

Cause of restaurant fire under scrutiny

BWS - P
Investigators probe charred debris for clues to blaze that claimed Positively Front Street

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SANTA CRUZ — Fire investigators have not ruled out arson as the cause of a fire that roared through the Positively Front Street pub building Saturday, and will begin interviewing witnesses with police detectives today.

"The investigation is ongoing," said Ray Zachau, deputy fire marshal with the Santa Cruz Fire Department. "The interviews will be crucial to the process."

Because of the magnitude of the three-alarm, 7:30 a.m. blaze, half a dozen fire investigators from agencies across the county are working the

case.

The stubborn fire that took 30 firefighters over three hours to contain devoured the landmark turn-of-the-century structure at 44 Front St., causing nearly \$1 million in damage, officials said.

No one was injured, but investigators found evidence that people, including children, may have been living on the second floor. No one was home at the time of the fire, and no one has returned to salvage what may be left of their belongings, Zachau said.

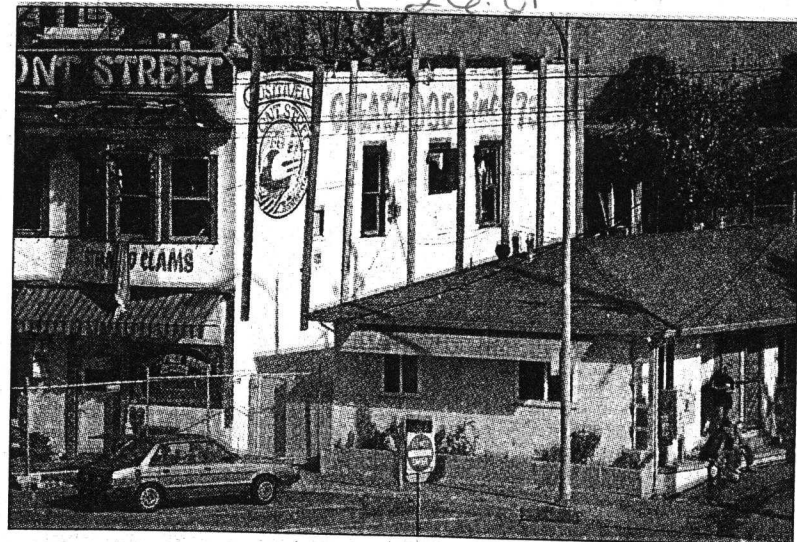
Investigators on Sunday continued to search through the scorched, sog-

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Residents return

After a fire-damaged wall was shored up, residents of neighboring apartments were allowed back in time for Christmas.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Workers shored up the damaged wall Sunday.

Fire

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gy, remnants of the charred building, and confirmed the fire originated on the first floor in the rear service area of the pub's kitchen.

Zachau said investigators collected items from the scene and booked them into evidence with the Santa Cruz Police Department. He declined to disclose what the items were and said it was still unclear how the fire began.

"It would all be speculative until we have (the evidence) tested," he said.

Former employees, patrons, and pub owner Louis Meadows are among those who will be questioned, Zachau said. Also on the list is a homeless man who claimed to have heard an explosion 2½ hours before the fire was reported. Investigators did not uncover any evidence of a "large-scale" explosion, Zachau said.

Meadows, who bought the pub three years ago and leased the first-floor space, said Saturday he has been in a two-year legal battle with building owner Harry Angus to purchase the property.

"This has been a long fight," Meadows said Saturday as he watched the building burn. He had planned to convert the upstairs into a bed and breakfast.

Meadows was not available to comment Monday, but Zachau said he characterized the fire as "suspicious."

Angus was reportedly in Florida at the time of the fire, and is not expected to return for two weeks, Zachau said.

New and used toys, a VCR, a television, children's bicycles, a Santa Claus decoration and burned clothing were among the items discovered in the rooms upstairs. Investigators also said they found evidence that a bathroom was being remodeled without permits.

Investigators were uncertain if the structure, built in 1907, would need to be demolished, but uncovered dry rot in the floors. The building also suffered significant smoke and water damage.

The ornate building — which had been a brothel, a hotel, and for many years an oyster house — is not on the city's list of historic landmarks.

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