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Bombing leaves family worried for older sister

By SHERRY KOONCE

As word of Oklahoma City's devastating explosion spread across the nation Wednesday, here in Panola County news of the bomb's blast vibrated down phone lines to set a stage of terror for a Carthage woman whose family worked in the targeted federal buildings.

A transplanted Okie herself, Pat Smith first heard news of the terrible tragedy when one of her sisters-in-law called Pat's business, The Hobby Horse, to enlist her help in the search for their missing loved ones.

As the second oldest of four sisters and four brothers, Pat explained that even though she was hundreds of miles from Oklahoma, she was called on to assume the family command post left vacant by her older sister Norma, who was involved in the explosion.

"Norma and I take care of everything and when my family could not get in touch of her, they called me," Pat said.

Ironically, when the call came, Pat said she had not heard of the disaster and could not understand what had happened in her sister's hometown.

"When I finally did understand what had occurred there, I got my address book and told the girls

working with me to start calling numbers until we found her," Pat stated.

But she wasn't prepared for four long hours filled with uncertainty of not knowing whether her sister was dead or alive.

"It was the worst four hours of my life. You just can't imagine what it was like — especially since we are so close, we're like best friends," she said.

But Pat's older sister, who is employed at the county courts federal building immediately behind the targeted Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, was not the only family member unaccounted for. In fact, both of Norma's sons worked downtown as well as a cousin. One son, Eddy, is employed only a couple of blocks away while the other son, Gene, actually worked in the bombed building as did the family's cousin, Cindy.

"We were frantic, we called pagers, phones, any number we had trying to get through, but could not," Pat stated.

For the next four hours Pat hung on — waiting for some kind of word.

And then around 1 p.m. the call

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came.

"Miraculously, we had gotten through on Eddy's pager and he was finally able to return our calls to let us know they were all safe and alive," Pat recounted.

By 1 p.m. Norma was able to get a call through, but it would be much later in the afternoon before the family members were calm enough to recount details of their harrowing experience.

Norma explained that miraculously both Gene and Cindy had not gone to work that morning. Gene was assigned to work at another location and Cindy had an engagement that would cause her to be late that morning.

Eddy, she said, was on his way to work stopped at a redlight three blocks from the explosion site when it occurred. When the explosion occurred around 9 a.m. Norma stated she had already been at work for over an hour.

"The day was fine, everything was normal when I arrived at 7:45 to begin my day at 8 a.m., but as I walked through my building's parking lot, I remember seeing a bomb squad. I really did not think much about it -- especially when we did not hear anymore about it," Norma explained.

But her own words would ring ominous just minutes after she said them.

"There was some talk about the bomb squad among employees in our office. We did wonder what it was doing in our parking lot. Jokingly, I said, 'Well I guess we'll find out soon enough,' Norma recalled.

In recounting her experience at the time of the blast, Norma said it was and continues to be unreal and indescribable.

"Around nine or maybe a little after I heard and felt it. It was a huge explosion and our building was shaking with vibrations.

"As we stood there paralyzed with fear, we were just waiting for the floor to fall beneath us. We really did not know what had happened, but in our dazed state did not associate the explosion with a bomb and thought that an explosion from a gas leak or something of that nature had occurred," Norma recounted.

After a while, Norma continued, she took the lead and fled the building -- not so much for her own safety, but rather to find her sons even though she said they thought it was just their building that was involved.

"It was so strange because we still did not associate the events with a bomb, but somehow I felt I had to find my boys."

But they were not prepared for what lay ahead of them.

In their own building, windows were blown out and things were in disarray, although no one appeared to be injured, she said.

Outside, it quickly became apparent that the destruction was widespread and centered upon the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in front of their offices.

"There was smoke and dust everywhere -- and bodies," she recalled of the first harrowing steps outside her own office.

"People were just bleeding and bloody. You just can't imagine unless you were there."

Continuing her account of the downtown devastation, Norma described glass was blown from exteriors of many other buildings for a radius of several blocks. Also, she noted, things were not that chaotic in the initial minutes after the blast.

"People were not running and at first there were just a handful of us on the street. We were walking fast and everyone seemed to be in a daze. We were simply shocked and confused about what had happened.

"Then someone said, 'it had to be a bomb', she continued, and then we all knew. I remember the bomb squad in our parking lot and knew what had happened."

Very luckily, Norma was able to reach her car, which was not blocked in and drive home, but only after she and another employee, Homer, got a phone call out to his wife.

"We walked to a nearby building and someone told us if we wanted to get a call out, we better do it quick because the lines are going down fast. I told Homer to call his wife and I gave her a number to call a relative of mine who I knew would be home. Homer told his wife to call relatives of everybody that worked with us and let them know what happened and that we were alright," she continued.

But still, Norma worried about her own sons.

"I knew I had to get home. If my boys were safe, they would contact me there."

Within a short period of time, Eddy did reach her at home and continued to search for Gene.

"It was so unbelievable, Eddy called the Oil Building, which is nearby and was talking to people there when they said that Eddy was calling on one of their other lines looking for his family. They got patched through to each other and soon we knew we were all safe.

Later that afternoon Norma said she learned that Cindy was also safe and had been on the other side of town when the explosion occurred.

Norma noted it would be another week before she could return to her office, but that even then, it would be frightening.

"I'll never forget this experience, never. The person that did this is not human. They can't be human to target babies. Whatever the punishment, there is none too severe for what they did to those babies. I will never forget what they did to the babies," she said.

With memories of the ordeal less vivid but just as upsetting, Pat indicated the family is planning a trip in the very near future away from their home in Oklahoma City.

"We've got a cabin in the mountains. I think it will do everyone good to get together in a beautiful, relaxed setting," Pat concluded.