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Aptos antique shop evacuated after discovery of explosives

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An Aptos antique shop was evacuated and closed for 1½ hours yesterday after it was discovered that a jar belonging to a shop merchant contained a highly explosive substance.

The substance turned out to be a crystallized picric acid compound, which, had the amount found exploded, could have blown someone's arm off and destroyed all glassware and breakables within a 50-foot radius, Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Sgt. Denny Clare, head of that agency's Bomb Team, said.

"If you dropped it or tried to unscrew it (the jar), it would probably explode," Clare said.

Fire Capt. Greg Joseph, hazardous-materials officer for the Aptos/La Selva fire department, said picric acid is poisonous, but not generally dangerous in its normal form.

"It is normally in an aqueous solution," Joseph said, "meaning, it's dissolved in water."

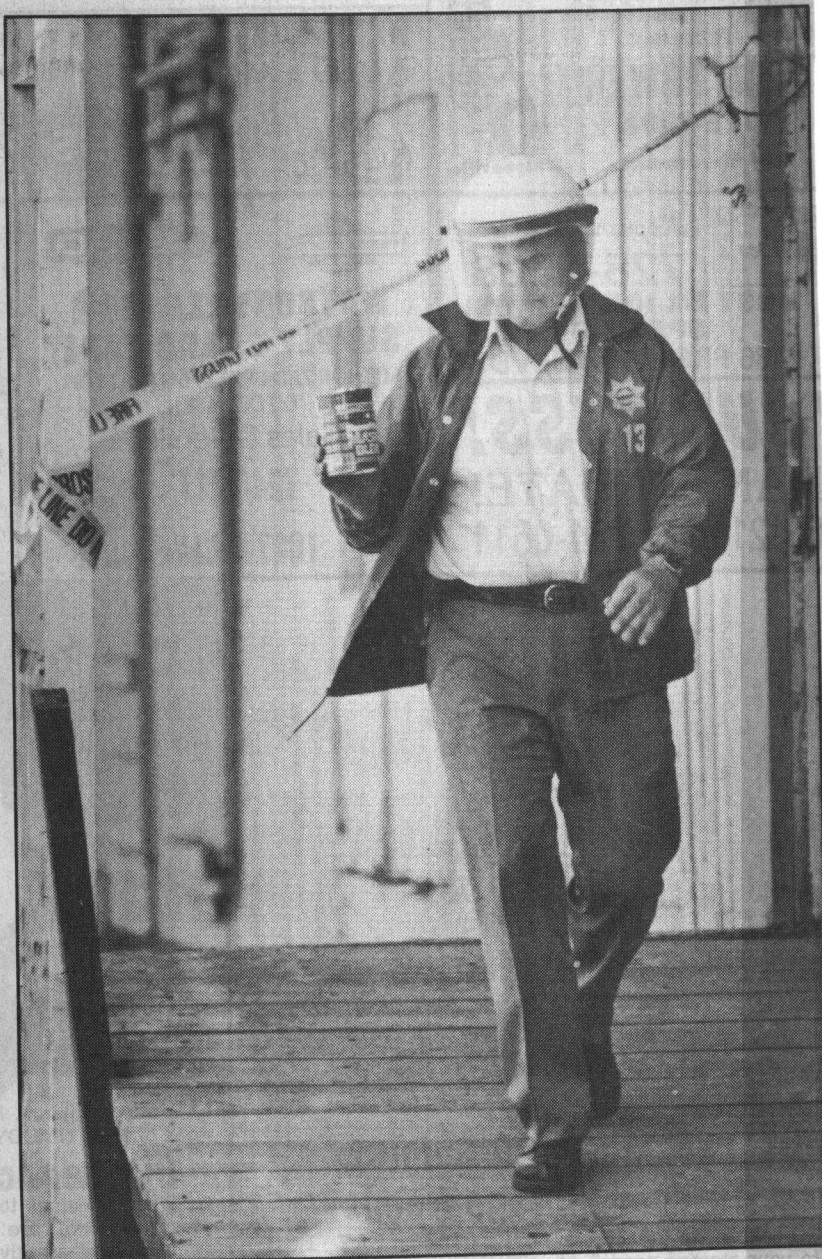
However, the jar discovered yesterday was "an antique pharmaceutical vial," he said. The picric acid — about 50 grams — was in a yellowish, crystallized form, he said, making it heat- and shock-sensitive. Had it exploded, it could have severely damaged the old wooden structure in which it was found — the Village Fair Antiques building, on Trout Gulch Road near the Aptos Post Office.

"I think it would wreak havoc," Joseph said. "It would definitely blow out all the doors and windows."

The jar was discovered at an antiques booth operated by Sharri Cree. Cree said a woman whose husband runs a local drugstore recognized the dangerous substance for what it was, and told Cree she ought to call the fire department to dispose of it.

When firefighters arrived just before noon and discovered the substance Cree had phoned about was picric acid, they evacuated the building, which contains about 20 shops, cordoned off an area around the building and called the Bomb Team, Cree said.

Clare and another Bomb Team member arrived about 1:30 p.m. After checking out the situation, Clare donned a helmet and carried the jar outside, depositing it in a containment trailer belonging to the Bomb Team.



Chip Scheuer

Sgt. Denny Clare carefully removes the explosive.

Clare said the picric acid compound would be taken out and destroyed by wrapping it in explosives and setting it off. The chemical name for the compound found in Cree's shop is trinitrophenol, he said, and the amount found was equal in explosive power to about a half stick of dynamite.

"If it were a lot larger quantity," Joseph said, "we'd have had to evacuate a lot further."

Trout Gulch Road would have been closed and a number of homes in the area would have been evacuated, he said.

Asked if she was surprised at the precautions, Cree said, "Yes, yes — absolutely."

She said the jar had been in the building for more than a week and before that, was carted around in her car for a few days.

"I have a lot to be grateful for, that it didn't go off with my kids in the car," Cree said.

She said she bought the jar, along with a number of other antique bottles, from a Santa Clara County man who was visiting in Aptos. The man told her the bottles had belonged to a pharmacy that opened in 1906 and closed in the '60s. The man had inherited the bottles from a relative who had operated the pharmacy, Cree said.

Joseph said the use of picric acid has waned in recent years as other materials have been developed. It's becoming rare nowadays to find the substance in the possession of private individuals, he said.

"It's commonly found in the laboratories of hospitals," he said, "and it was used a long time ago in analytical testing."

REFERENCE