

Command post

Table under tree served as HQ

By BOB JONES
of The Free Press

A plain wooden table set up on the lawn of a Foster Avenue home served as a command post during the explosion-fire crisis Tuesday.

The hastily-assembled post wasn't elaborate but it served as a base from where Police Chief Walter Johnson, Fire Chief Ray Morley, city engineer Keith Rowntree, and Union Gas and Hydro officials planned strategy.

Their problems appeared to be immense, but, during it all, according to Chief Johnson and Chief Morley, there was no panic and minimum of duplication of effort.

The over-all problem was: when the area, containing about 3,000 homes, including

about 700 customers of Union Gas, could be considered safe again.

There was also the fear that other homes in the area—bounded roughly by Oxford Street, Wharncliffe Road, Mt. Pleasant Avenue and Beaverbrook Avenue—might be hit by explosion and fire.

Fire Chief Morley had estimated that at least 25 homes were either hit directly by explosion and fire, and another 13 were scorched.

Police, firefighters and Mayor Jane Bigelow, who was brought up to date on emergency measures being taken, marvelled at the fact no lives were lost.

"Incredible," exclaimed the mayor. Chief Johnson said that apart from not having a mobile police-fire emergency vehicle, operations went smoothly.

From this command post, at 50 Foster Ave., the home of William Proctor, the crisis area was carved into six zones lettered A to F.

Union Gas and Hydro crews were assigned to check homes in each zone and report directly back to the post.

The plan:

- To make sure all gas-serviced homes were evacuated;

- Gas servicemen and police to check each of the 700 homes;

- In cases where occupants were not home, entry to be forced — with a police officer present — and the house checked;

- A police loud hailer and the broadcast media to be employed to inform residents to

open doors and windows to ventilate their homes;

- A target time of 7 p.m. set for Hydro crews to begin turning power back on;

- Gas servicemen to start relighting individual appliances — such as hot water heaters and stoves — as homes were checked out and considered safe.

Chief Johnson ordered the area to be sealed off overnight and that all persons desiring to enter be challenged by police to find out if they lived there.

Chief Johnson said that in the near future there would be available, in times of any crisis, a mobile emergency police-fire vehicle to be used in conjunction with an emergency centre to be established in the new police administration building to be built at Dundas and Adelaide streets.



Mrs. Roger Keller, 35 Foster Ave., hurries down the street with her children and her precious photo albums.



A group of volunteer firemen arrive to help London firemen, many of them called in from off-duty pursuits.

Reporter wonders: What am I doing here?

By GENE FLORCYK
of The Free Press

It's a helluva sensation after you realize what it is you're doing.

As I was racing up Britannia Avenue behind a fire truck and police cruiser, the thought didn't enter my mind that I was driving myself, and colleagues Bill Eluchok and Mary Kehoe into the heart of a holocaust.

The first indication of the seriousness of the whole thing was the sight of a policeman herding people — some crying, others with fear written across their faces — out of the area toward Westown Plaza.

Policemen and citizens were running door-to-door evacuating homes.

Loudspeakers warned people to get away. "Please leave the area," a police officer said to one aged resident. "We don't know what might go next."

Heat from the violently-burning house at 118 Britannia Ave. forced me to move the car about a half-block to a private laneway across the street.

Working my way down Britannia, I heard "there goes another one" from a fireman on a truck.

Heading down Britannia, a policeman warned: "Stay away, this one's gonna blow," as he pointed to 79 Britannia Ave. which had smoke billowing from windows and eaves.

I snapped a few pictures and ran like hell farther down the street to where 44 Britannia, at the corner of Tozer Avenue, was in flames.

By this time police had that particular area virtually evacuated.

Then another report of a fire . . . and another . . . and another.

We decided "this thing is bigger than the three of us." We wended our way back to our car and radioed for help.

It wasn't until well into the afternoon that it hit me: That's a helluva way to make a living. We could have been killed.

Like fireworks but more savage says eyewitness

Editor's note: Off-duty Free Press reporter Ted Kelly was on his way to deliver damage estimates from an automobile accident to his insurance agent when he saw smoke and was one of the first on the scene at Oxford Park.

By TED KELLY
of The Free Press

It started for me with a blue Union Gas truck, emergency lights flashing, tearing by on Platt's Lane.

Then I could see a black cloud of smoke rising above Oxford Street, a bit to the west, and I was off after the truck.

Little knots of people were starting to gather up and down Britannia Avenue. I pulled into a laneway at 67 Britannia.

Bright orange flames were eating up a frame house at the corner of Britannia and Tozer. They whipped through the place like those old red schoolhouse fireworks we used to set off as kids.

Only this was more savage and it was real. There were reports other houses in the neighborhood also were burning.

There was no panic — shock and disbelief, but little outward fear.

Uniformed and plainclothed police were there before the fire trucks, cordoning off streets and moving the crowds back.

Neighbors checked on each other, the elderly coming in for close scrutiny. There was a strong feeling of community, with people mentioning others on different streets.

Taking hasty notes I called the office from a neighboring house. A team of reporters and photographers was on the way.

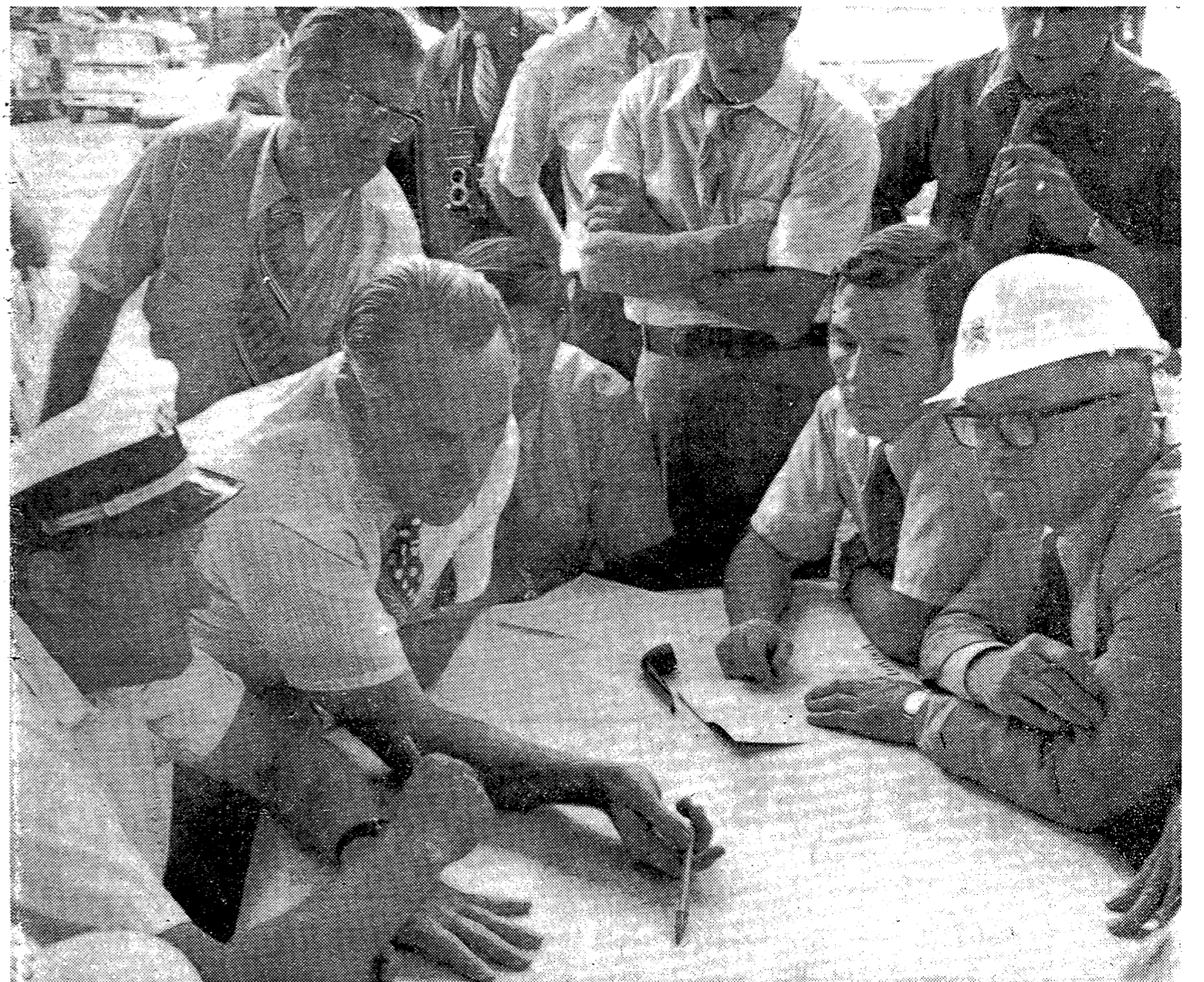
Still dictating, I was interrupted by the occupant. "We're supposed to vacate. Houses are exploding all over."

"Just a few minutes more, please. I'll be right out."

I turned and looked for the first time at my surroundings.

There in the corner was a stove — a gas stove.

My heart jumped — for just a moment. There was work to do and the day was just beginning.



Seated at a makeshift command post on Foster Avenue Tuesday are from left: Fire Chief Ray Morley, Police Chief Walter Johnson, Police Inspector Lloyd Bryson (partly hidden); Peter Duncan, operations manager for Union Gas, and Keith Rowntree, city engineer. Standing are former mayor Herb McClure, of the London Police Commission, left, and Supt. Herb Jeffery, in charge of police research and planning, second from right.

'The stove just went puff'

Fire shatters 21-year-old dream for family on Edinburgh street

By BILL ELUCHOK
of The Free Press

Helen Robb saw a 21-year-old dream shatter before her eyes Tuesday.

The dream was the home at 201 Edinburgh St. which she and husband Gordon have lived in and rebuilt since their marriage.

On Tuesday, the interior resembled the inside of an oven following an overcooked meal.

"I almost broke down and cried," she said after she and son Brian, 13, returned to the

two-storey brick house, later Tuesday afternoon.

Mrs. Robb and her son were in the kitchen when "the stove just went 'puff' and burst into flames.

"Brian was leaning against it but he didn't get burned. I was farther away preparing potato salad and some of my hair was singed."

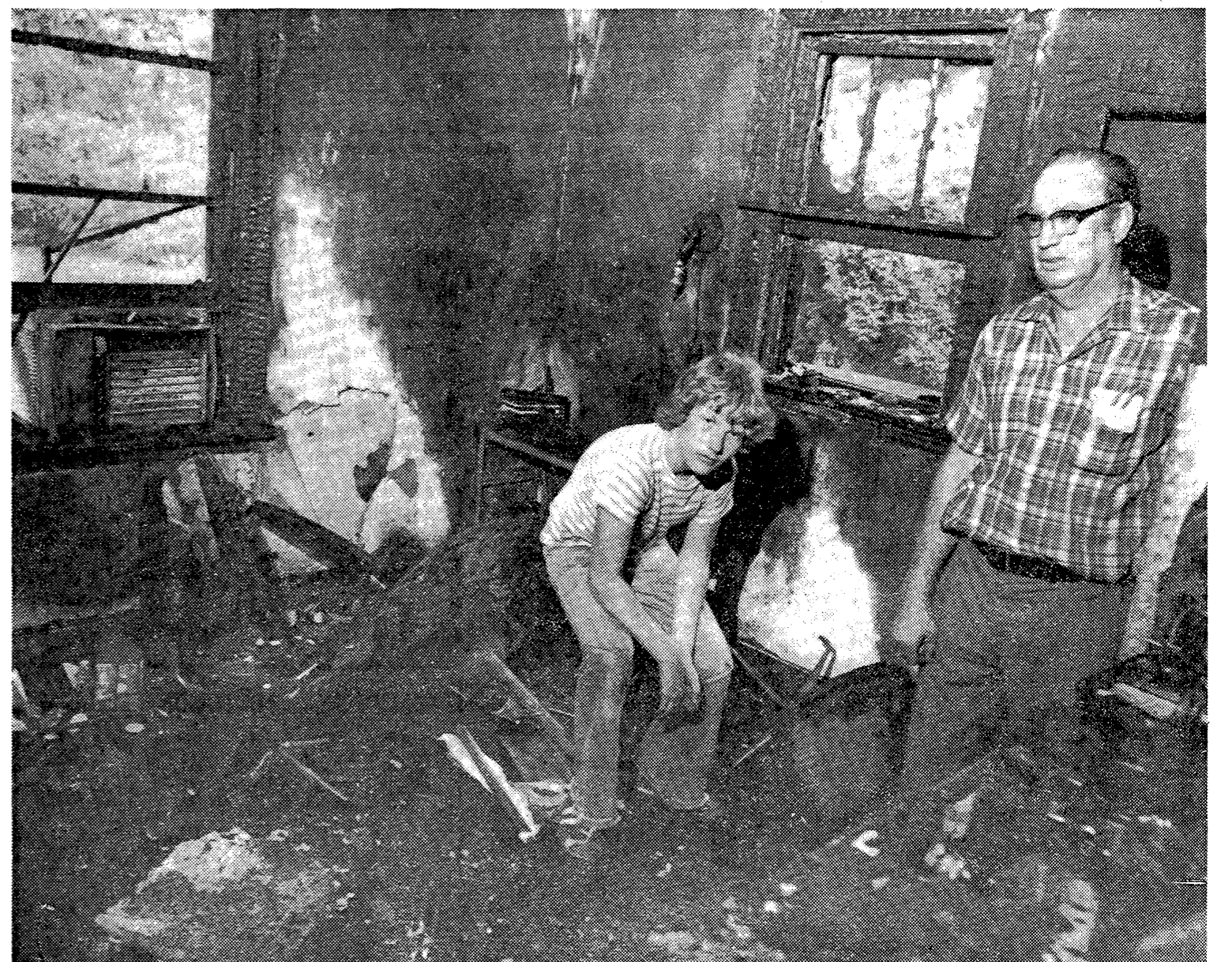
Mrs. Robb tried to put out the flames with pails of water but to no avail. Meanwhile, Brian attempted to call the fire department but all he got, he said, was a recorded voice

telling him the number was no longer in service.

Frankly, Mrs. Robb, a nurse at Victoria Hospital, rushed to her neighbors and the fire department was called.

"All we could do was wait. It was so frustrating because the fire department seemed to take forever getting here," she said.

"The flames by now were shooting out of the windows and I was nearly in hysterics. "I could hear my china shattering — piece by piece."



Gordon Robb and son Brian, 13, survey the fire-ravaged kitchen of their 201 Edinburgh St. home after gas exploded near the stove. Neither Mrs. Robb nor Brian, who were in the kitchen at the time, were injured.

By Dick Wallace of The Free Press

'That ended golf' Available firemen called

By MAC HAIG
of The Free Press

Four skeptical London firemen were hauled off the 14th tee at Fanshawe Golf and Country Club Tuesday to answer the emergency alert.

One of them, Bill Shepherd, said later they doubted the word they received that West London was blowing up.

"Somebody from the club house, a greenskeeper or something, came up in a golf cart and asked if we were firemen," he said. "He told us a bunch of houses in West London had blown up and that all firemen had been called in to work."

"You've gotta be kidding," I said. But he said the club had called and asked to find us, so that ended the golf."

The golfers were playing a match in a fire department house league and a small percentage of them were among the unknown number of off-duty firemen called to the crisis.

One of the busiest places in town, even after all units had left, was the central fire hall on York Street, particularly the second-floor communications centre.

Capt. Owen Wills estimated Tuesday evening that between 50 and 60 calls were received on the fires and explosions. While two officers took the calls, Capt. Wills was on the microphone dispatching units from across the city and beyond.

The first call came in at 11:20 a.m. from 7 Barrington Ave. The lady on the phone, Capt. Wills said, reported a fire underneath

her hot-water heater in the basement.

"We told her to turn her heater off and that we'd send somebody out but by that time a second call was coming in from 147 Britannia Ave. which sounded more serious and so we made our initial dispatch there. By that time, the two switchboards had lit up like a Christmas tree and we couldn't figure out what was going on."

Capt. Wills said it wouldn't be known until sometime today how many calls were received and how many addresses were serviced by the department. Nor could he say how many off-duty firemen had been called in.

Everybody available was contacted by three of the chief's clerks, downstairs from the communications centre.

"They had a list to use in such emergencies and we just told them to get hold of everybody they could," he said.

Even a Bell Telephone Company official who dropped in to check on some equipment was pressed into service calling London radio stations to request announcements for residents of the area to shut off all gas appliances and get out of their homes and for off-duty firemen to report for work.

Capt. Wills said all units in the city, except two vehicles at No. 2 Station on Florence Street, were dispatched to the scene. A couple of units must be kept free to answer other calls.

One of them had to go to a car fire at Commissioners Road and Highway 126 at 1:56 p.m.

Youth sprints from downtown to help firefighters man hoses

Blair McFarlane of 19 Pawnee Cres. was downtown at Carling and Talbot streets when he saw the fire engines go by.

He saw the smoke rising over Oxford Park and with all the vigor of a 17-year-old, went off on the run.

Still fresh after his dash of well over a mile, Blair stepped right in to help undermanned firefighters.

He helped couple hoses and when he got wet, firemen gave him a coat and boots. Then it was manning a hose.

The youth said he later helped pull a fireman overcame with smoke inhalation from a smoking house.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said. "I thought it was going to be another Chicago fire."

Dennis Van Belois, 19, of 60 Foster Ave. heard the news over radio while at work. He drove to the Westown Plaza parking lot and off up the hill on Britannia Street.

He was two houses away, still running, when a house at 118 Britannia exploded, practically in his face.

Glass and debris flew all around him.

"I stopped," he said. "I froze, but I didn't even look at the house. All I could think of was my brothers."

He knew his brother Tom, 20, a night-shift worker, was at home asleep. Three other younger brothers should also have been at home. Dennis feared the worst.

Arriving home, he found the house empty, and promptly turned out to help the firefighters.

"It was fantastic. Even people who don't live around here stopped to help. They just asked the firemen what they could do and then helped."

Like everyone, his reaction was one of bewilderment. "You read about disasters everywhere . . . but not in your own neighborhood."