

FIRE DESTROYS BUSINESSES IN DOWNTOWN BAXTER

[Mary Jo Denton](#)
Herald-Citizen Staff
Friday, Mar 14, 2008

A firefighter works at the scene of a fire that destroyed two businesses and damaged a third in Baxter early this morning.

Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea

BAXTER -- Fire fanned by wind destroyed two businesses in downtown Baxter early today and heavily damaged a third.



Someone passing by around 3:30 a.m. noticed fire in the S&S Furniture store on Broad Street and called 911.

By the time law officers and firefighters reached the scene, flames were shooting out of that building and spreading to adjoining structures which housed the Wagon Wheel restaurant and the Campbells Baxter BiRite grocery.

Reportedly, the fire spread from one business to the others through the attics of the row buildings, which were largely of wood construction.

No one was injured, officials said.

Baxter's volunteer firefighters called in help from the Cookeville Fire Dept., the Putnam County Fire Dept., and others, and by 7 a.m., the blaze was contained, though some smoldering fires remained inside the grocery store, Mayor Jeff Wilhite told the Herald-Citizen from the scene.

"We have two total losses, the furniture store and the restaurant, but it appears the grocery store will be saved, although damaged," the mayor said.

"I'm standing here looking at it and I can see little fires inside there. But it all was just an inferno earlier, and now it's under control. Wind has been a problem."

Mayor Wilhite said the buildings in that row were all very old, separated by fire walls that evidently did not reach into the attic areas.

"These buildings may date back to the 1920's," he said.

The mayor said a woman who was on her way to work at the McDonald's restaurant at the Love Truck Stop saw the fire and called 911.

He said Putnam Sheriff's Deputy David Gibbons arrived on the scene quickly and called in other deputies as firefighters arrived.

"When we got there, flames were coming through the roof, and we worked to keep it from getting into the

other buildings," said Putnam Fire Chief Daryl Blair.

He said about 13 of the county's volunteer firefighters responded to fight the fire, along with Baxter's firefighters and a small crew and ladder truck from the Cookeville Fire Dept.

Mayor Wilhite said firefighters "valved off" a main water line in the area in order to increase water pressure as an aid to the firefighters and said that action may have left some residents of the Old Baxter Road area without water for a time.

Baxter Fire Chief Chris Holmes happened to be out of town on vacation, but was notified of the fire and immediately started for home. Baxter Assistant Fire Chief Chris Austin was on the scene and told the Herald-Citizen that he believes damage to the grocery store may end up being mostly smoke damage.

"When we arrived, the fire was right at the edge of the restaurant, rolling across the ceilings," Austin said.

"It's a good thing we had mutual aid with the Cookeville Fire Dept. because their ladder truck made a lot of difference. It allowed us to get water on the roofs."

Austin said that other fire departments which sent help included the Livingston Fire Dept. and the Jackson County Fire Dept.

The cause of the fire was not known, or if it was, officials were unwilling to discuss it this morning. But they did vow to find the cause.

Putnam Sheriff David Andrews said he was notified of the fire very early this morning and said he was planning to stop in Baxter to talk to firefighters as he left on a trip to Nashville around 8 a.m.

"I discussed the fire with Deputy Gibbons when he notified me, and we did talk about whether it was a suspicious fire or not," Sheriff Andrews said.

"We haven't made that determination yet. It's just too early to determine the cause or the origin, but we certainly will investigate it thoroughly and will work in cooperation with any other agency investigating it."

Several cases of arson, mostly involving old abandoned houses, have plagued western Putnam County in recent months, and all are under investigation.

‘SEVERAL BUILDINGS CATCH ON FIRE IN DOWNTOWN BAXTER’

Fire officials in Putnam County have confirmed they are battling a fire at several buildings in downtown Baxter.

A dispatcher told News 2 that about 45% of the Broad Street strip caught on fire Friday morning.

Baxter is west of Cookeville, about a mile off Interstate 40.

Firefighters received the call around 4 a.m.

Witness Frances Owen talked to News 2 by phone Friday morning around 7 a.m. and said several buildings were still burning at that point.

She said the fire started closer to 3:30 a.m., and may have originated at the Wagon Wheel Restaurant.

Owen said the fire spread to several other buildings, including a furniture store and possibly even a grocery store.

She said that firefighters are getting the fire under control and that she did see paramedics driving back and forth all morning.

No injuries have been reported.

It is not clear how the fire started.

Gail's Wagon Wheel restaurant is located next to an old furniture store next door. The Baxter Bi-Rite, the town's only grocery store, is also in the area, however it does not look like it sustained significant damage.

by WKRN Nashville Tennessee: 14 March 2008

DOWNTOWN BAXTER ABLAZE

Associated Press

BAXTER, Tenn. -- Crews are working to clear debris from a large fire that broke out in downtown Baxter.

Fire Chief Chris Holmes says a block of Broad Street was on fire Friday morning, destroying or damaging at least a third of downtown.

Holmes says the blaze was too large for local firefighters to contain, so officials from Cookeville, Livingston and Putnam County were called to help.

No injuries have been reported.

Baxter says at least three businesses have been destroyed by the fire -- a restaurant, a furniture store and a grocery store.

Authorities say someone was walking by the furniture store early Friday morning and noticed smoke. When firefighters arrived, the building was engulfed in flames. The cause is under investigation.

Tennessean.com: 14 March 2008

BAXTER, TENN. - A large fire damaged or destroyed at least a third of downtown Baxter.

Firefighters from Cookeville, Livingston and Putnam County helped Baxter firefighters control the blaze. It was reported around 3:30 a.m. Friday.

Baxter is located about 10 miles west of Cookeville.

The city's only grocery store suffered smoke and water damage. The blaze destroyed a longtime furniture store and the city's only sit-down diner known as the Wagon Wheel.

Gail Swank was closing her restaurant around 3 a.m. when she smelled trouble.

"We smelled something burning," she said. "We checked garbage cans, threw water in them, checked coolers, unplugged them."

When she went out back, she saw flames from the furniture store next door.

"It just got out of control and there was no stopping it."

Flames had engulfed the building by the time firefighters arrived.

No one was injured.

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Cookeville, TN

Baxter Firefighters Certified

Sunday, 9 March
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Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea

Several of Baxter's volunteer firefighters recently completed 64 hours of classroom training as part of the process to become state certified firefighter-1's. The group will attend another course in Bell Buckle on April 18, before taking the state exam. From left in front, firefighters Brandon Pruett, Lt. Terry Hutchison, Dustin Stanton, Terry Fields, Capt. John Ramsey, Assistant Fire Chief Cris Austin, and firefighter Roy Spurlock. From left in back, Alderman Robert Vinson, Alderman Harmon Garris, Fire Chief Chris Holmes, and Safety Officer Robert Dobbs. Firefighters not pictured include Mike Randolph and Dusty Mahan.

BAXTER BUSINESS OWNERS LOOKING TO MOVE ON AFTER FIRE

[Liz Engel](#)

Herald-Citizen Staff

Saturday, Mar 15, 2008



Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea Local firefighters spray down what's left of Campbell's Baxter Bi-Rite grocery store, the Wagon Wheel Restaurant and S&S Furniture Company on Friday morning. The cause of the fire that destroyed two Baxter businesses is still being investigated.

BAXTER -- As the rain fell steadily in Putnam County Friday morning, smoke continued to rise from two downtown Baxter businesses completely destroyed by an

overnight fire.

Dozens of local residents gathered on the sidewalks and cars overcrowded downtown streets to watch as crews from the Baxter, Cookeville, Putnam County, Livingston and Jackson County fire departments worked most of the day on the blaze that started around 3:30 a.m. that morning.

And watching was pretty much all Gail Swank, owner of the Wagon Wheel, could do. Fire completely destroyed her restaurant/bar, sandwiched in between S&S Furniture Co. and the Campbell's Baxter Bi-Rite on Broad Street.

Swank said she believes the fire started on the backside of S&S, which officials had confirmed, a store which was also completely destroyed.

"I'm still in shock," Swank said. "I can't believe our business is gone. It's totally wiped out."

Swank said she was closing down the Wagon Wheel around 2:30 or 3 a.m. when her and another employee smelled smoke.

"We started looking, and we couldn't find anything," Swank said. "We went out back with a flashlight to go (look) underneath to see if we could see anything there, and that's when the guy who was with me looked up and said, 'Gail, we've got to call 911.'"

Swank said she looked up to see the fire at S&S.

"I couldn't even tell you what time I called 911," she said. "I kept thinking they could get this under control, but it just started spreading and never stopped."

Firefighters finally contained the blaze around 7 a.m. but continued spraying the buildings with water most of Friday morning and worked to eliminate any hot spots and cleared damage until late Friday night. Officials also had to work to clear out items in the Baxter Bi-Rite grocery store, which received some smoke and water damage and suffered food loss from a lack of electricity.

Chris Holmes, Baxter fire chief, said damage was estimated at \$150,000 and the department used around 500,000 gallons of water. Officials are still investigating the cause of the blaze, and arson has yet to be ruled out.

"It's a possibility," Holmes said.

Both buildings in that strip had originally been built between 1920 and 1930, according to Tennessee Property Data. Their age as well as the windy conditions was a factor in how quickly the fire spread.

"Everything in there was made of wood. The walls, the floor, the ceiling," Holmes said. "The (concrete) wall at Campbell's saved that grocery store.

"I can't praise the other agencies enough for helping us," he said. "To save that store was awesome, and nobody was injured."

As for Swank, she says that although her business was insured, this would be the last straw for her here. She had been a constant presence last year at city council meetings and the Baxter Beer Board subpoenaed her beer sales records in December.

"I will not open (here) again," Swank said. "This just blows my mind, and I think it could have been stopped before it ever went this far. But I've been through worse than this."

BAXTER BI-RITE READY TO REOPEN

[Liz Engel](#)

Herald-Citizen Staff
Sunday, Mar 30, 2008

BAXTER -- As Baxter Bi-Rite assistant manager Kathy Nash stocked shelves at the small downtown grocery store here last week, she couldn't help but look around and see all the work that still needed to be done.

The floors are a dirty and grimy mess, coolers that once contained frozen and refrigerated food items are empty, and the popular old-time black and white photos -- some dating as far back as 1920 that had once lined the walls -- need to be re-hung.

But more than three weeks after a fire nearly destroyed the long-time business, the Bi-Rite's doors are ready to open again.

Pending any setbacks, the store is set to open at 7 a.m. Tuesday.

"We had water damage, some smoke damage. We lost all our perishables -- dairy products, meats, frozen foods," Nash said. "There is damage in the back area, where we cut meat for food trays. The upstairs doors are burnt and the roof was damaged. But we hope to open Tuesday. We are really pushing."

Nash and store manager Denise Fields and other employees have been working full-time to get the store back into working order after power was restored two weeks ago. Most of the major clean-up was expected to finish this weekend and a large truck will bring back all the perishable food items on Monday.

The two women admit the store was lucky -- a fire wall where those old photos had hung slowed the blaze from entering the store -- but two adjacent businesses weren't as fortunate. The Wagon Wheel restaurant and S&S Furniture Co., where the fire had started, were completely destroyed in the March 14 blaze. "No trespassing" signs have been posted there, but that hasn't stopped the dozens of people who have come by to check out the damage in the past few weeks.

It also hasn't stopped those who have come by knocking at the grocery store windows to see when the doors would open again.

"Our customers depend on us a lot," Nash said. The grocery store is the only major one in town, with the next closest in Cookeville, about 15 minutes away.

"They've (the customers) told me you never know how much you miss the Bi-Rite until something like this happens," Fields said. "But we'll be ready to open."

<http://www.ajlambert.com>

