

Blast craters courthouse wall

Explosion is region's fourth bomb-related incident in a week.

VALLEJO, Calif. (AP) — An explosion blew a manhole-sized crater in the wall of the Solano County courthouse Thursday, smashing windows and damaging nearby buildings.

It was the region's fourth bomb-related incident in a week.

The powerful device, placed behind a wall of hedges near the front of the courthouse, didn't penetrate the building when it exploded, and no one was injured. Still, it shattered 22 courthouse windows and damaged several adjacent buildings.

Federal agents were looking for connections between the courthouse blast and two earlier bombs, one of which blew up near several bank ATMs, as well as a threat that forced the evacuation of the Vallejo courthouse.

And later Thursday morning, a

bomb threat forced officials to evacuate the courthouse and sheriff's office in nearby Fairfield. No bomb was found after either threat.

Investigators said thick fog and the dense hedge probably shielded whoever planted the device at the Solano courthouse. A wire leading from the site across the lawn and an adjacent street to an alley probably was used to trigger the explosion, according to Charles Barnett, arson and bomb supervisor for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms office in San Francisco.

A car battery was found near the wire, but it wasn't clear if it had been used to detonate the bomb. Barnett said lab tests would try to tie the explosion to two bombs from the weekend.

He said the three bombs appear to be "similar in design." He also said the simple devices could have been built by anyone with "common blasting knowledge."

Deputy David Robinson said links

to other bombings around the country were being looked at. He provided no other details. He said there was a witness, but declined to elaborate.

A bomb made of 30 sticks of dynamite and blasting caps was found in a rucksack at Vallejo's John F. Kennedy library on Saturday. It wasn't armed, but the library, City Hall, post office and a restaurant nearby had to be evacuated while authorities dismantled it.

A second device exploded about 12 hours later, early Sunday, in front of a set of Wells Fargo ATM machines a few miles away. The machines were damaged, windows were shattered and a hole was punched in the bank building. No one was injured and no money was taken.

And on Monday, a bomb threat forced the evacuation of the courthouse in Vallejo, a blue-collar town of about 100,000 people 40 miles northeast of San Francisco. The town was home to Mare Island Naval Shipyard for 142 years until it was closed in March.



MATT HANEY/DN

Look! Up in the sky! Is it a groundhog ... or ground hog?

TULSA, Okla. — A radio station got its listeners' attention with a Groundhog Day promotion. It also got them upset.

The phones at KHTT-FM were flooded Wednesday morning after disc jockey Andy Barber said the station planned to drop "Grady the Groundhog" 200 feet from a hot air balloon.

If Grady survives, Barber told his listeners, then spring will be on the way. If not, then winter will stick around.

Station news director Katrina Tyler said KHTT received so many calls, they started playing some of them on the air.

She said the station will go ahead with its plan Sunday, but isn't saying whether a live animal will be used. "All I can say is it's a groundhog," she said.

Rumor has it the station will drop a package of sausage — a ground hog.

Mall wall collapse kills three

HOUSTON (AP) — A wall collapsed at a shopping mall Thursday morning, killing three people, injuring seven and sending dozens of elderly "mall walkers" scrambling for their lives.

As many as six others were feared missing under tons of concrete and steel rubble.

The wall was being torn down to make room for a Magic Johnson movie theater complex when it caved in.

"It just all of a sudden went crackling. I ran," said Dorothy McCann, who was among those who exercise daily by walking laps inside the Northline Mall.

Rescuers using dogs searched through the debris for victims. Cranes were brought in during the afternoon to move rubble.

The bodies of two women were retrieved 10 hours after firefighters and paramedics descended on the site. A third body was discovered early in the evening but could not be recovered quickly.

"We're pretty certain there may be

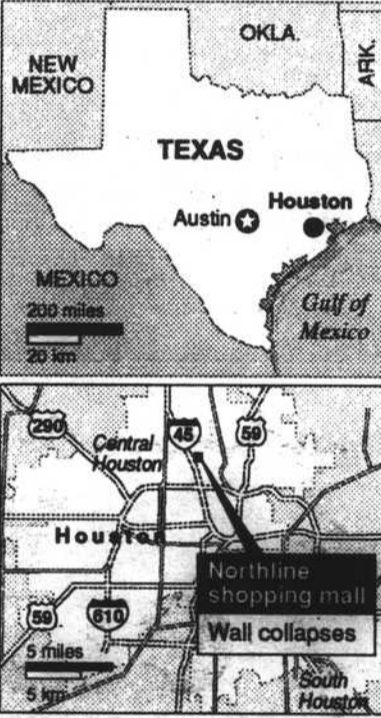
other people under the debris," Fire Chief Eddie Corral said. "We won't really know until we get in there and pull it off. Some of it is rather large and heavy."

The cause of the accident was not immediately known.

Demolition crews were removing the last sections of an old department store when a wall shared by the store and the mall caved in at about the time the mall opened at 9 a.m.

"I just heard a loud rumble," said Mary Shields, 59, who was inside the mall. "I could see dust flying. I turned around and looked back. I saw people running out of the offices saying somebody got hurt. The dust was so thick. You couldn't see."

Six of the injured were "mall walkers," most of them in their 60s and 70s. Among them were a man who ran through a window to flee the avalanche of debris, and a couple who were pushed to the ground by the force of the collapse.



AP/Wm. J. Castello

Missing kids web site to help reunite families

WASHINGTON (AP) — Five days before Christmas in 1995, Becky Comeaux suddenly found herself buying gifts for a son she hadn't seen in 12 years.

Just 15 months old when he was taken, Beau Arceneaux had become a computer-savvy teen-ager who, with the help of people using an Internet chat room, found his way home.

Mother and son were on hand Thursday to help inaugurate a World Wide Web site run by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

New technology donated by Computer Associates of Islandia, N.Y., will allow the center to keep photos of its 12 most recent missing children cases current on a web page, with links to other pages and access to the center's entire database of missing youngsters. The web page it had been using since 1995 sometimes took 24 to 48 hours to update.

"We've come a long way from milk cartons," said Ernie Allen, president of the center.

Beau was 15 months old when his father kidnapped him in 1983, said Mrs. Comeaux of New Iberia, La. It was a shock when a call finally came from the FBI in December 1995.

"I remember yelling and going down on my knees," she said of the first call, Dec. 18, telling her that he might have been located.

When the FBI brought her photos, she didn't believe the tall youth was

Beau. Her memory of him was always as a baby, and she remembered that when last she saw him she had carried him on her hip.

Beau, living with his father in Austin, Texas, said he had been told his mother left and had no interest in him. He had been using a neighbor's computer to visit a chat room on the Internet computer network and women in Delaware and Minnesota became curious about the boy who had no contact with his mother. They contacted police.

On Dec. 20, 1995, the FBI showed up at Beau's home to tell him his father had been arrested and his mother was looking for him.

"When I talked to her on the phone, my mom, it just seemed like everything was going to be all right," he went on, smiling at his mother, now three inches shorter than the boy she once carried on her hip.

Back in Louisiana, Ms. Comeaux went Christmas shopping for a lad she knew nothing about.

One photo showed him in a Charlotte Hornets jacket so she "went crazy" buying Hornets paraphernalia. Later he told her he had picked up the jacket at a yard sale.

But she still wasn't sure the boy was hers, not until that moment of greeting: "Once we hugged, it was all right."

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children home page is at <http://www.missingkids.org>.

Refund-seekers find AOL lines still busy

America Online settles with customers

Refund schedule for customers enrolled in the service during December and/or January

Hours used	Percent refunded
Less than 2 hours	100%
Between 2 and 8 hours	50%
Between 8 and 15 hours	25%
More than 15 hours	(No refund)

\$19.95 unlimited plan

Hours used	Percent refunded
Less than 1 hour	100%
Between 1 and 3 hours	50%
More than 3 hours	(No refund)

\$9.95 plan (5 hours of usage per month; \$2.95 for each additional hour)

Hours used	Percent refunded
Less than 1 hour	100%
Between 1 and 2 hours	50%
More than 2 hours	(No refund)

\$4.95 plan (3 hours of usage per month; \$2.50 for each additional hour)

Hours used	Percent refunded
Less than 1 hour	100%
Between 1 and 2 hours	50%
More than 2 hours	(No refund)

In addition:

- AOL will suspend most advertising in February while it attempts to expand its capacity.
- Future AOL advertising must "clearly and conspicuously" state that customers may encounter delays.
- AOL will make it easier for customers to cancel service, either by fax or mail.

AP/Wm. J. Castello

NEW YORK (AP) — A day after American Online announced refunds for customers who can't get through, people trying to put their requests in Thursday encountered more busy signals — and a suggestion they put it in writing.

"I got put on hold for over an hour and a half," said Jack Simpson, an AOL customer in Florida. "It seemed like every 30 seconds they said, 'We're sorry, the lines will be busy.'"

On Wednesday, AOL, under pressure from the attorneys general in more than 36 states, agreed to give millions of dollars in refunds and online time to customers.

But by Thursday morning, the nation's biggest online service had not yet updated its toll-free number for handling requests. People calling the number got a maze of recorded options. None mentioned a refund.

The toll-free number finally was updated by Thursday afternoon to include a prompt for getting refunds. Still, some customers encountered the same problem they were trying to get compensation for — clogged phone lines.

A customer service representative answering AOL's phone line during the afternoon said it would take at least 30 minutes before someone could handle a refund request because of a flood of calls from customers. Instead, he urged that the request be put in writing.

Daily Nebraskan

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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during summer sessions.

Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by calling 472-2588. The public has access to the Publications Board.

Subscription price is \$55 for one year.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448. Second-class postage paid at Lincoln, Neb.

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