

Heroic effort saves historic photos damaged in LaSalle Bank fire



By Paul Meincke

December 2, 2005 - Dozens of historic photos of Chicago were damaged in the fire one year ago at the LaSalle Bank building. But with luck and a lot of hard work almost all have been saved and restored.

Once it became apparent that there was no loss of life in the LaSalle Bank fire, attention turned to the bank's collection of photography. How many pieces had perished in the heat, smoke and water that would follow? It just had to be bad. Everyone knew, but everyone was surprised.

History hangs in the hallways of the LaSalle Bank building and has for years. Carol Ehlers, the curator of the bank's remarkable photography collection, was flying back into town a year ago December 6 when a colleague called her to say, 'Carol, I'm watching the news. The building's on fire.' Carol wondered how much history had been lost.

"My deepest fear was that the core of it was gone," said Ehlers.

"These were periods of Chicago history, and when you lose that documentation you can never get it back," said Heather Becker, Chicago Conservation Center.

Teams were quickly formed to recover pictures, nearly all undamaged, from lower floors. But it would be six agonizing days before Carol and Heather were able to enter the dungeon-like fire floors. They feared the worst.

Indeed, some photographs had melted into their own history, but surprisingly, the losses were few. The trained eyes knew that most had miraculously survived.

"I'm looking at this picture and it looks like it's smiling at me, and I burst out crying because I was seeing something that was alive and salvageable in a situation that looked to me like it was a disaster area," said Ehlers.

And in the disaster was great irony. Behind the partially melted Plexiglas was an original picture of the Chicago fire. It and some companion photos were fully restored.

"We took the photos off the walls and the security guys thought we were a couple crazy ladies because we were so ecstatic," Becker said.

Restoring the damaged photographs has taken time and tender workmanship to erase the villains of soot, moisture and mold, but the last of the fire survivors are now being framed and will soon hang again in history.

