

Explosion, fire kills Oak Grove couple

One-story home leveled by flames

By Scott Williams
Of The Examiner

OAK GROVE — An elderly husband and wife were killed today in a house explosion that rattled windows throughout the neighborhood and left the couple's Harding Street home in charred ruins.

Firefighters recovered the bodies of Forrest Johnson, 77, and Ethelyne Johnson, 75, in the basement of the house at 1300 Harding, where the couple had lived only about a year.

Fire and police officials said they did not know what caused the explosion or how the Johnsons died.

The house exploded and burst into flames about 6:30 a.m. Witnesses who said they were at the scene within minutes reported hearing the screams of a woman coming from inside.

Deputy Charles DeGroff of the Jackson County Sheriff's Department said he was the first police officer to arrive, and he tried to rescue

the screaming woman.

DeGroff said he went to an area of the house not yet in flames, knocked out a bedroom window and saw flames climbing across the ceiling inside.

The sheriff's deputy said he shouted to the woman in an effort to guide her out of the house, but, he said, "She didn't respond."

Deputy Chief David George of the Sni Valley Fire Protection District said officials knew the Johnsons were home when they arrived the scene.

But what remained of the one-story house was fully engulfed in flames, he said, and firefighters were helpless to attempt any rescue.

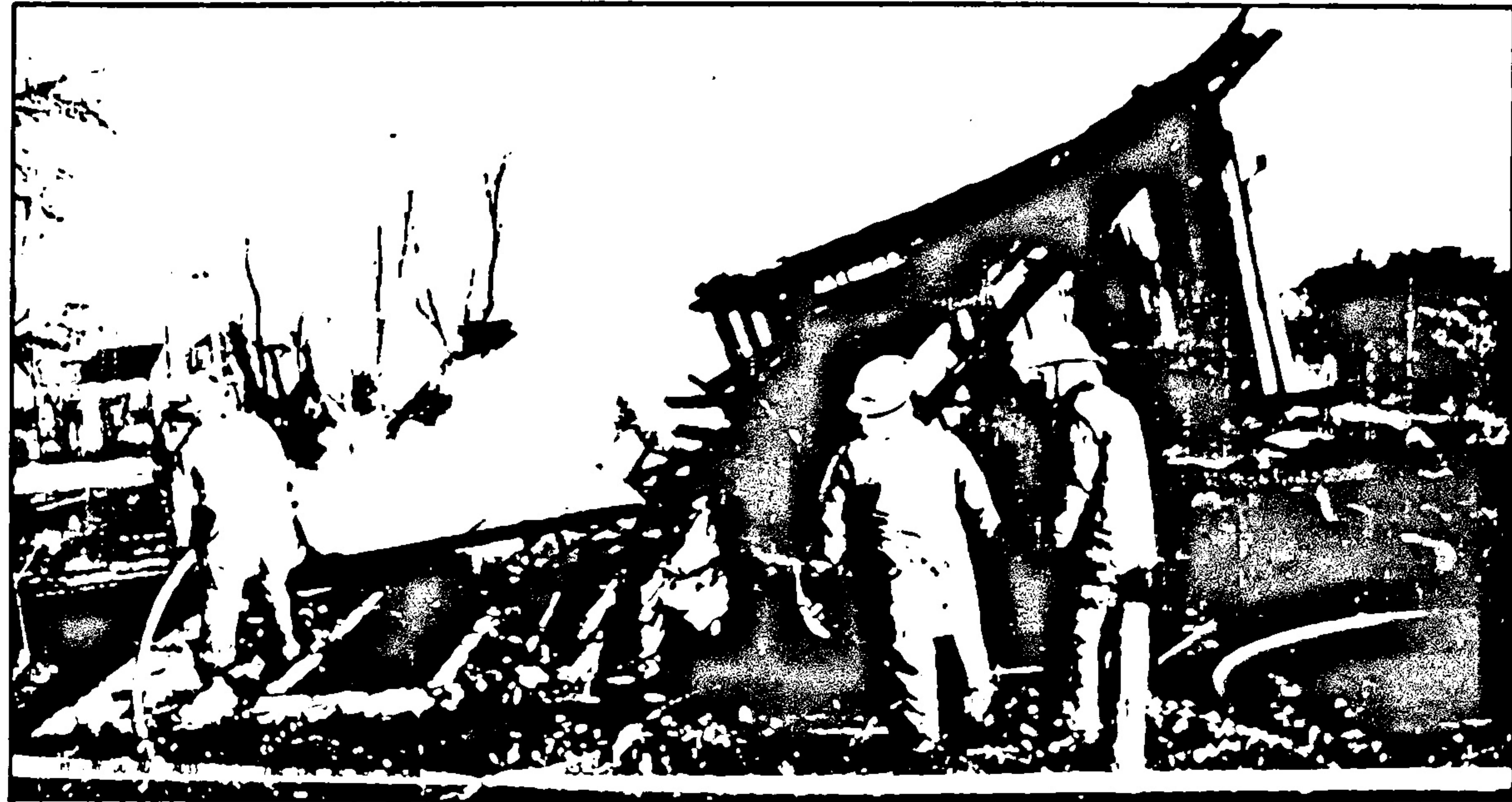
"The way this thing was burning, there was no way we could have gotten inside," he said.

Sheriff's Deputy Royce Richberg said the bodies of the couple were found in the basement.

Richberg said autopsies would be done by the Jackson County Medical Examiner's office.

Friends and neighbors said the Johnsons previously lived on a farm in Lafayette County but were well known for many years in Oak Grove.

Mr. Johnson, who used the



The one-story house was leveled and two vehicles nearby badly damaged.

nickname "Joe," had held jobs at the Lake City Army Ammunition Plant and as a janitor for the Oak Grove School District.

Mrs. Johnson was a housewife who was active at the First Baptist Church of Oak Grove.

The couple had no children.

"They loved their little house," one friend said. "They didn't get to use it

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