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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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'There was no way I could go in there'



PEGGY BRADBURY

Firefighters look over the charred rubble of a house in St. Charles in which a woman died. Lightning struck the garage and the flames spread fast.

LOCAL NEWS

AREA FACTS:

The dedication ceremony for the Eads Bridge was held July 4, 1874, although the bridge was actually completed earlier. The magnificent engineering achievement is all the more remarkable because the designer, James B. Eads, had little formal education (he left school at 13 to help support his family).

Lightning touches off a fatal house fire

■ Retarded woman panicked when her parents tried to get her out of their burning St. Charles home.

By MICHELE MUNZ
Of the Post-Dispatch

A St. Charles woman was killed and her father injured Friday afternoon when lightning set their house on fire.

Lightning struck the garage of the one-story home about 4 p.m., and flames spread quickly through the house.

The woman, Sharon Wright, 48, who was mentally retarded, panicked, authorities said.

The woman's father, Clair Wright, suffered second- and third-degree burns

on his back trying to rescue his daughter, authorities said. The father, who turned 64 Friday, was in fair condition last night at St. Joseph Health Center in St. Charles, according to a hospital spokeswoman.

The one-story wood-frame home on the corner of Boschertown Road and Little Hills Expressway was destroyed.

St. Charles County Sheriff's Deputy Mike Scott was driving by when he saw the smoke and flames. He stopped to help.

Clair Wright had already tried to get back in the house, and he and his wife, Vivian, 61, were outside screaming that their daughter was still inside.

They told Scott they thought she was in the back bedroom, so Scott made his way to the room's window after having

to go around a large sloping field on the side of the house.

"It was massive smoke. I could barely see the house," Scott said. It was also raining heavily and hailing.

He used his night stick to smash in the window. "All the smoke came gushing out. There was no way I could go in there," he said.

Scott then heard popping sounds, and an electrical wire came tumbling down from a transformer pole. Scott got the parents off the wet ground and safely to a patio.

The house quickly went up in flames. Things inside the house, including a fuel tank in the basement, exploded.

Scott said Sharon Wright had panicked and become confused when her parents first tried to get her out of the

house. They were not strong enough to control her, he said.

About 15 fire and emergency vehicles were at the scene along with nearly 50 firefighters and paramedics, said Scott Freitag, a St. Charles Fire Department spokesman. The heat was too intense and the smoke was too heavy for anyone to get in the house.

After 3 1/2 hours, firefighters were able to extinguish the fire.

Sharon Wright's body was found in the basement.

"Apparently, we don't know for sure, but it looks like she had run to the basement and hid under the stairs," Freitag said.

Thunderstorm cuts off power to thousands, downs trees

By DIANE TOROIAN
Of the Post-Dispatch

The powerful but short-lived storm Friday afternoon that caused a fatal fire in St. Charles and the closing of Fair Saint Louis also knocked out power for thousands of residents.

Wind gusting up to 40 miles per hour knocked down utility lines, street signs and trees throughout the metro region. The storm also caused a flurry of minor

traffic accidents. About 33,000 customers lost electrical power in St. Louis and nearby suburbs, said Susan Gallagher, spokeswoman for AmerenUE Corp. Late Friday night, 21,000 were still without power.

The storm lasted about 20 minutes. Meteorologist Kevin Stenson said, "Though everyone thought the storm was crazy, it was pretty typical for the season," said.

Trees were uprooted or broken in the

downtown area and to the south. Part of the roof of St. Vincent's Church at 1408 South 10th Street blew off and fell onto the right lane of southbound Interstate 55 and 44.

At Tucker Boulevard and Pine Street, wind knocked down a pair of traffic signal posts, one on each side of Tucker. The posts were ripped from their metal bases and lay several feet into the road.

Lightning and driving rain forced the closing of Maryland Height's new Aqu-

educt for about an hour Friday afternoon. The high wind roughed up the water and toppled some trash cans but did no damage.

The forecast for today Saturday calls for a high of 90 degrees with high humidity and scattered storms.

Anthony Jaffe and Repps Hudson of the Post-Dispatch contributed information for this story.

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