

Still no suspects in last year's Santa Cruz City Hall arson

City Hall
Fire one of several unsolved vandalism cases in city

By **DAN WHITE**

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SANTA CRUZ — Ten months ago on April Fools' Day, someone burned down part of City Hall and got away with it.

There were some clues: a burned backpack and an "ignition device" rumored to be a Molotov cocktail. Police and fire investigators even had a "person of interest," though that person left town prior to an appointment with a lie detector.

But almost a year later, a mildewed sign still hangs at City Hall, saying "\$10,000 reward." The sign looks a little moldier every month.

This case of arson, which caused an estimated \$400,000 of damage to city property, is one of several vandalism attacks on government buildings in Santa Cruz during the past few years.

Between local and state offices, within city limits, at least a half-dozen serious incidents of vandalism have occurred. Prior to the City Hall arson, a string of "hosings" took place across town — in which vandals caused intentional flooding damage — and the targets included city government buildings.

Attacks on city halls are rare statewide, according to the League of California Cities. The only other recent large-scale

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■ Other unsolved arsons in Santa Cruz County.

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attack on a city municipal office, beyond Santa Cruz, took place in December of 1999. Then, vandals used a hose to cause about \$1 million in damage to a three-story, 14,000-square-foot building rented by the city of West Sacramento.

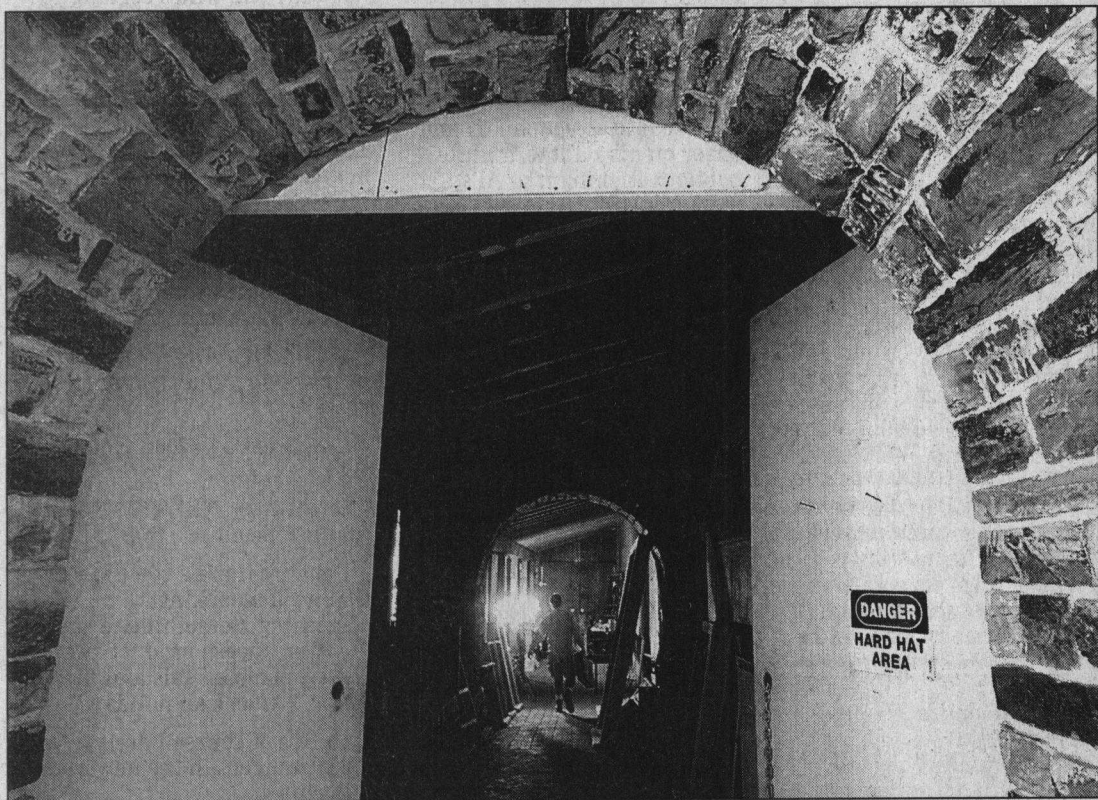
While investigators, in such cases, say the culprits could be someone holding a grudge, or perhaps

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Dan Goldcamp installs voice and data lines within the framing of the Santa Cruz City Hall reconstruction. The wing was burned by an arsonist last April.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

The wing of Santa Cruz City Hall destroyed by an arsonist resembles a catacomb during the reconstruction.

Arson

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someone making a political statement, the crimes have gone unsolved and no explanatory messages have been left behind.

So the motivations remain unknown.

"No one ever stepped forward to claim this (City Hall fire) as their handiwork," said Santa Cruz police Lt. Lee Sepulveda, who heads up the investigations unit at the police department.

Though investigators couldn't cite the exact costs of cleaning up property damage to government buildings in recent years, the price tag for cleanup per building is often in the six-figure range, and the psychological effects are long-lasting, investigators say.

Investigating City Hall

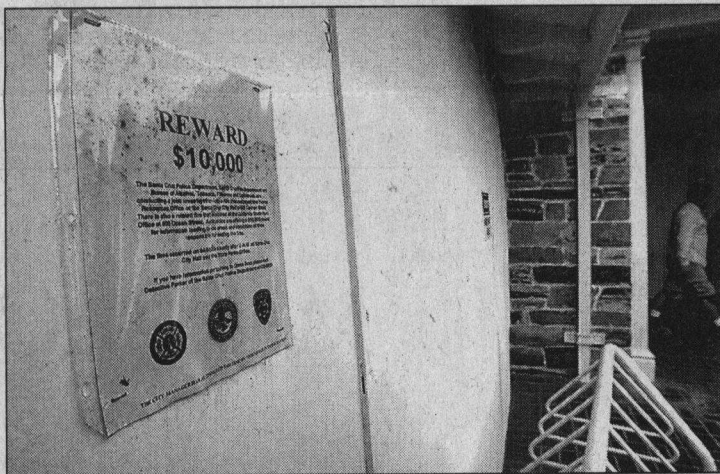
In the weeks after the City Hall arson, fingerprinting and angry denials were a constant in Santa Cruz. Some quickly accused government critics of inciting people to lash out against the city and perpetuating the arson.

Those critics said, however, they were being scapegoated for a crime that had nothing to do with them. Law enforcement found no indication they were involved.

But if the burning was meant to be a political statement, it has gone unexplained. City leaders can only guess at motives.

"If the attack was some kind of pathetic attempt at making a political statement, those responsible for such acts should step forward and accept responsibility for their actions," said Mayor Scott Kennedy.

"Likewise, those who know who did it should come forward with their names. Anything less repre-



A sign offering a \$10,000 reward hangs on the construction wall at Santa Cruz City Hall.

sents moral cowardice of a type that I find unacceptable."

UC Santa Cruz professor of psychology Anthony Pratkanis — who specializes in the study of propaganda — said the lack of an obvious "message" behind the attack leads him to believe it was someone with a grudge against the city acting alone and not the work of an organized group.

"An organized group will tend to take credit for it, either publicly or privately among the members, to say 'we are strong, we have these capabilities' and then use it internally for fund raising."

Considering the date of the attack, Pratkanis said there's a chance it was a "prank" that ran out of control.

While some city leaders have used the term "terrorism" to describe the attack, Pratkanis steered clear of this.

"If you undertake terrorism, you take credit for it. That's part of the terrorism, showing that 'I have the power to do this anytime I want.'"

The case has gone "cold" — police-speak for still active but stalled out — in spite of a joint

effort between Santa Cruz police, Santa Cruz fire and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which was called in because a government building was burned.

Few clues to go on

Police spent considerable time and man hours looking at one person in particular, said Sepulveda.

During a recent interview, Sepulveda did not provide the man's name because he has not been charged.

The man described is a former local resident in his mid-40s, who left town after the fire. He was detained after a previous attack on City Hall in July 1997. Then, someone broke into the city manager's office, soaked carpets, tossed com-

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Arson

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puters on the floor and sprayed the walls, desk and copying machine with a fire extinguisher.

The man was charged with felony vandalism, arson and burglary in the case, but charges were dropped after a key witness was deemed unreliable, having been arrested in New Mexico for providing false information to federal authorities in an unrelated bombing.

"I don't think we developed enough to say he's a suspect (in last year's arson)," said Deputy Fire Chief Ray Zachau, the city's lead fire investigator in the City Hall case. "He's a person of interest, someone we want to talk to about the fire if we ever did manage to ascertain his location. They did try to track him down, and went through all the trouble to (try to find him) in Florida. That speaks for itself."

Zachau said the City Hall investigation has slowed in recent months.

Arson crimes are "extremely tough to solve," he said. "For arsons, you probably have the lowest conviction rates of all (serious) crimes."

The problem, he said, is proving intent, while showing beyond a reasonable doubt that someone carried out the crime.

It's not impossible to make such convictions, however.

Santa Cruz investigators, with help from the Live Oak-based Central Fire District, nabbed three teenagers from Ben Lomond and Santa Cruz, reportedly part of a group called the "Player's Mob." The group got jail time for arsons and car thefts that took place in late 2001 and early 2002 throughout the city of Santa Cruz. The group also agreed to settle a \$10,000 restitution bill.

Zachau said investigators have had a much harder time with the City Hall fire, though someone reported seeing a person flee the scene on a bicycle.

Beyond City Hall

While county government buildings have been mostly free from serious vandalism attacks, various city, state and private businesses have been targeted.

In summer of 2001, someone

used a garden hose to wage a series of attacks on local buildings. Hit hardest was the Santa Cruz District State Parks office on Ocean Street, which sustained an estimated \$350,000 in damage.

No one ever took responsibility for the attacks, which all involved someone using an exterior spigot on the side of the buildings and their own hoses, brought to the scene to inflict structural damage. They often left water running overnight to maximize damage.

Nearly a year after the hosing attack, State Parks District Superintendent Dave Vincent can only guess at motivations.

"You never know if what you do might set someone off, whether you're removing fire rings from the beach or an arrest someone might be unhappy with. There are so many variables, I just don't have anything in mind."

Vandals with hoses also hit other buildings between June 3 and 17 that year, including the Sentinel, on Church Street. Here, before major damage could occur, press operators saw water flowing down the sides of a first-floor wall and were able to stop the flooding. To gain access, the attacker had scaled a 20-foot wall with help from a cypress tree.

Also vandalized in that time

period: a bakery owned by Councilwoman Emily Reilly, two law offices including the Public Defender's Office, various city buildings and an insurance office. These buildings were unoccupied at the time of the attacks.

The good news in Santa Cruz is that the once-charred section of City Hall is now being retrofitted, with a shored-up roof, electrical and mechanical features, a new sprinkler system and Dry-wall going in this week.

"We should finish up in the next 12 weeks," said Bob Mollman, owner of Kase Pacific, the local contractor that's handling the repairs, covered by the city's insurance policy.

If all goes as planned, the building will look better than ever, and the arson attack may fade from public memory.

But it still eats at the people who have tried to crack the case and come up empty-handed.

"I would have to say that right now I'm not very confident this is going anywhere unless some new information develops, unless we manage to find our suspect, or if (whoever did this) has a change of heart and confesses," Zachau said.

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