

The Record burns, moves

Offices relocate to 911 Main Street



The offices of *The Record* and Thursday Printing were destroyed by fire last Tuesday evening.

The businesses have been relocated to 911 Main Street in North Wilkesboro.

Employees of the newspaper and commercial print shop began work last Wednesday to set up new offices at the Main Street location.

For now, the newsroom, composing department, sales offices and print shop are located in the lower level. *Record* Publisher Ken Welborn's office is on the street-level floor of the building.

The fire that destroyed the 115-year-old white, wood frame, two story building that housed the offices at the corner of E and 4th streets in North Wilkesboro, has been ruled as accidental by investigators.

According to North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Niki Hamby, the fire began either in or around a plate-burning machine used in the print shop.

The blaze was reported around 6:30 p.m. last Tuesday after neighbors saw smoke rising from the building.

Karen Reynolds, executive director of Wilkes Playmakers, was meeting with members of the group at Benton Hall — about a block away — and saw smoke.

After seeing *Record* editor Jerry Lankford's car parked in front of the building, Matt Minton (who plays Tom Dooley in Reynolds' play *Tom Dooley: A Wilkes County Legend*) and Joe Connelly (longtime technician for the theatrical group) ran to the front door, fearing Lankford was still inside.

They attempted to break down the door, but it took firefighters, equipped with axes, to breach the heavy wooden entrance. Neighbor Bucky Luttrell also tried to break down the door, but was also unable to get inside.

No one, however, was in the building. Employees had already left for the evening, having completed the week's issue of the newspaper.

Lankford was the first staff member to hear about the fire. When he arrived at the *Lenoir News-Topic* — where *The Record* is printed — he was told that he had an urgent phone call from a family member. Lankford then reached Welborn on his cell phone.

Welborn's wife, Laura, and Lankford talked over cell phones as she and Welborn walked to the burning building from the Benton Hall parking lot.



“It’s bad,” she said, describing the smoke and flames rising from the green-painted, tin-shingled roof.

About 60 firefighters from North Wilkesboro, Broadway, Cricket and Knottville fire departments battled the blaze for several hours as the streets around the building filled with onlookers.

The blaze quickly spread through the building. The print shop was fully engulfed and the flames burned through to the second floor archives room where copies of the newspaper were stored.

Several firefighters suffered irritated eyes from the smoke. Emergency personnel rinsed their eyes and they resumed work.

The fire was contained around 8:45 p.m.

Firemen stayed on the scene throughout the night and into the morning. Flare-ups, which erupted around 1:30 a.m. and 4 a.m., were extinguished.

Welborn returned to the building shortly after daylight. Lankford and printer John Bentley arrived a short time later.

Lankford found a digital camera in his soot-covered office. Seeing that it still worked, he began taking pictures for this week’s issue.

SBI Arson Investigator Eric Wall and Hamby began their investigation around 9 a.m.

Wall, after an initial inspection, said he believed a plate-burning machine caused the fire. A couple of hours later, the metal-cased device was brought out onto the front lawn. He sifted through the ashes in the bottom of the machine, looking at each piece of debris.

Hamby took Welborn and Lankford inside, where the machine had been, and showed the deeply rippled, charred wooden beams. Hamby described the type of damage to the wood as “alligatored” and explained that the area appeared to be where the flame burned the longest.

The building was ruled a total loss.

The print shop, which was built on in additions to the old house, was the most heavily damaged area. Nothing appears to be salvageable there. The roof is mostly gone in the rear part of the building and machinery and tools are ruined.

Bentley stood looking inside the ruined print shop. “This is just terrible,” he said.

Two million sheets of paper in the print shop and throughout the building fueled the blaze.

The front offices received less damage.

Of these, Welborn’s was the worst. The plastic box of his computer was melted around the screen, many of the antiques — signs, furniture and a coin-operated radio — were ruined.

The big neon-lit clock, which appears in the picture that runs with Welborn’s column, was also ruined. It’s blacked hands show the time the power went off — at 6:39.

A fax machine and copier in the front lobby are mostly melted and the ceiling is hanging down in shreds.

The composing office received heavy water and smoke damage. As Welborn and Lankford carried computers from that space last Wednesday, water poured from keyboards and monitors.

The upstairs sales office also received extensive water damage, but some personal items were salvageable.

The newsroom was the least damaged area of the building. Windows were broken and plastic shades were melted. Other than that, the contents were only damp and covered with black soot.

Some computer hard drives were spared, including the one that stored most of Welborn's bookkeeping records.

Record sale representatives Linda Bumgarner and Gail Leger spent the days last Wednesday, Thursday and Friday selling advertisements and helping set up new phone lines and internet service.

Laura Welborn, who is executive director of Wilkes Smart Start, and members of her staff worked to clear space in the 911 Main Street building and set up work stations for *The Record's* temporary offices.

D.J. Royal of the composing department worked to retrieve computer programs and set up computers at the new location.

Bentley carried papers and set up shelves for the new print shop. Bill Absher, the driver for *The Record/Thursday* Printing, hauled the loads. A Hamada two-color printing press was delivered on Monday.

Welborn and his brother, T.A., worked throughout the weekend to retrieve savable items.

Carroll Lowe installed computer programs and reestablished internet and e-mail connections.

On Monday morning, *Record* staff members were able to start work on this week's edition, opening e-mail and making pages.

Thursday Magazine, the predecessor of *The Record*, began publication from the offices in July 1982. The first issue of *The Record* was printed in October 1999 after Welborn hired Lankford as editor.