

# Firemen Battle Smoke, Flames As Warehouse Destroyed

A grass fire accidentally ignited by an 11-year-old boy playing with matches has been ruled the cause of the September 9 blaze that burned the LeMans Corp. warehouse to the ground and covered much of the downtown area with a dense blanket of smoke.

The determination that the grass fire was the probable cause came Thursday morning following a police investigation headed by Capt. Keith Burdick.

No criminal charges will be brought against the Edgerton youth because police believe there was no "criminal intent" involved in setting the fire, Burdick said.

"There wasn't a crime committed," he explained. "We can't prove that he had any intention of burning the building."

According to the investigation report, an 11-year-old boy was walking on the private alley where the warehouse was located which connects West Lawton Street and West Fulton. The boy was playing with matches and inadvertently started a grass fire near the southwest corner of the warehouse. A southwest breeze caused the fire to spread out of control toward the building, reports said.

The boys then fled for help and two Edgerton men, Paul Barrett and Jim Thorpe, assisted the youth in extinguishing the blaze about 4:30 p.m.

Moments earlier, the smoke emitted by the grass fire was spotted by Tom Doerr from his Fulton Street tavern, and he reported it to fire department officials, who asked patrolman Gary Kirby, because of its proximity, to investigate the site. Upon his arrival, the group at the scene told Kirby that they had everything under control and that a fire truck would not be needed.

Kirby described the grass fire as burning an area 10-foot in diameter and burning right up to the building's edge.

However, police are speculating that the grass continued to smolder and later ignited again after the two had left, and with the aid of the wind, spread under the building.

Edgerton firefighters were called to the warehouse about 5:02 p.m. when an unidentified



By Thursday morning, the LeMans Corp. warehouse and its contents had been reduced to nothing more than the charred remains.

motorist noticed smoke coming from the building and notified Florence Turner, an employee of the neighboring Terra Chemical International plant, who informed the fire department.

Forty-five firemen with seven trucks from Edgerton (4) and Stoughton (3) battled the blaze and a thick, irritating smoke from the burning rubber materials inside the warehouse for about 4½ hours. Several firemen required oxygen from emergency medical technicians after being overcome by smoke inhalation. The most severely affected was fireman Wayne Lund, who was hospitalized for treatment of smoke inhalation for two days and then released.

"It was the kind of smoke you couldn't breath," said Fire Chief Charles Edwardson, adding that overcoming the smoke was the most difficult part about combating the fire.

Despite efforts to extinguish the blaze with over 250,000 gallons of water, the 30 by 60 foot warehouse and its contents were left in a smoldering and charred ruin by about 10 p.m.

Neither Fred Fox, the president of the company who was vacationing in Kansas when the fire broke out, or officials at

LeMans Corp., 204 W. Lawton, have commented publicly on the cost estimate of losses encumbered in the fire. The warehouse was filled with parts and inventory.

Edwardson listed the warehouse and contents as a "total loss."

The September 9 fire marks the second time Fox has been plagued with a LeMans Corp. warehouse fire. On July 12, 1979, a warehouse owned by Fox Corp., 111 W. Racine, Janesville, which leased space to LeMans Corp. and two other businesses, was burned in a fire of suspicious nature. Janesville fire officials suspected that arson may have been involved.

At the time, it marked the third fire in the same building in the last 24 years.

Much of the downtown area was blanketed with smoke as it billowed as high as 200 feet above the burning building. Edwardson was extremely concerned about the amount of smoke damage many of the merchants and downtown residents would receive. However, many of the store owners took precautionary measures and reported only minor damages, for the most part

limited to a little cleanup. Wednesday night or Thursday evening.

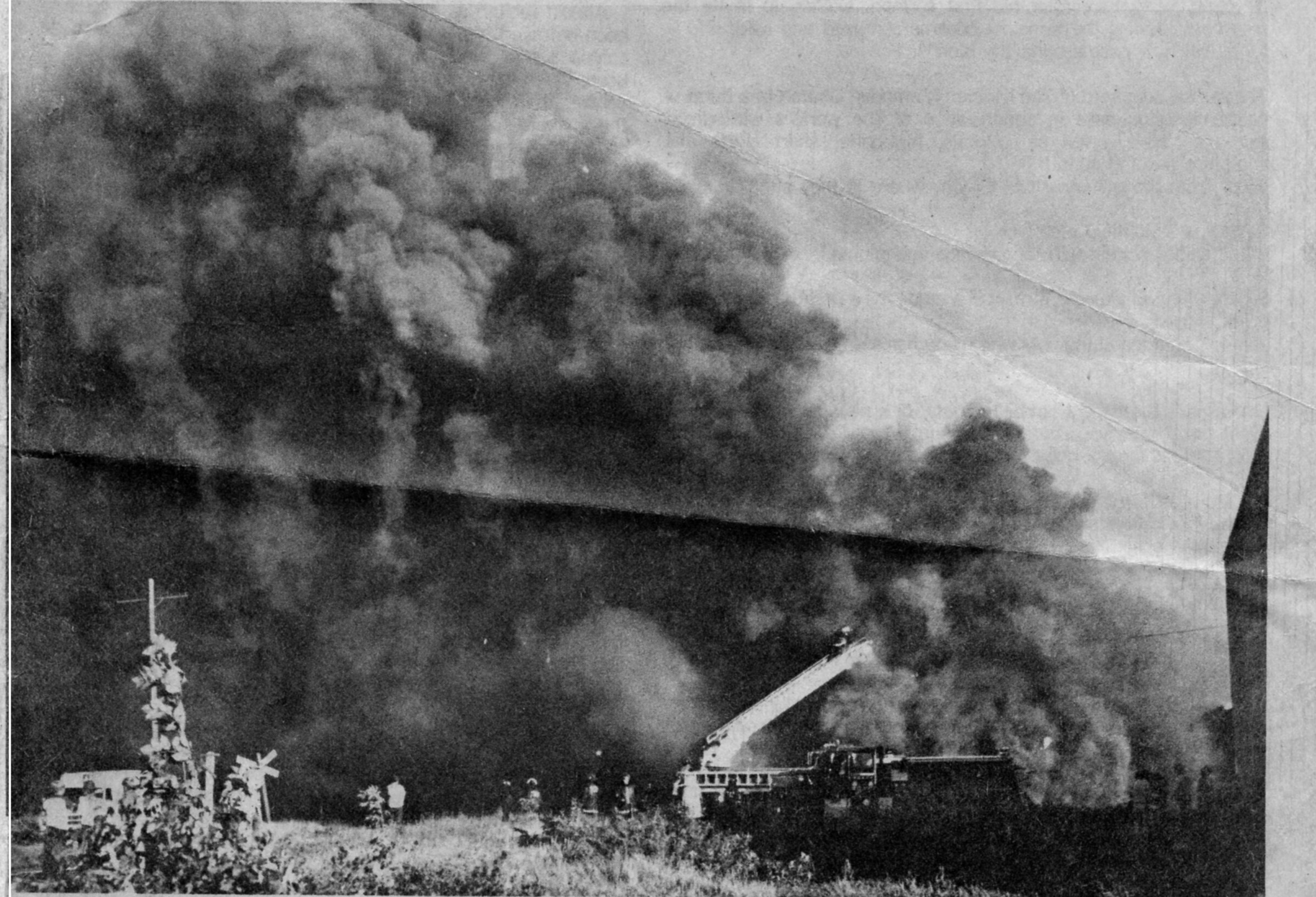
A more immediate concern to Edwardson and other firemen was the possibility of the fire spreading to the adjacent Terra plant. It was the southwesterly direction of the wind - the same path that carried the grass fire toward the warehouse - that pushed the smoke and flames away from the plant and into the Fulton Street area.

And as Edwardson and Terra manager Ed Thalacker noted, if the wind had been northerly instead, it would have spelled certain disaster for the fertilizer plant.

"If the wind had been blowing the other way, there is no way we could have saved Terra," Edwardson said. Thalacker said the building contained potash and phosphates which are not nearly as combustible as firefighters first feared.

The LeMans warehouse was stacked five layers high and eight layers thick with rubber snowmobile tracks and other parts and inventory. Because the building was nearly filled to its limits, firefighters found it almost

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The burning LeMans Corp. warehouse became invisible behind the thick screen of billowing smoke caused by burning rubber inside the building. Firemen from both Stoughton and Edgerton said the smoke was the most difficult factor in combating the Sept. 9 blaze which resulted in at least three firefighters being treated for smoke

inhalation, one requiring hospitalization. Forty-five firemen from both departments with four trucks from Edgerton and three from Stoughton battled the fire for 4½ hours. The fire was caused when an 11-year-old boy accidentally started a grass fire while playing with matches.



In the early going, firefighters were able to get close to the structure and direct their hoses inside the building. But as more of the rubber materials inside ignited, almost like an explosion the smoke rolled out in billows, forcing firemen to move away quickly.



Because of the irritating smoke, firefighters battling the blaze from the north side of the warehouse were forced to stay low to the ground to avoid as much of the smoke as possible.

## Fire . . .

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impossible to reach the burning materials near the bottom of the rubble as debris continued to fall on top as the fire burned. Firefighters could've conceivably been fighting the blaze well into the next day, Edwardson said.

To alleviate that problem, the fire department secured an endloader from Louis Marsden about 8:30 p.m., and with Marsden separating and scattering the charred materials, firemen were able to get at the smoldering materials near the bottom of the rubble. Firefighters also used their hoses to keep the smoke away from Marsden's cab

and to cool the hydraulics of the machine.

At the time of the blaze, Edwardson said the cause of the fire may never be determined because so little of the building or its contents remained.

Edwardson was quick to praise the work of the department's firefighters, considering the number of obstacles they faced, in the nearby five-hour ordeal.

"I've got a tremendous group of firemen," he said. "I can't ask for any more out of these guys. I tell them to do something once and it's done."