

# The Roseburg Blast



August 7, 1959

# **Most of the Roseburg residents were asleep when a great explosion shook the city of 13, 000 from edge to edge.**

An alarm of fire reported at 1:05 a.m. the morning of Friday, August 7, 1959, was the first of a series of events that terminated in 13 dead, more than 125 persons injured, eight blocks of business concerns smashed and engulfed in a raging inferno, plus some twenty blocks of commercial and residential properties suffering extensive blast and structural damage. (See back page map)

Completely unaware of impending disaster, Mr. Dennis Tandy, 17 years of age, had finished his work shift somewhat later than usual at the Nordic Veneer Mill and was enroute to his father-in-law's West Military Avenue residence for the purpose of meeting his wife, who had spent the evening there during the course of Tandy's shift. It is assumed that no evidence of anything unusual at this time distracted him while passing the Oak and Pine intersection on the way to picking up Mrs. Tandy, for the same path of travel was followed by them in returning to their Southeast Kane Street home, at which time something did attract their attention as they passed Oak and Pine. Reversing the small foreign-made car (Fiat 600) back to the intersection, both Tandy and his wife saw a small blaze, thought at the time to be a trash can afire alongside the Gerretsen Building Supply structure.

Turning the car, he drove north on Pine Street about halfway of the building, telling his wife, Marilyn, to sound the alarm while he attempted to do what he could to extinguish the fire and prevent its spread. Mrs. Tandy drove to an open all-night Shell Service Station one block distant on Oak and Stephens Street and relayed the fire message to attendant Dave Hanks, 18, who in turn phoned the City Fire Department.

Mrs. Tandy then returned to the fire which, by then, had increased considerably on the inside of the building. Finding her husband, she was told by him to return to the car and get away from the blaze. A few moments later, she was advised by a fireman to drive the car to an open space across the street. Mrs. Tandy stated that the last she saw of her husband, he was working with an axe at the cab door of a truck, trying to get into it for removal from the area.

The Gerretsen Building Supply, the original fire building, owned and operated by William H. Gerretsen and his two sons, Gordon H. and Donald K. Gerretsen, was located at Oak and Pine Streets and consisted of a 75' x 60' three-story building with wood and concrete floors. It had a built-up roof and a basement connected with a 130' x 60' roofed, one-story dirt and concrete floored, vertical latticed enclosed warehouse area. The warehouse area contained a plumbing shop and cabinet shop with combustible storage of lumber, flammable liquids such as paints, barrels of thinners and a barrel of white gasoline, together with cement and plastering supplies. The first floor of the masonry portion of the building contained the office, sales floor and general display area. The second and third floors were used for storage of general building supplies. Apparently, the fire burned undetected for a considerable time before discovery, as Mrs. Tandy and other early arrivals attested to the fact that the interior of the one-story warehouse area was aflame prior to the arrival of the fire companies and the flames were rolling out through the openings between the 1' x 4' open vertical siding and engulfing the eaves of the roof and a van-type truck parked in the street. Eye witnesses were of the opinion that place of origin of the Gerretsen Building fire as being at or near the cabinet shop and near the northwest corner of the warehouse. A rumor the fire originally started in an outside trashcan was discounted by interviewing officers, Mrs. Tandy and Fireman Lyle Wescott. Wescott was of the opinion that the fires on the outside of the building were flying debris from the burning roof.

The source of the original ignition will probably never be determined, but in this type of occupancy, such hazards as spontaneous ignition, electric appliances left "ON" and careless smoking cannot be overlooked.

An investigation by the State Police Arson Squad was started soon after the extinguishment of the fires but to date no grounds for suspected arson have been uncovered.

Subsequent investigation has revealed the presence of a 1959 F-600 Ford aluminum van-type truck belonging to the Pacific Powder Company of Tenino, Washington, parked in the Pine Street area, parallel to the fire building and about four feet from the burning structure. This truck has proved to be the implement that touched off the most devastating and costly blast in Oregon's modern history.

Driven from the Tenino plant by a company employee, the truck was parked at an early evening hour alongside the Gerretsen Building. Assuming the vehicle was 'attended' with the hourly checking of the area by a merchant policeman and claiming he had received permission to park from someone in the building, the driver then checked into a local hotel and prepared for bed. Unable to sleep, he returned to the parked truck area. Satisfied that everything seemed in order, he returned to his hotel room where he was awakened later by the fire siren. During the course of time involved in dressing and gaining access to the street, the explosion occurred, knocking him to the ground, with resultant injuries necessitating his removal to a hospital.

ICC inspection records reveal such a truck to be red in color with a canvas tarpaulin rear cover. Vehicle was of the 1 1/2—2 ton capacity rating and was identified as No. 45 in the company records. Appropriate 'EXPLOSIVE' signs were evidenced on the sides, rear and forward panels of the van section. Truck's contents, as evidenced by Pacific Powder Company dispatch loading sheets, disclose delivery ticket No. T- 1570 invoicing 4,000 lbs. Of 40% special gelatin in 2" by 16" sticks, packaged in cardboard cartons of 50 lbs. each; in addition,

the same invoice listed 120 3-ply bags (6,000 lbs.) of CAR-PRILL to be delivered to a blasting site in the North Umpqua River area, some distance north of Roseburg. Also loaded on the vehicle (Delivery ticket No. T- 1572) were 60 3-ply bags of CAR-PRILL (3,000 lbs.) with destination as Gerretsen Powder Magazine northeast of Roseburg. The special gelatin had been loaded first across the front of the van, six boxes high. All of the shipment was labeled for the account of Pacific Powder Sales of Oregon.

Upon receipt of the telephone alarm, Assistant Fire Chief Roy McFarland and Fireman Lyle Westcott proceeded to the fire with McFarland driving the American La France 1,000 gpm pumping apparatus (No. 5). On-duty Fireman Darrel Bilow was left at the station for 'watch duty'. The apparatus traveled west on Oak Street from the main station and turned north on Pine Street, (a distance of five blocks) where a reverse 2 1/2" hose lay was made with the hydrant connections at Washington and Pine Streets. (Refer to map on back page)



The apparatus was then turned and an additional 2 1/2" hose line was laid to the fire. The fire, at this point, had involved north and east portions of the building, creating such severe heat radiation that Fireman Westcott was severely burned to the extent that flesh loosened from his fingers. Westcott was taken to Mercy Hospital in a car driven by Police Officer Merle Jensen. When interviewed later at the hospital, Fireman Westcott stated that upon leaving the Oak Street Bridge (approximately six blocks from the fire) en route to the hospital, the explosion occurred, resulting in the instant death of Assistant Fire Chief McFarland, Dennis Tandy, City Police Officer Donald DeSues and other accounted for in this report.

In a matter of minutes, roaring, whirlwind flames involved the entire area between Southeast Oak Street and Douglas Avenue, Southeast Stephens Street and Flint Street. Following the blast and resulting holocaust, the fire-fighting strategy consisted of confinement, rather than extinguishment within the area bounded by Cass, Stephens, Douglas and Parrott Streets. Within this seven square block area, a mixed business, industrial and residential district that included Douglas County Farm Bureau Store and Elevator, the Douglas County Flour Mill, Gerretsen's Building Supply Company, the Coca-Cola Bottling Plant, Bill Stock Garage and apartments, three frame storage warehouses, a motor freight depot and warehouse, twelve dwellings, a furniture store, four rooming and apartment buildings, five box-cars and numerous small buildings were totally destroyed by the fire. (The map shows the outline)

## Firefighting Operations and Mutual Aid

The Roseburg fire defense consists of a gravity-flow water system fed by four reservoirs with a total capacity of 3,400,000 gallons of water. The downtown area net of water mains are principally six-inch mains with a static pressure of 85 to 100 psi.

The fire department, at the time of the disaster,

consisted of sixteen paid men and fifteen volunteers. On all building fires, a general alarm is sounded by two widely separated sirens. The operating procedure for the off-duty firemen on a general alarm is to telephone headquarters to obtain the fire location, then report directly to the fire grounds. Usually, the first two off-duty men to call are advised to report to the station to drive the reserve equipment if needed.

The headquarters station located at the corner of Oak and Main Streets, houses two 1,000 gpm pumpers with a combined hose load of 3,700 feet of 2 1/2" hose, one 500 gpm pumper with 1,250 feet of 2 1/2" hose and one salvage truck. The station is manned by one officer and two or three men per 24-hour shift. One of the men is assigned as dispatcher and remains at the station until relieved. The West Side substation, (Harvard Avenue and Pilger Street) houses two men per shift and one 500 gpm pumper. City firefighting operations on the morning of August 7, 1959, as outlined by Acting Fire Chief Don Starmer are as follows: (Note—Lieutenant Starmer has since been appointed as Acting Chief.)

**FIRST ALARM - 1:05 A.M. - AUGUST 7, 1959**  
Responding Engine No. 5, 1958 La France 1,000 gpm triple combination pumper manned by Assistant Chief Roy McFarland and Fireman Lyle Westcott. Chief McFarland told the dispatcher to sound the general alarm. "A 'burner' in the Gerretsen Building Supply Company," he remarked.



Remains of Bill Stock Motors

### **GENERAL ALARM - 1:06 A.M.**

Engine No. 5 laid reverse and straight lays from the hydrant at Pine and Washington Streets and commenced firefighting operations. Fireman Wescott found the radiant heat unbearable from his position even though he was shielded by a parked truck. (This was the truck loaded with explosives), and while moving across the street, Westcott noticed the flesh slipping from his hands. Police Officer Jensen, also a call fireman, arrived on the scene and left immediately with Westcott for the hospital. Chief McFarland, apparently assisted by two civilians, continued to fight the fire.

“Upon leaving my home, I could see the fire coming through the roof of the building and realized additional equipment would be needed, so I proceeded to the main station to pick up Engine No. 2, a Kenworth 1,000 gpm triple combination pumper carrying 2,250 feet of 2 1/2” hose loaded in a split bed. Fireman Logan joined me at the station and requested a short delay while he picked up his turnouts, as all he had at the fire was a t-shirt and could not get close enough to aid McFarland. I pulled Engine No. 2 out on the ramp and Logan mounted the apparatus a few seconds later. As I started the apparatus rolling, a terrific blast occurred. The night was lighted by a great fireball. Logan was knocked from the apparatus but was not injured. He climbed back aboard and informed me he was okay. I made a quick survey of the apparatus and responded to the fire.”

Engine No. 4 arrived at the fire and according to the Pre-Fire plan, laid a line from the hydrant at Spruce and Oak (see the map). The Pre-Fire plan for this company was to take a line through the south portion of the building. Engine No. 4 stopped at the southwest corner of the Gerretsen Building where the company was joined by Lieutenant Seibold. Langsev was making the hydrant hook-up. Seibold applying the hose clamp and Epperly engaging the pump and Stender flaking out the stretch line.

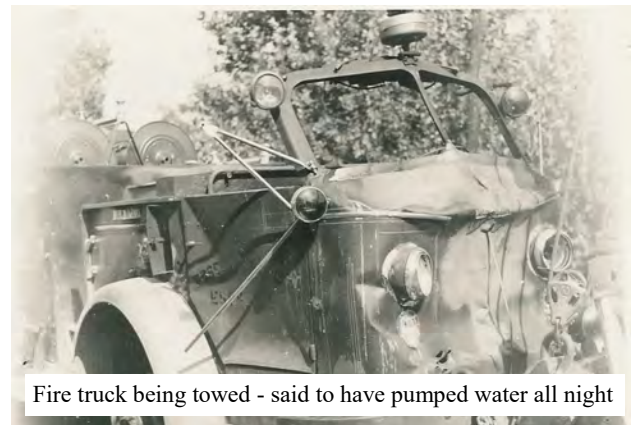
### **THE EXPLOSION - 1:14 A.M.**

From all indications, Assistant Chief McFarland had just moments before become aware of the

truck on which flames were impinging, was an explosives truck. He had just given the order to evacuate the area when the truck lad with two tons of 40% dynamite and 4 1/2 tons of “Car Prill” detonated. The explosion killed Assistant Chief McFarland, two civilians who were apparently helping him and Police Officer Donald DeSues who had just arrived on the scene for traffic control. Fireman Epperly suffered burns on his hands and ruptured ear drums; Fireman Stender and Lieutenant Seibold were knocked to the ground and also suffered ruptured ear drums. The building that had contained the fire was gone. Engine No. 5 was put out of service; Engine No. 4 was damaged but still functional.

### **TACTICS FOLLOWING EXPLOSION**

“I proceeded down Washington Street to Pine into chaos. I found McFarland and two other fatalities. Engine No. 5 was ruined and the hose lines severed at the hydrant. There was little left of the Gerretsen Building. It seemed



Fire truck being towed - said to have pumped water all night



Fireman fighting fire after the Roseburg Blast

very calm and quiet in the area with several small fire flickering here and there. I radioed the dispatcher about the situation and was informed that Chief Mills had suffered a heart attack upon being informed of the explosion and would be unable to respond. I informed the dispatcher that I was assuming command and to call for all Mutual Aid available. Taking Engine No. 2, I laid a double line from Pine and Washington to Spruce, - then a double line from Spruce and Douglas south on Spruce to Washington. At this time it looked as if the fire could be held at Washington Street. Within seconds after this hose lay, the Farm Bureau Building (north side of Washington and Spruce) and the buildings on the west side of Spruce seemed to ignite almost all at once. A cone of fire formed across Washington Street making this position untenable. I drove Engine No. 2 out, east on Washington through sheets of flame and falling power and telephone lines. The heat buildup was so rapid, there was no time for the men manning the lines to retreat with the hoses. While working their way out of the area, these men helped evacuate people from homes and rooming houses on the west side of Spruce Street. From the hydrant at Rose and Washington, I laid Engine No. 2's remaining hose load west on Washington, returning to hydrant and set pump. Turned pumping operation over to someone else and commenced survey of the situation.

The crew on Engine No. 4 picked themselves up and immediately moved their line back to protect the California-Pacific LPG bulk storage plant west of the railroad tracks on the south side of Oak Street. Applying 2 1/2" fog nozzle, they began playing a spray stream on the tanks to keep them cool. One Roseburg Rural Company responding to Mutual Aid was directed to lay a line from the west to provide additional protective lines on the California-Pacific Plant.

Roseburg Engine No. 3, manned by two firemen, responded from the main station about 1:30 a.m. to a fire located in the 1400 block of Thompson Street. This fire was under control by citizens on arrival. Engine No. 3 then was directed by radio to a fire in the 300 block of Southeast Pine. This fire was also under

control by citizens upon arrival. Engine No. 3 then was directed to lay a line from Engine No. 2 to Stephens and Oak. At approximately 1:55 a.m., Engine No. 3 was directed to reload and provide a pump line from Parrott and Mosher to aid in protecting 150,000 gallons of liquefied petroleum gas at the California-Pacific Plant.

Engine No. 4 was moved to a position near the South Pacific Depot and temporarily attacked spot fires on roof of depot and fire involving building south of California-Pacific Plant. The crew of Engine No. 4 then moved to Cass and Stephens Streets and laid a line down Cass to Pine, moving to the hydrant at Cass and Pine and set up the pump; they then hand laid a line north on Pine to the middle of the block, hand laid a line west on Cass, wye'd back to 1 1/2" lines because the supply of 2 1/2" nozzles had been exhausted. These 1 1/2" lines proved profitable in extinguishing spot fires on roofs across the street from the main fire.

Roseburg Rural Engine No. 13, a 750 gpm pumper, laid a remote pumping line from Rose and Cass, advanced a 2 1/2" line from the pump west on Cass, a 2 1/2" line north on Stephens and wye'd off to 1 1/2" line due to insufficient volume for 2 1/2" working lines. Roseburg Rural Engine No. 11, a 1,000 gpm pumper set at the hydrant at Oak and Stephens, advanced one 2 1/2" line north on Stephens and two 2 1/2" lines south on Stephens.

Lieutenant Gardener was placed in charge on the fire front along Stephens Street. Lieutenant Seibold was placed in charge in the front along



Street. The west side of Spruce Street was ignored; however, some lines were later hand-laid by personnel from Roseburg Rural from the hydrants at Douglas and Spruce and Washington and Pine. These lines were recovered hose from the bed of the damaged Engine No. 5.

The company from Sutherlin responding on Mutual Aid set up a deluge set on the hydrant line at Douglas and Spruce, then laid a line from Sheridan and Lane north on Sheridan to the fire line, returned to the hydrant and set up pumping operation.

The Veteran's Administration pumper was dispatched on Mutual Aid to stand-by at the West Station. Myrtle Creek was placed on stand-by at Roseburg Rural Station. Winston-Dillard was alerted and placed on stand-by in the own quarters. A Springfield Engine Company arrived later and was placed on stand-by at the Roseburg Rural Station. Two engine companies arriving from Eugene at 3:00 a.m. were placed on stand-by at the Main Station.

The method of operation along the Cass Street front and the Stephens Street front was to generally apply water on the involved portions and intermittently wet down the exposures across the street.

**THE FIRE WAS CONFINED BY ABOUT 2:15 A.M. AND UNDER CONTROL ABOUT 3:00 A.M.**

It should be clearly understood that Roseburg's fire defenses, adequate for protection in a normal emergency, could not have by themselves contained the fire within the limits to which it was confined. The quick action of the companies Responding to the Mutual Aid call, their initiative and good judgment in establishing and holding fire lines, the response of firemen on the scene conditioned by previous training to act automatically in emergencies, even though suffering shock from the blast, the quick action and cooperation of the Police Department, protective actions by individual citizens, - all these factors and many others formed the pattern of superb cooperation that prevented untold additional loss. This cooperation established fire lines which were held, making the total effort a success!

"Referring back to the time at which I approached the fire scene, the blast had occurred perhaps a minute prior to my company's arrival. During the ensuing two or three minutes, we laid 1,000 feet of hose, attaching four nozzles. During this time, due probably to the upsurging draft caused by the blast, the immediate area was relatively cool with little evidence of fire spread. Suddenly we were enveloped in a fire storm from which we barely escaped with our men and apparatus. The hoses and nozzles had to be abandoned, clearly indicating here the need for prompt and accurate size-up of the situation, the deploying of equipment outside of the fire lines and the making of those sacrifices necessary to establish fire lines that offer the best opportunity to offer a stop. Within these boundaries, evacuation and rescue should be made with the utmost dispatch. With the limited resources of the community, even including Mutual Aid, there is little possibility of establishing a second line of defense. Each retreat lengthens the fire front and compounds control difficulties. Once established, the



Aerial view of the area affected by the Blast



Aerial view showing crater and railroad yard

fire lines usually commit the officer to a last ditch fight. Again, in retrospect, it seems to me that I should have utilized all of Roseburg's equipment on the immediate problem and relied upon incoming aid to check outlying spot fires instead of reserving, as I did, one truck for that purpose."

At the request of the City of Roseburg's Fire Department, the Douglas County Mutual Aid apparatus assignments were activated by the Roseburg Rural Fire Protection District on-duty dispatcher, Richard Griffith, resulting in the mobilization of three engine companies and a salvage company, manned by fifteen men from the Roseburg Fire Protection District, one Salvage Company of two men and one Engine Company of five men from Myrtle Creek, one Engine Company of two men from the U.S. Veterans' Administration facility and one Disaster Unit with eight men from the Winston-Dillard Rural Fire Protection District. As a result of a police teletype message and a telephone call from a frantic Roseburg citizen, the Lane County Fire Chief, (Lane is the county immediately north of Roseburg) contacted the Roseburg Fire Department by telephone for confirmation of the situation and was told to send men and equipment immediately. The Lane County Chief dispatched two Engine Companies and ten men to Roseburg at approximately 2:00 a.m.; they traveled the 74 miles in a little over one hour. Shortly after dispatching the two pieces of equipment from Eugene, Oregon, the nearby Springfield Fire Department was notified of the apparent need for equipment and men and immediately dispatched one Engine Company and four men. The City of Eugene and Springfield apparatus and men were used on a stand-by duty at the Roseburg Rural and city Fire Department Stations. The Coos Bay Fire Chief and seven firemen, a captain and four men from North Bend Fire Department voluntarily supplied relief for the crews on the fire lines shortly after noon.

A total of 11,800 feet of 2 1/2" hose and 1,150 feet of 1 1/2" hose divided into sixteen 2 1/2" lines and twelve 1 1/2" lines were used in fighting the conflagration in addition to 3,150 feet of 2 1/2" hose being destroyed.

Operation procedure and dispatching of fire apparatus from the Roseburg Rural Fire Protection District as submitted by Assistant Chief Cliff Thrasher is as follows: (The Roseburg Rural Fire Protection District Station lies adjacent to Roseburg city limits.)

Engine Company No. 11, a 1,000 gpm pump responded with one officer and three firemen, taking the hydrant at Oak and Stephens and laying out four 2 1/2" hose lines.

Engine Company No. 12, a 1,250 gpm pumper responded with the Fire Chief and five firemen, taking the hydrant at Lane and Flint, with a hose layout of 1,450 feet of 2 1/2" hose to Oak and Spruce, then returning to the hydrant for pumping operations.

Tanker Company No. 13, equipped with a 750 gpm pump and a 1,000 gallon water tank, responded with one officer and three firemen,



Blast damage in railroad yard



Railroad cars off of the tracks and rubble

laying two lines of 950 feet of 2 1/2" hose from the Rose and Cass hydrant, then returning to Cass and Stephens for pumping operations.

Salvage Company No. 15, responding with one man to the Armory to supply electric power through a portable light plant such time involved in furnishing power was four and fifteen minutes.

### **CASUALTIES AND PROPERTY DAMAGE**

At this writing, the known and identified dead are recorded as thirteen persons, with the injured numbering one hundred and twenty-five, some critically. The explosion occurring so soon after the discovery of the fire probably saved the lives of many firemen, as few volunteers had arrived at the scene prior to the blast.

### **THE FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF FATALITIES**

<b>Eva McDonald</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Harrison Harry Carmichael</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Dennis Natter Tandy</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Richard Claude Knight</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>William Carl Unrath</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Roy Washington McFarland</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Bonnie Jean Berg</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Donald Everett DeSues</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Wayne Stevens Townsend</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Rufus Poe Wiggins</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Virginia Kuykendall</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Lelia Belle Kuykendall</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Martin Lust, Jr.</b>	<b>42</b>

Spectators and person on the street in the vicinity of Oak and Pine Streets at the time of the explosion were all casualties from flying debris or concussion. Other were literally 'blown out of their beds'. Guests of hotels suffered glass cuts and serious abrasions from falling plaster and other debris. Three girls reported from their hospital beds the nightmarish feeling of crawling through fallen rafters and wreckage to escape from a residence within a block of the Gerretsen Building.

As soon as it was possible to travel through the streets of the downtown business section, State Fire Marshall Deputies began a catalogue of damage to the business section and perimeter dwelling area. The survey included and inspection of 256 buildings, three of which were metal,

Fifteen brick, fifty-three frame and 185 masonry. It appeared that of the 256 buildings, 126 had complete glass damage, 93 heavy glass damage and 37 were considered as light glass damaged. As to structural damage, 90 suffered heavy structural damage and 20 complete destruction. 146 were lightly damaged.

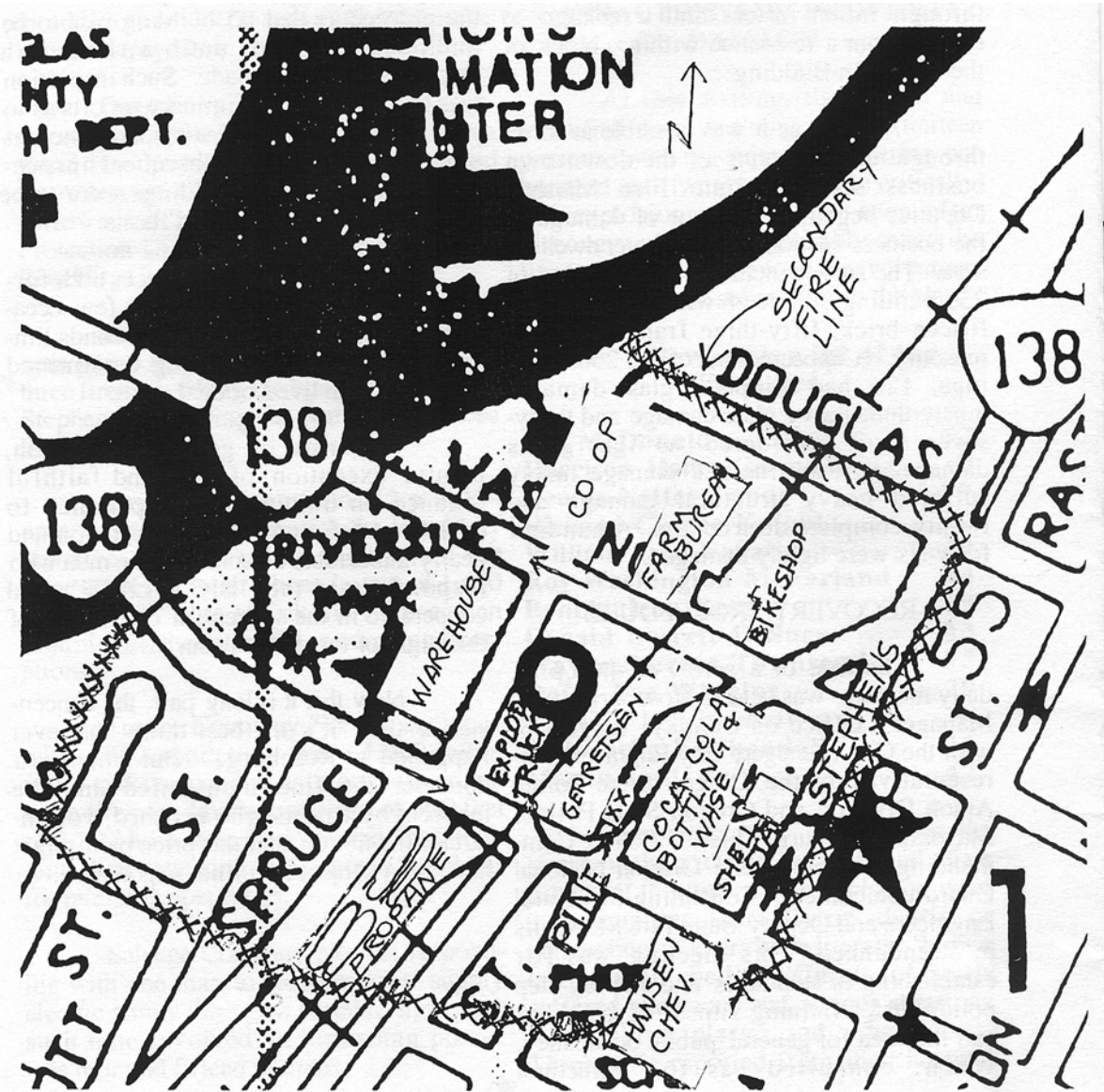
### **RECOVERY PROCEDURE**

The first of a series of 4:00 p.m. daily meetings was held in Roseburg's City Manager's Office on Sunday, August 8, with the City Manager, City Engineer, representative of the Oregon State Police Arson Division and Oregon State Police, Mayor of Roseburg, Chief of Police, Commanding Officer of the Oregon National Guard detachment, Consulting Structural Engineers and Deputy State Fire Marshalls in attendance. This meeting was for establishing of standards and step-by-step policy in determining fitness of buildings and the area for general public occupancy. When consulted as to 'structural stability,' Fire Marshall Deputies outlined the procedure that no building was to be publicly occupied until a thorough inspection had been made. Such inspection was to consist of preliminary reports as to general repairs needs, or condemned as unworthy of repair. Subsequent inspections of the affected buildings were to be conducted on an 'as needed' basis.

-----

In terms of coincidence, both fortuitous and disastrous, there are few occasions in history where a few seconds timing or a few feet positioning determined whether a person lived or died.

In terms of grim determination, painful execution of duty and faithful reliance on training and experience to complete a job fraught with frustration and nearly unbearable discomfort, the men who responded to the 'BIG BLAST' and cooperated in the successful conclusion of this night of terror are unsurpassed.



Map of Blast Area