

# Fire that killed two East P.A. kids fueled by illegal additions

■ 5- and 13-year-olds were killed early Christmas morning

By Amy Yarbrough and T.S. Mills-Faraudo

STAFF WRITERS

EAST PALO ALTO — A house fire that killed two young cousins on Christmas day was fueled by illegal additions to the home and poor construction, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report by the Menlo Park Fire Protection District supports investigators' earlier theory of how the fire started at 2590 Emmett Way in East Palo Alto.

Hopate Sanft, 5, was found dead at the scene, badly burned and buried under a collapsed wall. His cousin Lucy Sanft, 13, succumbed to seared lungs and other injuries the following day.

The report concluded that a spark, from a living room fireplace with no screen, ignited carpet, furniture and wood siding. Fire spread throughout the home, which had an add-on living room and two bedrooms that didn't meet fire safety codes.

"The wood siding caused it



JOHN GREEN — Staff file

**CODE VIOLATIONS** contributed to the house fire early Christmas morning that claimed the life of a 5-year-old East Palo Alto boy and his 13-year-old cousin.

to spread that much faster," added Fire Marshall Geoffrey Aus.

Investigators say the facts that were no smoke detectors, and the home was packed with clothing and belongings of the 12 people who lived there, also contributed to the deadly blaze.

The fire broke out just after 5 a.m. Relatives said Hopate Sanft, the first victim, wanted to sleep close to the Christmas tree in the living

room.

Firefighters found Lucy Sanft lying on the floor in a back bedroom — her parents' bedroom, not her own — indicating she knew there was a fire but had nowhere to run.

The report also details firefighter actions, and gives a picture of how other family members were able to escape.

Villiami Sanft, 26, was

See **FIRE**, News 10

10 NEWS

SAN MATEO COUNTY TIMES

1/22/03

## City to give out smoke detectors

► **FIRE**, News 1

sleeping in the front living room, near the fireplace, with brothers Hopate, Angitau and Sosia when he awoke just after 5 a.m., feeling heat on his back. Heavy smoke and fire was filling the room, coming from an area left of the fireplace.

Villiami warned other family members and tried to

**Only when most of the family had gathered across the street from their burning home did they realize Lucy and Hopate were missing.**

gather his three young brothers in a blanket and take

them out a side door.

Only when most of the family had gathered across the street from their burning home did they realize Lucy and Hopate were missing.

Villiami and two other family members returned to the side door of the house to find the kitchen and other rooms on fire. Heat and heavy smoke prevented them from re-entering the home through that door.

They soon learned that fire had engulfed the front of the home. They broke a window on the left side of the home to gain access to Lucy's bedroom, but the flames and heat were too intense to get inside.

As an attempt to prevent such a tragedy from happening again, fire officials are planning to distribute free smoke detectors in East Palo Alto on Feb. 22.