

Fire Destroys

Gilmanton FD Keeps Blaze From House

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Staff Writer

GILMANTON — Fire crews kept flames from spreading to Bill Lavoie's house but were unable to save a garage where he restored antique horse-drawn carriages.

Lavoie had just begun work Tuesday morning on his most recent project in a long list of carriages. A fire broke out a few hours later during his absence and consumed the small wooden garage on Smith Meetinghouse Road around 2 p.m.

Gilmanton Fire Chief Jim Clough ruled the cause undetermined this morning, but said it appears to have been accidental.

"We really couldn't tell due to the extensive damage to the building and its contents," he said.

Tuesday, he pointed to the ignition of chemical solvents Lavoie used for the finishing job as the most likely culprit, and that he was looking to see if the heat finish stripper Lavoie had been using was left on.

A crew member from the New Hampshire Electrical Cooperative arrived to disconnect electricity to the garage while firefighters finished hosing down the structure.

The fire was so hot it melted the vinyl siding on the house 35 feet away; the material did not have a brown tinge indicating a slower burn. Clough said the house would likely have caught fire had the department arrived a few minutes later.

"We wrote off trying to save the garage when we got here," Clough said. "Another few minutes and the house would have lit. None of the windows broke (due to the heat) though, thankfully. That fire was hot."

Lavoie has been restoring antique carriages for the past seven or eight years, including one he fitted for Percheron horses for a former Hollywood producer with a farm in Vermont. Last week, he sent off a replica of the Budweiser wagon to Nova Scotia.

He sells some carriages through Mead-

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Carriage Shop

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er's Draft Horse Supply in Rochester.

He couldn't pinpoint the number of carriages he's worked on over the years. He segued into the craft after learning woodworking through boat restoration.

"Most of the time, unless it's an unusual vehicle, you'd spend more on the restoration than the vehicle is worth," he said of antique carriages. He noted the similarities of curves and turns in the wood between the two trades of boat building and carriage building.

The carriage lost in the fire, from the late 1800s, would have remained his own; he

obtained it through a trade on another carriage. All that remained was the metal frame which sat in the charred rubble.

"I do a lot of them for customers, but this one was for myself," he said, adding that he has a horse on the property out back which he uses for his own carriage-driving pleasure.

Lavoie was pleased that two antique woodstoves he was restoring for the Smith Meetinghouse Society suffered little if any damage.

"It doesn't look like they sustained any damage. That's good, they have some real historical value," he said.

Lavoie had visited a neighbor and came in for lunch when he saw the smoke. His mother and her nurse quickly fled to a neighbor's home while he called the fire department.

Gilmanton Fire Deputy Paul Hempel saw the thick smoke while en route to the fire and called for a first alarm. Crews from Barnstead, Belmont, Gilford, Laconia, Loudon and Alton also responded to the blaze.

Water was supplied via a dry hydrant almost a mile from the scene.

Also lost were some tools and an air compressor; Lavoie managed to get a large wooden toolbox out with little damage.

He said he may have to use the attached garage at the other side of the house for future work until the destroyed garage is rebuilt. He said he planned for someone else to utilize that space for other work but he doesn't know what will happen now.



William Lavoie of Gilmanston looks away as firefighters work to extinguish the last burning embers in his garage Tuesday afternoon. Lavoie used the structure to build and restore carriages.

(Citizen photo/Al Hogue)