The Boiler Explosion at the J. C. Penney Co. Building:
San Jose, California, 1963

An Essay Presented to the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County
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by
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Introduction:
Setting the Stage

Long before it came to be called Silicon Valley, Santa Clara County was known as “the Valley of Heart’s Delight” and “the prune capital” of the world. San Jose -- the county seat -- benefitted from the enormous farm wealth resulting from its position as the world center of the fruit and processing industry. A total of 127,300 acres was under cultivation in the county, and growers sold the bounties from their orchards and vineyards to the 44 canneries and 30 dried fruit plants located in San Jose for processing and distribution (Polk 1963).

City leaders had begun an aggressive campaign in the 1940s to attract new industries to the valley, and by 1963 over 300 businesses had located plants in the city or purchased land for future construction. United Technology Corporation, Lockheed, IBM, and Ford Motors took their place alongside Sunsweet Growers, Sun Garden Packing, and the Richmond-Chase Company (Polk 1963). The city proper had a population of 95,280 in 1950 when A. P. “Dutch” Hamann became city manager; under his pro-growth leadership the population increased to 274,000 by 1963 (Polk 1963).

Much of the valley’s business was conducted “downtown.” Major banks, large department stores, locally-owned family stores and businesses, theaters, restaurants, a library, the Civic Auditorium, San Jose State College, churches, and hotels were all within walking distance of each other. The very heart of the community’s thriving commercial center, its core, and its busiest intersection was at First and Santa Clara

Streets. A fleet of 44 buses heading to points east, west, north and south within the city regularly made stops at the various corners for waiting passengers.

Two stores located at this intersection in 1963 are at the center of this story: the three-story concrete and steel J. C. Penney store at 1 West Santa Clara Street, and the adjoining Thrifty Drug Store located at 25 West Santa Clara Street. On March 22, 1963, they became the site of what Mayor Robert C. Welch described as “the worst explosion in the history of San Jose” and a scene of death, destruction and chaos (Furgeson 1963). Although there was no fire, the blast left the city’s longest casualty list since the 1906 earthquake, and by the evening’s end three persons were dead and 71 injured -- two of whom later died.

The Explosion at the J. C. Penney Co. Building

It was a rainy afternoon on Friday, March 22, 1963, when the usual rush hour activities in downtown San Jose ceased abruptly a few minutes before 5:00 p.m. A violent, rumbling explosion wreaked havoc at the J. C. Penney Co. and Thrifty Drug stores when a boiler in the basement, building up deadly pressure, blew and blasted out all of the ground floor windows in both stores. The basement of the Penney store extended under the Thrifty Drug store. Consequently, when a water boiler in a corner of the basement blew, it released a dense mass of steam which blasted through the ground floor of the building, tearing a 900 square foot hole out of the first floor of the drugstore (Nailen 2002). Instantly, San Jose's busiest intersection was turned into "a no-man's land," and the hundreds of shoppers (300 of whom were in the two stores) and downtown employees were caught in the wake of the devastation (*San Francisco Examiner,* 1963).

Six San Jose fire trucks were already en route to the scene even as the explosion was taking place. Shortly before the blast, Raymond Mauss -- the floor manager at Penney's -- had gone to the boiler room in search of the maintenance man. When he opened the door, the furnace was roaring at full draft and the room was full of steam. As he rushed to the nearest telephone to call the fire department, he warned people to get out. The blast went off as he was making the call resulting in a tragedy that came within minutes of having been averted (*San Francisco Examiner* 1963).

Ken Martin, then a young firefighter with the San Jose Fire Department, was on a truck dispatched from the Market Street fire station and was one of the first to reach the

scene. Years later he recalled that they were rounding the corner when the boiler blew up. “We saw a completely white cloud...a huge rush of steam” that stretched all the way across Santa Clara Street (Bailey 1989).

Two San Jose police officers who were on duty directing traffic at the busy intersection were eyewitnesses to the explosion. Officer Leo Plinski watched as the two-inch-thick glass show windows “seemed to billow out for a moment” before he felt the concussion of the blast (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). Patrolman Andrew Crawford ran to the blast as he watched heavy smoke come from the drug store. He yelled for everyone to get down on their hands and knees and crawl out. Ground floor windows in both stores were shattered and the store interiors nearest to the blast were torn into shambles. Merchandise and mannequins that were initially mistaken for bodies came tumbling out of the store windows, and the shattered glass stretched across the six traffic lanes of Santa Clara Street. Sections of the sidewalk were covered with two inches of glass. Plinski ran to the call box in front of the First National Bank and put in an alarm -- the first of many that evening. He estimated that about 75 people had been standing on the Penney’s corner. Many of them had been injured by the flying glass and were sitting in shock on the curbs of the street waiting for help (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). Inside the building, heavy smoke and a shower of debris mingled with the cries and screams of the injured. The steel door for the freight elevator at the corner of the building on First Street was blown out and badly injured a passerby.

The 50-60 people who had been in the drug store bore the brunt of the injuries. Thrifty Drug was the site of a popular lunch counter where a group of seniors regularly gathered for their Friday evening get-together. People sitting at the soda fountain told of

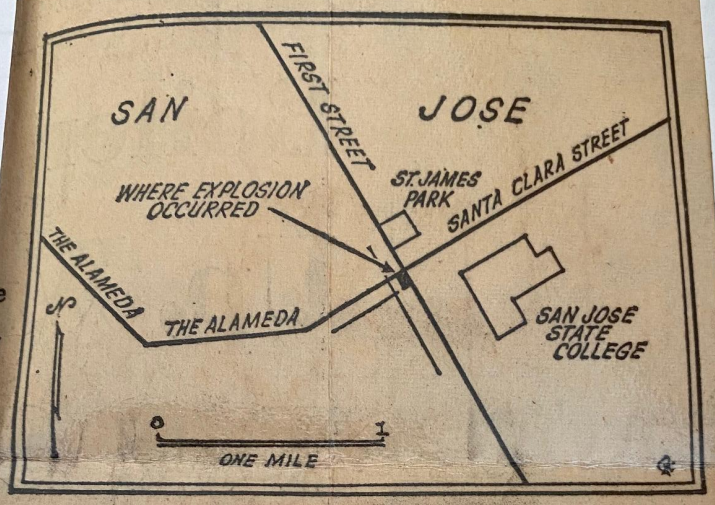
being knocked off their stools and pushed up toward the ceiling as the floor lifted up under them before disintegrating. They found themselves sliding through a mixture of splintered beams, shattered merchandise and bodies into the dark, and then realized they were looking up from the basement. Hot water burst all over them from the broken sprinkler system while plaster and debris fell from the ceiling (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). James McLarney, the assistant manager of the Thrifty Drug Store had just left the store and was carrying a box with a $400 bank deposit. As he was crossing the street, the metal box blew out of his hands and was later found 125 feet away (*San Francisco Examiner* 1963).

Shocked eyewitnesses had many and varied reactions to the blast. The force of the explosion was described as being that of an erupting volcano. Others observed that it blew with the power of a jet engine. Miriam Richards, a native of England, said that "For just a second I was back in London in the Blitz. It was war again for just a moment and I couldn't control myself." Many initially thought that an earthquake had struck the area. Several thought that "the Russians had hit us" (*San Jose News* 1963). Attorney Mark Cali, whose law office was in the Bank of America building across the street from Penney's, heard the blast, looked out the window and like many others thought the mannequins were human bodies (Bailey 1989).

During the Cold War era of the 1950s and 1960s, bomb shelters had been constructed in many public buildings as well as backyards. One such shelter was located in the Penney's building, and an orange and black sign was posted near the door of the blasted-out store that read "Fallout Shelter Capacity 350" (*San Jose News* 1963). It was not to be a haven, however, on that day.

—Examiner Photo

BOILER EXPLOSION SPREAD HAVOC



WHERE THE BLAST HIT IN SAN JOSE

Blast in Heart of Downtown Section

SAN JOSE, March 22.—First and Santa Clara Sts., the site of Friday's explosion in San Jose, is quite literally the heart of the downtown section of the city.

At one corner is the Bank of America Building, with its tower on top, a familiar landmark to travelers passing through San Jose.

Santa Clara St., which a mile to the West becomes The Alameda, is the main east-west artery, while First St. is the main north-south thoroughfare of the city.

Source: *San Francisco Examiner,* Saturday, March 23, 1963.

Calm Amidst the Chaos and Confusion

Chaos ensued and within minutes the city's disaster operations went into effect. County Communications notified the four area hospitals (County, San Jose, O'Connor's and Doctor's) which in turn called in staff. Seventeen ambulances screamed in and out of downtown for hours lining up four and five deep to carry away the victims (Watkins 1963). At one point ten people were loaded into one ambulance (KNTV). Police cars and those of private citizens were also used to transport the less seriously injured to hospitals. At San Jose Hospital, the corridors were filled with both victims and their relatives, and half of the hospital cafeteria was used as an emergency room to accommodate the overflow of the more seriously injured.

Amid the chaos there was calm as authorities went about their work. Mayor Robert Welch was on scene alongside the rescuers and later said that "Both the fire and police captains worked side-by-side with their men, as laborers" (*San Jose Mercury-News* 1963). Twelve pieces of fire equipment and sixty men from the San Jose Fire Department worked along with 120 policemen including San Jose regulars and reserves. Sheriff's deputies and patrolmen from Campbell and Los Gatos were also on scene to aid in the rescue (*San Jose Mercury News* 1963).

In spite of the drizzling rain, huge crowds of curious bystanders were gathering in the vicinity. Fear that the blast had loosened gas mains and could risk new explosions prompted police to clear and rope off a four-square block area, and nearby buildings were evacuated. A patrol car with a loudspeaker went through the area warning people to leave. To add to the confusion, one hour after the explosion, a bomb threat was

called into Hart's Department Store one block away thus diverting officers to that location. It proved to be a false alarm but added to the turmoil (*San Jose Mercury* 1963).

News of the explosion spread quickly. People heading home from work heard about it on car radios while the local television channel KNTV reported live from the scene. As a result of a misunderstanding with a spokesperson at San Jose Hospital, the County Communications Center was initially left with the impression that there were at least 20 dead. This information was released to the local media and was picked up by network television and radio newscasts across the country which in turn reported the erroneous numbers. Additionally, a hospital official reported that more deaths were expected and not enough doctors were on hand to treat the injured. Subsequently, more physicians than were needed responded and there were more doctors than injured (*San Jose Mercury News* 1963). Crowds thronged to the site which further hampered the flow of emergency equipment.

All sorts of volunteers appeared in the spirit of "all hands on deck." One police officer told of looking up at bystanders and asking for help getting oxygen and "...a tough who looked like he didn't care about anyone" went to the main fire station and "...before I knew it, he was back lugging a big tank of oxygen" (Stokes 1963). Store personnel helped to guide customers out, while Alexander Saucier, the manager of Penney's, "was up to his knees" digging people out of the debris (*San Jose News* 1963). Battered handbags were collected and processed by police as were the cash registers. Narcotic drugs were retrieved from the store debris. The Salvation Army provided a canteen truck which offered coffee and donuts to volunteers and police and

fire officials who huddled in the cold wherever there was shelter from the pelting rain. The Red Cross responded to the scene within 20 minutes. First aid instructors treated victims at the site and six Red Cross station wagons were used as ambulances to transport the injured to hospitals. At the chapter's office on North First Street, 40 volunteers answered the hundreds of phone calls pouring in, and nurses from the Red Cross office were sent to hospitals to aid in keeping lists of casualties updated (*San Jose News* 1963). At 9:45 p.m. an emergency call went out for blood donors, and the call was answered by firemen, policemen, sheriff's deputies, and members of the public on call for such emergencies (*San Jose Mercury-News* 1963). Through the next few days, newspapers published extensive lists of the names and status of the victims.

The Death Pit

The hunt for the injured and/or dead went on through the rainy night, and the rescue crews grew continuously. Police outside were methodically beginning a massive crowd control, and both firemen and police were delving into “the black hole of the blast” (*San Jose Mercury News* 1963). The exploding water boiler had turned into “a destructive bomb” and blown through the ceiling above and into the pharmaceutical and lunch fountain sections of Thrifty Drug (Conroy 1963). Tons of debris and a mass of humanity came tumbling back down through the hole into the basement leaving a six foot high pile of blast litter. Broken pipes contributed to six inches of water rippling across the basement.

> The mess was unbelievably awesome. Drugs and patent elixirs oozed over grotesquely twisted fountain stools, heating pads, beach balls and all sundries making up the drug and lunch counter sections of a huge downtown drug store. And this tossed in with giant splinters of ceiling and floor beams, wall sidings, light fixtures and twisted water pipes. (Conroy 1963).

Although a few people were able to escape on their own, police and firemen worked together to extricate other victims. Firefighter Martin recalled:

> You’re digging through all this stuff to get down to people, and you’re not sure where they are. Somebody would call for silence and everybody would listen. You would hear someone moaning and you’d go for it again. (Bailey 1989)

Stretchers were lowered into the pit and victims were quickly and gently lifted by rope tow to the floor above to waiting ambulances. Several doctors were on scene as disaster volunteers and administered aid and morphine to some of the victims in the pit.

Flashlights were played on the scene from above, but a call soon went out for portable generators and flood lights. As the rescue crews worked, water from the

broken mains and fire sprinkler system was flooding the basement. Pitchforks were used to lift floating objects into canvas baskets. By 6:00 p.m., three bodies had been recovered from the pit. It was a dirty, wet, and miserable job, and as workers slowly emerged from the hole later that night, “silent prayers were offered for those mangled bodies found in the death pit” (Conroy 1963).

Shoe Leather Detective Work

Within one hour of the violent explosion, police had identified and picked up 27-year-old Ricardo Mello for investigation. Chief of Detectives Bart Collins had been helping to rescue people from within the building and decided to step to the crowd watching the scene. He later told a reporter that "It's usual for us to check out a crowd watching a fire or an explosion." Collins related that as he stood on the edge of the crowd, "Someone pointed Mello out to me, casually saying he was the maintenance man at the store but he'd just been laid off that day." Another bystander commented that he overheard Mello remark aloud that "there was something wrong with the boiler." As Collins moved closer to Mello, he heard Mello ask someone what had happened. When Mello was told that three persons had died and scores had been injured, Collins said that "Watching his face then, I knew our brief search was over" (*San Francisco Examiner* 1963). Ricardo Mello was taken into custody for questioning.

Over the next several hours, Mello was questioned and was administered a lie detector test, part of which he flunked. The two questions he flunked were: "Did you tamper with the boiler?" and "Did you feel any resentment about losing your job?" Although he answered in the negative to both questions, police determined his reactions indicated he was lying (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). In addition, Collins added that Mello admitted having been rankled enough about the layoff to think about "crossing some wires or something to cause a minor accident" (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). The test result was the basis for holding him, and at midnight, Collins said that he would be

booked on a charge of investigation of homicide and held until the safety valve on the boiler was found (*San Jose Mercury* 1963).

"Rivers of traffic" ran through downtown all weekend (*San Jose Mercury-News* 1963). Six lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic filed by the two stores as the arms of police officers were in continual motion waving them on. There was nothing to see, however, as the windows were all boarded up.

The Investigation

Ricardo Mello had moved to California from Massachusetts “bringing with him high hopes and a clean slate” two years before the blast (Furgeson 1963). He had been working at Penney’s for six months and felt “happily secure” in his job (Furgeson 1963). Consequently, it came as a shock when he was called to the front office at noon on that Friday and told that he was fired. Although his work was satisfactory, the company had decided to contract an outside maintenance company to service the boilers and Mello was no longer needed. Saucier, the store manager, later said, “He gave no trouble, did his job well, and we’d have given him a good recommendation to go anywhere” (Furgeson 1963). With only four hours notice, Mello later acknowledged to police that he was “upset” and that four hours notice was “petty and chicken” (Furgeson 1963).

The central heating system for the building was provided by a pair of 16-year-old boilers in the corner of the basement, only one of which was in operation at the time. The boilers had safety valves which were set to “pop off” at a temperature of 250 degrees (Nailen 2002). There had been a series of recent repairs to the steam boilers, and a subsequent Fire Department inspection had graded them “OK” at that time (*San Jose News* 1963). Investigators for the police and fire departments scoured the wreckage of the boiler room through the night searching for pieces of the boiler to see if they could determine the cause of the blast. They found two boiler temperature gauges in the debris -- both frozen at the top, 240 degrees (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). Late in

the evening, Fire Chief Ronald LeBeau stated that “There is no doubt the explosion was caused by a boiler in the basement of the Penney’s store” (*San Jose Mercury* 1963).

As the investigation continued that weekend, detectives and fire officials who had been working with engineering experts announced that they had found evidence in the debris that the furnace was “roaring at full draft” when the boiler exploded (Hobbs 1963). The fan blower had been put into an open position with a lock screw thereby increasing the draft so that the furnace developed an intense heat, “maybe up to 400 degrees” (*San Francisco Examiner* 1963). The locked-open safety, or popoff, valve designed to compensate for overheating, was thus not able to “pop off.”

During 19 hours of questioning, Mello claimed that the boiler’s automatic controls had not been working properly in the past several days and admitted that he “froze” the furnace controls. He denied, however, that he deliberately set the valves so that the boiler would burst and stated that he “forgot to fix it right again” before leaving work at 4:00 p.m. to look for another job (*Furgeson 1963*). He was on the street when he heard the blast and returned to the store. Detectives announced that during the weekend Mello submitted to three lie detector tests and “each time he flunked on questions dealing with the deliberate tampering of mechanisms to cause trouble” and “being mad” at Penney’s after he was informed that his job was to be terminated (Furgeson 1963; *San Jose Mercury* 1963). It was further revealed that Mello did not have an operating engineer’s license certifying him as a boiler man and possibly did not realize the extent of the force with which he was dealing. Following hours of questioning, Chief Collins stated that “I don’t think the fellow did it intentionally...but his negligence caused three deaths. He didn’t intend to hurt anyone, I know that.” “But,” he added, Mello “admitted

leaving a boiler valve open and knew what it would do" (*San Jose News* 1963). By all accounts, Mello was cooperative with investigators and repeatedly expressed sorrow for his victims.

Mello remained in jail for several days. By law, he had to be either charged or released by midnight on Tuesday, March 26. District Attorney Louis Bergna, Chief Collins, Assistant Fire Chief John Gerhard and investigators from the state division of industrial safety were "closeted" through the day on Monday trying to reconstruct the accident and determine how, if at all, Mello should be charged (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). Although both Bergna and Collins believed that Mello had no intention of causing death or injury to any person, Bergna said that it was his negligent operation of the boiler that caused the explosion and pointed out that Mello had taken a one-year school course in boiler maintenance. He thus was aware of what could happen if the furnace fuel lines were open and left unattended (*San Jose Mercury* 1963).

On Tuesday, March 26, Mello was arraigned in municipal court (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). District Attorney Bergna charged Ricardo Mello with involuntary manslaughter in the three deaths (two more would later die) resulting from the explosion. He was charged under Section 192, Subdivision 2, of the California Penal Code which specified that involuntary manslaughter is a commission of a lawful act which might produce death in an unlawful manner or without due caution or circumspection (*San Jose News* 1963). Municipal Judge Grandin H. Miller set bail at $52,500 and appointed Mark Cali as defense counsel (*San Jose News* 1963). On Wednesday, March 27, Cali moved to have the bail reduced on grounds that "it was excessive because he has no record of any kind" (*San Jose Mercury, San Jose News*

1963). On Thursday, March 28, 1963, Mello was able to leave jail after posting a bail of $6,300 *(San Jose News* 1963).

The Grand Jury's Decision

On Monday evening April 1, 1963, the district attorney's office put their evidence before the Santa Clara County Grand Jury. The case had attracted much publicity over the past two weeks, and it would be left up to the jury to decide whether or not to bring in an indictment which would mean holding Mello for trial after reviewing the material presented by police and the district attorney. In this case, the jury decided to talk to Mello. While some attorneys would have counseled their client to stay silent, Attorney Cali decided to put Mello before the Grand Jury. Cali reasoned that Mello had nothing to hide and said: "The bottom line is you're telling the truth, so let her go" (Bailey 1989). As a result, Mello and the jury engaged in a dialogue for two hours.

On Tuesday, April 2, at 2:00 a.m., after seven hours of deliberation, the Grand Jury decided against returning an indictment as it was impossible to prove that Mello's actions had caused the explosion. District Attorney Bergna then withdrew the charge, and Ricardo Mello was free. Attorney Cali was paid $100 from the county for his effort. Mello could not afford any fee but later gave Cali a pair of work boots (Bailey 1989).

The Aftermath

In the end, authorities were not able to conclusively determine the cause of the blast as the safety valves, along with other broken boiler parts, were so badly damaged (Nailen 2002). Ultimately, an equipment malfunction failure of the safety valves was listed as the cause of the explosion.

It is often said that “the wheels of justice turn very slowly,” but this was not the case for Ricardo Mello. The blast occurred on Friday, March 22, 1963, and on Tuesday, April 2, 1963, his ordeal within the judicial system was over.

Not to be forgotten are the many victims of the blast for whom the memories linger. Salvador Caballero was a junior at James Lick High School in 1963. His mother, Florence Caballero, was working downtown that day and needed to pick up a prescription on her way home. Salvador didn’t want her to have to take the bus home, so he drove downtown, parked his car on Santa Clara Street, put two pennies in the parking meter (anticipating a quick trip into the drug store) and was standing at the prescription counter of Thrifty Drug with his mother when the explosion occurred (Dickey and Boyle 1963). She was killed immediately, and he was critically injured and left with permanent injuries. In a 1989 interview, he said that for years he avoided going downtown as “It’s like a nightmare...never far from my mind” (Bailey 1989).

Repercussions from the explosion went on for years. Almost immediately various agencies called for stricter safety standards and controls over the more than 700 low-pressure boilers operating in the city’s offices, schools, apartment houses, canneries, factories, and laundromats (Romano 1974). The San Jose City Council met

on Monday evening March 25 and discussed licensing requirements for persons in charge of water heating plants. Although San Jose was one of only a few cities in California to require licenses of persons in charge of high-pressure boilers, Walter Rickett, a stationery engineer with the county, urged the city to consider requiring licenses of persons operating low-pressure equipment as well (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). Prior to the blast, inspection of these boilers was primarily conducted by insurance companies on a random basis. By 1968, control over boiler operations was put under the jurisdiction of the San Jose Fire Department, and new San Jose ordinances were enacted regarding inspection and licensing of low-pressure boilers.

Litigation continued for years after the blast resulting in over $9 million in damage suits against owners and managers of the stores and the building itself (Nailen 2002). Austen Warburton, a Santa Clara attorney, was retained by officials from J. C. Penney Co. (*San Jose Mercury* 1963). A number of out-of-court settlements running as high as $400,000 were reached (Nailen 2002).

The downtown J. C. Penney store was closed for repairs for two weeks following the explosion. The Thrifty Drug store, however, was a total loss and the store interior had to be rebuilt. The Penney store eventually closed in 1973 as shoppers had begun to gravitate to the new malls away from downtown.

Acknowledgement

Research has been a challenge during the ongoing pandemic. I was fortunate to have the original copies of the *San Francisco Examiner,* the *San Jose Mercury News,* and the *San Jose News* for the dates between March 23, 1963, and April 5, 1963, from which to work.

In more normal times, inter-library loans of microfilm from the San Jose Public Library to my library in Connecticut would have made it possible to expand research beyond those dates, but that has not been an option for the past year.

My thanks go to Shane Curtin, archivist with the San Jose Public Library, (who remained on duty in spite of the pandemic closures) for searching through the clipping files in the California Room to locate the articles from 1974 and 1989 as they provided additional perspective to the event. For those who can, a visit to the California Room is an opportunity to immerse oneself in the pages of the past.

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Chance Guides Two To Death

By JIM DICKEY and PAT BOYLE
News Staff Writers

The ironic twisting by chance of the flu, a rainy pay-day, and medicines needed by two sick women resulted in a prescription for tragedy Friday.

It resulted in the death of a man and a woman, two of the three persons killed in the Thrifty store explosion.

Vernon B. Hinton, 41, was in Thrifty Drug Store filling two prescriptions refilled for his wife, Jo[illegible] when he was killed.

He usually got the drugs at a pharmacy on [illegible] Street but decided to get them at Thrifty since he was [illegible] be in that area cashing his payroll check. His wife [illegible]

Mrs. Florence Caballero, 45, was downtown [illegible] get her eldest son, Joseph, 19, had flu. Mrs. Caballero had [illegible] Mary [illegible] taken her son's place for the day at the wholesale sau[illegible] [illegible] shop, El Azteca Chorizo Co., 168 W. Santa Clara St. [illegible] The shop is owned by her sister, Mrs. Frances Rodriguez. [illegible] Mrs. Caballero had been trying all day to get away [illegible] from the store for a few minutes to have a prescription [illegible] for high blood pressure filled at Thrifty drugstore, but [illegible] rain had delayed her trip.

When the rain stopped she was about to go home for the day, she walked the two blocks to the drugstore.

Another son, Salvador, 16, didn't want his mother to have to take a bus home from work, so, after school, he

(Concluded on Page 2, Column 4)

EXTRA

SPORTS FINAL

EMPLOYE FACES BLAST CHARGES

SAN JOSE NEWS

Vol. 160, No. 53, 80th Year San Jose, Calif., Sat., March 23, 1963 34 Pages ★★★★★ 10 Cents

Shift Near End —Then, Death

Mrs. Marie Straight, who was 56 Tuesday, was killed in the Thrifty store explosion at 4:51 p.m., 39 minutes before she was to quit work for the day.

Mrs. Straight, of 745 Harrison St., was a sales clerk in the yard goods department of J. C. Penney's, where she had been employed for 11 years. She had worked [illegible] before at [illegible]

She was a native of Nebraska and had moved here from Iowa 11 years ago. Her husband, Harold, is an operating engineer for a San Jose construction company.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Eight Victims On Critical List

While authorities sifted through the rubble in an attempt to pinpoint the exact cause of Friday's disastrous downtown explosion, area hospitals worked feverishly to keep the fatality list at three.

The critically injured list today was eight and another five persons suffered what are described as serious injuries.

The injured:

O'CONNOR HOSPITAL

Annette Ritter, 25, 593 N. 2d St., critical condition.

Adam Duydis, 72, 173 S. 1st St., condition serious.

Mrs. Connie Walton, 173 S. 1st St., treated and released.

COUNTY HOSPITAL

Salvadore Caballero, 15, of 1433 Chrisland, whose mother, Florence Caballero, was killed. The boy suffered lacerations of the liver and multiple fractures. Condition critical.

Elmer James, 53, of 2800

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Race Results

Bay Meadows

FIRST—1 yr. 4th & up, 4 furs.
Kare Taque 113 (Lopez) 8.80 4.20 3.20
War Ballot 120 (Lyne) 10.20 5.20
My Goal 113 (Hunt) 4.20
Ed Lewis, Eagle Bones, Madmun, Space Monkey, Swift Gove, Roman Arr, Minor G.

SECOND—4 yrs. 1½ mi.
Imploir Kid 113 (Costa) 11.60 6.40 4.00
Sir Tramp 114 (Frye) 8.00 4.80
San Diego 113 (Abrera) 4.00
Gamer Boy, Fisher, Shining Low, Average Boy, Annie C., Fathe's Pet.

Daily Double (7-4) Paid $47.00

Gulfstream

FIRST—2 yrs. 6 & up, 6 fur.
Thisbee S. 114 (Gerber) 13.20 13.20 8.20
First Lord 119 (Brooks) 7.80 5.20
Cormac 114 (Williams) 11.80
Gamble 114—Sycorax, Cyrob, Dy Driver, Gamer Boy, Fisher, Shining Flatterer, Distant Dream, Fibert.

Aqueduct

FIRST—2 yrs. F. & fur.
Wee Bonnie Lass 114 (Gustines) 5.80 4.00 2.80
Young Countess 114 (Fallaiano) 4.40 3.00
Fighting Chief 109 (Ward) 3.20
Tiny Tim, Miss and Half—Comet Queenie, Chris R., Aside Bee, Pleasant Dreams.

Rain's End In Sight

The spring storm which dumped more than 15 inches of rain on some parts of the Central Coast area was expected to end today.

The U.S. Weather Bureau forecast calls for partly cloudy skies tonight of Sunday in Santa Clara Valley, with a low tonight of 38 to 48 degrees and a high Sunday of 57 to 64.

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The Hands Of Mercy

Firemen carefully lift one of the women victims of the blast from the huge, gaping hole in the front of the Thrifty Drug Store.

'Thought The Russians Hit Us'

"Suddenly everything blew up . . ."

"The walls came down . . ."

"I thought the Russians had hit us . . ."

This was just a sampling of the shocked reaction of eye-witnesses to the explosion which racked Thrifty Drug Store and J. C. Penney Co. stores in the heart of downtown San Jose Friday, killing at least three persons and injuring more than 70 others.

"For just a second I was back in London in the Blitz," said Miriam Richards, 28, a native of England and secretary for the Salvation Army here.

She had just walked out of a bank across Santa Clara street from the stores when the blast hit.

"It was war again for just a moment and I couldn't control myself," she recalled. "I couldn't move or do anything."

Mrs. Jennie Garcia, 25, of 243 W. Taylor St., said she and her sister, Mrs. Dorothy Garnica, 236 Clayton St., had just sat down at the drug store lunch counter.

"Suddenly everything blew up," she said. "We were knocked off our stools.

"Hot water burst all over me, and everything I was sliding through a lot of debris. I felt I was suffocating. It was all dark. Then I saw light and found I was in the basement of Penney's.

"My sister-in-law started sliding when I did. Then I didn't see her anymore, but I could hear her yelling, 'I'm burning, I'm burning.' I yelled, 'Come this way,' but I heard her voice kind of faint. She probably passed out."

BOTH INJURED

Both women were treated for minor injuries and burns and released.

Mrs. Connie Walton, resident of a downtown hotel, said she was sitting at the Thrifty lunch counter with two friends when the explosion happened.

"All three of us went into the basement and when I could look around I was in the basement of Penney's. I don't know what happened to the two women who were with me."

She was released after treatment at O'Connor Hospital.

HUGGED WALL'

"I was working in the tobacco department," said Mrs. Dorma Hall, a clerk at the drug store, of 1460 Glenwood Ave. "When the explosion hit we hugged the walls until things stopped falling.

"It sounded just like the Russians had hit us. Just a sharp explosion. We had to wade through stock knee deep in the aisles to get to the front door. There was a very peculiar odor, more like ammonia than gas."

Mrs. Vivian Smith, a waitress at Thrifty, said she was in the second floor restroom when the blast blew her through two doors. She was not hurt, but went downstairs where she saw another waitress "laying in

(Concluded on Page A, Column 1)

Driver Dies

BOCA (UPI)—Walter E. Bird, 23, of Reno, was killed Friday night when his car went over an embankment on U.S. Highway 40 east of here in a snowstorm.

D.A. To Decide If It's Murder

By HOWARD WATKINS
News Staff Writer

A 27-year-old janitor today was held on homicide charges after Friday's rush-hour downtown boiler explosion that killed three and injured 71.

He is Ricardo Mello, who was discharged from his janitor's job at Penney's department store only a few hours before the blast which left the city's longest casualty list since the 1906 earthquake.

After more than six hours of intensive interrogation including two lie detector tests, Chief of Detectives Burton Collins issued this statement:

"I don't think the fellow did it intentionally, but his negligence caused three deaths."

Collins said he will put the facts before District Attorney Louis P. Bergna on Monday for a decision as to whether Mello should be charged with manslaughter or murder.

He said Mello will not be released from jail.

The blast beneath the crowded Thrifty Drug Store lunch counter was the city's worst explosion catastrophe in history.

Collins said he is convinced Mello did not mean to harm anyone.

"He didn't intend to hurt anyone, I know that."

But, he said the janitor admitted leaving a boiler valve open, and "knew what it would do."

Mello, of 1842 Girard Dr.,

RICARDO MELLO

Milpitas, has been held since Friday night when police overheard him tell bystanders in the crowd that gathered after the explosion that the boiler had been causing trouble.

BOOKED

He was booked into Santa Clara city jail Friday night on suspecion of homicide.

Mello had been notified of his dismissal at noon Friday after six months on the job, and told the firing was effective at 4:30 p.m.

Company officials explained they planned to contract with a maintenance firm rather than hire their own janitorial

(Concluded on Page 2, Column 1)

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'Confusion' Breeds An Erroneous Toll

Confusion surrounding a major disaster became evident shortly after the violent downtown San Jose explosion, leading to erroneous reports of the number dead.

One hour after the blast, one wire association servicing newspapers, radio and television outlets filed a story stating "at least 18 persons dead."

A San Jose television outlet was quoting a figure of 20 dead.

SHOCKED MANY

These figures blew the destruction far out of proportion of the toll actually taken and left those who had heard the erroneous reports in dismayed shock.

Checks Friday night and today traced the course of misinformation.

County Communications Director Robert Mason said his center was partially to blame because of what he termed a misunderstanding with a spokesman at a San Jose hospital.

Mason said his control center was given the impression there were at least 18 persons dead in the hospital and more expected from the scene.

This information was forwarded to Don Bouchette, deputy coroner.

ERROR COMPOUNDED

News services and at least one San Francisco newspaper immediately quoted Bouchette on the number of dead.

A spokesman for the San Jose television channel said their early report of at least 20 dead was based on an interview with hospital personnel.

Mason said it was a misunderstanding coming at a time when everyone was involved in rescue operations following a major disaster.

New Earth Tremor

NAPLES (AP) — A mild earth tremor today shook an area east of Naples where violent quakes last

Source: *San Jose News,* Saturday, March 23, 1963.