

## **BLAZE COULD HAVE BEEN REAL TRAGEDY, PROBERS SAY**

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As crews sifted through the blackened Governor's Mansion Thursday, many second-guessed what might have happened had the circumstances been different.

Investigators determined the fire that caused between \$1 million and \$2 million damage to the historic mansion was caused by faulty wiring on the 25-foot Christmas tree. The tree was inside the front door and extended up through an oval opening and into the second level. "The governor's bedroom was very near where the tree pokes up to the second story. We could have had a real tragedy had that been a night fire," said Salt Lake Fire Capt. Dan Andrus.

All of the Leavitt family's bedrooms were very close to the burning tree. Firefighters described it as "explosive" because the flames spread so quickly.

"I'm told it went straight up the tree . . . and spread through the third floor," Gov. Mike Leavitt said. "This was a matter of seconds, not minutes."

His wife, Jacalyn, who was home with their 3-year-old son, Westin, said as soon as she saw the fire she knew she had to act quickly. "There was no time to pick up or get anything, a purse or anything."

Salt Lake fire investigator Steve Herrman said several things combined to make the tree more flammable. First, the tree's trunk was wrapped with dried moss as decoration to keep the wood from showing. The moss was in close contact with a number of the 2,000 miniature lights on the tree.

"The moss insulates heat," he explained.

The fire flashed through the center court and into the third floor and its ornate wooden ceiling, which also burned and carried fire toward the outside edges of the mansion.

Rows of firewood had also been placed around the base of the tree to conceal the water container that the tree sat in. The wood helped sustain the fire on the main floor once the smaller tree needles and branches burned away.

Although fire officials had given public warnings, this tree had not been treated with any kind of fire retardant.

"You might as well have poured five gallons of gasoline on the tree, tossed on a match and said 'Have a nice day,'" Herrman said.

What if the fire had started Tuesday night when there was a party at the mansion or during events scheduled later in the week that would have brought more than 600 guests to the mansion?

"I don't even want to think about that possibility," Andrus said. "I think we could have seen a major catastrophe there."

When asked if the mansion was a firetrap, the captain replied, "No doubt about it." The mansion had open staircases, large amounts of wood and no sprinklers, he said.

But state fire marshal Lynn Borg balked at the notion of it's being a firetrap.

"If each floor had been sealed off, you wouldn't have this kind of damage," he said. "But that's just the way the home was built."

Even if the tree had been treated with fire retardant, it wouldn't have helped in this kind of fire, said Jack Quintana, assistant director of facilities management for the state.

The oval opening above the main-floor reception hall was designed in 1902 to accommodate

tall Christmas trees. The open space and the three-story open staircase helped spread the fire rapidly. The tree was cut down and brought to the mansion on the Monday after Thanksgiving. It was erected by the Division of Facilities Construction and Management; the division also strung the lights. The decorations, however, were designed and put up by volunteers selected by the first lady.

“It (decorating the tree) was all done very carefully,” said Neal Stowe, division director. “Anyone who’s ever seen a Christmas tree catch fire knows they literally explode. This one was cut fresh with fresh water that’s still there, right to the top.”

He emphasized the lights were also tested beforehand and no defects were detected.

Borg said the mansion met all state fire codes for an existing building. The codes have specific exemptions that deal with historic homes.

The mansion has a fire alarm system, but Herrman believes the house should have had a fire suppression sprinkling system. “If they would have had sprinklers, they would have had water damage and a little fire and that’s it,” he said.

Borg agreed. “You wouldn’t have had 10 percent the damage. That’s what sprinkler systems are for.”

But the state fire marshal said such a system would come at a great cost.

“To retrofit with a sprinkler system, you’d almost have to destroy the home,” he said, adding that the system would also cost four times more than it would cost to put one into a new home.

Division of State History director Max Evans said the state has no policy against installing sprinkler systems in historic buildings. “In fact, we would recommend it,” he said.

Quintana cited some of the problems associated with the installation. “You need to understand the difficulty in trying to go through this while people are living and making it a residence - the kind of extensive work that would have to go on. That’s not an excuse . . . it’s just difficult.”

Some of the discouraging comes from politicians, who shy away from spending tax dollars on improvements to buildings they use. For example, earlier this year Leavitt rejected as too expensive a proposal to renovate the second-floor living quarters of the mansion to accommodate his five children.

“They are concerned about spending,” Stowe said. “I don’t want to give the perception that it wasn’t done because nobody wanted to spend the money. I don’t know if it was ever considered.”

Stowe estimated the price tag for mansion sprinklers at about \$60,000. Now, he said, “without question,” sprinklers will be considered for the mansion.

Former first lady Norma Matheson, who was in charge of the 1978-79 renovation of the Governor’s Mansion, said she recalls no discussions at that time as to whether or not sprinkler systems should be installed.

The State Historical Society, which occupied the building previously, had installed sprinklers in the basement, but problems with the system prompted its removal. “Sprinklers were not an issue in the restoration project,” she said.

More than 50 firefighters battled the four-alarm blaze for nearly two hours before it was officially declared under control. “The main fire body was brought down in a little over an hour, though,” Andrus said.

As firefighters fought the flames, they also placed canvas and plastic tarps over most of the expensive furniture in the home. The Leavitts repeatedly praised the efforts of the firefighters.

“They have preserved a great deal and I’m grateful for that,” Gov. Leavitt said.

Andrus said people often bend wires sharply when they wrap Christmas lights tightly around limbs of the tree. “That cuts off the flow of the current and causes resistance heating,” he said.

The cause of the fire was traced to a wire about 2 feet up from the base of the tree, although it's unclear what its defect was.

Two firefighters suffered minor injuries while battling the blaze. Both were treated at a local hospital and later sent home.

Deseret News staff writers Lisa Riley Roche and Jerry Spangler contributed to this story.