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Shopping

Homes

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Factory explosion kills man

Man was part of salvage work at ex-Thomson plant

BY KATIE ALBRIGHT

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A 41-year-old man who was using a blowtorch to salvage industrial equipment at the former Thomson plant was instantaneously killed Monday night in an explosion that sent a fireball into the sky and rattled windows blocks away.

Seymour resident John Phillips and other workers were removing a canister measuring 10 feet across and 20 feet high that was located outside on the east side of the abandoned plant, 3301 S. Adams St. In the process, Phillips cut through pipes connected to the canister, said Marion police Capt. Jay Kay, head of detectives.

At 6:04 p.m. Monday, Marion police dispatchers were overwhelmed by 911 calls after an unknown substance inside the canister ignited and caused the explosion, Marion police Lt. Stephen Dorsey said.

The victim was working for Franklin Surplus Inc., located near Seymour, to collect scrap metal on the factory site, said Lester Lee, the North Vernon businessman who bought the building from Thomson.

It was unclear late Monday night what company had employed Franklin Salvage to collect the scrap metal.

"It was unexpected, and we don't want anything like this to happen again," Lee said. "We need to find out the cause."

To that end, Marion police officers were treating the dock areas on the east side of the plant as a crime scene, restricting public access and having officers gather evidence and information to help aid in the ultimate determination of the explosion's cause.

The Marion Fire Department's Hazardous Materials team was brought in late Monday to examine the contents of the canister. Volunteers from the Emergency Management Agency were also on the scene, blocking traffic along 33rd Street between Adams and Meridian streets.

Dorsey said that tests will be run on the remainder of the canister, which was left largely intact despite the blast, to discover its contents. There were some placards on the canister, but they were weathered and unreadable, he said.

He also said that the fire caused by the explosion was short lived.

"It blew itself out," he said.

Another worker was also on the scene but was approximately 30 feet away when the explosion



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AT THE SCENE - Marion police investigate the scene after Seymour resident John Phillips was killed in an explosion Monday evening during salvage work at the former Thomson plant. Investigations into the explosion are ongoing.

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occurred, leaving him uninjured. He was taken to Marion General Hospital for further observation, Dorsey said.

Chief Deputy Coroner Kevin Evans said an autopsy is scheduled for today at Marion General Hospital.

Residents called the police and investigated the situation after the loud boom shook their houses and the smoke filled the air.

"I think everybody heard (the explosion)," said Ron Tackett, 3242 S. McClure St. "It shook the house."

Robert VanHoosier, 3222 S. McClure, said the big boom next door caused numerous reactions. Some of his grandson's electronic toys that are activated by a pushbutton or movement were brought to life by the explosion's reverberations.

"I saw a puff of smoke and heard car alarms going off all the way over on Meridian Street," he said.

Angie Bowling, an employee at Penguin Point, 3406 S. Adams, thought the building was falling apart.

"I thought that one of our air conditioning units fell off the building," she said.




Robert Pauley, a cook at Penguin Point, explored the situation outside as soon as he heard the boom.

"All you could see was a huge cloud of black smoke," he said.

This was the first fatal industrial accident in Marion in more than two years. The last was in March 2003, when a man fell to his death at Auto Tech, 695 N. Miller Ave., while repairing the building's roof.

Thomson closed its television picture tube plant in March 2004, costing nearly 1,000 jobs. Earlier this spring, Lee finalized his purchase of the building and surrounding land, and recently held an auction of office and industrial equipment to prepare to market the site to potential buyers.

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