Six Kansas City firefighters killed in 1988 explosion

In the windy predawn darkness on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving 1988, a security guard at a highway construction site called the Kansas City Fire Department. A pickup truck, the guard reported at 3:40 a.m., was on fire.

The dispatcher sent two pumper trucks to the scene, a pit near U.S. 71 and 87th Street, where the new Bruce R. Watkins Memorial Drive was being built.

The area housed explosives for blasting away limestone. Two trailers loaded with a mixture of ammonium nitrate, fuel oil and aluminum pellets stood there, too. Between them they carried 50,000 pounds of the explosive, along with fuel oil. The trailers’ markings probably were covered, which federal regulations then allowed to deter theft and vandalism. Other containers with blasting caps were marked.

The security guard updated the dispatcher: Not only was a pickup on fire but flames also were visible in the area where explosives were stored. The dispatcher cautioned the firefighters about the presence of explosives.

At 3:47 a.m., Pumper 41 from the Bannister Road fire station arrived at the truck, noticed the second fire and radioed for more help. About five minutes later Pumper 30 reached the area from its station on Prospect Avenue, drove up a gravel access road and parked near the trailer. Then 41 asked the dispatcher to urge 30 not to get too close to the trailers. After that, 41 extinguished the fire in the pickup and drove up to the second fire to help 30.

At 4:04 a.m., one of the firefighters radioed his battalion chief: “Apparently, this thing’s already blowed up. He’s got magnesium or somethin’ burnin’ up there.”

Four minutes later, a chief pulled up a quarter-mile away and sensed trouble. He reached for his radio to tell his men to pull back.

He was too late. The contents of one trailer blew with astounding force and noise. A boom rolled across the construction site, breaking windows, rattling doors and shaking walls across south Kansas City, and sweeping outward. Tens of thousands of sleepers across the metropolitan area awoke, wondering what happened. People heard it 50 miles away.

“Pumper 30,” a fire dispatcher called. “Pumper 41.”

There was no response.

In an instant, all six firefighters died.

More fire trucks arrived, but chiefs kept them back. Flames spread to a second trailer, and 40 minutes after the first blast a second explosion tore through the night. It was bigger even than the first.

Each explosion created crater 80 to 100 feet in diameter and 8 feet deep.

The events of that dark morning, Nov. 29, 1988, began as a simple case of arson — a small fire set as a prank, a provocation or a distraction. It ended with a city wide awake and wondering, and with six firefighters dead:

The material that killed the six was the same explosive used in 1995 at the federal office building in Oklahoma City — only the Kansas City amount was five times as large.

Soon it became clear that no one had intended to touch off such an Armageddon, nor to kill the firefighters. But just as clearly someone had set the fires, and investigators turned to finding out who.

Because concrete was delivered to the site by a nonunion company, one theory was that the fires resulted from union vandalism. That theory never reached the stage of charging anyone.

Another theory: Someone set fire to the pickup as an insurance scam, and the fire got out of hand.

A third theory: Petty thieves aimed to loot the site, and set a fire either as a distraction, a warning or simply a demonstration of prowess.

For more than seven years, witnesses were questioned and leads followed. Investigators paid close attention to the account of the security guards, a brother and sister who said they had seen trespassers and left the site to try to follow them, leaving the sister’s truck behind. They went to a convenience store a mile north, where they were told by the manager that he had seen no prowlers. The guards bought food and drinks, and sat in the parking lot until a passerby pulled in and reported seeing the fires.

Finally, in June 1996, authorities acted on the third theory. They charged five police characters — thieves, rowdies, drug users and high school dropouts — who lived in the nearby Marlborough neighborhood.

Using more than 50 witnesses who said they had heard the defendants brag about being at the scene before the blast, or otherwise indicate they were responsible, prosecutors said the five aimed to steal tools, dynamite and two-way radios. Failing in attempts to break into the trailers filled with explosives, they set one on fire — either from frustration or to cover up their crime.

In July 1997 a jury convicted the five: Frank Sheppard; his brother Earl “Skip” Sheppard; Bryan Sheppard, a nephew of Frank and Earl; Darlene Edwards, Frank Sheppard’s girlfriend; and Richard Brown, Bryan Sheppard’s friend.

All five were sentenced to life in prison, yet the convictions did not put the matter to rest. Ever since, evidence has popped up hinting that the five were not guilty after all. Among other things, three passed polygraph tests, and none would testify against the others, even in return for shorter sentences.

Of the 50-plus witnesses against the five, 24 were felons with 76 convictions among them, and 14 were serving time in jail.

Earl Sheppard died in July 2009, maintaining to the end his innocence. The others, too, have continued to deny guilt. Meanwhile, several of the witnesses said they were pressured by investigators to snitch, either with inducements such as money and promises of shorter prison terms, or by threats to prosecute.

The firefighters, meanwhile, have been remembered in several lasting ways. At the site of their deaths, six stone crosses and a flagpole were built, and about 5,000 feet of 87th Street was renamed 30/41 Memorial Drive.

On 31st Street just east of Broadway, a Firefighters Fountain was dedicated in 1991 as a memorial to the six who died.

Perhaps most lasting, Kansas Citians enacted a sales tax to support a hazardous-materials team to aid firefighters at emergencies. Also, Kansas City undertook a labeling program for structures, which paved the way for the now-ubiquitous diamond-shaped placards on buildings and containers, indicating hazardous materials used or stored inside.

When: November 1988 | What: Six firefighters died in an explosion | Where: Near U.S. 71, southern Kansas City, Mo. | Outcome: Five people were sentenced to life in prison.

A security guard’s burned-out pickup near the scene of the explosion that killed six firefighters in 1988.