

Local

A-2 — Friday, Jan. 29, 1993 — Santa Cruz Sentinel

Welding disputed as tunnel fire's cause

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FELTON — A state fire official said Thursday it appears a blaze that destroyed a 300-foot section of a railroad tunnel a week ago was started accidentally by welding in the tunnel earlier that morning.

Georgiana Clark, chief executive officer of Roaring Camp & the Santa Cruz Big Trees and Pacific Railway, says she has serious doubts about that conclusion.

"It's so questionable," Clark said. "There's a lot of people who walk by the

area. Cigarettes could have been tossed. We just don't know."

She said one of the workers who returned to the tunnel 45 minutes before the fire was reported did not smell or notice any type of combustion. In addition, the wood in the tunnel had been sprayed with a fire retardant in the last two years.

"As far as I'm concerned and those that I've talked to, (the cause) is suspect, but I don't think anyone will ever be able to tell," Clark said.

More than half the tunnel, located about three miles south of Felton 250 feet below

Highway 9, collapsed in the Friday inferno. The cave-in hampered investigation efforts, and physical evidence of what may have ignited the blaze is buried, said Gary Luttringer, an investigator with the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

A Big Trees and Pacific Railway crew was welding some steel supports replacing the wooden ones inside the 1915 tunnel just hours before a bicyclist spotted the fire and reported it to the Felton Fire Department shortly after noon.

The crew had taken precautionary measures and hosed down the tunnel before leaving the site at 10 a.m., "but I think one spark got into an area they didn't see," Luttringer said.

Fueled by "tons of wood" in the tunnel and heat sustained in the rail ties, the fire continued to smolder for four days, Luttringer said.

Though the cause of the inferno is in dispute, what is clear is that the railroad tunnel is history.

The tunnel will be left as is, Clark said,

and plans are under way to rebuild the line around it in time for the usual Memorial Day weekend opening of the popular summer train ride, which takes tourists from the redwoods in Felton to the Boardwalk in Santa Cruz.

The realignment should extend the 1 hour and 10 minute trip by a couple of minutes, Clark said.

Damage estimates are still being assessed, but the amount is sure to surpass the \$1 million mark, said Clark, who hopes insurance will pay a good portion of it.