

Tank cars derail, ex



Staff photo by Jerrey Roberts

Law officers direct citizens away from the scene of train derailment north of Marshall.

Residents recount smoke, flames

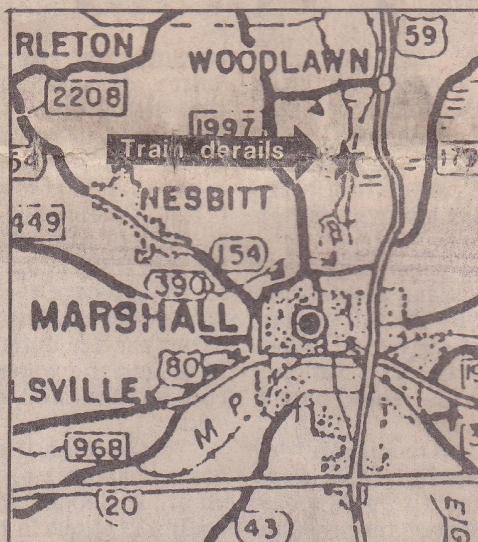
By CRAIG PUGH
Staff Writer

"It was the blackest smoke I've ever seen," said John Riggins. "At first I thought a neighbor's house was on fire. But the smoke was too black, and there was too much of it. Then, since it had been raining so much, I thought maybe a tornado was forming."

It was neither of those calamities, actually, that roused dozens of residents along Sue Belle Lake Road north of Marshall Saturday afternoon at 3:10.

It was a 37-car freight train laden with chemicals from Longview's Texas Eastman plant, slewing off the tracks and exploding. Even the constant rain that had fallen all day and flooded surrounding areas could do little to stop the numerous fires, which lit up the night sky.

"I live about four miles away and I heard the first explosion and looked up and saw flames in the sky above the trees," said Jim Thomas, a member of the Woodlawn Volunteer Fire Department.



Arrow shows site of train derailment near Marshall.

At first, no one knew what was on the

in, like it had hit something.

"I tried to see how many cars were off the track, but the huge flames and boiling black smoke obscured almost everything; I just couldn't tell what was down there."

Meanwhile, residents such as the Riggins' had been evacuated by law enforcement officials.

"I walked outside with my wife and sons and right about then heard the first explosion," Riggins said. "This was around 3:30. And boy, did we see some flames. They were bright red-orange, with swirling black smoke whipping around and boiling up from them. His wife, Margaret, said the air had a chemical smell.

The rain continued falling Saturday night, and by the time darkness came only the red-and-blue lights of police cars were visible, blocking off all roads leading to the derailment. But off in the distance, about a mile west of Highway 59, the sky would glow a faint orange