

Gas leak suspected in explosion

Two women injured as house next door reduced to blackened hole

By Ritchie Gage

A natural gas leak is suspected as the cause of a fire and explosion which injured two women and destroyed a house at 454 Sydney Avenue and scattered debris which damaged seven other homes yesterday morning.

"We were sitting in the living room when the whole ceiling fell in," said Caroline Grimes, 73, who was at home with her sister, Rose Tritheart, 75, next door at 458 Sydney when the explosion occurred.

"It was so sudden. There was instant fire and I tried to pull my sister out but couldn't. It was disastrous. Someone finally broke in the door and got us out. We've lost everything."

The owner of the wrecked house, Will Bergen, and a male tenant, Dan Dyck, were not at home when the explosion occurred. The stucco and brick house, insured to an assessed value of \$30,000, was reduced to blackened hole in the ground surrounded by charred lumber and the \$2,500 garage was flattened.

A police inspector at the scene said a gas furnace had been installed in the home the day before the explosion when the dwelling was converted from oil to natural gas heating.

The inspector said a gas leak is suspected as a possible cause of the

explosion. Greater Winnipeg Gas Co. officials at the scene refused to say whether gas from the new furnace was involved in the mishap.

The provincial fire commissioner's office is investigating.

Tritheart was taken to Concordia Hospital and then transferred to the burn unit at the Health Sciences Centre with first- and second-degree burns to her thighs and legs. Grimes was treated for cuts, bumps and first- and second-degree burns on her arms at Concordia and released.

Grimes said she tried to pull her sister out of their house, but the

debris and fire stopped her.

"My arms are burned, my ankle is swollen and I have lost everything, I think," she said. "I don't even have a coat."

Marvin Lipchin, 30, who lived next door at 450 Sydney, said he narrowly escaped death in the explosion.

"I was in the bedroom right next to the blast and if I hadn't gone to the bathroom on the west side of the house I would have been killed," he said.

Penny Lipchin said she came from work to find her husband shaken, but alive and her house on fire.

"I guess everything's gone inside."

Insulation, lumber, and an eaves-trough hung in nearby trees and the rear windows of unoccupied houses directly behind on Neil Avenue were blown out.

Firefighters hosed down houses on both sides of the Bergen residence in an attempt to halt the spread of the blaze. Fire officials said the explosion occurred after the fire had started, spreading flames instantly to the other houses.

Other houses at 446, 453, 457 and 468 Sydney suffered minor damage such as broken windows and damaged siding.

\$50,000 sought to finance heart attack aid program

The Winnipeg Ambulance Commission has asked civic finance committee to put an extra \$50,000 in next year's ambulance budget for a series of courses in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and a public awareness program about heart attack symptoms and emergency action.

The money also would be used to print and distribute pamphlets dealing with heart attack treatment.

Coun. Jim Ragsdill, chairman of the commission, said the courses would be offered free of charge through community organizations in the city and

consist of four hours of instruction.

Ragsdill said the resuscitation courses are needed to improve the survival rate of heart attack victims, which now stands at 10 per cent in Winnipeg.

"That's a terribly poor rate of survival, much poorer than in many if not most other major Canadian cities," Ragsdill said.

The commission chairman said the ambulance service has included the \$50,000 in its 1982 budget, which stands at \$5,426,178, but will not know for some

time whether the item has been approved.

Ragsdill said the ambulance service also needs at least one and possibly two additional ambulances and eight more attendants to operate the extra equipment around the clock seven days a week in areas of Winnipeg which are now underserved.

The problem is particularly acute in Charleswood, Ragsdill said, because no ambulance is stationed in the general area.

"It takes about four to five minutes

Two women injured in blast

By Carol Picard
and John Bertrand
Sun Staff Writers

Two elderly East Kildonan sisters were injured when their next door neighbor's house disintegrated in a fiery explosion that was heard more than a mile away.

The mid-morning blast, which is still under investigation by the fire commissioner's office, levelled a one-storey house at 454 Sydney Ave. and caused extensive fire damage to two adjacent bungalows.

Witnesses said neighbors pulled 76-year-old Rose Treehard and Caroline Grimes, 73, onto the boulevard as flames raced through their home.

Treehard was reported in stable condition in the Health Sciences Center with first and second degree burns, lacerations and bruises. Her sister was treated and released.

The two men who lived in the levelled house, Will Bergen and Dan Dyck, were not at home at the time and could not be reached for comment.

There is some suspicion that the blast was related to the new gas line which was apparently inspected by Greater Winnipeg Gas the night before.

Marvin Lipchen was in the bathroom of his home at 450 Sydney when the explosion sent him sprawling across the room.

"I rushed out and saw my living room on fire, I was so scared it was unreal," he said. "I thought my house had blown up or a plane had landed in the roof."

While some witnesses described it as a scene from a war movie, Mitch Purtil looked out of his shop on Watt Street and saw "a mushroom cloud of flames with stuff disintegrating in the middle" shoot above the rooftops.

Burning debris rained down on him as he helped one of the injured women to the street and safety.

Glass was machinegunned in every direction and pieces of smoldering lumber landed on roofs five houses away.

Betty Neufeld sobbed after she rushed home from work and saw the shattered windows in her newly purchased home. Her husband Werner sighed as he inspected the glass shards embedded in the metal siding.

"We just had the gas turned on Wednesday when we moved in," he said. "We were to meet with the insurance agent today to change the policy to the new house."

Herbert Harrison lives across the backlane from the razed house and said "it was like being in the war again."

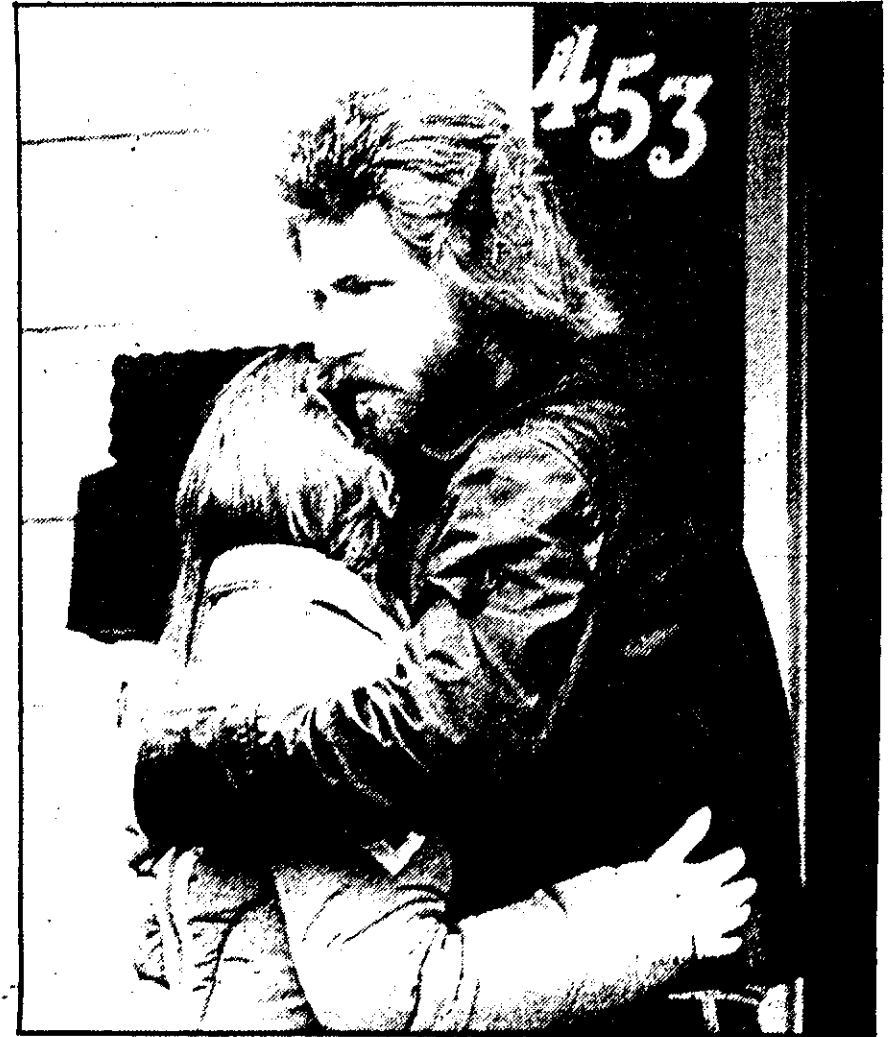
"I've seen some pretty bad things in my time but this is bad, really bad."

Fire department officials were still sifting through the ashes late Tuesday, and it's not certain when the final report will be completed.

The damage is listed at more than \$70,000.

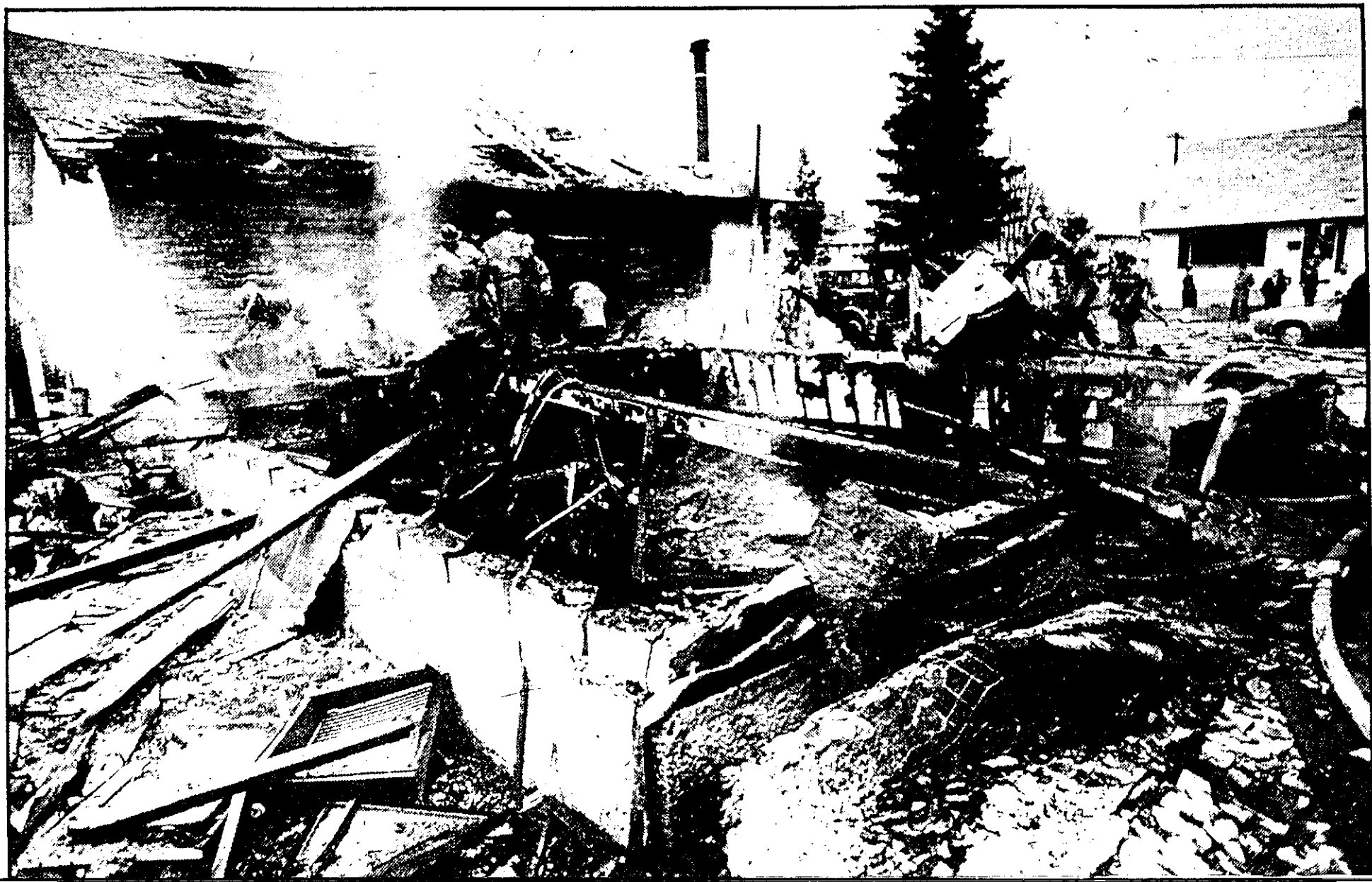
Sun
photos
by

**Gerard Kwiatkowski
and Joe McLellan**



Betty and Werner Neufeld had just moved into a nearby home. It was damaged by flying debris . . . they hadn't arranged for insurance yet.

**More photos
on Page 35**





Aftermath of blast

The roof of the house demolished in Tuesday's blast was blown backwards — an indication of the force of the explosion.

Nearby homes were damaged and firefighters were kept busy (below) making sure that an even greater disaster was averted. As it was, some neighbors were hard hit and fearful of insufficient insurance coverage.

Little of the house's contents survived the explosion, as witnessed by the demolished fridge (lower left).

*Sun photos by Joe McLellan
and Gerard Kwiatkowski*





Scene of blast

Smoke billows from rubble after a house at 454 Sydney Ave. was levelled by an explosion Tuesday. Homes on either side suffered extensive fire

Sun photo by Gerard Kwiatkowski

damage, and other nearby residences were damaged by flying debris. Two elderly women were injured.

The complete story is on Page 11, with more photos on Page 35.