

A fire on December 30, 1983, destroyed the Rebholz Gas and Electric and Buffa's convenience store in downtown Edgerton. The story was carried in the following week's issue of the Edgerton Reporter:

VOLUME 110 NUMBER 16

Fire Destroys Two Downtown Businesses

A team from the state Fire Marshall's office spent Wednesday morning sifting through the ice-covered charred remains of a six-hour fire late Friday night and early Saturday that destroyed two long-standing East Fulton Street businesses and hospitalized Fire Chief Charles Edvardson.

An investigation continued into the cause of the blaze that gutted Rebholz Gas & Electric Inc., 14 E. Fulton, and Buffa's Convenience Store, 16 E. Fulton. With brisk 30-40 mph winds whipping up the cold, a chilled contingent of Edgerton and Stoughton firefighters battled the blaze for more than six hours.

Michael J. Van Keuren, a special agent for the Division of Criminal Investigation, was summoned to the E. Fulton Street site Saturday morning to begin a probe into the devastating blaze. However, the inquiry was postponed until Tuesday after preliminary statements were taken from witnesses because the concentration of ice and snow covering the

debris prevented authorities from drawing any conclusions into the origin of the fire.

Firefighters were dispatched to the scene about 11:45 p.m. Friday, but by 6 a.m. Saturday, the one-story white brick building which housed the household appliance dealership, laundromat and grocery store was reduced to a smoldering heap of rubble framed in brick and coated with ice.

Smoke from the blaze was reportedly visible for five miles Saturday morning. Four firemen remained at the burning edifice until 6:30 a.m. Saturday.

First Assistant Fire Chief Jim Neal said the building was completely consumed by flames when firefighters arrived. "The building was a total loss," he said.

"We have no idea at this time of what caused the fire. We don't suspect anything, but we'll find out if there was anything fishy," Neal said. The only serious fire-related ailment was sustained

by Edvardson, who was hospitalized overnight at Edgerton Memorial Community Hospital after he suffered apparent respiratory problems about 3 a.m. Saturday at the fire scene.

Among the injuries reported by firefighters were knee and back ailments and minor instances of frostbite resulting from exposure to the frigid elements.

Twenty-six volunteer firemen from Edgerton, equipped with an aerial ladder truck, two water pumping units and a rescue vehicle, responded to the fire call initially.

With the rapidly spreading flames burning through a false ceiling and soon engulfing the brick structure, the Stoughton Fire Department was radioed for assistance, responding with two units and 12 firefighters.

Two Edgerton police officers, Capt. Keith Burdick and Patrolman Bradley Roehl, discovered the fire while on routine patrol. As the police officers approached the burning building, they could see flames which originated in Rebholz Gas and Electric. Suddenly there was an explosion which shattered a series of plate glass windows allowing smoke to billow out of the front of the appliance store.

"We pulled up, and kaboom!... the glass went," Burdick said. "The fire hadn't been going on long at all when we got there. There was a lot of smoke but the flames appeared to be limited to the Rebholz side."

When the glass windows shattered, the wind apparently allowed the flames to sweep to the rear of the store.

Burdick indicated that a police department investigation into the fire will depend on the results of the fire department and state fire marshal probe.

"We have no reason to believe that arson was involved until we're informed by the fire department or fire marshal," he added.

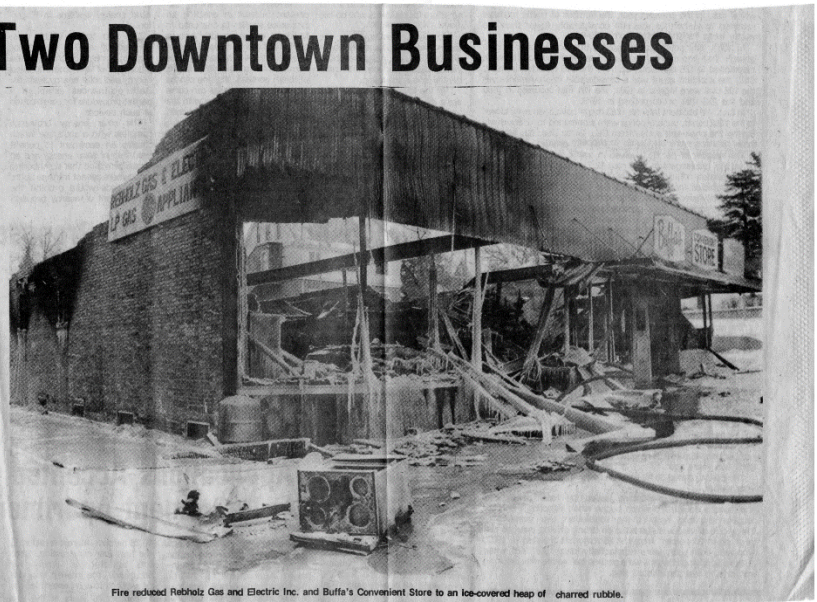
The owner of the razed structure, John Rebholz, a retired businessman, placed \$80,000 to \$100,000 value on the brick building and said it was insured for the "appraised value."

Rebholz, 616 E. Fulton, rented half of the white-brick building to his daughter and son-in-law, Rose and Werner Last, 5-R 348 Badger Heights Rd., proprietors of the retail outlet featuring large and small home appliances. The other half was leased to Donald Durn, owner of Buffa's.

Mrs. Last said the dollar value of the Rebholz Gas and Electric stock lost in the fire would be unknown until an inventory can be completed and forwarded to insurance adjusters. She said the store was insured, but was uncertain how much of the loss the insurance company would pay for.

Both the grocery store stock

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Fire reduced Rebholz Gas and Electric Inc. and Buffa's Convenience Store to an ice-covered heap of charred rubble.

Blaze Rips Through Established Businesses

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and the washers and dryers of the laundromat business inside Buffa's were completely destroyed by the burning flames.

It was the second fire in the last two years that destroyed property owned by Dunn. On May 2, 1982, a downtown warehouse of Dunn's was lost in a blaze ignited by two youths who allegedly set a lawn chair on fire inside the building. The juveniles were later charged with criminal arson following a police investigation.

Neal said firefighters' chief concern was preventing the blaze from spreading to a propane storage area located in the rear of the gas and electric company. A cement brick wall separated the explosive liquid gas from the rapidly spreading flames.

However, the underground propane tanks were not the only immediate danger of explosion at the fire scene. Wisconsin Power & Light Co. crewmen were called to the scene to disconnect natural gas lines that were piped into the clothes dryers at the laundromat inside Buffa's.

Firefighters utilized the department's rescue vehicle to escape from the cold. Inside, the fire department ladies auxiliary supplied the weary firemen with hot chocolate, coffee, donuts and sandwiches.

Rodney Teubert, 304 Craig Rd., and a 17-year-old local boy were arrested by police and charged with obstructing an officer in connection with police efforts to control a crowd of onlookers who began to gather near the burning businesses.

Burdick said the two were booked for failure to cooperate with police orders and interfering with firefighters' handling of the blaze. Both Teubert and the boy have been ordered to appear at Edgerton Municipal Court on Jan. 14.

Burdick, coordinator of Edgerton's division of emergency government, applauded the combined efforts of firefighters, police, the Rock County Sheriff's Department deputies and department of public works employees.

Four sheriff's department units assisted police with traffic control and street department workers set up barricades to block off East Fulton Street and nearby pedestrian walkways. The department of public works also utilized a salt and sand truck to improve traction on the frozen roadway.

Much of the block on East Fulton Street in front of the mound of smoldering rubble was blockaded Saturday morning as city crews worked to scrape a three-inch layer of ice from the street that had frozen because of the amount of water utilized during the firefighting efforts.



A fire late Friday gutted two East Fulton Street businesses.

The cause of the Rebholz fire was not determined, as reported the Edgerton Reporter:

Origin of Downtown Fire Determined; Cause Remains Unknown

Investigators with the state Fire Marshall's office have determined that a Dec. 30 fire that destroyed two long-standing East Fulton Street businesses originated in Buffa's Convenient Store near a series of video games.

However, the cause of the six-hour blaze, which gutted the one-story, white-brick building housing Rebholz Gas & Electric Inc., 14 East Fulton, and Buffa's, 16 E. Fulton, officially remains unknown.

A team of investigators from the state Fire Marshall's office spent last Wednesday sifting through the ice- and snow-covered charred remains of the blaze that kept firefighters from Edgerton and Stoughton occupied from 11:45 p.m. Dec. 30 to about 6:30 a.m. the next day.

Authorities returned to the fire scene Friday to continue the

probe.

Edgerton First Assistant Fire Chief Jim Neal said Thursday that the lone conclusion the fire marshal investigation has uncovered to date is that the devastating blaze originated in the combination grocery store-laundromat business near a series of video games located in the center of the store.

However, Neal said the cause of the fire is still officially listed as unknown.

"He (the fire marshal) ruled out arson. No foul play is suspected," Neal said. "He was leaning toward an electrical cause because of the video games and an (suspicious) electrical outlet in that area which could have been the cause, but we don't know anything for sure."

Michael J. Van Keuren, a special agent with the state

Division of Criminal Investigation said the probe is continuing with the cooperation of local police, the fire department and the division of criminal investigation.

"We're still looking into other aspects (of the blaze) before we reach a final conclusion," Van Keuren said. "It will be a few days before anything more is decided."

Two Edgerton police officers who came upon the burning building while on routine patrol reportedly saw flames which originated at Rebholz Gas & Electric. As the two policemen approached the burning structure, there was reportedly an explosion which shattered a series of plate glass windows, allowing smoke to billow from the front of the household appliance dealership.

"That's not an indication of

anything," Van Keuren said of the police officers' initial observation. "The fact that the flames were seen there (in Rebholz Gas & Electric) and not in the other location (Buffa's) could mean a lot of things."

Van Keuren said an air current, propelled by 30-40 mph winds that night, drafted the flames in a direction toward the appliance store.

He also indicated that any view of the flames inside Buffa's Convenient Store was more obstructed and that the policemen may not have been able to see any fire inside from their vantage point.

John Rebholz, the owner of the gutted building, valued the structure at \$80,000 to \$100,000 and said it was insured for the

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Fire Probe

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appraised value.

Rebholz, 616 E. Fulton, rented half of the white-brick building to his daughter and son-in-law, Rose and Werner Last, 5-R 348 Badger Heights Rd., proprietors of the retail outlet featuring large and small home appliances. The other half was leased to Donald Dunn, owner of Buffa's.