

# 1973 Fire De

A smouldering brick skeleton was all that remained of the once-bustling Firestone complex building No. 2 on the morning of March 9, 1973, after a raging \$1 million fire raced through the structure.

Destroyed by fire were facilities earmarked for expansion by Providence Pile Fabric Corp. and two floors used as a warehouse for production goods.

Fire Chief Moore reported that his men were hampered by hydrant problems and a sprinkler system that was shutoff in the century-old, three-story mill building.

The sprinklers had been shut off in the winter months because there was no heat in the building. A new heating system was being installed by the structure's new owners, Providence Pile.

Shortly after 1:30 p.m. Thursday, Eliot Holden, assistant general street foreman for the Fall River Gas Co., noticed a "small light" on the third floor of the mill building. He walked to the company regulator station on Anawan Street and notified the Fire Department that he suspected a fire.

When Holden returned to Water Street, he found the third and fourth levels of the building on the north side engulfed in flames.

Ironically, Holden's nickname is "Smokey."

The signal station at the Fire Department logged the call at 1:32 p.m.

When firefighters arrived on the scene, they saw flames shooting from the upper floors, and it became obvious that the battle would be more one of containing the fire in the structure, preventing it from spreading to other buildings in the complex and the nearby tank farm of the Northeast Petroleum Co. on Ferry Street.

District Fire Chief William Clark sounded a second alarm at 1:35 p.m., and Deputy Chief Antone Medeiros sounded a general alarm moments later, calling in all off duty firefighters and reserves.

At the same time, an alert for assistance went out to area communities. Those sending apparatus included Westport, Tiverton, Portsmouth, Swansea, Somerset, Dartmouth, Warren, Bristol and Barrington.

Some equipment repor-

Water Street were closed to traffic.

Police Chief Bowers said he called in men of the first watch at 2 p.m., about two hours early, to assist in traffic control.

Hundreds braved the rain to witness the end of a symbol of the city's industrial past. Mothers brought young children with cameras to record on film what once had been a city landmark. Couples held hands and watched from the causeway over Firestone Pond.

After dinner, families were walking down to see the fire that still burned intensely among the ruins.

At about dusk, one of the white geese, that populated the pond swam from under the causeway bridge, through the smoke and the bright orange glow of the reflected fire, to the north side of the bank where it took to the grassy banks and shrubs for shelter.

Workers at the nearby J&J Corrugated plant were advised by management to leave their jobs shortly after the fire erupted.

Two other shifts were cancelled. The Salvation Army's mobile canteen was at the fire scene as were members of the Civil Defense teams handling communications.

Among the spectators at the blaze was Alan Symond, president of Providence Pile. As the fire roared through the structure he kept saying that he hoped the fighters would move away from the building to safety.

Shortly after Symonds uttered those words, the fire fighters moved back and the building began to collapse.

The northeast wall went first, toppling, with a thunderous roar, back into the building itself.

Then the southwest wall collapsed in a pile of wooden floors, steel ventilating fans, struts and bricks.

Symonds repeated his concern for the safety of the firefighters and asked if anyone was in the building. Luckily no one was in the structure by that time.

Ashes and smoke mingled with rain blanketed the firefighters, coating their rubber goods, helmets and faces with soot.

Water cannons and hose teams were positioned at key points around the

and Barrington.

Some equipment reported to the scene, others were assigned, with supervisory city fire personnel, to man empty stations here whose equipment and men were at the fire.

Some pieces were sent home at 6 p.m. Others, assigned to empty fire houses, were dismissed at midnight.

Chief Moore said that pressure loss at the hydrants, due to the amount of water used, caused him to draw water from Firestone Pond and the Taunton River.

A Coast Guard tug stood by, should it have become necessary to fight the blaze from the water side.

District Chief Clark said that nearly 24 pieces of apparatus, including 8 from outside the city, were pressed into service.

At the fire scene, Water Superintendent Matthew D. Sullivan and Assistant Superintendent Michael Miszko Jr., said they doubted that anything was wrong with the hydrants. Pressure was boosted to the area after notification of the fire, said Sullivan.

A pillar of smoke, seen for miles around, signaled the end of the building that literally hummed with military goods production during World War II, employing thousands of people.

The thick, black smoke churned upward, despite sometimes pelting rain. The smoke at times obliterated traffic on the Braga Bridge.

Police kept spectators from parking on the bridge and its ramps. But traffic on the bridge for a time bogged down, slowing commuters to a crawl, because parts of Davol Street, Broadway and

teams were positioned at key points around the building and a favorable, mild wind played an important role in holding down the fire's progress.

But soon the fire had run the length of the south end of the old mill building. The flames ate up through the roof, which subsequently collapsed. Despite the thousands of gallons of water poured into the structure, the interior was an inferno by mid-afternoon.

No one was hurt in the fire, despite the fact that 20 persons were at work inside when the fire broke out. They all escaped without harm.

The work crews were in the process of preparing the first floor of the mill for the manufacturing expansion of the main plant on Grinnell Street.

The second and third floors were used as storage areas for the goods used in production at the main plant.

Two persons were injured. One was treated at St. Anne's Hospital after gasoline splashed into his eyes during refueling operations. He was identified as Paul Lopes, of Warren, a member of the Central Fire Company of that town.

Admitted to St. Anne's with chest pains was Steven King, 28, of 489 Spring St. Hospital spokesmen said he was an employee of one of the firms affected by the fire.

King had been in the process of moving goods to a safe distance from the fire when he was stricken.

Employees of Borden-Remington were hard at work moving volatile chemicals from the areas of their building nearest the fire. And at Tillotson, similar operations, with

# estroyed Firestone

forklift trucks, were underway. A spokesman here said machinery was being moved from the close fire zone.

Council President Britland, acting mayor, went to the fire scene shortly after the first contingent of firefighters arrived. He was accompanied by Councillor Springer.

Councillor DiNucci was at the scene for nearly two hours, standing in the occasionally heavy rain. He was angry and he said so. He commented that some hydrants were not working and the efforts of the fighters were being stalled as new water sources were sought.

As water rolled off his cap and down his face, DiNucci decried the loss of the building and the tax

dollars it might have brought into city coffers.

That figure, reported earlier in the year by city assessor chairman Albert Mercier, was about \$300,000 per year for the entire complex, the amount that the buyers agreed to as tax assessment, the same as Firestone's last year of operation here.

The firestone era ended in September, 1971 after 34 years. Ever since 1937 the company was a major element in the economic, social and cultural life of the city.

Some of the buildings once formed a sizable portion of the American Printing Co. complex and many buildings of the old Fall River Iron Works stood in the general area

of what, in later years, was known as the Firestone plant.

Historically the city has suffered greatly from fire and the acreage occupied by the Iron Works-Print Works-Firestone complex, did not escape.

In 1867 fire destroyed a nearly-completed major print works causing an estimated \$2 million loss.

Within 16 months the ruins were removed and a new five-story building made entirely of granite was completed and filled with machinery.

Operations began with a small work force and a handful of supervisory help and the first product made was a battery separator.

The complex was sold to Firestone Tire and Rub-



Firefighters worked feverishly attempting to contain the fast spreading blaze at the Firestone complex but the flames, fanned by strong winds, quickly spread throughout the former mill building.

# *Complex Building*

ber Co., in October, 1937.  
In 1941, just weeks before  
Pearl Harbor, five broke

out again in the complex  
centering in the old main  
building of the American

Print Co. The monetary  
loss that time was \$15  
million.