

Case Number

2011-394

Lead Investigator

John W. Steinbach

State Fire Marshal Division

Department of Public Safety
444 Cedar Street, Suite 145
St. Paul, MN 55101-5145



Investigation Report

Confidentiality: Juvenile: Homicide: Confidential:

Property

Name: Swany White Flour Mill

Address: 206 2nd Street SE

City: Freeport County: Stearns State: MN Zip: 56331-

Phone: 320-836-2174 Contact Name: Gary Thelen Contact Phone: 320-836-2962

Property Use Code: 700

Building Name: Use Code: Alarm Type: Choose Sprinkler: Choose

Section Name: Use code: Alarm Type: Choose Sprinkler: Choose

Incident Detail

Date: 12/27/2011 Time: 1637 Fire Type: Undetermined Fire Cause: Undetermined # Injuries:

Fire Dept.: Freeport FDID: 73107 Req. Agency: Freeport Fire Department Coop. Agency:

Type of Occupancy: Manufacturing Process/Flour Mill Pre Fire Value: \$ Loss: \$850,000

Smoke Detector Performance: None Sprinkler System Performance: None

Occupied: Yes: No:

Disposition

Open: Closed: Referred to other agency: Referral Info:

Note: All fields underlined are required upon initial submission of this report.

Synopsis

The business owner and an employee at an operating flour mill business discovered smoke and flames on the third floor of the mill and called 911. Firefighters made an exterior attack on the structure to battle the blaze. The one-hundred-year-old structure later collapsed and excavation equipment was used to demolition the remaining structure. I was unable to perform a thorough fire investigation due to the demolition of the structure. I was unable to determine an area of origin and/or definitive cause for the fire.

Owner 1

Check if Occupant:

Last First Middle Fatality DOB Gender
 Thelen Gary Joseph 07/19/1956 M
 Address: 224 9th Street SE CO: % BAC: Drugs:
 City: Freeport State: MN Zip: 56331-
 Phone: 320-836-2962 Contact Name: Gary Thelen Contact Phone: 320-249-1739
 E-mail: School District #: Country:

Blue indicates required fatality information. DOB is optional unless a fatality.

Owner 2

Check if Occupant:

Last First Middle Fatality DOB Gender
 Address: / / Choose
 City: State: Zip: - CO: % BAC: Drugs:
 Phone: - - Contact Name: Contact Phone: - -
 E-mail: Country:

Blue indicates required fatality information. DOB is optional unless a fatality.

Occupants

Last	First	Middle	DOB	Fatality	Gender	CO	BAC	Drugs
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>

Blue indicates required fatality information. DOB is optional unless a fatality.

Other Fatalities – Fire Fighters and Others

Last	First	Middle	DOB	Gender	FF/Other	CO	BAC	Drugs
			/ /	Choose	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	Choose	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	Choose	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	Choose	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>
			/ /	Choose	Choose	%		<input type="checkbox"/>

CO, BAC and Drugs only required if fatality is not a Fire Fighter

Insurance Record

Insurance Agency: AG States Group Agent: Kim Gubeli Phone: 651-355-6891 City: Inver Grove Heights, MN
Insurance Co: Michigan Miller Policy Number: A0104270 Inception Date: 12/31/2010 Expiration Date: 12/31/2011
Amount of Policy: Building: \$510,000 Contents: \$50,000 Other:
Claim Number: Payable to: Adjuster: Ron Weiburg Phone: 800-888-1914, Cell -515-822-4665

Remarks: According to insurance agency officials, the property owner's insurance policy was scheduled to expire on 12/31/2011 and they were going to be insured by a different insurance carrier. The insurance premium with new the insurance carrier was unpaid at the time of the fire.

Narrative Report

People

Owner – Gary Joseph Thelen; 229 9th Street SE, Freeport, MN 56331; 320-836-2962, 320-249-1739
Freeport Fire Department – Fire Chief Noah VanBeck; 320-241-3087
Assistant Fire Chief Dean Jungles; 320-980-5327

Background

At 1938 hours on December 27, 2011, I received a call from the State Duty Officer informing me Freeport Assistant Fire Chief John Gilk was requesting my assistance for a commercial business fire at Swany White Flour Mill in Freeport. I phoned Assistant Chief Gilk, who informed me firefighters responded to a fire call at the Swany White Flour Mill at approximately 1630 hours that afternoon. The flour mill business owner and an employee were inside the three-story structure, discovered smoke on the third floor of the 100-year-old structure and called 911. Flames were shooting from the mill's cupola on the roof. Chief Gilk advised the structure was currently on the ground and that excavation equipment was being used to disassemble the remaining structure for fire suppression.

I arrived on scene at 0841 hours on December 28, 2011 and observed an enormous pile of charred debris and bricks from a three-story flour mill. After my arrival on scene, Freeport Fire Chief Noah VanBeck and Assistant Fire Chief Dean Jungles arrived on scene and provided me with the following background information:

- The fire was reported by passerby Mike Phlipsen (320-250-5073) at 1637 hours.
- Upon their arrival, flames were shooting from the cupola on the roof of the building and they could see an orange glow inside the third-story windows.
- The structure burned from the top down.
- With the assistance of neighboring fire departments, firefighters made an exterior attack on the blaze.
- Hose streams were applied to adjacent structures to prevent flames from spreading.
- Mill owner Gary Thelen had the natural gas meter shut-off when they arrived on scene.
- Gary is a retired Freeport firefighter.

I then met with and conducted a digitally recorded interview with flour mill business owner Gary Thelen (see Interviews). Thelen also signed a consent form for this fire investigation (see attachment).

Property Description

This one-hundred-year old structure is a three-story, wood framed building, with a two-story brick addition. It is used to manufacture white flour from wheat grain. The flour mill, with four exterior grain bins used to store wheat, is a family-owned flour processing business. The exterior of the wood-framed structure is metal clad, and the interior walls and ceilings are open wood frame construction and/or sheeted with combustible wall coverings. The flour mill includes a full-sized basement and three-phase electrical power to operate the mills electrical equipment. The mill is also heated by a natural gas boiler in the unfinished basement.

Scene Examination

The three-story flour mill is reduced to a pile of fire debris, damaged by fire and demolition by excavation equipment. Due to the demolition of the structure, I was unable to conduct a thorough investigation into the origin and cause of the fire. Witness statements suggest the fire originated on the third floor, as the flour mill was in operation. A definitive origin and/or cause for the fire couldn't be determined. All potential accidental causes for the fire couldn't be eliminated.

Evidence

I collected no evidence from the fire scene.

Photographs & Diagrams

A photo log is attached to this report.

Interviews & Investigation Activity

I interviewed business owner **GARY THELEN**, who told me the following:

- He has owned the flour mill since 1998; he bought the place from his father.
- He has one employee, Ron Berscheit. Ron is a mill labor and has been with the company for 15 years. He has had no problems with Ron.
- He manufactures white flour from wheat at the mill.
- The business is open 8:00 AM until 6:00 PM Monday through Friday and 8:00 AM until noon on Saturday.
- It was a normal day yesterday. He got to work at about 8:00 AM. Ron was also at work.
- It was just him and Ron at work.
- He started the mill up; they grind flour on all three floors.
- He has a 75-horsepower motor in the basement that operates most of the equipment in the mill. The motor operates line shafts that operate various types of equipment in the mill, sifters, feed legs, purifiers.
- There's also a dust collector on the second floor.

- The mill was operating all day.
- On the third floor are sifters and an auger that moves wheat from a grain leg to a tempering bin.
- The auger, with a three-quarter horsepower electric motor, sets atop a platform above sifting equipment on the third floor.
- The auger is just below the cupola on the roof the structure where flour dust vents and where various grain legs are located.
- It's a continuous process to produce flour.
- At about 3:00 PM, he went up to the third floor to check on equipment and everything was fine.
- He went back down to the first floor and bagged flour. Ron was on the first floor cleaning up oil on the floor from oiling machines.
- He smelled wood burning at about 4:30 PM.
- He went up to the second floor and noticed smoke. He could see on the second floor.
- When he got to the third floor, he couldn't see. It was full of smoke.
- He went back down to the first floor and told Ron to get out of the building and to call 911.
- When they got outside, he could see flames shooting from the cupola on the roof of the building.
- He ran back inside the building to shut the power off.
- He thinks something got hot and started the fire.
- Fire hazards are that the building is 100-years-old and the dust inside it.
- There were no electrical problems; he does smoke, but not in the building; Ron doesn't smoke; there were no problems with equipment; no burning candles; no staining, welding or soldering; and no gas leaks.
- About a month ago, he repaired a jack shaft on the auger on the third floor. The motor worked fine, with no problems.
- His financial condition is average.
- He bought the family business from his dad in 1998 on a contract for deed for \$200,000.
- He pays his dad \$1,700 a month on the mortgage, which is current.
- Annual sales for the mill are about \$500,000.
- He's not behind on any debts or taxes and there are no lawsuits, liens and/or judgments against him.
- He's never filed bankruptcy.
- He's had no prior fires.
- His insurance agency is AG States Group, Michigan Miller Insurance Company.
- He has a recent DWI conviction.
- He didn't set his business on fire.

Conclusion

Due to collapse and demolition of the three-story flour mill, I was unable to conduct a complete and thorough investigation to determine an area of origin and/or cause for the fire. Witness observations indicate the fire originated on the third floor of the mill as it was operating. This case shall be closed.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John W. Steinbach". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "S".

John W. Steinbach CFI
Deputy State Fire Marshal – Investigator

Date Submitted: 1/3/2012

Attachments

1. Photo Log
2. Consent Form

PHOTO LOG
CASE FILE #2011-394

1. North side of fire scene;
2. North side of fire scene;
3. Electrical meters on north side of building;
4. Northeast corner of fire scene;
5. Fire scene;
6. Southeast corner of fire scene;
7. South side of fire scene;
8. Southwest corner of fire scene;
9. West side of fire scene;
10. West side of fire scene;
11. Fire scene;
12. Fire scene;
13. Fire scene;
14. Southwest corner of fire scene;
15. Natural gas meter southwest corner of building;
16. Flour mill auger equipment;
17. Electric motor for auger in flour mill;
18. Fire scene;
19. Fire scene;
20. Garmin Fire Photo.