

Historic inn burns

Firefighters throughout the region battle five-alarm fire

By TARMO HANNULA
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

One of the largest fires in Watsonville history ripped through the four-story Wall Street Inn early Wednesday morning. What was initially described as an explosion and a fire on the fourth floor quickly escalated into a five-alarm blaze, drawing team upon team of firefighters from scores of agencies.

The 1:59 a.m. incident, at 30 West Beach St. in downtown Watsonville, sent all the residents of the famed 1911 building out into the chilly night and caused what may be irreparable damage to the historic building.

All 47 residents at the single room occupancy residential hotel were quickly moved to the Youth Center on Maple Street, and moved into motels by 6 a.m. by volunteers from Santa Cruz County Chapter of the American Red Cross.

"It went to five alarm — this is the first time we've ever had that in Watsonville," Fire Chief Ben Evans said.

Every fire department in Santa Cruz County, as well as five departments in Monterey County responded to the blaze, with 146 firefighters arriving from as far afield as Monterey, Salinas, Felton, Zayante and Ben Lomond.

The fire began in one room and spread quickly to the attic,



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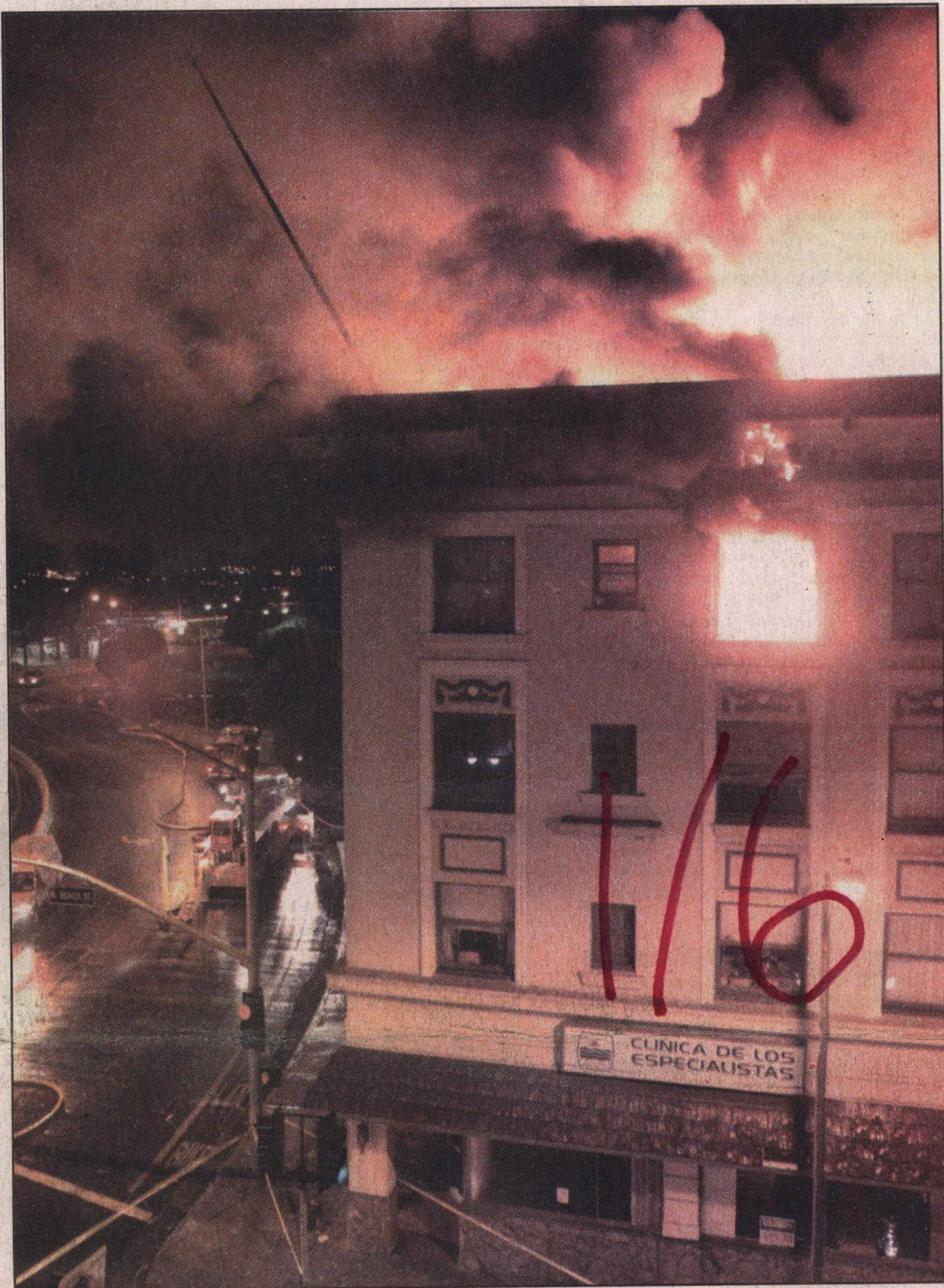
Capt. Will Farr charges into the Wall Street Inn to battle the fire early Wednesday morning.

INSIDE

Watsonville historian Betty Lewis looks back at the Wall Street Inn's history — Page 9

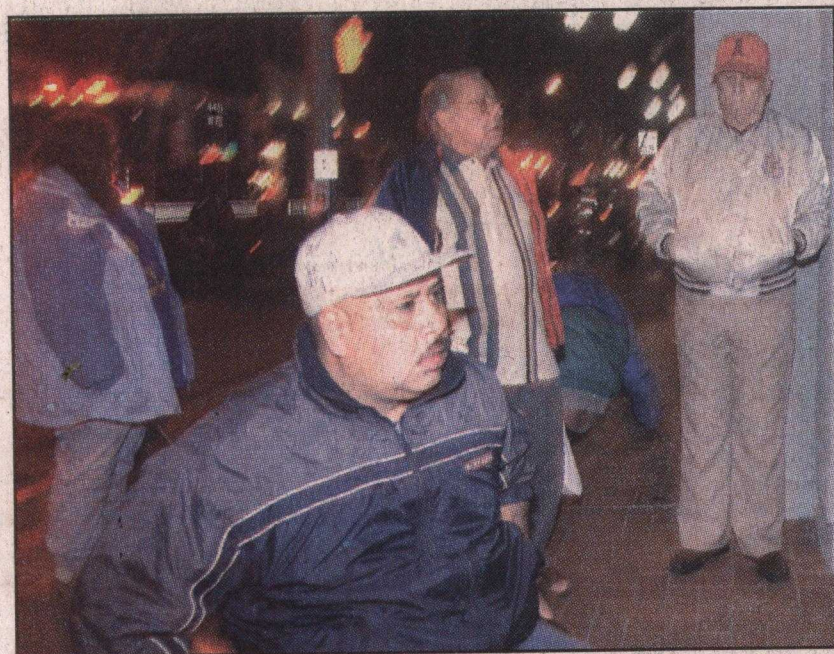
which is the most dangerous way for a fire to move, Evans said. There was a less than 30-second response time from nearby Fire Station 1, but there were not enough firefighters to

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Flames and smoke leap out into the sky Wednesday at about 3:30 a.m. as a five-alarm fire rages at the Wall Street Inn at the corner of West Beach and Rodriguez streets in Watsonville.



Wall Street Inn residents scramble out of the hotel after being evacuated.

Tarmo Hannula
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Fire victims recall night of terror

Without clothes or shelter, residents now need help

By J.D. HILLARD
and AMANDA SCHOENBERG
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Edward Lovell was among the first ones out of the Wall Street Inn after the fire started at 2 a.m.

"As soon as I walked out the back door I looked up and saw the flames shooting up. I heard someone screaming," he said.

A police officer approached, and Lovell helped the officer get through the door, which locks itself, he said.

Then the officer ran up the stairs toward the fire. Lovell said he would never forget the officer running up the stairs toward the fire.

"These guys are in there risking their life to make sure we're all safe," he said.

On the afternoon following the fire, Lovell and other residents of the West Beach Street building recalled to each other their moments inside the burning building hours earlier and wondered how they would replace medicines and possessions.

Roger Daugherty, a resident of the fourth floor of the Wall Street Inn, awoke to the sound of the fire alarm combined with the building manager and his wife running up and down the hallway knocking on doors. The building was on fire, they told him.

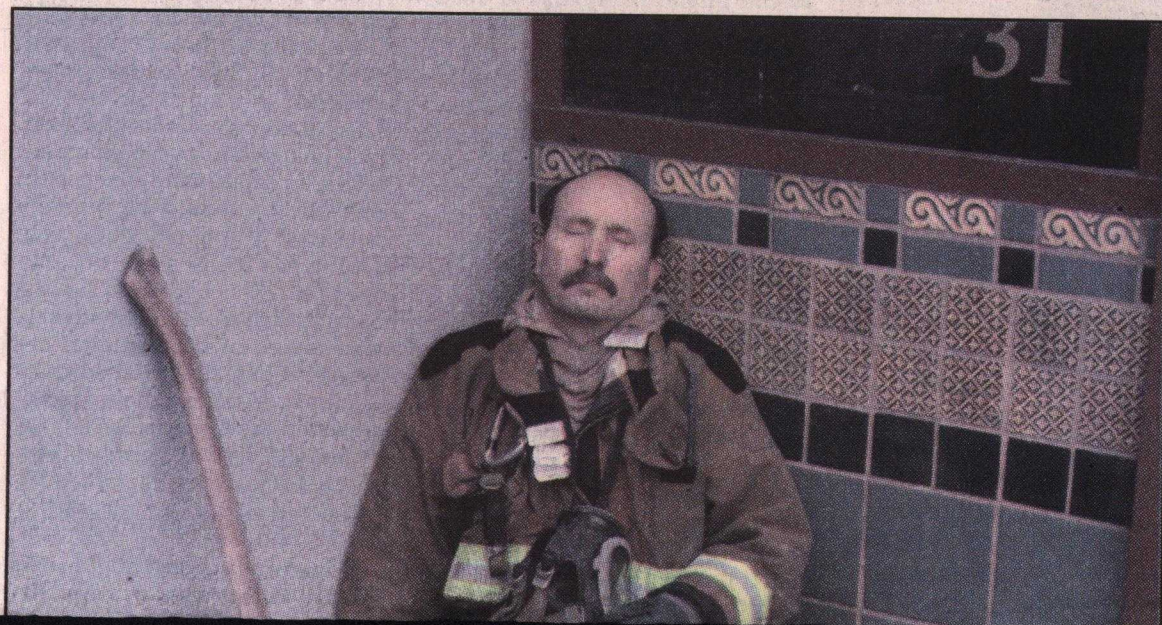
When he left his room, the hallway was full of smoke and someone was lying on the floor in the smoke. Daugherty opened the door to the man's room and found it engulfed

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Ron Hart, CDF battalion chief of Corralitos, watches the fire light up all the top floor windows of the Wall Street Inn by 5 a.m.

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FIRE

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wage war against the blaze.

Watsonville police Sgt. Terry Traub and officer Chad Chagnon were the first emergency workers to charge into the building. They banged on doors and got residents up and moving out of harm's way.

"Watsonville police did an excellent job," Evans said. "They most likely saved a lot of folks from serious injury."

Firefighters followed the officers into the building and continued waking residents. Firefighters had to break through some residents' doors to alert them. A team of 15 volunteers from the American Red Cross arrived by 3 a.m. to ferry residents to safety and find temporary housing.

Firefighter Beth Hoffseth of CDF at Corralitos said she joined two other firefighters in an attack on the third floor.

"I think we had to come out and change our air bottles three or four times. They last about 20 minutes. It's scary but, at the same time, it's pretty exhilarating. I mean, you see some amazing things when the flames are just curling along the ceiling. This was definitely one of the bigger fires I've been to," Hoffseth said.

One of her team members, firefighter Vernon McGuire said he felt grateful for the training exercises he's been part of.

"Now is when it all that training pays off and you appreciate all the skills you and everyone around you have," McGuire said. "This is what we all train for. You really have to appreciate all the strong camaraderie that takes place on a fire like this."

By 9:30 a.m. the fire had been quelled, but the building still smoldered, and firefighters used a thermo-image camera to pinpoint continuing hot spots, Evans said.

Although the building was still standing Wednesday morning, stress on the concrete, because of the extreme temperature changes making it expand and contract, left Evans concerned about its stability.

"We are concerned about the west side of the building and a possible collapse," Evans said. "We'll see if it's repairable, but I doubt it."

The four-story Wall Street Inn, a residential hotel, was built in 1911, designed by architect William Weeks, and is a registered historic site. That designation could interfere with the plans of safety officials. Historic preservation rules could make it harder to demolish the building if it's determined to be unsafe.

"If I deem it a public nuisance I still have a problem getting it torn down," Evans said.

City officials were working with the state agency that oversees historic sites. Building official Rafael Adame surveyed the building, but the future of the structure was still uncertain Wednesday evening. The building needed to be inspected by a structural engineer, Adame said. That inspection was planned for today.



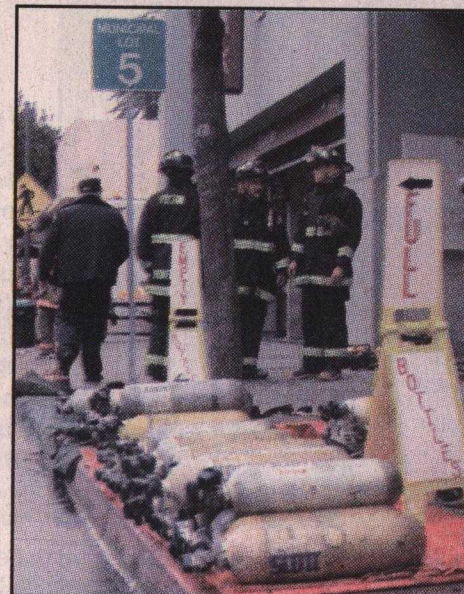
ABOVE: Watsonville Fire Dept. sent their aerial ladder above the action to aim a water cannon at the flames. **LEFT:** CDF Fire Capt. Lawrence Erickson grabs a nap about 10 a.m. after fighting the fire since 2:30 a.m.



ABOVE: A shaft of flames blasts out a fourth floor window. **BELOW:** Hidden in the darkness, a firefighter mans the water cannon.



Firefighters use a circular saw to cut a lock off of an outdoor utility box.



The sidewalks of West Beach Street between Main and Rodriguez streets were filled with firefighters and their equipment Wednesday morning.



Smoke billows up from the rooftop after firefighters cut loose with their aerial water cannon.

Tarmo Hannula
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investigation into the fire is ongoing, and firefighters are now questioning one resident into what appeared to be an accidental fire, possibly started by a cigarette or space heater.

The historic building, which Evans called "unsprinkled, with a high potential for loss of life," was the site for many fire drills and captain promotional exams.

"That was the one we worried about," he said. "It burnt exactly the way we thought it would," Evans said. "The crews did an exceptional job."

County and state codes require new buildings to have fire sprinklers, but old buildings like the Wall Street Inn were not included under the requirement, said Charles Gluck, Watsonville Fire battalion chief.

There were two vacant businesses in the building which suffered significant water damage. Abe Novin, owner of the building, said he paid about \$4.5 million dollars for it just months ago. He was at the scene Wednesday morning surveying the damage. While obviously despondent at the loss, Novin watched smoke continue to drift out of the upper stories from a corner across the street.

"It's a beautiful building, a gorgeous building," said Novin.

Novin said he got a message on his cell phone early in the morning but could not make sense of it. This morning he got another call, but said he did not clearly understand how bad the damage was until he saw it for himself.

"It's been there for a hundred years. I don't know why it happened when I bought it," he said.

In addition to the man being questioned, another resident and one firefighter, who complained of chest pains, were taken to Watsonville Community Hospital. The firefighter was later released, Evans said.

None of the surrounding buildings suffered fire damage, and the Santa Cruz County Health Services building next to the Wall Street Inn suffered only a foul smell, Evans said.

Register-Pajaronian staff members Amanda Schoenberg, J.D. Hillard and Jon Chown contributed to this report.