

## ***“In the Heat of the Day”***

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MUSCATINE, Iowa – It’s 11 a.m. Wednesday morning at 3110 U.S. Highway 61 North and the mid-summer humidity already hangs heavy in the air like a soggy blanket.

Not a good day to conduct any kind of strenuous outdoor work, let alone putting out spot fires inside a abandoned brick two-story house wearing a thick fire suit and 40 pounds of breathing equipment.

Although the weather was decidedly uncomfortable, the 23 firefighters of the Muscatine Fire Department attending a fire-training exercise were grateful for the cloudy skies above them.

“I’m glad to have this cloud cover,” said Muscatine Assistant Fire Chief Jerry Ewers, who led Wednesday’s training exercise along with Muscatine Fire Chief Steve Dalbey. “I got a weather e-mail last night that said that it was gonna be sunny and 96 degrees by 3 p.m.”

However, Ewers, along with Dalbey and Assistant Fire Chief Garry Lee, believes that fire-training exercises, such as the one conducted Wednesday and an earlier one at East Ninth and Cypress Streets on July 2, benefit not only the participating firefighters, but also enhances the safety of Muscatine residents.

### **Procedures**

Setting up a fire-training exercise is a long and involved task, according to Lee, not only because of the formal procedures that the fire department has to go through to obtain permission for a house burn, but to also be able to achieve several objectives for the firefighters involved.

“It’s actually easier for us not to do house burns because the department is under so much scrutiny when we conduct them,” Lee said Tuesday.

However, Dalbey wrote in a July 14 press release to city officials and the Muscatine Journal that receiving requests from property owners to burn down structures slated for demolition is a beneficial tradeoff for owners and his department.

“For the property owner, burning a building significantly reduces the amount of debris that must be landfilled or disposed of in some other manner,” Dalbey wrote. “For the fire department it is an opportunity to train firefighters in areas of firefighting tactics using live fires in real buildings.

“The alternative is otherwise limited to advancing hose lines up the stairs in our training tower, looking for a barrel of smoldering straw, or in some other structure using our smoke machine. There is no substitute for the real thing when it comes to learning how to extinguish structure fires.”

Dalbey said that house burning permits have to be secured from Iowa’s Department of Natural Resources as well as other local and state government entities. All utilities must be shut off and all asbestos must be removed from the house prior to the burn. There are also tight restrictions on burning roof shingles.

Because of time constraints in obtaining the necessary permits, the department often refuses burning offers, Dalbey said. Many buildings are rejected because they are either too close to other buildings or power lines, are structurally unsound, or offer little in quality training situations for firefighters.

Dalbey estimates that his department accepts only half of the buildings made available for training. Besides the two training burns in July, the fire department burned two houses last year on Sixth and Cedar Street, near Community Bank, and two years ago in the area that is now home to DrugTown on Sixth Street and Mulberry Avenue.

Even with all of the permits in place, Dalbey said that fire-training exercises are often thwarted by situations beyond his department’s control. Because of that, it’s difficult to provide adequate and timely warning for neighboring residents and businesses. For example, the training exercise on U.S. 61 Wednesday was supposed to be conducted on July 14.

“We set the dates and work toward them,” Dalbey wrote to city officials. “but a promise to conduct any particular

activity on a date set in stone cannot be made.”

Ewers said local businesses around the location of Wednesday’s house burn, including Wal-Mart, Allsteel and Krieger Ford, were formally notified of the fire department’s activities earlier in the week.

## **Objectives**

Once a house or building is selected for burning and the necessary permits obtained, Lee and Ewers set up several activities for the firefighters to accomplish once a fire is lit and they’re inside. The events are thoroughly planned to protect the firefighters from injury.

“We like to conduct at least six room fires,” Lee said. “Sometimes with a smaller house, we’ll burn the same room twice.”

The training is designed primarily for new and inexperienced firefighters, although training exercises are also a good way for experienced crews to observe how different types of fires spread within a structure.

“We use training fires for investigative purposes, such as demonstrating how a stove or grease fire spreads,” Lee said. “We also videotape different kinds of fires for courtroom use.”

By pairing up new firefighters with more experienced ones, Lee said that the exercises help reduce the fear factor that all firefighters have to struggle with when putting out fires.

“Training fires allow our firefighters to recognize situations where they could either move a little bit further in to fight the blaze or escape quickly if they sense that they’re in great danger,” Lee said.

Fire-training exercises also help fire officials improve leadership qualities among the rank and file.

“This is a great way to train people who are up for promotion,” Ewers said. “I oversee the activities when the burn is going on, however, I also use flash cards with certain fire scenarios listed.

“During the time we’re out here, I pick out a scenario and simply hand out the cards to crew members so they can act out each scenario on their own.”

## **Interruptions**

A fire-training exercise often takes all day, depending on the size of the structure to be burned. Training exercises are mandatory for new firefighters and Dalbey authorizes overtime for other firefighters to help man Muscatine’s two fire stations while the exercise is in progress.

However, the men and women who train also have to be on call for real fire and medical emergencies as they happen.

Around noon, several firefighters dropped what they were doing and ran to a pumper and two ambulances to answer three medical emergencies in town.

As the ambulances screamed south on U.S. 61 back into Muscatine, one firefighter joked that the “mobile” fire station at 3110 U.S. Highway 61 North had run out of personnel right in the middle of lunch.

However, by early afternoon, everyone had returned for the grand finale of burning the red and gold-colored house to the ground. As the afternoon traffic on U.S. 61 slowly passed by, firefighters finished the training exercise and started cleaning up the site for demolition crews around 3 p.m.

## **Risks**

Even under the best of circumstances, Muscatine fire officials admit that all training exercises have the potential of damaging fire equipment as well as surrounding buildings.

The July 2 fire exercise melted \$1,100 worth of vinyl siding on a nearby house, burned a hole in a lawn swing cushion and caused water damage to a coin changer at a local car wash. The fire department paid for repairs out of its own budget.

“It’s a calculated risk when we conduct these exercises,” Lee said. “Yes, we can ruin \$1,000 of equipment during an exercise, but compare that to spending \$2,000 in class training.”

During Lee’s 25 years in the Muscatine Fire Department, he said that the overall professionalism of the department has grown substantially, which he partially attributes to extensive and sophisticated training.

“We entered into this activity [training fires] understanding that there would be risks associated with it,” Dalbey wrote July 14. “The alternative [is] becoming an increasingly inexperienced fire suppression force.

“The success of decades of fire prevention programs may have resulted in a reduction in the number of serious fires, but it still takes a well-trained contingent of firefighters to tackle those that still occur.”

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