

The Day a Texas School Exploded, and a Generation Died



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The school at New London, Texas, before the 1937 explosion

FAITH LAPIDUS: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Faith Lapidus.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise. This week on our program, we tell you about the seventy-fifth anniversary of a tragedy in Texas. It led to new safety requirements for natural gas around the world. Yet the tragedy itself is not very well remembered today. A gas explosion at a school killed nearly three hundred children and adults.

And, later, we hear about a group that provides jobs through the Internet for people in the some of the world's poorest places.

(MUSIC)



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FAITH LAPIDUS: People in East Texas call March eighteenth, nineteen thirty-seven, the day a generation died. This week, people in New London and surrounding communities are honoring the victims of that day.

Seventy-five years ago, the community of New London had one of the wealthiest school systems in the country. That was because oil had recently been discovered in the area. People in the community were proud of their newly built school.

It cost one million dollars. The building had separate areas for the lower grades and for a high school. London High School -- that was its name -- was for students in grades five through eleven.

School officials had decided to heat the new school with natural gas. At that time oil companies considered it waste gas. It came out of the ground when they drilled for oil.

Oil companies burned it off into the atmosphere. But people were allowed to tap into pipelines carrying the waste gas and use it for fuel in homes and buildings. By using the free gas, the school was able to save about three hundred dollars a month in heating costs.

Miles Toler is the director of the local museum.

MILES TOLER: "You get the mindset of people who, even though you were a very rich school district, we're in the thirties, we've just come out of the Depression and we're saving money any way we can."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: On the afternoon of March eighteenth, nineteen thirty-seven, students in the lower grades had already been dismissed. The high school students were nearly finished for the day.

London High School had an estimated eight hundred fifty students. Many of them were preparing for a big sports event and were not in the building. Several parents had gathered in a nearby building for a meeting.

At three-seventeen that afternoon, a machine shop teacher turned on a piece of electrical equipment, causing a spark. That spark ignited gas that had been leaking from the school's pipeline. No one knew about the leak because the gas had no smell.

The explosion that followed blew the roof off the school. Miles Toler says the roof crushed the front of the building as it crashed back to the ground.

MILES TOLER: "The blast literally eliminates the front half of the school."

Mr. Toler says there were about five hundred students in the building, in addition to teachers and visitors, at the time of the explosion. There are different estimates of the number of people killed. He says the museum has been able to confirm the deaths of two hundred ninety-three children, teachers and visitors.

In the hours that followed, thousands of people came to the school from all around. They came to search for their children and to help in the rescue effort. Today people on YouTube can watch an old newsreel report about the explosion.

ANNOUNCER (UNIVERSAL NEWSREEL): "There was no warning. Before the eyes of persons in the vicinity -- including scores of parents assembled for a meeting in a nearby building -- the schoolhouse, one of the finest rural structures in the country, suddenly burst asunder and collapsed. In the remaining hours of daylight and the through the long, terrible night, the scenes of the disaster were indescribable, harrowing. A wild confusion of feverish rescue work by floodlights with their gruesome, ghostly shadows, and everywhere, sobbing, hysterical parents."



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A nurse cares for a young victim

FAITH LAPIDUS: News of the explosion spread across the country and throughout the world. In part that was because of a young reporter named Walter Cronkite. He was working for United Press in Dallas, Texas, at the time. He quickly traveled to the school, two hours away, and began reporting on the explosion. It was his first major story.

Walter Cronkite went on to cover wars and other major events. He became the nation's leading nightly news anchorman. But he would later write that nothing could have prepared him for what he witnessed that day in New London, and no other story ever equaled it.

Several lawsuits were brought after the explosion. However, no one was found legally responsible for the accident.

But one of the most important results of the disaster was the passage of a new state law in Texas. It required gas suppliers to add an odor to natural gas so people would know if there was a leak. That requirement was quickly adopted throughout the country and around the world.

Today millions of people recognize the danger of a gas leak when they smell an odor like rotten eggs.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Miles Toler at the museum in New London says classes restarted within two to three weeks of the explosion.

MILES TOLER: "I don't know how you walk past it where everybody was killed in the explosion, but you do and you go to the gym and other buildings on the campus and you finish the school year out."

Mr. Toler was born two years after the explosion. He says the community had an extremely difficult time dealing with the tragedy. He says no one ever discussed it while he was growing up and attending the very same school.

Local citizens rebuilt the school over the next two years, replacing the natural gas with steam heat. And in nineteen thirty-nine a large stone memorial was placed nearby. But Mr. Toler says the first memorial gathering was not held until nineteen seventy-seven.

MILES TOLER: "So there's a forty-year span that nobody talks about anything that went on."

He believes the people of the rural community just could not deal with so great a loss.

MILES TOLER: "Some lost as many as three kids, some lost the only children they had, and, you know, it's one of those things, if you don't talk about it, maybe it's going to go away. Of course, we know it doesn't."

FAITH LAPIDUS: The museum opened across the street from the school campus in nineteen ninety-eight. Mr. Toler says people donated things their families had saved, including clothing that their surviving children were wearing that day. Other items include telegrams of sympathy sent from throughout the world. There are twenty-five cards that students in Switzerland sent at the time of the explosion. And there is even a telegram sent by Adolf Hitler, then the chancellor of Germany.

Today, Mr. Toler says more than two thousand people visit the London Museum each year.

MILES TOLER: "A lot of students come through with field trips so that they can learn about the explosion, about the fact that natural gas has a smell to it because of the explosion at London."

The school in East Texas still operates. In nineteen sixty-six the name was changed to West Rusk County Consolidated High School.

(MUSIC)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The State Department in Washington has recognized the work of a nongovernmental organization called Samasource. Samasource connects workers to jobs through the Internet. The group received an Innovation Award for the Empowerment of Women and Girls.

Its founder, Leila Janah, says helping people get jobs is a better way to end poverty than simply giving them money as charity.

LEILA JANAH: "I really don't like charity. I think charity does a disservice to the people that it tries to help."

Samasource uses the Internet to employ hundreds of people living in poverty around the world.

Ms. Janah graduated from Harvard University. She has spent much of the past ten years working in development and visiting poor countries.

FAITH LAPIDUS: She was seventeen when she made her first trip to Ghana. She says she was surprised to discover that many of the poor children she met were smart and spoke English.

LEILA JANAH: "I really flipped my understanding of economic development and poverty on its head and I realized that we don't live in a global meritocracy."

In a meritocracy, people are recognized and rewarded with advancement based on their skills.

The idea for Samasource was born when Ms. Janah was working for a management firm. She visited an outsourcing center in India. If people could use the Internet to work for that company, she thought, so could others living in rural areas.

Samasource has its headquarters in San Francisco, California. It negotiates contracts for projects with big technical organizations. Then it breaks down large projects into "microwork." This can include creating content for websites and

working with data. Samasource workers can complete this work anywhere they have a computer and an Internet connection.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Samasource began in two thousand eight. It works with sixteen work centers in Africa, South Asia and Haiti. Ms. Janah says Samasource has paid more than one million dollars to more than one thousand five hundred people, many of them women.

She says violence against women often results from their inability to earn an independent income. But when women are given work with computers, she says, they are helped not just financially.

LEILA JANAHA: "They start getting respected for their brains rather than their bodies."

Some critics question the idea of sending work outside the country. The Great Recession increased the number of Americans living in poverty. Ms. Janah says Samasource is looking for ways to use its technology to help them. But she says anti-poverty efforts need a more globalized point of view.

LEILA JANAHA: "I think it's important to remember that a person is a person, whether it's a poor person in Bangladesh or a poor person in rural Mississippi. Each deserves our consideration."

(MUSIC)

FAITH LAPIDUS: Our program was written and produced by Brianna Blake. We also had reporting by Monaliza Noormohammadi. I'm Faith Lapidus.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise. You can find videos about the New London school explosion on our website, voaspecialenglish.com. You can also find transcripts and MP3s of our programs, along with podcasts and activities for learning English. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.