

Old children's home burns

Monday, December 9, 2002

By **EDD PRITCHARD** Repository staff writer



WASHINGTON TWP. — For 20 years, Mildred and Richard Beamer called the Fairmount Children's Home their home.

Richard was superintendent and Mildred worked as matron. They kept a rein on the county facility's operations. They took care of the children — sometimes 125 of them — placed there after they had been taken from bad homes or problem parents.

"I watched smoke come out of my bathroom window today," Mildred said Sunday evening. "It was pretty sad."

The main building at the Fairmount home burned on Sunday morning. Much of the building, which is in the 6700 block of Union Street NE, about four miles south of Alliance, collapsed because of the fire.

Washington Township Fire Chief Terry Wilson said a cause for the fire has not been determined. The Stark County Arson Task Force was set to visit the building today and investigate how the blaze started.

Wilson is convinced the fire is suspicious.

Washington Township firefighters extinguished a small apartment fire just south of the Fairmount home shortly after midnight Sunday, Wilson said. At about 2:45 a.m., Wilson was driving home from the fire station. He passed



Richard C. Bixler for The Repository

DOUSING FLAMES. Firefighters estimate they poured more than 2.5 million gallons of water on the Fairmount Children's Home trying to extinguish a fire at the main building early Sunday morning. No one was injured in the blaze. About 100 firefighters from seven departments fought the fire at the abandoned home on Union Avenue NE in Washington Township.

by the Fairmount home. The building was dark.

The fire was reported at 4 a.m. — less than 90 minutes after Wilson had driven past.

“At 4 o’clock when we got the call, the whole sky was lit up,” Wilson said. A fire that large, that spread that quickly, had to have help, he figures.

The building that burned was vacant, Wilson said. Like several others at the site, it had no heat or electricity.

Wilson said firefighters couldn’t get inside the building, so they battled flames from the outside. Crews were at the scene for about 30 minutes when the center roof collapsed.

More than 100 firefighters using 24 trucks fought the blaze. Wilson’s department received aid from the Minerva, Marlboro, Nimishillen and Lexington townships, and North Georgetown and Homeworth in Columbiana County.

An aerial truck from the Minerva department poured 1.6 million gallons of water onto the fire, Wilson said. He estimates that firefighters used more than 2.5 million gallons of water to fight the blaze.

Fairmount home’s main building was built in the 1870s and was one of several at the county children’s home. A greenhouse in front of the facility still is used and operates as Fairmount Gardens. At one time the facility had five cottages, a barn, slaughterhouse and other buildings. During its early years, Fairmount operated a farm.

The main building included a dining hall, a dormitory for older girls, offices, a laundry, a library and the apartment for the superintendent’s family. The Beamers lived and directed the home from 1953 until it closed in 1973.

Most of the children at Fairmount came from bad homes with parents who didn’t care for them, Mrs. Beamer said. Very few of the children were orphans. Children sent to the home ranged in age from 6 to 18. Occasionally, the Beamers would find themselves caring for younger children in an emergency.

Stark County officials decided to close the facility after maintenance became too expensive, Mrs. Beamer said. Children that would have gone to Fairmount now are placed in group homes or in foster care.

Before Sunday, Mrs. Beamer last visited the home in the late 1970s. It was a shambles, she said. “It made you sad to see how it had gone downhill.”

The county sold the property after closing the facility. Chief Wilson said people actually had lived in some of the buildings through the mid-1990s. No one was living at the facility now, he said. Pasquale A. and James G. Romano of Cuyahoga County have owned the property since August 1998.

In recent years, the Fairmount gained a reputation for being haunted. One Web site claimed the sounds of children playing or ghosts whispering “children ... come out and play” could be heard.

Those reports caused headaches for Stark County sheriff’s deputies, who were called to the facility several times to deal with trespassers.

Mrs. Beamer was surprised to hear that someone thought her old home was haunted. "I stayed there many a night by myself and I never saw a ghost."

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Burned ex-children's home troubled by trespassers

Tuesday, December 10, 2002

By **EDD PRITCHARD** Repository staff writer

WASHINGTON TWP. — As a boy, Micah Norcom knew the hulking building behind his greenhouse business as home.

His grandfather's home.

Jake Maendel bought the Fairmount Children's Home and 20 surrounding acres in 1977, the year Norcom was born. The building became home for his 10 children and other families who needed a roof over their heads. Sometimes four or five families shared the house.

Neighbors wondered if Maendel was running a hippie commune, Norcom said.

Norcom just knew that he could expect fun when he visited grandpa's house. "It was a nice place to grow up in."

On Monday afternoon, Norcom — who owns Fairmount Gardens at 6774 Union Ave. NE in front of the old children's home — stood guard on the porch of the old children's home.



Repository / Stan Myers

LITTLE LEFT. As the sun rose Monday, wisps of smoke wafted away from the smoldering remains of the Fairmount Children's Home on Union Avenue NE in Washington Township. The old children's home burned early Sunday morning. Investigators call the fire suspicious. Greenhouses for Fairmount Gardens, a plant nursery, is seen in lower right corner.

He watched as flames burned in what was left of wooden floorboards in a room on the southwest corner. Wisps of white smoke wafted skyward behind the brick wall that faced Union Avenue NE.

Fire destroyed the 130-year-old building early Sunday morning. Portions of outer walls that supported the three-story building still stood. But most of the building had caved in, filling the basement with bricks and other debris.

Members of the Stark County Arson Task Force scoured the site Monday looking for clues to how the fire started. The fire is considered suspicious.

The extensive damage to the building, however, might make it difficult to determine where and how the fire started, said Terry Wilson, Washington Township fire chief.

Firefighters returned to the children's home Monday night after a passerby saw flames flickering in the remains. Wilson said crews poured on more water, but he doubted the flames would spread or increase the damage.

Norcom fears the fire might have been retaliation for a series of arrests made at the children's home during the summer.

Fairmount home ended up on a Web site called:

<http://ohiotrespass.com>

The site listed 16 unusual locations in Ohio and West Virginia where the curious could see something odd. The site called Fairmount home one of the scariest places in Ohio, and suggested that was haunted by orphans who once lived there.

Although the building was big and spooky, Norcom said he had never seen any signs of ghosts.

Fairmount home really wasn't an orphanage. It was home to neglected and abused children who were taken from their parents. The home operated from the late 1870s until Stark County commissioners closed it in 1973.

Norcom said teenagers, most of them from outside the area, began visiting Fairmount at night this past summer. They vandalized the buildings and stole more than \$3,000 worth of goods from the greenhouse.

Norcom posted no trespassing signs and began staking out the house on weekends. When teens started showing up, he tried to send them on their way. When some got into the house, he called the Stark County sheriff for help. Eventually, more than 20 teenagers were arrested for trespassing.

The Web site posted a warning in October telling people to stay away, and that they faced arrest if found at the site.

But Norcom wonders if some of them returned Sunday.

After county officials closed Fairmount, a local farmer bought the 153-acre property. The farmer later portioned off 20 acres where the home and several other buildings stood, and sold it to Maendel. He started the greenhouse that his grandson now operates.

Maendel lived in the old building until he moved in 1997. He sold the property to two Cleveland-area greenhouse operators, Pasquale A. and

James G. Romano. Norcom said he leased the property from the Romanos.

Norcom said the building was structurally sound, but beat up on the inside. He would have liked to renovate the building, but knew it would be expensive. "It was good to go for a long time, still."

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