



A HISTORY OF
THE
GUNNISON VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT
BY
JOHN F. X. MCCARTHY

W.H. McCarthy, John F. X.
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McCa Gunnison Volunteer
Fire Department

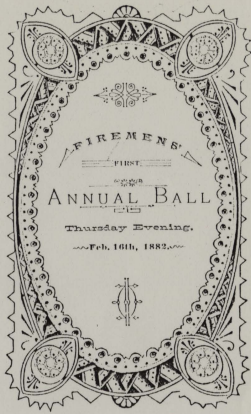
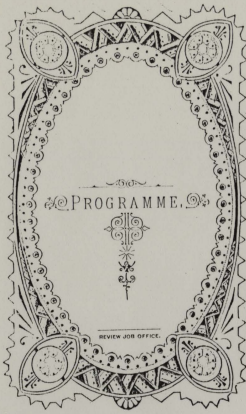
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PROGRAMME.

GRAND MARCH.....	For the Hook and Ladder.
1. Quadrille.....	For Fun.
2. Waltz.....	To your Partners.
3. Lancers.....	A good Prospect.
4. Schottische.....	To the West.
5. Quadrille.....	A Boom in Ginnison.
6. Waltz.....	To our Treasurer.
7. Quadrille.....	Plau.
8. Polka.....	I am Ready.
9. Waltz Quadrille.....	For a Good Time.
10. Lancers.....	To our Foreman.
11. Quadrille.....	To All.
12. Polka Mazourka.....	I am Hungry.
INTERMISSION.	
13. Waltz (Newport).....	Fred's Favorites.
14. Fireman's Dance.....	Dance Hurrah.
15. Sicilian Circle.....	Around the Hall.
16. Quadrille.....	Brilliant.
17. Polka.....	I am Tired.
18. Lancers.....	For-get-me-not.
19. Waltz.....	How do you Like our Ball.
20. Quadrille.....	Very Well.
21. Virginia Reel.....	Well a Good Time.
22. Waltz Quadrille.....	Let us go Home.
23. Quadrille.....	All Right.
24. Waltz.....	Home Sweet Home.

ENGAGEMENTS.

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17.
18.
19.
20.
21.
22.
23.
24.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..... ii

CHAPTERS

I. THE EARLY YEARS -- 1880-1883..... 1

II. FIREMAN'S BALL -- THE TERPSICHOREAN TREAT..... 7

III. THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE.....13

IV. PICTURE SECTION.....17

V. THE FIREMEN'S CONCERT -- A CULTURAL TRADITION..31

VI. TECHNOLOGY FOR THE TIMES.....33

VII. MAJOR MODERN CONFLAGRATIONS.....36

VIII. THE MODERN ERA -- THE EVOLUTION OF AN
INSTITUTION.....40

IX. CONCLUSION.....42

X. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....44

XI. APPENDIX.....45

A. Colorado Bureau of Investigation Report on
Robidoux Fire

B. Your Volunteer Fire Department is as Close as Your
Phone

C. Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department Memo

D. Constitution of the West Gunnison Hose Company,
1884

INTRODUCTION

Fire departments, whether urban or rural, are a vital part of the community in which they serve. Major Departments are staffed by men who go to the Firehouse, spend their time on the job and go home often times to a different community. The Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department is not such a department. This department is comprised of a group of local citizens who have volunteered themselves, 24 hours a day, to serve the community in which they live.

The men who volunteer their time are not fulltime firemen who have chosen to be smoke eaters as a way of supporting themselves. They are men with other occupations: carpenter, teacher, plumber, merchant and banker. The volunteers, however, share a common bond with one another. That bond is that they are all willing to drop what they are doing at a moment's notice in order to help their neighbor and community even at the expense of their own personal welfare.

The Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department has been in existence for 104 years and during that time has contributed in many ways to the growth of this beautiful area in which we live. These

contributions transcend the basic purpose for which the department was formed, fighting fires. The volunteers, through their time and efforts, have enriched Gunnison socially, culturally and economically.

CHAPTER I
THE EARLY YEARS--1880-1883

Volunteer fire departments have long been the backbone of many a small town in the United States. These rural forces have provided many a service other than that for which they were initially designed. The men who staffed these departments were dedicated and unselfish individuals who put the safety of their community at the head of their list of priorities. Gunnison is a fine example of how true this is. Our local volunteer fire department, in addition to its constant vigil against the deadly element of fire, has given to the community many opportunities which have enabled Gunnison to grow socially, culturally and economically.

The fear of fire in Gunnison, as in any pioneer town in the late 1800's, was not only great but quite justifiable. With buildings made of timber and logs, and coal or wood burning stoves as a source of heat, the threat of fire possibly ravaging a settlement was omnipresent.

On July 15, 1880, the Gunnison Fire Company, No. 1 was formed. In a meeting chaired by Mayor Kubler the department was formed and officers were elected. The results of these elections were:

T. J. Shandal -- Captain
G. A. Hawley -- 1st Assistant
W. S. Lippincott -- Secretary
W. B. Spencer -- Treasurer

There was discussion as to what type of apparatus should be used with which to fight fire and at a subsequent meeting, it was determined that hooks and buckets should be procured due to ". . . our liberal supply of running water and the character of our buildings."¹

The effectiveness of this department, however, was questionable. The Gunnison Democrat reported in December of 1880, "The fire department of the town is as yet an inchoate state. One volunteer company has been formed, but its organization and equipment remain incomplete."²

The fear of fire grew as did Gunnison. References to near fires were made in the local newspapers along with warnings as to the dangers of different fire hazards, such as burning lamps. Finally it happened! Gunnison's first fire occurred on March 26, 1881. The event was recorded by

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²The Gunnison News, July 17, 1880, p. 2.

The Gunnison Democrat, December 29, 1880, p. 3.

The Gunnison Democrat.

Gunnison's first fire occurred on Saturday evening last, and was confined to the slaughter house owned by Dawson of the West Side. The house contained a large quantity of tallow and hides, and the loss will amount to about twelve hundred dollars, with no insurance. Mr. D. is absent visiting relatives in the East.³

It was shortly after this fire that the volunteer department, most probably spurred on by the Dawson fire, actively sought to purchase the equipment needed to handle any such fires. The fire company obtained buckets, hose and a hand engine from Preston and Company of Chicago. The engine arrived in late 1881 at a cost of between \$400 and \$500 dollars, the rubber hose came at the cost of 70 cents per foot. It seemed that the Gunnison Fire Company was all set with the exception of one problem--no water! The Gunnison Daily Review summed it up best when it stated, "Gunnison claims the best fire company in the state, but just now without any water, the boys appear more ornamental than useful."⁴

During the year 1881, The Gunnison Fire Company, No. 1, was not the only volunteer fire fighting force in town. In

3

The Gunnison Democrat, March 30, 1881, p. 5.

4

The Gunnison Daily Review, January 12, 1882, p. 3.

addition to Company Number 1 were the E. A. Buck Hose Company, as well as the Harrison Hose Company. The companies competed with one another in the sighting and putting out of fires in town. The dates of the formation and disbanding of these companies were not found by this student, although it is known that the Harrison Hose Company was disbanded and reorganized as the Gunnison Hose Company, No. 2. The Buck Company along with Company No. 1, however, were to remain the major forces of fire fighting for years to come. In later years companies such as the West Gunnison Hose Company and the Loudon Mullin Hook and Ladder Company made contributions, but these companies were shortlived and details of them are sketchy at best.

As previously stated, these fire companies were relatively useless without water. There were fire patrols formed, consisting of three men, who kept on the alert for the outbreak of fire. Merchants were instructed to keep a barrel of water in front of their places of business in case of emergency. These barrels, however, would prove to be virtually useless in the case of a major conflagration. The town needed some way to protect itself from flames and it knew it well. Newspapers such as the Daily Review tried to drive the idea home with editorials.

Our town is at the mercy of the firefiend. Should a fire break out there is not a pint of water available to quench it. Now that there is a proposition to erect water works without any cost to our people we think they should by all means embrace the opportunity.⁵

This editorial was followed three days later with the shocking news that, "Should a fire break out today there is nothing to prevent the entire destruction of town."⁶

Both gas and water works were constructed during the winter of 1881-82, being completed in March of 1882. The completion of these waterworks seemed to lessen the fear of the threat of fire as well as bring the opportunity for both competition and some fun. When the water systems were completed the water company gave the fire companies a chance to test the pressure. Picked squads of Company Number 1 and the E. A. Buck Hose Company, rivals with one another, stood at the intersection of Main and Virginia, attached hoses to plugs on the opposite side of the street and turned the water on one another.

For about one half hour they heroically and stoically stood their ground until one side

5

⁶ The Gunnison Daily Review, November 18, 1881, p. 2.

The Gunnison Daily Review, November 18, 1881, p. 1.

was drowned out. The water company demonstrated that water could be thrown more than twice as high as the highest building in that vicinity. The test was a success and furnished plenty of fun for the onlooker.⁷

Fire was still a threat to Gunnison, but the fear of it devastating the young town was considerably lessened by the completion of the water works.

Later on in the year 1882 a petition was sent around the town requesting that the town purchase a fire bell. It was reported that only one man in town refused to apply his signature to the petition.⁸ The 2,000 lb. bell was purchased and placed into position on the tower in the rear of the Gunnison Hose Company Building on February 28, 1883. ". . . the first tap sounded at 15 minutes past 3 o'clock."⁹

Gunnison now had the manpower, equipment and water with which to fight fire. These firemen, however, did not sit back and let life pass them by. Their contribution to the town were merely beginning.

7

George Root, Unpublished Typed Manuscript, Kansas State Historical Society, located at Colorado State Historical Society, Denver, Colorado, August 11, 1932.

8

The Gunnison Daily Review Press, November 17, 1882,
p. 4.

9

The Gunnison Daily Review Press, February 29, 1883,
p. 1.

CHAPTER II
FIREMAN'S BALL -- THE TERPSICHOEAN TREAT

Gunnison, as is well publicized, is infamous for its long, cold winters. It seems as though often times Gunnisonites go into hibernation during these cruel months of the year. The volunteer fire companies, however, saw a way to break the monotony of winter. They initiated a fireman's ball, which was soon to become the social event of the year.

As with many other things, competition among the various departments was both intense and good natured. Credit is given to the West Gunnison Hook and Ladder Company for establishing the Annual Fireman's Ball. As advertised in The Gunnison Daily Review on February 14, 1882,

The grand ball to be given by the Hook and Ladder Co., on Thursday evening, February 16th, promises to be one of the best ever given in this city. The price of admission is only two dollars and the proceeds are to be used for housing the trucks and apparatus of the new company. No one should fail to help this enterprise along. . . . Supper will be served at the Madonna Restaurant to all who desire, at 75 cents each; transportation free.¹⁰

A tradition, which was to last for approximately 60 years had been started. The Fireman's Ball came to be looked upon not as a fundraiser, but rather as the most gala social occasion of the year. A detailed account of the ball best describes its effect upon the town.

The first annual ball given by the West Gunnison Hook and Ladder Co., came off at the new hall on Boulevard last night and was by far the largest, finest and most enjoyable gathering ever held in Gunnison. The number present represented the best of Gunnison society and everything passed off to the satisfaction of all. At an early hour in the evening the coronet band appeared at the hall and discoursed some excellent music, the notes reverberating and echoing up and down the valleys. Dancing commenced at nine o'clock and was kept up until four o'clock this morning, eight sets being almost constantly on the floor, and at one time ten sets. There were present at one time seventy three ladies and about one hundred and fifty tickets were sold. Many of the boys belonging to the company appeared dressed in their red shirts which gave the scene a charming appearance. Most excellent music was furnished, there being two violins, base viol (sic) and coronet. Supper was served at 12 o'clock at the Madonna Restaurant.¹¹

The other departments, however, were not going to be outdone. Several departments soon came up with the "First Annual Fireman's Ball." Not only were these events the top

11

The Gunnison Daily Review, February 17, 1882, p. 3.

of the social list as far as the local gentry was concerned, but people from outlying areas would face the hardships of uncomfortable transportation of the time to be in attendance for these gala social events. An account of the E. A. Buck Hose Company's first ball referred to the volunteers as ". . . gallant fire laddies . . .",¹² which is an indication that these men who volunteered their time to protect the town had taken their rightful place as leading citizens of Gunnison. Buck Company's first ball was

the scene . . . of splendor. To describe the dresses worn or give the names of those whose privilege it was to be present would take up too much time and space, suffice it to say, that besides the Buck's and their ladies, there were present a host of our best citizens and a number of ladies and gentlemen from adjoining camps . . . a delicious supper served at the Delmonico by Mynherr Rott. . . . All those who attended agree that it was positively the most delightful ball ever given in the "Great Gunnison."¹³

Although these volunteer forces competed for the honor of who could give the biggest and best grand ball, they could also work together quite well. On occasions such as the Fourth of July all the forces would pitch in so that the town would have the best festivities possible. A grand ball

12

The Gunnison Daily Review-Press, October 13, 1881,
p. 1.

13

Ibid.

was held on Independence Day in which all the companies helped sponsor. The result of such united endeavors did nothing except to further enhance those men to the townspeople. "The balls given by the fire company have always been successful, and Gunnison society has fallen into the way of looking to the boys to take hold of all affairs of this kind, feeling confident that they know no such word as fail."¹⁴ These volunteers had not only become adept at the extinguishing of fires, but had become Gunnison's unofficial social directors.

As time went on and the different companies fell by the wayside, so did the different "annual" balls. It became tradition for the Fireman's Ball to be held during the month of February, just as the first ball was in February. The ball was usually held in conjunction with the celebration of Washington's birthday. The absence of competition between the fire companies did not diminish the zeal of the fire department. The Fireman's Ball continued to be the social event of the year.

Throughout the 1920's and 1930's the ball was the highlight for many. The firemen were able to wear their resplendent uniforms and the ladies would go all out to look their best. Newspapers would give the details of who wore what as well as the details of the dance program.

14

The Gunnison Daily Review, July 5, 1882, p. 1.

Western State College became involved with the event. Female students were allowed to stay out of their dormitories late and the collegians' dance band usually provided the music.

The ball continued to be a source of funds for the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department. Proceeds from the affair always went towards purchasing needed equipment which enabled the men to use up-to-date methods in securing the safety of the Gunnison community. The need for these funds was vital to the success of the department. ". . . firemen, in need of funds for furnishing their recently completed upper floor of the municipal building, will make a strenuous drive for increased ticket sales. . . . Property owners and householders will be asked to make whatever donations they deem best. . ."15

These dances provided both the funds to continue the efficiency of fire fighting in Gunnison and a social event for the local populace to get out and cut the rug after a long, hard winter. These much-looked-forward-to affairs

fell by the wayside with the closing of the La Veta Hotel in the 1940's. "The good times were over."¹⁶

CHAPTER III
THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition among small towns in Colorado has historically been intense. A town being better than another has been attempted to be determined in many ways; climate, economics, interscholastic athletics, hotels and competition between local volunteer fire departments. Some towns in the 1800's went so far as to hire men who did not fight fires, but rather just competed in inter-town competitions.

Prior to Gunnison competing with other towns, they competed with the various other departments in town. These contests became popular in the late 1880's and are still very much in vogue today among volunteer departments. Most times contests would be held in connection with a holiday such as the Fourth of July. The contests were practical applications of fire-fighting methods which exhibited speed and accuracy. The earliest known contest in Gunnison was a race between the E. A. Buck Hose Company and the Gunnison Hook and Ladder Company on the Fourth of July 1887. Races of this sort were indicators as to who could get to the fires the quickest.

By 1892 the contests had grown in popularity and skill level. In that year contests were held and cash prizes were given to the more successful departments. The July 4th, 1892 festivities were kicked off with a fireman's tournament on Boulevard street. A wet test in which the companies must race 500 feet, 300 of that to a plug and then another 200 feet unreeling hose. The hose is attached to the plug and the first company to get water through the hose is declared the winner. First prize in the 1892 contest went to the E. A. Buck Company, with a time of 30 3/4 seconds.¹⁷ Buck's effort were rewarded with a prize of \$100 and more importantly, the bragging rights that went with it.

By 1899 the Fireman's Tournament on the Fourth of July had gone intercity. Fire companies from other towns, such as Crested Butte and Buena Vista, participated in the tournament. In that year, the Gunnison company bested all challengers, proving themselves to be the best in the area.

As previously mentioned, these contests continue to be of considerable interest, especially in rural areas. Major Today these contests consist of four major events: The wet test, motor replacement, stationary apparatus and the Y-Hose

17

The Gunnison News, July 9, 1982, p. 1.

test. These contests represent the practical application of knowledge and skills, as well as the pride of the volunteers who strive to attain excellence in their field.

CHAPTER IV
PICTURE SECTION



Late 1950's group photo taken in front of
the firehouse in the municipal building.
From L. to R.: Don Schmaltz, Tom Coupe,
Bob Czillinger, Troy Fulton, Jim Chapman,
Bob Williams (Compliments of GVFD)



1962 Firemen's Meeting -- From L. to R.:
Bob Williams, Don Schmaltz, Red Meredith,
Ralph Sangosti. In Foreground: "Si"
Sievers (Compliments of GVFD)



A Fire on North Pine St. in the Late
1950's. From L. to R.: Woman unknown,
Bob Henderson, Frank Eastman, Tom Coupe,
Elmer Long, Glen Fulton (Compliments of
GVFD)



Firemen Practice on a Training Fire at
the William Bryon Residence on North Main
St. in the early 1960's. (Compliments of
GVFD)



The OK Tire Shop Fire -- 1950's. From
L. to R.: Harold Doyle, Tom Coupe, Wayne
Secresh, Herb Dorricott, Si Sievers,
Warren Mergelman, Don Schmaltz, C. C.
Starkebaum, Dudley Gray, Frank Eastman,
Hank Starks (Compliments of GVFD)



Field Fire North of Town in the Early
'60s (Compliments GVFD)



The Volunteers Relax During the 1962
Convention in Glenwood Springs. From
L. to R.: Bob Czillinger, Glen Fulton,
Don Benson, Don Schmaltz. In Fore-
ground: "Si" Sievers (Compliments of
GVFD)



The Firemen Share a Social Moment at Wes McDermott's Cabin on the Lower Gunnison. From L. to R.: Wes McDermott, Unknown Pueblo Fireman, Vern Mauer, Unknown Pueblo Fireman (Compliments of GVFD)



Harry Miller and Larry Lemay Extinguish
a Fire at Miller's Place North of Town.
(Compliments of GVFD)



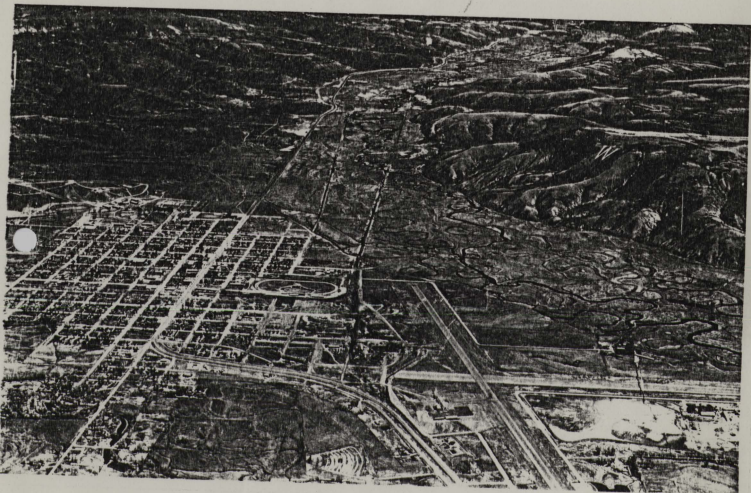
The Devastated Remains of the Tomichi
Village Fire in May of 1970 (Complimen-
ments of GVFD)



The City Dump Fire in 1971 (Compliments
of GVFD)



Fire is Put Out on the Spann Ranch, Date
Unknown (Compliments of GVFD)



Photograph of Gunnison Used for the 1963
Firemen's Convention Program (Compliments
of GVPD)

CHAPTER V
THE FIREMEN'S CONCERT -- A CULTURAL TRADITION

With the passing of the Fireman's Ball in the 1940's the volunteers had to come up with a way to raise the funds needed to obtain the necessary equipment to properly fight fire. In keeping with tradition, the firemen decided to raise money in a way that not only would gather those much needed monies, but in a way that would benefit the townspeople both socially and culturally. In 1953 the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department started a tradition that is still going strong today, the Firemen's Concert.

Started 22 years ago, the Firemen's Concert has enriched the town of Gunnison with a cultural event that has brought men of international renown to this rural area of the Rockies. Internationally known composer and arranger Ferde Grofe was the guest conductor in 1961. At the 7th annual concert in 1959 famed Detroit coronet soloist and trumpeter Leonard Smith was made an honorary member of the Volunteer Fire Department.

In 1960 one of the most famous conductors of all times came to Gunnison so that he could partake in the annual

concert. The guest conductor that year was none other than the legendary Arthur Fiedler. On March 25 and 26, 1960, Fiedler, himself a fire-fighting buff, picked up the baton in Taylor Auditorium on the Western State campus and conducted the concert. The concert was culminated by making Arthur Fiedler an honorary member of the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department. It was the 82nd time that Fiedler had been so honored, but it would definitely be a day to remember by the Gunnisonites in attendance.

It must be remembered that these men who provide protection against fire in this town are volunteers and do need to procure funds whenever necessary. Instead of merely asking for donations or holding bake sales, these fine men volunteer even more of their time to create an experience that will brighten up the lives of the local residents.

CHAPTER VI TECHNOLOGY FOR THE TIMES

Fire fighting, along with everything else in this world, has made significant strides in technological advances over the last hundred years. The days of calling volunteer firemen to duty with the use of a bell has been replaced by the age of battery run electronic pages.

Safety in fighting a fire is of the utmost concern. In the 1880's, fires were fought by attempting to douse the flames by throwing water on them from rubber buckets or from water coming out of hoses only as fast as the men could pump it. If a man had to enter a flaming building often times he would tie a rope around his waist so that in case he went down, the men on the outside would be able to drag him to safety, hopefully.

With all of the technological advancements, fire fighting on the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department is no longer a group of guys throwing a bunch of water onto a fire as quickly as they can. Instead, they have developed their skills and kept up-to-date on the most advanced methods of containing and quenching a blaze. These skills could be considered the application of a science to anyone who has ever witnessed them in action.

The volunteer force currently has much of the equipment necessary to deal with the forces they battle. Some of the major pieces of equipment include 4 class A pumpers, the newest having been received in January 1984. A utility truck is also on hand to be used for a multiplicity of purposes such as extrication or as a pumper. The trucks are able to supply hoses, ranging in size from 1 inch to 2 1/2 inches, with water coming out at 90 lbs. P.S.I.

The men no longer have to completely avoid entering burning buildings. Clothing no longer consists of overalls and work boots, but rather bunker suits which are designed to protect him from the flames engulfing a building. Entry suits are also on hand in the case of fuel fires or other fires where the heat becomes so intense that the bunker suits will not allow the fireman to get close enough to the fire to do his job effectively. The men also have masks to which compressed air may be attached.

When in a building that has been set ablaze these volunteers no longer tie ropes around their waists, but can keep in touch with the outside through the use of radio communication. In this manner, the chief may direct his men from a more advantageous position.

All these technological advancement would be useless if the men were not knowledgeable in how to operate them. Training sessions are held every Wednesday evening and are supervised by the elected officers who have been certified in the use of this equipment.

It must be remembered that even with all of these up-to-date methods, the volunteer is still supplying the most valuable resource -- himself. All the technological advancements to date have made fire fighting safer, but it is still not 100% safe. On any given call, the volunteer may be putting his life on the line.

CHAPTER VII
MAJOR MODERN CONFLAGRATIONS

Gunnison has not escaped the terror of deaths by fire unscathed. Three of the following four accounts of major fires have resulted in tragic deaths.

In March of 1939 Colorado Hall on the Western State Campus succumbed to flames. "Fire of undetermined origin burned to the ground Colorado Hall, old frame building -- and first dormitory on the campus of Western State College, early Wednesday afternoon."¹⁸ Fortunately no one was living in the building at the time, as the recent addition of Chipeta Hall had rendered the building obsolete. The real danger came to two houses nearby that the firemen had to soak down in order to save them. "Firemen deserve commendation for their work; it was no sport to stand in heat that set clothes on fire and smoke so thick it was impossible to see a thing. Smoke clouds billowed up several hundred feet and spread over the whole north-east section of town."¹⁹

18

The Gunnison News-Champion, March 9, 1939, p 1.

19

The Gunnison News-Champion, March 9, 1939, p. 12.

It was later discovered that the fire was a result of arson. The pyromaniac was apprehended and dealt with severely.

Undersheriff Harry Grubb made a trip to Grand Junction Tuesday afternoon, taking down the fifteen year-old boy who, earlier in the day, had been committed by County Judge Clyde Welch to the Home for Mental Defectives at that place. The boy, admittedly the firebug who ignited the dormitory . . . will stay at the Junction home until he is at least 21 years of age.²⁰

Twenty years later, in March of 1959 a fire claimed the life of George F. "Fritz" Benson, owner of Benson's feed and grain store at 609 West Tomichi. It seemed that Benson, his wife and son, Fred, were cleaning the cylinders of their Studebaker truck when the battery shorted and sparked which ignited an open bucket of gasoline. Benson's wife kicked the container of gasoline into the corner where it started the hay on fire. Fred and his mother escaped, but Fritz, thinking his son had gone up into the hay loft, went after him. The garage and loft exploded, leaving Fritz with burns over 95% of his body.²¹ He was flown to Denver where he died as a result of his burns. Fritz's son, Fred, is presently a member of the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department.

20

The Gunnison News-Champion, March 23, 1939, p. 1.

21

The Gunnison News-Champion, March 26, 1959, p. 1.

One week before Christmas in 1971 tragedy once again struck Gunnison in the form of a fatal fire. A phone call was received by an operator in which a fire was reported. No address was given, but the operator traced the call to a residence on West Tomichi. The house, near the river, was not in a part of the Gunnison city limits so the rural fire department was called out to respond. The city fire department soon came to the aid. It took some time to get water onto the fire, as the city hydrants were too far away. Finally, water was pumped onto the fire from the river. Clarence Bosgal, after leaving the building, re-entered the building to rescue his eight year old son, Mike. The result was that both father and son died from asphyxiation. The widowed Mrs. Bosgal was left with four children ranging in age from nine months to nine year.²²

The final account to be described is one that will live in the minds of many for quite some time to come. The date was February 25, 1975 and the place was Robidoux Hall, Western State College.

The Gunnison Police Dispatcher received a report of the fire at 12:36 a.m. on February 25, 1975. When the first truck arrived at 12:43 a.m. the entire 3rd floor of Robidoux

22

The Gunnison County Globe, December 30, 1971, p. 1.

Hall was engulfed in flames. The resident director, Mrs. Marjorie Chiles, informed the firemen that the dormitory had been evacuated and that one student, Brett Andrew Reid, was missing. Reid's body was recovered at 4:15 a.m. in the third floor lobby in the north end of Robidoux Hall. It was determined that Reid had re-entered the building for reasons unknown after he had safely been evacuated.²³

The fire started due to a faulty timer on an iron on the third floor. The ensuing investigation uncovered approximately 100 violations of the Colorado fire regulations and safety code.

The firemen on the scene expressed their gratitude to the students and townspeople who helped them in many ways. The townspeople also came to the aid of the students that were forced out of Robidoux Hall with little or nothing. The students were offered housing, clothing, books, etc. The people of Gunnison pulled together in order to ease the burden of this tragedy.²⁴

23

Steven Sedlacek, Agent, CBI Report, File #75,02-0019, April 16, 1975.

24

Top O' The World, March 4, 1975, p. 7.

CHAPTER VIII
THE MODERN ERA -- THE EVOLUTION OF AN INSTITUTION

From the Gunnison Fire Company No. 1, organized in 1880 and serving the small town of Gunnison, the volunteer force has transformed into the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department, a group of 35 men who help to protect 1.9 million acres in the Greater Gunnison Basin.

Prior to 1973, the rural areas of Gunnison County were traditionally under the protection of the County Sheriff, who also served as Fire Marshall. In case of fires, the sheriff would put the trustees from the county jail to work at putting those fires out. The sheriff was also aided by members of the Lions Club, many of whom were also city volunteer firemen. Due to the efforts of Bob Williams, C. C. Starkebaum, Harry Miller and others, the Gunnison County Fire Protection District was formed and put into effect in 1975.

Today, the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department works for three agencies: The City of Gunnison, the Gunnison County Fire Protection District and Gunnison County. The department consists of 35 men with openings up to 40. There is also a full time, paid fire marshall in the city whose job it is to enforce the fire codes, of which there were none prior to 1974. This position probably came into

existence as a direct result of the Robidoux fire. The fire marshall has the responsibility to inspect the Western State campus. Even though the college is exempt from his jurisdiction and he has no authority, his recommendations should be heeded so as to prevent further incidents such as Robidoux.

From 1932 to 1974 the Municipal Building housed the city fire-fighting equipment and the county its own equipment. With the completed construction of the new fire house in June, 1974, all fire-fighting equipment is now housed under one roof. The facility and its equipment are the envy of many another volunteer departments in the state.

From the early days of financial backing of the various companies by individuals, the present day force has come to witness a comfortable budget established along with the district in 1975. This budget is supported by a mill levy within the district.

Gunnison always and still has one of the finest volunteer fire departments anywhere. The reason for this continued excellence is the dedication of these volunteers to keep abreast of the times and the never ending search for ways in which to protect the people and property of the Gunnison Country.

CHAPTER IX CONCLUSION

The history of the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department has indeed been an illustrious one. From the days of rubber buckets to the present day \$100,000 pumpers, the presence of these selfless men has been felt.

Their contributions to the area have transcended merely putting out flames, although that is their primary purpose. Socially, they have given Gunnison the Fireman's Ball, parades and contests. Culturally, they have enriched our lives through their concerts, with the likes of Arthur Fiedler at the podium. Economically, they have hustled to host state conventions here in 1963, 1970 and 1984, thereby giving the town a financial shot in the arm.

Most importantly, they have given of themselves. Blood, sweat and yes, tears have come from the long list of names. The devotion of these men from all walks of life; doctors, carpenters, electricians, bankers and teachers is truly a story in itself. It is not the equipment nor the buildings that comprise the fire department, but rather the men themselves. Names such as Zugelder, Williams and McDermott are but just a few that represent not only individuals but families that have dedicated themselves to help preserve the high quality of living that has come to

be associated with Gunnison, Colorado. The list of names grows long and it will continue to do so.

Fire, next to an epidemic, was the greatest fear of the inhabitants of pioneer towns during the 1800's with buildings close together, made of wood and heated by wood and coal burning stoves, the threat of a devastating fire was constant. The early Gunnison fire companies rose to the challenge in order to prevent any such devastation.

As time rolled along, buildings came to be constructed farther apart, of different materials and the technology with which to combat fires improved steadily. These changes greatly lessened the fear of total destruction by flames.

Today, through the use of telephone and radio, fires may be quickly reported and the volunteers are able to respond to the scene within minutes. By means of modern equipment, training and dedication the men of the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department have responded to the challenge and have almost completely quelled the fear of fire by the inhabitants of this town.

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CHAPTER X

APPENDIX

- A. Colorado Bureau of Investigation Report on Robidoux Fire
- B. Your Volunteer Fire Department is as Close as Your Phone
- C. Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department Memo
- D. Constitution of the West Gunnison Hose Company, 1884

COLORADO BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
 REPORT OF INVESTIGATION

75-02-0019

REPORT BY

AREA

Agent Steven Sadlacek

Gunnison, Colorado
 Gunnison County

NATURE OF CASE

Fatal Fire

- #1 State of Colorado, Western State College, Gunnison, Colorado, telephone number 943-0120.
- #2 BRETT ANDREW REID, W/M - 6/0 - 185 - DOB 11-15-55, brown hair, brown eyes, Suite 304, Robidoux Hall, Gunnison, Colorado, home address: 215 Otis Street, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Tuesday, February 25, 1975, at approximately 12:30 a.m.

Robidoux Hall, Mears Men's Dormitory Complex, Western State College, Gunnison, Colorado.

STEPHEN HAMILTON GREGG, W/M - 5/10 - 145 - DOB 8-30-55, brown hair, blue eyes, Suite 312, Robidoux Hall, Gunnison, Colorado, home address: #12 Gregg Drive, Loveland, Colorado.

GREGG stated that on February 25, 1975, at approximately 12:20 a.m., he heard an unusual noise coming from the hallway. He went into the hall and saw smoke and observed flames coming from the ironing board area. He pulled the fire alarm box by the door; however, the alarm did not go off. He then went back into his room and telephoned the fire department. His call was received at 12:36 a.m.

- #1 Sample of nonfire-rated acoustical ceiling tile, recovered from Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #2 Sample of fire-rated acoustical ceiling tile, recovered from Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #3 Sample of paper-wrapped rock wool insulation, recovered from Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #4 One (1) can of Toko Brand Spray-on Ski Wax labelled flammable, recovered on the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #5 Sample of press board style wood panelling, recovered from Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.

- #6 Sample of vinyl coated wall paper, recovered from Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #7 One (1) can of Ree Ski Wax, recovered from Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #8 One (1) can of Ree Ski Wax, recovered from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #9 One (1) exploded propane fuel tank, recovered from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #10 Twenty-five (25) color photographs of the fire scene at Robidoux Hall, taken and retained by the reporting agent.
- #11 Ironing board electrical control panel #1, recovered by the reporting agent from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the Gunnison Police Department.
- #12 Ironing board #2, recovered from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #13 Ironing Board Electrical Control Panel #2, recovered from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the reporting agent.
- #14 Ironing Board Electrical Control Panel #3, recovered by the reporting agent from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the Gunnison Police Department.
- #15 Ironing Board Electrical Control Panel #4, recovered by the reporting agent from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the Gunnison Police Department.
- #16 Ironing Board Electrical Control Panel #5, recovered by the reporting agent from the third floor of Robidoux Hall and retained by the Gunnison Police Department.
- #17 STEPHEN HAMILTON GREGG, W/M - 5/10 - 145 - DOB 8-30-55, brown hair, blue eyes, Suite 312, Robidoux Hall, home address: #12 Gregg Drive, Loveland, Colorado, will testify to reporting the fire to the Gunnison Fire Department and to his observations (refer to signed statement).
- #18 SALVATORE MARIO "SAM" DeSANTIS, W/M - 6/0 - 190 - DOB 1-14-54, brown hair, brown eyes, Suite #11, Robidoux Hall, home address: 425 6th Street, Frederick, Colorado, will testify that he is the room advisor for the third floor of

Robidoux Hall. He will further testify to his observations of the fire and that he evacuated the residents of the third floor (refer to signed statement).

- #3 MICHAEL ROBERT McCLAY, W/M - 5/8 - 145 - DOB 4-29-56, blond hair, green eyes, Suite 317, Robidoux Hall, home address: 438 Almar Avenue, Pacific Palisades, California, will testify as to his observations of the fire. He will also state that he was unable to locate a fire extinguisher and that he pulled the fire alarm boxes on all three floors of Robidoux Hall but none of the alarms worked (refer to signed statement).
- #4 MARK KENNETH HORCHER, W/M - 6/0 - 170 - DOB 7-28-56, brown hair, brown eyes, Suite 215, Robidoux Hall, home address: 25 South June Terrace, Lake Forest, Illinois, will testify as to his observations of the fire on the third floor of Robidoux Hall. He will further state that he went to Suite 304 and aroused BRETT REID and assisted him to the stairway (refer to signed statement).
- #5 JOHN GREGORY MANGUSSO, W/M - 6/1 - 160 - DOB 9-15-56, brown hair, brown eyes, Suite 316, Robidoux Hall, home address: 4985 Estes Court, Arvada, Colorado, will testify that he was in his room when the lights started flickering. He went into the hall and saw the fire. He will further state that approximately 15 minutes after he evacuated from the dormitory, he talked to BRETT REID near the south end of the dormitory (refer to signed statement).
- #6 WILLIAM LEMASTER, W/M - 5/10 - 160 - DOB 2-16-56, brown hair, blue eyes, room 320 Mears Hall, home address: 580 Douglas, Lake Forest, Illinois, will testify to his observations of the fire. He will further state that while watching the fire from the third floor of Mears Hall, he observed a subject standing at the third floor north lobby window of Robidoux Hall. He could see flames behind this person, and the person appeared to be trying to break out the window.
- #7 JOHN A. BARRON, JR., W/M - 6/2 - 175 - DOB 2-9-54, brown hair, blue eyes, room 320, Mears Hall, home address: 176 East Stone Avenue, Lake Forest, Illinois, will testify to his observations of the fire and to seeing a person trying to break out the glass in a third floor north lobby window of Robidoux Hall.

NAME	DATE	FILE	PAGE
Agent Steven Sedlacek	4/16/75	75-02-0019	4

- #8 NOLIN LEE RENFROW, W/M - 5/10 - 150 - DOB 12-16-55, brown hair, brown eyes, Room 321 Moffit Hall, home address: 423 Glenmoor Road, Canon City, Colorado, will testify that he was standing near the north end of Robidoux Hall watching the fire. He looked up and saw a person standing at the third floor lobby window. The person was waving his arms and suddenly dropped from sight.
- #9 DONALD EUGENE CALKINS, W/M - 5/10 - 160 - DOB 10-29-35, brown hair, hazel eyes, #6 Irwin Street, Gunnison, Colorado, telephone number 641-0651, will testify that he was the first fireman to arrive at Robidoux Hall on the morning of February 25. He will state that he entered the building through the south entrance and went to the third floor. He heard someone yelling for help from the north end of the third floor hall. He tried to reach the person, but was beaten back by flames, smoke, and heat after he had reached approximately halfway down the hall.
- #10 STEVEN SEDLACEK, Agent, Colorado Bureau of Investigation, 2002 South Colorado Boulevard, Denver, Colorado, 759-1100, will testify to his investigation of the fire at Robidoux Hall.
- #11 ROBERT E. COOPER, Safety Inspector, Colorado Division of Labor, Grand Junction, will testify to his observations of the fire scene and to his inspection of Robidoux Hall for fire and safety violations.
- #12 WILLIAM CAIN, Patrolman, Gunnison Police Department, will testify that he assisted in the fire investigation at Robidoux Hall and to his observations during the investigation.
- #13 THOMAS CANFIELD, M.D., Forensic Pathologist, Montrose, Colorado, will testify to the results of the test which he performed on blood samples taken from the body of BRETT REID.
- #14 BUD SMITH, Director of Public Works, City of Gunnison, will testify to his examination of the ironing board electrical control panels recovered from the third floor of Robidoux Hall.
- #15 ROLAND SMITH, Electrical Foreman, City of Gunnison, will testify to his examination of the ironing board electrical control panels recovered from the third floor of Robidoux Hall.

On Tuesday, February 25, 1975, at approximately 11:15 a.m., Gunnison Police Chief FLOYD JOHNSON requested investigative

NAME(S)	DATE	FILE	PAGE
Agent Steven Sedlack	4/16/75	75-02-0019	5

assistance from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation regarding a fatal fire at Western State College. The reporting agent was assigned to the case and arrived in Gunnison at approximately 2:30 p.m.

The reporting agent was met by Captain GEORGE HEDRICK and Patrolman WILLIAM CAIN. Captain HEDRICK stated that a fire was reported to the Police Dispatcher from Robidoux Hall at Western State College at 12:35 a.m. on February 25. The dispatcher sounded the fire alarm for the volunteer fire department and dispatched police units to the scene. The first police unit arrived at the scene at 12:37 a.m. and the first fire truck arrived at 12:43 a.m. Several volunteer firemen arrived at the scene prior to the arrival of the fire truck. The officers and firemen found the third floor of Robidoux Hall engulfed in flames. They were advised by Mrs. MARJORIE CHILES, resident director of the dormitory complex, that the dormitory had been evacuated and that one student was missing. At approximately 4:15 a.m., firemen recovered a body in the third floor lobby in the north end of Robidoux Hall.

Gunnison County Coroner C. J. MILLER determined the deceased to be BRETT ANDREW REID, W/M - 6/0 - 185 - DOB 11-15-55, brown hair, brown eyes, 215 Otis Street, Colorado Springs, who had been residing in Suite 304 of Robidoux Hall. Coroner MILLER obtained a blood specimen from the deceased but did not order an autopsy. He sent the blood specimen to Dr. THOMAS CANFIELD, Colorado Bureau of Investigation Pathologist in Montrose, who ruled that the death was due to smoke inhalation.

The reporting agent contacted Dr. CANFIELD and requested that, in addition to the blood alcohol test requested by the Coroner, a test be conducted for carbon monoxide content and for drugs. Dr. CANFIELD later contacted the reporting agent and stated that his test determined a carbon monoxide content of 60 percent and an alcohol content of .265 milligrams percent. Dr. CANFIELD further reported that the blood sample was insufficient for drug tests. The reporting agent determined that a carbon monoxide content in blood of over 8 percent is considered fatal unless immediate medical attention can be received.

The reporting agent and Officer CAIN went to the fire scene. Robidoux Hall is part of a three-building attached dormitory complex which is known as the Mears Complex. Robidoux is a three-story brick and concrete building and was constructed in 1935-1966. The building is 51' x 183' and is designed to be occupied by 140 students and three counselors. Floors in the unit are poured concrete. Each room measures approximately 13' x 16' and each pair of rooms shares a bath.

NAMES	DATE	FILE	PAGE
Agent Steven Sedlacek	4/16/75	75-02-0019	6

In addition to normal facilities, each floor has a lounge area, a baggage storage closet, a linen closet, and an ironing area which contains five fold-away ironing boards. The lounge areas are located at the north end of each floor. Adjacent to the lounge is a fire stairway which has a self-closing solid-core fire rated door, a dumbwaiter shaft, and a fire hose cabinet. The fire hose cabinet is designed to hold approximately 200 feet of 1" hose attached to a water stand pipe system, a control valve for the stand pipe, and a fire extinguisher. On the wall adjacent to the stairway is a local fire alarm pull box.

A second fire stairway with a self-closing door is located at the south end of the unit and a second local fire alarm pull station is located on the wall adjacent to the stairway exit.

Each pair of rooms is entered through a central vestibule from the main hallway. This entrance contains a one-hour rated solid-core door. The entrance to the shared bath is located just inside the vestibule. Each room has its own entrance from the vestibule secured by a standard fire rated door. Partitions between rooms are 3/4" thick, constructed of gypsum board, maintained on metal stud frames, which contain rock wool insulation between the boards. The architect's plans specify that the partition be one-hour fire rated.

Initial examination determined that the fire was confined to the third floor, with the center section of the floor being gutted and the roof over the west side of the center section having collapsed. The second floor of the building suffered extensive water damage and the first floor received moderate water damage.

After the initial examination, the reporting agent interviewed STEPHEN HAMILTON GREGG, who resided in Room 312 of Robidoux Hall (refer to List of Witnesses).

Mr. GREGG stated that on February 25, 1975, at approximately 12:20 a.m., he was in his room in Robidoux Hall, and he heard a commotion in the main hallway. He ran into the hallway and observed smoke and flames coming from the ironing board area in the hall. Mr. GREGG described the flames as being orange colored and the smoke as being bluish black. He pulled the handle on the fire alarm box by his room, but the alarm did not sound. Mr. GREGG ran back into his room and telephoned the fire department. After notifying the fire department, he left the building (refer to signed statement).

The reporting agent interviewed SALVATORE MARIO "SAM" DeSANTIS, who resided in Room 311 (refer to List of Witnesses).

NAMES	DATE	FILE	PAGE
Agent Steven Sedlacek	4/16/75	75-02-0019	7

Mr. DeSANTIS stated that he serves as a room advisor for the third floor of Robidoux Hall. On February 25, at approximately 12:15 a.m., he was in his room with several other students. They heard several loud popping noises coming from the area of the hallway, and Mr. DeSANTIS went to the hallway to investigate. He found that the hall was full of smoke. The smoke varied in density from light blue at the south end of the hallway to extreme dense black at the north end. In approximately the middle of the hall, in the area where the ironing boards were, he could see flames. The flames appeared to be growing from the ironing board installation and were going up the wall toward the ceiling. The flames were bright yellow in color. Mr. DeSANTIS estimated that the main concentration of flames was approximately five feet above the floor. Mr. DeSANTIS and two other students began knocking on doors and telling the students to evacuate the floor, as there was a fire. He estimated that at that time there were approximately 40 or 50 people on the third floor. He further stated that approximately 20 minutes after he first observed the fire, the first fire department units arrived at the scene (refer to signed statement).

The reporting agent interviewed MICHAEL ROBERT McCLAY, who resides in Room 317 of Robidoux Hall (refer to List of Witnesses). Mr. McCLAY stated that on February 25, at approximately 12:15 a.m., he had just completed a long distance telephone call in his room, and he went next door to Room 316 to talk to some other students. He had been there about 10 minutes when they heard a commotion in the hallway. He opened the hallway vestibule door and saw smoke directly across from the doorway, as well as yellow flames coming from the ironing board area. He stated that the smoke was creating a light haze and, at that time, the smoke was gray in color. He ran into their joint bathroom and filled a bucket full of water. He then carried the bucket of water into the hallway and threw the water onto the area between the top of the ironing boards and the ceiling. It appeared to momentarily put out the flames; however, Mr. McCLAY stated that he could see flames in the control panel for the second ironing board unit and he realized that it was probably an electrical fire. He stated that his father is a fireman and that from what his father had told him, he knew that water was the worst thing he could put on the fire. He then began knocking on doors and telling other occupants on the floor to evacuate. He stated that he also pulled the fire alarm in the hallway but the alarm did not go off. He also looked for a fire extinguisher and found that the extinguisher had been removed from the wall holder. As the smoke was beginning to become quite dense, Mr. McCLAY stated that he went down to the second floor where he again pulled the fire alarm box and the alarm still failed to go off. He then went to the first floor and pulled that fire alarm box which also failed to go off. Mr. McCLAY stated

that after pulling the first floor fire alarm box, he left the building (refer to signed statement).

The reporting agent interviewed MARK KENNETH HORCHER, who resided in Room 215 of Robidoux Hall (refer to List of Witnesses). Mr. HORCHER stated that on February 25, at approximately 12:30 a.m., he learned that a fire was in progress on the third floor. He went to the floor to see if he could assist in any way. On arriving, he observed that the hallway was full of smoke, varying in color from light blue to dense black. In the ironing board area of the hallway, he observed blue, yellow, and orange flames coming from the second ironing board unit. From the north end of the building, he also observed that this unit, which contained electrical outlets and a control panel, was sparking as if a fire was shorting out against the metal. He described the sparks as being silver-red in color and similar to that caused by an electrical failure. He started going from room to room to tell people to evacuate and, while going down the hall, he met a student whom he knew to be BILL FARLEY. FARLEY told HORCHER that his roommate, BRETT REID, was passed out in Room 304. HORCHER then went to Room 304 and found REID passed out on the bed. He tried to arouse him, and he had to slap him several times on the face before he could arouse him. HORCHER stated that REID appeared to be quite dazed and unaware of what was occurring. HORCHER took REID by the arm and led him through the doorway and down the hall to the fire exit stairway. HORCHER stated that the smoke was very dense at that time, and that upon reaching the fire door at the entrance to the stairway, he could feel himself become dizzy from the effects of the smoke. As he pushed through the door to go onto the stairway, he let go of BRETT's arm and dove down the stairs. After breathing some fresh air, he stated that he continued on down the stairs and did not see BRETT again, after he had reached the stairway entrance (refer to signed statement).

The reporting agent interviewed JOHN GREGORY MANGOOSO, who resided in Room 316 of Robidoux Hall. MANGOOSO stated that on February 25, at approximately 12:30 a.m., he noticed that the lights in his room were flickering. The flickering was not of an off-and-on type, but, rather, was a rapid dimming of lights and then a return to their normal state. He went out into the hallway and saw flames approximately five feet above the floor, coming from the second ironing board unit from the north end of the building. The flames were orange and blue in color and a light smoke was beginning to fill the hallway. MANGOOSO stated that he immediately left the building and waited outside of the dormitory near the south end. Approximately 15 minutes after he saw the flames, he observed a student who resided on his floor and whom he knew to be BRETT REID. He stated that REID appeared to be in a dazed condition;