

Lightning strikes St. Agnes Cathedral

By JUDY RATTNER

It was like a scene out of "Back to the Future."

At around 7:20 p.m. on Jan. 26, as the seventh snowstorm of the winter was kicking into high gear, lightning struck the bell tower of St. Agnes Cathedral, damaging parish equipment and causing an 80-year-old water main under adjacent Clinton Avenue to rupture, which sent bubbles of water up to the icy street.

Mayor Mary Bossart said village officials believe that the electrical charge traveled along a grounded lightning rod through the church and underground to the water main. The electricity, she said, found a point of weakness in the middle of a pipe in the main, she said, and blew a 3-inch hole in it through which water started pouring out.

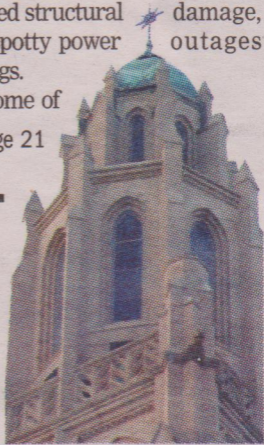
Sean Dolan, spokesman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre, confirmed that lightning hit St. Agnes's tower. Although the cathedral appears to have been spared structural damage, there were widespread, spotty power outages throughout parish buildings.

According to Dolan, some of

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LIGHTNING STRUCK

the steeple of St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, causing damage to the church and a nearby water main.



Lightning damages church, nearby water main

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the electronic equipment in the church was damaged, including microphones and lighting. The organ was also affected, he said, because it has sensitive electronic components. Some of Telecare's television broadcasting equipment, stored in the cathedral, was damaged as well, but computers and telephones in the buildings were working immediately after the strike.

Dolan added that the lightning affected the heating systems in both the Parish Center and the rectory, but they were quickly repaired.

Black cinders that presumably fell from lights in the cathedral's ceiling, landing on the pews, were cleaned. Dolan said that despite the damage, the regular schedule of Masses in the cathedral was not disrupted.

Rahul Handa, the proprietor of Bialystok & Bloom Gourmet on Clinton Avenue, diagonally across the street from St. Agnes, had a front-row seat for the dramatic event — though he was sitting with his back to the door. "I had the lights off in the store because we were closed," Handa said. "I was just reading the paper and the only light was coming from the TV; it was enough for me to read. And then suddenly, the whole store lit up — it was brighter than daylight. And immediately after that I heard a big boom and the whole building shook.

"Honestly, I thought that a plane had crashed," Handa continued. "I expected to see something horrible, like a plane or a train that had fallen off the trestle.

"So I ran outside, and [a] police officer was driving by. He said, 'Did you see it? Lightning hit the church.' We realized that it must have hit the lightning rod, which did what it was supposed to do — absorb and disperse the electricity. But the water main was hit.

"My phones and my cable went out ... I think it burned out the box," Handa added. "At the time I thought this was it, this was the end ... if I'm going, this is the time."

The Fire Department was called to the scene, and Water Department workers soon joined firefighters, as did a local contractor, Frank Robustello, with his two sons. Together they worked through the height of the storm, until 1 a.m., to repair the water main.

Nearby buildings on Clinton Avenue, with the exception of the Cathedral Gardens condominiums, were without water for two to three hours during the repairs.

Fire Chief Mark Murray, who was among those first on the scene, said, "Whether it was from the lightning strike or just a coincidence,

the water main burst. The lightning rod did what it was supposed to do, and sometimes you get the effects of it."

At around the same time, approximately 20 homes near the Knollwood gate at Fireman's Field, adjacent to South Side High School, lost power when high winds toppled a tree, which in turn snapped a Verizon utility pole. Village workers notified Verizon — calling an office in Albany — and then patched the wires and restored electricity to the darkened homes by 9:30 p.m. A crew from Verizon replaced the pole at 2 a.m., but Bossart said it would need additional repairs.

The lightning and thunder also set off many home alarms. Although it was predicted, "thundersnow" is extremely rare, and occurs when there is great instability in the atmo-

sphere (*see sidebar*).

Other village employees had an active night as well. After 10 p.m., the police investigated people who are alleged to have been involved in larcenies in cars parked in Municipal Parking Field 8. And in addition to dealing with damage from the lightning strike, the Fire Department responded to calls for emergency assistance.

"It was a very busy night," Bossart said, "and I'm very proud of how the village managers, employees, Fire Department and Police Department met the challenges we faced."

Tom Steinert contributed to this story. Comments about it? RVCEditor@liherald.com or (516) 569-4000 ext. 208.