

By Dave Vrbas

The Wauneta Breeze

When Merlin Marquart talks about the fire that destroyed a Wauneta landmark he owned for just under a year, the retired schoolteacher forces himself to fight back tears.

"I've never had anything like this happen and I hope to never have it happen again," Marquart said Monday afternoon, standing up from his chair a couple times to collect himself.

Renovating the former B & D Service station to use as a storage garage since purchasing it last fall from Bob and Mindi Goings of Wauneta, Marquart had crews in early this spring constructing a peaked roof on top of the building's previously flat roof. More work on the landmark Wauneta building was slated for this summer and fall.

Early last Thursday morning, the building burned to the ground, the fire taking with it all of his possessions stored within. With his insurance company scheduled to visit on Tuesday of this week, Marquart on Monday had inventoried three full pages of miscellaneous items destroyed by the blaze.

"The things don't matter," Marquart said Monday afternoon. "I'm just so thankful no one was hurt."

Wauneta Fire Chief Donn Allen was thankful the blaze started on a night with no wind. With homes immediately to the west and south sides, in addition to Frenchman Valley Co-op's enormous elevators just across the street to the east, Allen said the fire could have been very difficult to control had wind been a factor.

"When we got there, flames were coming out of the eaves pretty hard and the radiant heat was intense," Allen explained. Witnesses to the 3:15 a.m. fire call reported flames standing half as tall as Frenchman Valley's elevators.

Fire crews were on the scene for nearly six hours, making sure the flames were put out and debris pushed back behind fire ribbon fastened up around the scene.

"The guys did a fantastic job," Allen said. "We train for this, but when the adrenaline started pumping, they did a great job."

Marquart agreed wholeheartedly. "They were awesome. They did an aggressive job of knocking that fire down. This is a wonderful town with a great fire crew. I didn't feel like I was alone going through this."

Allen said State Fire Marshall Ryan Sylvester was able to pinpoint an area of origin, but unable to determine a point of origin.

As of now, an official cause cannot be determined until the point of origin can be located. Foul play was not suspected.

B&D building a local landmark

Nostalgia is in no short supply for locals who did business within the walls of the former B & D Building.

Cliff Shackelford of Wauneta purchased the oil business and building from Ray Ogier Oil Company in North Platte around 1957-58.

Soon after purchasing the building from Ogier, the Shackelfords renamed it Plains Oil Company and paid to have the back part of the building constructed which served as a tune-up shop run by the Shackelfords.

"It was an old landmark," Shackelford said. "We've been nostalgic about it after hearing it burned down, but those things happen."

The business changed hands again in 1963 when it was purchased by Dale Bischoff. Bischoff said he and Bill Winscott ran the business together, naming it B & D Service, until Bischoff bought Winscott out in 1973.

“It’s quite a Wauneta landmark,” Bischoff said. “There are a lot of memories in that building. Boy, when we started out there, those were rough years.”

Bischoff’s son, Bill, later became involved in the family business, allowing the B & D Service name to remain intact.

When the Bischoffs owned the building, they were a full-service fuel and auto maintenance station, even employing a tank wagon for deliveries.

Bill, having essentially grown up in the building, and having worked there several years with his father, would later be involved as a firefighter battling a blaze at the same location.

Bob Goings purchased the building from Dale Bischoff in May of 1998 after Bischoff moved his business to a building at his home just east of the Wauneta Park.

Goings named his business Advanced Automotive and worked out of the B & D Building for nearly four years before moving to his downtown location.

He kept the building for storage until it was purchased by Marquart last fall. Goings was also one of the firefighters at Thursday morning’s blaze.

Although nothing will replace the landmark building lost in the blaze, Marquart has plans to rebuild a storage garage on the lot.