



Last Week's Weather

	Hi...	Lo...	Pcp.
Wed.	34	18	0
Thurs.	29	-1	0
Fri.	7	-3	0
Sat.	16	-2	0
Sun.	20	18	tr
Mon.	22	18	.5 sn
Tues.	25	10	tr

# Courier Freeman

A PARK NEWSPAPER

Other local news,  
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## Arson Probe Continues; Businesses Plan To Carry On

### Investigation Not Yet Released

BY HAL STOKES AND BESTY BAKER  
Police and arson investigators have thus far remained mum on the results of their investigation into the cause of a fire that swept through four business establishments and two apartments in the downtown Market Street Historic District early Thursday morning.

Arson specialists from the county's Office of Emergency Services, trained in detecting the causes and origins of fires, made their way Saturday through the frozen hulk of a building that once housed the Thomaris Agency insurance firm, the Isle Of You clothing store and boutique, two upstairs apartments, the Family Shoe Store and the Focal Point photography studio.

One part of the building, at 26 Market St., was owned by Leonard Thomaris of the insurance agency. The other part, 28 Market St., was owned by Francis "Bill" Healey.

Augie Weiss, Canton, one of the investigators, said Monday that sketches and pictures that he and Frank Burns, Helena, made during their inspection Saturday have been turned over to the Potsdam Police Department.

A report from the two is expected to be delivered the latter part of this week to Potsdam Fire Chief Robert Williams and Potsdam police, Weiss said. Of that report, all he would say is "We have come to some conclusions." He said he feared further remarks might jeopardize the police investigation.

Speculation has been high that the fire may have been set, either intentionally or unintentionally, by burglars. Asked about it, Weiss commented, "I can't say that (what is being speculated) was not the case."

Detective Sgt. Malcolm MacGregor said Friday that he planned to interview several persons who had contacted the police with possible leads.

**Good Chance Of Knowing**  
The present condition of the building, with its top floors removed and the remains sheathed in heavy ice, might give the appearance that it is impossible to determine the cause of the fire. But St. Lawrence County Emergency Services Coordinator Patrick Ver-Schneider said Friday that he believed the men could make a "reasonable determination as to the cause."

Thursday, a crane from the ConQuip Corporation tore down most of the upper stories in an attempt to get at the fire that still smoldered inside some ten hours after the first call came in. Potsdam Chief Williams determined that the only way to effectively extinguish the fire was to demolish the upper stories. Firemen had been recalled to the scene at 11:10 a.m. when the smoldering building caught fire once again.

**Thursday Battle**  
Potsdam police launched their investigation of the blaze at mid-morning Thursday. Eleven fire companies continued to battle the blaze at mid-morning Thursday.

Authorities, alerted by the reports of the patrolmen who first spotted the fire at 2:55 a.m., were considering arson a definite possibility, according to Lt. Clinton Matott, acting chief of the department.

Patrolman John Perrella, one of the first on the scene, said that there were holes broken through the two front glass doors of the Thomaris Agency. Other eyewitness reports confirmed that the holes were large enough for a person to pass through.

Perrella and officers James Lewis and David McCarthy had just finished investigating apparent accident damage to the rear of Herbert Cohen's men's store when they saw smoke billowing from the Thomaris building.

When they first arrived, police also noticed lying about some items that they said could have been burglarized from the Isle Of You, which shares the front entryway with the insurance firm. The patrolmen were able to retrieve the items, reportedly a "roach clip" and some cigarette papers.

While authorities began checking into that possibility, firemen continued to bring the blaze under control and beat the flames down with streams of water that almost immediately froze solid in the sub-zero temperatures.



**BUILDINGS DESTROYED**—Look closely at the lower section of the glass door in the center of this photograph and you'll see the hole that has led to speculation that arson was behind a fire that burned through four businesses and two apartments at 26-28 Market Street in Potsdam early Thursday morning. Police launched an arson investigation after officers who first spotted the blaze at 2:55 a.m. stated that they saw this hole and another one in the glass door leading into the Thomaris Agency.

building, sparing the neighboring Eugene Earle Jewelers and Barstow Furniture buildings. Although flames did not appear to have penetrated the firewalls between the neighboring buildings, there was smoke and water damage to those businesses.

Estimates from Potsdam's water pumping station indicated that perhaps a million to a million and a half gallons of water had been pumped to bear on the blaze since the pumps began running "at full bore" at 4 a.m. Much of that water turned to solid ice which eventually began to take its toll on men and firefighting apparatus.

Throughout the early morning battle, firemen scurried back and forth, their faces etched with the labor of their task, their coats and helmets caked with heavy ice.

By 8 a.m., the Potsdam aerial tower truck and Norwood's ladder truck had been knocked out of commission by icing problems, but Canton's aerial ladder continued to pour water down onto the building as the roof caved in.

The blaze was fanned by breezes gusting to 15 miles an hour which brought the wind-chill temperatures down to about 23 below zero. The still air registered at five degrees below zero at 3 a.m. when the fire was discovered.

Two firefighters, Alexander Grant, Potsdam, and Brian Haggatt, Norwood, were taken to the Canton-Potsdam Hospital complaining of chest pains associated with smoke inhalation. A third fireman, Shawn Hubbard, was taken to the hospital later in the morning with possible overexposure to the cold.

One other injury was reported. Kerry Lincoln, an employee of the Isle Of You, arrived at the scene and reportedly became so distraught that she fainted.

All were transported by the Potsdam Rescue Squad, which stood by at the scene since 3 a.m.

The fire caused thick clouds of smoke to billow across the downtown area and firefighters, who at first entered the buildings wearing air packs, were forced out because they said they could not see anything.

Only one of the two apartment dwellers was home when the fire broke out. William Thomaris, who lived upstairs over the insurance agency, was home sleeping when he was awakened.

He said that he first thought the smoke was coming from his refrigerator, which he unplugged. Then he looked out into the hall and saw it filled with smoke.

He tried to awaken his neighbor, Brian Zolnar, but Zolnar was not home.

Thomaris ran back to his apartment, he said, tried to call the fire department, realized his phone was dead, grabbed his coat and ran downstairs.

As he came downstairs, he said he saw the holes in the doors of the insurance agency.

Meanwhile, Zolnar, who is a member of the rock band "Flying Wedge," returned home about 4 a.m. from a musical engagement at Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity at St. Lawrence University. He did not know of the fire until he walked around the corner and saw his apartment in flames, he said.

The fire took from Zolnar everything he owned except the clothes on his back, \$6 cash, and his saxophone. He did not have insurance, he said. He said he lost, among other things, a \$5,000 stereo system and a number of irreplaceable tape recordings of his music.

Police Lt. Matott ordered the evacuation of the Arlington Inn, a rooming hotel located in the same block as the gutted buildings.

Some 40 tenants were ushered out into the cold for about two hours until it became apparent that they could re-enter their dwelling safely.

Some huddled in darkened doorways along Market Street and watched the drama being played out before them. The harsh floodlights from the fire vehicles turned the familiar downtown section into an eerie moonscape, as firefighters continued their battle.

There was some added excitement Thursday morning when, at about 4:40 a.m., it was reported there was a fire at the Potsdam Laundry off Munson Street. A truck was dispatched to the scene but the report proved unfounded.

**Businesses Help Out**

At about 4 a.m., Carl Sellers, the custodian for the town office building located directly across the street from the fire, opened it up and began serving coffee to the volunteers, who occasionally came in for a respite from the cold.

Police also reported recovering near the door merchandise that may have been stolen from the neighboring Isle Of You boutique. Firemen struggled against heavy smoke and sub-zero temperatures to bring the blaze under control. Village officials met Friday with the affected businessmen and offered assistance, discussing such avenues as low-interest loans and Small Business Administration aid. (Hal Stokes photo)

Soon other businesses were helping out. Some of those that assisted were the Potsdam Bakery, Mr. Donut, White's Hardware, the Deli-Sub, McDonald's, and the downtown Kinney Store also opened early to help five the volunteers some shelter.

Potsdam's new aerial tower truck performed well until ice conditions caused a coupling to crack around 8 a.m. Firemen said that the trouble was apparently caused by freezing in the line that attaches to the spray gun on the tower platform.

Representatives of Ladder Tower Industries arrived in Potsdam Friday to examine the apparent failure.

Steam jennies from the village and Niagara Mohawk were called in to help thaw out the tower.

The trouble with the Norwood ladder truck was apparently caused by a heavy build up of ice on the extended ladder.

**Last Fire In 69s**

Potsdam officials said the last major fire in the downtown blocks occurred in the late 1960s.

According to the Potsdam Museum Director Kay Wyant, the Thomaris Building was built in the early 1880s. It was built about the same time as the Ives Building next door. A. D. Heath and other associates ran a clothing store here from 1882 to 1907 with retailing on the lower floor and tailor shops on the top floors. The other part of the building was occupied by various stores.

It became the Morgan Clothing Store after Heath sold out. In 1968 it was a fruit market.

### Saturday's Shoppers React To Blaze With Surprise

BY MIKE UTTER  
Student Intern

"How does the fire make you feel, Alex?"

The fifth grader looked across the street at the charred remains of what was once a building. He looked for a few moments, possibly unsure of how to express his feelings at his innocent age. He had seen many fires on the TV before, but this was a real one that had left its mark across the street.

"It's sad," was all he could muster at first. Then, as if to clarify his feelings, he added, "It was a nice building."

Though Alex may only be in the fifth grade, his feelings about the tragic wake of a destructive blaze that destroyed part of the heart of downtown Potsdam, it was a tragedy which, because of its suspicious origin, has caused the people of Potsdam to wonder.

The word arson is not used around here very often. When it is, it is usually referring to somewhere else, not Potsdam.

Now, the word arson and its results bring about reactions of "terrible" and "awful" in the minds of townspeople. Businessmen were of the firm opinion that "we don't need it."

The result of the arson has been the destruction of four businesses and several apartments. To date, the business people have indicated that they will relocate and start again.

For the shoppers downtown, the fire not only brought inconvenience but an eyesore, too.

The fire left a gaping hole in the major downtown block on Market Street. Several of the shoppers on the streets on Saturday commented on the "awful hole."

The hole seemed nearly filled with fantastic ice formations, the result of firefighting in sub-zero weather. Mixed with the ice, one can see the charred beams of the stores that were once shopped in. Scattered among the rubble were pieces of clothing and furniture.

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### Village Offers Assistance

BY HAL STOKES AND BESTY BAKER

All of the businessmen affected by Thursday's downtown fire have indicated that they intend to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start over again.

One of the affected firms, the Thomaris Agency, was already back in business by Monday. And the others say they intend to resume and most are now looking for places to relocate.

"We hope to turn disaster into something better," said Larry Hazen, owner of the Isle Of You, located in the portion of the building that received the most fire damage.

The fire swept through the Isle Of You, the Thomaris Agency, and two apartments in a building owned by Leonard Thomaris of the insurance agency; and the Family Shoe Store and the Focal Point photography studio in a building owned by Francis Healey.

Combine the rent income and the gross sales revenue from all those businesses and you have a total of close to \$1 million a year, it was estimated by some of the business people.

Also affected by the fire were the neighboring businesses of Eugene Earle Jewelry, Barstow's Furniture, and Snell's TV and Appliances.

Village officials met with the businessmen on Friday and spoke with them again Sunday and Monday, offering help of some sort. Assistance could take a number of forms: guaranteed or direct loans through the Small Business Administration, low interest loans through the Department of Housing and Urban Development, technical assistance and architectural fees through the Department of the Interior's Office of Historic Preservation. That last comes because the fire was in the Market Street Historic District which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

At a meeting of the affected business people held last Friday at Chris Fay's Restaurant, Potsdam Mayor Ruth Garner told the group that "the village is pledged to help you in any way we can."

No definite plans for aid are in place as of yet. Attending the Friday meeting with village officials were Francis Healey, Leonard Thomaris, and representatives of the Focal Point, the Family Shoe Store, the Isle Of You, Barstow's Furniture, Eugene Earle Jewelers and Snell's TV and Appliances.

Village officials had called the noon meeting for the Civic Center board room, but restaurant owner Chris Fay donated his restaurant and the lunch as a way of assisting the fire victims.

Although most funding sources, such as the SBA, work individually with business operators, village officials said they hoped for better results with the village coordinating assistance efforts.

One building owner said Friday that it would be "impossible" to rebuild without subsidies, in view of today's high mortgage rates and construction costs. Without subsidies, mortgage costs would put building rental rates beyond reach, the owner noted.

Over the weekend, some of the business owners took the risk and entered the burned-out building to see what could be recovered.

Thomaris Agency

Leonard Thomaris said that he was able to recover his safe from the building. At the present time, he is reconstructing the records. Reconstructing records won't be a problem, according to his son, William Thomaris. At the present time, they are open for business and can be reached at 265-2000.

All of those insured with the agency are still covered, he said. The firm expects to be in a temporary location by the end of the week.

Isle Of You

Hazen, owner of the Isle Of You, said he went into his building over the weekend, but remarked that there did not appear as though there were much that could be saved. Presently, he is looking for a new location and plans to start up again as soon as possible. He said that he did have insurance on his store.

Focal Point

Laird Chaffee, owner of the Focal Point, said that he had gotten into his studio and had been able to recover some items, principally camera bodies that he hoped could be rebuilt. He intends to start up the business again, he

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