

From dallasobserver.com
Originally published by *Dallas Observer* 2002-02-21
©2005 New Times, Inc. All rights reserved.

"Today, a Generation Died."

Revisiting the story of the 1937 New London gas explosion--the worst tragedy involving schoolchildren in American history

By Carlton Stowers

Lonnie Barber, janitor-driver for the New London School, watched as young children climbed aboard his bus, laughing and horseplaying. The elementary school students--released 10 minutes earlier than their junior high and high school classmates--were in particularly high spirits that springlike Thursday afternoon of March 18, 1937. The next day had been declared a holiday so students could attend the annual district scholastic and athletic competition in nearby Henderson. It was an otherwise unremarkable day, except that because the much-anticipated casting for the annual senior play had begun, only four of the 740 students had been absent, a record for the new school year.

The lanky, gray-haired Barber shifted the bus into low gear and began a slow climb up a dirt road on the outskirts of the East Texas oil-field community. It was 3:20 p.m.

As Barber reached the crest of a hill, a sudden force of air shook the bus. There was a growing, loud rumble, then the shattering echo of an explosion. Simultaneously, Barber and the children turned their attention to the source of the noise. Two dozen horror-stricken faces stared back toward their 4-year-old school building--which was no longer there. In a bizarre, catastrophic moment that was to find its way into the history of American tragedy, there was nothing left but black smoke mixing with a spiraling cloud of red clay dust and sprayed rubble where the E-shaped building had once stood.

Had Barber looked back a split second earlier, he would have seen the same grotesque scene eyewitnesses would later recall: a rumble as the ground shook, then the walls of the two-story brick building seeming to expand outward. The red tile roof was momentarily lifted into the air, then crashed back down. Natural gas, used to heat the school's 72 steam radiators, had been accumulating from an undetected leak in the building's sub-basement for days, apparently ignited when a teacher flipped the switch to start an electric sanding machine in the school workshop.

Barber hesitated only briefly, then squared himself in his driver's seat and pressed the gas pedal to the floorboard. He knew the parents of the children he was transporting would be worried about their safety. Thus, even as word of the worst tragedy involving schoolchildren in American history was being flashed around the world, Barber, his face twisted with agony, dutifully completed his hour-long route just as he'd done for years.

Only then did he hurriedly return to the school to find out if his own four children were among the survivors.

He was met by chaos. People were digging with bare, bleeding hands into the smoldering rubble in an effort to reach screaming victims trapped beneath the twisted steel beams and brick. The gruesome remains of dozens of young victims had already been removed and placed along the edge of the school yard. Those drawn to them, searching madly for their children, quickly realized that identification was going to be a difficult task. Almost immediately, speculation of the number of deaths began to climb: 400, 500, maybe more. A form of insanity



Every available truck was used for 'round-the-clock funerals. The tragedy was one of the first stories covered by a young Walter Cronkite, who recalls that "grief was everywhere."
AP/Wide World



The New London explosion is still the third-worst Texas tragedy. At the time, only the Galveston hurricane of 1900 had claimed more lives.
AP/Wide World



A survivor of the explosion in New London looks over one of the books that was found in the ruins of the school. The final death toll: 280 students and 14 teachers.
Mark Graham



swept through the town. First on the scene were parents who had escaped death themselves only because a PTA meeting they were attending had, at the last minute, been moved from the school auditorium to the gymnasium. Soon, truckloads of oil-field roughnecks, released from their jobs as soon as word of the catastrophe reached drilling sites throughout Rusk County, arrived with bulldozers, winch trucks and acetylene torches. Local Boy Scout troops were called into action. Texas Governor James Allred, upon learning of the disaster, immediately dispatched National Guard troops. Red Cross and Salvation Army workers poured into the isolated community from throughout East Texas. Radio stations in nearby Tyler and Kilgore discontinued regular programming and served as a communications network for the rescue operation.

From Dallas, 120 miles to the west, came 30 doctors, 100 nurses and 25 embalmers who, because of the magnitude of their task and the lack of facilities, were forced to perform their work on tables set up on the school grounds. Every available form of transportation--buses, automobiles, pickups--was enlisted as ambulances or hearses. Bodies were pulled from the wreckage and lined up along a fence with school principal Troy Duran assigned the task of identifying the dead before they were transported to makeshift morgues.

The thunderous blast claimed the lives of 280 students and 14 teachers. One of them was 11-year-old fifth-grader Arden Barber, the bus driver's youngest son. His three other children, including high school senior L.V. Barber, were among the nearly 100 who escaped with injuries.

"I was in the study hall, which was located in the far end of the building," L.V. Barber recalls, "and I wasn't injured, except for a few scratches. But my sister Pearl, who was sitting next to me, was hit by a part of the wall that fell and suffered a back injury. My younger brother Burton was in the shop where the explosion took place and somehow came out of it with only burns and a few cuts. As soon as I got out of the building I ran straight home to tell Mother what had happened. She'd already heard and was getting ready to go up to the school. My dad was there when we arrived, and he told us that Arden was dead but he hadn't been able to find his body.

"My parents finally located him later that night, in a funeral home over in Overton."

It was a story L.V. Barber rarely told during his lifetime. "Even Dad never talked much about the explosion after Arden's funeral," he says. "I guess he, like everybody else, just decided to try and put it behind him. He retired the next year, then died in 1969. I can remember newspaper people coming around every now and then, asking him questions about that day, but he never had much to say."

In modern Texas history, only two disasters have claimed more lives: the Galveston hurricane of 1900, in which nearly 8,000 died, and the 1947 Texas City chemical-plant explosion that killed more than 600. For years, in fact, many of those who lived through the nightmare chose simply to lock away their memories, as if by doing so they could somehow move past that horrific day when an entire generation had died.

Texas newspapers have occasionally dispatched reporters to do "anniversary" stories on the event that once made headlines worldwide, briefly reviving the horror story and repeating the question of why such a wealthy school district flirted with the danger of piping free natural gas into the school. Until recently, however, the tale of enormous grief and guilt, courage and triumph has remained a well-kept East Texas secret. Only now, with word that a New York journalist has received a high six-figure advance to write a book on the subject, does it appear the remarkable story will be told to a national audience.



Felix McKnight covered the disaster in New London for The Associated Press. "The enormity of what I saw..." he says, "never left me."
AP/Wide World



A ridge of earth shown in this air photo taken four days after the explosion indicates the foundation line of the school in New London and suggests the sweeping power of the gas explosion that killed nearly 300 people. Debris in the background was quickly cleared away by thousands of volunteer workers who helped remove crushed bodies of the schoolchildren and teachers.
AP/Wide World



School Superintendent W.C. Shaw never got over the New London tragedy.
Mark Graham



That night brought a cold driving rain. Ignoring the weather, rescue crews dutifully went about their work. Bill Rives, an Associated Press reporter at the time, estimated that 2,000 men dug and carried away more than 5 million pounds of rock, brick and steel, moving it 100 yards from the explosion site, in less than 24 hours. Before they would finish, Rives wrote, "the area where the blast had occurred looked as if it had been swept clean by brooms."

Dallas' Felix McKnight, 26 at the time and also working for AP, opened his first dispatch with a sentence that would become a journalism classic. "Today," he wrote, "a generation died."

Now 91, the former *Dallas Times Herald* executive editor is quick to list the New London story as the most memorable he covered during a 65-year journalism career in which he also wrote the lead story for the *Herald* on the Kennedy assassination.

"It was dusk by the time Rives and I arrived," he recalls, "and workers were already clearing away the rubble, searching for survivors. A long line had formed and they were passing along peach baskets filled with debris. We identified ourselves and were immediately told that helpers were needed far more than reporters." Thus McKnight and Rives joined the brigade of oil-field roughnecks and distraught fathers in helping clear the area.

"I finally broke away after an hour or so and ran over to this little oil-field shack where there was a telephone," McKnight recalls. "It was being guarded, and I was told it was for emergency use only. But, finally, they let me use it for two minutes and I was able to dictate a brief bulletin."

After learning that a skating rink in nearby Overton had been converted into a makeshift morgue, McKnight went there in an effort to get a more accurate body count. "The enormity of what I saw there has never left me," he says. "There were lines of small bodies laid out on the floor, each covered with a sheet. I don't remember seeing a one that was identifiable. They had all been so mangled and torn apart by the blast." He remembers parents identifying their lost children only by the remnants of clothing on the bodies.

A doctor gave McKnight a bucket of formaldehyde and a sponge, telling him to sprinkle it onto the sheets. "I'd do it for a while," he says, "then, when my eyes began to burn so badly I couldn't see, I'd have to go outside for a few minutes."

Every building in the area--church basements, a drugstore, the gym, a garage--was converted into either a morgue or a field hospital. Every funeral parlor within a 50-mile radius was filled with victims. In Dallas, workers at a casket company were put on around-the-clock shifts to fill the sudden need. In Tyler, the grand opening of the new Mother Francis Hospital had been planned for the following Monday. The ceremony was quickly forgotten, and it opened as soon as word of the explosion reached the hospital administrator. The need for bandages and medication depleted the stock of every drugstore for miles. Traffic in and out of the community was bumper-to-bumper as the injured were being carried away and the curious were arriving.

Another Dallas-based newsman on hand was 22-year-old Walter Cronkite, a newly hired United Press International reporter. Cronkite, who would become a journalism icon covering major events worldwide, now says that nothing had prepared him for the scene he would find upon his arrival in New London.

"I got my first inclination of just how bad it was," the retired *CBS Evening News* anchorman says, "when I got to Tyler and saw all the cars lined up at the funeral home. It was dark by the time I got to New London. I'll never forget that scene."

"I can still see those floodlights they had set up and the big oil-field cranes that had been brought in to remove the rubble. Men were moving around like a colony



Claude Kerce of DeSoto was a sixth-grader at the time of the explosion. He holds a photo of himself at the time of the New London disaster.
Carlton Stowers



Many of the markers in the New London cemetery have the same date of death. At top is the marker for Arden Barber, the youngest son of bus driver Lonnie Barber.
Carlton Stowers



Across from the rebuilt school the town erected this 34-foot-high cenotaph--carved from 120 tons of Texas granite--as a permanent reminder of the tragedy.

of ants, climbing up and down the piles of debris, literally digging with their hands."

Cronkite says he was there for four days, filing stories on the explosion, its aftermath and, eventually, the around-the-clock funerals. "Grief was everywhere," he recalls. "Almost everyone you ran into had lost a member of his family. Yet they went about doing everything they could to help each other. The men were digging out the bodies and removing the rubble while the women were helping the injured and supplying coffee and meals for the workers."

For many parents the search lasted days. A mother located one of her dead sons on the school grounds and placed his body in the backseat of her car. Then she began driving from one funeral home to another, finally locating the remains of her other child two days later. Another went from body to body, clutching a small piece of fabric left from a new dress she'd sewn for her daughter. Only when she was able to match the swatch to the clothing on one of the dismembered bodies did she learn that her child was dead.

Soon, an unsettling barrage of stories spread, some true, some embellished, many wholly fabricated. For a time, a rumor circulated that one of the students, angered by the reprimands of a too-strict teacher, had stolen several sticks of dynamite from one of the nearby drilling sites and had blown up the school. One story that *was* true, however, involved a father who earlier in the day had found his children at a nearby fishing hole, playing hooky. He'd scolded them and personally delivered them to school just hours before the explosion killed them.

Another woman, finding her dead 16-year-old daughter, suffered a fatal heart attack. Two mothers engaged in a hysterical fight over a mutilated corpse, each insisting it was her son. A young girl, uninjured by the blast, had jumped to safety from a second-floor window but had suffered a deep cut to her inner thigh when she landed on a pile of rubble. Before her condition was noticed, she bled to death.

A student, bleeding and in shock, approached rescue workers, begging that they help his best friend. When asked where he was, the boy pointed upward toward highline wires that stretched between two still-standing poles. Lying across them, 30 feet in the air, was a body.

A young Boy Scout from a neighboring community wandered through the debris carrying a sack, his assignment to collect scattered shoes. Many of them still contained the feet of mutilated victims. A number of the bodies, in fact, were unrecognizable. One youngster was finally able to identify his dead brother only after reaching into his pocket and locating the string he used to spin his prize top.

Funerals were soon held at an assembly-line pace--as many as a dozen were conducted simultaneously. When all hearses in the area were in use, pickup trucks were used to transport caskets to the Pleasant Hill Cemetery. Pallbearers literally raced from one grave site to another, as did members of a local church choir who had volunteered to sing a hymn during each ceremony. Oil-field workers dug the graves.

As word of the tragedy spread, a sympathetic world shared in the grief that had visited the isolated community. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt wired her sympathies, as did German dictator Adolf Hitler. A Japanese elementary class sent a telegram, expressing its sorrow. Soon a memorial fund was established and donations arrived from around the world. A Girl Scout troop in Kansas sent 25 cents it had collected. A 5-year-old Galveston girl who had been saving her pennies to purchase a doll mailed them to New London, saying she would rather they be used to memorialize the dead children. Students at the Cherbourg School in France conducted a drive and collected \$9.50.

The funds helped pay for a permanent reminder of the tragedy that now stands across from the rebuilt school: a 34-foot-high, \$20,000 cenotaph, carved from 120 tons of Texas granite. Engraved at its base is the name of each person who died in the blast.

Before 1937, the biggest news to visit the region was the discovery of one of the world's richest oil deposits beneath its sandy loam soil. An Oklahoma wildcatter named C.J. (Dad) Joiner, using unconventional search techniques such as fortunetellers and divining rods, hit it big in 1930, and the area went from the Depression-era doldrums to staggering riches almost overnight. New London residents, in fact, had proudly claimed theirs the richest school district in the United States. Where else, they would boast, could one find a 15-acre school campus with 10 pumping oil wells located on the grounds?

One of Joiner's promises to a civic-minded local resident named Daisy Bradford was that if she would allow him to drill on her land, the oil revenue he was certain would result could provide an improved school for the children of New London. In 1934, the new \$1 million school was built. Teachers' salaries were increased. New books, band instruments and a piano were purchased. Soon, the Wildcats had the first football stadium in the state lighted for night games. The county's population grew from a pre-oil boom 32,000 to 65,000.

Why, then, given the school's unlimited wealth, had it risked students' lives to save \$3,000 per year on heating fuel?

The school board, at the urging of Superintendent William Shaw, had voted to heat their million-dollar school by siphoning off free natural gas, then a worthless byproduct of petroleum extraction, from a nearby refinery. This although petroleum experts considered the odorless and highly volatile gas too dangerous for commercial use.

In the days before the disaster, numerous students complained of headaches and burning eyes. Still it apparently never occurred to school officials that a pipeline might be leaking, that 6,000 cubic feet of gas had slowly collected beneath the foundation.

Ten days after the explosion, school resumed in makeshift classrooms on the New London campus. The 287 returning students--a little more than half the previous academic population--assembled in the gymnasium as somber teachers quietly called roll. The names of many drew no response except for the occasional "He's dead," or "She's still in the hospital."

Slowly, the townspeople's grief turned to outrage. Embittered parents threatened civil suits against the school district and the refinery from which the deadly gas had been siphoned. The U.S. Bureau of Mines, now a part of the Department of Interior, launched an investigation, calling Superintendent Shaw before a court of inquiry. Despite the fact he had lost a son and a niece in the blast, talk abounded for a time that a lynch party would visit his home. Though ultimately exonerated of any wrongdoing, Shaw resigned. "Years after the explosion," a friend remembers, "it was all he could talk about. He never got over it."

In time, a single lawsuit--a "test" case--was brought to trial despite the opposition of many families who worked for the oil companies and were thus reluctant to challenge their employers. The litigation divided the community to a point where shouting matches and occasional fights broke out on the steps of the courthouse. Finally, after months of testimony--much of it from young students who had survived the blast--Judge R.T. Brown stunned a crowded courtroom by ruling that none of those named in the suit could be held directly responsible.

One good thing came from the event. The Texas Legislature quickly passed a law requiring that a foul-smelling substance called methyl mercaptain be added to natural gas. Soon, the regulation was being adopted worldwide. It is because of the New London school explosion that natural gas used now has an easily detectable odor.

Today, it is no longer called the New London School. Since 1995 it has been known as West Rusk Consolidated, and enrollment has grown to 861 students--almost as many students as New London has residents (987).

Across the street from the school, where Charlie's Drug Store was once a favored hangout of the community's teen-agers, the London Museum and Tea Room offers visitors a moving reminder of the tragedy that struck just a few hundred yards from its front door. There are photographs and newspaper clippings, the telegrams and letters of condolence received and artifacts claimed from the wreckage. There's a copy of the edition of *Life* magazine that featured a lengthy photo story on the aftermath of the explosion, as well as the brief newsreel footage that showed in the nation's movie theaters the week after the disaster.

Overseen by Mollie Ward, a fourth-grader in 1937, the museum features one area that has been labeled "Ms. Wright's Classroom" and displays an antique blackboard salvaged after the explosion. There are remnants of papers written by her English students, along with dented lunch boxes and tattered spiral notebooks found and saved by those who searched the rubble.

"While I felt it was important to keep the memory of what occurred alive," Ward says, "I have to admit that I was concerned about the reaction some would have to the visual reminders of what was the worst day of many of their lives."

She need not have worried. Now, when survivors make their biannual pilgrimages to New London for reunions, Ward's museum is the first place they gather.

It's also a place, and a town, to which I'm drawn. For years, I've seldom made a trip into East Texas without detouring off Interstate 20 to visit New London. For reasons I can't fully explain, I'm drawn to its people, to the memorial, to the quiet drive into the dogwood- and tree-laden outskirts where the Pleasant Hill Cemetery sits atop a rise. I'm drawn to the headstones that bear the photographs of smiling children, their date of death all the same.

In that time, I've wondered why, in the grand scope of the nation's history, the New London explosion has been all but forgotten. Another disaster that occurred just two months later in Lakehurst, New Jersey--the flaming crash of the Hindenburg--eclipsed the nation's memory of New London, even though fewer lives were lost.

Only now, it appears, has the world beyond New London decided to take notice. Sara Mosle, a former New York teacher and journalist, was recently signed by Knopf to do a book on the event. "My grandfather worked in the oil fields near New London," she says, "and my mother was a first-grader at nearby Arp when the explosion occurred." An aunt, she says, was in the fourth grade. "I remember them talking about it when I was growing up, and the story has stayed with me. Yet it seemed to have dropped from the history books." Mosle's book, tentatively titled *Boom*, will be published in 2003.

I've come to know some of those who were there and survived that infamous day. As a journalist, I attended the first of their reunions in 1977. For some, I learned, it took nearly a lifetime before they could speak about it.

Claude Kerce, who now lives in DeSoto, was in the sixth grade, a student in Ms. Ann Wright's class memorialized at Mollie Ward's museum. "I remember one minute the teacher was talking, then all of a sudden there was nothing but dust everywhere," he says. "I ran toward the window and Miss Wright was standing by it. I pushed her out and then went out right behind her. We lived about two miles from the school and I ran every step of the way home. I never even looked back to see what had happened."

As Claude was making his way home, his father, a welder for Humble Oil Co., was driving past the school. Seeing the horrifying sight, he steered his pickup across the school yard, through the debris, and immediately went to work digging in the piles of rubble. It would be 30 hours before he reached home.

Claude's late brother G.W. remembered talking to his best friend, Billy Roberts, when the building exploded. A brick sailed past his head. He ran outside onto the football field, looking back at the mushroom of dust and smoke. Only later would he learn that just four of the 16 students in his 10th-grade geometry class survived. Billy Roberts was not among them. Until his death, G.W.--former minor-league baseball player, Exxon employee and past president of the local school board--carried a faded old school photo of Roberts in his billfold.

Decades later, Arthur Shaw, a 10th-grader in 1937, remained confused about the sequence of events. "I can remember sitting in geometry class, talking to a friend of mine about hitchhiking to Fort Worth the next day to see the fat stock show," he says. "And then I heard this rumbling noise. The next thing I can remember is being under a pile of boards and dirt, yelling for someone to help me.

"I vaguely remember someone taking me to the basement of the Baptist church where the local dentist and a hairdresser sewed some stitches into my head. Then, I was in somebody's truck and finally at the emergency room of Mother Francis Hospital in Tyler.

"A friend of mine, Elbert Box, was also there--he later had to have a leg amputated--and we talked. At the time, we both thought it had been only our classroom that blew up. We had no idea the whole school exploded."

Shaw, who suffered a fractured vertebra, was also unaware of the extent to which the tragedy had touched his family. An older sister had been in the library and escaped serious injury when a wall behind her fell and killed a teacher and several students in an adjacent room. Among them was his younger sister Dorothy, a sixth-grader.

"My older sister later found Dorothy in a row of bodies outside the school," he says. Also lying among the dead was his 16-year-old cousin Sambo Shaw, son of the school superintendent.

Marie Beard was a second-grader waiting for her older sister to get out of class when the school exploded. Suffering a concussion, severe damage to one eye and a broken pelvic bone, she was dug from the debris and placed into a bread truck that was being used as an ambulance. "There were a lot of bodies in there," she remembers, "but a boy named Billy and I were the only ones who were still alive."

After the truck had reached the hospital, the driver noticed that the little girl, though still breathing, had been placed alongside a row of dead bodies. When he urgently called her condition to the attention of one of the doctors, he was told that she was so near death that it would be futile to waste time attempting to save her.

Marie's older sister, who also survived, and her parents would later tell her the remainder of the story once she emerged from a 10-day coma. "The bread-truck driver--I never learned his name--picked me up, put me back into his truck and drove me to a hotel in Overton that was also being used as an emergency hospital.

"In all these years," she says, "I never learned that driver's name. But I'll forever be grateful to him. He saved my life."

Today, Marie, 73, is married to her school days sweetheart, 75-year-old Ike Challis, who was also dug from the rubble.

Mrs. Walter Harris had traveled from nearby Overton to place flowers on the grave of her son James, a fifth-grade student in '37, when we met. Standing near the headstone, she spoke softly. "James was going to be competing in the county meet the next day," she said, "so I'd gone shopping to buy him a new shirt. Then I heard about what had happened at the school and went immediately to see about him and if I could help with the injured."

She had worn a pretty spring dress that day, she recalled, and by nightfall it was bloodstained and matted with grime. "I wasn't even aware of it," she says, "until another lady offered to take me over to her house and loan me some clean clothes."

It would be three days before she and her husband found their deceased son, his body stored in a car shed adjacent to a funeral home in nearby Henderson.

As she told her story she began walking away from James' grave site, then stopped and turned, silent for several seconds. "That day," she finally said, "I sent him off with 35 cents to buy his lunch. When the funeral home returned his personal belongings to us, the money was still in his pocket."

"Even now, all these years later, I still sometimes find myself wondering if he missed lunch, if he died hungry."

It was not until 40 years after the explosion that old schoolmates Pete Miller and Ray Motley returned for a reunion and met each other on the steps leading up to the rebuilt school. Even before they spoke, Motley embraced his friend. He had been knocked unconscious that day when debris began to fall, and it had been Miller who hoisted him onto his shoulders and carried him to safety.

Those who survived all have stories, some they are eager to tell, others they hold too private, too personal to be shared. Many, like Bill Thompson, spent years struggling with "survivor's guilt." He was in fifth-grade English class that afternoon, flirting with a classmate named Billie Sue Hall. To get nearer to her, Thompson persuaded another girl to switch seats with him just minutes before the explosion.

The next thing he remembered was hearing the blast and being hurled into the air. When he fell back to the floor, he looked up to see the ceiling falling toward him.

Though hospitalized for cuts and bruises, he was well enough to be on hand for roll call when school reopened. "I can still remember hearing the teacher call the name of the girl I traded seats with," he says. "Then, a second later, I heard someone say that she had been killed. That's the day I first felt the guilt that I've carried for a long time."

"As the years have passed, I've gone past that memorial monument many times and seen her name. And I think to myself that it should be my name there, not hers."

Though the 77-year-old Thompson had often spoken of trading seats with his 12-year-old classmate that day, he was always careful never to mention her name. Until recently. "I finally called Ethel Dorsey's brother, Gordon, in Farmington, New Mexico," he says. "He listened to the story I'd been wanting to tell him for ages, then said something that made me feel better than I had in a long time. He told me, 'Don't you feel guilty about it.'"