

GALVESTON COUNTY DAILY NEWS

Texas' Oldest Newspaper

<http://galvestondailynews.com>

Copyright © 2004 Galveston County Daily News

Future water park site goes up in flames

By Carter Thompson

The Daily News

Published September 21, 2004

GALVESTON — Fire destroyed an aircraft hangar Monday that for decades housed Farmer's Marine Copper Works and was to be the centerpiece of a \$30 million Schlitterbahn water park.

There were no reports of deaths or injuries, and the cause was unknown Monday night.

Towering flames drew hundreds of onlookers and sent thick black smoke into the sky about 6:30 p.m. Explosions were heard at least twice. Shortly after 7 p.m., the building's roof collapsed.

The 50,000-square-foot hangar had been described as a key part of the water park plan because it was to house indoor facilities that could operate all year. It was originally built during World War II to house B-17 bombers.

Jeff Henry, an owner of New Braunfels-based Schlitterbahn, said workers were preparing the building for its transformation from a pipe-making operation to a tourist destination when the fire occurred.

He said the workers were using a diesel-powered forklift — what he called a manlift — and had the flammable gasses acetylene and propane on hand.

At 7:30 p.m., the fire hit one of those fuel sources. An explosion sent more black smoke into the sky, and its low-frequency boom set off car alarms hundreds of yards away.

Gas lines to the building had been shut off several weeks ago, a worker with Southern Union Gas said.

Henry said it was too soon to say what affect the fire would

have on plans for the park.

Henry was not on the island Monday, but representatives of his company were and called him with the bleak news.

"They said it was a total loss," Henry said. "I am crushed."

Blaze to be probed

Galveston firefighters got the call at 6:46 p.m., had the blaze contained by about 8 p.m. and extinguished by 8:30 p.m., said Fire Chief Michael A. Varela Sr.

First responders said the fire started in the southeast corner of the building. When they arrived, the gate was locked and the hangar empty.

Contractors had been working in the building throughout the night, but were on a dinner break when the fire started, Varela said.

Varela said 50 of his department's 105 firefighters battled the blaze and that an arson investigator was on the scene.

Henry said all of the workers were accounted for, but Varela said firefighters had not found them for interviews as of 9 p.m.

"We haven't even begun the investigation yet," Varela said. "Tonight we will do a little fact finding and talk to witnesses."

He said the investigation would continue today.

Affects unknown

Henry's family is partnering with the island-based American National Insurance Co., headed by Robert L. Moody, on the water park, which is scheduled to open in 2005.

Irwin "Buddy" Herz, a Moody spokesman, was at the fire and said the hangar's destruction was not likely to delay construction of the 26-acre water park, which will include at least 12 large waterslides.

On Monday, Tom Farmer went to see the damage done to the building where for 34 years he operated Farmer's Marine Copper Works, a pipe manufacturing plant. Earlier this year, Henry signed a lease agreement with the city and Farmer's Marine Copper Works, which had held an extended lease on

airport land where Schlitterbahn was set to be built. Farmer, who never disclosed how much money he made from signing his lease over to Schlitterbahn, took heat for his negotiations over the 40-year airport lease.

Farmer on Monday said his company had cleared out of the property on Sept. 3.

Henry walked through the property as did city officials.

"They verified all of our stuff was out and were pleased with the condition of the building as we left it," Farmer said. "The power was all out."

Farmer said he was saddened by the building's loss.

"I am really shocked," he said. "It's just a setback. One of Jeff's (Henry) biggest worries was a hurricane. A fire is worse."

Firefighters pulled water from nearby Moody Gardens and the Scholes International Airport to help fight the fire.

Sisters witness blaze

Officials with the Moody Gardens hotel said they had not evacuated guests, but were keeping watch from nearby buildings to make sure the fire was contained.

Tourist Kay Parden was outside the hotel when the fire started. She and her seven sisters were visiting Galveston from Louisiana, part of their annual sister gathering.

"I was talking to the guy about the price and I saw a little smoke," she said, watching as the flames consumed the hangar's frame.

The sisters were supposed to stay in Alabama this year but their house there was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan, which struck the Gulf Coast last week.

"All of these natural disasters, maybe this should tell us something," her sister Yvette LeBlanc joked.

They decided not to stay at Moody Gardens.

Reporters Sarah Viren, Laura Elder and Wes Swift contributed to this report.

