

Neighborhood matriarch dies in Santa Cruz fire

12-30-82
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SANTA CRUZ — The 96-year-old matriarch of an East Santa Cruz neighborhood was killed Wednesday afternoon when fire engulfed the kitchen of her home.

Dead is Freda Bender of 201 Marnell Ave., the first fire fatality of the year in Santa Cruz.

Division Chief George Lopes said char marks on the kitchen walls indicated the fire had smoldered for an hour or more before neighbors spotted smoke and flames and called in the alarm.

Smoke was pouring from the eaves of the old, wood-frame home. "There was so much fire in the kitchen area, the whole size of the window was a mass of flames," said Lopes.

Firefighters had been alerted en route that the home was occupied by an elderly woman, who might be inside.

Firefighters, including Matt Tracy who grew up in the house across the street and knew Mrs. Bender well, donned breathing masks and advanced a hose line through the front door of the house to begin a room-by-room search for the woman.

In the street, neighbors, including Tracy's parents, gathered, waiting to hear if their elderly friend had been rescued.

Emerging from the house, Tracy and other firefighters reported they had found Mrs. Bender's badly-burned body under the kitchen table.

Lopes said she probably had been dead for about an hour before the blaze had been discovered.

Firefighters, Lopes said, confined the blaze to the kitchen area, which sustained major damage. Dollar loss, he said, is SEE BACK PAGE

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hard to estimate because of the age of the house, probably one of the first in the neighborhood. Similar damage to a new home, Lopes said, would be in the range of \$35,000. Cause of the fire is under investigation.

Lopes said he learned the woman had been expecting friends to visit later in the afternoon. A plate of cookies was found on a table.

Mrs. Bender was born in Chicago and moved to Southern California in 1919. For 30 years, she and a sister operated a cafe on Hollywood Boulevard, catering to some

of the movie stars. She moved to Santa Cruz in 1947. Among her hobbies was making hooked rugs and she was active in rugmaking classes through adult education.

"She was the matriarch of the neighborhood," said Irene Tracy. "For a woman her age, she was really up with the times. She was a beautiful, tolerant and positive person. She had many admirers.

"All my children grew here. She was like a second grandmother to them. My son, Matt, was one of the firemen who found her. It was difficult for him," said Mrs. Tracy.