Front St. Business Block Heavily Damaged in Fire SUNDAY AUG. 8/54

East Robertson Block Badly Gutted In Two-Hour Blaze

Fire Started in Vanity Fair Shortly After Noon Sunday

Damage estimated at $150,000 was caused Sunday afternoon to business offices and stores in Front Street's three-storey East Robertson Block by a fire which is believed to have started in the Vanity Fair dance hall on the third floor. No one was injured.

The fire, believed to have started about 1.30 p.m., completely gutted the dance hall and burned off the building's roof. It was prevented from spreading into the Elks' Club rooms adjacent Vanity Fair and into second storey offices by a fire wall and fire doors on the second and third floors.

However, smoke and water damage in six street level stores and 10 second-storey offices was heavy.

Main floor stores heavily damaged by smoke and water were: Singer Sewing Centre, Bill Cook's Cigar Store, Doyle's Drug Store, R. E. Kuntze and Sons Electric Service centre, Dickens and Son bakery, Duff's Drug Store and the Children's Shop.

Second-storey offices involved were those of: C. W. Burr, general insurance; Great West Life Assurance Co.; R. E. Barrett, law office; Collins and Collins, law office; National Life Assurance Co.; F. D. Arnott Q.C., law office; North American Life Insurance; Dr. J. R. Guthridge, dentist; J. E. Marsh, insurance; Miller Stone and Co., chartered accountants.

FOUGHT TWO HOURS

Firemen fought the blaze for two hours using an aerial ladder truck and seven hose lines before quelling the flames. Thousands of Belleville residents lined Front Street to watch. All available firemen in the city were called to help fight the flames and extra policemen were called out to keep the crowds clear of firefighters and to direct traffic.

R. E. Barrett, whose law office is on the second floor, was the only person in the building at the time of the blaze.

He had just arrived in his office, he stated, "when I heard a noise like a great bubble bursting. Almost immediately afterward I noticed smoke curling around the baseboard. I looked out in the hall and it was filled with smoke."

PHONED DEPARTMENT

"I phoned the fire department," said Mr. Barrett, "but the line was busy. I told the operator about the smoke and asked her to notify the fire department as soon as the line came free."

Mr. Barrett then started throwing wills, deeds, files and valuable papers into the street to prevent their loss.

Belleville Police constable, Harry McKee, on duty at the Four Corners, noticed the smoke about 1.30 p.m. and ran into the building to give warning to anyone, who might chance to be in the offices. He helped Mr. Barrett carry some files and a dictaphone machine to safety.

First call to the Belleville police station was turned in by Constable Bill Warring, who was not on duty at the time but happened to be on Front St.

Fred Navin, 45, and Ernie Fry, 35, both of Belleville were just pulling away from the curb in front of the New Service Lunch restaurant in their car, when they saw a third floor window explode.

"It blew out like a blow torch," said Fry. "Smoke and flame shot out of the top floor window about 10 feet."

Fry stated that by the time he and Navin had found a place to park and called the fire station, that someone else had already notified them of the fire.

SAW WINDOW EXPLODE

"Firemen weren't five minutes arriving after we saw the window explode," said Fry.

A. Bruyea, 59 South Church St., who wired the entire block following a fire there six years ago, said that "it was not likely the wires that caused the fire this time. I rewired it completely six years ago, while working for the Refrigeration Service, and I don't think the wires could have done it."

Owners of most of the business premises and occupants of the offices were out of town for the week-end and could not be contacted at once.

R. E. Kuntze, proprietor of R. E. Kuntze Electrical Service, stated that the loss in his establishment "will run into thousands."

Included in his loss, besides all the electric motors on appliances, are four new pianos.

The staff of Bill Cook's cigar store tried to move some of the merchandise but loss was expected to be heavy. Prescription files in Duff's Drug Store were removed from the store, while firemen fought flames overhead.

One prophetic note in the afternoon's proceedings was a sign in the Children's Shop window advertising a "Smoke and Water Damage" sale. The sign was referring to a small fire in that store during July.

Sam Pappas, owner of the East Robertson Block, was in Toronto at the time of the fire.

When interviewed today he was reluctant to estimate the total damage to stores and offices but stated that he thought damage to the building itself would be in the neighborhood of $80,000, to $90,000.

He stated that the building was adequately covered by insurance.

He denied a rumor which had been circulating about the sale of the East Robertson Block.

"Nothing had been arranged for its sale," he said. "I am still the owner."