

Remembering September 21, 1951

In light of the recent events in New York City, Arlington, and western Pennsylvania, the Brighton Disaster of 1951 pales in comparison but the sudden and terrifying sight of houses exploding was Brighton's experience with horror. Friday, September 21, 2001, is the fiftieth anniversary of the gas explosions that caused three deaths and extensive property damage.

Friday, September 21, 1951, was unseasonably warm. Children were in school, fathers at work, mothers gardening and running errands. The exception was Our Lady of Lourdes School where classes were suspended for a teachers' workshop.

Workmen near the corner of Monroe Avenue and Winton Road were making road repairs. The open vault on the northwest corner of the intersection contained a gas-regulating device which controlled the amount of gas released into the homes in the Meadowbrook, Roselawn, and Bel-Air neighborhoods. Somehow the control valve and its back up regulator malfunctioned and, at 1:20 p.m., the first explosion occurred. According to the 1952 Fire Underwriters' report, the "...explosions were the result of uncontrolled fuel gas accidentally released into a distribution system at a pressure far in excess of that which could be safely accommodated by the service accessories and domestic appliances."

Firefighters at the Twelve Corners station began receiving calls from homeowners describing stove pilot lights shooting up to the ceiling. As the explosions continued, firefighters and R.G & E. workers went door to door turning off gas service. Civil Defense personnel established a command post at the Brighton Town Hall, then located at 1795 Monroe Avenue. School children were rushed to the playgrounds to await pick-up by parents.

Nineteen houses were completely destroyed by the internal explosions and fire which badly damaged twenty-five neighboring structures. Billy and Mary Ann Maas of Buckland Avenue died in their home. Louise Meyers of Antlers Drive succumbed to a heart attack while being evacuated. Ten persons were injured.

The Gullen house on Buckland was the first to explode. Mrs. Gullen ran out of a Twelve Corners hair salon in mid-permanent to find her Buckland Avenue house destroyed. Her son, Martin, a student at Our Lady of Lourdes School, was at the movies in downtown Rochester. He discovered the chaos when the bus was forced to let him off several stops before his street. Neighbors ran to him and hugged him because they thought he was in the house when it blew up. Virginia Oberkoetter, also of Buckland Avenue, sent her children and their playmates to hold hands around the large tree in their front yard while she ran to a neighbor's for help.

The smoke from Meadowbrook, the Kodak Employees' Realty Corporation development, was visible from Kodak Office in downtown Rochester. Frantic men were confronted by road blocks when they tried to reach their homes.

Fifty years later, there's little physical evidence of that terrible Friday in Brighton. New houses have replaced the burned and blown-up structures. The community established a memorial fund to honor the Maas children. What's left of the Brighton Disaster exists in yellowed newspaper clippings and the memories of residents who pause every September 21 to remember.

Mary Jo Lanphear
Town of Brighton Historian
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