marshal’s office is investigating the fire.

Third Major Loss

The Cecilia school fire is the third major school loss in St. Martin Parish in the past four years. On Oct. 20, 1976 the old administrative building on the Breaux Bridge Jr. High campus built the same year as the Cecilia school, was destroyed, and on Dec. 15, 1976 a fire caused extensive damage at Breaux Bridge Elementary School.
A group of Cecilia volunteer firemen concentrate their efforts on protecting an adjacent science building (left) as the main administrative and academic building of Cecilia Sr. High School burns out of control in the background. The blaze, which was discovered around 10:20 a.m. Saturday, completely gutted the 58-year-old building, which housed administrative offices, the library, commerce and home economics departments as well as 11 classrooms. The exact cause of the fire has not been determined, but the blaze appears to have started near the principal’s office. A dozen units from five parish fire departments and Lafayette responded to the alarm and battled the fire through most of the day. (Staff Photo)

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