



THE BELLPORT MIDDLE SCHOOL BARGE

Investigative Report

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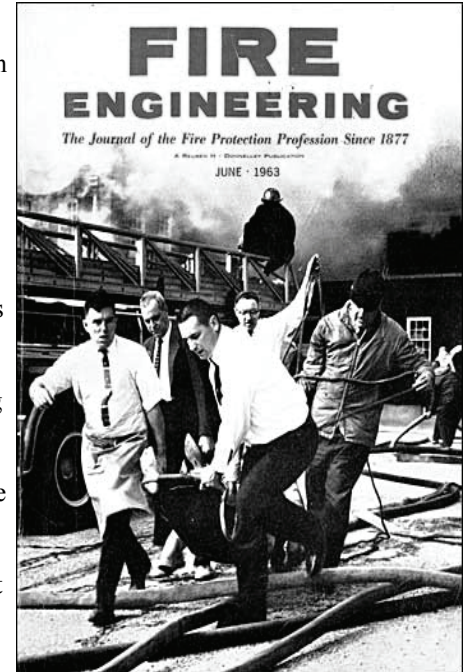
ISSUE #3

The 1963 Bellport School Fire

WRITTEN BY BARGE WRITERS AUSTIN NEESE, STEFANI GRUNDSTROM, COLLEEN MCDONNELL, LINDSEY SMITH



On **Friday March 8, 1963**, at approximately 1:44 pm, the Bellport Junior/Senior High School went up in flames. Several female students discovered the fire when they smelled burning rubber while walking into the unoccupied auditorium. At that point the girls recall looking up and seeing flames along the edges of the ceiling. Once the principal, Thomas Feeney, was alerted the fire alarm was sounded. All teachers were notified by telephones located in each wing of the school. The fire was hidden well and spread throughout the entire east wing of the school. Our current 6th grade wing, was reduced to smoky ruins. There were some issues with the evacuation process, as the windows on the second floor of the building were nailed shut. This made getting out a bit tricky. A well organized escape plan would have helped at that time, and that is a lesson that we have learned since. Luckily there was not one loss of life in the entire building. Approximately 37 students, several faculty members, and a few of the hundreds of firefighters who were at the scene, were injured and sent to Brookhaven Hospital. As current students of BMS, we should take our fire evacuation plans very seriously. Fire safety is very important and definitely not a joke.



I REMEMBER...

AN INTERVIEW WITH MRS. STAFFORD WRITTEN BY STEFANI GRUNDSTROM

I was able to sit down and chat with Mrs. Cataldo's secretary, Mrs. Darlene Stafford, about the fire of 1963. Although she was not attending this school at the time, her siblings were and she was right next door!

As soon as the fire began and the surrounding areas were alerted, I asked her if her school, Kreamer Street Elementary School, remained in session. "Schools were in split session at the junior and senior high level, and half of the students would come in the morning and the others in the afternoon. When the fire broke out, everyone was alerted." Mrs. Stafford said that school was dismissed but all the children had to wait to be picked up. "I can remember walking home and stepping over all of the fire hoses." Although Mrs. Stafford was not attending this school, her three brothers were here when the fire broke out. "None of my brothers were hurt, thank goodness, but one of them was on the second floor and got quite a bit of smoke in his lungs." I wondered where all of the students went while the building was burning. "As the fire became worse, all the students in the building were gathered on the other side of the building, where our current west gymnasium is located. It was less wooded at the time and the fire had not spread to that area." There are different reports on how the fire actually started, but as far as she knows, Mrs. Stafford said it was an electrical fire. "Evacuation was difficult because the windows were nailed shut, and the students and faculty could not get out easily." She had only one sibling, as mentioned above, that was on the second floor of the building. He was able to get out safely.

Thank you for your time Mrs. Stafford in recalling this historical Bellport event. We know you were very little when it happened, but something like that would probably remain in your thoughts forever. Thank goodness you and your family members remained safe.

