

Staff Photo by Thomas W. Haywood

About 75 firefighters battled the blaze before bringing it under control.

Fire Guts Railroad Warehouse

By BILL STEIGER
and ARLIE PORTER
Post-Courier Reporters

Fire roared through a century-old East Bay Street railroad warehouse Thursday night, destroying the building that was used as a flea market.

Hundreds of spectators viewed towering billows of smoke that blew across the Cooper River as the fire at The Charleston Freight Station, 556 East Bay St., burned out of control for about an hour.

Fire erupted at the station, which housed a restaurant, numerous gift booths and the Atlantic Brokerage Co., a packaging firm, about 8 p.m., according to Charleston Fire Chief Wilmot Guthke.

While battling the blaze, Charleston firefighter Daniel Kelly injured his right knee when he fell. He was placed in splints and taken to the

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emergency room at the Medical University of South Carolina, authorities said.

No other injuries were reported.

The 107-year-old wooden structure was a total loss, owner Howard Blackburn said. He said he left the building about 7:30 p.m. and received word that it was on fire almost as soon as he arrived home.

Both he and Guthke said they had no idea what caused the fire. Blackburn said his son-in-law, Charles Richbourg, was inside Atlantic Brokerage Co. when the fire broke out.

Richbourg said he was working about 8 p.m. when he heard a creak in the warehouse and thought someone was breaking in. "I had no idea

that there was a fire at that time, I just passed it off. But when I heard a real definite noise, I called 911."

But before he could reach the emergency operator, the phone went dead. Richbourg said he cautiously made his way into the hallway, which was filling with smoke. As he made it out the door, the smoke was at the level of his head.

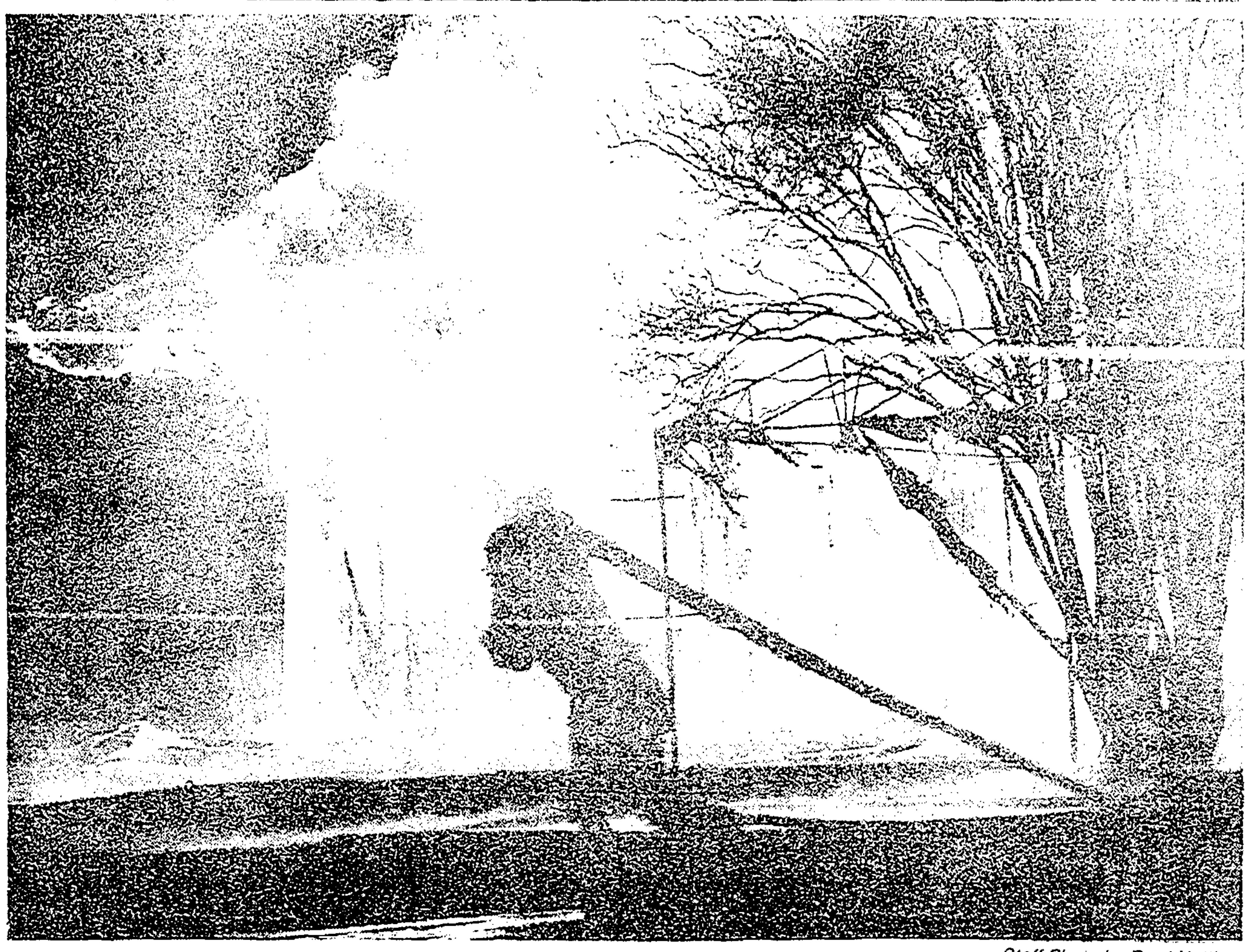
Richbourg said the fire must have started in the warehouse on the back side nearest the Cooper River. He said he had no idea what caused the fire.

About 75 firefighters from Charleston and North Charleston District fire departments brought the fire under control in about an hour, Guthke said. Other local fire departments were put on stand-by.

Explosions rang out intermittently as flames

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17-Year-Old Bus Drivers Must Go. Labo



Staff Photo by Brad Nettles

Roaring flames silhouette a firefighter dragging a hose.

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shot down the wooden beams framing the building. Nearby telephone poles steamed because of the intense heat.

A stiff easterly wind blew flames across a lot behind the building and shipping containers sitting in the yard at the State Ports Authority caught fire.

Anne M. Moise, spokesman for the SPA, said about 20 containers were burned. "Some were empty and some were loaded," she said. None contained hazardous materials.

She said they were owned by various freight lines. No estimate of damage was available late Thursday.

The station, located near Chapel Street, originally was constructed as a railroad freight warehouse. It was first used by the old Northeast Railroad system and later by the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad.

The building opened as a flea market in July 1, 1983, with almost 100 individual vendor areas.

C.H. Simmons Jr., manager of the market and owner of a nautical shop, said he was devastated by the loss. "I had no insurance on the shop ... It's all wiped out."

Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. and Charleston County Council Chairman Elizabeth M. Kerrison were at the scene and both said the



Howard
Blackburn



C.H.
Simmons Jr.

destruction of the station was a great loss to the city.

"It's interesting that in working with design of the new post office

(which is being constructed directly across East Bay Street from the freight station) we tried to respect the station" and make the post office architecturally compatible, the mayor explained.

"To have happened at a time when this neighborhood, this street, was being regenerated makes it doubly tragic," Riley said.

As he watched the building burn, the mayor said perhaps the brick columns that supported the structure will be left standing after the fire and could be preserved and used to highlight any new structure there.

Guthke said firefighters would be at the scene throughout the night, wetting down debris and beginning their investigation.

Broken Cable Disrupts Communication In East

data transmissions.

About 20 percent to 25 percent of the calls running north and south between Boston and Washington were answered with a recording that told callers that all circuits were busy, and asked them to try again later.

A re-routing scheme whittled down the interrupted calls, and by noon all calls were going through, Leach said.

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