

TRAFFIC OFFICER KNOCKED DOWN BY CAR

# Friday Fire Destroys Dental Lab, Jewelry Shop In Calabash

BY SUSAN USHER

A man from Elon College was eating dinner Friday evening at Beck's Restaurant in Calabash when he heard a loud noise, looked out the window and saw the building south of the restaurant "exploding" and on fire.

"It was a real loud explosion," recalled Wayne Allen. "At first I thought it was a wreck. Then I saw the fire. There was a big fireball. It started at the far end of the building."

The heat explosion blew out the front window of the Cypress Jewelry and Repair Shop and lifted the roof of the brick building long enough for walls to fall away, Brunswick County Fire Marshal Cecil Logan said afterward. "Then the roof set back down."

Incident commander Tondra Scott, first captain with Calabash Volunteer Fire Department, said the blaze started when the ballast in a recessed fluorescent light at the shop short-circuited and caught fire.

The fire destroyed both the jewelry shop and the adjacent Cypress Dental Laboratory.

Scott said the fire was reported by a bystander who came out of Callahan's Nautical Gifts and was walking across the parking lot around 5:30 p.m. when he heard a "small popping sound like an explosion." Then, like Allen, he saw and heard the front window blow out.

The two businesses had been owned and operated for the past six years by Brenda and Larry Harris. The fire marked Mr. Harris's 50th birthday. The former UCB branch office building was owned by Ruth Beck.

Logan said he determined the cause of the fire through a process of elimination after investigators saw

that the roof had burned through in several places. They found no wiring problems, but found a fluorescent light fixture with melted tar in its base. The tar melts only when the ballast it encases fails and is overheated by electrical current. Normally ballast provides the starting voltage or stabilizes the electrical circuit in a fluorescent light. Ballast gone bad is a common cause of fires in older buildings, said Logan.

"The explosion was caused by the continued build-up of heat inside," he said. "It was built for a bank and it was apparently built pretty tight."

Mrs. Harris said the two businesses had closed Wednesday for the Thanksgiving holiday.

One firefighter received minor injuries, but not from the fire itself. Volunteer Henry Opperman was directing traffic at the stoplight at River Road and N.C. 179 when he was knocked down by a vehicle attempting to enter River Road. The accident is under investigation by the N.C. Highway Patrol. (See related story in this issue.)

Traffic officer Opperman was "bruised and sore" but fine after being checked at Loris (S.C.) Community Hospital. "We've put him off service for several days. We want to make sure he's fine."

The fire department barred traffic from the front half of River Road—the main street used to reach restaurants on the waterfront, so Calabash and Sunset Beach firefighters could reach the fire with their trucks and hoses.

A supertime traffic snarl ensued as Calabash VFD's traffic officers tried to redirect drivers headed to the waterfront along an alternate route following Riverview and Oak streets.



A HEAT EXPLOSION blew out a window and popped the roof as a Friday night fire gutted a Calabash building housing a dental lab and jewelry shop. Ballast in a fluorescent light shorted out and caught fire while the businesses were closed for the Thanksgiving holiday.

## Ulrich Takes Burgaw Job

Two weeks after retiring as Holden Beach's town manager, Gus Ulrich was back at work Tuesday as part-time town manager in Burgaw. Ulrich started working Tuesday and said he plans to work two or three days a week for the next few months while Burgaw officials look for a new town manager to replace Tim Barth.

"It's strictly a part-time situation, only until they can find another manager," said Ulrich, who retired as Holden Beach manager on Nov. 11.

Ulrich, who was town manager in Garner for 17 years before moving to Holden Beach in 1989, said he was contacted about the Burgaw job a couple weeks before his retirement.

Burgaw, in Pender County, is working on water and sewer service extension projects and the renovation of a building for the police department.

"They have three or four construction projects going on. To a large extent I'll be concentrating on those," Ulrich said.

Ulrich said he expects the part-time position to last into the spring. "I don't anticipate it lasting past March or April, and it may not even be that long."

Once he leaves Burgaw, Ulrich said he's not sure if he will accept other interim positions.

"That was another reason I wanted to try this to see if this is something I'm interested in doing elsewhere," he said.

## Shalotte Fire Damages Two Automotive Shops

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the office," Gore said.

While a Volvo on one bay rack burned, Gore said there was no problem cranking a second vehicle and driving it out. That was just one of several quirks noticed after the fire, he said. While the interior of the parts room was gutted, a push broom leaning against the other side of one of its walls was not damaged.

In the bay area, anything plastic melted, Gore said, and a lot of cleaning will be needed because of heavy smoke damage. Until power is restored he won't be able to determine whether the hydraulic equipment is salvageable. "Some of it may need to be rebuilt."

Gore praised firefighters' quick response and handling of the fire. "I think they did an excellent job," he said.

SBI arson investigator Matt White searched through the remains of the fire Thursday morning with Fire Marshal Logan, Fire Chief Carter and Gore, and later interviewed people who had been at the fire scene.

"We all looked at it, but we couldn't determine how it started," said Logan. We could see it started at the back corner near the electrical panel, but there was nothing to indicate there was an electrical problem. That's not to say it wasn't."

There had also been problems with the fluorescent lighting, with Gore changing out one tube recently, Logan said, but investigators didn't find any trace of the light to check.

Cleve Gore said he left the shop around 4 p.m. Monday. Logan said Tapio closed around 4:40 p.m., shutting off the power before he left.

Less than two hours later a hunter coming out of the woods at dusk reported smoke coming

from the building. Brunswick County Deputy Sheriff Sheldon Caison and Shalotte Volunteer Rescue Squad Chief Mark Gore arrived almost simultaneously and began checking for signs of fire. There were no flames coming from the building, but they also saw wisps of smoke.

"Sheldon went around one side of the building and I went around the other," said Mark Gore. "The building was scorching hot. If you touched it, it would have burned your hands. The glass in the front door was starting to bow."

When owner Cleve Gore arrived, his first instinct was to open the front door, he said, but firefighters stopped him, warning that a rush of fresh air into the building could cause a backdraft.

Heat pressure was intensifying inside the well-insulated and tightly made metal building, said Shalotte Fire Chief Tim Carter. "The bay doors had bowed out. It was on its way."

## No Fault Found In Death Of Woman On Highway

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despite his efforts. He was travelling at what Trooper Jones estimated was 50 miles per hour.

"He thought what he hit might have been a woman, but was not certain," Gore said. "He slowed the vehicle, drove to the Belville exit and promptly reported the accident. He contacted 911 and told the dispatcher that he thought he might have hit a woman."

"The dispatcher asked where he was when he hit the object and, after being given the location, told Mr. Gowan not to worry, 'he had hit a deer,'" Gore said. "Relieved, he drove to Wilmington."

As it turns out, Gowan's initial suspicions were correct. An autopsy report has not been completed, but "due to the great number of times Ms. Marsh was hit after that first blow, we do not expect to be able to tell if she died instantly from that first impact," Gore said.

Charges will not be filed against Gowan because he quickly made an effort to report the accident and there is no evidence to suggest that he was violating any traffic laws that led to Marsh's death, Gore said.

"You Hit A Deer" Emergency Communications Director Douglas Ledgett on Tuesday said he has listened to all the tapes and reviewed all documents relating to the incident and found "no violation of guidelines" and plans "no disciplinary procedures" against the 911 dispatcher who took Gowan's call and assured him that he did not hit a person.

"I don't think what he did was

*"I don't think what (the dispatcher) did was wrong. But he may not have used the best judgment. We'll have to work on that issue."*

—Doug Ledgett

wrong. But he may not have used the best judgment," Ledgett said. "We'll have to work on that issue."

Ledgett said the mistaken identification occurred after an Emergency Medical Services technician responding to another call in that area reported seeing "a large carcass" on the opposite lane of U.S. 17 at 6:07 a.m.

Eight minutes later, another caller reported "a deer carcass" in the same location, Ledgett said.

The call from Gowan came in seven minutes later, at 6:21. The truck driver said he thought he "hit a lady" shortly after 6 o'clock. Weather conditions in the area were overcast with periods of rain and light drizzle. The sun would not rise until 6:50 that morning.

Ledgett estimated that more than 400 deer are reported hit by vehicles on Brunswick County roads every year, especially during hunting season.

At the 911 center that morning, Ledgett said one dispatcher was out sick, forcing others to double up on the phones. Ambulances were responding to two different calls at the time Gowan's dialed 911.

The dispatcher evidently assumed that the third report in 15 minutes of

something in the roadway was the same as two previous calls from that area.

"The caller reported that he thought he hit a lady," Ledgett said. "I can't say that based on that information the dispatcher made a logical assumption. It's one of those situations that you can't foresee. But you can learn from them. I can assure that it won't happen again."

Ledgett said he has been meeting with 911 staff and reviewing department guidelines in an effort to prevent a recurrence. He said the dispatcher who took Gowan's call has eight years experience in the position and has been employed by Brunswick County for about a year.

Meanwhile, Gore said it is unlikely that authorities will ever determine how Marsh was struck that morning.

A witness reported seeing Marsh's brown Buick parked by the side of Green Hill Road in Winnabow about two miles from the accident site. The woman said she saw someone walking and asked if she could help.

"The person said, 'No' in a real loud voice," Gore said.

Another witness who was driving

by on U.S. 17 reported seeing someone walk "right on across" the southbound lane of the highway. He told investigators that the person continued walking across the northbound lane. As he looked in his rearview mirror, the witness said he "kept seeing taillights swerving to avoid something," Gore said.

The district attorney said very little is known about Marsh. She had been living in an apartment on 23rd Street in Wilmington and doing engineering work in the area. She reportedly has no immediate family here. Her closest relatives live in Pennsylvania. Her car was registered in Georgia.

Detectives investigating the case have said she had been depressed about recently being turned down for a job. Friends of Marsh have told police that the last time they saw her a day earlier she had been drinking heavily.

Gore said that because of the condition of her body, medical examiners are not likely to determine whether or not she had been drinking before the accident.

## Capital Case Jury Selection Is Painstaking

(Continued From Page 1-A)

with the murder of 80-year old Lena Hales, who was severely beaten in her home during an apparent robbery. She died the following day at Duke University Medical Center.

Assistant District Attorney Lee Bollinger said after court adjourned Tuesday that testimony in the Cummings trial is not likely to begin before the middle of next week.

## Former BCC Instructor Gets Cash, Statement In Lawsuit Settlement

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leges is based on enrollment. Some financial aid programs also require documentation of regular attendance, as do some curriculum programs.

Page's suit questioned the timing of the non-renewal of her contract and the reasons for it, saying she was entitled to a grievance hearing and seeking damages in excess of \$10,000.

The college's liability insurance will pay all of the Page settlement but a deductible of about \$2,500.

While her last contract had ended

in May, she was not notified until late August 1993, the day after graduation, that she would not be rehired for the 1993-94 term.

A business instructor at the college for six years, Page asserted in her suit that she was not rehired because of her activism and outspoken criticism of the college's administration.

After she dismissal she took her concerns public, criticizing the school's leadership as being more interested in fund-raising and public relations than in educating students.

## Look For Average Temps, Rainfall

Expect seasonable temperatures and precipitation over the next few days, says Shalotte Point weather-watcher Jackson Canady.

Canady forecasts nightly lows in the 40's and daytime temperatures in the mid-60s with about half an inch of rainfall.

For the period Nov. 22-28, the

maximum high reading was 73 degrees on the 28th, with a minimum low of 28 degrees on the 24th.

Average temperatures were about 2 degrees above average for this time of year.

Canady measured % of an inch of rainfall.

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