Storms Start Blaze In Normandy; Fallen Power Line Kills Woman

By Fred W. Lindecke
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

A line of thunderstorms that moved through the St. Louis area during the afternoon rush hour Wednesday tied up traffic and set off a fire in an apartment building in Normandy. And a woman was electrocuted by a fallen power line near Skinker Boulevard.

The woman, about 60 years old, was walking her dog in an alley near Skinker and Westminster Place about 4:30 p.m., Capt. Everett E. Page of the 7th District reported.

The woman apparently tried to get around a fallen line, which was carrying 2,300 volts, Page said. She apparently came in contact with the line, stumbled and fell onto it. The dog was uninjured, Page said.

Employees of Union Electric Co. had to cut off the electrical power before the woman's body could be removed, he said.

The woman's name was withheld until relatives could be notified.

Police blocked Skinker between Delmar Boulevard and Forest Park Parkway after the accident. That caused one of the many traffic jams that occurred throughout the metropolitan area.

A Union Electric spokesman said 15,000 customers had lost service. The service interruptions were scattered throughout the area but appeared heaviest in northern sectors. Service was expected to be restored to most customers by this morning, the spokesman said.

A fire sparked by lightning caused about $75,000 damage to an apartment complex in Normandy on Wednesday afternoon, officials said.

Deputy Chief Joe Pecoraro of the Normandy Fire Protection District said no one was injured in the fire at Hillcrest Apartments, 4625 Grinstead Court. Firefighters from Normandy, Berkeley, Ferguson and Jennings responded to the blaze, which broke out about 4:30 p.m., he said.

Pecoraro said lightning apparently had struck an electrical fuse box and shorted electrical lines running through four apartments in the center section of the 36-unit complex.

St. Louis County police and the St. Louis Fire Department got numerous reports of electrical fires, caused by lightning strikes or power lines that fell. Authorities said the fires had been put out quickly; officials lacked reports of injuries.

In Madison County, the power was out at Oliver C. Anderson Hospital in Maryville for about 4½ hours, said Rose Eisenbeis, nursing supervisor. The power went out about 4 p.m., during the thunderstorm, and was restored about 8:30 p.m., she said.

The hospital switched to its own generator for power to the emergency room, the intensive care unit, the labor and delivery rooms, and other critical areas, Eisenbeis said. But it had no electricity for patients' rooms, air conditioning and the dietary unit, she said.

The hospital had 75 patients at the time.

"The storm came so rapidly and left so rapidly, the patients hardly had time to become frightened," Eisenbeis said. She said everyone had stayed calm but had become uncomfortably warm over the several hours without air conditioning.

The heat and humidity in the building caused fire alarms to go off twice, she said. The Maryville Fire Department responded the first time. The second time, the hospital notified the department that the alarm was false, she said.

Paul Strausbaugh, a spokesman for Southwestern Electric Cooperative, said the outage had been caused by the wind blowing trees onto the lines and by a utility pole belonging to Illinois Power falling across the lines, which run along Route 162 west of Maryville.

Dennis McCarthy, a meteorologist for the Weather Service, said the forecast office in St. Peters had measured 0.92 of an inch of rain between 2:30 and 4:30 p.m., with the storms moving east.

Officials at Lambert Field measured 0.37 of an inch of rain between 3:45 and 5:30 p.m. An additional 0.40 inch of rain was measured between 7 and 10 p.m., for a total of 0.77 of an inch of rain.

McCarthy said the band of thunderstorms was about 20 miles wide and extended from central Illinois southwest into Oklahoma. He said the thunderstorms had moved ahead of a cold front that would bring cooler weather to this area for the next two days.

Reports of hail — ranging from pea-size to a half-inch in diameter — were reported in Old Monroe, Vandalia and Rolla, Mo., McCarthy said.

The wind was clocked at 43 mph in St. Peters and ranged from 40 to 50 mph in other places, he said.

No serious flooding was reported, McCarthy said.

Chicago Area Flooded

Volunteers frantically filled sandbags, and overflow sewage and storm water was dumped into Lake Michigan on Wednesday as rain raised swollen waterways in already flooded areas.

Meanwhile, authorities declared a state of emergency in Cook and DuPage counties amid predictions that the Des Plaines River and Salt Creek would overflow their banks.

The heavy rain had subsided by Wednesday night, but periods of rain and drizzle were forecast until Thursday.

The Chicago area was soaked with 2.46 inches of new rain by 7 p.m. Wednesday. That brought the total for August so far to 17.01 inches, nearly 3 inches above the previous high for one single month of 14.13 inches in September 1961, said James Hall of the National Weather Service.

Normal precipitation for the month of August is 3.53 inches.

The Metropolitan Sanitary District opened flood gates in Wilmette, a northern suburb, shortly after 6 p.m. to let a combination of storm water and raw sewage from the North Shore channel of the Chicago River into Lake Michigan, said spokeswoman Barbara Rumsey.

Andre Jackson and Joan Bray, both of the Post-Dispatch staff, and The Associated Press contributed information for this story.