



Photo By K. D. Kragen

Future Hazy for Poulsbo Restaurant After Fire

By Derek Sheppard, dsheppard@kitsapsun.com, May 31, 2006

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POULSBO

Poulsbo firefighters Shane Reeley, left, and Justin Zeigler douse the smoldering remains of Mitzel's American Kitchen on Tuesday morning.

One of Poulsbo's most recognizable meeting places, where coffee and conversation flowed freely, is gone.

A fast-spreading fire consumed Mitzel's American Kitchen off Highway 305 on Tuesday morning, taking with it a social hub for thousands and the livelihoods of dozens of employees.

For two decades, Mitzel's welcomed hungry travelers and locals alike, located just off the busy thoroughfare through Poulsbo.

Service clubs, businesses and families would have get-togethers there — one of the few places in town to gather a lot of people together for a meal.

Upward of 3,000 people would eat at Mitzel's each week, many of them regulars.

To them, it was more than coffee and pancakes.

Nearly every morning before work, you could find Ron Sowers occupying his own little piece of Poulsbo — table No. 10, right next to the fireplace.

Instead of having breakfast Tuesday morning, Sowers stood outside the charred remains of the restaurant consoling the employees, some still in pajamas.

"This is not what I expected this morning," he said.

To Sowers and the other regulars like him, the restaurant's 35 employees were more than servers or cooks.

"I made some good friends here," he said.

Marsha Rayburn has worked at the restaurant 17 years, a familiar story at the Poulsbo Mitzel's, where several employees have stayed more than a decade.

"It was something that was going to be a part-time job," Rayburn said. She started as a hostess. Now she's the general manager.

Over the years, she's seen the children of regulars grow up to become employees, she's seen a couple meet on a blind date to return each year for their anniversary, and she's seen the usual crowd at a loss for what to do each morning when the restaurant was closed for remodeling five years ago.

It's too early to tell what will happen to the restaurant now, if it will be rebuilt, but Rayburn knows it will affect usual patrons.

"A lot of them aren't gonna quite know what to do with themselves," she said.

It's a similar story for the Mitzel's employees.

In the early morning light as acrid smoke wafted through the air, about a dozen employees stood around what was left of their workplace.

"We're kind of one little family here," said server Kari Grantham. "This is really, really sad."

They're still having a hard time coming to terms with the fire, let alone planning what they'll do next.

"I think everyone's kind of in a daze right now," server Mark Shepard said.

When asked what he thought would happen to his family, he replied: "I just have no idea right now."

Mitzel's management said it was too soon to speculate about what might happen with the employees or whether the building would be reconstructed. The Poulsbo restaurant was one of five Mitzel's in Washington state. The chain is based in Portland.

"Today we're taking care of the emotions," said regional manager Charles Amner.

Several people made comparisons to the Kingston Inn fire in September, when a similar community hub and popular restaurant burned to the ground.

Rayburn said about five employees at Mitzel's were displaced Kingston Inn workers.

"They were some of the first calls this morning," she said.

Eyebrows were raised as some wondered how the fire got so big. The Poulsbo Fire Department is right across the street.

Ultimately several area fire departments would arrive to battle the inferno, which Poulsbo Fire spokeswoman Kristi Wlodarchak called "fast-moving."

She said the building wasn't equipped with an alarm or sprinkler system, and the first report at 2:04 a.m. reported flames from the roof.

"At that point, who's to say how long it had been burning," she said.

A Poulsbo crew arrived quickly and battled the fire in the kitchen, though it's not clear if that's where it started, but had to retreat when it became too dangerous.

From there it spread rapidly, eventually causing the roof to collapse.

Investigators from several area fire departments began working Tuesday to figure out how and where the blaze began.

The guy who sat at table No. 10, Sowers, can't help but wonder what will become of his friends who lost their jobs.

"How many people are going to suffer from this?" he asked.



Photo By K. D . Kragen

Poulsbo Mitzel's Restaurant destroyed by fire

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - Tuesday, May 30, 2006 · Last updated 8:53 p.m. PT

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/6420AP_WA_Restaurant_Fire.html

POULSBO, Wash. -- A popular restaurant in this Kitsap County community burned to the ground early Tuesday in a quick-spreading fire.

No one was inside Mitzel's American Kitchen at the time of the blaze, and there were no injuries.

But the building had been a popular gathering spot and a local landmark for 20 years at the corner of busy State Highway 305 and the Poulsbo Village shopping mall entrance.

The cause of the fire was under investigation.

Firefighters got the initial call at about 2 a.m., about four hours after the business had closed for the night.

When they arrived a minute or two later - the fire station is just across the road - flames had already reached the roof of the building.

Fire crews entered the building, but quickly retreated to fight the fire from outside because the blaze spread so quickly.

The building had no sprinklers or alarm system, Poulsbo Fire spokeswoman Kristi Wlodarchak said.

Marsha Rayburn, who worked at the restaurant 17 years and was its general manager, said she had seen the children of regular customers grow up to become employees, and saw a couple meet on a blind date and then return each year for their anniversary.

"A lot of them aren't gonna quite know what to do with themselves," she told the Kitsap Sun.

Mitzel's management told the Sun it was too soon to speculate whether the building would be rebuilt. A damage estimate was immediately available.

"Today we're taking care of the emotions," regional manager Charles Amner told the Sun.

The restaurant had about 35 employees.

Landmark Restaurant Destroyed By Fire

POSTED: 7:15 am PDT May 30, 2006 - UPDATED: 12:25 pm PDT May 30, 2006

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<http://www.kirotv.com/news/9291345/detail.html>

Web article includes a video of the fire and a 10-image slideshow.

Poulsbo, Wash. — One of Poulsbo's most popular community gathering places burned to the ground on Thursday morning in a quick-spreading fire that is under investigation.

The building containing Mitzel's American Kitchen is a landmark at the corner of Highway 305 and the Poulsbo Village entrance.

Fire officials said it is a total loss.

Firefighters got the initial call at about 2 a.m., about four hours after the business closed for the night.

When they arrived a minute or two later, flames had already reached the roof of the building.

Fire crews first entered the building to battle the flames, but they quickly had to retreat and fight the fire from outside because the blaze spread so quickly.

The building had no sprinklers or alarm system.

No one was inside at the time of the blaze, and there were no injuries.

Firefighters told KIRO 7 Eyewitness News they have no reason to believe the fire was set, but they can't rule out the possibility of arson.

An excavator is being brought in to demolish what's left of the building.