Looking Back:

The Beacon Manufacturing Plant Fire

Beacon Manufacturing opened its blanket manufacturing plant in Swannanoa in 1925. The facility grew to cover 21 acres with parts of the building being four and six stories high, and in the 1980s became one of the largest blanket manufacturers in the world.

When the plant officially closed in 2002, all of the manufacturing equipment was removed, leaving behind a large, empty structure within eyesight of Interstate 40 and U.S. highway 70 — both major east-west corridors to Asheville. Most locals knew that the homeless and people passing through would stay in this building. It was also known that local teens would hang out there.

The vacant facility was located just across the street from the Swannanoa Fire Department. Chief Anthony Penland and his firefighters were concerned about the risk of damage to the station if a fire should break out in the abandoned building. Their concerns grew when they learned that the owner of the manufacturing plant was going to turn off the building's sprinkler system. Chief Penland contacted Buncombe County Fire Marshal, Mack Salley and state officials to determine if the owner could be required to keep the sprinkler system operable. When they could find no way to obligate the property owner to maintain the system, firefighters toured the empty facility to help them formulate a firefighting plan in the event of an emergency. Finding more than 25 life-threatening areas in the building, including a six-story open shaft and a lab which still contained stored chemicals, fire officials decided that only defensive firefighting maneuvers would be performed in the event of a large fire at the abandoned building.

On the morning of Sept. 3, 2003, Swannanoa firefighters responded to an alarm that flames were coming through the old Beacon building's roof. Because of the close proximity of the building to the fire station, and the specific danger if a large wall of the building should collapse, the first priority for firefighters was to remove all fire apparatus from the station to a safe area. During the initial movement of Swannanoa's fire equipment, all 24 fire departments in Buncombe County were alarmed either for responding to the scene or covering for a fire department responding to the scene.

Response Came from Buncombe County and Beyond

The initial mutual aid response to the fire was made by Engine 43 from Black Mountain Fire Department, crewed by Lt. Ronnie Bartlett and Firefighter Chad Blackwelder. The men were half of the four-person shift on duty at Black Mountain when they were notified by Buncombe County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) of a mutual aid request for an engine. Engine 43 is a 1250-gallon-per-minute pumper with a 750-gallon tank.

Driving from Black Mountain to Swannanoa on U.S. 70, Bartlett and Blackwelder said they could smell the fire nearly two miles away and could see the fire's glow in the sky.

Arriving at the scene, Engine 43 stopped behind a Swannanoa Fire Department engine on Whitson Avenue on the west side of the Beacon Manufacturing plant. Bartlett checked in with the incident commander and was told there would be no interior attack on the fire. Engine 43 was assigned to supply water to a Swannanoa Fire Department high-capacity deluge gun, using Swannanoa Fire Department large-diameter hose connected to a hydrant.

Engine 43 was pumping more than 500 gallons per minute to the deluge gun through two 100-foot sections of 2.5-inch hose. From that start, Engine 43 pumped non-stop for three days.

Engine 43 was assigned to protect a laboratory within the plant, and the flames never reached that section of the building. Michael Sheehan of Pinnacle Consulting Group, which organized the eventual cleanup of the site, was quoted in the local news media as saying the lab contained flasks and drums of highly-concentrated dyes.

Flames and smoke from the burning 21 acre facility could be seen from miles away, as firefighters battled the blaze for more than two days.

Firefighters continued to fight the blaze through the night; one fire engine narrowly escaped damage when the west wall of the building collapsed around daybreak.

"One drum could have dyed the Swannanoa River for miles," he said in an article published by the Mountain Xpress on April 7, 2004.

Shortly after Engine 43 arrived at the scene, two additional Black Mountain Fire Department personnel arrived: Brandon Dohey and Lindsay Jellison, both volunteer firefighters. The four-person crew worked non-stop until noon on Sept. 4, when they were relieved by a fresh crew from Black Mountain Fire Department. The engine was crewed in 12-hour shifts for three days, never leaving its original location.

The deluge gun was repositioned several times, as the fire moved through the building. The west wall of the building collapsed into Whitson Avenue around daybreak on Sept. 3, with rubble falling no closer than 150 feet from the engine.

Days after the fire was extinguished, investigators began looking for clues into the cause of the suspicious fire.

Water Hydrants Tapped Out

As mutual aid equipment and crews arrived with ladder trucks, and additional water monitors were placed in service, the hydrant system capacity was quickly determined to be insufficient to meet the demand for volume of water required. The Asheville water department was contacted and requested to open additional valves allowing more water to be supplied to the area. Deputy Chief Robert Griffin from Asheville Fire Department was placed in the position of water supply officer. Chief Griffin quickly determined that the water system was not adequate for the magnitude of the fire.

The hydrants in the immediate vicinity of the plant were capable of only 500 gallons per minute. Some of the hydrants adjoining the plant could flow nearly 1,000 gallons per minute. One of these required firefighters to dig a trench under a railroad track and lay lines, which then supplied a ladder truck. This grid of the water system was supplied from two different water mains.

The facility had three fire pumps that were designed to supply the sprinkler system that was disabled. Two of the pumps had above ground storage tanks of 250,000 gallons each. The third was supplied by two below ground lakes under the facility that stored a total of 500,000 gallons. None of this water was accessible to the firefighters as there were no fire department connections to these supplies and they were too close to the fire to be safely accessed.

Engines were placed near the Swannanoa River and they pumped water to the fire scene through a culvert underneath a five lane highway. It is estimated that approximately four million gallons of water were pumped from the river.

A ladder truck supplied by a tanker operation hauled water from the nearest water pressure zone nearly two miles away.

Communications Compatibility Established

Initially, communication among the responding agencies was not a problem because the various departments operate on a 150 MHZ frequency. But when the Asheville Fire Department arrived, compatibility became an issue, as Asheville operates on an 800 MHZ frequency. Asheville Assistant Chief Chris Morgan immediately established a cross patch and portable repeater system that allowed everyone to communicate effectively.

Buncombe County Emergency Management provided a mobile command post allowing all fire departments to talk to each other, including those from the four surrounding counties that responded.

Incident Command Kept Order at the Scene, Oversaw More than 350

Buncombe County is very proactive in the Incident Command System, enabling them to put a command system into place very quickly, which was necessary to manage the mutual aid equipment and teams arriving from many different departments. The media also required constant briefings as all major networks covered this fire.

A total of 367 firefighters were on the scene during the three days of suppression. All functions of Incident Command were established during this operation. Engines operated for days and firefighters worked 12 hour shifts requiring a tremendous amount of food, facilities and fuel. Mechanics were on standby as well as additional hose, nozzles and appliances.

After the Fire — The Investigation

Five days after the fire, investigators determined the scene cool enough to enter and look for evidence. The fire was investigated by the Asheville / Buncombe County Arson Task Force, North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation and Federal Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms.

Investigator Gary Bartlett of the Black Mountain Fire Department had been investigating a series of fires in Black Mountain at the time of the Beacon fire. All of these fires were on sites of property that represented wealthy members of the community. Bartlett's investigation identified a suspect who had already been convicted of setting four fires and was being interviewed for another warehouse fire. During the warehouse fire investigation, a search of the suspect's residence turned up items from the lab at Beacon which directed investigators to focus on that suspect for the Beacon fire as well. The man was later convicted of a warehouse fire in Ridgecrest, four fires in the Cheshire Village and also the Beacon fire. He is now serving time at Central Prison in Raleigh.

Review

In reviewing the Beacon Manufacturing plant incident, it is clear that the State of North Carolina needs a regulation that prohibits a sprinklered building from being abandoned by the owner. The amount of risk to any community which could be involved in a fire such as this could have dire consequences. In addition, neighboring counties should practice working with each other through joint fire department drills, studies and schools to be better prepared for such large-scale fires. Air quality, investigations evidence and clean-up are just as important in solving and possibly preventing another such incident.

The most important thing in this particular fire is that out of the 367 firefighters who fought round the clock for three days, they all went home without injury.

Black Mountain Fire Chief Tim Rayburn and Swannanoa Fire Chief Anthony Penland collaborated on this account of the Beacon fire.