1904 Lake Church house damaged, but family counts its blessings

Thirteen-year-old Jenna McConnohie was asleep in her parents' bedroom on the second floor of their Lake Church home when she was awakened by a crackling noise shortly before 2 p.m. Sunday.

She saw flames on the porch outside the bedroom and ran outside to safety, her father Brad said.

"I'm glad she got out when she did. I think it was an act of God," he said. "Usually, Jenna can sleep through anything."

McConnohie said he and four other children had biked with a youth group from Portview Christian Center in Port Washington to Harrington Beach State Park for a picnic. His wife Dorothea, who drove the support wagon, was also at the picnic when McConnohie got a call from a neighbor that their house was on fire.

The park is less than a half-mile from their home at 668 Hwy. D. The family could see the

smoke and hear the sirens.

McConnohie said all he could think about was Jenna, who had stayed home because she didn't feel well.

"When I got there, I said, 'Where's my daughter?' and started running toward the house," McConnohie said. "They had to restrain me and told me they would take me to her, that she was safe. I would have went into the house if she had still been in there.

"She was in the rescue squad, and she's fine."

A firefighter rescued their cat Daisy.

The fire started in the northwest corner of a porch near the master bedroom and a second-floor living room, Belgium Fire Chief Dan Birenbaum said.

"Our guys did a nice stop. They kept it from getting inside the house," he said. "We had to take down some walls and ceilings to make sure it didn't get inside."

The fire was reported by a neighbor who smelled smoke, Birenbaum said.

About 40 to 50 firefighters from Port Washington, Cedar Grove, Fredonia and Waubeka responded to the scene.
A Fredonia firefighter sprained his ankle and was taken to Columbia St. Mary's Ozaukee Hospital in Mequon, where he was treated and released, Fredonia Fire Chief Brian Schommer said.

There is extensive smoke and water damage throughout the house, but a fire restoration crew said the house, which was built by Frank Wellenstein in 1904, can be restored. Wellenstein built many homes and churches in the area and taught the carpentry trade to his five sons.

"The Wellenstein house is like a landmark around here. I want to let people know we think it can be restored," McConnohie said.

Damage was estimated at $100,000, he said. A third of the building looks "really bad," McConnohie said.

McConnohie, a member of the Ozaukee-Washington Red Cross Disaster Action Team since 1996, said he's gone into many burnt structures and assisted families in much worse situations.

"But it's different when it's yours," he said. "It looks like a war zone."

McConnohie, his wife and five children, ages 8 to 14, are staying at the Lake Church Inn near their home.
People have sent pizzas and meals and called to offer help, McConnohie said.

“It’s an outstanding community,” he said. “People are very friendly and want to help. We’re truly blessed to live here.

“We’re a little cramped now, but we’ll be OK. We’re just very fortunate that nobody got hurt. We’re just really, really blessed.”