

Ex-Teamsters leader's home destroyed by fire

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A fire last night destroyed the Kelly Lake home of Richard King, retired leader of Watsonville Local 912 of the Teamsters' Union.

The blaze broke out at 8:15 p.m. in the kitchen at King's lake-front home at 75 Cutter Drive, according to reports. King, 70, his daughter-in-law and three grandchildren were inside at the time of the fire, but they were able to get out without injury. Firefighters didn't fare as well.

Three firefighters from the Salispuedes Station were injured in their efforts to put out the fire. Javier Vasquez injured his back when he fell from some stairs, Kevin Herbe was burned on the side of his face when the fire flashed on the second floor, and Capt. Mark Rosa suffered a broken nose when he was hit with a 24-foot ladder being used to fight the blaze, according to Salispuedes Fire Chief Ron Hart. All three were treated and released.

Several members of the Freedom Fire Department assisted in battling the fire, which was finally extinguished in the early morning hours after lighting up the sky for some distance.

The fire, according to King, started in a corner of the kitchen and quickly moved upstairs. He said he was upstairs in bed "half awake, half asleep" when one of his grandchildren alerted him that the kitchen was on fire.

About two weeks ago, King bought two fire extinguishers, but he and his daughter-in-law could only get one of them to work. King said that if both extinguishers had worked properly, the fire might have been put out quickly.

King is a longtime Watsonville resident and a graduate of Watsonville High. He was secretary (the highest office) of the local Teamsters union from 1951 to 1986, retired during the two-year Watsonville Canning strike. At one time, the union represented over 9,000 members in the area, he said.

Before becoming a Teamsters official, he served as a merchant marine for eight years and collected many items from his travels around the world. All of those things were destroyed in last night's fire.

The fire destroyed most of the contents of the house, as flames scorched much of the lower floor and completely gutted the upstairs section. King was chased from the house in his bathrobe and barefooted. He said his plan for today is to buy a pair of pants and shoes.

Fire investigators this morning are scheduled to investigate the remains of the house to determine the actual cause of the fire. They estimate the loss at \$500,000. Officials said they don't believe the fire was arson.

Although he lost his home and many treasured items, he said he is grateful that none of his family was injured in the fire.

"I'm just thankful that nothing happened to my grandchildren," King said.