

Arson Possible in Canandaigua School Fire

TEXT BY CHARLES RANDISI
PHOTOS BY DAYE WITBECK

Canandaigua — For the second time in less than two months, a diocesan facility has been damaged badly by fire — and for the second time, the possibility of arson exists.

First it was St. John the Baptist Church, Elmira, which nearly was destroyed by flames on Dec. 27. Not it's St. Mary's School, Canandaigua, hit by a blaze during the afternoon of Wednesday, Feb. 20.

The wing of the school built in 1910 was the part that caught fire. The original 1880 building received only minor water and smoke damage, and the newest wing, constructed in the late 1950s, was untouched.

Sister Diane Dennie, SSJ, principal, said that the 225 students who had classes in the nine rooms of the 1910 wing would attend makeshift classrooms in the gymnasium until the school could be rebuilt.

Unofficially, the damage was estimated at around \$90,000.

Father William Charbonneau, pastor, was out of town when the fire struck, and was unable to return until Tuesday, Feb. 26. Plans for rebuilding could not be made until his return.

Sister Diane was meeting with other Sisters in the school basement when the fire started around 3:30 p.m. "What we heard

was glass popping or breaking," she said. The noise came from the boys' locker room. She and the other sisters ran down the hall of the next building to sound the alarm, and escorted several students in the burning building to safety.

The Canandaigua Fire Department fought the flames for two hours before bringing the fire under control. The first floor above the locker room had caved in, much of the basement and first floor had burned to rubble, and practically nothing was saved.

The fire came on the day after a number of threats had been made to the church property. Mrs. John Doran, wife of the school custodian, received a call on Tuesday, Feb. 19, in which a voice said, "Watch the buildings," and hung up. St. Mary's Convent and the Canandaigua police also received threats.

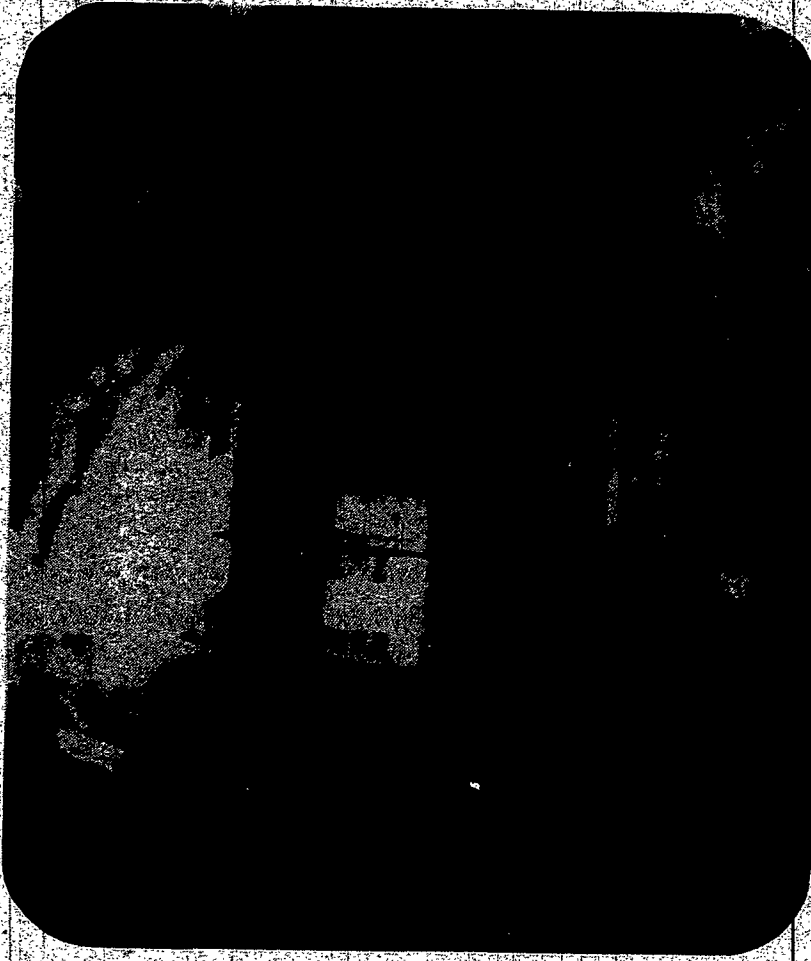
Two weeks ago, two Gates youths were arrested for vandalism of St. Mary's School. Both were in jail at the time of the fire. At a preliminary court hearing on Monday, Feb. 18, friends of the two had to be escorted from the courtroom for unruliness.

However, the possibility of arson is still just a possibility.

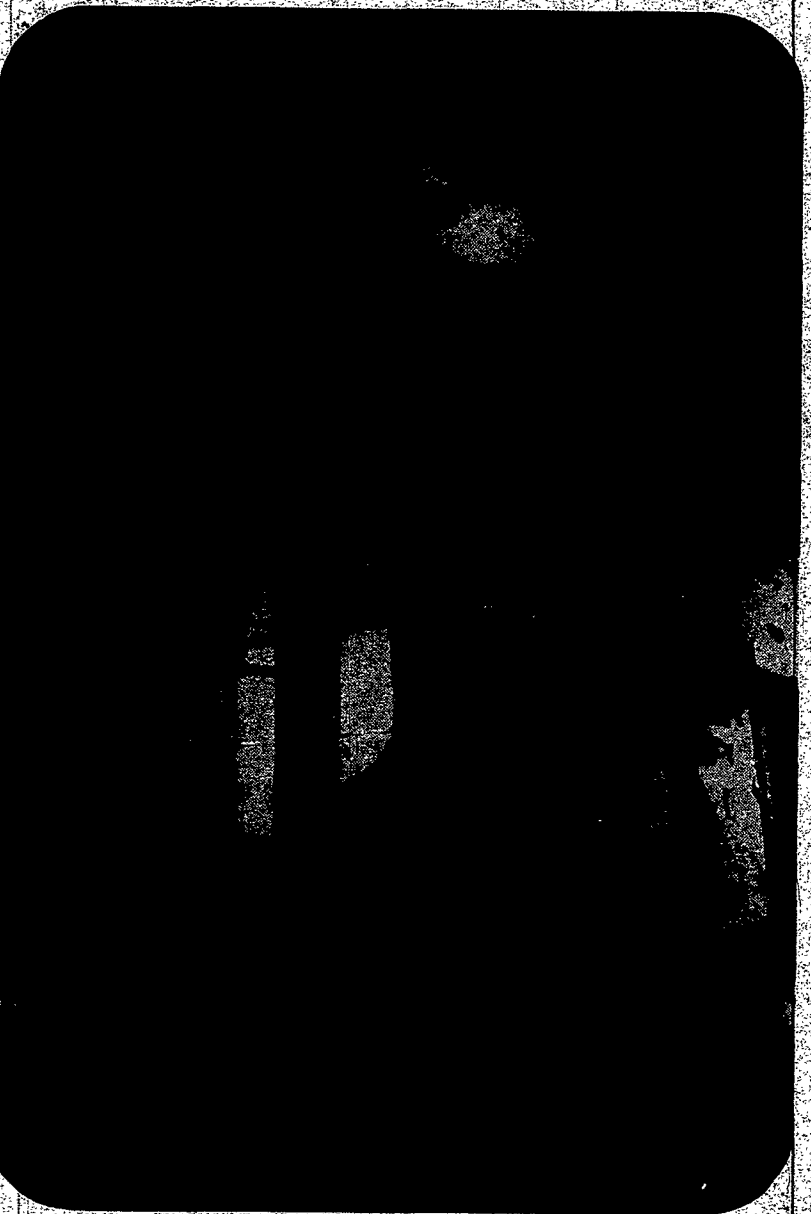
Father David Gaesser, associate pastor, had left Canandaigua for Rochester approximately 15 minutes before the fire started. He didn't hear the news until Wednesday evening.

He spent most of the next day talking with adjusters and insurance men. John Ritzenthaler, diocesan comptroller, also paid a visit to view the damage.

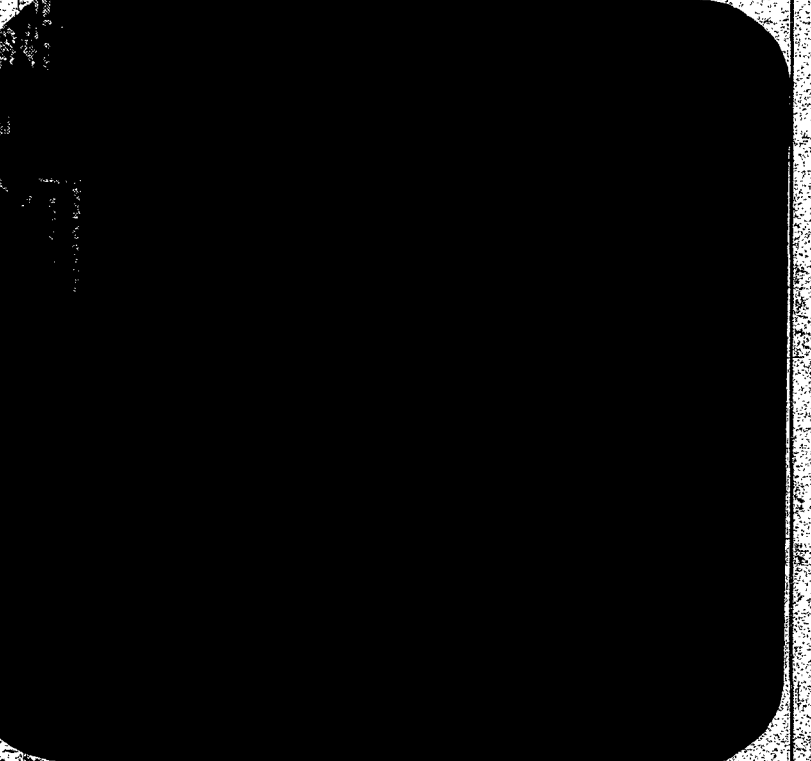
He was hesitant to blame the fire on an arsonist. "We don't really know yet what caused the fire," he said.



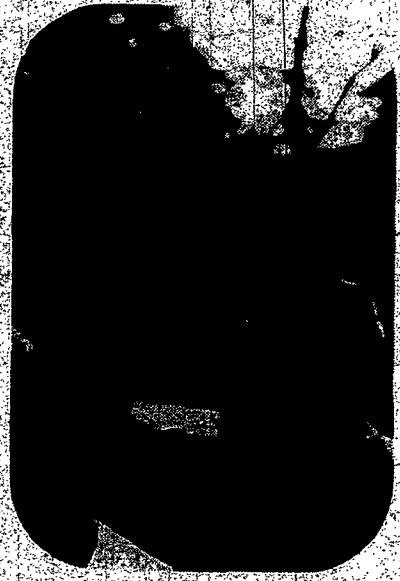
Through a broken window, Sister Diane surveys the damage.



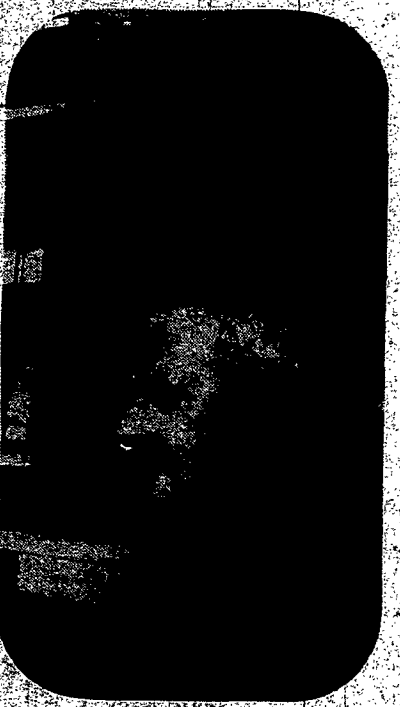
Flames burned a hole through the ceiling.



School desks poised over caved-in floor.



Assistant Fire Chief Orin Buck points to where flames reached school tower.



School Custodian John Doran, whose wife received threat on school.



Sisters of St. Joseph were meeting here when fire started.

FUNERAL DIRECTORS 

- QUALITY STANDARDS
- DIGNITY IN SERVICE
- INTEGRITY IN BUSINESS

F. H. McELWEE
Funeral Home, Inc.
Phone 394-2220
Leo M. Bean
Francis H. McElwee
200 Buffalo St., Canandaigua, N.Y.
90 E. Main St., Victor, N.Y.

HARLOFF 586-5948
Funeral Home ST. JEROME'S PARISH
E. ROCHESTER

BURNS - HANNA
FUNERAL HOME
1795 Ridge Rd. E. 467-5745


Paul W. Harris
FUNERAL HOME INC.
570 Kings Highway South (corner Titus)
SPACIOUS PARKING Private casket selection room 544-2041 AIR CONDITIONED

M. L. ALLEN & SON
Corning, N.Y.
Quality Furniture
62 Bridge St.
Phone 936-8431