

Fire at center stopped in time

By GRACE R. DOVE
Post Staff

When Adam Hozempa, owner of Adam's Clothes in the Back Mountain Shopping Center, received a telephone call shortly after 6 p.m. Sunday that the shopping center "had gone up in flames," he set a record driving from his Tunkhannock home to his shop in Shavertown.

"It probably took me less than 20 minutes," he said. "I was really worried."

The three-alarm fire, ignited by a malfunctioning water heater in the back of the Back Mountain Laundromat around 6 p.m., also damaged the Old River Road Bakery next door and sent smoke into the Shavertown Acme, on its other side.

When Hozempa arrived at the shopping center, he couldn't see any flames, but there was still plenty of smoke, he said.

Equipment from four Back Mountain fire companies and Kingston Borough's Ladder 3 were clustered in the parking lot in front of the 36-year-old structure, while firefighters checked the roof for hot spots.

"Those firefighters did an outstanding job," Hozempa said. "They were very professional and worked fast to minimize the damage."

The Old River Road Bakery next door didn't fare as well as Hozempa's business. All of its stock was ruined.

Because the electrical meter had been removed after the fire, the store didn't have any lights, refrigerator or heat Monday morning.

Part-owner Gordon Kutz at-



POST PHOTO/GRACE R. DOVE

THREE-ALARM FIRE - Back Mountain firefighters used Kingston's overhead platform truck, Ladder 3, at Sunday night's fire at the Back Mountain Shopping Center.

tempted to total up the bakery's losses late Monday morning, counting pies, brownies and cookies in the semi-dark which still reeked of damp, stale smoke.

"There's some water damage in the back and a couple of holes in the back ceiling," he said. "We lost several hundred dollars of stock which we had left overnight - I don't have a final figure yet."

Kutz said he got to the bakery around 6:30 Sunday night after a store worker had called him about the fire.

"They wouldn't let me near the place for safety reasons," he said. "We had only minimal smoke damage. It could have been a lot worse."

After several mandatory inspections, small repairs and "a thorough scrubbing," the bakery will probably reopen around midweek, Kutz said.

Laundromat owner Dan Bechetti said a customer doing laundry had noticed the fire and reported it.

"This could have been a bad one. We could have lost the whole shopping center."

Gary Beisel
Shavertown fire chief

"The place was open and in use," he said. "I'm glad nobody was hurt."

The back roof of his business and some of his clothes washers and dryers sustained some damage, Bechetti said.

"Some of the equipment is okay," he said. "We'll reopen as soon as possible."

The shopping center is owned by the Henry Fein, et al partnership. No official estimate of damages was available, according to manager Allen Reishstein, who is waiting for the insurance appraiser's and contractor's reports.

The fire was caused by a malfunctioning water heater, which ignited part of the roof at the rear of the laundromat, according to Shavertown fire chief Gary Beisel.

"There are lots of concealed spaces between the roof and the drop ceilings in the businesses," he said. "The rafters run the length of the building, which could have given the fire a path to spread. If we hadn't stopped it over the laundromat, we could have lost everything between the Acme and McCrory's."

A firewall running through the roof between the laundry and the Acme stopped the fire from spreading in that direction, Beisel said.

Although the other businesses are separated by concrete walls ending at the rafters, only McCrory's at the opposite end has another firewall extending through the roof, he said.

"They didn't have any fire or building codes in the late '50's when this place was built," Beisel said. "This could have been a bad one. We could have lost the whole shopping center."

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