

Mansfield Memories -‘Send All You’ve Got’ - Mansfield Town Hall fire of December 1970

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MANSFIELD – This month marks the 50th anniversary of the fire which destroyed the Mansfield Town Hall. This is the first of a two-part series on the tragic blaze.

“We’re going to lose it,” reported Mansfield patrolman Richard Wade to fellow officer Earl Weeman on the night of Dec. 20, 1970. “The town hall is on fire; send all you’ve got.”

Hailed as a symbol of progress when it opened in 1883, the elegant town hall



sat on a tiny lot at the corner of West and Union streets for 87 years. It was the heart of the community. It held the town offices. In the early years the high school and public library were located there. An open hall on the second floor hosted everything from town meetings and elections to high school basketball games, assemblies, proms, and dances.

The police department had a tiny headquarters in an addition at the rear of the building. By 1970 it was in need of improvement. The police had temporarily vacated the headquarters so work could begin.

On the night of Dec. 20, 1970, Officer Wade was making routine rounds on a quiet Sunday night. The temperature was a chilly 25 degrees but there was no wind. He discovered the town hall blaze at 11:45 p.m.



The fire was already well involved when Wade radioed Officer Weeman to alert the Fire Department. Fellow patrolman Louis Cipriani soon arrived. The heaviest flames were at the rear of the town hall where work on the police headquarters was being performed.

“While we stood in back of the hall waiting for the apparatus, heavy smoke was pouring out of the roof near the chimney,” said Officer Wade. “I could see a red glow on the first floor. All of a sudden the glass door in the rear of the hall blew out.”



When the Fire Department arrived, Chief Cyril Bellavance saw flames belching out the back roof and immediately summonsed help from seven nearby communities for the “biggest assembly of fire apparatus Mansfield has seen in years.”

Crews from Foxborough, Attleboro, Norton, Easton, North Attleboro and Walpole arrived to lend aid. Plainville’s 100-foot aerial was set up to draw water directly from the Rumford River. High above the blaze was James McLaughlin in the Mansfield aerial, “at times engulfed in dense smoke, guiding a line into the rear of the structure where the fire started.”

News of the blaze spread quickly. Hundreds of spectators looked on from a safe distance. The calm wind assured that nearby historic buildings like the

Congregational Church, the Lovell Block and Memorial Hall would remain unharmed.

The sense of loss was instant but the community spirit shone throughout the night. Local store owners Mr. and Mrs. Phillip DiMonte and Mr. and Mrs. Paul Zecher led a group of volunteers who opened the kitchen at the Congregational Church. They cooked more than 12 dozen eggs and served hot coffee to the weary firefighters. Plainville Fire Chief Thomas Skinner later recalled “there was nothing more welcome than that church across the street where firemen could go and have a cup of hot coffee and let the body thaw out.”

The flames were largely subdued by 3 a.m. Most of the out-of-town rigs had left the scene by 5:30 a.m. The Mansfield Fire Department stayed on scene to manage the occasional flare-ups. Within a few days officials from the state fire marshal’s office determined that faulty wiring in the police headquarters had likely sparked the blaze.

Insurance was expected to cover \$265,000 in structural damage and \$50,000 to replace the contents of the building. But in the immediate shock that followed the fire, that was little consolation to the townspeople. They had lost their beloved town hall, possibly the most historic structure in Mansfield. They were now forced to contemplate the fire’s aftermath.

