

Fire leaves clues—it's just a matter of finding them, says fire marshal

By KATHLEEN MORAN

The putrid smell of melted plastic hung in the air Wednesday as Troy fire marshal Richard Sinclair climbed through the ruins of a Troy plant destroyed by fire the night before.

"This is Mission Impossible," he said grimly, stopping to survey the mounds of plastic, roofing and metal which once was the manufacturing area of J.A. Astley Inc., at 532 Robbins Executive Drive. Most steel trusses which had supported the roof crashed to the floor under the heat of the blaze, but a few still hung limply like suspended rubber bands.

After driving from Lapeer to help fight the blaze for 6½ hours until 3:30 a.m. Wednesday, Sinclair returned at 9 a.m. to begin his job—searching for the cause. He first walked around the perimeter of the building, taking photographs and determining the condition of the cement walls, only three of which were left standing.

"We'll have to fence this area off and see about pulling this wall down," he said pointing to the remains of one wall. "I'm afraid with one puff of wind it will come crashing down on some kid. There have been kids all around here this morning."

THE BLAZE broke out in the early evening Tuesday when just two employees were in the building. The fire department received the first call at 7:30 p.m. and within minutes fire-fighters who had gathered for a training session were on the scene.

Fire Chief James Halsey said it took approximately 1½ hours for the nearly 50 fire fighters from three stations to get the blaze under control. One fireman, Edward Oliver, was hospitalized and treated for smoke inhalation. There were no other injuries.

Damage was estimated at \$250,000. Although just a cement wall separated

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—Richard Sinclair, fire marshal

ated offices from the manufacturing portion of the building, the manufacturing area was totally destroyed and offices suffered only smoke and water damage. So far, he said, there is no evidence of arson.

"I'm concentrating my efforts here," said Sinclair as beads of sweat dripped down his ash-streaked face. He pointed to the front portion of the plant where about 250,000 pounds of multi-colored plastic pellets were stored. The plastic had melted into forms of the steel girders which crashed down over the storage area.

THE EMPLOYEES who had been at the back of the plant saw flames in the front section, said Sinclair. But even if they hadn't seen the flames, the blaze left other evidence.

"You can track a fire just like tracking a bear in the woods," said Sinclair. "It leaves evidence. 'It's more difficult in a cement building. This looks nearly impossible. But in a wood house, you can look at the alligatoring on the wood. Where the char is real deep you can tell the fire burned the longest."

One piece of wood on a wall alongside the storage area was deeply charred. "This burned a long time," said Sinclair.

Assisted by firefighter Dale Brice, Sinclair began cutting through metal with an electric saw and then breaking up the melted plastic with a pick. "I want to get through to the floor and shovel some of this out."

"You always look for the lowest

point of burn," he said. "Fire always travels upwards. You find the source of ignition and they then work up."

"But in this instance, the fire was all the way up. This isn't the kind of fire you learn about in books."

Sinclair said he has to stop and think about what the fire would have done, where it would have been fed by air.

"You have to find where it got air first and start tracking it."

Sinclair said his ability to search out the cause of fires comes from his work as a former Troy police officer, training through county, state and national associations for fire investigators and by experience. "You learn mostly by doing it," he said. "You work with somebody who has knowledge of fires and learn from him."

The Astley fire would take four to five days to investigate, he estimated. "I'm going to see if a friend of mine can come here one day to help. This is the kind of thing where two heads are better than one."

"There's quite a challenge here, maybe more here than I want," he said while resting on top of the ruins. "Right now, it's just downright nasty."



Sinclair cuts through metal roofing to get nearer the floor where his investigation began.

DIT registration now

The Detroit Institute of Technology, 2727 Second, opens its doors for its 10th year of operation with its fall classes. Dr. Hugh Thompson, president of DIT, has reaffirmed DIT's commitment to the city and technology with students working at their own pace in small groups with a teacher.

Practical, career-oriented courses are available at the Detroit Institute of Technology. The three courses, engineering, business admin-

istration and arts and science, are enriched by special programs. The new study program, in conjunction with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, offers mathematics and technology with students working at their own pace in small groups with a teacher.

There are also studies available in criminal justice, banking administration, occupational education and secretarial science in conjunction with Detroit Institute of

Commerce. A co-op program allows students to earn while learning. Registration continues until Sept. 15. Information is available at 962-0800, ext. 211. It is suggested students needing financial aid apply early.

Harry Schade, director of admissions, stressed, "The early registration dates are crucial for those desiring financial aid. It is imperative that they register as soon as possible. We'd like those requesting aid to avoid any disappointments."



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County residents fill metro visitors council

Oakland County residents will dominate the board of directors of the International Visitors Council of Metropolitan Detroit during the 1977-78 term.

Frank Angelo, associate executive editor of the Detroit Free Press and a Birmingham resident, will continue as the board's chairman. The council is a tax-exempt, non-profit organization formed in 1972 to handle Detroit-area arrangements for foreigners visiting the metropolitan area.

Mrs. Edward A. Proctor was elected secretary; Donald E. Schmatz was elected treasurer and Samuel Gorman was elected assistant treasurer. All are residents of Birmingham. Another Birmingham resident, Gretchen Hitch, will serve as executive director.

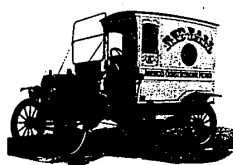
David Wolski, also of Birmingham, and Franklin's David Pollack will join the council as new directors.

Also continuing as officers are Mrs. Harold J. Gibson of Farmington Hills, Judge Lawrence C. Gribow of Bloomfield Hills, John Kotyk of Birmingham and Stanley Krajewski of Southfield as well as James T. Mauders of Troy, Mrs. Walter Melton of West Bloomfield and Russel A. Swaney of Birmingham.

Robert W. Hefty has been reelected as the organization's president. Hefty is public relations director for the

Ford Motor Co.'s Ford North American Automotive Operations. He resides in Dearborn. The International Visitors Council is financed by private and corporate contributions.

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