

WICKES LUMBER

WE

SURVIVED

THE

BLAST

109 1st Ave.

**Just East of the Old Building)
La Salle, Colorado**

284-5515

Wickes Lumber would like to express our appreciation and extreme thanks to everyone involved in working through the disaster at our yard Saturday morning.

**Wickes is open to serve you
in the best possible way.**

HOURS: 7:00-5:00 M-F

8:00-12:00 Saturday

WICKES LUMBER



Smoke-enveloped firemen take a break.

Power of blast stuns residents, firefighters

By JOEL ENGELHARDT

LA SALLE — La Salle volunteer firefighter Steve Hergert heard the explosion from his bedroom, three blocks away.

"It brought you out of bed, I'll tell you that," he said at 2:30 a.m. Saturday. Clouds of white smoke from the smoldering Wickes Lumber showroom, 100 2nd St., billowed overhead; shattered glass from flattened windows crunched underfoot.

Hergert and 65 volunteers from the La Salle, Platteville, Evans, Gilcrest and Western Hills fire departments donned rubber suits and oxygen masks to put out a blaze that sizzled like a dying campfire until dawn.

When they arrived about 1 a.m. Saturday, they faced 150-foot flames bordered on two sides by stored lumber. They soaked the lumber to prevent ignition, then turned toward the fire, each department attacking from a different direction.

Hergert helped save two flat-bed trucks trapped between the fire and the stored lumber. A third truck burned, its front end melted, its cab black and hollow.

At two storefronts across the street, south and west of the showroom, the windows were shattered, metal frames twisted by the blast's force.

Three miles south, the explosion shook the house of La Salle firefighter Bruce Sandau, 22444 Weld 35. His wife, Dalayne, worked with other volunteers to distribute coffee to chilled firefighters.

"At first we thought it was our furnace. But then my husband said, 'Oh, it's that gas well,'" she said.

That "gas well" is actually an abandoned water well east of the

showroom. A searant applied to the well Friday forced gas beneath the showroom to cause the explosion.

Hergert, dressed in black and holding an oxygen mask, agreed with the officials.

"I don't know if that's what happened, but God, I would think that would have to have caused what we have here,"

Firefighters, two to a hose, poured a continuous stream of water on coal-hot debris buried beneath the showroom's collapsed roof. "We're having a hard time getting to it," La Salle volunteer Daryl Westover said.

Gilcrest volunteer Mike Tibbens clutched a Styrofoam coffee cup as he awaited an oxygen refill for his 15-minute capacity tank. "It's rough," he said.

As he spoke, the overhead smoke cloud, blowing south and east, dropped its white smoke on resting firefighters.

Strewn along U.S. 85, which was closed to traffic for seven hours, were walls that divided six Wickes offices mixed with ladders, fluffy pink insulation, an unused kitchen sink fixture, and assorted hardware.

Berta Padilla worked for 12 years in one of those offices, now roofless, wall-less and scorched by flames.

She pointed to a crushed filing cabinet, setting in water by the road side. "Looks like Vicki's file," she said.

Other cabinets, handles melted, green paint scorched black, were grouped by firefighters near the road's median strip.

Amid debris 2 feet deep was Wickes overhead road signs. Frames of the signs, two empty rectangles on a twisted post, hovered above.



Firemen work in pairs and alone to help extinguish the blaze.



Alone against a wall of smoke.



La Salle fireman Bret Tanberg removes some of the office records.

Photos by John Blake

More gas found at explosion site

Pipes sunk to vent vapors

By DOLORES WHISKEYMAN
Tribune Staff Writer

The Weld County Health Department Wednesday found that high concentrations of combustible natural gas have saturated the soil beneath the blacktop at the Wickes Lumber property in La Salle, and today the town is sinking pipes in an effort to vent some of that gas.

Ron Stow, environmental health director for the county, said today that Wickes and La Salle officials are putting about 10 vents into the ground around the explosion site and a nearby water well that exploded several weeks ago.

The Wickes showroom and offices were destroyed in a blast last weekend caused by natural gas from an unknown source.

Stow said 10-foot perforated pipes are being put into the ground, and 10 foot non-perforated pipes are being connected to them above ground, in order to allow the natural gas to escape.

Stow said the gas beneath the asphalt was of a 100 percent combustible concentration when readings were taken Wednesday.

His task of monitoring the gas has been made a little easier, he said. The

State Health Department has brought portable monitoring equipment to La Salle, and all testing is now being done there. Previously County Health Department officials had to take samples to Denver for testing, he said.

La Salle Mayor Bruce Kamada said today he has requested assistance from a geologist through the Colorado Geological Survey.

"We want to have someone who can read these logs that are coming in to us," he said.

He said no one involved in the investigation so far feels comfortable about interpreting technical information about the water well that exploded Feb. 9.

That well is now being redrilled to cut through a cement cap that was poured eight hours before the explosion this weekend.

Kamada said the cost of bringing in a geologist would come to about \$2,650 for six days work and he has asked that Gov. Richard Lamm waive the charge.

The town has already spent a considerable sum to deal with the gas leak, he said, although he did not know what the figure was.

Kamada said he expects a response from the governor's office today.

and sur-
viving officers
shortly after the
ruptured at 2:23 p.m. from the
ing near the public school,
located in a middle-class area five
miles south of downtown.

Several guns, including at least one
shotgun and one high-powered rifle,
were found inside the dead man's

attempted to
help her up, he would
somewhere across the street and
would duck back.

"And so the last time I attempted to
try go over, that's when I got hit, and I
felt the sting the minute I got hit."

Jones had a shotgun pellet removed

See SNIPER, page A14

Tests reveal gas pocket within Wickes property

LA SALLE — Tests at the Wickes Lumber property Friday revealed that a pocket of natural gas said to be connected to last weekend's lumberyard explosion is trapped in a zone 50 to 60 feet below ground.

But the gas doesn't extend beyond the property line of the lumberyard and apparently will not endanger other properties or groundwater sources, according to La Salle Mayor Bruce Kamada.

Town, county and state officials met at Town Hall Friday to discuss the tests performed by an out-of-state consulting firm, Schlumberger Well Service, and to map a plan of action.

"We do believe we've got some answers," Kamada said.

The source of the gas just below the surface of the ground has not been pinpointed, however. The group theorized Friday that a water well east of the Wickes property that exploded Feb. 9 may extend at least 1,100 feet below ground, where a layer of natural gas is said to exist, according to information provided by state geologists.

Kamada said it's possible the gas at 1,100 feet below the surface moved up the water well to create the pocket at 50 to 60 feet below ground.

Or, another layer of gas exists at

2,700 feet below the surface, Kamada said. "Water wells have been known to be dropped to both of those levels. The gas could be from either layer," he said.

County health department officials also have said they haven't "totally discounted" the possibility that the gas is from a deeper gas formation, such as the Codell, about 7,200 below the surface.

Kamada also said a press conference is scheduled at 2:30 p.m. today to discuss a monitoring plan for the next several weeks.

About 20 vents were created at the lumberyard Thursday and Friday in an attempt to allow the trapped gas to escape.

The group also agreed Friday to keep the gas well head open for at least two weeks so that it can be monitored to measure the amount of gas escaping.

The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, meanwhile, has established jurisdiction over the gas well and will determine when it will be closed.

The government officials are scheduled to meet again at 1 p.m. March 7 to determine whether further action needs to be taken.



Tribune photo by John Blake

Evans fireman John MacKenzie sprays water on the fire that destroyed the Wickes Lumber showroom in La Salle early Saturday.

Officials attribute La Salle fire to gas leak

By JOEL ENGELHARDT
Tribune Staff Writer

LA SALLE — A natural gas leak sparked an explosion and fire at 12:49 a.m. Saturday that leveled the Wickes Lumber showroom and six offices in the center of this south-central Weld community.

Nine fire and police departments responded to the 7-hour blaze that caused no serious injuries but forced officials to close a four-block strip of U.S. 85 in downtown La Salle.

La Salle Police Chief Carl Harvey heard the explosion from his car less than a block away. "By the time I turned to look, the building was completely annihilated," Harvey said.

Firefighters arrived before 1 a.m. and began dousing open-sided lumber storage areas that bordered the showroom on two sides, La Salle Fire Chief Jack Cox said.

The fire did not spread to the lumber or any nearby buildings. "We didn't try

saving this (the showroom). There was no saving it," Cox said.

Damage estimates will not be available until Monday, Wickes Manager Bob Earle said. Fire Chief Cox said damage would probably total "in the hundreds of thousands of dollars."

The explosion broke windows in buildings across the street from Wickes and produced a blast heard three miles away by Dalyn Sandau of 2244 Weld 35, who later distributed coffee to firefighters.

La Salle Mayor Bruce Kamada blamed the blast on a natural gas leak that caused a small explosion Feb. 9 in an abandoned water well about 50 feet east of the Wickes showroom. That explosion carved a 10-foot hole in an asphalt parking lot, but caused no injuries or other damage.

Samples of gas from the water well matched samples taken Saturday from a pipe in the foundation of the flattened showroom, said Ron Stow, environmental

health director for the Weld County Health Department.

When gas from the Feb. 9 explosion continued to escape throughout last week, Wickes officials decided to seal the leak. Jim McKee, an engineer for the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, approved the action Friday after a meeting with county and lumber yard officials.

Officials suspect the sealant, applied by 5 p.m. Friday, forced the gas to surface beneath the showroom, leading to the explosion eight hours later.

Four days before the Feb. 9 explosion, developer Arlo Richardson of Evans drilled an oil and gas well a half mile south of town, an incident that may be connected with the gas leak, Kamada said.

Weld County officials, state legislators, representatives of the state Health Department, and Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission Chairman Bill Smith discussed the issue for 90 minutes Saturday at the La Salle Town Hall.

Smith said three La Salle-area developers agreed to halt drilling operations for 20 days until officials pinpoint the leak's source.

Official investigations will be conducted by the Weld County Sheriff's Office or the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, Cox said. A Wickes consultant will also investigate, he said.

About 65 firefighters representing fire departments from La Salle, Evans, Platteville, Gilcrest and Western Hills responded to the blaze. Also responding were law enforcement officers from the La Salle, Milliken and Evans police departments and the Weld County Sheriff's Office. The WCSO Posse also responded.

Two firefighters were treated for minor injuries at North Colorado Medical Center and released. Western Hills volunteer Fred Cook suffered from smoke inhalation and Evans volunteer Lowell Roberts

See FIRE, page A12



Tribune photo by John Blake

Gene Rempel, right, of La Salle Fire Department sprays water on the smoldering remains of the Wickes Lumber building Saturday afternoon.

Leak presumed stopped after two weeks of tests

LA SALLE — Mystery surrounds a natural gas leak that sparked an explosion which leveled the Wickes Lumber showroom early Saturday, the director of the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission said.

After two weeks of tests and experiments, officials thought they had stopped the gas leak when they sealed an underground section of an abandoned water well 50 feet east of the Wickes showroom, said Director Bill Smith.

But eight hours later, the showroom exploded, leaving officials more uncertain than ever.

They know the leaking gas must have surfaced beneath the showroom, causing the explosion, but they don't know how much gas is left or where it may surface next.

The implications for Weld County, the state's second largest oil and gas producer, may be substantial. Local and county officials, along with Sen. John Donley, R-Greeley, and Rep. Bill Artist, R-Greeley, met with Smith for 90 minutes Saturday in La Salle. They agreed to order a 20-day halt to area

drilling and fracking operations.

Drilling and fracking at nearby wells may have forced gas into the abandoned water well, where it touched off an explosion Feb. 9 that ripped a 10-foot hole in an asphalt parking lot, Smith said.

In fracking, a gummy solution is forced through the well hole into the ground where it breaks solids, freeing gas and oil deposits, Smith said.

Three La Salle-area well owners contacted Saturday by Smith agreed to the halt. Smith had not contacted Arlo Richardson of Evans, the fourth well developer within two miles of La Salle.

Fracking for the Richardson well, about a half mile south of La Salle, began Feb. 5, La Salle Mayor Bruce Kamada said. "It seems funny that four days after you frack the well all of a sudden you have a problem," he said.

First, the natural gas, about 40 percent methane, surfaced through the abandoned water well and exploded. To trace its source, Wickes' consultants

See LEAK, page A12

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La Salle LEADER

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35th Year No. 49

La Salle, Colorado 80645

Thursday, February 23, 1984

Wickes building leveled in gas blast



WICKES LUMBER showroom and offices stood here until destroyed by the Saturday morning explosion. Business

operations have been resumed across the street.

By Michael Neilson

The natural gas problems in La Salle seem to keep disappearing in one place and re-appearing in another place.

But in a telephone interview Tuesday night, Mayor Bruce Kamada seemed confident. "We think we've got just one problem now, not a number of them" he said.

Following last Saturday's explosion and subsequent destruction of the Wickes Lumber showroom and offices in downtown La Salle, the most recent problem emerged Tuesday morning as gas was discovered in a sewer line in the alley north of the United Bank of La Salle parking lot.

Even though there

was no gas in the building, bank officials decided to open a bit late Tuesday morning. The gas in the sewer line was quickly vented and dissipated; at this time, there is no longer any gas being detected in the sewer line.

Mayor Kamada said a number of holes were dug Tuesday to search

underground spreading (migration) of natural gas. The holes were dug on the south, east, and west sides of the Wickes block, and no gas was found, Kamada said.

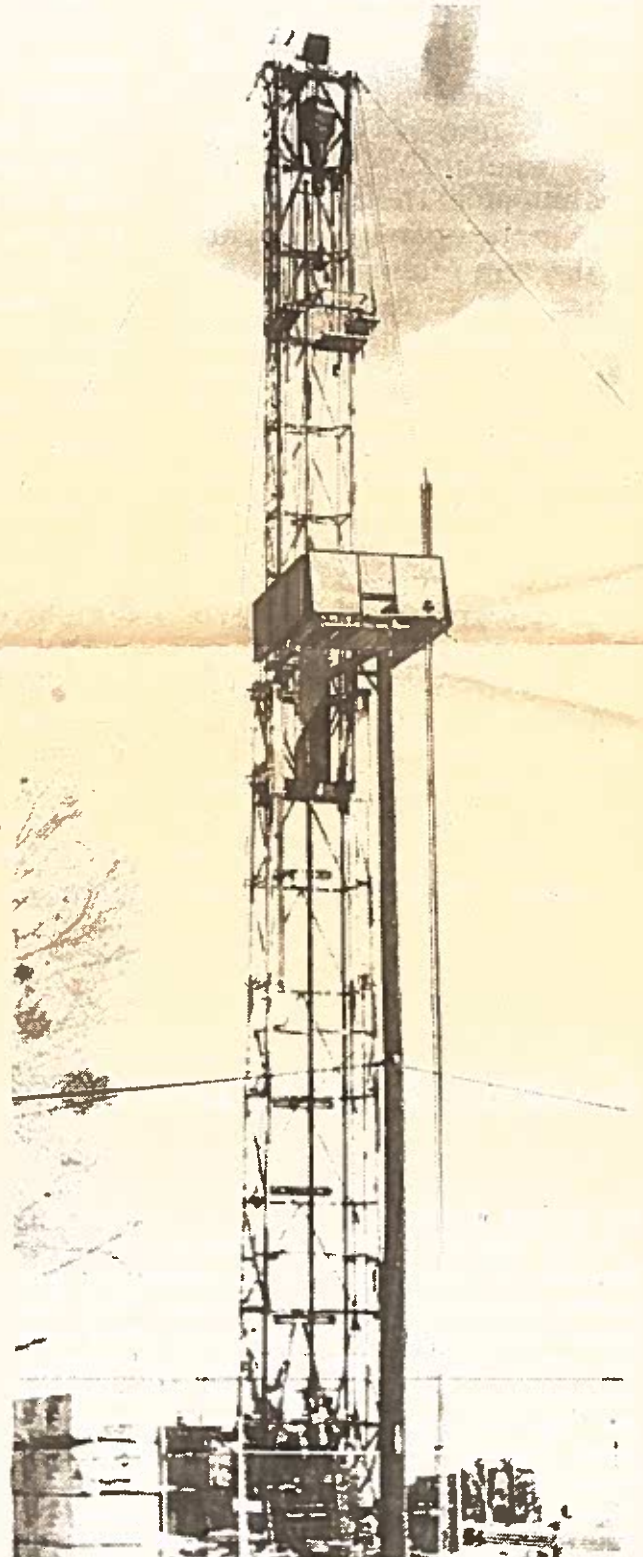
Drilling operations at the site of the original gas leak in the asphalt lot at Wickes have reached a depth of 260 feet as they drill through the plug that was placed there last week.

Kamada said there will be some critical days this week in possibly determining where this leaking gas is coming from.

The natural gas explosion ripped through the offices and showroom of Wickes Lumber in La Salle at 12:49 a.m. Saturday morning.

The explosion and resulting fire completely destroyed the building. The outside lumber storage sheds did not catch on fire.

The explosion blew out some windows of businesses across the street from the Wickes showroom. A



STILL IN PLACE in the lot behind the Wickes showroom, this rig is drilling into the old water well that was the source of the original gas leak sealed off last week.

resident on South 3rd Street Court felt the concussion of the blast in his home. An employee of the La Salle Getty Truck Stop Restaurant --three blocks north of the explosion site --heard the restaurant's windows rattle after the blast.

which was also heard by an area resident three miles away.

More than 60 firefighters from several communities responded to help fight the seven-hour blaze that forced the closing of a stretch of

Continued on page 8



LOOKING FOR ANSWERS, the La Salle Town Board members have numerous questions Saturday morning for Ron Stowe, Wes Pot-

ter, and Ralph Wooley (standing, left to right), all of the Weld County Health Department.

From Page A1

★ Gas

found at the Wickes site: a shallow sandstone formation several hundred feet down, or the Codell Formation, 7,200 feet down.

But Potter said the gas could have migrated from the Codell Formation if a well drilled to that depth had been done so improperly.

He said that if there were a crack in the casing of the well, gas could migrate up the outside of the casing to the Hygene sandstone formation, move along that porous rock to the abandoned water well and through that well to the surface.

There is, however, no evidence of such a problem with the Richardson well south of La Salle. Potter said the logs from that well indicate all appropriate steps were taken to prevent such a leak.

Smith said his personal opinion is that the gas came from the Hygene formation, in which small amounts of gas deposits have been found in the past.

It isn't known whether the abandoned water well was drilled that deep, Potter said, since the Wickes company plugged the well with 104 bags of cement last week, before it was determined what kind of gas had been leaking or where the source was.

Potter said that action probably led to the explosion, because the gas continued to collect near the surface.

"I don't think we would have had this problem if appropriate action had been taken," he said.

The health department will continue to test the gas at the site. If the department measures a sustained release of gas, he said, it will indicate "an active plume" below the surface — meaning the gas is continuing to seep from its original source.

But if there is no evidence of sustained release, he added, then there is only a small, residual pocket of gas remaining.

He said the plugged opening of the water well is being re-drilled so the depth of the well can be determined, and the well will be tested to see if gas is migrating along the exterior

★ Reopens

onlookers driving past to view the wreckage, the yard was full of employees, corporate representatives, law enforcement officials and others.

Directly behind the lumberyard an oil derrick has been erected so workers can drill out a concrete plug that was poured to stop an apparent gas leak just nine hours before the explosion. Officials still are looking for the cause of the leak and are checking to see if the plug may have diverted leaking gas to fill into the basement of the lumber company building.

"We lost the hardware area and offices," Earle said, "but you've got to remember that first of all we're a lumberyard. We still have the lumber to sell, and we've ordered supplies to replace the hardware, adhesives and paint we lost. We have eight other buildings around here for storage, so we're still able to do business."

The company lost one truck — which was only 30 days old — and two others were damaged, but Earle emphasized the company has other trucks. "We're making deliveries today."

The offices have been moved into two small houses next door to the lumberyard, and employees were busy this morning moving in desks, typewriters and a few water-soaked, smoke-blackened file cabinets. Other employees were digging through the debris to find other salvageable goods.

Five representatives from the Wickes headquarters in Vernon Hills, Ill., were in town today, and Earle was escorting them through the debris-laden area. They took notes and talked in serious tones.

Also walking through the charred remains were La Salle Fire Marshal Gary Sandau and Weld County Sheriff's Sgt. Ed Jordan.

Sandau stood over a freshly dug hole where the restrooms to the building once stood. "We found an old sewer pipe down there, and it was apparently abandoned and sealed years ago. We ran a test probe in there yesterday to check the gas level and it showed it

they checked the hole a second time, there was no gas reading. Several checks throughout the day Sunday showed varying levels of gas from the old pipe. He said they don't know if the gas that filled the building and caused the explosion came from the abandoned sewer, but it could have. Investigators said Saturday they believed the explosion was touched off by a pilot light. Sandau said the water heater and furnace for the building were located above the old sewer pipe.

While Sandau is cautious when talking about future dangers for the town, he said 20 houses and businesses in the area were checked for any gas accumulations Sunday, and none was found. The water system for the town has also been monitored, because officials said gas could be leaking into the city water system.

No estimates of damage have been released, although it will amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to Earle. He said the building was fully insured, and the adjusters were in La Salle on Saturday. They are supposed to come back this week to complete their reports.

★ Neighbors

sometime in the mid-50s when they built the new lumberyard."

Weigandt, who said he has lived in La Salle all his life, said Wickes Lumber used to be the Weld County Lumber Co., which was started in the early 1900s.

"Wickes has only had it for the past five or six years, I think," Weigandt said.

Rick Downey, who owns Rick's New and Used Furniture, estimated damage to his business at \$3,000. His business is southwest of the lumberyard across U.S. 85.

"That's just a guess (on the damage). I had seven used sleepers up there by the windows that have glass in them. I can't sell them now," he said. Four plate glass windows on the southeast corner of the business were blown out by the explosion, and paintings were

there was no damage, but Loren Kent is one of many La Salle residents or businessmen who are concerned about more explosions.

"Marge (Weigandt) called me about 1:15 Saturday morning and asked me if I knew what was going on down there. I live in Greeley and own both the office and Rick's building. I went right down there because I was concerned about looting from Rick's place, but we didn't have any problems like that," Kent said.

"I feel they've got a real problem with this gas, and I don't think they've got it solved yet. I think everybody is pretty concerned in La Salle; I know we are," Kent said.

Downey echoed that feeling.

"One more explosion and I'm leaving. I'll close up and leave and try to find something else somewhere else," he said this morning.

David Broyles, executive vice president of the United Bank of La Salle, directly west across U.S. 85 from the lumberyard, also indicated concern.

"Police have been in our basement twice since the explosion checking to see if there is any gas, and there has been nothing yet. I hope there isn't, but I am concerned," Broyles said. He said there was no damage to the bank, but glass, blown across the street by the explosion, remained in the parking lot and on the ground in front of the bank building this morning.

Worrisome

Mystery still surrounds the explosion Saturday morning which destroyed Wickes Lumber in La Salle. But some very serious concerns are being raised: The explosion may have resulted from oil and gas exploration in the Codell Formation.

It's too early to make such a conclusion. But nothing should be left unchecked in the continuing investigation. The implications are severe.

Lumberyard gas blast mystifies La Salle

Officials worried trouble not over

By MIKE STONE

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

LA SALLE, Colo. — Puzzled town officials here are looking for the source of natural gas that caused an explosion early Saturday, leveling the Wickes lumberyard.

Although no one was injured in the explosion that "shook the town," most of the lumberyard was reduced to smoldering rubble. Wickes is at the intersection of First Street and Colorado 85, about half-way through the mile strip of town along the highway leading to Greeley five miles to the north.

The blast rattled windows for blocks and woke up many of the town's almost 2,000 residents. It knocked out two plate-glass windows at the Conoco service station across First Street.

Although the fire was put out Saturday morning, Mayor Bruce Kamada doesn't think his town is out of danger. The circumstances surrounding the blast read like a geological mystery and support Kamada's concern.

"No one we've talked to, none of the geologists or anyone, has ever seen anything like this," Kamada said.

LA SALLE Fire Chief Jack Cox said the explosion apparently was caused by natural gas vapors escaping from the ground into the Wickes yard and building. The gas was from an unknown source, not from any gas lines. It evidently was touched off by the pilot light in a Wickes furnace.

But the chain of events that sparked the blast may have started last week, or earlier, according to city officials.

Kamada said there was another, milder explosion at an old, unused city water well on the Wickes property, about 200 feet to the west. That blast, of unknown origin, occurred on the evening of Feb. 9.

Kamada said that the next day water and natural gas were bubbling out of the old well through a crack in the asphalt. City officials said the mixture bubbled as high as two feet out of the ground.

Private geologists, gas company inspectors, county health officials, town maintenance crews and other officials were called in.

PUBLIC WORKS crews began monitoring the town's two water wells to see if any gas was entering them. None was.

The problem was studied for several days and some concrete was poured over the top of the well to seal the gas. That didn't work and later the entire 220 feet of the old well was drilled out and concrete was poured into it.

That job was finished at 5 p.m. Friday. About eight hours later, the Wickes building blew up.

"We can't say for sure that the same gas was forced over to the lumberyard by plugging up the old well, but the explosion came after it was done," Kamada said. "Draw your own conclusions."

City crews and firefighters were out Saturday morning looking for the path the natural gas may have taken. Kamada said he was concerned that the gas may have gotten into sewer lines under the Wickes property.

CREWS LOCATED all sewer lines and then Greeley Gas Co. workers, with gas detectors, checked them for gas vapors. By shortly after noon, it was determined that the sewer lines were clear of vapors.

But city officials are still wrestling with some tough questions, such as where did the gas come from? How much may still be under the town waiting to be ignited?

Samples of the gas found at the Wickes



Evans, Colo., fireman John MacKenzie sprays water on the fire that followed explosion at Wickes Lumber.



explosion site will be examined and compared with samples taken from the well site last week, Kamada said. He is hopeful that the two will match.

If they don't, he said, it could mean there are other gas pockets scattered around the area.

Kamada said no one will be evacuated, but officials are keeping an eye on the area. They also will continue to monitor the city water and sewer system for gas.

The mayor also said he has asked the Colorado Oil and Gas Commission to declare a moratorium on any gas drilling for a 3-mile radius around town. Although La Salle is described as a bedroom community to Greeley and Denver, natural gas exploration is common in the fields surrounding it.

KAMADA SPECULATED that recent drilling using explosives about a half-mile from Wickes may have caused the gas to spread.

Saturday's explosion occurred shortly before 1 a.m. By Saturday afternoon, a small amount of gas sporadically leaked from a hole where the office used to be. The charred frame of Wickes' neon sign stood over the heaped ruins of the business.

Firefighters estimate the damage to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Fire units from Evans, Western Hills and Gilcrest joined the local crew. About 60 firefighters battled the blaze.



An ironic message on a sign lies in the remains of the lumberyard.

Blast aftermath

Investigators say gas came from deep rock; source not identified

By DOLORES WHISKEYMAN
Tribune Staff Writer

The natural gas that exploded beneath Wickes Lumber showroom in La Salle early Saturday morning was a deep rock variety from below 1,000 feet, officials at the Weld County Health Department said today.

How that gas made its way to the surface is debatable, said Wes Potter, environmental health specialist with the department.

The explosion destroyed the company's offices in the lumberyard. No one was injured in the blast. Two of the 65 firefighters who responded to the blaze were treated for minor injuries at North Colorado Medical Center and released.

No damage estimate had been released as of this morning by investigating officers or Wickes' officials.

Potter said samples taken during the weekend indicate the gas that exploded Saturday is of the same type that exploded Feb. 9 in an abandoned water well some 50 feet east of the building.

Testing in both cases showed the same composition of ethane and propane gases that are found in deep rock formations.

He also said no evidence of natural gas has been found in the town's water supply, another indication the gas came from a deeper source.

Four days before the Feb. 9

explosion, an oil and gas well owned by developer Arlo Richardson was drilled about 6/10 mile south of the Wickes site, and officials had suggested a link between the drilling of that well and the first explosion.

Bill Smith, director of the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, said today that all operators within two miles of the explosion site have agreed to halt drilling and fracking operations until March 5.

During fracking, chemicals are injected into the rock formation to cause cracks that permit the natural gas and oil to escape.

Both Smith and Richardson said the natural gas migrates straight up to the ground surface a maximum distance of 1,300 feet after fracking, and for it to have moved diagonally from Richardson's well to the Wickes site — a distance of 8,500 feet through more than 5,000 feet of shale — would be highly improbable.

"I could tell you an accumulation of beans underneath the Armadillo (restaurant) caused that explosion," Richardson said. "Nobody knows. Only God knows, and he's not talking."

"I'd have a better chance of spitting 8,500 feet than fracking 8,500 feet," he added.

Potter said there are only two sources for the kind of gas

See GAS, page A12



Tribune photo by John Scank

Contractors Chuck Bollig, left, and Ed Weber survey damage today at Wickes Lumber, La Salle.

Lumberyard reopens for partial business

By MIKE PETERS
Tribune Staff Writer

LA SALLE — This morning Wickes Lumber Co. manager Robert Earle stood among the blackened debris of what had been his company's main offices and shook his head. Quietly, he said, "We can't say it's business as usual, but we're open today."

The fact that the offices are open is surprising. There is no main office area. In its place is a charred hole in the ground,

surrounded by piles of ashes, debris, twisted steel and blackened lumber. Shortly before 1 a.m. Saturday, a gas explosion leveled the building. The fire that followed completed the devastation of the offices, although 65 firefighters were able to save most of the lumber surrounding the main building.

The corner where the lumberyard stands was busy this morning. In addition to several

See REOPENS, page A12

Damage frustrates neighbors

By BILL JACKSON
Tribune Staff Writer

LA SALLE — Marge Weigandt's first thought early Saturday morning was that another traffic accident had occurred on U.S. 85.

"We have a lot of bad accidents out there on the highway. We (she and her husband, Pink) were asleep, and the explosion woke us up. I heard the glass falling and thought it was another accident. I jumped up out of bed and pulled on some jeans and a sweatshirt that were laying by the bed and

ran out the front door. When I got to the corner the lumber company building was already gone, and flames were shooting up probably 100 feet or more into the air," she said this morning.

The Weigandts live at 204 2nd Ave., a block and a half northwest of Wickes Lumber Co. It was leveled by a natural gas explosion about 12:50 a.m. Saturday. Sixty-five firefighters from five area departments battled the ensuing blaze for seven hours.

The Weigandts, along with other residents and busi-

nessmen in the four-block area of downtown La Salle, were checking homes and offices for damage this morning or waiting for insurance adjusters to arrive to begin their estimates.

"We own this house and the one next door. I'm going over to check to see if there is any damage to that one as soon as the sun gets around on that south side and warms up a little," Weigandt said. "This house we live in used to be on the corner where the lumber company is. It was moved here

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From Page A1

★ Gas

found at the Wickes site: a shallow sandstone formation several hundred feet down, or the Codell Formation, 7,200 feet down.

But Potter said the gas could have migrated from the Codell Formation if a well drilled to that depth had been done so improperly.

He said that if there were a crack in the casing of the well, gas could migrate up the outside of the casing to the Hygene sandstone formation, move along that porous rock to the abandoned water well and through that well to the surface.

There is, however, no evidence of such a problem with the Richardson well south of La Salle. Potter said the logs from that well indicate all appropriate steps were taken to prevent such a leak.

Smith said his personal opinion is that the gas came from the Hygene formation, in which small amounts of gas deposits have been found in the past.

It isn't known whether the abandoned water well was drilled that deep, Potter said, since the Wickes company plugged the well with 104 bags of cement last week, before it was determined what kind of gas had been leaking or where the source was.

Potter said that action probably led to the explosion, because the gas continued to collect near the surface.

"I don't think we would have had this problem if appropriate action had been taken," he said.

The health department will continue to test the gas at the site. If the department measures a sustained release of gas, he said, it will indicate "an active plume" below the surface — meaning the gas is continuing to seep from its original source.

But if there is no evidence of sustained release, he added, then there is only a small, residual pocket of gas remaining.

He said the plugged opening of the water well is being re-drilled so the depth of the well can be determined, and the well will be tested to see if gas is migrating along the exterior of the casing.

★ Reopens

onlookers driving past to view the wreckage, the yard was full of employees, corporate representatives, law enforcement officials and others.

Directly behind the lumberyard an oil derrick has been erected so workers can drill out a concrete plug that was poured to stop an apparent gas leak just nine hours before the explosion. Officials still are looking for the cause of the leak and are checking to see if the plug may have diverted leaking gas to fill into the basement of the lumber company building.

"We lost the hardware area and offices," Earle said, "but you've got to remember that first of all we're a lumberyard. We still have the lumber to sell, and we've ordered supplies to replace the hardware, adhesives and paint we lost. We have eight other buildings around here for storage, so we're still able to do business."

The company lost one truck — which was only 30 days old — and two others were damaged, but Earle emphasized the company has other trucks. "We're making deliveries today."

The offices have been moved into two small houses next door to the lumberyard, and employees were busy this morning moving in desks, typewriters and a few water-soaked, smoke-blackened file cabinets. Other employees were digging through the debris to find other salvageable goods.

Five representatives from the Wickes headquarters in Vernon Hills, Ill., were in town today, and Earle was escorting them through the debris-laden area. They took notes and talked in serious tones.

Also walking through the charred remains were La Salle Fire Marshal Gary Sandau and Weld County Sheriff's Sgt. Ed Jordan.

Sandau stood over a freshly dug hole where the restrooms to the building once stood. "We found an old sewer pipe down there, and it was apparently abandoned and sealed years ago. We ran a test probe in there yesterday to check the gas level, and it pushed the needle right off the scale."

However, Sandau said when

they checked the hole a second time, there was no gas reading. Several checks throughout the day Sunday showed varying levels of gas from the old pipe. He said they don't know if the gas that filled the building and caused the explosion came from the abandoned sewer, but it could have. Investigators said Saturday they believed the explosion was touched off by a pilot light. Sandau said the water heater and furnace for the building were located above the old sewer pipe.

While Sandau is cautious when talking about future dangers for the town, he said 20 houses and businesses in the area were checked for any gas accumulations Sunday, and none was found. The water system for the town has also been monitored, because officials said gas could be leaking into the city water system.

No estimates of damage have been released, although it will amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to Earle. He said the building was fully insured, and the adjusters were in La Salle on Saturday. They are supposed to come back this week to complete their reports.

★ Neighbors

sometime in the mid-50s when they built the new lumberyard."

Weigandt, who said he has lived in La Salle all his life, said Wickes Lumber used to be the Weld County Lumber Co., which was started in the early 1900s.

"Wickes has only had it for the past five or six years, I think," Weigandt said.

Rick Downey, who owns Rick's New and Used Furniture, estimated damage to his business at \$3,000. His business is southwest of the lumberyard across U.S. 85.

"That's just a guess (on the damage). I had seven used sleepers up there by the windows that have glass in them. I can't sell them now," he said. Four plate glass windows on the southeast corner of the business were blown out by the explosion, and paintings were knocked off walls, he said.

Next door, at the office of Low Level Aerial Applicators,

there was no damage, but Loren Kent is one of many La Salle residents or businessmen who are concerned about more explosions.

"Marge (Weigandt) called me about 1:15 Saturday morning and asked me if I knew what was going on down there. I live in Greeley and own both the office and Rick's building. I went right down there because I was concerned about looting from Rick's place, but we didn't have any problems like that," Kent said.

"I feel they've got a real problem with this gas, and I don't think they've got it solved yet. I think everybody is pretty concerned in La Salle; I know we are," Kent said.

Downey echoed that feeling.

"One more explosion and I'm leaving. I'll close up and leave and try to find something else somewhere else," he said this morning.

David Broyles, executive vice president of the United Bank of La Salle, directly west across U.S. 85 from the lumberyard, also indicated concern.

"Police have been in our basement twice since the explosion checking to see if there is any gas, and there has been nothing yet. I hope there isn't, but I am concerned," Broyles said. He said there was no damage to the bank, but glass, blown across the street by the explosion, remained in the parking lot and on the ground in front of the bank building this morning.

Worrisome

Mystery still surrounds the explosion Saturday morning which destroyed Wickes Lumber in La Salle. But some very serious concerns are being raised: The explosion may have resulted from oil and gas exploration in the Codell Formation.

It's too early to make such a conclusion. But nothing should be left unchecked in the continuing investigation. The implications are severe.

Gas poses no danger — expert

By JOEL ENGELHARDT
Tribune Staff Writer

LA SALLE — Residents of this south-central Weld County need not fear the odorless, colorless natural gas that is trapped beneath the Wickes Lumber site, Weld County Health Department official Wes Potter said Saturday.

Potter, an expert in soils and geology, said actions taken late last week are working to end the situation that led to the Feb. 18 explosion that leveled the Wickes showroom.

"We feel we have the situation well in hand and it's not a danger. We have not found any gas in anybody's basement," Potter said at a Saturday afternoon news conference at town hall.

Officials scheduled the news conference to put at ease the worries of residents, many of whom have expressed fears that other parts of town may be in danger.

"We are very confident that the gas has been restricted to this area. We're going to monitor it. If it moves, we'll know it," Potter said.

Potter also revealed Saturday that low atmospheric pressure from a storm system that moved through Weld County on Feb. 18 may have contributed to the explosion. He said the change in the atmospheric pressure exerted force on the trapped gas, perhaps helping to bring it to the surface.

Another storm system and low pressure zone moving through Weld Saturday night may have a similar effect on the gas, Potter said. But this storm system may be advan-



Tribune photo by Geoff Forester

Officials investigating the Wickes Lumber explosion in La Salle have placed small, white pipes into the ground to vent natural gas from the site.

tageous because the gas is being vented from the site with 20 pipes drilled 10-feet deep.

By attracting the non-poisonous gas toward the surface, the low-pressure system may quicken the release of the trapped gas, Potter explained.

The flammable gas is not dangerous when dispersed in the air, officials said.

But officials will not be able to measure changes in the volume of gas released until costly monitoring equipment, expected Monday, is installed, Potter said.

Officials also will drill more vents in a two-block radius surrounding the site, although gas has not been found beyond the site. With the added vents, officials will know if

the gas is moving to other parts of town.

The theory is that the gas is trapped under the Wickes site by frost and hard-packed dirt beneath paved streets and parking lots. Since gas is lighter than air, it travels the path of least resistance, which presently is toward the surface through the vents, Potter said.

But the least-resistant path on Feb. 18 was through an abandoned sewer line that sloped upward into the Wickes basement. Officials now believe that a spark from a refrigerator may have ignited the gas, Potter said.

Officials will measure the amounts of gas escaping to determine when the source is exhausted. They said they hope the

gas flow stops within two weeks.

If it doesn't, they will reconsider their theories, Potter said. State, county and town officials will review the situation at 1 p.m. March 8 at La Salle Town Hall.

The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, which has jurisdiction in the case, has ordered a halt until March 7 on well fracturing, also called "fracing," within three miles of the site.

In fracing, drillers break open a horizontal rock formation, freeing oil and gas deposits to travel upward through the well.

Oil and gas commission Director Bill Smith said last week that fracing at nearby wells could not have caused the Wickes explosion

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★ Gas

or a smaller explosion in a Wickes parking lot Feb. 9.

But county official Potter has not ruled out fracing as a cause. He suggested two theories, based on gas samples and geology, that could account for the source of the gas that led to the explosions.

Potter said the gas contains varied amounts of methane, ethane, propane and butane, materials that normally exist below depths of 1,100 feet. Gas with similar composition has never been extracted from nearer the surface, Potter said.

The most probable explanation is that the gas originated in the Pierre Shale Formation at the 1,100-foot mark, rose through an abandoned water well beneath the Wickes parking lot, and emerged Feb. 9, causing the first explosion, Potter said. Small amounts of natural gas are known to exist at the Pierre Shale Formation, but not enough to be profitable for oil and gas developers.

The water well, drilled in the 1870s and abandoned in 1917, may have corroded, allowing the gas to enter and rise to the surface, Potter said.

The second theory may never be proved, Potter said. He suggested the gas slipped through fracing seals in a nearby well drilled 7,100 feet deep into the Codell Formation. Pressure exerted by the frac may have forced the gas toward the Pierre Shale Formation, where it may have traveled horizontally toward the water well.

One reason the second theory may never be proved is that fracing is not closely regulated, Potter said. Fracing companies file reports with the state oil and gas commission, but no inspections are made.

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From page A1

★ Fire

suffered a pulled leg muscle.

Officials ordered a 30-minute area power outage during the blaze when flames threatened electrical lines, a Home Light and Power Co. spokesman said.

Wickes' manager Earle did not disclose the plans for rebuilding or relocating the firm's lumber business.

Kamada said Saturday night he was certain the building is insured. But the loss of the Wickes business even temporarily will have an economic impact on the community, he said. He estimated the firm had at least a dozen full-time employees.

"They're the third-largest generator of revenue for the city with their sales tax," he said.

Kamada said it was likely a chain-link fence would be constructed on the perimeter of the Wickes lot.

★ Leak

constructed an oil rig above the water well and forced fluids through its casing.

The gas entered the well at a depth of about 50 feet, they learned. The town's water table starts at 65 feet.

They then decided to seal the well casing rather than withdraw the gas, the latter option appearing too hazardous, Smith said.

"It (the gas) is tough to control in that casing. So he (Wickes manager Bob Earle) decided to plug it up so it wouldn't burn down his lumber yard. It's like having a broken gas main in your front yard. The first thing you do is shut off the gas," Smith said.

Earle was not available for comment Saturday night.

When county and local officials asked that the well not be sealed, oil and gas conservation officials objected, saying the decision belongs to Wickes because the gas is on private land, Kamada said.

Kamada said he relied on the state's expertise, a decision he regrets.

"I feel like I've been told a lot of things these last two weeks and everything has turned out to be wrong," Kamada said.

Officials of the Greeley Gas Co. are testing local water wells and sewer lines every six hours for the gas, which smells like a pungent cleaning solvent, Kamada said. Initial checks found no natural gas in the water or sewer system.

Kamada asked residents with basement wells to request a test by calling La Salle Town Hall, 284-6931.

Well drilling rejected as blast cause

By JOEL ENGELHARDT
Tribune Staff Writer

Oil and gas development within a mile of downtown La Salle could not have caused an explosion Saturday that leveled the Wickes Lumber showroom, the director of the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission told Greeley officials Tuesday.

Director Bill Smith told the Greeley City Council and the Greeley Planning Commission in separate meetings that drilling company records and the nature of fracking, a process by which gas is forced to the surface, led him to reject the idea that a well six-tenths of a mile south of town led to the explosion.

The lumber showroom explosion followed a smaller explosion nine days earlier in an abandoned water well in a Wickes parking lot. County health officials have said the same type of natural gas, origin unknown, is responsible for both explosions.

But Ron Stow, environmental health director for the Weld County Health Department, said this morning he has not "totally discounted" the possibility that there may be some connection between oil and gas wells outside of La Salle and the explosions.

He said the health department still is gathering facts and won't come to any conclusion while the problem is under study.

He said a Wickes consultant who is drilling to find the depth of the water well has decided to go down only 300 feet. The consultant will attempt to prove his theory that the gas came from a pocket 60 feet deep.

Smith said the explosive gas may have been buried since 1917, when a 1,150-foot-deep water well was drilled near downtown, according to La Salle town records.

Long buried gas deposits, known to exist at that depth, may have surfaced in recent weeks and led to the explosions, Smith said.

"The formation does contain gas. Why it set there for 40 years under the ground I don't know," Smith told council.

Greeley Planning Director Rebecca Safarik said city departments received many telephone calls this week from residents concerned that nearby oil and gas development may result in similar explosions in Greeley.

But Smith dismissed those worries. Recent testimony by experts on fracking indicated that a frack could not exert pressure further than 1,300 feet from the well.

Fracking for a well about 3,500 feet from the abandoned water well began four days before the first explosion, leading La Salle Mayor Bruce Kamada to suspect a connection.

See BLAST, page A12

★ Blast

During fracking, chemicals are injected into the rock formation to cause cracks that permit natural gas and oil to escape.

Smith came to Greeley to report to the planning commission on the state's role in oil and gas regulation, a role he said will expand if four new workers are added to the commission's three-employee inspections staff.

He also said one way to avoid a smattering of well sites citywide is to invite developers to establish a single well site from which they can drill at angles beneath the city.

The process is no more dangerous than wells separated by spacing requirements and the probability of accidents is less than that of an airplane crash, Smith said.

But he said developers would need greater economic incentive than offered by the Codell formation, which underlies much of Greeley and central Weld County.

Wickes explosion

Continued from page 1

U.S. 85 for nearly six hours.

Two firemen were slightly injured in fighting the blaze; there were no other injuries.

Some officials see a cause-and-effect relationship between events recently taking place within a mile of the explosion site.

The events they refer to include the drilling of an oil and gas well during the first week in February less than a mile south of the Wickes site; the discovery of a natural gas leak in an old water well beneath the asphalt lot behind the Wickes showroom on February 9; the decision to seal off that well to prevent any more gas from escaping; and finally the explosion Saturday morning that destroyed the Wickes building.

Kamada said tests have shown that the gas at the explosion site and gas from the initial leak behind the building "are identical."

Tuesday night the mayor added that a gas sample has been obtained from the head of the nearby Dabco well. Kamada said this sample will also be analyzed to see if there are any

similarities in the "footprints" of the various gas samples obtained.

La Salle officials are continuing to check for gas in the town's sewers and water supply "every six hours," Kamada said.

The mayor also said that initial paperwork has been done and contacts made in case La Salle should need State emergency funds or an outside water supply.

Kamada indicated that area drillers have been "very cooperative" in agreeing to a temporary halt to all drilling and fracking operations within two or three miles of the explosion site.

Gas company officials and Bill Smith, director of the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission say that it is very unlikely that the fracking process at nearby drilling sites caused the natural gas to "migrate" through the earth to the Wickes site.

Kamada was not disputing what these officials said but only speculating when he said, "If the fracking theory is incorrect, this will be something brand new to the (drilling) industry."

Gas might have seeped through pipe

By DOLORES WHISKEYMAN
Tribune Staff Writer

Natural gas that caused an explosion on the Wickes Lumber property in La Salle may have seeped into the building through an abandoned sewer pipe, a Weld County Health Department official said today.

That pipeline also leads directly into the city's sewer system, said Ronald K. Stow, environmental health director for the county.

Stow said natural gas had been discovered in the pipe at several points, and officials have speculated that the gas may have found its way into the building through that channel.

He said the city has checked its sewer system for natural gas and so far has found a very low concentration of gas in the sewer line in the alley north of the explosion site. He said that gas so far is not a serious concern.

The Wickes Lumber showroom and offices were destroyed Saturday in a blast that occurred nine days after a Feb. 9 explosion at a water well behind the property. Two firefighters were injured in the fire that followed. No estimate of damages has been released.

Eight hours before the explosion, the water well had been plugged with cement, an action officials think may have diverted the gas and caused it to collect underground.

Pockets of natural gas were found in "various places" beneath the property on Monday, Stow said.

He said that the concentrations
See GAS, page A10

of gas on site are still high, and he still is concerned about the danger.

A consultant hired by the Wickes company is reopening the plugged water well so that the source of the natural gas can be found. Gas was still coming out of the well Monday, Stow added.

So far the depth of the well is not known. Stow said the consultant, Thomas Majors Consulting Inc., has pledged to drill until it reaches the original bottom of the hole.

As of Monday, Stow said, the drilling had reached to at least 126 feet and had probably gone deeper.

While the drilling continues at the water well, the county health department will test producing gas wells in the area, Stow said.

The county will test the composition of the gas being produced at a well recently drilled by Arlo

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Richardson of Evans. That well was drilled about six-tenths of a mile south of the blast site only four days before the Feb. 9 explosion.

Stow said it was his understanding that Richardson had granted permission for the tests. He said other wells will be tested if the operators' permission can be obtained.

If the gas at one of the local wells is close in composition to the gas found on the Wickes property, it could provide a clue to the source of the problem, Stow said.