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Town Loses Historic Market; Family Loses Lifetime of Work

By Marie P. Grady

GILBERTVILLE – Frankie Kardas was sweeping up the pieces of a broken dream. The three-story, century-old building that had housed the Kardas Supermarket before a fire gutted it Sunday night was in the background, a burned-out shell of the legacy that began when Kardas' parents, Joseph and Julia, opened their first store here in 1929. A charred, fluorescent beer sign hung from the adjacent, family-owned liquor store that sustained heavy smoke damage.

Seven area fire departments battled the blaze for more than eight hours before the flames were finally contained at 12:30 a.m. yesterday. Nearly 60 years worth of work and \$300,000 worth of property was lost.

'A Family Affair'

All Frankie Kardas could do now was sweep.

"It was a family affair," he said. "It was a total loss. It was a lifetime's work gone down the drain."

Hardwick Police Officer Roland Kosla was driving by the Route 32 store that stood next to the Whistle Stop Restaurant at 4:30 p.m. Sunday when he noticed the smoke.

"I used to buy my Megabucks tickets there," he said.

Others in this town bought foodstuffs, glass and paint in what was one of the last general stores in the area.

Built in 1864

The building was erected in 1864 as a combination store/boarding house. The Kardases purchased it and in 1944 bought the adjacent building that later housed the liquor store. Gilbertville Fire Chief Raymond Walker had one thought in mind as he directed firefighters from the towns of Ware, Hardwick, West Brookfield, Barre, Princeton, Rutland and Petersham. He was remembering other fires and the times Nellie (Kardas) Ready and her husband Joe had helped.

"They're very nice people," he said. "When we had other fires, nine times out of 10, they donated doughnuts for the men."

Walker believes the fire started near the rear of the main building, possibly close to a furnace that provided steam heat. The cause is under investigation by the state fire marshal's office, but arson is not suspected, he said.

Hydrants Inadequate

Firefighters were hampered in their battle to quell the flames. "The hydrant system there is probably not adequate for that volume of fire," Walker said.

Firefighters laid four-inch lines into the Ware River for more water.

Nellie and Joe Ready, who own the store with Nellie's brother Frankie, watched from their home across the street as water was sprayed over the burning embers of the buildings.

They had been visiting a relative in Somerset when they received a phone call. "They called us at twenty past six," said Joseph Ready.

Felt So Bad

He said his wife drove 88 miles in less than an hour and a half to get back home.

"When they (firefighters) saw us come in, no one could look us in the eye. They felt so bad," said Nellie.

Frankie, who retired from the business six years ago, does not believe the building was insured. Nellie is not sure. And the records that would say went up in flames.

For now, they are awaiting the Fire Marshal's report. "I'm so glad it doesn't look like arson," Nellie said.

She is thankful the fire did not happen when her mother, Julia Kardas, still lived in an apartment above the store. She died last August.

"My mother would not have left that building. She would have jumped into the fire,"

Nellie said as two friends comforted her and her husband in the living room of their home yesterday.

The family has no plans to rebuild. In a perverse twist of fate, the fire has solved a problem that has nagged the Readys, who are planning to retire.

"When you come right down to it, there was really no one in the family to take over the business," said Nellie's son, Michael. "They didn't know whether they should sell it or not. Now the decision's been made. It's over."

Local historian Charlie Angell is lamenting the passing of one of the town's original buildings.

Village Landmark

It was built more than a century ago by the George H. Gilbert Manufacturing Co. It served as the headquarters of the Wendell and Henock Construction Co., who made the last four shafts for the tunnel at the Quabbin Reservoir in 1936.

"It was a landmark in Gilbertville," said Angell. "It's been here roughly since the town started. It's such a sad, sad thing."

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