

Loss of Harcourt Community Centre brings back memories of good times



Above, Highlands East firefighters control the blaze at the Harcourt Community Centre on Sunday, Nov. 28. Photo by Tammy Donaldson

By Angelica Ingram

Birthday parties, weddings, anniversary celebrations, showers and much more.

The Harcourt Community Centre has been host to thousands of these types of celebrations over the past few decades, since it was built more than 50 years ago.

Now what remains of the popular small town community centre on the edge of the boundaries of Dysart et al is merely white brick walls and piles of debris that include shells of what were once kitchen ovens and piles of chinaware.

The blaze that destroyed the community centre in the hamlet of Harcourt started some time before 7 a.m. on Sunday, Nov. 29.

Harcourt resident and municipal Councillor Tammy Donaldson was one of the first to see the flames, which appeared reflected in the windows of the house across the street from where she lives.

Residing diagonally from the centre, Donaldson could see the smoke and flames when she looked out into her backyard.

The first thought that went through her mind was how is this happening?

?It's such a monumental ... I mean people come to Harcourt for the community centre, that's the only thing that's left here,? she said.

?It was like I can't believe what I'm seeing.?

The call to 9-1-1 was made by several parties, first by community centre neighbour Paul Rowbotham. Although the building is technically in the municipality of Dysart et al, a mutual aid agreement saw Highlands East firefighters attend the scene, due to the proximity of their fire halls.

Highlands East fire chief Bill Wingrove said they got the call at 6:54 a.m. and were on scene by 7:08 a.m.

Thirty-one firefighters attended the blaze, which took three hours to put out, he said.

Wingrove said at this time the fire is not suspected to be suspicious and the fire marshal has not been called to investigate.

No one was in the building at the time of the fire. A janitor was the last to have been there a day prior.

According to a press release from Dysart fire chief Miles Maughan, upon investigation it is believed the fire started in the ceiling/attic area above the kitchen, before spreading to the roof.

?We're 90 per cent sure it was electrical,? said Wingrove when asked about the cause of the fire. ?It was burning in the attic for quite a while before it broke through.?

Donaldson began taking pictures right around 7 a.m., prior to firefighters arriving on the scene.

Photos were posted to the community centre's Facebook page and comments quickly began to flood the page. Comments from those who live in the area and others from residents who have long since left.

The pictures from the blaze were shared by more than 160 people.

?So sad to see this gone,? wrote Michelle Purto. ?So many great memories there.?

The memories being shared on the social media site are a testament to the building and the place it holds in people's hearts.

?When Martin Lumber was here there was a lot of people there,? said Donaldson. ?It was the people that were inside that made up

the hall. I mean it's just a building ... we were eating breakfast at the diner and people were saying I had my first dance in there. I got married in there.?

The fire chief had a similar experience, with those watching the building go up in smoke sharing their stories of the place.

?You wouldn't believe how many people came up to me when I was standing there and [said] you know we got married there 30 years ago or we had our reception there,? said Wingrove.

Ed Otto has been a volunteer at the centre for the past 17 years, calling bingo on Wednesday nights. He has many memories within the walls of the building and said he doesn't know what he's going to do this coming Wednesday.

Looking at the building where he has spent hundreds of hours, Otto is saddened to think of all the memorabilia that hung on the walls that will never be replaced.

The original part of the community centre dates back to the 1950s, with an addition that was added in 1974.

Wingrove said everything inside the building was destroyed, right down to the plates and cutlery.

?It's all melted and twisted,? he said.

Donaldson says the centre will be rebuilt, making it more modern and up to code.

The councillor is confident the hamlet will rally together and work towards creating a new place for memories to be made.