

\$750,000 Blaze Levels Warehouse

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Embers from a small fire in a sponge dryer touched off a raging, three-alarm blaze Monday night which destroyed the Fmali Herb Co. warehouse at 801 Almar Ave.

Damage has been estimated at about \$750,000, including a half-million dollars' worth of products.

Owner Ben Zaricor told The Sentinel at the scene Monday night that employees were drying lofa sponges when the fire broke out.

Workers called the fire department, but thought they had the fire out before the first engine arrived at the scene.

"Then, we looked up and could see embers going into the roof," said Zaricor.

The Westside Santa Cruz fire station is located virtually across the street from the warehouse, and in the few short minutes it took for the engine to reach the scene, the fire was traveling the length of the attic in the 100-yard-long warehouse, which was not equipped with a fire sprinkler system.

Joined shortly by a second engine from the downtown station, firefighters quickly got hose lines on the blaze. But, the water served only to accelerate the flames, which raced across the attic and through boxes of herbs, sponges and other products which were stacked from floor to ceiling.

"Every time we got a line in, the fire moved right past us," said Division Chief George Lopes, who directed the firefighting effort.

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This is all that remained of Fmali Herb Co. warehouse this morning following Monday's fire.

Pete Amos/Sentinel

WAREHOUSE FIRE

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The combination of the stacked products plus the wooden interior of the building not only served to keep the fire roaring for hours, but prevented firefighters from getting inside to battle the flames.

Firefighters, who were called to the scene at 5:50 p.m., finally brought the blaze under control at about midnight.

Lopes eventually called in three alarms, bringing to the scene a total of five engines and some 30 on and off-duty firefighters. Live Oak Fire Department sent an engine to the downtown station to stand by in the event of another emergency.

Firefighters kept a steady, 1,000-gallon-per-minute stream of water on the building from their aerial squirt truck throughout the night. They were still pouring water down on the shell of the warehouse this morning as the contents continued to smoulder.

At the height of the blaze Monday night, flames shot some 50 feet through the roof into the cold, clear night, drawing a hundred or so spectators to the area.

As the roof fell in, section by section, the inferno inside the warehouse was revealed.

The warehouse is bounded to the north by the Safeway shopping center, far enough away so as not to be in danger of fire spread, and by the railroad tracks and an open field to the south.

Firefighters only had to be concerned with the spread of the fire to a new building under construction at the west end of the warehouse. They protected that building as they stopped the blaze some 30 feet short.

By doing so, firefighters also were able to save some expensive machinery and records in the office portion of the warehouse building.

In addition, Zaricor managed to rescue several pieces of art work from the office before the flames in the warehouse shot out of control.