

"ANYTHING TWO PEOPLE KNOW IS NOT A SECRET."



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Mary Coonts of Mary's Bake Shoppe speaks out ...

**"I did not start the fire.
I do not know who started the fire.
In fact, I don't think anyone started it."**

First of two parts

by Dave FEATHERLY

In a lengthy, one-on-one interview with me, Mary Coonts, owner and operator of Mary's Bake Shoppe, spoke candidly about her experiences in losing a business she had founded to a fire and then being suspected of perhaps starting the fire that claimed not only her building but a neighboring structure that housed the Wyoming Home furniture store.

The anniversary date of the downtown fire prompted stories by the Casper Star-Tribune and the Wyoming Tribune-Eagle, in addition to the first-person statement from Mary that was published in the December 27, 2005 issue of the Cheyenne Herald. She granted an interview to Rob Black of the Casper daily. She did not do the same with the Cheyenne daily paper. That refusal earned her their wrath.

That interview refusal, of course, did not stop the WT-E, by insinuation and innuendo, from continuing to cast suspicion on Mary by repeating erroneous information fed to them by the mayor, city attorney and others on their behalf.

It is apparent, after talking with Mary Coonts for two and a half hours, that the interplay between the city and her has been very limited. And that much of what has been fed the WT-E by the mayor is inaccurate, exaggerated, or untrue.

The tragic fire that erupted the night of Sunday, December 28, 2004 has been determined to have started in the basement of Mary's Bake Shoppe, formerly next door (west) to the long-abandoned Hynds Building. Investigations have been done by local officials as well as an insurance company - one who insured all the properties on the same block.

(Mary was accompanied at the interview by a friend and adviser but confirmation of everything said or shown is hers.)

Mary was contacted after midnight that night by her single employee, whose son was out on the town and had seen the emergency vehicles in the vicinity of her

Mary opened her downtown bake shop in 1996 at 206 W. 16th Street, in a location between the empty Hynds and what would become Wyoming Home. She first leased

businesses to carry only enough insurance to satisfy a mortgage - never expecting that one day they could wiped out and face rebuilding an entire business - property and patronage - at today's costs.

Mary Coonts told me, as the night worn on, that she was in shock, watching her building burn and realizing nothing could be done to stop the fire and salvage her building. Then, within days, she felt "diminished" as her plight was ignored while her neighbor's took precedent.

A week later, she was invited to a meeting that she thought was to deal with the problems of the property owners affected by the fire - only to find out the meeting was to announce plans to construct a skyway down the alley behind the burned-out buildings.

Assurances were made that help would be forthcoming to enable the businesses to become operational again. No help was ever offered to Mary or provided.

A fund-raising effort was announced and Mary decided to distance herself from it. She was unclear about its purpose. She had people approach her later and tell her they had donated to her cause but she has never received a nickel from any fund-raising and encourages anyone who thought they were giving to help her to ask the promoter what became of the money.

From her first-person explanation to me, it sounds like the mayor and those around him had decided Mary had started the fire that consumed her building and business and that she was considered persona non grata from the first day after the fire. The fact that she has been judged by both the police department and her insurance fire investigator blameless has brought no apologies from the mayor.

That behavior on their part does not surprise me. It disappoints me but it doesn't surprise me. *(More on page 5)*

City Sued Again! Saddle Ridge II annexation challenged.

Story on page 3

store. She quickly dressed and went down to the store. Flames were already coming out the windows and she told firefighters on the scene who she was and how to contact her. No one had called her from the scene prior to her going down to check on things at her own initiative.

Inexperienced as most would be at such a time, she returned home and tried to make contact with a 24/7 telephone no. for her insurance company, The Hartford.

She returned downtown again at 3:00 am and spoke with firefighters on the scene. She was told that "the firewall had held" and that the fire was contained. Flames and smoke were "clean" and were just from materials in her store - paper, wood, etc. She again went home, to return downtown at about 7:00 am. At that point, the fire had spread and the smoke had become dark - from materials in the adjoining furniture store.

That renewed and expanded fire was fought for hours.

While it was her store burning from the beginning, Mary felt there was suspicion on her from the outset and that she was treated accordingly. There seemed to have been an assumption of guilt even though no one knew the cause of the fire - just that it likely started in the basement of her bake shop. Eventually, the fire would be considered to be of suspicious origin. But how reliable was that determination and who made it?

the space from John Veta, former owner of Wyoming Ranchmen Outfitters (WRO) and then she bought the building. The narrow building was about 22' wide across the front and 132' deep to the alley in back. The building is three stories above ground and a basement. There were three entrances. One that went into the bake shop from 16th St., one next to it that opened to a stairway to the floors above, once a hotel - and the third, off the alley behind. The door to that alley entrance had a lock in the handle and a bar was sometimes placed against it inside for security.

During the period of time that Mary's Bake Shoppe was open in that location, the downtown area near her was often torn up and streets were either inaccessible or obstructed. She weathered the loss of surface parking (taken away for the construction of the Depot Plaza and the new downtown parking garage), and street construction of both 16th Street and Capital Avenue. Carey Avenue was narrowed to facilitate the long period of construction for the garage. All of these actions reduced access to her store.

The Hynds Building was never occupied during her almost nine years as its neighbor. Frontier Printing closed and moved its plant to Loveland. Mary persevered and always spoke positively of the downtown, her business, and her customers.

At the time of the fire, she said she was woefully underinsured. It is common for

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herald n, A person who carries or proclaims important news;