

Lightning hits downtown Watsonville

By RICHARD EGAN
STAFF WRITER

A handful of people quietly going about their business in downtown Watsonville this morning got a reminder of their mortality when a fat bolt of lightning crackled from the sky and struck several points.

Frank's Chevron Service at 222 Main St. and Ideal Cleaners

at 200 Union St. both suffered power failures as a result of the strike around 9:30 a.m. There was no visible evidence of the strikes, save for the facial expressions of several witnesses.

Watsonville police detective Sgt. Benny Tumbaga was wiping some rain off his bike at the rear of the station, which is located directly between the

gas station and the cleaners, when it hit, and he thought his number was up.

"I heard a crackling, and then BAM! I felt my hair rise in back and thought to myself 'Oh, man, they got me.' I thought somebody had shot me," Tumbaga said. "A motorcycle guy next to me got a surge of power through his hands and up his arms."

The members of the Ragsac family, which owns Ideal Cleaners, were standing around shaking their heads 15 minutes after it hit.

Frank Ragsac was working the counter when he saw a bright flash illuminate everything brighter than a movie set, followed by the deafening report.

"I saw it hit the telephone

pole across the street, and saw sparks falling from the transformer," he said. "I thought it hit across the street, but then when I went outside everyone was staring at us and said we were hit."

"God-dang, that was scary," said his mother, Mary. "I never hear a sound like that. It was a really weird, loud blast."

Joe Hidalgo was working at

Frank's Chevron when he saw it hit a power pole in front of the station. "It was all around us," he said. "I've seen it before, but not this close. I was waiting for the mushroom cloud."

It wasn't all bad for Hidalgo. "We're just kickin' back now that the power is off."

Station owner Gonzalo Zensati

said he felt the ground move. "It popped that (cement) cover off the meter on the sidewalk. It was real loud."

Those working in the city administrative offices above the police station got a good start.

Grace Hayashi was carrying some coffee in the city manager's office above the police station when it hit. There is now a coffee stain on the office rug.

"I spilled it everywhere," Hayashi said. "I'll have to get on my hands and knees to clean it up. And my grandson will have to eat lunch by himself now, because I'm not walking home in this."

Susanne Harper, a program operator in the data processing office down the hall, saw the bolt hit a metal cover on top of the cleaners.

"I was sitting down and looked up in time to see it hit. I've seen it hit trees at Lake Tahoe," she said, "but never this close."

Martha Barragan was working next to Harper. "I thought somebody had bombed the police station," she said.

Barragan wasn't worried at all, however. "I lived in Mexico until I was 10, and we used to have lightning storms all the time where it would hit the roofs of houses."

"The sound was just incredible," said systems analyst Jeff

Merrill. "There was a bright crackly crash, and then this huge bang. It was qualitatively different from the sound you usually hear."

PG&E trucks were busy in the area after the incident, but there was no official damage estimate available.

PG&E public information spokesman Bill Leonard said that the damage was limited to blown fuses. "It knocked out a few fuses on our equipment around town," he said. "About 400 to 500 customers were knocked out, but most were restored within 15 minutes."

In Corralitos, at 846 Browns Valley Road, lightning snapped a tree branch that fell onto power lines. The overburdened wires arced, then shorted, and power was lost.

A firefighter from the California Department of Forestry said that aside from the inconvenience, damage was minimal. Since the wires were not destroyed, he said he expected power to be restored "soon."

Firefighters at departments in Aromas, North Monterey County, Corralitos, Freedom, Aptos and Santa Cruz reported lots of rumbling thunder, but no calls or reports of lightning strikes or loss of electrical power.

Heavy rain was reported in Santa Cruz this morning, but only light showers fell in Watsonville.

—Melanie Munk also contributed to this report.

REFERENCE

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