

Notification: (Its somewhat different for a private investigator than a public one.)

I'm told in advance, and often have to travel to the scene so may have some time to prepare. I use on-line tools to pull up a before picture of the structure and maybe even the entire neighborhood. Sometimes its a street view and an aerial view. With real estate programs, I can often determine how long someone has lived at the location, if its for sale, value, etc.

A look at a picture of house, even if its only one shot taken from the street can often reveal a great deal. Have you ever tried drawing a floor plan of a house, just from one photo? Try it some time. Lots of things are fairly predictable. In a one story structure, the living room is generally front and center. Bedrooms tend to be at one end often front and back. Kitchens are usually at the back and often centered. But every house is different, so more often than not, I'll have some things wrong and others right. Still its an exercise I feel is worth doing. You start to get a feel for the structure, a structure that may no longer be there when you arrive

Use map programs to determine location - in a city the gas service may be natural. rural is more likely LP. Location may often hint at fire department response time.

Look at the economic status of the neighborhood. Different fires sometimes occur in high-end neighborhoods, than low-end.

Consider the time of year and the weather. Low temperature can mean furnaces in use. Or high temperature can involve air conditioning and even swimming pool heaters. Rain can mean flooding. Snow and ice can bury regulators and sometimes even damage them. All those things can have special meaning in considering the cause of fires. All are worth noting, even in their absence.

On arrival. There are certain things I like to do first, but I have to be flexible. I prefer to walk around the perimeter of the fire scene, just to look at what's there. This is especially helpful if I have seen a before picture. But its not always possible to wander around first. There are often people - homeowners, clients, other investigators awaiting me. Its a bit rude to ignore them and begin my walk. Doing my walk may be helpful to me, but at the same time antagonize people who I'll want to talk and/or work with. So, my preference doesn't always take precedence.

When I do get the chance to look, I'm looking at the environment: what's it like. Hot dry, cold wet, how will wind affect the property and a fire there. I'm looking at the damage: how extensive it is. Has the structure been flattened, totally blown over a wide area. How much of the structure is still recognizable. Was I told it was an explosion but no explosion damage is apparent. I look for the division between explosion damage and fire damage, how much there is of each. Are things that have been blown a distance from the structure burned or unburned (can indicate a backdraft explosion.)

What was the structure? Can I tell if its a site built or manufactured structure. Does it appear to be configured much as it was originally or is it a “little house that’s grown” with addition after addition: often indicating DIY activity. Is the house “complete” or in a state of perpetual remodeling. What’s around the structure - junk, building materials, etc.

Interviewing. I like to meet the people who are present, maybe listen to a bit of their story but not extensively interview them yet. A basic what happened. Sometimes if occupants were home, they’ll have a lot to say. Other times, not so much. But to a reasonable degree, I listen to whatever they have to say. Often homeowners, clients, other investigators have already developed theories. Though I’d seen investigators who don’t want to hear such things (they want to decide for themselves), I think there’s much merit in listening to what others say. Sometimes I know what’s being suggested couldn’t have happened (some claims violate the laws of physics) but there’s really not much to gain by telling people at this point their ideas are unworkable. Listen, learn, consider and file it away. This is not yet time for in-depth interviewing. Often homeowners seem anxious to leave, not something I necessarily attribute to some relationship to causation, ie incendiary fires. I try to stress to them what an important part they are in my investigation (sometimes thats true, sometimes its not) but I want them to know they have a role. So please stick around and I’ll try to hurry to get back with them. Again the idea is don’t antagonize anyone. Its easy to start nice, then “bore in” later. Its much harder to reverse the process.

Sooner or later, I need to get a close up look at whatever’s left of the structure. A closeup walk through is in order. At that point, I like to get a better idea how much damage is from fire and how much if from explosion. I’m looking to see if its a “seated” type explosion as opposed to a gaseous variety. One may dictate bringing in authorities with more experience than me to look for explosives. Assuming that’s not the case, if there’s lots of fires, I need to consider if this really is a initially gas-fueled event, although I may get helpful clues to that from interviews. I get to see what appliances are present, even if they’re not in their pre-fire condition. And where are they relative to where the probably were. A general sense of the structure is what I’m looking for, so that when someone tells me they were in the dining room, I know where that room is located.

Then its about time to start the interviewing process. I want to know everything that’s happened in the last 24 hours, in detail. If they turned on the dishwasher, I want to know what setting, what was in it, etc. So what’s that have to do with gas you say? If the house has a gas water heater, it requires the water heater to function. Then I want to know what’s changed in the last month and in the last year. Before I’m done, I think I’m a success if the person I’m interviewing comments that “You sure ask a lot of questions!”

Its a stock rule to interview people separately but I find its often hard to start that way. Situations being what they are, I often begin the interview process with both the homeowners present but usually no kids (I’ll get to them later.) I’ll get the “lay of the

land” that way, who is in charge, who’s the family spokesperson but eventually, I’ll separate them and interview in much more detail. Again, its not only a process of where you were, what you did but how you did what you did. This process for me is the same almost regardless of the type of fire.

I suggest you develop lists of questions to ask. Not necessarily that you ask each but so you can review them as you go along and often think of things you might not necessarily have thought to ask. I have a list of general questions, list of electrically related questions, list of gas-related, lists of solid fuel-burning appliances, etc. There are probably several hundred questions in all. I’m sure I’ve never asked them all. I also have lists of suspected incendiary fire questions but I often develop leads in that direction from asking appliance-specific questions. If you do need to ask incendiary fire related questions, I suggest not starting with that topic.

If possible, I’m going to want to interview not just the homeowners, but - often at a later date - kids, neighbors, servicemen, utility workers, law enforcement and fire fighters. You can never tell where an important tidbit of information may originate.

Then its back to the scene. I trace EVERY bit of gas piping from its source to the ends of each and every line. I’m looking for the of material, uncapped lines, how each line is terminated, positions of gas cocks, etc. I want to be able to create a diagram that outlines where everything was and its condition. I want to look at every appliance, especially gas-fired ones and learn everything I can about each. If its my assignment to rule out other potential causes, this process can become lengthy.

I’m also looking for potential ignition sources. I think there is seldom a time when I can do better than say, “such and such COULD have initiated ignition.” But I think its important to see what the options are.

I also want to look at any “shop” the homeowner may have. What kinds of tools are there: general, woodworking, electrical, plumbing, gas plumbing, etc. People generally have tools for things they like to do. Seeing those tools can provide clues to activities not necessarily brought out in interviews.

Then think about what it all means. Many times its obvious but other times sleeping on the topic overnight occasionally seems to bring clarity. Fire investigation, like it or not, is a thinking person’s business. Give that some thought! Good luck.