

The Fireman Who Burned Ketchikan

By Tom Brennan

Lieutenant Bill Mitchell was one of the most enthusiastic members of Ketchikan's Volunteer Fire Department, but nobody quite understood just how enthusiastic he really was.

In the late 1950s Mitchell managed his parents' Ben Franklin store on Main Street and was usually there during business hours. But no matter where a fire broke out in the Southeast Alaska city of 6,000, Bill Mitchell was the first fireman on the scene.

The handsome young lieutenant had a perfect attendance record at drills and fires. He was often injured or overcome with smoke, receiving first aid or transported to the local hospital. His exploits made headlines in the Ketchikan Daily News. Mitchell was a popular man, president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce and had a lovely wife.

After a fire, Mitchell liked to recount his experiences to anyone who would listen. Isobel Daigler, manager of the Coliseum Theater, told a reporter that Mitchell used to come into her theater after the fires and tell her all about them, his voice filled with excitement.

Though Ketchikan is in the heart of Alaska's rain country, the city was highly susceptible to fires. Most of its buildings were wooden structures built on stilts along a short stretch of Revilla Island's shoreline. Though the exterior of most buildings were damp much of the time, the interior and most of the understructure were protected from water, the wood dry and would easily burn.

Ketchikan was growing rapidly. A fishing and mining community for many years, the mines played out but logging was filling the gap and a large pulp mill was under construction.

A tunnel was being dug under Knob Hill and downtown streets were widened to accommodate heavy trucks and increased passenger cars. High-rise apartments were going up on both sides of town and new schools were in planning.

Despite all the good news, there were a few worrisome developments. For one, as the decade progressed the wooden city on stilts began to experience an unusual rash of fires. All seemed to start near laundry or utility rooms, apparently ignited by candles left burning near trash. Little

was said publicly but the volunteer firemen discussed among themselves the possibility that it was the work of a firebug.

None of the blazes were too serious until July 15, 1956, when an entire block of Main Street went up in flames. Burned were the Coliseum Theater, the 50-year-old Red Men Lodge and all its tenant spaces, as well as the Ketchikan Meat Co. and Ralph's Liquor Store.

Other smaller fires broke out after that. Then on New Year's Day, 1958, an entire block of 12 businesses on the dock side of Front Street went up in flames. Lost were the Alaska Steamship offices, Stan's Music Shop, the telegraph office, the Rainbird Cafe and Bar, a drugstore and a row of second-floor apartments.

One of the more valuable items salvaged from the fire was a portion of an oil painting rescued from the wall of the Rainbird Bar. It depicted a scene from the Robert Service poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and was later hung on the wall of the Sourdough Bar, the only structure left standing on the burned block.

On Jan. 12, 1960 fire broke out in the dockside Hunt Building. Firefighters were able to save the building but just 13 days later that building and all the adjacent properties were destroyed by yet another fire. Ketchikan people noted that the many waterfront fires were opening new and unfamiliar views of the marine traffic navigating Tongass Narrows.

The community was growing increasingly angry about the suspicious fires, which were both frightening and costly. Major fire insurance companies were canceling all their Ketchikan policies. Three of the five companies operating there canceled in one day.

On August 27, 1960, the investigators got a break in the case. A fire was set in an apartment building and an intact triggering device with a candle was found there. Someone had indeed been setting the fires.

Investigators ran background checks on a large number of Ketchikan citizens, following leads ranging from New York to Hawaii. Night patrols were conducted in the town, buildings were checked hourly and fire alarm boxes were dusted with a powder dye to see who was pulling the alarms. Insurance fraud was ruled out; the fires appeared to be the work of a pyromaniac, a firebug.

By this time Fire Chief Ralph M. Bartholomew, Police Chief Hank Miller and state Fire Marshal Jerry Phillips were all convinced both that they did have a firebug on their hands and that Bill Mitchell was probably the guy. The newly formed arson squad also included a Special Agent of the National Board of Fire Underwriters. Miller was former Anchorage Chief of Police. Phillips worked out of Public Safety headquarters in Anchorage.

The arson investigators were not ready to go public with their suspicions since they had no proof, but they had been working the case for a year and everything seemed to point to Mitchell. Bartholomew told the community he was tired of being called “The Chief in Charge of Burning.”

At that time very little was known about pyromania or the compulsions that drive some arsonists, though Mitchell’s case would later become part of a national study.

The Ketchikan investigating team brought in Sergeant Ed Dankworth of the Alaska State Troopers post in Anchorage, Alaska’s first trained polygraph operator. On arrival in Ketchikan, Dankworth began conducting lie detector tests on members of the Volunteer Fire Department. That evening Bill Mitchell suddenly became ill and sought medical treatment. He was admitted to the hospital the following day and, upon release, left the state for a short rest.

Dankworth tested 26 other firemen without developing anything of use to the investigators, who were very interested in Mitchell’s sudden illness, but Mitchell was unavailable for testing. A doctor confided he had treated the young fire lieutenant for an overdose of narcotics. The arson squad looked at Mitchell’s perfect attendance record, his injuries and smoke inhalation problems, the times he needed first aid and the headlines he achieved with his exploits. All told an interesting tale but there was still no evidence.

Then in January of 1961 fire destroyed the mortuary on Main Street, taking with it the second story of the 108 Bar and damaging the Bon Marche store. The blaze was contained just before it reached the Ben Franklin store owned by Bill Mitchell’s parents. As always young Mitchell was the first fireman to show up at the blaze.

The arson squad asked Mitchell to take a polygraph but he hopped on a plane with tickets for Salt Lake City; he said his father had been taken seriously ill. Dankworth had returned to Ketchikan and examined 10 more firemen while he was there, leaving Mitchell the only one who hadn’t taken the polygraph test.

Mitchell returned to Ketchikan six days later and reported to the fire station. When told that Dankworth was in town and could conduct the test right away, Mitchell said he would take the test but had to go to his mother's home first. Mitchell dashed out of the fire station with members of the Fire and Police Departments close behind.

They found him trying to swallow some kind of medicine and physically restrained him, but he had already downed a number of the pills. Mitchell asked for hospital care and consultation with a psychiatrist and voluntarily committed himself to a hospital in Juneau.

While in the hospital he was visited by a long-time friend who was a Captain in the Ketchikan Volunteer Fire Department. When accused of setting the fires and shown some of the evidence, Mitchell confessed.

A state grand jury returned a secret indictment in March, 1961, charging him with two counts of second-degree arson. He appeared in Ketchikan Superior Court, entered a not-guilty plea and was released on a \$7,500 bond posted by his stepfather. He flew to California to stay with his mother-in-law pending his trial scheduled for July.

Ketchikan assumed its fire problems were over but on July 3 a blaze broke out in a hardware and grocery building, another a few minutes later in a drugstore and apartment building two blocks away, then a third fire erupted an hour later in a hotel across the street from where the first fire was still being fought.

Earlier that week a Special Agent from the Anchorage office of the FBI had come through Ketchikan looking for a fugitive from justice who sometimes dressed as a woman. Travel and airline employees were alerted that the man could be in the area. That particular fugitive had no connection to the Ketchikan firebug case but the alert proved helpful in an unexpected way.

On the afternoon of July 3 the Special Agent received a call from Police Chief Hank Miller advising him that the Pan American World Airways ticket office had spotted a person believed to be a man impersonating a woman who was boarding a flight to Seattle. The person was traveling under the name "Julia Dunton."

The Seattle Division of the FBI contacted the aircraft in flight, got a description of the passenger and the seat number and confirmed that it appeared to be a man dressed as a woman. When

the flight arrived in Seattle, FBI agents boarded the plane, met passenger Dunton at her seat and took her in for questioning. They confirmed that the passenger was neither a woman nor the fugitive they were seeking earlier; it was Bill Mitchell.

The Special Agent tried to call Chief Bartholomew but he and all other public safety officers were still battling the three fires raging in downtown Ketchikan. The FBI man talked to the Ketchikan telephone operator, told her the call was urgent and Bartholomew soon came on the line. The investigators still needed confirmation that Mitchell had been in the area of the fires so they took photos of him in his Julia Dunton getup and shipped them to Ketchikan, where they arrived the next day.

There was considerable urgency about the investigation since many people were in town for the Fourth of July celebration and would be leaving soon. Ketchikan Police found several people who had spotted "Julia" including one logger who bought her coffee and tried to make a date with her.

Mitchell was briefly released while paperwork caught up, then rearrested when he voluntarily appeared at the Placer County, Calif., Sheriff's Office. He eventually pleaded guilty to arson charges, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and sent to McNeil Island Penitentiary in Washington State.

Mitchell was a model prisoner and was released early. He got a job in Fairbanks with help from a Fairbanks businesswoman who was a member of the Alaska Parole Board. He was a good citizen there and apparently set no more fires, eventually returning to his family in California where he lived out his life.

Finding and stopping the Ketchikan Firebug was a unique effort that was ultimately successful. An FBI report on the case noted that the challenge was met "with law enforcement's most effective weapon — cooperation."