

The Texas City Disaster – April 16 & 17, 1947



The morning of April 16, 1947 can still be remembered by many of the citizens of Texas City. This was a morning that many must have thought was the end of the world, and for some people it did become the end of their world. The day started as a bright, clear spring morning. A ship in the Texas City harbor, the Grand Camp, bearing a cargo of ammonium nitrate fertilizer destined for war torn Europe, caught fire. The fire department was on the scene helping to put out the fire, and a crowd

of people (many children) had gathered to watch the firefighters. The bright orange color that came out of the black smoke seemed to catch everyone's attention. The crowd must not have known that ammonium nitrate is highly explosive or they didn't know what was in the cargo hold of the ship. The standard plan for towing a dangerously burning ship from the harbor was not implemented until it was too late, and the tugboat didn't arrive in time to prevent what happened next. A little after 9:00 a.m. the Texas City Disaster, as it is often referred to, happened as the Grand Camp exploded. A great column of smoke shot up an estimated two thousand feet, followed in about ten seconds by another, and even more violent shockwave. Within moments of the second blast, the Monsanto Chemical Plant was in flames that resulted from broken lines and shattered containers. As entire buildings collapsed, trapping people inside, fires quickly spread to the refineries that made up the Texas City industrial complex.

Another catastrophic event happened when a miniature tidal wave resulted when the water from the bay, which had been driven out by the explosion, rushed in over the docks and continued as far inland as one hundred and fifty feet, sweeping everything in its path with it. All day long the work of caring for the injured and fighting the fires was underway. By nightfall, the town was filled with rescue workers, and ambulances had been making repeated trips to area hospitals.



Darkness did not stop the efforts to find those who were still trapped in the wreckage. Throughout the night, fear mounted because another firefighter, the High Flyer, which was also loaded with ammonium nitrate as well as sulfur, had also been burning all day. Tugs had tried in vain to tow her out of the ruined harbor. At 1:00 a.m. on April 17, everyone was ordered away from the area. At 1:10 a.m. the High Flyer exploded in the most violent of all the blasts, taking with her another ship, the Wilson B. Keene. It also destroyed a concrete warehouse and a grain elevator and triggered even more fires. Almost the entire fire department had been lost in the first

Text written by: Susie Moncla

Pictures provided by: Moore Memorial Library

explosion, along with plant workers, dockworkers, school children, and other bystanders. Windows rattled in Baytown and a fine mist of black oil rained in Galveston.

The losses from the disaster were unprecedented. Nearly 600 deaths in a town of about 16,000 is a terrible toll. It is impossible to arrive at an exact figure because many bodies were never recovered. No one in the city was unaffected by the explosions and fires. Not a single family could be found that didn't suffer either a death, an injury, or severe damage to a house or business.

A full week passed before the last of the fires was extinguished, and a month had gone by before the last body was pulled from the tons of rubble. The very process of identifying the dead was complicated because often a person disappeared without a trace. Moreover, some people with no permanent ties to Texas City simply picked up their families and left town. Occasionally relatives came in, located a body and unceremoniously took it away for burial elsewhere. These circumstances, plus the condition of some of the bodies, made the task enormous.



At last, it was done, leaving the Memorial Cemetery on Loop 197 North as a mute testimony to the 63 unidentified dead who are buried in numbered graves on land designated by the city for that purpose. On June 22, 1947, in donated cypress caskets and with simple services conducted by religious leaders of all faiths, the bodies were laid to rest. Members of veterans' organizations, labor unions, and volunteer firemen served as pallbearers.

Dreadful as the disaster was, it brought the people of Texas City together as nothing else had ever done. Those that remained were determined to rebuild again, and all of the industries that were damaged, stayed and rebuilt. It must be remembered that the disaster was not caused by an industrial accident, but one caused by a ship in port that exploded. The industries were as much a victim as any individual.

The Texas City Terminal Railway (TCT), for example, in the twinkling of an eye, saw all of its port, most of its railroad and much of its warehousing destroyed. Forty-six of its employees were killed, including President H.J. Mikeska, and 125 employees were injured. The indomitable spirit, not only of TCT personnel, but of all those plant employees and citizens of the area, were not to be denied and the world marveled at the will of this town.

The mayor, Curtis Trahan, and the leaders of its two hardest hit industries, Edgar M. Queeney of Monsanto and W.H. Swede Sandburg of TCT stated without hesitation We will rebuild and let there be no mistake, we will be bigger and better and safer. Much has been written of this darkest period of our history.



Text written by: Susie Moncla

Pictures provided by: Moore Memorial Library

Our dead will not be forgotten, nor will the valor, optimism, and superhuman efforts of the survivors to clear away the destruction and rebuild from the shattered ruins.

Memorial Park and Cemetery



Memorial Park and Cemetery (Loop 197 North and 29th Street) is the burial site for the unidentified dead from the 1947 explosion. The Park, dedicated in the 1980s, represents many years of effort on the part of Texas City citizens to create a lasting and meaningful homage to those who have paid with their lives for the freedom and security of others. There is of course a special emphasis on unnamed victims of the 1947 Disaster.

Located near the outskirts of present-day Texas City, Memorial Park and Cemetery is a beautifully designed tribute to some of the most painful, but ultimately triumphant days in the history of Texas City. The Obelisk to War and Peace Monument I commemorates employees killed in the line of duty and soldiers from Texas City who have given their lives to their country in this century's wars. The Information Center contains a pictorial description of the events on April 16th and 17th of 1947.

The Angel of Peace fountain sits in the cemetery keeping constant vigil over the unknown dead from 1947. The pavilions at either end of the park offer visitors a secluded spot to sit and reflect.

The employees of the Texas City Railroad Terminal dedicated this park in 1987 on the fortieth anniversary of the Disaster. The propeller is from the ship HIGH FLYER and is located at Loop 197 South at Dock Road.

Anchor Park, located at the entrance to the Texas City Dike, the anchor of the GRAND CAMP sits near the site where Texas City had its beginnings as a reminder that even a disaster such as the one in 1947 cannot stop the growth of the city.

