

Fire kills five near Sherrard, Illinois

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Early last Wednesday morning, five people were killed in a fire that engulfed a double-wide mobile home four miles south of Sherrard, Illinois. The fire, which killed a woman and four girls, is the deadliest in Illinois this year.

According to Mercer County reports, those killed included Anna Viager, 38, and her second-grade daughter, Breanna, 8; Jessica Harker, 11; Holli Harker, 13; and Cassandra Turner, 15. The Viager family was having an overnight sleepover for their children and their friends.

Anna Viager's husband, Wayne Viager, and his sons Dekoteh and Allen escaped. The boys were sleeping in the living room when the fire began at 1 a.m. in the morning. The boys woke up screaming, and the father immediately tried to get them out. Viager ran back to save the others, but the fire's intensity prevented him and left him badly injured.

The double-wide mobile home, built in 1974, was completely destroyed by the blaze. The house itself was in a cluster of homes near the crest of a hill. The house was surrounded by cut wood and children's toys.

The Mercer county sheriff and the Illinois state fire marshal have not determined the cause of the fire, stating that it is under investigation. Mercer County Coroner Ron McNall says the fire may have been caused by a heavy wood-burning stove.

According to the *Rock-Island Argus*, Anna Viager worked at the Sherrard High School cafeteria and recently underwent a major cancer-related surgery. Wayne Viager was an employee at the Mercer County Highway Department.

The tight-knit community of Sherrard was shocked by the tragedy. Many in this small rural town knew the Viagers. They have been described by many who knew them as considerate, hard-working people.

According to one person who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Although I did not personally

know the family, they were actually neighbors of my parents. For such a small community this is devastating. And since everyone knows just about everyone, I feel so many people knew some, if not all, of the victims from the fire.

"I do know that the people of Sherrard are very helpful and I can imagine a lot of residents will go above and beyond to help all of those who are grieving this tragic event."

The Sherrard Library Board has called for donations to help the family. The Viagers frequented the library to borrow books and movies.

Whatever the exact cause of the fire, the conditions of people who live in mobile homes are rarely safe. Residents of mobile homes are predominantly low-income and many lack even basic home insurance. Mobile homes are frequently in far greater danger of being ravaged by natural forces, including tornadoes, strong storms, and flooding.

Conditions of unsafe infrastructure in small towns like Sherrard are not uncommon. Dangerous heating methods are often used by the economically distressed all across the country, including the use of wood-burning stoves in some mobile homes. Adding to the danger, fire detectors are not always present in such homes.

Sherrard, population about 640, is a small town in Mercer County, Illinois and part of the greater Quad-City metropolitan area, which includes Davenport, Rock Island, Moline, Bettendorf and East Moline. Per capita income in Sherrard is about \$18,967, and 4.6 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line.

Mercer County is a former coal-mining region whose population was at its height in 1900 at 20,945. The population has vastly declined since then and has seen a 3.1 percent decrease in the last decade, according to the 2010 United States Census.

Most who live in rural areas like Sherrard have to travel to nearby cities for work because of the lack of jobs and industries. Population decline has long set in, as big corporations have largely abandoned these regions for more profitable pastures.

Deadly house fires have increased across the United States with the onset of the global economic crisis. While statistics from the US Fire Administration show that the fire near Sherrard was one of the deadliest so far this year, over 782 civilian fire fatalities have been reported so far for 2013.

The deadliest fire this year occurred in Gray, Kentucky, on March 9, when seven people died in a house fire, including five children and two adults.

Five people, including three adults and two children, died in an English, Indiana mobile home fire on February 7. A wood-burning stove was determined to be the cause.



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