



Observe the Monsanto Plant, nearby oil tanks farms, and residential areas before the explosion.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



See French freighter the *SS Grandcamp*, a World War II vintage Liberty Ship, resting placidly in port one day before it caught fire and exploded.



TEXAS CITY DISASTER, April 16, 1947

Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library

University of North Texas Libraries

Primary
Source
Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster



The PORTAL to TEXAS HISTORY



Note the amount of debris
the rescue workers
are standing on.



Photo courtesy of Moore
Memorial Public Library

BAUMGARTNER, HAROLD J. "BUMPY"

Sharp, crackling sounds came from the hold as firemen on deck played water streams into the hatch. I could see my father, Fire Chief Henry J. Baumgartner, on the ship with about a dozen men. The water looked like it was turning into steam. No one knew it, but it was already too late to conquer this fire. Right after Dad arrived, he told a fellow Terminal employee: "This is a dangerous fire. We need all the help we can get!"

Two Piper Cub airplanes circled the docks. I looked up as one banked above me to turn toward the dock. Louder crackling sounds came from the ship. I looked down. The ship disintegrated before my eyes.

Objects of all sizes shot into the air from the fireball before the sky turned hazy and dark. The ground shook violently. The shock wave – overpressure – sped across the open field and slapped the trees to the ground. There was no time to react. The seismic wave reached me in about 0.2 seconds, the shock wave in 1.7 to 1.8 seconds. The ground shock's noise and the intensity of the overpressure were incredible. It lifted me over the levee, blew me across 4th Avenue and rolled me into a ditch about 190 feet away. I waited to see if more explosions would follow as people ran screaming from the area, caught in no-man's land with no place to hide. To the north and south lay a block of open land, to the east, an inferno. There was no time to reach the homes to the west.

Jim Bell picked up his Harley-Davidson, about 850 pounds, tried to crank it, but it wouldn't start. Knowing objects would be falling from the sky, I looked for substantial shelter and dove through a hole in the wall of a damaged garage. An elderly black man in suit and tie was on his knees praying. Showers of shrapnel and objects rained down over the entire area, hit the garage and crashed into the surrounding homes, creating incredible sounds. Those noises, which often shook the ground, were joined by human wails of pain and screams for help. We were pelted by splinters of wood from the garage's structure and roof as it was being destroyed around us. The roar and heat of the fires was tremendous. After what seemed an eternity, the barrage stopped.

It seemed impossible that I had escaped without so much as a scratch. If I had stayed home doing my homework, I would have been cut to ribbons. My desk was riddled with glass shards embedded in the top and sides.

On Sunday we attended a memorial service at 5:00 p.m. at the football stadium with a backdrop of black smoke and burning storage tanks.

"Baumgartner, Harold J. 'Bumpy'."
We Were There. (Texas City, TX:
Mainland Museum of Texas City,
1997). 10-11.

Primary
Source
Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster



Aerial view of the burning oil refineries and storage tanks.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



The PORTAL to
TEXAS HISTORY

Various photos of the
warehouses along the docks
on fire. Note the complete
destruction after fires
were extinguished.

Photos courtesy of Moore
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The PORTAL to TEXAS HISTORY



Read an account by a
Monsanto survivor.
Note the fire consuming
the refineries.

FAIR, JAMES R.

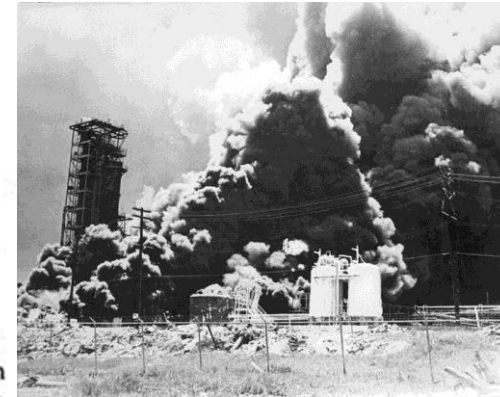
I was a Monsanto chemical engineer transferred from St. Louis effective April 1st. My mission now was to work on assimilating the plant into the corporation.

That morning when we reached the causeway, we noticed orange-colored smoke over the docks. Experiences at Marshall told me it was nitrogen dioxide gas, liberated usually by decomposing nitric acid or a nitrogen-containing compound. As we parked in front of the administration building, we saw that the smoke was from a ship in the slip next to Monsanto, docked at the opposite side next to a long warehouse.

* * *

I stopped and chatted with Charlie Eck, then turned toward the entrance of the service building and BAMMMMM! I blacked out temporarily. I came to and found the wooden scaffolding on the soon-to-be third floor collapsed on me and my hand and head bleeding. I extricated myself and headed for the north gate with a number of people. I ran into Will Lane and Matt Jones, covered with white asbestos insulation and looking like ghosts. They had been in the control laboratory. The ship was emitting dense clouds of black smoke and two benzene storage tanks near the gate were on fire. The ethylene plant was totally in flames. There was concern its feed tanks, containers of liquid propane under pressure, would explode.

The next day we returned and went to the office Monsanto had set up in the Mainland Building. They thought I was missing. I was the only survivor of seven engineers assigned to the polystyrene unit. My job then was to be Monsanto's representative on the body identification team. The first time I went to the gym, I didn't think I could get through the door. I worked for about two weeks until we were to the point that no more could be identified. There were many experiences during those two weeks, but most were not things I want to write about. After this, a few days off, and back to work tearing down and then rebuilding.



Photos courtesy of Moore Memorial
Public Library.



Primary
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Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster

View of the wrecked Liberty ship
SS Wilson B. Keene and
the debris clogged docks.

Photos courtesy of Moore
Memorial Public Library





See the Longhorn II, a 150-foot steel barge, which the SS Grandcamp's explosion blew 250 feet inland from its moorings.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



The PORTAL to
TEXAS HISTORY

Embark on a Voyage of Discovery

<http://texashistory.unt.edu>

See the destruction of the port facilities caused by the explosion of the *SS Grandcamp* and *SS Highflyer*.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library

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Primary
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Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster



Read about the toll the explosion took on one family and how one decision saved Mary.

Z ARAGOZA, MARY JIMENEZ
I recall that day and how it started.

I went to school afternoons and so was home that morning when my cousin, Lila Hernandez, came by wanting me to go see the fire. She said a lot of kids were going, and I went along. I sat there awhile, then decided to go home because my mom, Ernestine Jimenez, didn't

know I had gone. I knew I'd be in a lot of trouble if I didn't get back. I guess it wasn't my destiny to die that day. All the people I had been sitting with at the docks were killed.

Mom was fixing my breakfast as I sat in the kitchen. The explosion shook our house, and the windows blew in all over Mom and me. Mom had glass embedded in her skull and had been struck all over her face. She was bleeding from her face and head, and the blood was running down her arms. I was so scared. We ran outside and saw people running down 3rd Avenue South, the road which led to Monsanto, the Terminal Railway, and the docks. They were full of oil and grease, and many were bleeding. Some were holding their arms or limping, with injuries all over their bodies. Some were partially clothed; some had no clothing at all. It was very scary, to say the least. We had no details of what had happened or how serious it was. We kept running down the street and met my younger brothers, Jimmy, seven, and Hector, six, who had left school. They were scared and very glad to see us. We held hands and walked down the road together. Along the way we met our Aunt Mema Hernandez and her youngest daughter Alma, three. Sixth Street was filled with people leaving town. Through the darkness we could see flames in the dense, black smoke.

Our older sister Ernestine was a secretary for Iron & Metal Company, about half a block from the *Grandcamp*. The entire building collapsed, and she was trapped under it. Our father had the foresight to take a sheet with him when he searched for her. When he found her, she was unconscious and had a very weak pulse. He could not lift her by himself because his collar bone was broken from a previous injury. He ran out of the building praying to God to help him. He saw a man and asked him to help. The man said, "That's why I'm here, to help you." Together they took her to the ambulance and then to the hospital. My father didn't know the man and never saw him again. Afterwards Father said, "It must have been an angel from Heaven sent from God to help us in our hour of need, for I couldn't have done it myself."

Ernestine's spine was broken, and she was dead on arrival at the hospital. She was only twenty, and had been a loving, caring daughter and sister. Such a waste! Our grandfather, Carlos Pedraza, had also been taken to the hospital. He was outside our home feeding the cows when a piece of metal three feet long embedded itself in his skull. He lived a day or two before dying. Our poor mom lost her father and her oldest daughter. Mom was injured herself, and she lost everything she owned.

"Zaragoza, Mary Jimenez." *We Were There*. (Texas City, TX: Mainland Museum of Texas City, 1997). 262-263.



An aerial view of the destroyed area days after the explosions.

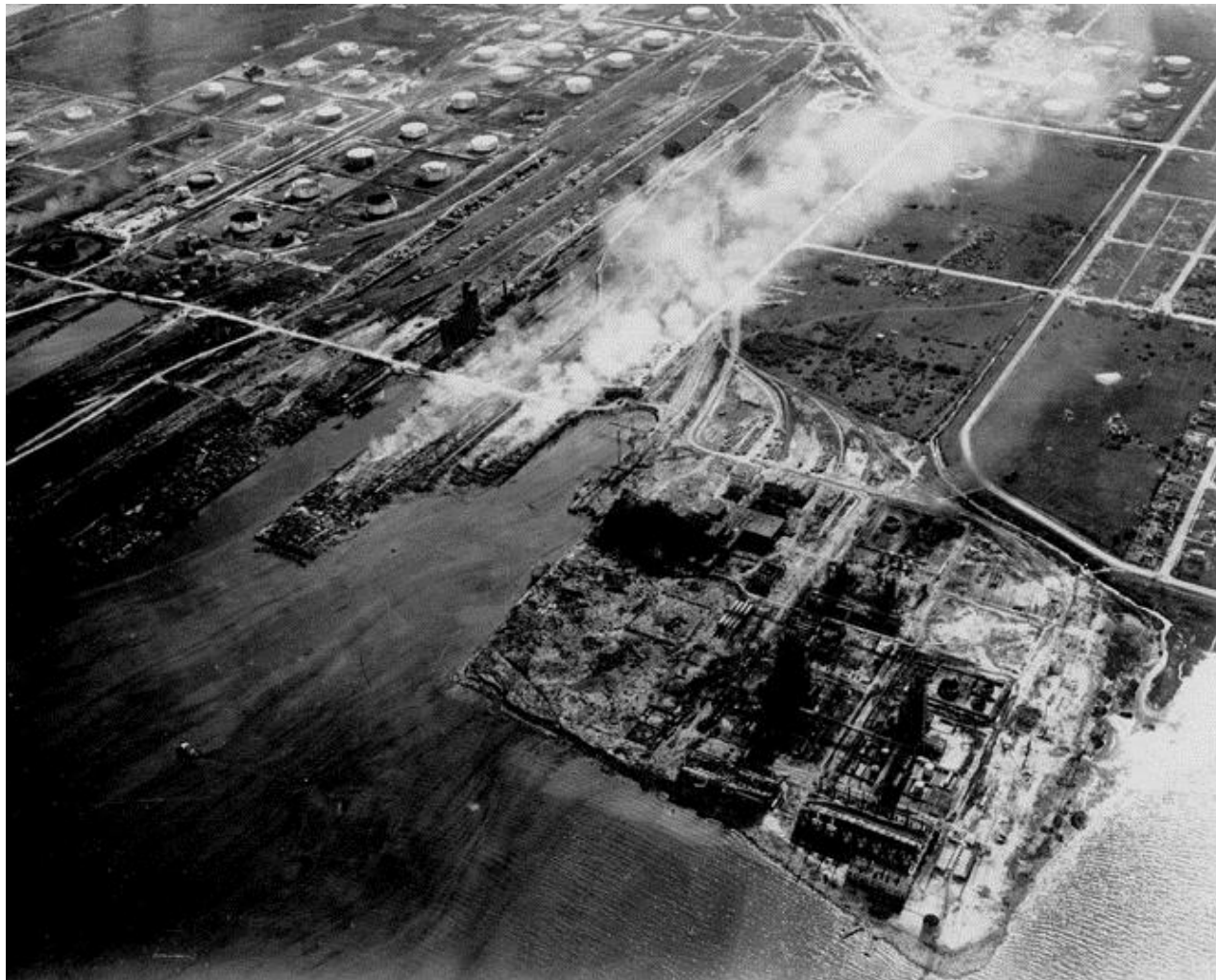


Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



See the remains of the Monsanto plant, Texas City Railway Co. docks and oil storage tanks days after the explosions.

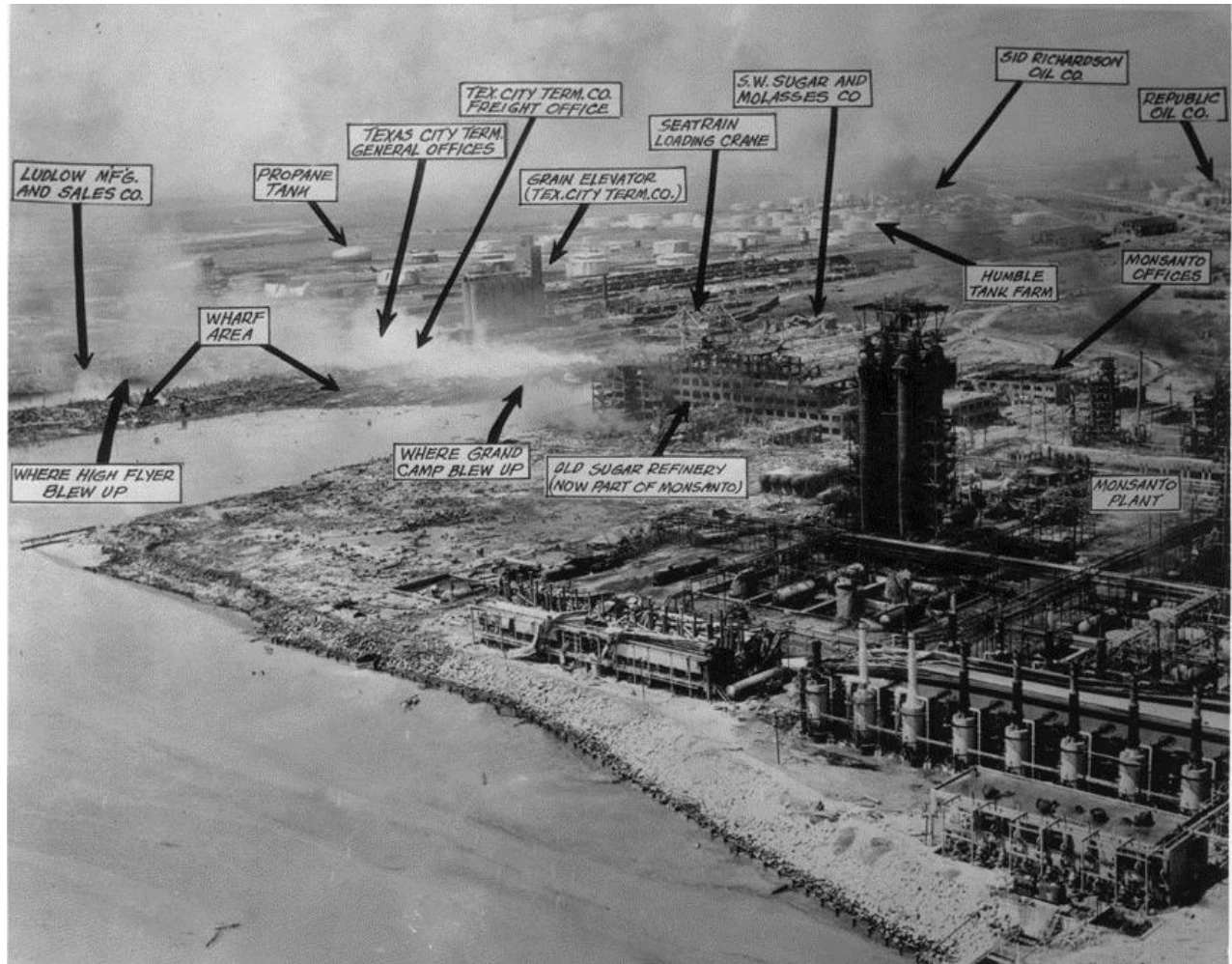


Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library

Primary Source Adventures: Texas City Disaster



View from downtown Texas City of the devastated port area.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



Houses damaged and burning due to the explosions.

MEDSGER, HERB

The force of it hit me in the back, and dust and debris rushed past me. A split second later I was picked up or blown twenty-five feet. Fortunately nothing hit me. One of our group was hit by a piece of steel, developed gas gangrene, and was hospitalized for many weeks.

I ran toward Bay Street. My car was caved in, and steel started hitting the pavement all around me. I crawled under a car, and several missiles hit it. Some were so large they almost buried themselves when they hit the ground. When the metal quit raining down, I crawled out and looked around. The ship was gone, and there were one or more tanks on fire inside Monsanto's fence. Many cars on Bay Street were smashed. West of Bay Street several people were trying to get over a fence enclosing a small pasture. They were mostly women and children. I remember the stark terror on their faces. Somehow I was able to break the fence post at ground level so they could get through and escape toward Texas City. I did the same thing on the other side of the pasture.

The first row of small houses located a couple of blocks south of Texas Avenue and east of Fourth Street had all the windows blown out, many were totally destroyed, and all suffered damage. A woman crying and speaking Spanish was running back and forth. I was able to understand enough to know her baby was inside, and she wanted me to get him. The ceiling had caved in, and I had to crawl through a broken window. The baby was in his crib with dust and debris all over him. He wasn't moving at all. I thought he was dead. I cleared away the old wall paper and picked him up. He immediately began bawling. The kid had slept through it all. I will never forget the joy on her face when I handed him to her.



"Medsger, Herb." *We Were There*.
(Texas City, TX: Mainland Museum
of Texas City, 1997). 142-143.



Note the damaged residential areas of Texas City.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



Houses ripped from their foundations due to the concussive force of the *SS Grandcamps* explosion.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



The PORTAL to
TEXAS HISTORY

Additional medical personnel
Arrive to provide medical aid to
The many wounded.



Photos courtesy of Moore
Memorial Public Library



Rescue workers on a break being served by
the American Red Cross.



The PORTAL to TEXAS HISTORY

A wounded man who is recuperating after receiving medical treatment.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library

THIEL, JOHN M.

I was a young surgeon of thirty-four on the faculty of the University of Texas Medical Branch in the Department of Surgery as an associate. Dr. Paul Mesquita had referred a patient to me for abdominal surgery, and the two of us were at St. Mary's Infirmary preparing for the operation with the usual aseptic scrubbing, dressed in scrub suits. Shortly after 9:00 a.m., as we had started the operation, there was a sudden loud explosion which shook St. Mary's like an earthquake. We didn't know the nature of the explosion; during the operation, we learned that a terrible blast had occurred at the Texas City docks. By the time we finished our surgical procedure, they were bringing casualties into St. Mary's.

Learning the severe nature of the casualties after observing a few of them, I determined I should go to John Sealy Hospital and take charge of an operating room team with my surgical residents along with Dr. G.W. "Nurdy" Eggers, Chief of Orthopedic Surgery, and Dr. Truman Blocker, Professor of Surgery. We directed the various surgeons, some of whom came from Houston. I was in charge of one operating room with my surgical team, and we took those patients who were in most immediate need of surgery.

Prior to my having arrived at the operating room suite of the old John Sealy Hospital, the sirens and ambulances were screaming and

could be heard and seen bringing patients into both hospitals. The halls were lined with different individuals in various states of emergency need. There were even some lying on the lawn at John Sealy. They had been brought in by ambulances and protected as best as possible until they could be taken to one of the four operating rooms.

The scene was reminiscent of a battle field or evacuation hospital in a war. Stretchers were everywhere holding different individuals with various types of injuries, including severe burns, head injuries, chest injuries, abdominal injuries, broken arms and legs, those with limbs missing, those who had died, and those who were dying. Over all of this carnage the moans of those who were conscious could be heard.

I took charge of one operating room at 10:00 a.m. Wednesday morning. We worked continuously, selecting first those who were hemorrhaging and needing blood loss stopped and replaced, those with serious cardiac and thoracic wounds and head injuries, and then those who were conscious but had numerous fractures and open wounds. We operated on one patient after another, too numerous to count. We didn't stop all of Wednesday or Wednesday night, all day Thursday and Thursday night. Finally at 7:00 a.m. on Friday we were able to stop and rest. To make the catastrophe worse, a second ship exploded early Thursday. During this forty-eight hour period, some food occasionally was being furnished to us, and in between operations we had the opportunity to have a sandwich brought to us and a cup of coffee.

"Thiel, John M." *We Were There.* (Texas City, TX: Mainland Museum of Texas City, 1997). 218-219.

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Primary
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Texas City
Disaster



The PORTAL to
TEXAS HISTORY



Primary
Source
Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster

Local volunteers and military
personnel search the wreckage
for survivors.

Photos courtesy of Moore
Memorial Public Library





Note the parking lot full of destroyed cars at the Monsanto plant,
145 out of 450 shift workers perished.



Photo courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library



Read the account of a
 Monsanto survivor.



*Shattered and burning remains
 of the Monsanto plant.*

**MARTIN, CALVIN PERRY
 "PAPPY"**

A fellow Monsanto employee, Milton Skillian, and I walked over to the dock warehouse to watch the fire. The ship was billowing orange smoke, and I remembered the many ships I had seen blowing up while in the Navy. I had a pretty good idea of the damage an explosion of this type could cause. So I told Milton that we had better go back to the job site which was approximately three hundred yards away. We headed to the styrene unit and distillation units 5 and 7. When the elevator door opened, our boss, Tom McAllister, told us not to go back up the tower but to go smoke and wait to see about the fire.

As I opened the smoke shack door, the ship blew up. I saw my friend Milton fly out of the back of the smoke shack about twenty-five feet in the air, in a sitting position. I lost consciousness, and when I came to, someone was poking me in the stomach asking me to get off of him. However, I was trapped myself by debris and could not grant his wish. Someone said, "Here is an arm." My next memory was that of lying flat on my back by the railroad track near several more people. Then I heard another explosion as a tank blew up. I crawled down the track and met Tom. We went some distance and

found Jewel Robinson. We drug her down the tracks to the fence, somehow got her over a large drainage pipe, and ended up in a field where we saw Bill Tounall and John Longshore. John was covered with a black substance, and Bill's arm was broken. We applied a tourniquet. A truck came by and put him in it. That was close to noon. We decided to try to get to Beeler-Manske Clinic. Tom, Milton, and I ended up at the clinic. John went on to Pearson's Fish Market to get help from his in-laws and to check on them. My next memory was trying to make it to the trailer park on Texas Avenue. My trailer was completely destroyed. A piece of plate steel had come through the top of the trailer and took the kitchen area into the ground with it. I stood there looking and thinking all was gone, including my wife. The next thing I remembered was being at my sister's house and finding out my wife was fine. That was the end of a long day of tragic memories, and I thanked God for my family's safety as well as mine.

"Martin, Calvin Perry 'Pappy'."
We Were There. (Texas City, TX: Mainland Museum of Texas City, 1997). 137-138.

Primary
 Source
 Adventures:
 Texas City
 Disaster



See the damage the explosions caused
to railway and storage facilities.



Photos courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library

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Primary
Source
Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster



The PORTAL to
TEXAS HISTORY

See the damage caused to
railway stock.

Note how even the brick walls
of the factory were destroyed
by the explosion.



Photos courtesy of Moore
Memorial Public Library



The PORTAL to
TEXAS HISTORY

Mass funeral for the
unidentified victims
of the Texas City explosion.



Photos courtesy of Moore
Memorial Public Library

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Primary
Source
Adventures:
Texas City
Disaster



Read about how Zaragoza lost his two brothers in the explosion
and he was saved because it was too far to walk.

ZARAGOZA, PLACIDO "PYE"

I was sixteen and working at a clothing store owned by Mac Herbert located on Texas Avenue. We could see smoke and people were rushing to the docks. I asked my boss if I could go see the fire, and he said, "Yes, but come right back." I started walking, and had gone about three blocks on the road leading to the fire, and thought, "Boy! This is really too far to walk to go see that fire!" I decided to return to the store.

The ship blew up about ten minutes after I got back to the store, and it shook the building and blew out all the windows. Mr. Herbert was standing under a large ceiling fan. It fell, hit him on the head, and knocked him unconscious. Blood was coming from his head and face. My knee had a bad cut on it, but I removed the fan from on top of him and helped him up. I was so scared, I totally forgot about my knee.

My father worked at Ford, Bacon, and Davis, and we didn't see him for a couple of days. Two of my brothers were missing, and he had stayed in Texas City seeking information about them. Manuel and Ignacio were longshoremen and were working on the ships at the docks at the time of the explosion. Manuel was twenty-one; Ignacio was nineteen. Another brother Ray worked at the A&P Grocery as a butcher. He went to the gym looking for them and saw all the bodies, but they were not there. The fires still raged, and black smoke filled the sky, turning day into night.

We kept hoping Manuel and Ignacio had been picked up by an ambulance and taken to a hospital. We continued searching for their bodies. We saw some friends of theirs amid the rows of bodies in the gym,

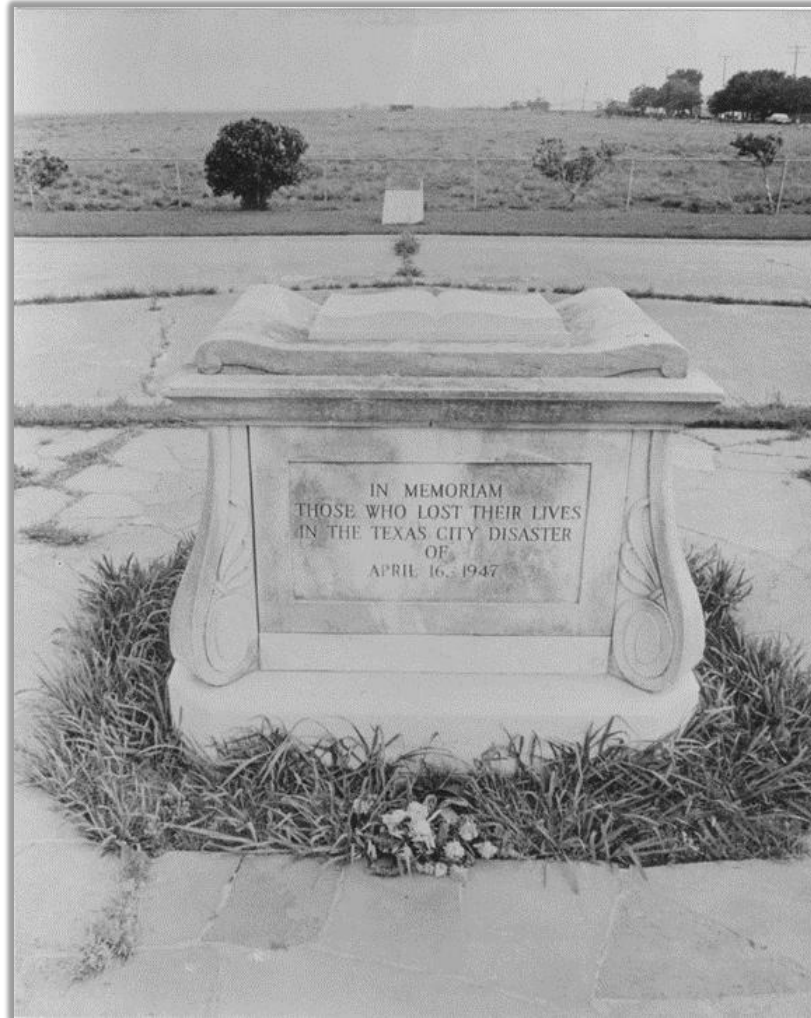
knowing they all had always worked the docks together. Mom knew her sons were working on the ship that exploded but kept praying to find them. To this day we still do not know what actually happened to them. We think they probably hung around the ship, waiting for the fire to be put out so they could go back to work, but we'll never know for sure. Their bodies were never found. Later on, my parents received two pay checks for Manuel and Ignacio, paid up to the time of the explosion. It was all so sad.

The saddest thing about this tragedy is we had no bodies to mourn, no family Christian burials. It is much harder to accept death when there is nothing to see to convince you of the loss. We still think of them as they were, since we never saw them in coffins. We have had to accept the fact that they are really gone. We hope and pray they are at rest in Memorial Cemetery.

"Zaragoza, Placido 'Pye'." *We Were There*. (Texas City, TX: Mainland Museum of Texas City, 1997). 263.



Memorial to those lost in the Texas City disaster.



Photos courtesy of Moore Memorial Public Library

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