

Firefighters recall in detail how they saved a landmark

By Joanne Hatherly, Times Colonist, January 28, 2009



TLC Deputy Executive Director Ian Fawcett took Bill Bennett, (Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts) on a tour of Craigflower Manor and illustrated the cause and damage from the fire. Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist

When alarm bells rang at 110 Island Highway, View Royal Fire Chief Paul Hurst knew it was Craigflower Manor.

"It's the one building that I hoped never to have to attend in my career," said Hurst who was born and raised in View Royal. He had seen the 156-year-old Craigflower nearly every day of his life.

The alarm system at the building -- which was connected directly to the firehall -- dated to the 1960s, built to detect heat, not smoke, so Hurst knew the fire would already be well underway.

By the time the bells rang at 5:09 p.m. Friday, View Royal's firehall had been closed for more than 30 minutes, but that day, firefighters Troy Mollin, Rob Marshall, Heath Bevan, Enzo Calla and Kyle Hawkins were still in the hall, some catching up on paperwork,

others were in the weight workout room or unwinding on the station's Xbox. Normally, an after-hour call would go to a full-time patch and the firefighters would have been paged. That would have taken more time.

But within a minute, the team was downstairs on this occasion, their exit hastened by a fire pole donated to the hall two years earlier by residents they had saved in earlier days, Margaret Horton and Florence Stewart.

Before the installation of the pole, the firefighters would have had to run down the back steps.

As Hurst later recounted, the seconds saved by the pole mattered.

At 5:10 p.m., Marshall swung into the driver seat of Engine 38 with Mollin, Bevan, Calla and Hawkins on board. Hurst was behind them in the chief's truck.

At 5:12 p.m., the first crew were running hoses to the house.

Green-brown smoke leaked out from a rear second storey window near the centre hall, its colour signalling the fire had not reached flashover. Posting himself at the northeast corner of the house, Hurst yelled for Mollin and Calla to go in.

Mollin axed at the back door, plunging the blade next to the deadbolt until the door popped free of the jamb, exposing black smoke rolling down from the high ceiling to chest-level.

The blaze gulped at the new air that poured in through the open door, drafting a fireball toward Mollin and Calla.

Crouched low and armed with thermal imagers, Calla entered first, holding the hose nozzle with Mollin behind him. Past the kitchen, the men made out a red glow in the dark.

Calla judiciously shot a spray of water into the ceiling above the glow. The water hit the heat and vaporized.

"That causes the moisture to fall down to the fire and reduce the overall ambient heat, and takes away the flashover potential," Hurst later explained.

Marshall, who was manning Engine 38's controls said, "In a flashover, it doesn't matter how many thermal layers you're wearing, you're toast."

Calla then shot at the seat of the fire.

"And it was over, the fire was out," Mollin said. It was 5:25 p.m., 16 minutes from when the alarm first rang.

Hurst said Craigflower Manor's 1853 construction worked for and against it. It was built with no fire-protection between floors, as modern buildings are, and that means a fire could quickly engulf the entire structure.

In its favour, however, its massive squared-log construction protected it from collapse, giving the firefighters extra minutes to get inside and attack the flames.

Ian Fawcett, deputy executive director for The Land Conservancy, which manages the national historic site, said the fire apparently was caused by a failed fan in an in-wall heater that had been installed under the centre stairwell during one of the house's later upgrades. He said it is uncertain that repairs will be complete in time for Craigflower Manor to open in May as it has every year.

Hurst said he will encourage TLC and the province to install a smoke-sensitive alarm system that would signal danger earlier.

Fawcett agreed a review is in order. "This house was restored by the province in the 60s and there really hasn't been much changed since then," he said.

As Bill Bennett, B.C.'s minister responsible for heritage, toured the house yesterday, he saw rooms in near pristine condition, furniture unscathed, plates and glasses sitting in order on the pantry shelves where just on the other side of the wall, the fire chewed down to the house's timbers.

A melted candle in a second storey bedroom reveals how high the temperature had risen during the brief blaze.

In the house's main halls, however, the fire's footprints can be seen. A pervasive smoke odour hangs in the air. Daylight seeps through a burned out staircase riser, dimly lighting the gap beneath where the heater had been. Blackened arbutus spindles and rails trace where the flames coiled upward, showing how close to conflagration the house was when Mollin and Calla doused the fire.

Standing on Craigflower's front stoop, View Royal Mayor Graham Hill said, "This is a terrific save." Speaking of the building, he added, "This is where it started. This is where so much of our roots are."

Noting that only one artifact, a painting, had been lost, Bennett praised the firefighters.

"You guys did well," Bennett said. "No visibility, walking through a china shop. I'm surprised nothing more was damaged."

Hurst accepted the accolades on behalf of the firefighters with pride. "This is a team. This community means something to every one of us, but I'd be totally remiss if I didn't mention the support we have from the mayor and council. The money they put to training and equipment, it's second to none."