

pullquote of the century: “Unfortunately, this type of construction is built to burn. It doesn’t have any fire sprinklers in there, and being a common attic, the fire can travel ... without being stopped very easily.”

Sonoma Fire Capt. Bob Norrbom

Fire rips Sonoma Marketplace

sub: 20-year-old arrested for arson

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By Neal Ross

A Sonoma man has been charged with arson in connection with a fire which tore through five businesses at the Sonoma Marketplace shopping center Tuesday night.

The inferno raged for more than two hours as an army of firefighters from nine fire districts battled to control the roiling flames.

Twenty-year-old Geoffrey Meyers, a 1997 graduate of Justin Siena High School who also briefly attended Altimira Middle School and St. Francis Solano school, was initially arrested at his Cooper Street home around 1 a.m., Wednesday, for failure to register as a convicted arsonist, according to Sonoma Police Chief John Gurney.

McCalou's Department Store, Nail Pro/Tip Top Cleaners, California Organics, Homegrown Bagels and the Sonoma Beauty Supply House were destroyed, while Sonoma Sport, and the Movie Merchants video store sustained some smoke and water damage.

Similar damage were also reported at Launderland, Happy Garden restaurant, Wine Country Pasta and the New Image Salon. Longs Drug Store also reported minor smoke damage.

Gurney said evidence was discovered linking Meyers to the fire, and that arson charges were filed around 4 p.m., Wednesday. He did not elaborate on the nature of the evidence. Police Capt. Robert Wedell declined to release details of Meyer's previous arson conviction, saying only that it didn't occur in Northern California.

Sonoma Fire Chief Mike Cahill estimated the loss at \$2 million for the building and \$1 to \$2 million for contents. Due to the multi-million dollar damage, agents from the federal bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms participated in the investigation.

The fire, discovered just before 10:30 p.m., Tuesday, by Sonoma police officer Steve Cramer, apparently started in a pile of cardboard boxes behind the California Organics natural-food store before quickly spreading to the rear attic and roof.

It was declared under control at 12:40 a.m., Wednesday, after drawing more than 100 firefighters and 30 pieces of equipment to the 201 W. Napa St. shopping center --

including 20 engines, three ladder trucks, six command vehicles and three ambulances. No injuries were reported.

Engines from the Sonoma and Valley of the Moon fire departments were the first to respond, rolling into position while 20-foot flames painted the night sky a hellish red.

Sonoma fire Capt. Bob Norrbom, who was with the first arriving engine crew, said Wednesday morning, that the building itself worked against firefighters' efforts.

"Unfortunately, this type of construction is built to burn," Norrbom said. "It doesn't have any fire sprinklers in there, and being a common attic, the fire can travel ... without being stopped very easily."

"It would have been much easier for us to contain if it started (at) one end of the building or the other, but basically, it was in the corner in the middle going both ways," Norrbom said. "Our initial goal was to try and cut it off in each direction, (but) it moved too quick on us through McCalou's."

As a woman sprayed her Third Street West home across from the blaze, a Sonoma truck extended its ladder onto McCalou's roof while smoke drifted up from the gable. Firefighters scrambled cautiously out to assess the scene while a crew connected hoses to hydrants and prepared for battle.

Soon, high-powered streams of water arced into the burning roof, as Third Street West filled with curious onlookers.

At 10:40 p.m., an engine apiece was dispatched from the Schell-Vista, Glen Ellen, Eldridge, Kenwood and Mayacamas fire departments, followed quickly by a call for Petaluma to send its own ladder truck.

By that time, the parking lot in front of McCalou's had become the firefighting nerve center. Sonoma Fire Chief Mike Cahill assumed command, while Assistant Chief Allyn Lee kept tabs on equipment and personnel with a flowchart spread out on the hood of one of the chiefs' vehicles.

As part of the southern roof collapsed in a huge clatter of tiles, Sonoma's ladder truck -- still stationed behind McCalou's -- sprayed water into the building's burning interior. Black smoke boiled out of the roof, lit from within by crackling red flame.

At 11 p.m., Cahill called for another ladder truck from Santa Rosa. Four hose crews -- three firefighters to a hose -- shot water through McCalou's front door. Smoke filled the parking lot, and the heat could be felt 100 feet away.

"McCalou's is pretty much an open store," Norrbom said. "So once you get a fire penetrating the inside of the store, then ... it becomes involved fairly quickly."

Cahill called for five more engines at 11:20 p.m., which were dispatched from the Rincon Valley and Bennett Valley fire districts. Two minutes later, Petaluma's truck arrived, dropping its ladder on Movie Merchants' roof. A Valley of the Moon rescue truck lit up the scene with daylight brightness, but clogged parking-lot drains soon turned the area into an ankle-deep lake.

Just after midnight, a second call came in -- this time for a structure fire on Broadway. Two engines and a chief raced away from Sonoma Marketplace, returning when the second call turned out to be a burn pile.

Meanwhile, Santa Rosa's ladder truck rolled into place behind Launderland, helping firefighters to finally contain the blaze at its easternmost point.

"We stopped it right about Sonoma Ski and Sport," Norrbom said. "We really opened (the roof) up almost completely, and were really able to get in there and penetrate ... we had to cool the fire that was burning as well as stop the progress of the fire, so that's what took so many resources to do."

By 12:30 a.m., most of the flames had died down, after briefly redoubling inside the shell of McCalou's. Most crews were released by 3 a.m., with one Sonoma engine standing by until Wednesday afternoon to monitor the situation. Debris smoldering under the collapsed roof twice flared into flames Wednesday evening, but were quickly controlled.

Norrbom said that despite the extent of the flames, no one was injured either by smoke, flame, or falling debris.

"A fire with this magnitude, nobody even cut a finger -- it's kind of amazing," he said. "The roof collapsed on us in several places just as we had gotten off -- we got very lucky."