

Kotzebue Recreation Center Destroyed By Fire

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The Kotzebue IRA, (Indian Reorganization Act), Recreation Center was completely destroyed by fire on the night of February 5, 1981. The blaze broke out shortly before nine o'clock and had reduced the two-story structure to smoldering embers by 10:30. Several people, all of whom escaped unhurt, were in the building when the fire started.

At the time of the blaze, there was a man in the men's sauna, and a woman in the women's sauna. Both noticed the same thing: smoke coming from the floor drain. Hastily wrapping themselves in towels, they went out to the office area

to find out what was going on. They found the manager there, Charlie Stalker, yelling "Everybody out of the building!" Both of the towel-draped people ran into their respective dressing rooms, grabbed their clothes and went out.

At this point the building was filling up with smoke; Stalker grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran down to the furnace room to try to fight the fire; He thought the fire must have started there. Both of the persons in the sauna thought the smoke smelled oily, too.

Crews from the volunteer Kotzebue fire department and the airport battled the blaze, but, hampered by 25 mph winds and problems with the water supply,

were unable to control the blaze. Although the city water tank held plenty of water during the battle, the city's fire chief said the system simply cannot deliver enough water to the hydrants to fight a major blaze like the one that consumed the Rec Center. He said a flow of 7,000 gallons per minute would have been required for such a blaze but a flow of only 3,000 gallons was available at the beginning, and that declined to about 2,000 per minute during the fight.

In addition to tapping the city's water supply, fire fighters drew water from a large tank at the nearby PHS hospital. The only injuries reported were minor smoke inhalation by one fireman and a bump on the head

of another. The building was not equipped with sprinklers but did meet fire codes.

Although the building was operated by the Kotzebue IRA Council, the U.S. Economic Development Agency held title to it as well as the insurance policy. The value of the building was not immediately known, but the original cost of construction was put at \$700,000. The building featured a game room, exercise facilities, sauna and shower on the ground floor, with offices on the top story.

IRA Council president Nellie Ward said the BIA social services administered by the Council will be moved to the Drift Inn till space opens up in

the Eskimos Building. The School District has headquarters in the Drift Inn; the Eskimos Building is owned by the village corporation and Mauneluk has its headquarters there.

Although the cause of the fire has not been pinned down, the state's chief fire investigator said it is definitely not arson. Fire marshal Lee Davis said that he has concluded that the fire was accidental, possibly electrical, in origin. Davis said he may have more information after consultation with other experts in Fairbanks. Davis also said that since the Rec Center was owned by the U.S. Government, investigation will not be pursued further unless there is a request from the federal agency.