

Spring  
2020

# LEGACIES

*A History Journal for Dallas & North Central Texas*

**Disasters:  
Natural and  
Man-Made**

**Deadly Dallas Disasters**  
**Documenting Disasters with Photography**  
**The 1946 Baker Hotel Explosion**  
**Destruction and Resurrection of Dallas's Sportatorium**  
**Panel Discussion: The Dallas Tornado of 1957**



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**Front cover: The Baker Hotel in downtown Dallas was rocked in 1946 by a massive explosion, the largest in Dallas up until that time, which resulted in ten deaths and thirty-eight serious injuries with over \$500,000 in estimated damage. See “Like a Bomb Went Off: The 1946 Baker Hotel Explosion,” beginning on page 24.**

**Back cover: Padgitt Bros. Saddlery Co. was subject to threats of dynamite in 1915, one of several sabotage efforts in the early 20th century. See “Deadly Dallas Explosions,” beginning on page 4.**



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Volume

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Disasters:  
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EDITED BY STEPHEN FAGIN

All previous issues of *Legacies* from 1989 through 2016 are online at the University of North Texas Portal to Texas History. The address is: <http://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/LHJNT>



**The Trinity River flood of May 1908 was one of the most devastating in Dallas history. It was also the first to be well documented through photographs. This image captured a frame building somewhere in the flood plain that had been inundated. See “Floods, Fires, and Crashes: Documenting Disasters with Photography,” beginning on page 18.**

*Disasters*, whether natural or man-made, seem to exert a strange attraction. Floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes often dominate news coverage. Explosions, fires, and plane crashes garner headlines. Maybe it's because such catastrophes are out of the ordinary. And maybe it's because most of us can empathize with the victims, imagining ourselves coping with the aftermath.

Throughout human history, people settled near rivers and streams as sources of water and possibly transportation. But also throughout history, water courses have flooded their banks, wreaking destruction on adjacent settlements. Such was certainly the case during the nineteenth century in Dallas, as the Trinity River flooded with alarming regularity. But the worst modern instance was the flood of 1908, when the Trinity engulfed parts of downtown and swept away bridges connecting Dallas and Oak Cliff. In his photo essay, Peter Kurilecz documents this event, the first local flood to be extensively photographed. He continues with images of two later disasters, a spectacular fire that destroyed the Neiman Marcus Annex in 1964 and the crash of Delta Flight 191 in 1985.

Many disasters were the result of human ignorance or carelessness, as Rusty Williams explains in his article. At the turn of the last century, oil lamps, dynamite, gas lighting, gasoline, and steam boilers were all inventions intended to improve daily life and work. But they were often poorly designed and just waiting for the ignorant or careless user, resulting in explosions and loss of life.

A gas leak was identified as the cause of an explosion that destroyed an annex being constructed adjacent to the Baker Hotel on Commerce Street in downtown Dallas in 1946. As Misty Maberry recounts in her article, ten people were killed, and thirty-eight were seriously injured, making it the most deadly such event in the city to that date.

And the death toll might have been higher without heroic efforts by hotel employees and Dallas firefighters.

Arson was the culprit in a fire that destroyed the Sportatorium on Industrial and Cadiz in 1953. Brandon Murray tells the colorful history of the octagon-shaped arena, home to highly promoted wrestling matches, and the investigation into the crime. He also narrates the resurrection of the facility, and its new life as a venue for such crowd-pleasing wrestling attractions as the Von Erich family and popular musicians appearing on "Big D Jamboree."

When tornados devastated numerous Dallas neighborhoods last fall, they stirred memories of another one in 1957, which swept from Oak Cliff through West Dallas and into Farmers Branch. Because this tornado occurred in late afternoon, it was well photographed; it was also one of the first to be filmed. Mark Doty wrote about the 1957 tornado on its fiftieth anniversary, for the fall 2017 issue of *Legacies*. For the recent 21st Annual *Legacies* Dallas History Conference, he assembled a panel including three eyewitnesses to the tornado, a weather reporter, and a representative of the National Weather Service. The panel members shared their memories of the event and scientific perspective on it, as well as comparisons with the 2019 tornados. Stephen Fagin has transcribed and edited the discussion for publication in this issue.

Much as we might try to control our environment, natural and man-made disasters disrupt our lives with sad frequency. They often influence future development (levee projects to control floods) or regulations (fire safety procedures) and thus have a legacy extending well beyond their moment in time.

—Michael V. Hazel

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# Deadly Dallas Explosions

**More unfortunate incidents, deplorable mayhem, and grisly fatalities at the turn of the twentieth century**

BY RUSTY WILLIAMS

*W*hat can you expect when anyone can buy dynamite by the crate at the local hardware store? When unregulated steam boilers chug away at most every major construction and drilling site in town? Or when natural gas is pumped through uninspected plumbing into Dallas homes and businesses?

*Ka-BOOM!!!* (That's what you can expect.)

In turn-of-the-century Dallas, explosions were popping off like the Fourth of July. There were the smaller, more personal explosions that might cost a person his hands or life. And there were the big building-flattening ones that rocked the city to its limestone footings.

From the 1880s through much of the 1920s, Dallas was growing, and technology was changing. There were stumps to be cleared from developing land, and workers found the new nitroglycerine-based dynamite more effective than black powder. Highly flammable natural gas piped into lighting fixtures was replacing kerosene lamps. The increasing availability of gasoline for motorcars encouraged all manner of businesses to adopt it as a solvent. And equipment manufacturers were attaching steam boilers to construction equipment while experimenting with pressure vessels made of steel instead of more expensive iron.

The result? *Ka-BOOM!!!*

But emerging technologies, the city's growth, and increasing urbanization weren't the only reasons for this explosive period in Dallas history. In fact, one of the most horrifying explosive devices had been in everyday use since the earliest families settled along the Trinity River.

## Oil Lamps

Bates Tomlinson, a farmer living just east of Dallas, woke at midnight in October 1892 to give his sick son some medicine. Probably still half-asleep, Tomlinson lit an oil lamp. When the lamp began to sputter and flare, Tomlinson ran for the door to throw it outside. He was too late; the lamp exploded in his hand, scattering burning oil over his arms and body. Tomlinson died in terrible pain just after noon the following day. He left a wife and nine children.<sup>1</sup>

Humans have used oil lamps for thousands of years to light the nighttime. The earliest were open seashells or clay cups filled with fat or the oils of crushed plants. A wick soaked in the fuel would burn, providing a flickering light.

By 1899 most oil lamps were engineered to burn brighter and longer. Household lamps of the time consisted of two connected compartments: an oil reservoir below and a glass bulb above. A wick—usually braided or tightly woven fabric—connects the two. The wick, saturated with flammable oil in the lower reservoir, draws the oil to the top of the wick in the bulb. There, the oil evaporates into a combustible gas. When the wick is lit, the flammable gas burns with a bright flame, diffused by the glass bulb to provide a flickering light.

Nice light. But dangerous. Blow on the wick to extinguish the light, and you might drive the flame down into the oil reservoir, igniting it. Let the fuel reservoir get too low, and the flame could burn its way down the wick into the almost-empty reservoir, igniting the remaining fuel and the volatile gas that has collected there.

In either case, the lamp is likely to explode, splashing anyone and anything nearby with flaming oil.

Visiting friends in Dallas, Mrs. Annie B. Farnham, a Houston resident, and her eight-year-old son, Bobby, stayed in a boarding house at 438 Pacific Avenue. Other residents later said Mrs. Farnham was in the habit of keeping an oil lamp burning on a table outside her room to light the way to a bathroom down the hall.<sup>2</sup>



**Oil lamps were common in homes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But they could be dangerous, exploding and causing fires, resulting in injuries and loss of life.**

No one saw the lamp outside Mrs. Farnham's bedroom explode at two o'clock Saturday morning, July 29, 1899; most boarders were awakened by the crackle, whoosh, and hiss of the fire as it set wallpaper ablaze and flared across ceilings to burn upward to the second story. Escaping down burning hallways or through windows, boarders gathered on the street in various states of night-dress to watch flames engulf the entire Pacific Avenue residence.

A quick census of the survivors noted the absence of the Farnham mother and son. Even as the ruined building still smoldered, firemen discovered the still-smoking remains of Mrs. Farnham and Bobby, both burned beyond recognition and lying just two feet apart. Fire Chief H. F. Magee



later speculated that Mrs. Farnham allowed the hallway lamp to run low on fuel, and the fiery explosion trapped her and the boy in their room.<sup>3</sup>

Two days later, mother and son were buried side by side in white coffins in Greenwood Cemetery.

Exploding oil lamps claimed lives and property at a fearsome rate through the first two decades of the twentieth century. Though gas and electrical lighting were introduced in Dallas in the 1880s, half of Dallas County homes still depended on oil lamps as late as 1925.

## Dynamite

Alfred Nobel invented dynamite in the 1860s as a more stable, more powerful alternative to black powder and nitroglycerine; by the 1880s the eight-inch-long, red paper-wrapped cylinders were as common on farms and at construction sites as hay rakes and claw hammers.

Generally, there were no restrictions on purchase.

Feed and hardware stores kept dynamite in stock for sale to farmers, who used it to blow stumps, blast out a honey pit, or demolish an unused outbuilding. Well diggers depended on dynamite when a water well went down more than twenty feet. A helper with an auger would be lowered down the well, where he would dig several holes, plant the dynamite, light the fuse, then signal his boss to pull him to the surface as the fuse burned down.

Well digger John Hammontree was blasting through rock to reach water on the Nelson farm,

just south of Oak Cliff. He lit the dynamite fuses and grabbed a rope that would pull him out of the shaft. Somewhere near the opening he lost his grip and fell thirty feet onto the smoldering explosives. Too injured to hold the rope or reach the burning fuses, Hammontree recited Bible verses until *Ka-BOOM!*

Something similar happened to an amateur Oklahoma well digger in 1904. He fell back into the well, but the charge exploded before he hit bottom. The blast shot him out of the hole and into the air like a champagne cork. The actual blast didn't hurt him, but he suffered severe injuries when he hit the ground.<sup>4</sup>

Many homeowners kept a few sticks of dynamite in a storage shed or under the back steps. They dropped it down rat holes to rid themselves of rodent nests, they used it to collapse the dirt under unneeded outhouses, and some used it for fishing. (A Van Zandt County man was fishing from a small boat on the Trinity when he lit the waterproof fuse on a stick of dynamite and threw it overboard, intending to stun the fish and bring them to the surface. Instead of sinking, the dynamite continued to float next to the boat, and the man spent his last few seconds trying to paddle away. "He was blown to atoms," the morning newspaper reported.)<sup>5</sup>

Most young boys knew where the dynamite was stored in their neighborhoods. For some of them, the temptation was too great.

Nine-year-old Robert Arnett found a stick of dynamite in his father's tool shed in August 1919. The boy put it into a tin talcum powder box and shook it to make it rattle against the sides of the



Dynamite was readily available in hardware stores at the turn of the last century. Even in the hands of experienced professionals, it could be dangerous.



can. He ended the day in Baptist Sanitarium with doctors trying desperately to save his sight.<sup>6</sup>

The volatile component of dynamite is nitroglycerine. This highly unstable liquid is slowly combined with an absorbent—sawdust, wood pulp, and clay are the most common—and rolled into a cylinder, which is then wrapped in red paper. Handled and stored correctly, a stick of dynamite is relatively stable. To explode, dynamite usually requires a cap, a firecracker-like charge made of a fulminating powder, ignited by a burning fuse, an electrical charge, or a sharp impact.

Charles Barnes and Leon Young were still teenagers, just boys playing outdoors on a chilly February afternoon in 1909. A nearby neighbor noticed the boys standing face to face in the backyard of the Young's Eagle Ford Road house. One of the boys bent to pick up a box—which police later determined contained a dozen blasting caps—and the other grabbed for it, causing it to fall to the ground.

The witness described a brilliant white flash and the sight of the boys being blown fifteen feet in the air. The earth trembled, she said, knocking out glass and rattling doors for some distance around.

The first parties at the scene saw a gruesome sight. The Barnes boy was terribly maimed and obviously dead. Leon Young was still alive, sitting upright on his torso, both legs blown entirely away, his face and chest a crackly char. Still, Young spent his final minutes calling for his mother and father as a neighbor held what was left of his hand.<sup>7</sup>

Working with dynamite is work best left to professionals, but even professionals make mistakes. A well-meaning mistake was all it took for three experienced explosives handlers to set off the biggest dynamite explosion in Dallas history. In 1903, the blasting crew from Texas Portland Cement Company set out to dispose of six crates of dynamite “duds.” Three hundred pounds of dynamite in storage froze the previous winter and was no longer reliable. They transported the containers of duds to an inactive quarry, placing the first box fifty yards from the others. The blasters wedged a fresh stick of dynamite under the first crate and

laid a fuse to a protected area some distance away. At six o'clock they lit the fuse.

*Ka-BOOM!!!*

The blast was strong enough to lift the crew off the ground as the first box—reliably explosive, after all—set off the other five with “a noise that sounded like a blast from the infernal region.” The explosion sent a tremor (“not unlike an earthquake shock”) across Dallas County.<sup>8</sup>

West Dallas residents ran from their homes as window panes fractured and crockery fell to the floor. Waking from a dead sleep, an Oak Cliff man in his nightwear ran from his house thinking his chimney was collapsing. A county clerk was milking his cow in the East Dallas suburbs when a usually-docile bossie kicked over the bucket (and the clerk) in a scramble to run out of the barn. Fortunately, there were no serious injuries or fatalities.

B. R. Bourland was just the sort of up-and-comer Dallas needed in 1914. Still in his thirties, Bourland's reputation as a skilled and hard-working concrete contractor in Dallas was blossoming. He and his wife moved to the city just a year earlier to take advantage of the building boom, and he immediately won two large contracts with developers. Now he was working on his biggest deal yet: a \$25,000 project laying the sidewalks and curbs of a new addition, Junius Heights, three miles north-east of Dallas.

At dinnertime on April 6, 1914, he told his wife he had completed clearing the land and was eager to build his forms and start laying concrete. Mrs. Bourland was relieved; her husband spent much of the previous month using dynamite to blast out stumps of old-growth elms and oaks from hard-baked black dirt. He had encountered no particular problems when blasting out a hundred acres of stumps, but his wife was pleased that that part of the job was completed.

The next morning, he set out for work with his tools, but first he had to return the leftover dynamite and blasting caps to the storage shed. He bent over a wooden crate containing the explosives and—

*Ka-BOOM!!!*



**Interurban tracks in Dallas were damaged by dynamite explosions several times in 1909 and 1910. Fortunately, the sabotage was discovered before any damage to cars or passengers, but the culprit was never discovered.**

By the time other workers reached the site, pieces of Bourland were spread in all directions of the compass, some as far as a hundred feet away from the still-smoldering crater.

Co-workers speculated that, when Bourland bent to pick up the crate of explosives, a metal tool slipped out of an overall pocket and into the box, a tool heavy enough to detonate one of the caps, which caused the sticks to blow the contractor all over the newly platted neighborhood.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the century, dynamite would become the enforcer of choice for Dallas gangsters and racial fanatics, but the city apparently experienced its own brands of dynamite terrorism early in the twentieth century.

On December 28, 1909, police in Dallas received word that a dynamite explosion blew out a section of the interurban's track on Greenville

Avenue shortly before Texas Traction Company cars would've passed over it. There was nothing to investigate; interurban crews repaired the damage before police could arrive. It was an attempt to stop the train and rob the passengers, police concluded, an attempt that was foiled by a premature explosion.<sup>10</sup>

Two months later, on March 1, an alert motorman stopped his interurban cars just south of Plano when he noticed a broken rail ahead. Again, a rail was blown out of place by dynamite and, again, police were notified too late to investigate.<sup>11</sup>

"Dynamite on Track Again," newspaper headlines announced a week later; "Third Mysterious Explosion on Interurban." A new explosive package, this time set to blow both rails, was discovered near Delmar Heights by security officers hired to walk



**Padgett Bros. Saddlery**, one of the nation's largest leather products wholesalers, was the target of a dynamite threat in 1915, possibly because the Dallas company had recently signed a large contract to produce leather medical bags for the British military in addition to supplies of harness and saddles.

the track. "Who is this mysterious enemy of the Texas Traction Company?" editorials asked. Police had no answer, and company officials remained mum. With no clues, the Dallas chief of detectives was forced to instruct his detectives to "sweep the

town for every suspicious man." Meanwhile, ridership plummeted.<sup>12</sup>

On April 20, another explosion destroyed interurban tracks in the suburban Ross Avenue neighborhood east of Dallas, awakening neighbors

and drawing an immediate police response. Within an hour sheriff's deputies arrived with tracking bloodhounds. The dogs followed a scent trail for two miles, but lost it on the Katy rail tracks.<sup>13</sup>

The mystery bomber struck again on May 2, this time mangling a section of track north of Plano. Sheriffs from two counties and police officers from multiple jurisdictions were forced to admit they "so far have not obtained anything they can work with."<sup>14</sup>

Despite a \$500 reward, no trace of the saboteur was ever found and the traction company never speculated as to a motive for the mayhem. There were no further incidents, and interurban ridership eventually returned to normal.

In July 1915, J. D. Padgitt, president of Padgitt Bros. Saddlery Co. of Dallas received a phone call from an unknown person "with a Germanic accent." The caller told Padgitt he would be bombed that evening, then hung up.<sup>15</sup>

Police didn't take long to find the dynamite bombs under Padgitt's house and to trace the fuse back to a secluded area in the back yard. They staked out the house, waiting for the bomber to return and light the fuse. As they waited, they heard the sound of a dynamite blast just four blocks away.

The blast was from the residence of W. T. Moore, caused when someone flung a leather valise loaded with four sticks of dynamite with a burning fuse onto the porch where Moore and his twenty-year-old son were sleeping. The bomb slid under the bed frame, a mattress saving the two from the worst effects of the blast. Interestingly, Moore was a long-time employee and foreman of Padgitt Bros. Saddlery Co.

Padgitt Bros. Saddlery, one of the nation's largest leather products wholesalers, manufactured saddles, tack, belts, collars, and harness at their factory on Jackson Street. The Dallas company recently signed a large contract to produce leather medical bags for the British military in addition to supplies of harness and saddles.<sup>16</sup>

The next day a call came in with another warning: "Unless the concern stopped work on its European war orders, the plant would be destroyed."<sup>17</sup>

As Jess Padgitt pondered the consequences of canceling the war contracts and putting a hundred men out of work, rumors swirled across Dallas about other threats to other companies. Anti-German sentiment was beginning to be heard in Dallas gathering places.<sup>18</sup>

Three days later Dallas police arrested Wallace Moore, Jr., W. T. Moore's oldest son, and charged him with two counts of assault to murder and one of arson for the dynamiting of his father and younger brother. Though the district attorney was convinced the young man was also responsible for the threats to Padgitt and his company, they failed to find sufficient evidence.<sup>19</sup>

Prosecutors dropped charges against the troubled young man when a witness was unable to identify him and his father refused to testify against his son.<sup>20</sup>

Dallas would face deadlier dynamite terrorism threats later in the century—union organizing violence, the dry cleaner wars, gangland disputes, and in response to racial integration of housing—but the fear of sudden, random, explosive death by dynamite was well-known at the turn of the century.

## Gas Lighting

Dallas homeowners who replaced their old oil lamps with coal gas lamps could boast of brighter illumination, lighting that was less flickery, and eliminating the need for expensive kerosene. City ordinances of the day didn't require licensed plumbers or electricians to perform the work. Installations were often hurried and shoddy, and there were no provisions for city inspections. Tragically, some of those homeowners found that gas lighting brought the danger of suffocation, fires, and explosions.

If E. W. Copley's Jungleland Theatre had exploded twelve hours earlier, hundreds of moviegoers and museum visitors might have perished. Instead, the morning gas explosion in January 1912 blew out the front of the theater and upstairs



**A gas leak related to a private lighting system resulted in an explosion and fire at E. W. Copley's Jungleland Theatre and Museum on Elm Street in downtown Dallas in 1912. Many of the exotic animals on exhibit were killed.**

museum, shattered glass and damaged buildings for blocks around, and seriously injured six.<sup>21</sup>

Jungleland Theatre and Museum was modeled after Barnum's New Museum, updated for the twentieth century. On the second floor of the three-story building at 1505 Elm Street near Akard was the Jungleland Museum and Zoo. The museum featured a menagerie of taxidermied animals from around the world. ("A specimen of every animal that is in existence!" Copley's advertising promised.) Exhibits included living primates, predators, rodents, reptiles, and big cats. ("Featuring Sultan, the only lion known to wear glasses and smoke a pipe!") The 700-seat picture house on the first floor ran movies continuously, "showing daily not less than three reels of the best pictures that can be obtained." A 112-instrument Welte orchestral organ provided concert-class music between features.<sup>22</sup>

A single ten-cent ticket bought admission to both attractions. "A big show for little money," Copley promised.

Copley hired a local handyman to install a gas generator for a private lighting system in the theater. When the workman noticed there was gas leaking into the theater he opened the front door to let in some air. The man was standing by the door when the explosion occurred, hurling him against the ceiling and lodging him in the wreckage of the big organ.<sup>23</sup>

The explosion and resulting fire injured the workman, a night watchman, and four pedestrians who happened to be walking past the theater. All survived their injuries. Many of the monkeys, birds, lions, and other exotic animals were killed outright. However, some escaped onto Dallas streets to be recaptured or shot.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout most of the first decades of the

twentieth century, the gas used for heating and lighting was not the “natural” gas in common use today. (Natural gas was an undesirable byproduct of oil exploration and often allowed to burn off harmlessly at the well site.) Commercial gas at the turn of the century was most often coal gas, derived from the burning of coal, collected, and put under pressure. Coal gas and natural gas are invisible and have no detectable smell. Modern producers mix an odorant into the gas and, occasionally, a coloring agent to detect leaks.

A young Dallas schoolteacher had no clue that explosive levels of gas filled her new stove.

Gladys Hurdle was the fifteenth child of parents who were born into slavery. She attended school in her East Texas home town and, with financial assistance from her siblings, graduated from Northeast Texas Christian Theological and Industrial College in 1914. After teaching in Timpson for several years, she was elected by the Paris school district to teach there. In 1922 she was recruited to Dallas, hired to teach music and literature to students of the B. F. Darrell School.<sup>25</sup>

Along with seven other schoolteachers, Miss Hurdle found respectable lodging at Cornelia Adams’s boarding house at 2805 Thomas Avenue, just a short walk to the school at Hall and Lenox Streets and to the black-owned shops in the neighborhood. In February 1923, Mrs. Adams was converting her boarding house to gas heating, and Miss Hurdle’s room would be the first to have a gas stove installed.

On Monday, February 5, Miss Hurdle rose at first light. The woman in the room below heard her alarm clock ring and the sound of her footsteps walking across the floor to the location of the new stove. The next sound was a thunderous whoof, followed immediately by a floor-buckling explosion and the sound of glass and brick falling. Upstairs residents screamed that the building was ablaze.

Schoolteacher Gladys Hurdle, 32, was the only fatality, though other residents suffered grievous injuries and burns. Fire officials later speculated that improper installation allowed gas to leak and

build up inside the stove and along the floor of her bedroom. The act of striking a match touched off the inferno.

The following Friday a delegation of family members and former Timpson students arrived in Dallas to escort her remains back to East Texas for burial. A choir made up of Darrell School music students sang to Miss Hurdle as her body left Dallas on the train.<sup>26</sup>

Four years later the wreckage was so profound and scattered such a distance that Dallas Police and Fire Commissioner Clarence Parker couldn’t attribute a specific cause to the gas explosion of the I.O.O.F meeting hall. The blast killed six and would be the deadliest Dallas explosion for the next twenty years.<sup>27</sup>

Members of Metropolis Lodge No. 358 of the Odd Fellows lodge scheduled initiation of new members on the night of May 11, 1927. The lodge met on the second floor of a two-room brick building on the northwest corner of Forest and Second Avenues, and a half-dozen members arrived early to prepare for the rituals at 8:30 P.M. The first floor was occupied by three businesses—a grocery store, a barbershop, and a drugstore. The grocery and barbershop were closed for the evening; only the drugstore remained open.

As members and initiates arrived, they waited in an anteroom for the ceremony to begin. One of the members, W. E. Brunson, a Dallas firefighter, thought he smelled smoke and walked downstairs to investigate. Brunson spotted a blue jet of flame coming from a door jamb. He called to the men upstairs, telling them to vacate the building, before rushing to the pharmacy to phone the fire department. Other members, fireman W. Henry Lee and Walter H. Coleman, directed streams from hand extinguishers as still others tried to reach the gas meter in the basement of the grocery to shut it off.

A chemical fire engine and additional firefighters arrived quickly. Some lodge officers remained in the upstairs office gathering relics when assistant fire chief Jack Redmond ordered them to evacuate immediately. Redmond then ran downstairs to direct his crew and equipment.

Jason Euberman stood a hundred feet west of the building, trying to see what all the excitement was about.

*Ka-BOOM!!!*

“The building raised three feet off the ground,” Euberman said later. “There was a terrific explosion and a gust of wind that passed my face like a cyclone.” The explosion brought Euberman to his knees.

The sound of the explosion was heard throughout the county, and debris rained for blocks around. (A motorist several blocks away was pelted by oranges blown into the sky by the blast.) The owner of the Gulf filling station across the street from the building was blown against the rear wall of his office and seriously injured.

The two-story building was demolished; nothing was left but a matted heap of bricks and fallen timbers. Within an hour a crowd of more than a thousand gathered to assist in recovering any survivors within the wreckage. They spent the night under floodlamps installed by the fire department, passing bricks from hand to hand, searching for the dead.

With all the wreckage, Commissioner Parker couldn't determine how the gas leaked, but he was sure that it “filled every wall and penetrated every crevice” before it ignited and exploded. The six fatalities were: O. D. Allen, 32-year-old pharmacist was killed immediately behind his dispensing counter; Frank Linka, 21, was seen sitting in his parked car reading a newspaper when the blast occurred; Mrs. Christina Cour was walking home after dinner with friends and happened to be on the sidewalk outside the grocery store; Eddie P. Norvell was inside the drug store, waiting to pick up a prescription for his wife; Fireman W. Henry Lee, 30, was a member of the lodge and was attempting to douse the blaze at the time of the blast; and the body of W. D. “Fatty” Hill, lodge secretary, was recovered from the debris hours after the explosion.

## Gasoline

By the 1920s gasoline was the fuel of choice for most automobiles; internal combustion engines had largely replaced the old steamers and electrics. But refining large quantities of gasoline from petroleum was still a new technology, and the means of delivering and dispensing it were still being worked out.

The Simms Oil Company refinery in West Dallas initially shipped gasoline in rail cars intended for water. After each shipment, a worker climbed into the tank car to swab it out. H. B. Taylor would be followed by two other workers as he climbed through the car's manhole. Halfway down the metal ladder he flicked on his electric lantern.

An apparent short in the lantern ignited fumes remaining in the tank car, blowing Taylor out of the manhole and onto the ground. His co-workers were seriously injured by the explosion; Taylor didn't survive the night.<sup>28</sup>

Gasoline was delivered to Dallas filling stations in large drums carried on trucks. A. D. Randell of Trinity Heights was leaning on a lamppost at the corner of Commerce and Poydras Streets, where a large gravel truck collided with a truck carrying gasoline. The drums exploded, leaving Randall with burns over his eyes, face, and head. (He sued both trucking companies for \$10,000.)<sup>29</sup>

A box of dynamite, a stream of gasoline, and a fire eating its way to the explosive is the stuff of action movies. In 1927 a filling station attendant opened the spigot on a barrel of gasoline, and his lantern accidentally ignited the fuel. The gasoline ran flaming toward a box of dynamite stored in the shop. Firemen arrived in time to douse the dynamite with water and hose down the barrel until the tank's spigot could be safely closed.<sup>30</sup>





**In 1910 a contractor was using a steam boiler to drill an artesian well in the alley behind the Campbell House Hotel at Elm and Harwood when the boiler exploded and flew down the alley like a rocket, killing people in its path.**

## Steam Boilers

The most significant explosive danger to early Dallasites was largely unnoticed by most residents, hidden in plain sight among the commerce and construction occurring everywhere in the bustling town. Steam powered the trains along track on downtown streets, drove the heavy excavating equipment used to dig new foundations, powered tall lifts that raised building materials to higher floors, and turned the drill bits used for private water wells. Steam was generated in large cast-iron tubes, boilers where water was contained and heated to create maximum pressure and power.

The night shift operator of one of the White

Rock reservoir's pumps in 1911 probably overfed the new boiler and dozed off as it overheated. James Murphy was scalded to death when the boiler exploded on him.<sup>31</sup>

The big boilers were nothing short of bombs, waiting to explode at the slightest mismeasurement of water or heat.

In 1910, many of the larger office buildings and hotels drew water from their own artesian wells, assuring a regular supply of water at a time when the city utility was unable to do so. And that's why the owners of the Campbell Hotel, located at the corner of Elm and Harwood, hired contractor John Sharpe to drill an artesian well in the narrow

alley off Harwood that separated the hotel from First Presbyterian Church.<sup>32</sup>

John Sharpe's crew first built a forty-foot timber derrick, placing it about fifty feet into the alley from the Harwood sidewalk. Twenty feet further, they cradled the boiler on heavy wooden chocks anchored to the ground and strapped the twenty-five-foot-long boiler tube to the chocks. The boiler had a square firebox welded to the rear of the tube, where a wood fire would heat water inside the boiler, creating steam to spin a flywheel that would drive a series of leather belts which would, in turn, twist the teeth of the drill bits into the ground beneath the derrick. This particular steam boiler, reconditioned in Houston and installed at the site just days before, had a small pressure gauge sticking out from the dome of the cylinder, but there was no relief valve. There was no way to relieve the pressure in case of overheating.

Wednesday, July 19, 1911, four days into the Campbell Hotel well job, and Sharp's crew was already dripping with sweat by 11:30. Four workers on the ground fed cordwood into the boiler's firebox and shuttled pipe along the alley to the derrick as the drill bit crunched downward. A fifth man was high up on the derrick, preparing to add another length of pipe to the stand.

Later, the five workers said that their attention was first drawn to the boiler by a sound like a cork popping out of a bottle and the sight of the pressure gauge flying off into the air. Immediately, the boiler began shaking hard enough to snap the straps holding it to the chocks.

With an explosion loud enough to shatter windows, a seam parted at the rear of the tube, and a jet of scalding steam shot out from the gap. The two-thousand-pound boiler launched itself into the air like a rocket.

At thirty feet off the ground the boiler tipped over to fly westward up the alley. It bulleted through the derrick, splintering the wooden beams into pick-up sticks, and continued toward the alley entrance, losing altitude as it hurtled toward Harwood Street.

Harwood Street between Elm and Main carried its usual mix of midmorning traffic. The

sound of the explosion froze farmer B. O. Clark's mules, and his wagon jerked to a halt just before he crossed the entrance to the alley. The mules saved his life at the cost of their own. Clark barely registered the metal missile crossing just feet in front of him, decapitating both animals as it flew by.

H. T. Prewitt pulled the emergency brake on his automobile, stopping on a dime. Another three feet and the one-ton metal tube would have slammed into the vehicle. As it was, the boiler flew across the hood spewing steam and burning Prewitt's face and hands.

Charlie Carmack and his wife, Mary, delivered butter and eggs from their Mesquite farm to customers in Dallas. At 11:20 A.M., the Carmacks' wagon was parked directly across Harwood from the alley entrance. The couple sat side by side on the wagon bench. Behind them in the wagon bed, crated eggs were nestled in cotton and the butter was draped in damp dishtowels to keep it fresh.

As the boiler flew across Prewitt's auto, the front end struck Charlie Carmack broadside, carrying him across his wife and grinding him into the sidewalk and stone of the building beside their wagon. Still jetting steam, the tube flipped, the top knocking a hole four feet deep into the front of Loudermilk's undertaking parlor. Mary Carmack fell into the street, scalded and torn by flying metal. Charlie Carmack died instantly; his wife died later that evening.

Other than some minor burns and a temporary loss of hearing, Tharpe's crew escaped uninjured. The worker on the derrick managed to jump to a hotel window ledge as the tower disintegrated beneath him, and volunteers rescued him shortly after.

## Twenty-first century dangers

Dramatic explosions still occur in Dallas. In 2007, fiery gas canisters pelted a busy freeway following an explosion at a welding gas plant; a 2018 natural gas explosion killed a child, flattened a house, and required that a section of North Dallas be replumbed due to faulty gas piping.

But the city still faces a threat from the nineteenth century.

Dallas suffered a water shortage in 1888, and the city decided to drill a well for artesian water in City Park. The well reached 300 feet deep when drillers encountered hard rock. After some consultation, they carefully lowered two ten-gallon glass bottles of nitroglycerine into the shaft to break up the blockage. The nitroglycerine didn't explode. After two weeks of trying (and failing) to detonate the explosive, workers quietly retrieved their pipes and filled the hole. The nitroglycerine could not be recovered.<sup>33</sup>

Visitors to Dallas Heritage Village today would be advised to tread softly. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“A Lamp Explosion,” *Daily Times Herald* (hereafter cited as *DTH*), October 13, 1892.

<sup>2</sup>“Burned to Death,” *DTH*, July 29, 1899.

<sup>3</sup>“Fate of the Farnhams,” *The Dallas Morning News* (hereafter cited as *DMN*), July 30, 1899.

<sup>4</sup>“Dynamite Blows Man to Top of Well,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 19, 1904.

<sup>5</sup>“Found Dying in His Room,” *DMN*, June 6, 1886.

<sup>6</sup>“Child is Made Blind by Dynamite Explosion,” *El Paso Herald*, August 9, 1919.

<sup>7</sup>“Exploding of Dynamite Kills Boys Handling It,” *DMN*, February 18, 1909.

<sup>8</sup>“Whole City Was Shocked,” *DTH*, July 24, 1903, and “Shocks Entire Town,” *DMN*, July 25, 1903.

<sup>9</sup>“Man Blown to Bits in Dynamite Explosion,” *DTH*, April 7, 1914.

<sup>10</sup>“Explosion Foils Robbery,” *The (San Antonio) Daily Express*, December 29, 1909.

<sup>11</sup>“Broken Rail is Discovered,” *DMN*, March 2, 1910.

<sup>12</sup>“Dynamite on Track Again,” *DTH*, March 8, 1910, and “Steel Rail Damaged on Interurban Track,” *DMN*, March 9, 1910.

<sup>13</sup>“Dynamite Under Sherman Road,” *DMN*, April 20, 1910.

<sup>14</sup>“Interurban Track Blown Up,” *DMN*, May 3, 1910.

<sup>15</sup>“Sleeping Men Are Injured by Bomb Exploding Under Bed,” *DMN*, July 27, 1915.

<sup>16</sup>“The Padgitts and Saddle Leather,” *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook*, 29 no.3 (1953).

<sup>17</sup>“Cancels Contracts for War Supplies,” *DMN*, July 28, 1915.

<sup>18</sup>“Denies Rumors of Threats,” *DMN*, July 28, 1915.

<sup>19</sup>“W.T. Moore Won't Prosecute His Son,” *DMN*, July 31, 1915.

<sup>20</sup>“Wallace T. Moore Jr. Exonerated of Charges,” *DMN*, August 9, 1915.

<sup>21</sup>“Jungleland Wrecked By Terrific Explosion,” *DTH*, January 11, 1912.

<sup>22</sup>The description and promotional language come from an advertisement: “Jungleland Picture House,” *DMN*, July 12, 1912.

<sup>23</sup>“Gas Causes Big Explosion,” *Lancaster Herald*, January 19, 1912.

<sup>24</sup>“Building Was Badly Damaged,” *DTH*, January 12, 1912, and “Gas Explosion in Dallas,” *Bryan Eagle and Pilot*, January 11, 1912.

<sup>25</sup>“Teacher Meets Horrible Death in Gas Explosion,” *Dallas Express*, February 10, 1923, and “Negro Teacher is Burned to Death,” *DMN*, February 6, 1923.

<sup>26</sup>“Funeral of the Late Miss Gladys V. Hurdle of Dallas,” *Dallas Express*, February 17, 1923.

<sup>27</sup>Thorough newspaper coverage and photos of the event can be found in *The Dallas Morning News* and *Dallas Times Herald*, May 12, 1927. See also “Blast Killing 6 Ascribed to Escaping Gas” and “Larger Emergency Hospital Favored,” *DMN*, May 13, 1927.

<sup>28</sup>“Man Is Killed in Explosion,” *DMN*, July 2, 1927, and “Three Injured As Empty Gas Tank Explodes,” (*Timpson Weekly Times*, July 8, 1927.

<sup>29</sup>“Damage Suit Follows Truck Explosion,” *DMN*, July 6, 1927.

<sup>30</sup>“Gas and Dynamite Threaten Explosion,” *Borger Daily Herald*, April 4, 1927.

<sup>31</sup>“Is Scalded To Death By Boiler Explosion,” *DMN*, May 21, 1911.

<sup>32</sup>See “Boiler Explosion, One Dead, One Hurt,” *DMN*, July 20, 1911, and “Injuries Are Fatal to Mrs. C.C. Cormack,” *ibid.*, July 21, 1911. (*The News* misspelled the Carmacks' last name throughout its coverage.) For more information about the farm family, see “Mesquite People Victims of Terrible Accident,” *The Texas Mesquiter*, July 21, 1911, and “Mrs. Carmack Follows Husband to the Grave,” *ibid.*, July 28, 1911.

<sup>33</sup>*The Dallas Morning News* published stories about the well and the reluctant nitro through much of early February 1888. See “The Artesian Well,” February 4, 1888; “Shooting the Well,” February 7, 1888; and “Local Notes,” February 12, 1888.

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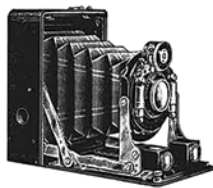
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# Floods, Fires, and Crashes

## Documenting Disasters with Photography

BY PETER KURILECZ

*I*n 1918 the phrase “One Picture is Worth a Thousand Words” appeared in an advertisement in the *San Antonio Light* newspaper. The phrase aptly describes what a photograph is capable of doing, especially when documenting disasters.

Invented in the mid-19th century, early photographic technology limited photographs to stiffly posed images of people. Occasionally street scenes or buildings would be photographed, but individuals appeared ghost-like in the images. At the same time, newspaper illustrations were limited to engravings, many made from photographs since there was no way to print a photograph until the arrival of the half-tone image at the turn of the century.

The 1908 Trinity floods were probably the first disaster in Dallas history to be heavily photographed. Several photographers rushed to the river to take photographs. One photographer lost his life as he scrambled along the banks of the raging river with his equipment. The newspapers now

had the technical ability to publish these photos, documenting the event. Sanger Brothers sold photographic post cards of the flooding so that people could send them to their friends around the country. Just an early day Instagram.

The arrival of the airplane added another dimension to photography. No longer was the photographer limited to taking pictures from ground level or high atop a building; now he could shoot his photographs from hundreds if not thousands of feet in the sky. One of the best-known aerial photographers in the Dallas-Fort Worth area was Squire Haskins, whose archive is now held by the University of Texas at Arlington.

Photography was once limited to professionals or skilled amateurs, but nowadays we all carry a camera, our smartphones. The recent North Dallas tornado of 2019 will go down as one of the most heavily photographed disasters in the city’s history, since virtually everyone in the area took pictures of the tornado and the devastation it left in its wake.

*One Picture is Worth a Thousand*

# Trinity Flooding

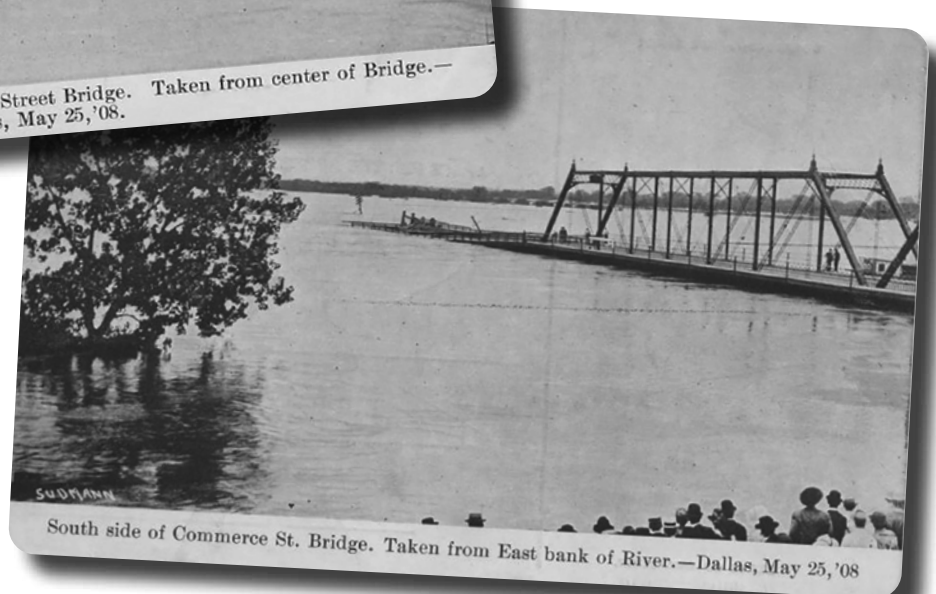
According to Indian lore, the first known flood of the Trinity River near Dallas took place in 1822. Since that time, others came along in 1844, 1866, 1871, 1890, and 1908. It was the floods that took place in April and May of 1908 that served as the impetus to build the Houston St. Viaduct tying Oak Cliff and Dallas to each other. The May flood was devastating. It knocked out the power plant, leaving Dallas without electricity, which powered the street car system. The flood disabled the Turtle Creek Pump Station, forcing the citizens to seek

out artesian wells for their drinking and cooking water. For five days Oak Cliff was isolated from Dallas with access available only via the steam powered excursion boat *Nellie Maurine*. Two thousand Oak Cliff citizens gathered at the Oak Cliff Casino to demand the construction of a flood-proof bridge that would connect them to Dallas. Over 15,000 Dallasites crowded the east bank of the Trinity to watch the flood. Numerous photographers came out with their equipment to document the flood. One poor fellow was seen climbing along the east bank with his camera and a box



**This image of flooding in downtown Dallas along the east bank of the Trinity River was taken by an intrepid photographer who ventured to the middle of the Commerce Street Bridge.**

**This image shows the Commerce Street Bridge slowly being inundated by flood waters.**



Words

# Trinity Flooding



of glass plates when he slipped, fell, and was swept away by the flood waters never to be seen again. *The Dallas Morning News* reported that a young boy named Cumby took his Brownie camera with him to the river so he could take photos. In the early 1930s the Trinity was tamed to a degree when the current levee system was constructed and the river was straightened. Floods were contained within the walls of the levee system, but areas outside of the levees still got flooded. As you drive north on I-35 East from downtown know that you are driving on what was once Trinity River bottom lands.



**An estimated 15,000 people crowded the east bank of the Trinity River to watch the waters rise.**

**Residents of Oak Cliff, on the west side of the Trinity, also ventured out to watch as the flood waters gradually cut them off from Dallas.**

*One Picture is Worth a Thousand*



## Neiman-Marcus Fire, December 19, 1964

December is a department store's major selling season. Imagine you are Stanley Marcus and you get a call six days before Christmas that your store is on fire. At about 3:40 A.M. on December 19, a fire broke out on the fifth floor of the Neiman-Marcus Annex, between Main and Commerce at the west end of the original building. In about an hour's time the fire was declared a five-alarm blaze. More than 300 firefighters fought the blaze, eventually gaining control five hours after it started. Heavy smoke poured from the 5th and 6th floors, five firefighters were overcome by smoke, and two others suffered cuts. Citizens crowded the street,

standing in freezing rain to watch the fire. On that Saturday morning shortly after the fire was controlled, a young bride who was to be wed that afternoon received a call telling her that her dress had been destroyed. But she wasn't alone. Several other brides also learned that their wedding dresses were gone. But Neiman's swung into action, bringing in dresses from its other stores, and the young woman's wedding took place on time. One bystander wondered aloud if Neiman-Marcus would hold a fire sale. The answer was no.

Here is a link to Dallas Fire Department film about the fire [https://texasarchive.org/2018\\_01769](https://texasarchive.org/2018_01769)



**In these images, smoke billows from the 5th and 6th floors of the Neiman-Marcus Annex between Main and Commerce Street on Dec. 19, 1964, as firefighters battle the blaze and citizens crowd the street despite freezing rain.**



*Words*

## Delta 191

Early in the evening of August 2, 1985, a Delta Airlines Lockheed L-1011 Flight 191 carrying 160 people was on its final approach to Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. Thunderstorms were around the area, and rain was pouring down. Suddenly the aircraft came down just north of Highway 114, bouncing across the highway. Its landing gear struck two west-bound cars, decapitating one driver's head. Then it bounced in the air before coming down again, its left wing

striking a water tower. The plane broke apart with its tail section skidding to a stop far away from the rest of the plane. It was this section that contained the only survivors of the crash. At the time no one knew what caused the crash, but the speculation was that a wind shear or micro-burst might have been involved. Twenty-four passengers and three flight attendants were the only survivors. To this day the crash of Delta 191 remains the deadliest crash in Dallas aviation history. **L**



**Heroic firefighters battled the flames that followed the crash of Delta Flight 191 on August 2, 1985. It remains the deadliest crash in Dallas aviation history, with 133 passengers killed.**



*One Picture is Worth a Thousand Words*



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# Like a Bomb Went Off

## The 1946 Baker Hotel Explosion

BY MISTY MABERRY

*The Baker Hotel*, an eighteen-story, 700-room hotel that cost \$5.5 million to build, opened on October 9, 1925, at Akard and Commerce Street in downtown Dallas. When it opened it boasted the largest ballroom in the south, the Crystal Ballroom, which could host up to 1,700 people.<sup>1</sup> The hotel quickly became a center for downtown activity with regular social activities and musical entertainment. Just over twenty years later, in 1946, the Baker Hotel was rocked by a massive explosion, the largest in Dallas up until that time, which resulted in ten deaths and thirty-eight serious injuries with over \$500,000 in estimated damage.<sup>2</sup> The Baker Hotel disaster occurred during a span of time that coincided with several other major hotel disasters, the public outcry from which ultimately led to a national call for safety standards in public buildings.

The Baker Hotel was the crowning achievement of a farsighted and tenacious hotelier. Theodore Brasher “T. B.” Baker was born into the hotel business, learning the trade from his first job in

his father’s hotel. After he spent twenty-five years expanding and growing his holdings, *The Dallas Morning News* lauded him as being one of the leading hotel men in the country. Yet only ten years later, in the midst of the Great Depression, the company he created and helmed through so much growth was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1934 and reorganize with his nephew Fenton J. Baker as president.<sup>3</sup>

T. B. Baker was born July 11, 1875, in Washington County, Iowa, to William and Loraine Baker née Grayson.<sup>4</sup> Known as Pete when he was younger, he began his career at the age of 20 working in his father’s hotel, The Goodlander, in Fort Scott, Kansas. Deciding to strike out on his own, he leased a hotel in Eureka, Kansas, and then another in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. Successfully operating and then selling these two hotels enabled him to buy hotels in Emporia and Fort Scott, Kansas, and then in 1910 a hotel in Joplin, Missouri. In 1914 his attention turned to Texas, where he leased the St. Anthony Hotel in San



**This 1940s photo of the Baker Hotel, right center, shows it across Commerce Street from the Adolphus, and with the flying red horse of the Magnolia Building just visible beyond.**

Antonio. By 1915 he added the Menger Hotel and in 1920 the Winfield Hotel, both in San Antonio, to his portfolio.<sup>5</sup> Next came the Stephen F. Austin Hotel in Austin and the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth, followed quickly by the purchase of a site in Dallas to build what would become the Baker Hotel. Consolidating his primary business to Texas, he organized his holdings under the Baker Company, and continued his rise, becoming Texas' largest hotel operator.

It was a persistent, incremental model of success – taking on hotels and methodically trading them up for more ambitious, larger hotel properties, securing financing and support along the way until what was arguably the pinnacle of his busi-

ness achievements, the construction and opening of the Baker Hotel in Dallas, a modern hotel that was built and appointed at a total cost of \$5.5 million. The Baker was designed for entertainment and conventions, boasting four dining options, nightly live music, a weekly radio broadcast on local station WFAA, an arcade of shops, a beauty parlor and barber shop, and a plethora of event and meeting rooms. Baker was a man of singular vision, making the Baker Hotel a one-stop shop for all the possible needs of visitors, and succeeding in his goal of “making his hotels institutions of public service, where guests rather consider it a pleasure to part with their money.”<sup>6</sup>

The Baker Hotel, which became the center of

Dallas society for many years, was the second hotel at the southeast corner of Akard and Commerce Street. The Oriental Hotel opened on that site in 1893 with six stories containing 200 hotel rooms. There was no heat, but corner rooms had fireplaces, though a fire in the fireplace cost an additional 50 cents. According to *The Dallas Morning News*, if a guest did not have a room with a fireplace “he had to go to bed to keep warm.”<sup>7</sup>

By 1924, Dallas was booming into the modern age. The city, experiencing rapid growth, jumped from the 86th to 46th largest city in the nation in just twenty years. The city was home to nine large hotels which could accommodate 7,500 guests and forty-two smaller hotels which could hold up to 6,500. Yet with an expanding convention and tourist industry, including the annual State Fair of Texas, which hit an attendance of 200,000 per day, additional facilities with modern amenities were in demand to continue to support the growth of the city.<sup>8</sup>

The just over thirty-year-old Oriental Hotel was a beautiful but outdated hostelry featuring turn of the century elegance but lacking in modern conveniences. In March 1924, T. B. Baker purchased the aging property for \$785,000 from the Oriental Hotel Association, explaining, “I bought the Oriental because it stands on the best hotel site in Texas.”<sup>9</sup>

An experienced Texas hotelier already successfully established in the state with the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth, the Menger Hotel in San Antonio, and the Stephen F. Austin Hotel under construction in Austin, the enterprising Baker promised that the new hotel he was planning for the site would be “one of the most modern hostleries in Texas.” In October 1924, Baker also acquired the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, which made him the largest hotel operator in the South.<sup>10</sup>

Construction began on the Baker Hotel on November 26, 1924, and it was just under a year later, in October 1925, that the hotel opened. The Baker was designed by architect Preston J. Bradshaw, with W.J. Knight & Co. serving as consulting engineers, and the Gilsonite Contracting Company completing the construction with the assistance

of a total of forty-two subcontractors.<sup>11</sup> Successful completion of such a large building in a short span of time was so impressive that *Dallas Magazine*, published by the Dallas Chamber of Commerce, boasted that only one and a half days were lost from work due to bad weather, no serious injuries were incurred on the site, and that 90 percent of the construction subcontracts were with Dallas firms.<sup>12</sup>

The eighteen-story Baker Hotel opened formally on October 9, 1925, on the former site of the Oriental Hotel, which coincidentally, had also opened on October 9, thirty-two years previously. Constructed of reinforced concrete with Texas brick and terra cotta facings, and showcasing marble and terrazzo tiles prominently in the interior design, the building was inspired by classical Italian Renaissance style. From the subbasement to the roof, the building spanned 235 feet in height, with a footprint of 222 by 152 feet.<sup>13</sup>

With 700 rooms, the Baker Hotel could accommodate 2,500 to 3,000 overnight guests.<sup>14</sup> A prominent local department store, Sanger Brothers, furnished the hotel, filling it with 15,623 pieces of specially constructed furniture which took 110 carloads to deliver.<sup>15</sup> The hotel was fitted with 33,000 yards of carpet,<sup>16</sup> and the lobby and lower floors featured marble, stucco, and terrazzo with walnut woodwork furnishings.<sup>17</sup>

The eleventh floor was the “women’s floor,” designated for women traveling unaccompanied. The furnishings were said to be in a more feminine style, and “feminine requirements” for furniture were a consideration when every room was outfitted with vanities. Draperies also were of a “more delicate color and design,” presumably to better accommodate feminine sensibilities.<sup>18</sup>

One of the principal modern amenities of the Baker was a “refrigeration system” that was promoted as the finest in the Southwest. With a 150-ton capacity, four units supplied the needs of the hotel: one unit on the seventeenth floor was solely dedicated to the roof garden; one unit was used for the “ice plant,” including an ice cream manufacturing machine and ice cream hardening room; while two units were used for preparing and



**Fire rescue crews arrived on the scene within minutes, donning gas masks to enter the wreckage and search for survivors.**

distributing air throughout the remainder of the building. An extensive ventilation system powered by fans pumped fresh air throughout the building, and in warm weather the air being circulated was cooled using ammonia compressors.<sup>19</sup>

The ice plant was capable of producing seven tons of ice per day, in 300-pound blocks, which were stored in adjacent tanks until needed. The plant supplied ice for everything from the food storage units or ice boxes to shavings used for dining services. The hotel water was fed from two 806-foot artisan wells, and every hotel room was supplied with ice water, which was fed from the

tank of the ice plant.<sup>20</sup>

The Baker was designed to accommodate business and meetings both social and professional, the second floor consisting of dedicated rooms for conventions, meetings, or banquets of varying sizes. Fenton Baker, the general manager, stated that the “mezzanine and convention floor had been planned for the satisfactory accommodation of the largest conventions . . . without losing sight of the needs of the smaller groups, luncheon clubs or social gatherings.”

The Convention Room had a capacity of 1,500-1,700 people. Featuring 23-foot ceilings,



it was later known as the Crystal Ballroom after the six crystal chandeliers adorning the room; each chandelier was made up of approximately 3,000 crystals imported from Czechoslovakia at a cost of \$9,000 dollars.<sup>21</sup> One of the most prestigious fundraising organizations in Dallas, the Crystal Charity Ball, which is still active today, was named after the room which originally hosted it.<sup>22</sup> The floor also featured six smaller private dining and conference rooms ranging in capacity from 30 to just over 100 people, decorated with gold and black mohair seating.<sup>23</sup>

The third and part of the fourth floors were dedicated to “sample rooms” that were designed with traveling sales representatives in mind. Each room was larger than the standard guest rooms and laid out with a large area designed to host guests and display product samples while concealing the sleeping area of the room from view.<sup>24</sup>

There were multiple venues for meal service at different price points throughout the hotel, including a street-level coffee shop that offered twenty-four hour service, a cafeteria (or “caveteria” as the term was coined for its basement location and black marble décor), and the main hotel dining room.<sup>25</sup> For the most upscale dining and dancing experience, there was a roof garden and dining room known as the Peacock Terrace, named for the stuffed peacocks keeping watch over the dance floor.<sup>26</sup> The hotel was staffed at opening by a small army 450 people, and hotel kitchens could serve 7,500 meals per sitting, up to 25,000 meals per day, handling the four dining areas, room service, and catered banquets and meetings.<sup>27</sup>

Live music was a major attraction of the hotel. WFAA-Radio studios were housed on the roof adjacent to the Peacock Terrace for many years. The Peacock Terrace offered a nightly rotation of famous and up and coming bands, and WFAA broadcast the music live from the hotel. The Baker became famous for the talent it hosted, including performers like Lawrence Welk, Gene Krupa, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Frank Sinatra, Patti Page, Herbie Kay, Ozzie and Harriet, Jimmy Joy, and Art Kassel.<sup>28</sup>

Neiman Marcus presented weekly style shows

over lunch at the hotel. The Rotary Club, the Idlewild Ball, and countless others had regular gatherings and meetings at the hotel. It was also the main hotel for the annual Texas-Oklahoma football game during the State Fair of Texas.<sup>29</sup> The August 1945 celebration of the Japanese surrender, ending World War II and known as V-J Day, centered around the Baker Hotel, with thousands of celebrants lining the streets. Whether spending the evening or staying at the hotel, a visit to the Baker Hotel was a memorable and lavish experience, and it functioned as the social heart of Dallas.

Because of its importance to the city, when a flash explosion ripped through the Baker Hotel basement at 11:13 A.M. on Friday, June 21, 1946, the event drew thousands of onlookers. The explosion was felt throughout downtown, as plate-glass windows shattered and occupants in a building two blocks away reported being bounced in their chairs. Workmen as far away as Chalk Hill, a distance of six miles from the Baker Hotel, felt the blast.<sup>30</sup>

Many victims were critically burned by the first blinding flash, and falling debris injured or killed many others. Acrid gas and smoke poured through the three basement levels of the hotel, spilling into the upper reaches of the coffee shop, the Mural Room, and hotel lobby, causing confusion and disorientation. A cloud of ammonia gas engulfed the basement, and survivors choked for air and struggled to escape through the eye-burning gas haze.<sup>31</sup>

The Baker Hotel kitchen, which had just been renovated and restocked at a cost of \$200,000, was a wreck. A six-foot wide by sixty-foot long steel dishwashing table was crumpled. Food, water, and an estimated \$8-10,000 of beer and liquor from the damaged wine cellar created a slippery surface on the floors, making them difficult to navigate for survivors and rescuers.<sup>32</sup>

Bobby Jack Payne, a baker working in the kitchen near the blast area, reported, “It sounded like a bomb had landed in the basement. Flames from the oven leaped out at us. We jumped back with the dough still in our hands, thinking any minute that the oven was going to come down on



**The Baker Hotel explosion made wreckage of this passageway between the Baker and the Southland Life Building. This photo was taken looking north from Jackson Street toward the Magnolia Building.**

us. Walls were caving in all around us. We were so scared we didn't know what to do. After the explosion we heard moans and cries. We ran out into the hall and finally to safety."<sup>33</sup>

Large slabs of concrete rocketed more than two stories in the air from the force of the explosion. Several people passing by on the street outside the coffee shop were showered with glass as the

windows were blown out. Workmen completing the new hotel kitchen were blown into the vacant lot next door, and many people were buried under debris. The hotel purchasing agent, William E. Cotton, was crushed by falling debris as he sat at his desk in the basement of the hotel. He was pulled from the wreckage by fellow employee Garland Mashburn, already dead from his wounds.<sup>34</sup>

Jim Kelly, a former Marine with service in the South Pacific, was next door and said he had instinctively ducked for a foxhole in response to the explosion because it sounded like an air raid.<sup>35</sup>

Charles Hodge was in charge of the laundry area with ninety-seven people in that department when the explosion happened. Workers were panicked, and he could smell the ammonia fumes coming through the door, so Hodge gave the employees wet sheets to cover their heads and ordered them to exit the area by crawling on hands and knees to avoid the fumes. Only two of the ninety-seven employees in the laundry room were injured.<sup>36</sup> Other survivors escaped through a manhole at Jackson and Akard streets, climbing or being hoisted out with ropes.

The butcher was on the service elevator that connects the basement to the first floor when the explosion happened, and it took six hours to dig him out of the debris. According to Floy Lenington, the secretary to the chef at the time, people were afraid to use that elevator afterwards.<sup>37</sup>

Several people were found wandering around outside the hotel, dazed and with no memory of the explosion or how they got out of the hotel. Preston Scott, an employee of the Baker, was found seven blocks from the hotel unable to explain how he had gotten there. A customer from the coffee shop was seen on the street a few seconds after the explosion with his meal check in one hand and no memory of how he had come to be outside. It was assumed that he was blown through the coffee shop window, as his suit was covered with glass.

A soldier passing the Jackson Street entrance to the hotel said the blast blew his furlough papers from his pocket and was quoted as saying, "The MPs will never believe that one."

Jack McDonald, a bicycle courier passing on Jackson Street, was next to the hotel when the explosion happened and recounted, "The blast blew me and the bicycle on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street from the hotel." He stayed to help with the rescue effort and pulled three people from the fume filled basement to safety.<sup>38</sup>

The Mural Room had just opened, so it didn't yet have many customers, but debris showered the room and ammonia clouds rolled in. The bandstand was damaged and a large mirror on the east wall shattered, shooting glass across the room.

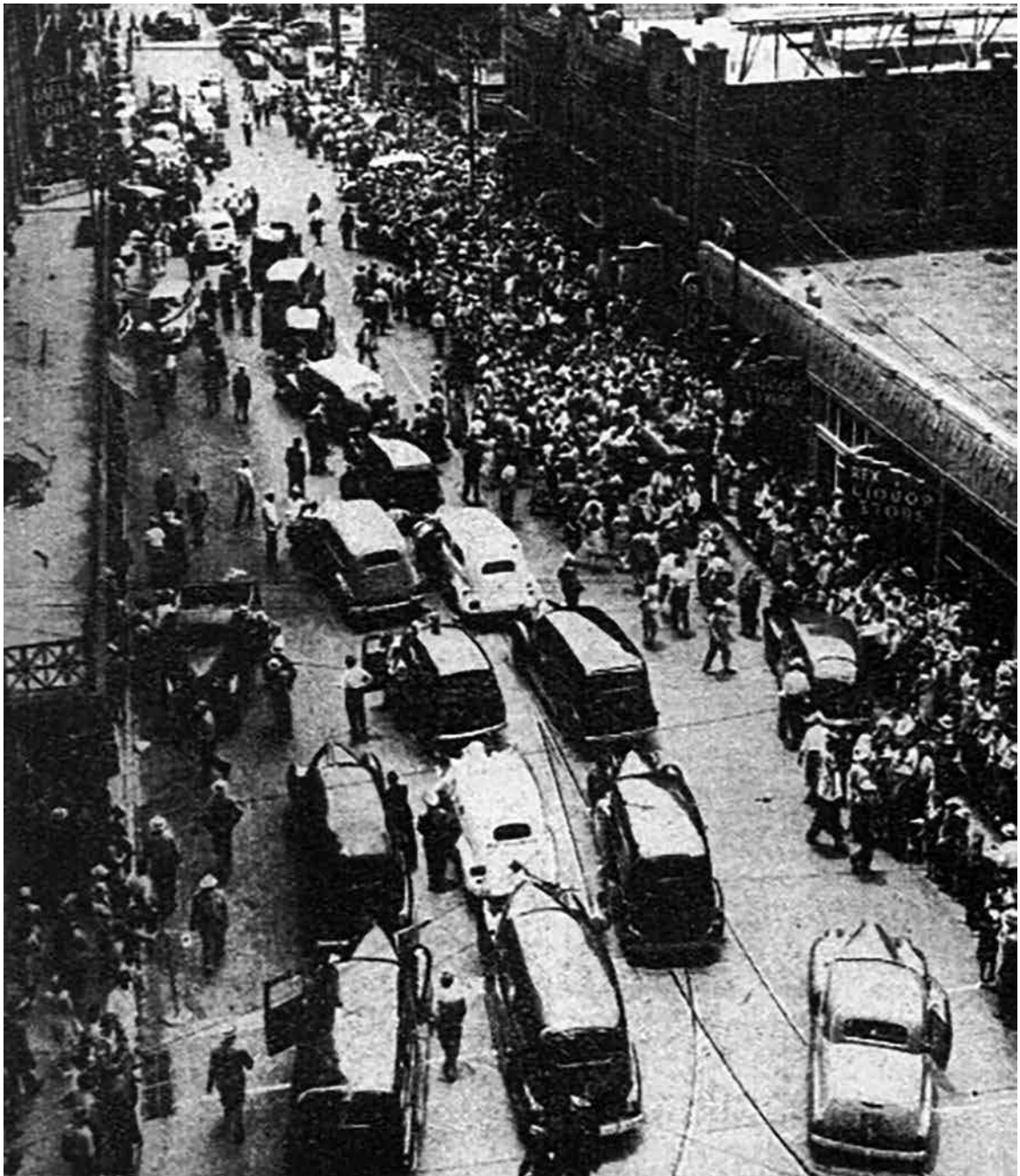
No fire followed the explosion, a circumstance that undoubtedly saved many lives. It was estimated that nearly 150 employees were in the basement at the time of the explosion. Fire investigators reviewing the scene stated that people would have been hopelessly trapped if fire had indeed broken out.<sup>39</sup>

The blast originated in the basement of the hotel under the coffee shop, which was being renovated as part of an addition being constructed on the east side of the existing structure. The explosion blew a hole in the east wall of the main hotel and nearly demolished the new building annex being constructed. New refrigeration units, which used ammonia gas, were being installed, the source of the leaking ammonia gas filling the air, causing eye irritation, blindness, and trouble breathing for the people escaping the affected areas.

At least four employees of the Henger Construction Company, the contractor working on the new annex area where the explosion originated, were saved from the blast because they were working inside a large steel furnace that was being re-lined at the time of the explosion.<sup>40</sup>

Fire rescue crews arrived on the scene within minutes, donning gas masks to enter the wreckage and search for survivors. Heroic employees returned to the basement to guide rescue crews to fellow employees. Thomas Lott, a site foreman for the construction company, escaped the building but covered his nose with a handkerchief and went back in to help with rescue efforts. He later recalled, "We couldn't see anything. We just had to feel. Somebody had to go in with the firemen to show them the way; I figured it might as well be me."<sup>41</sup>

Immediately following the explosion, many curious onlookers were drawn to the area. The crowds surrounding the building became so vast that ambulances and fire fighting equipment had a hard time getting through. Police Chief Carl



**The crowds surrounding the building became so vast that ambulances and fire fighting equipment had a hard time getting through.**

Hansson sent all available officers, including homicide detectives, to cordon off the scene and hold back the crowds.

Thirty-six ambulances made forty-five trips, and the injured soon crowded the hospitals treating

the victims: Parkland, Baylor, and Methodist. Even the Naval Air Station sent two ambulances and a medical team to assist.<sup>42</sup>

At Parkland Hospital the arrival of so many ambulances attracted a crowd of spectators there

## TO THE FRIENDS AND CUSTOMERS OF THE BAKER HOTEL

Damage from an explosion of unknown origin which occurred on the property adjoining the hotel building where new construction work is being done was confined almost entirely to the basement of the hotel and the rear area of the kitchen. No damage of any consequence was done except below the first floor.

Due to damage caused to storage ice boxes, and some service equipment, no food will be available for a few days, but otherwise the hotel is in full operation with the approval of all regulatory officials.

None of the guests of the hotel were injured, and we sincerely regret the loss of life and injuries suffered by our own employees and those of the construction company.

The company expresses its sincere appreciation of and earnest admiration for the most efficient work done by the Police and Fire Departments of the City of Dallas.

FENTON J. BAKER

Fenton J. Baker, the hotel manager, placed an ad addressed to friends and customers of the Baker Hotel in the paper to run along with reports of the tragedy stating that no guests of the hotel were injured and expressing regret for the loss of life and injuries to employees.

as well, but this was put to good use when blood plasma began running low and onlookers were asked to donate. Twenty-five people stepped up to donate blood.<sup>43</sup>

The main hotel building had swayed during the explosion, but it remained intact. Inspec-

tors checked for structural integrity immediately following the blast and deemed it safe. No immediate structural defects were found in the hotel proper, but what remained of the construction work on the new hotel annex had to be demolished and removed.

Hotel guests were evacuated as fumes spread throughout the building, but none were seriously injured. Seven people were killed outright by the explosion, and thirty-eight were injured to the point of requiring medical attention. The death count rose to ten people as a few more hospitalized victims succumbed to their injuries.

Three hours after the explosion, the hotel began to return to normal, with a disruption only in food service; check-ins for the day proceeded as normal after 4:00 that afternoon. Guests maintained confidence in the establishment, and the 700-room hotel was still booked at near capacity the night of the explosion.<sup>44</sup> Fenton J. Baker, the hotel manager, placed an ad addressed to friends and customers of the Baker Hotel in the paper to run along with reports of the tragedy stating that no guests of the hotel were injured and expressing regret for the loss of life and injuries to employees.<sup>45</sup>

Of the deaths, nine were hotel employees and one was a workman for the construction company. The explosion, whose final toll was ten people dead, thirty-eight hospitalized, scores of lesser injuries, and upwards of \$500,000 in property damage, immediately earned the distinction as the worst explosion in Dallas history.<sup>46</sup>

Fire inspectors and hotel management were cautious in assessing the reasons for the accident, although gas was an early suspected culprit. Four days after the explosion, in a prepared statement, Fire Marshall B. C. Hilton announced the cause of the blast as an explosive gas pocket about two-feet high, fifty-two feet long, and thirty-seven feet wide located between the top of the refrigeration rooms and the basement ceiling.<sup>47</sup> Due to the location of the explosion near the refrigeration units that were being fitted, an ammonia leak was suspected, but during his investigation, none of the witnesses interviewed reported an odor of ammonia prior to the explosion. However, an odor of natural gas before the blast was reported to Hilton. Only six months before, in the previous December, hotel manager Fenton Baker had the gas lines tested under pressure, so it seemed unlikely that the regular gas lines were at fault. It was found that some time prior to the explosion the contractors

working for Henger Construction had extended a small gas line through the confined space into the new area they were working on above the refrigeration rooms.<sup>48</sup> While this was not conclusively determined to be the cause of the gas leak and subsequent explosion, the Henger Construction Company was subject to a lawsuit brought by fifty-four injured survivors and the heirs or estates of the ten persons who were killed in the accident.<sup>49</sup>

One of the headlines in *The Dallas Morning News* the day after the Baker explosion was “Hotel Disaster Nation’s Third,” tying the Baker Hotel disaster to fires at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago and the Canfield Hotel, in Dubuque, Iowa, each of which happened within a sixteen day period.<sup>50</sup> *The Fort Worth Star Telegram* also drew parallels to those recent hotel disasters in its coverage of the explosion.<sup>51</sup> The *Texas Hotel Review*, in addressing the string of similar events, suggested that “fires and accidents have a tendency to run in cycles.”<sup>52</sup>

Hoteliers naturally were alarmed at the spate of disastrous events. Not only were they tragic incidents of loss of life, but also problematic to the industry in both public perception and loss of revenue and assets.<sup>53</sup> A week prior to the Baker Hotel explosion, the Dallas Hotel Association had convened to discuss fire safety in response to the first two incidents, but after the Baker Hotel disaster they re-convened for a special meeting, one result of which was a plan to implement fire and accident prevention and emergency response training for hotel employees from the fire marshal.<sup>54</sup>

On both a local and a national level, this string of hotel tragedies, occurring so closely together, began a movement towards safety standards and regulation for hotels and public buildings, but it was not until the Winecoff Hotel fire of December 7, 1946, an event which still holds the tragic distinction of the deadliest hotel fire in United States history, that a nationwide call for safety standards for public buildings began.

Displaying a hubris worthy of the promoters of the *Titanic*, the Winecoff Hotel was advertised as being “absolutely fireproof” because of its steel construction; it was even stamped on the hotel stationary. The fifteen-story building had no fire

alarms, sprinklers, or fire escapes, and just a single staircase without doors that quickly became a towering inferno. In all, 119 people, including the hotel's owners, died while over 100 were injured.<sup>55</sup>

Dallas Fire Marshall B. C. Hilton, who conducted the Baker Hotel explosion investigation, also attended the investigation of the Wine-coff Hotel fire. In December 1946 he presented safety recommendations based on his experiences to the Dallas Hotel Association at a meeting at the Baker Hotel. He outlined a six-point fire prevention program, including fire drills, maintenance of equipment, good housekeeping, escape routes posted on the doors of each hotel room, a methodology for closing ventilation transoms in unoccupied rooms, and a system for immediate notification of the fire department in the case of fire. Additionally Hilton recommended that the Dallas Hotel Association seek legislation requiring all buildings with basements to have fire sprinkler systems and for fire doors to be a requirement for stairwells in buildings greater than two stories tall.<sup>56</sup> Hilton's safety suggestions are commonplace standards today, but at the time they were a much needed revolution in the methodology for thinking about public safety and fire.

In 1947 the push for public safety went national when President Harry Truman called a three-day conference bringing together city, state, and federal government officials and national groups interested in fire prevention and saving lives. As the president said during his opening address to the gathering, "The great hotel fires of last year again showed that we cannot afford to entrust our citizens' lives to unsafe buildings."<sup>57</sup>

The Baker Hotel was a beloved landmark and the center of the social life of Dallas for many years, hosting conventions, luncheons, meetings, and social gatherings of all types in a luxurious and modern space. When disaster struck, thousands of Dallasites turned out both to help and witness the spectacle. The gas explosion that happened in the basement of the Baker Hotel on June 21, 1946, was Dallas's worst explosion. The stories of the day are full of heroism, tragedy, and even some humor, and coming at a time that coincided with other hotel

tragedies in the nation, the Baker Hotel explosion played a role in the eventual implementation of fire safety standards for public buildings. **L**

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>"Baker Hotel, Costing \$5,500,000, on Oriental Site, to be South's Largest," *The Dallas Morning News* (hereafter cited as *DMN*), May 18, 1924.

<sup>2</sup>"Inquiry Completed on Hotel Blast," *DMN*, July 6, 1946.

<sup>3</sup>"Reorganization Plan for Baker Hotel Agreed On," *DMN*, April 10, 1935.

<sup>4</sup>Death Certificate of Theodore Brasher Baker, June 11, 1972, File No. 40739, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.

<sup>5</sup>"T. B. Baker is Leading Texas Host," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>"Memories of Bygone Days Fade with Passing of Oriental for New Building," *DMN*, April 27, 1924.

<sup>8</sup>"Dallas, a Great Hotel Center," *Dallas Magazine*, July 1924.

<sup>9</sup>"Oriental Hotel is Sold for \$785,000," *DMN*, March 4, 1924.

<sup>10</sup>"Baker Gets Gunter Hotel San Antonio," *DMN*, October 1, 1924.

<sup>11</sup>"Baker Hotel, Costing \$5,500,000, on Oriental Site, to be South's Largest," *DMN*, May 18, 1924.

<sup>12</sup>"700-Room Baker Hotel Opens," *Dallas Magazine*, October 1925.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>"Baker Hotel, Costing \$5,500,000, on Oriental Site," *DMN*, May 18, 1924.

<sup>15</sup>"Big Job to Equip Hotel," *DMN*, October 10, 1925.

<sup>16</sup>"Work Rushed to Completion of New Hotel," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>17</sup>"Baker Hotel Guest Room is Tasteful," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>18</sup>"Women Guests Have Floor," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>19</sup>"Cooling Plans are Complete," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>20</sup>"Big Ice Supply for New Hotel," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>21</sup>"Mezzanine is Show Place," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>22</sup>"Baker Hotel Leaves Memories," *DMN*, July 31, 1979.

<sup>23</sup>"Six Banquet Rooms Unique," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

<sup>24</sup>"Sample Rooms Well Lighted," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.

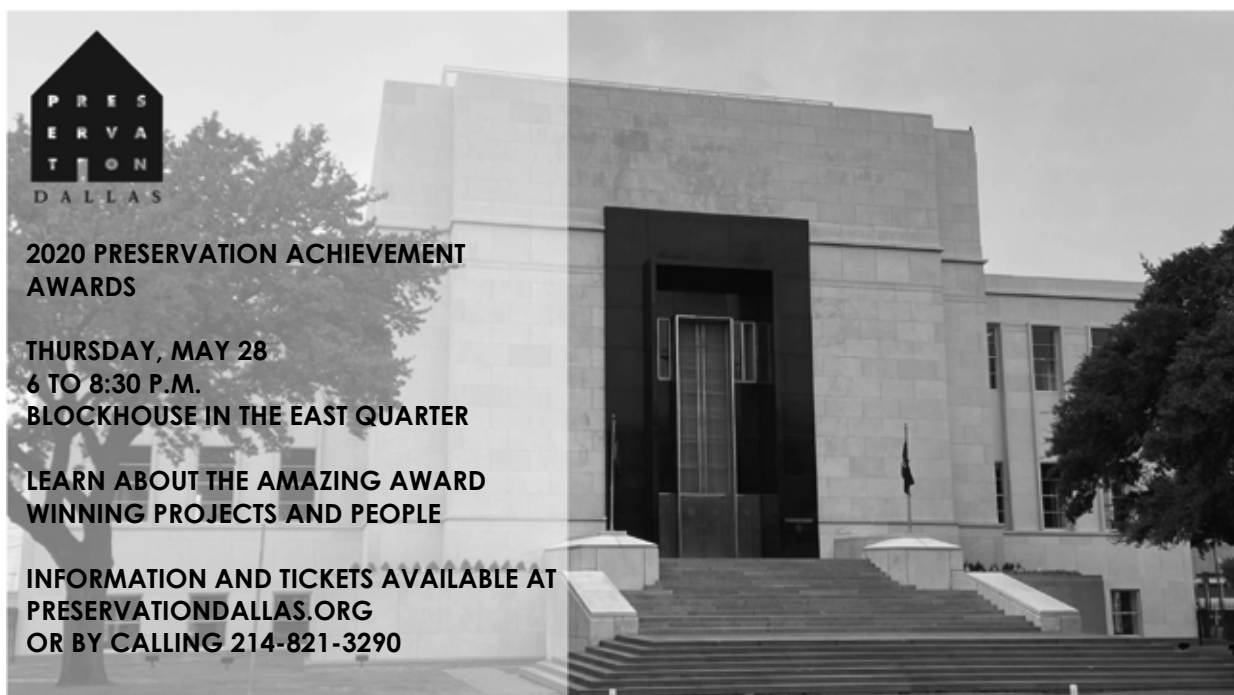
<sup>25</sup>"Reader Will Give Program," *DMN*, June 5, 1927.

<sup>26</sup>Paul Rosenfield, "The Peacock Terrace," pamphlet from the vertical file in the collections of the Dallas Public Library, Dallas History & Archives Division.

<sup>27</sup>"Well-Known Hotel Men on Baker Staff" and "Baker Ready for Feeding," *DMN*, October 11, 1925.



- <sup>28</sup>Rosenfield, "Peacock Terrace."
- <sup>29</sup>"Baker Hotel Leaves Memories," *DMN*, July 31, 1979.
- <sup>30</sup>"Sounded Like Bomb Had Hit, Witnesses Say of Explosion," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>31</sup>"Seven Die, 38 Hurt as Blast Rocks Hotel Basement," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>32</sup>"Baker Hotel Blast, Dallas, Kills 7," *Fort Worth Star Telegram* (hereafter cited as *FWST*), June 22, 1946.
- <sup>33</sup>"Sounded Like a Bomb Had Hit," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>34</sup>"Baker Hotel Blast Kills 5," *Dallas Times Herald* (hereafter cited as *DTH*), June 21, 1946.
- <sup>35</sup>"Sounded Like Bomb Had Hit," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>36</sup>"Seven Die, 38 Hit," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>37</sup>Floy Lenington Oral History Interview, August 4, 1979, Dallas Public Library, Dallas History & Archives Division.
- <sup>38</sup>"Seven Die, 38 Hurt," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>39</sup>Floy Lenington Oral History Interview.
- <sup>40</sup>"Seven Die, 38 Hurt," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>41</sup>"Baker Hotel Blast, Dallas, Kills 7," *FWST*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup>"Sounded Like a Bomb Had Hit," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>44</sup>"Cause Sought in Hotel Explosion," *DTH*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>45</sup>"To the Friends and Customers of the Baker Hotel," *DMN* advertisement, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>46</sup>"Seven Die, 38 Hurt," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>47</sup>"Gas Pocket Blamed for Hotel Explosion," *DMN*, July 7, 1946.
- <sup>48</sup>"Gas Smelled Before Blast," *DMN*, July 7, 1946.
- <sup>49</sup>"Judge Consolidates Suits Based on Hotel Explosion," *DMN*, April 4, 1956.
- <sup>50</sup>"Hotel Disaster Nation's Third," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>51</sup>"Hotel Blast Death Toll Reaches 8, Probe Pressed," *FWST*, June 23, 1946.
- <sup>52</sup>"Hotels Alert to Fire Prevention Measures," *Texas Hotel Review*, July 1946.
- <sup>53</sup>"Hotel Disaster Nation's Third," *DMN*, June 22, 1946.
- <sup>54</sup>"Hotels Alert to Fire Prevention Methods," *Texas Hotel Review*, July 1946.
- <sup>55</sup>"116 Dead in Hotel Disaster," *DMN*, December 8, 1946.
- <sup>56</sup>"Hotel Fire Safety Asked," *DMN*, December 19, 1946.
- <sup>57</sup>"Address at the Opening of the Conference on Fire Prevention," Harry S. Truman, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/232166>.



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# Wrestling with Fire

## Destruction and Resurrection of Dallas's Sportatorium

BY BRANDON P. MURRAY

*A*t 12:35 A.M. Friday, May 1, 1953, on the corner of Cadiz and Industrial Boulevard in Dallas, a five-alarm fire consumed the “sports palace” known as the Sportatorium. The blaze destroyed all but a portion of wall around the entrance within forty minutes, and Night Fire Dispatcher A. C. Crowson reported that more than 100 firefighters were called to help extinguish the fire.<sup>1</sup> The 6,400-seat, one-story stadium was insured for \$52,500 according to Ed McLemore, Sportatorium promotor and the head of the Cadiz Corporation that owned the famous sports stadium, and “. . . thousands besides the wrestling fans had become acquainted with the enclosed stadium through attendance of the many hillbilly music shows there.”<sup>2</sup>

This was neither the beginning nor the end of the drama that surrounded the stadium, which had an octagon shape, as is evident in the structure

depicted at 1000 S. Industrial Blvd. in the 1952 update to the 1921 Sanborn Map of Dallas.<sup>3</sup> Even as *The Dallas Morning News* reported the fire on May 1, the newspaper described the date of the stadium's true “death-knell” as March 27 1953, with the ruling of District Judge Sarah T. Hughes, who sided with the City and County Levee Improvement District and the Dallas County Flood Control District, when she declared the Sportatorium land owners W. T. Cox, William Bond Cox, and the Cadiz Corporation, which owned the building, responsible for clearing “all structures from the old Trinity River channel” because of a legal agreement that put one-third of the Sportatorium on state-owned land.<sup>4</sup>

The night watchman for the Sportatorium on the night of the fire was actually Deputy Sheriff C. C. Mooney, who was sitting in a car with fellow



**The Sportatorium was totally destroyed by fire during the night of May 1, 1953.**

night watchman J. O. Mitchell, who worked for Rosa's Barn located nearby on Industrial Boulevard, when a stream of fire and smoke was noticed coming off of the Sportatorium roof.<sup>5</sup>

By the day after the fire, W.T. Cox was calling it arson, declaring from a Gaston Avenue Hospital bed that the Sportatorium would rebuild. When asked about Judge Hughes's ruling, Cox was defiant, stating, "That court decision doesn't mean a thing. That case can't be settled before two years.

We've got the law on our side and politics against us. We are prepared to carry it to the United States Supreme Court. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Ed McLemore mirrored Cox's intention to rebuild, stating that events that had been scheduled at the Sportatorium would be temporarily moved to Fair Park's Livestock Building and that plans were underway to move the debris from the fire when the investigation was completed. It's interesting to note that McLemore admitted that plans

for a rebuilt Sportatorium “. . . would be slightly east of the old structure and would extend farther south.”<sup>7</sup>

A week after the fire, Hal Hood, the Dallas County Fire Marshall, officially announced arson as the cause of the blaze, mentioning that several people had already been questioned, though a motive had not been determined.<sup>8</sup> Although the arson investigation was conducted by the Dallas County Sheriff and the Dallas County Fire Marshall, in the 1953 Annual Report issued by the Dallas Police Department (DPD), the only arson-related statistics recorded by the DPD were juvenile arson arrests, which resulted in twenty cases referred to juvenile court and one case in which the juvenile offender was released to their parents.<sup>9</sup>

What would follow within less than a year included a three-month multi-state investigation, rapid construction, a grand reopening, criminal trials, and convictions.

## Before The Flames

The Sportatorium, which reportedly cost \$40,000, opened on December 9, 1935, with Bert Willoughby as the promoter.<sup>10</sup> “Bill” Cox, one of the original land owners, also owned the business Cox Fence and was known for inventing the woven wire fence.<sup>11</sup> The venue was intended for wrestling, boxing, indoor circuses, basketball, conventions, and “style shows.”<sup>12</sup> More than a week before its opening, the plans for inaugural Sportatorium events were ambitious but tenuous. Willoughby claimed to be “hot on the trail of twenty of the Nation’s best wrestlers. . . . I can’t say just now who will be on the card but hope to have the name of every man by Monday or Tuesday.”<sup>13</sup> He touted that he planned to book Juan Humberto, Southern heavyweight champion, and that there would be Texas’ biggest wrestling program at the Sportatorium “if present plans go through as outlined.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the arena’s developed popularity, legal battles were a factor for the Sportatorium owners early on. Judge Claude M. McCallum of the 101st Judicial District of Dallas County issued

a ruling on November 27, 1937, that the defendants, including Sportatorium, Inc., Ed McLemore, W. T. Cox, Dud Nelson, and those working in affiliation with the Sportatorium, “who conduct public physical endurance competitions for admission fees, prizes, or awards” must adhere to certain stipulations. Specifically, no endurance contest was allowed to last longer than a 24-hour period nor schedule multiple endurance contests from taking place within 168 hours of each other in the same location.<sup>15</sup>

In 1939, Ed McLemore would be actively working in the spotlight as a wrestling promoter rather than just an owner.<sup>16</sup> By 1946, McLemore had a regularly scheduled country music variety show on Saturday nights at the Sportatorium, which initially involved help from Dallas “nite [*sic*] club scene veteran” and owner of the Ole Top Rail Club Slim McDonald as well as McDonald’s publicity director, “Uncle Gus” Foster—a radio personality.<sup>17</sup> KLIF radio deejay Big Al Turner, who was with the show even before there was an actual radio broadcast component to the weekly event, soon became the main producer with McLemore as McDonald and Foster moved on to other things. Turner made a radio deal with WFAA-570 for an hour-long weekly broadcast, but McLemore did not want to jeopardize his wrestling radio broadcast arrangement with KRLD.<sup>18</sup>

In 1948, McLemore arranged a deal with KRLD program director Clyde Rembert to take over broadcasting the Saturday night country music show, bringing in KRLD’s Johnny Hicks, though Turner and McLemore would remain the driving force of the show. It was Hicks who rebranded the show as the Big “D” Jamboree, which made its debut under that name on October 16, 1948, and by September 1952, all four hours of the show were broadcast each week.<sup>19</sup> A show in July 1950 featured guest stars Leon Payne and the Dipsy Doodlers in addition to “Smokie Montgomery (King), Dub Dickerson and Zeke Clemmens (Imperial), Paul Blong (Bullet), and Riley Crabtree (Talent), and the show’s regulars Jack Saucier, Jimmy Fatherly, Al Turner, and Johnny Hicks.”<sup>20</sup>

Among the musical acts featured on the Big



**Promoter Ed McLemore never lost an opportunity for press coverage of himself and the Sportatorium, as this 1952 photo of him with two swimsuit-clad beauties testifies.**



**Duke Keomuka, Texas heavy-weight wrestling champion, is shown after a January 1952 attack on KRLD Announcer Charlie Boland and Ring Announcer George Preston in the Sportatorium ring. Deputy Sheriff N. W. Barnes, left, is shown with Sheriff R. L. Heard.**

“D” Jamboree during its run were Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price, and Hank Williams, and in 1951 the Light Crust Doughboys of local fame (billed at first as The Country Gentlemen) became the Jamboree’s second house band. That was also the year the Jamboree was added to a revolving national broadcast on CBS Radio called “Saturday Night Country Style.”<sup>21</sup>

As a promoter, McLemore often utilized the Sportatorium to raise money for charities as part of his publicity endeavors. This included several kinds of fundraising opportunities for groups such as the March of Dimes charity. Each year, he donated all

proceeds and purse money to the March of Dimes from the wrestling show that fell on his anniversary as a promoter.<sup>22</sup> The thirteenth anniversary show in January 1952 featured a bout between wrestlers Duke Keomuka and Sterling “Dizzy” Davis for the third straight year, and the previous anniversary event raised \$5,000 for the March of Dimes despite weather complications caused by snow and ice.<sup>23</sup>

Keomuka was a fount of controversial publicity for McLemore and the Sportatorium. He not only purportedly ruptured a blood vessel in “Dizzy” Davis’s neck with a judo chop, but in

early January 1952, Keomuka was forced to pay court costs and \$100 fine issued by Justice of the Peace W. E. Richburg in response to physically attacking wrestling announcers Charlie Boland and George Preston at the Sportatorium.<sup>24</sup>

McLemore made profitable television broadcasts in Texas but found himself the target of a wrestling strike that began on December 10, 1952, when wrestlers refused to perform in front of cameras in a San Antonio event. Wrestlers claimed that McLemore “repeatedly violated an agreement that promised them \$5 per airing of matches they appeared in and limited broadcasts . . . the telecasts were diminishing gate receipts and they were tired of promoters keeping all of the income from advertisers.”<sup>25</sup> McLemore also perceived animosity toward him by Houston booking agent Morris Sigel over an argument between the two during a September 1952 convention in Santa Monica where McLemore rejected a proposed \$50,000 arrangement to give Sigel 75 percent of any wrestling filming at the Sportatorium.<sup>26</sup>

This seems to have partially colored McLemore’s reaction to a later meeting arranged by the Texas Labor Commissioner to address the wrestling strike, with the owners of the Texas Wrestling Agency (Doc Sarpolis, Morris Sigel, and Frank Burke) negotiating on behalf of the wrestlers against McLemore, who felt unduly pressured into agreeing to a percentage given to the wrestlers.<sup>27</sup> Despite this arrangement, on December 29, 1952, a lawsuit was filed by Red Berry and seven other wrestlers against KRLD-TV, McLemore, Sarpolis, and Texas Rasslin’ to name a few. The judge ruled in favor of the wrestlers, so McLemore’s response was to boycott his association with the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), the Texas Wrestling Agency, and Morris Sigel. Then he arranged for a new Thursday night wrestling spectacle run by Maurice Beck that would run in addition to the regular Tuesday night wrestling schedule at the Sportatorium, in order to stave off a rival wrestling show that had popped up at Pappy’s Showland on Tuesdays run by Norman Clark on behalf of Sigel and his partners.<sup>28</sup>

On January 6, 1953, McLemore used a

series of “independent grapplers” and previously unknown names in combination with his main attractions Olympian Roy Dunn and Jack Bernard, while the Pappy’s Showland match that same night featured NWA champion Lou Thesz and Mr. Moto. McLemore was able to get some notable talent to stand with him in spite of the NWA, including Roy Graham, Jack Kennedy, and Jack O’Brien. There was a series of acrimonious interactions including a restraining order against McLemore by Clark.<sup>29</sup>

McLemore also approached Jack Barton Adkisson to become a professional wrestler, making his debut at the Sportatorium under his real name in January 1953. Adkisson attended Crozier Tech High School in Dallas and was on the 1948-49 Southern Methodist University football team before playing on the Dallas Texans American Football League team for a time in the 1950s. By year’s end in 1953, Adkisson had adopted the name “Fritz Von Erich” and wrestled on the road portraying a “Nazi disciple” persona.<sup>30</sup>

May 1953 brought the infamous fire and the subsequent reconstruction of the Sportatorium, but a year later on May 22, 1954, the Texas Wrestling Agency, Sigel, and McLemore finally gave in to a last ditch, two-month intense pressure campaign by the NWA to settle their disagreements, with a deal that gave Burke and Sigel 50 percent of all wrestling films while McLemore received 50 percent of the promotional revenue from Dallas. McLemore would also be sued separately between 1954-55 by wrestlers Duke Keomuka, Ray Gunkel, and a promoter in Corpus Christi.<sup>31</sup>

## Chasing The Fire

On August 21, 1953, Sheriff Decker disclosed the arrests of four individuals in connection with the May 1 Sportatorium fire, filing charges against three of the men. Alford Huey McCrory of Louisiana was arrested by authorities in California on August 14 and charged with attempted arson. In his five-page confession, McCrory admitted to his involvement in an aborted attempt to burn down the Sportatorium in January 1952, having agreed to \$100 payment but “chickened out.” The

unnamed fourth man arrested in this sweep was believed to be part of the failed attempt in which two five-gallon gasoline tanks were left behind the Sportatorium.<sup>32</sup> McCrory was a 34-year-old former defense plant worker.<sup>33</sup>

Roy Tatum, age 26, of Houston had arson charges filed against him on Thursday, August 20. He was arrested the next morning by Chicago police detectives at his place of employment at the Hilton Hotel, where he worked as “assistant manager of the food storage department,” and was flown to Dallas that Friday evening.<sup>34</sup> Tatum and McCrory both named the last person arrested in the probe, William Theodore (Bill) Moncrief of Aubrey, Denton County, as the person who offered them money to burn down the Sportatorium. Moncrief was described as “an ex-convict with a long record of arrests.” Tatum, on the other hand, admitted to setting the May 1953 fire that destroyed the stadium.<sup>35</sup>

When running the Associated Press account of the arrests, the *Denton-Record Chronicle* referred to Moncrief as a “Denton County man” who was arrested for arson in Aubrey, Texas, at “6 P.M. Friday [August 21] by Sheriff Ones Hodges of Denton County, Deputies Tipton and Kelley and Sheriff Decker and two deputies from Decker’s office.”<sup>36</sup> Moncrief, age 38, provided no criminal statement to authorities, but identified himself as a night watchman and an upholsterer by trade. Authorities possessed shears that were used by Tatum to cut open the Sportatorium fence the night of the fire.<sup>37</sup>

According to a WBAP-TV television news report of the arrests, Sheriff Decker credited Jesse Sweetser of Athens, Texas, with providing information that broke the case.<sup>38</sup> On Sunday August 23, 1953, Moncrief was released on a \$5,000 bond for arson charges and a \$2,500 bond on charges of attempted arson, posted by attorney Bert Barr. The others arrested remained in jail.<sup>39</sup> Sheriff Decker and Marshal Hood brought the arson evidence against the three conspirators before a grand jury on Wednesday September 2, 1953.<sup>40</sup>

According to court testimony, the following series of events occurred in regard to the arson of

the Sportatorium that cost the building owner Ed McLemore \$150,000, deducting the insurance. In January 1953, Moncrief offered Jack Ragsdale, Bill Cook, and McCrory \$100 to burn down a wrestling arena in Dallas, but they refused, and Ragsdale later testified to seeing Moncrief and Tatum at the American Grill in Houston.<sup>41</sup> McCrory actually traveled with a woman named Alice and Moncrief to Dallas from Houston in January 1953 and was prepared to be paid by a “Tony” in Houston for using two five-gallon tanks of gasoline to burn down the Sportatorium, but he lost his nerve at the last minute, leaving the fuel at the arena, which McLemore found and removed, not knowing their origin.<sup>42</sup>

Roy Tatum testified that Moncrief, whom he had known since 1952, offered him \$150 in April 1953 while at the American Grill, if Tatum would burn the Sportatorium, to which he agreed. On May 1, the two drove to the Sportatorium in Moncrief’s old Lincoln automobile, and Tatum used a pair of gloves and tin snips to cut an entrance into the galvanized tin wall of the Sportatorium, poured gasoline in areas that Moncrief had indicated, ignited the fuel, then fled to Moncrief’s car after discarding the gloves and the (later recovered) tin snips.<sup>43</sup>

Tatum received payment after the two returned to Houston, although night watchman C. C. Mooney, who discovered the fire, testified that on the night of May 1, he did see an old Lincoln in the vicinity with a man inside he later identified as Moncrief, as well as a man talking outside who turned out to be Tatum.<sup>44</sup> A man named Elvis Dalrymple testified hearing Moncrief on the phone talking to a “Tony” to report a mission accomplished, and Moncrief later admitted in conversation with Dalrymple to being near the Sportatorium around the time of the fire.<sup>45</sup>

Bill Moncrief’s conspiracy to commit arson trial ended on December 9, 1953, when after forty minutes of deliberation, the jury returned a guilty verdict. The judge then issued a five-year prison sentence, to which Moncrief responded with a scowl. His co-conspirators McCrory and Tatum testified to receiving \$100-150 for agreeing to





**Attorney James J. Shown, Houston, on the left, represented William Theodore Moncrief, accused as arson pay-off man in the Sportatorium fire of May 1, 1953. Moncrief was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison.**

burn down the Sportatorium.<sup>46</sup> McCrory, who was described as a “small, wiry aircraft mechanic,” and Tatum, “a stocky man with raven-black hair,” were both given lighter sentences for pleading guilty and testifying against Moncrief. Tatum received a two-year sentence for arson and a two-year sentence for conspiracy to commit arson (to be served concurrently), while McCrory was freed from his five-month stint in county jail and given two years of probation.<sup>47</sup>

The Court of Criminal Appeals ruling by Judge W. A. Morrison later found sufficient evidence to uphold the five-year sentence of Moncrief for conspiracy to commit arson.<sup>48</sup> According to a death certificate on record with

the Texas Department of State Health Services, a William Theodore Moncrief of Fort Worth died in a hospital for the Texas Department of Corrections in Huntsville, Walker County, Texas at the age of 59, on July 3, 1974. Although no autopsy was performed, the cause of death is listed as lymphosarcoma cell leukemia, with arrested military tuberculosis listed as a significant condition contributing to his death but not related to his terminal condition.<sup>49</sup> The death certificate lists him as divorced with a primary occupation as a heavy equipment operator in the construction industry, and the duration of his stay in Huntsville as of his death as two years, three months. He was interred on July 7, 1974, in Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery.<sup>50</sup>



**This photograph, taken from Industrial Blvd. near Cadiz in November 1956, shows the rebuilt Sportatorium in the background.**

### Out of the Ashes

Five months after the arsenous flames completely destroyed the Sportatorium, construction on the new, very slightly moved Sportatorium building, also at Cadiz and Industrial Boulevard, was far enough along that a grand opening ceremony was held on September 22, 1953, with a wrestling show and awards presented to Ed McLemore, including a horseshoe-shaped bouquet of flowers presented to him by “two polio patients” on behalf of the March of Dimes for his years of fundraising on their behalf and a plaque from the South Dallas Kiwanis Club, presented by its president, George Smith. A plaque was also presented to heavy-weight wrestler Stanislaus Zbysko in honor of his seventy-fifth birthday.<sup>51</sup>

The new-and-improved Sportatorium structure was not without its technical issues. The sound system originally installed in the new building had repeated “acoustical problems” that eventually resulted in the replacement of the sound system with a \$10,000 “Circa Sonic Sound” system designed by acoustics consultant and Southern Methodist University physics professor Dr. Wayne

Rudmose, debuting on a September 1954 Big “D” Jamboree Saturday night music show.<sup>52</sup>

Although Al Turner was replaced by a series of other personalities, McLemore remained involved with the Saturday night music show, and the Jamboree evolved in the 1950s to include more rockabilly and rhythm & blues performers that included performances by Elvis Presley and the February 19, 1955, show with headliners Sid King & the Five Strings.<sup>53</sup> McLemore had developed an in-house music publishing company called Big “D” Music with a large staff devoted to regional music management, booking, road shows, and artist publicity, but by the mid-1960s, the Big “D” Jamboree had closed down, despite a brief attempt to resurrect the show by McLemore’s son-in-law George Baum circa 1970.<sup>54</sup> Violence sometimes occurred beyond the ring of the “Million Dollar” Sportatorium, such as a reported stabbing of three people after a rock and roll show on Monday night July 15, 1957. Bill Plummer of Fort Worth was hospitalized in serious condition “with knife wounds in his heart.”<sup>55</sup>

McLemore pursued a number of promotional avenues to maintain an audience for Sportatorium

events, including the publication of a wrestling magazine called *Rasslin'*. In the March 24, 1959, issue alone, McLemore is featured on the cover story as having arranged the “Dream Match of the Decade” by meeting world heavyweight champion Pat O’Connor’s guarantee and adding a rematch clause to the contract in order to pit O’Connor in a match against Ray Gunkel to battle for a world title “worth a conservative \$50,000 a year.”<sup>56</sup> The magazine’s four-page issue, which cost ten cents, featured advertisements for upcoming Sportatorium wrestling card matches and a Big “D” Jamboree Saturday music show as well as advertising space sold to promote Jax, Falstaff, Lone Star, and Busch Bavarian beer products.<sup>57</sup>

Jack Adkisson grew his notoriety over the years using the “Fritz Von Erich” moniker as a wrestling villain, winning several wrestling titles including “AWA and Nebraska world titles” on July 27, 1963. He eventually severed ties to Houston booking agent Morris Sigel in order to start Southwest Promotion, Inc. with McLemore on September 23, 1966.<sup>58</sup> Over time, McLemore and Adkisson bolstered their mutual Sportatorium interests and expanded their booking privileges in several Texas cities. Adkisson was personally mentored by McLemore in promoting and booking, eventually taking charge of the company after McLemore’s February 1968 heart attack, with Adkisson’s father in place as Sportatorium manager and Ed Watt as the “front matchmaker” for the Dallas Wrestling Club during the 1970s.<sup>59</sup>

### Sportatorium After McLemore

Ed McLemore died of a subsequent heart attack Thursday morning January 9, 1969, two months after he finally achieved his lifelong goal to own a Rolls Royce.<sup>60</sup> He was survived by his wife, Rose, three daughters, including Mrs. William Griffith of Midland, two brothers, and thirteen grandchildren. Jack Adkisson described McLemore as “a master of crowd psychology,” adding, “I don’t think the crowd enthusiasm anywhere else I’ve ever performed could match what he developed here.”<sup>61</sup> Adkisson defended his American title fifteen times between 1966–1982 and was a “key challenger”

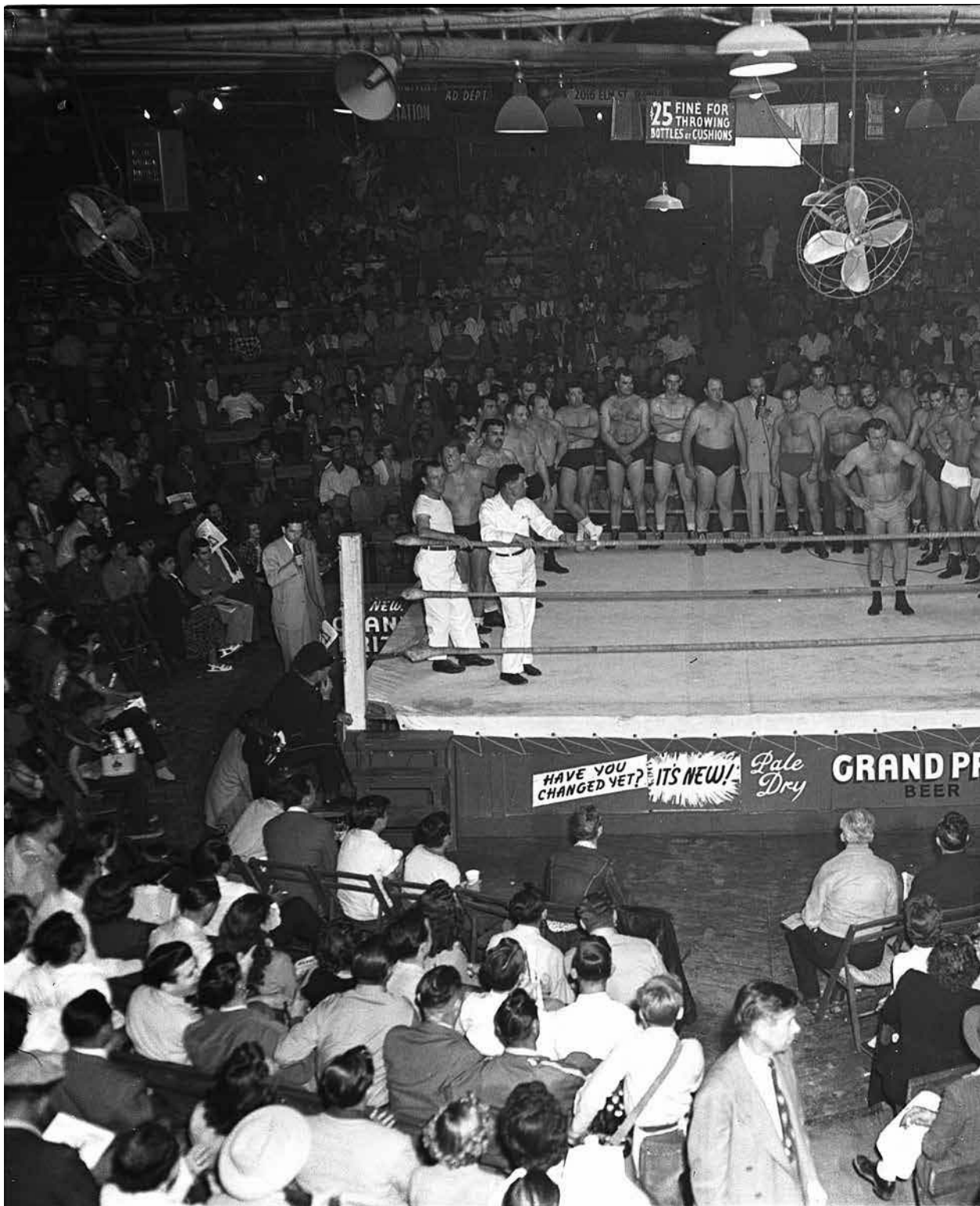
for the National Wrestling Alliance.<sup>62</sup> According to the listing for the Sportatorium in the 1973 Polk’s Dallas City Directory, the owner was Mrs. Wm. Griffith, President of Sport Promoters Corp, who was McLemore’s daughter.<sup>63</sup>

A notable Sportatorium wrestling program took place at 8 P.M. on January 13, 1976, that featured Adkisson as “Fritz Von Erich” teamed up with “Samoan strongman Chief Maivia” against rivals the Mongolian Stomper and Butcher Buddy Wolf.<sup>64</sup> This particular program performance also featured the Sportatorium debut of wrestler Rocky Johnson, “One of the nation’s top Negro [sic] mat stars,” in a match against Leo Seitz.<sup>65</sup> Peter “Chief” Maivia and Rocky Johnson are the grandfather and father, respectively, of film star and former professional wrestler Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, who in a 2003 interview for the “Texas Living” section of *The Dallas Morning News*, recalled living in a Dallas area motel for a year at the age of eight while his family wrestled at the Sportatorium.<sup>66</sup>

Johnson said of this period, “For me, the biggest memory of being in Dallas was going to watch my grandfather and my dad wrestle every weekend at the Sportatorium. That was a small venue, and it was very intimate and loud and at times obnoxious. But there was nothing like it. It was a great place to be on a Saturday night.”<sup>67</sup>

Five of Jack Adkisson’s six sons, Kevin, David, Kerry, Michael, and Chris, adopted the “Von Erich” name and entered wrestling, not as villains, but as “fan favorites and teenage icons” that were a hallmark of World Class Championship Wrestling and Sportatorium regulars and staples in Dallas, although by 1993 all but one of the six sons had died.<sup>68</sup> Jack Adkisson sold his promotion interests in 1987 and retired, eventually dying of cancer on September 10, 1997.<sup>69</sup>

An Arlington lawyer named Grey Pierson produced a wrestling show at the Sportatorium between 1992 and 1994, and during the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, the Saudi Arabian delegation that George H. W. Bush invited to attend insisted on visiting the Sportatorium when their travel arrangements



Wrestlers gather in the ring of the Sportatorium before a bout in 1965.



brought them through Dallas.<sup>70</sup> Music concerts continued in the early 1990s at the Sportatorium, including a 1992 show by post-punk rappers the Beastie Boys, who had to bring in their own generators, and the sheer volume of the music made the galvanized sheeting that covered the building resonate so much that, “The walls were moving.”<sup>71</sup> Pierson lost his lease in 1994, despite selling out the arena regularly, because he “couldn’t compete with rival promoters who reached a national television audience.”<sup>72</sup>

The Sportatorium closed for good around 1998, although the owner of the liquor store across the street from the stadium, Kwong Soo Chong, did assume the lease on the Sportatorium, only to discover that the City of Dallas required cost-prohibitive improvements before the structure could be reopened. Mr. Chong explained his dilemma, “I need a strong promoter. This building can only make good business with people who can put in a lot of money.”<sup>73</sup> By February 2003, the Sportatorium was being demolished. The owners, Sportatorium Associates, Inc., obtained a demolition permit from the City of Dallas and soon had workers dismantling the building, including its “asbestos-laden shingles.”<sup>74</sup> No building now stands in that spot at what was later renamed Riverfront Boulevard,<sup>75</sup> but perhaps a strong wind gusting through the area of the former arena might sound like the faint roar of a crowd. **L**

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>“Insurance Maps of Dallas, Texas 1921,” Sanborn Map Company, 1, sheet 105 (1952 reissue).

<sup>4</sup>“Fire Destroys Sportatorium,” *DMN*, May 1, 1953.

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<sup>6</sup>“Sportatorium To Be Rebuilt, Operators Say,” *DMN*, May 2, 1953.

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<sup>8</sup>“Arena Fire Held Arson,” *The Dallas Times Herald* (hereafter cited as *DTH*), May 8, 1953.

<sup>9</sup>C. F. Hansson, Chief of Police, *1953 Annual Report*, City

of Dallas Police Department.

<sup>10</sup>“Here’s Newest Addition to Local Sports Landscape,” *DMN*, December 9, 1935.

<sup>11</sup>Don Walton, “Arena Hosted First Dallas Rock,” *DTH*, September 3, 1986.

<sup>12</sup>“Willoughby Opens New Arena Dec. 9,” *DMN*, December 1, 1935.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>State of Texas v. Sportatorium, Inc., et al., 28878-E N 294 (1937).

<sup>16</sup>“Keomuka, Davis Top Dimes March Slate,” *DMN*, January 29, 1952.

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<sup>21</sup>Kevin Coffey, Liner notes for *The Big ‘D’ Jamboree Live: Volumes 1 & 2*, by David Dennard.

<sup>22</sup>“Keomuka, Davis Top Dimes March Slate,” *DMN*, January 29, 1952.

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<sup>25</sup>Tim Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling* (Toronto: ECW

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>32</sup>“Suspect Confesses Sportatorium Fire: Four Being Held In Arson Probe,” *DMN*, August 22, 1953.

<sup>33</sup>“Arson Probers Continue Case,” *DMN*, August 23, 1953.

<sup>34</sup>“Suspect Confesses Sportatorium Fire: Four Being Held In Arson Probe,” *DMN*, August 22, 1953.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>“Three Held In Arson Case,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, August 23, 1953.

<sup>37</sup>“Arson Probers Continue Case,” *DMN*, August 23, 1953.

<sup>38</sup>WBAP-TV (Television station: Fort Worth, TX). [News Script: Three charged in Sportatorium fire], item, August 23, 1953; (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc722054/m1/5/?q=three%20charged%20in%20sportatorium%20fire>: accessed December 12, 2019), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, UNT Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>39</sup>“Suspect In Arson Case Freed on \$7,500 Bond,” *DMN*, August 24, 1953.

<sup>40</sup>“Arson Data Presented To Grand Jury,” *DMN*, September 3, 1953.

<sup>41</sup>Moncrief v. State, 274 S.W.2d 678 CASETEXT

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(Tex. Crim. App. 1955). The electronic copy of the appellate court ruling is dated January 26, 1955, but that is most likely due to the inclusion of the subsequent ruling by Judge Woodley which upheld Judge Morrison's opinion and denied Moncrief's motion for a rehearing.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>WBAP-TV (Television station: Fort Worth, TX). [News Script: Moncrief guilty — Sportatorium fire], item, December 9, 1953; (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc726499/m1/1/?q=Moncrief%20guilty%20sportatorium%20fire>: and <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc726499/m1/3/?q=Moncrief%20guilty%20sportatorium%20fire> accessed December 12, 2019), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, UNT Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>47</sup>"Light Terms Given 2 In Arson Case," *DMN*, January 24, 1954.

<sup>48</sup>Moncrief v. State, 274 S.W.2d 678 CASETEXT (TX Crim.App. 1955).

<sup>49</sup>"Texas, Death Certificates, 1903-1982," digital image s.v. "William Theodore Moncrief" (1914-1974), Ancestry.com.

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<sup>51</sup>WBAP-TV (Television station : Fort Worth, TX). [News Script: Ceremony opens new Sportatorium], item, September 23, 1953; (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc722057/m1/1/?q=ceremony+open+s+new+sportatorium>: and <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc722057/m1/3/?q=ceremony%20opens%20new%20sportatorium>: accessed December 26, 2019), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting UNT Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>52</sup>"Sportatorium Installs New Sound System, *DTH*, September 2, 1954.

<sup>53</sup>Kevin Coffey, Liner notes for *The Big 'D' Jamboree Live: Volumes 1 & 2*, by David Dennard.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>WBAP-TV (Television station : Fort Worth, TX.). [News

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<sup>56</sup>Sportatorium Dallas Wrestling Club, Promoter, "McLemore Meets Champ's Terms To Assure Action Classic Match!," *Rasslin'*, March 24 (1959): 1.

<sup>57</sup>Sportatorium Dallas Wrestling Club, Promoter, *Rasslin'*, March 24 (1959).

<sup>58</sup>Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance*, 243.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>"Famed Promoter Ed McLemore Dies," *DMN*, January 10, 1969.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance*, 243.

<sup>63</sup>"Sportatorium," Polk's Greater Dallas City Directory, 1973, Dallas County, Texas.

<sup>64</sup>"Fritz Battles The Stomper Tuesday Night," *DMN*, January 13, 1976.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Katherine Leal Unmuth, "The Rundown On The Rock Jumping From Ring To Action Hero Is A Natural Progression, But This Wrestler Has Loftier Goals," *Texas Living: Dallas Morning News*, electronic version, September 29, 2003.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance*, 243.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Michael E. Young, "Going Down For The Count," *DMN*, February 22, 2003.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Jacquielynn Floyd, "Vacant Arena Hosts Ghosts of Wrestling Past," *DMN*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Young, "Going Down For The Count."

<sup>75</sup>"Dallas' Industrial Boulevard Becomes Riverfront Boulevard," *KXAS NBC DFW*, electronic text, November 10, 2008 (accessed December 22, 2019).

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# Terror from the Sky



**A**t the recent *Legacies* Dallas History Conference, held at the Dallas Public Library on January 25, 2020, Mark Doty, Assistant Director of Planning for the City of McKinney, moderated a panel discussion on the 1957 Dallas tornado.

The following is a modified transcript of that discussion, edited for space and clarity by Stephen Fagin, Curator, The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza. Featuring:

Kathy Burke  
Jim Dolan  
Jose “Pepe” Martinez  
eyewitnesses

Jesus Jimenez  
staff writer,  
*The Dallas Morning News*

David Bonnette  
meteorologist,  
National Weather Service

Mark Doty  
moderator



# The Dallas Tornado of 1957

Transcribed and Edited by **Stephen Fagin**

**MARK:** Good morning. I'm Mark Doty, now with the City of McKinney. I was with the City of Dallas for thirteen years. I started doing this research when I was doing publicity for *Lost Dallas* in 2012, and I would post Facebook images about certain events. I posted one about the 1957 Dallas tornado on the anniversary, and while I don't think the post went viral, there were a lot of comments. So, that started this whole thought of, if you grew up in Dallas from a certain generation, aside from the Kennedy assassination, the Dallas tornado of 1957 is probably one of those things that you remember exactly where you were, what you were doing, and everything about that. I did an article for *Legacies* in 2017, and now we put this wonderful panel together. I'm going to introduce everyone, and we're going to get right into it.

Our first panel expert is David Bonnette. He's a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Fort Worth, and he is going to provide a little technical expertise on the tornado. Then we have Jesus Jimenez from *The Dallas Morning News*. He's a staff writer, and he does what I call the "weather beat." So, if you see Jesus Jimenez's name in *The Dallas Morning News*, it's usually weather-related. I wanted to bring him on to get the media aspect. And then we have our three eyewitnesses. We have Jose "Pepe" Martinez, who was twenty-three at the time. He lived in West Dallas, and he is a very spry eighty-seven years old, with a memory that is much better than mine at forty-four! He must have led a really good life. Then we have

Jim Dolan, who was five and a half. He was an eyewitness from Oak Cliff who saw the tornado. And next to him is one of his really good friends growing up, Kathy Burke, who was also five and a half. So, I'm going to go ahead and start off with David to share some technical expertise on the 1957 tornado.

**DAVID:** Good morning. I'd like to share a little bit of technical information about the tornado. Starting off, the first thing everybody always wants to know is: how strong was it? What was the rating of that tornado? This tornado was an F3. Nowadays, they're going to say an EF-3. There was actually a change in the tornado scale. It used to be the Fujita scale based off of the tornado research of Dr. Fujita. And actually, a lot of his research was spurred by the 1957 Dallas tornado. This was one of the most photographed and well-documented tornados of its time because it moved through the populated areas. We didn't really have radar. We didn't have satellites that were as good as what we have today. So, you couldn't really get a sense of how a tornado actually spun or what it did. We knew it was a swirly thing, but that's about it. So, it was really a pioneering tornado event for a lot of research. But the tornado itself was 17.3 miles and 100 yards wide. That was the official survey. One of my favorite newspaper clippings, in going back and doing research on this tornado, included a quote from the Weather Bureau assistant chief in Washington, D.C. who estimated wind speeds at 500 to 700 miles per hour. If it really had 500 to 700 mile-per-hour winds, it would

not be an F3. It would be an F18! So, that just goes to show how much tornado research has really advanced since this tornado.

I hate to say it, but there were ten fatalities with this tornado. Damage estimates were about \$4 million in 1957 money, or \$36.5 million when adjusted for inflation. For that time, there was quite a bit of damage. It was a pretty classic meteorological setup. It was really warm, humid air in the low levels, really strong jet coming over top of it. So, everything was set up for what could be a pretty strong tornadic event. The weird part about the '57 tornado is that it basically moved from south to north. If you look at most tornado tracks, they move to the northeast most of the time. But if you look at this one, it's moving north, south, and even curves a little bit towards the west. Basically, it just goes to show that not all tornados are the same. This one moved backwards from the way most tornados generally occur.

The other interesting thing about this storm is that tornado warnings were really in their infancy. Today, tornado warnings and severe thunderstorm warnings come from our office at the National Weather Service. Our goal is to issue those warnings for the protection of life and property. We try to save lives by issuing out those warnings as soon as possible. I don't think there was an actual tornado warning for this storm. In fact, the first tornado warning was issued in 1948 by a couple of Air Force meteorologists in Oklahoma City, and it was more of a forecast than a warning. The first actual public tornado warning didn't come out until 1952, and the first one that aired on television and radio was in 1955, just two years before this Dallas tornado. And the first-ever tornado warning based off radar came from Texas A&M in 1956. So, at the time, if you had said "tornado warning," people would be like, what's a tornado warning? It wasn't common vernacular like it is today.

**MARK:** Thank you. Let's go ahead and go to our eyewitnesses. Let's start with Kathy Burke and Jim Dolan, who were both five-and-a-half in Oak Cliff.

**KATHY:** OK. I was with my parents in their car. We were on Ninth Street heading west from Zang Boulevard. My father had had a medical appointment, and so we were in the car on Ninth Street heading toward Edgefield, heading west. Then all of a sudden, I look up, and there is this blackness. I mean, it was just pitch black. And I remember it, of course, like it was yesterday. There was a part of a roof that I could see that was flying around it. That scared me half out of my wits. I remember we stopped at Ninth and Tyler. There was a 7-Eleven, which I think is still there. My Dad went to the phone booth and called my brother, who was home at Windemere and Ninth, to check on him. He was OK. I also remember a man came and stopped traffic and said, "Tornados move from south to north." So, we were going west on Ninth. The tornado had already come over Jefferson and was heading back north. I remember he stopped cars and had us all turn left, which would be toward Jefferson at the time, because he knew the tornado was moving north. I think, for '57, that was kind of interesting for someone to have the wherewithal to direct us south when the tornado was going north. After it was over, we inspected the neighborhood. I remember distinctly driving on Clinton in Winnetka Heights, and it was like every other house did not have a roof. And at Clinton, the tornado went right through what is now the Kessler Theater. There was a brick wall at the back, and for years, it was a V-shape and you could tell where the brick had been replaced. That's what I remember. My mother said that for weeks or even months after the tornado, anytime we were on those streets, I would hit the floorboard because that's what I did when I looked up and saw that twister with the roof dangling around. So, that is my story.



**Significant portions of the roof on the Kessler Theater, located on West Davis at North Clinton, collapsed as the storm peeled back the majority of the rear wall. Panelist Kathy Burke was in a car with her father and recalls driving past the theater shortly after it was struck.**

**JIM:** Ms. Burke and I didn't know each other yet, though we were soon to be introduced. I grew up at Tenth and Edgefield. And on that particular day, while Kathy was coming home with her family, I was at home. My mother was a nurse and would sometimes help people with minor medical procedures, and there was a lady at our house there to have an injection of some kind. I was watching TV, and all of a sudden, the TV went dead. The dog started running around from window to window to window. And with no air conditioning in those days, the curtains started moving like this. And when they did this, cold air came in. I remember that very well—cold air, the curtains, the dog.

All of a sudden, there was a feeling of panic in the house. The lady who was there to have her injection said, "That's so interesting. I didn't know that you had a train track nearby." And of course, we did not have a train track nearby. What we had was a tornado going overhead. And earlier today, I listened to the radio coverage from KLIF, and it almost begins immediately with, "Here we are at the intersection of Tenth and Edgefield." And I went, whoa, that was us right there at Tenth and Edgefield. We rushed to the front porch to see if we could see what that train sound was, and I just remember standing there, looking up, and seeing the big dark funnel almost directly overhead and bouncing around,



**Curious citizens pause along Live Oak Street in East Dallas to watch the progression of the tornado through West Dallas. The newly completed Republic Bank tower is the tallest building in the background.**

up and down, all up the street. All of a sudden, everything became chaos. Then it all goes black. I think I probably went into shock because I have a very vague recollection of my mom taking us to shelter somewhere in the house. And then, for years after that, I had a terrible phobia about tornados. I remember seeing the damage and being mystified because we were completely untouched while just within blocks, houses were blown apart. That is the totality of my story.

**MARK:** The tornado went through north Oak Cliff through what we call Winnetka Heights. It did some damage to a pharmacy, took the roof off. As it left Oak Cliff, it went into West Dallas. And this is when some of the most iconic images of the Dallas tornado were taken. People were getting on roofs, filming it

and taking photographs. As we go into West Dallas now, I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Martinez and let him give his account of what happened.

**JOSE:** I was about two blocks from where the tornado hit. I got out of work about 4:00 or 4:30 and saw the debris, and I asked the owner, I said, "What's that?" He said, "It's just paper." I had never seen a tornado in my life, but before I knew it, I could see the tornado and could hear it come down like a bomb. And then it went back up. I was not afraid because I had never seen one. I was just looking at it two blocks away. I could see it go down, and it rose up and moved towards the south where my family lived. I went over there later, and when I walked in the house, I saw a two-by-four stick-



**Dallas Police and other residents gather in front of Orozco's Grocery and Market on Singleton Boulevard in West Dallas. Panelist Jose Martinez had just gotten off work nearby.**

ing out of a wall about two feet. That's all that happened there, but the next street to us, a man ran into the garage at a filling station trying to get away from the tornado. He got killed. You could see there were no tops on the houses and see foundations and all that. And all the way to the Trinity River, everything was destroyed over there. I was in the National Guard, and they called us in. I was patrolling the Trinity River along Canada Drive. You could see butane tanks and everything floating down the river. It was all pretty scary, but at the time I saw it, I wasn't scared because I didn't know what it was.

**MARK:** It seems like the Dallas tornado is sometimes referred to as the Oak Cliff tornado. However, the most death and destruction happened in West Dallas and then Arlington Park and those neighborhoods around Love

Field. West Dallas was predominantly Hispanic American, African American, and some white, but it really was where the working class of Dallas lived. So, you had these houses that were probably not constructed very well that were just blown apart by this tornado.

I'm going to bring Jesus into the conversation to talk about media. You know, people think of storm chasing as a relatively new phenomenon, maybe in the last ten years or so, but that's pretty much what the media did in 1957. Maybe you can tie in the October 2019 tornado and the role of media in terms of reporting a tornado as it's happening and trying to get that message out to people. There were reports during the '57 tornado of people listening to KLIF as it was going through Dallas.



**In this photo taken from the roof of *The Dallas Morning News* building, the tornado begins its brief crossing over the Trinity River basin. The time of day, along with a rain free cloud base, enabled the Dallas tornado to become the most photographed and recorded storm at that time.**

**JESUS:** Right, when I first listened to the KLIF radio coverage, one of the things that was remarkable, if you compare the '57 tornado to the October 20th tornado last year, the real-time reporting was actually better on the radio in '57 because you had eyewitnesses across the city that were calling in and reporting versus if you were watching and keeping up with the October 20th tornado on television. What you were watching on that Sunday night was probably just the meteorologist saying, "Here's where we think a tornado is. It's moving in this direction. If you're here, you need to take cover." Whereas in 1957

we had reporters giving very accurate descriptions of what was going on. Now immediately after the tornados, that's where things are different now because we have people tweeting videos and sharing stuff on Facebook. In the aftermath, I think you're able to get more nowadays because there are so many different mediums. Another big difference is that the '57 tornado was a daytime tornado, so you were able to see it moving through town whereas the October 2019 tornado, because it was at night, the only videos that exist are where you can see it in a lightning flash.





**Wrecked and overturned cars, sheet metal and other debris in trees, and ruined buildings were just a few of the hallmarks left by the tornado as it churned through Dallas neighborhoods.**

**DAVID:** Listening to Jesus talk about the 2019 tornado, I would like to add that we have complementing roles. At the National Weather Service, our first priority is to shoot out those warnings. In our office, we have all four of the local stations on the TV on our wall. As soon as we issue a warning, live news breaks in, and we're watching the news and relying on the news reports and video. We're also watching Twitter. So, if we see video confirmation, we'll update the warning to a confirmed tornado on the ground. There are times when we're in communication on the phone with the NBC station. They might have a video up, and we'll say, "Hey, keep that video up. We need to see it." And they keep it going for us. So, there is definitely a complementary role between the media and the National Weather Service, especially in live scenarios like that.

One of the big differences between the 2019 tornado and the 1957 tornado is that the '57 tornado happened at 4:00 in the afternoon. It was a lone tornado, so you could see behind it. All these films and pictures, they're beautiful in my eyes because you can see a beautiful clear sky behind it. You just see the funnel. You can really see where the tornado is. From a scientific standpoint, you can't get any better than that if you're trying to make some sense of it. The October 2019 tornado, like Jesus said, provided opportunity for pictures and videos only during a lightning flash. That's what happens with nighttime tornados.

As far as damage, the 2019 tornado produced \$2 billion worth of insured losses. In 1957 dollars, that would be \$36.5 million. So, there was a lot of damage in the October tornado. One of the things that I'm most proud with the October tornado is that there were no deaths, thanks to advanced warnings, working with the media, getting the word out, and people taking shelter. Getting alerts on your phone is one of the biggest advancements that we've had. When I was

out doing storm surveys last October, most of the people I spoke with said they were either watching the Cowboys game when the news broke in or they got an alert on their phone.

**JESUS:** There are a few interesting and eerie similarities between the 1957 and the 2019 tornados in terms of stats. The '57 one was seventeen miles long, and the 2019 tornado was fifteen miles. So, they both traveled very long distances, and both were EF-3. As David said, there were no fatalities or serious injuries in 2019. I think what contributed to that was that, unlike the 4 P.M. tornado in 1957, this happened on a Sunday night when the Cowboys were playing in prime time. So, a lot of people were at home. And of course, people were informed. I reported on this for three days leading up to it, and then I'm still reporting on it now. I read the National Weather Service forecast discussions. Even twenty-four or thirty-six hours out, they were already saying the atmosphere was favorable for tornados. On Sunday morning, they were saying all modes of severe weather were possible. By Sunday night at 7 P.M., they issued a tornado watch for all of North Texas. That night, I had my computer and was updating my story. And as soon as that tornado watch went out, I alerted our social media team. We did a push alert to everyone on our app to keep people informed. A tornado watch means there's no confirmed tornado, but the atmosphere is favorable during the next couple of hours. So, two hours before a tornado touched down in Dallas, people knew that it was possible. I think that's probably one of the biggest differences between the ten fatalities in 1957 and zero fatalities last year. People were just informed.

**DAVID:** On that particular night in October 2019, we had three people on staff in our office at the National Weather Service. There were two storms, one going through Dallas/Fort Worth and another one that went to Midlothian. They were moving basically east to



west. I was talking with the radar operator. He had severe thunderstorm warnings out, watching for hail and wind. So, he goes down to look at the Midlothian storm, and then about two minutes later, he switches back to the Dallas storm and sees there's a tornado already on the ground. There were no precursors. There was no advance anything on the radar data. It basically went from severe thunderstorm to tornado in two minutes. So, he issued the Tornado Warning, and then he sees a confirmed tornado. We're starting to see debris on radar. And then he goes down to the Midlothian storm, and there's a new tornado there. So, we go from kind of a night of severe thunderstorms to all-out panic because we issued two tornado warnings, with one confirmed and moving straight through Dallas.

**JESUS:** On a similar note, I work Monday through Friday, but anytime there's a possibility of severe weather, I'll carry my laptop around in my car all day. By the end of that night in

October, we had dozens of reporters out all over the city trying to get reports of damage. *The Morning News* had normal staff that night, and then the next morning it was all hands on deck trying to find as many stories as we could. That night, as soon as the tornado passed through my area, my editor called me and said, "Where are you and where can you go?" I was in Richardson, and as soon as the storm passed, I was driving up and down 75. Just minutes after the Home Depot was demolished, I was there, trying to make it through Royal Lane, which was very badly hit. There were so many downed trees and power lines that I had to turn around. But for us, it went from one person updating online to dozens of reporters out all night and then the next morning—and for the next week—trying to do our best reporting.

**MARK:** I want to thank all my panelists. Thank you all so much for coming this year. I hope you enjoyed it. ■



## DEGOLYER LIBRARY

### SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

With strong collections of primary materials devoted to Texas and the West, the DeGolyer Library supports historical research and scholarship, not only on campus but beyond. Of special interest is the George W. Cook Dallas/Texas Image Collection, consisting of thousands of photographs, postcards, ephemera, and other rare materials. We welcome queries and visitors.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

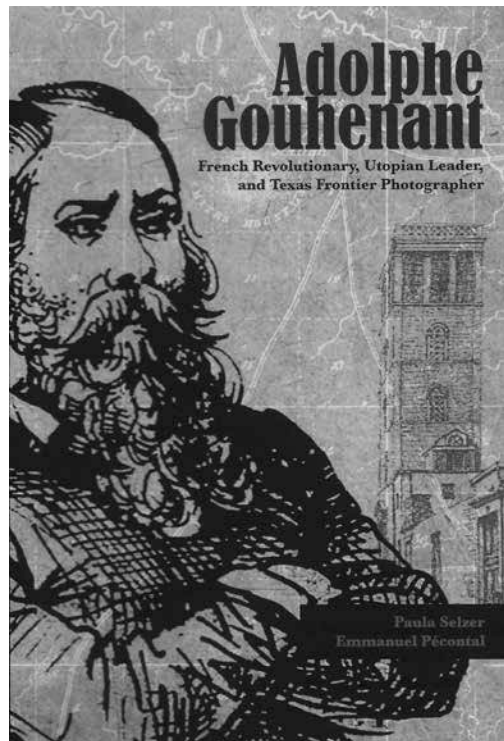
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**Paula Selzer and Emmanuel Pécontal, *Adolphe Gouhenant: French Revolutionary, Utopian Leader, and Texas Frontier Photographer* (#3 in the Texas Local History Series) (Denton, Texas, University of North Texas Press, 2019, 430 pp. \$34.95)**

Two well-matched authors shine the light of scholarship on “that Frenchman” Adolphe Gouhenant, who has long been a mysterious figure in the early history of Dallas/Fort Worth/Denton. Tantalizing glimpses of Gouhenant appeared in early sources: scapegoat for the failed Icarian venture on Denton Creek, dancing and fencing master for the officers at the Fort Worth military outpost, and charming host of the Arts Saloon in Dallas. Now we have Gouhenant’s full career (1804–1871) fleshed out by Paula Selzer and Emmanuel Pécontal.

After experiencing the nadir of his Texas career when he was expelled from the Utopian Icarian community on Denton Creek, Gouhenant took refuge at the Fort Worth military post, where he forged lasting friendships with the officers and their ladies. He owned property in both Fort Worth and Dallas, property that enmeshed him in endless litigation. One case, argued before the Texas Supreme Court, set precedent for Texas Homestead Law.

In Dallas, the irrepressible Frenchman established the notable Arts Saloon (not a drinking place but an art gallery and ballroom), which was the first cultural institution of the frontier village. Gouhenant was Dallas’s first adman, painting signs for businesses around the courthouse square. He was Dallas’s first naturalized citizen and was present to greet the La Reunionists when they arrived in 1855. An early student of Daguerre, Gouhenant produced photographs which give us a visual record of Dallas and her citizens. A long-time Mason, Gouhenant was an officer of the Tannehill Lodge and a respected friend of fellow Masons, the lawyers John McCoy, Nat Burford, and John Crockett.



When he left Dallas and moved to Pilot Point in 1859, “Doctor” Gouhenant practiced naturopathetic medicine. Finally, he became something of a geologist, a fossil expert. He was en route to Washington, D.C., to pursue this venture when he died in a train accident in 1871. Whatever his financial or personal setback, Gouhenant accepted the consequences of his perpetual risk-taking and he always bounced back.

Part of the problem of tracing Gouhenant (pronounced “Gounah” by Texans) is the twenty-four diverse spellings of his name in letters, newspapers, and court records. Paula Selzer, a descendant of Gouhenant, capably follows his activities in Texas, while Emmanuel Pécontal is able to translate the record of his early life in France. The seamless merger of the authors’ talents makes it difficult to determine which author is writing. Their extensive research, endnotes, bibliography, and index make this biography a valued contribution to North Texas history.

—*Susanne Starling*

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**James Pratt, *Sabotaged: Dreams of Utopia in Texas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020, 336 pp., \$35)**

James Pratt does a good job bringing a fascinating episode of local history to life, and it is high time we get to read about La Reunion as an adventure. The reader of history must always exercise a bit of caution when historic figures start engaging in dialogue and sharing their thoughts. How could the author know such things? The optimal answer is the author did such extensive research that the historical figures become knowable, and the enlightened author can make reasoned guesses about their thoughts and words. Pratt did his research, here and in Europe, and included the footnotes and bibliography to prove it.

Victor Considerant, the wealthy Frenchman and would-be empresario, led the colony with amazing ineptitude, and his record of failures easily inspires the question, “What was he thinking?” Pratt offers several ideas in answer to the question. Considerant was a man of talent and human

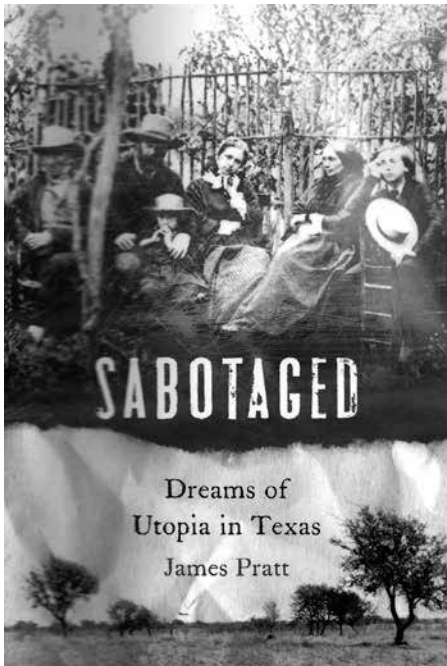
weaknesses. He was idealistic, driven to succeed, and a convincing writer. He was also a poor manager of money, people, and his own ambitions. He led a colony of utopian socialists who dreamed of sharing as equals in labors and rewards. While they walked to Dallas, he rode in a fine carriage. While they worked, he reclined in a hammock.

Considerant was an energetic promoter of the utopian philosophies that drove the group. We see him navigating difficult political challenges in both Europe and Austin, with varying success. The logistics of moving people and supplies to North Central Texas proved difficult. In the end, he returned unscathed to his chateau in France, where he hung the portrait of his late wife, which had travelled with him to Dallas and back. He inspires the reader’s sympathy, contempt, and confusion.

Other members of the colony are portrayed as much easier to like. Auguste Savardan and Francois Cantagrel worked hard to build the colony and make it productive. Pratt’s recitation of the work done by the residents in a single day is exhausting to read. It proves both the colonists’ devotion to their dream and Pratt’s devotion to detailed scholarship. All of the popular La Reunionists appear, including a young Julien Reverchon and his father Jacques Maximilien.

As an architect, James Pratt left his mark on Dallas in such building projects as the Quadrangle and the Apparel Mart. He contributed to innovative urban design and to publications such as *Prairie’s Yield* in 1962. As the restoration architect for the Old Red Courthouse, he based his architectural storytelling on careful research of the building’s history. That was completed in 2007, before his retirement. The readers of Dallas history are fortunate that he transferred his passion for research to La Reunion, and that his talent for working in stone translated so well to working in words. Mr. Pratt is no longer with us, having passed away in 2018, but he left us a good story to read.

—Evelyn Montgomery





# 22nd Annual LEGACIES Dallas History Conference

## Call for Proposals

Papers presented at the conference may focus on topics related to crime, law enforcement, legal proceedings, or protests, and might examine an incident, an individual, or a group.

All papers must be based on original research and must not have been presented or published elsewhere. The best papers will be published in a subsequent issue of *Legacies: A History Journal for Dallas and North Central Texas*. Those interested in presenting papers should submit a brief summary of their proposal by JULY 31, 2020, to “Dallas History Conference, 1515 S. Harwood St., Dallas, TX 75215,” or by email to LegaciesDHC@gmail.com. Those selected will be notified by August 31, 2020.

The organizers of the 22nd Annual *Legacies* Dallas History Conference welcome proposals from both professional and lay historians on topics related to the theme:

### *Law & Disorder in Dallas Revisited*

Throughout its history, Dallas has experienced periods when outlaws, criminals, and even protests for change presented special challenges, such as:

- The 1870s, when the coming of the railroads turned Dallas into a boomtown, brought a huge increase in saloons, gambling, and related crimes associated with those vices.
- The early 1900s saw concern over red-light districts, with prostitution and drugs.
- The 1920s were the era of bootleg whiskey and the KKK, while the 1930s saw Bonnie and Clyde grab the headlines.
- Organized crime, including gambling, flourished for a time in the 1940s.
- In the post-World War II era, civil rights protests pushed for an end to racial segregation of African Americans, fair treatment for Mexican-Americans, and equality for the LGBT community.

The 22nd Annual *Legacies* History Conference will be held on Saturday, January 30, 2021, at the Old Red Museum of Dallas County History & Culture. The conference is jointly sponsored by sixteen organizations: AD EX (The Architecture and Design Exchange) Dallas County Historical Commission Dallas Genealogical Society Dallas Heritage Village Dallas Historical Society Dallas History & Archives Division of the Dallas Public Library Dallas Municipal Archives Dallas Woman’s Forum, DeGolyer Library at SMU Historic Aldredge House Irving Archives and Museum Old Red Museum of Dallas County History & Culture Park Cities Historic and Preservation Society Preservation Dallas The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies at SMU with additional support from the Texas State Historical Association and the University of Texas at Arlington Library.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Peter Kurilecz** is a native Dallasite. He is a graduate of Vanderbilt University and the University of Texas at Arlington. His interest in photographs as documentary evidence of events grew out of his work as the photographic archivist in the 1980s for the Dallas Public Library. He is a records and information management professional currently serving as the Records Management Officer for the City of Dallas.



**Misty Maberry** is a Certified Archivist in the Dallas History & Archives Division of the Dallas Public Library. She received a Master's Degree in Library Science from the University of North Texas along with a Certificate in Digital Content Management. It was Misty's undergraduate studies, which had a focus in photography, that piqued her interest in the need for preservation and digitization of historic photographs. She holds a BA from the University of Texas at Dallas, and a Certificate in Professional Photographic Practice from University of the Arts London.



**Brandon Murray** is a Certified Archivist in the Dallas History & Archives Division of the Dallas Public Library. Born in El Paso but raised in Fort Worth, he has a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of Texas at Arlington and a Master of Library Information Science degree from the University of North Texas. Brandon's previous experience includes over two years of digitization and cataloging of special collection items for the Norwick Center for Digital Solutions at Southern Methodist University. On behalf of the Dallas Public Library, Brandon writes a series of Dallas history blog articles for *D Magazine* called "Tales From the Dallas History Archives," about items from the library's historical photograph collection.



**Rusty Williams** is an award-winning writer and speaker. His *Red River Bridge War: A Texas-Oklahoma Border Battle* was named "Best Book of Oklahoma History, 2016" by the Oklahoma Historical Society. *My Old Confederate Home—A Respectable Place for Civil War Veterans* won the 2011 Douglas S. Freeman Award for Southern History. Also by Rusty: *Historic Photos of Dallas in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s*, essays and captions. Rusty is a regular speaker at meetings of historical groups, civic organizations, and book clubs. He is a former journalist and lives in Dallas. His article "Deadly Dallas Streets" was published in the spring 2018 issue of *Legacies*.

## BOOK REVIEWERS

**Evelyn Montgomery** is Book Review Editor for *Legacies*. She is currently serving as Director of the Old Red Museum of Dallas County History & Culture . . . **Susanne Starling** is a native Texan who earned her M.A. from UNT and taught for many years at Eastfield Community College. She is co-author of a history of Mesquite entitled *A Stake in the Prairie* and author of a biography of early Texas surveyor Warren A. Ferris. The biography, *Land Is the Cry!*, was much hailed by Texas surveyors who twice invited her to be keynote speaker at their state conventions. Her most recent article for *Legacies* was "The Hedgcoxe War or the Peters Colony Rebellion" for the spring 2016 issue.

# Dallas THEN & NOW



## **Turtle Creek Pumping Station**

The Turtle Creek Pumping Station in Oak Lawn was erected between 1908-09 as a downstream pumping facility for Trinity River water flowing southward from Record Crossing and Bachman Reservoir. Within the lower levels of the Turtle Creek station, huge steam boilers powered engines that pumped untreated water to Dallas customers through two large mains. A sediment filtration plant (seen at left in top photo ) joined the pumping station in 1913.

The imposing pumping facility, located on high ground to protect it from periodic Trinity River floods, served until 1930, after which it was used as a warehouse and repair facility by the water department. The old filtration plant was demolished for the construction of Dal-Hi (P.C. Cobb) Stadium in 1940. Part of the former pump building was sliced off by a widening of Harry Hines Boulevard in 1954. After years of neglect, a new purpose for the deteriorating facility was found in 1988 when it was converted into the Sammons Center for the Arts. The cavernous former pump room is now Meadows Hall, a rehearsal and performance venue.

—Mark Rice









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