

Climax Fuse Company Explosion 1905

Not all history is pleasant history. But the Avon Historical Society's mission statement is toidentify, collect, preserve, utilize, publish, display, and promote the history and heritage of Avon. Therefore, a respectful recounting of this Avon event, whose 107th anniversary is on September 13th, seems a fitting tribute to the fifteen lives lost on that day.

The Climax Fuse Company formerly existed at the site of the present day Town Hall complex. The company manufactured 'safety fuses' which is an ironic product name in respect to the tragic event that occurred. Based on the historic Hartford Courant articles, a horrific scene was beheld that day when according to reports, a worker was in the process of unclogging a spool with a hot iron and theoretically a section of fuse was not fully coated in protective material. This explanation was speculative at best but without modern day forensic expertise, this was the working theory of the time. In any event, the situation was a disaster just waiting to happen.

In some historic photographs, one can view what the original buildings looked like before the explosion and what was left of them afterwards....only a stone wall shell with incinerated remains inside of the building where the blast took place. Another photo shows spools with safety fuse wound on them and very shabby window coverings and some photos show workers playing cards or posing. In the newspaper accounts, there is mention of powder dust that was supposed to be swept four times a day and also of 'oil soaked' asphalt floors. So this was obviously a recipe for calamity. There was an attempt to have a fire suppression 'system' in the form of a 500 gallon water tank, but this was useless in the fire as the cables that operated it were immediately burned.

Witnesses nearby didn't hear a tremendous blast, but rather a more muffled sound. Some works who were in that building though were literally blown out the windows! There is graphic description of a 'sheet of flame' and the terrible burn injuries to the works which will not be readdressed here out of respect for the families. In all, fifteen workers died either instantly, or as a result of their severe injuries. To make the story even sadder is the fact that some victims were young teens that used to work for the company before heading off to school. There were not child labor laws at that time and in some photographs you can see how young these children were.

So what is the benefit in retelling such a negative and depressing story? First, it is a piece of Avon's history that distasteful or not, the story contributes to the collective fabric of our town's heritage.

Reading those historic accounts sheds light not only on the loss of life, but on the heroism shown that day. Our town did not have a Fire Department of its' own but assistance came from the nearby Canton Fire Department. Although their efforts to extinguish the blaze were futile, they came to help in any way they could. Doctors and nurses worked tirelessly to try and save the lives of survivors. Some nurses came from Hartford and a doctor opened his private resident to care for victims. People came from all around the area when news spread of this event both to offer to help and to see for themselves the tragedy that unfolded. The police, though not specifically mentioned, must have played an important role in crowd control and security and local business helped with food and supplies.

The take away from this is not only the death but the life...this tragedy led to better building construction, improved work safety, better fire suppression and better worker's insurance. Those victims who did carry some life insurance had very paltry death benefits paid to beneficiaries. In 1097 Ensign Bickford became the new owners of the company and land was donated by them at 25 Darling Drive for our present day Fire Department headquarters which was started in 1943.

Unfortunately there will continue to be disasters, explosions, destruction and deaths. But out of the ashes rise the best qualities of human nature....compassion, empathy, selflessness, strength and courage. We saw these qualities in our residents after 9/11/2001 and we know from historic sources, these qualities were seen in our residents on that fateful day in September of 1905. Let us not forget the fifteen lives that were lost and we can all share our community pride in what made Avon a special place then and now...it's heart.