

## Another Generation Remembers

By Donna Pauline Cox Beveridge \*

**NEW LONDON SCHOOL EXPLOSION.** In 1937 New London, Texas, in northwest Rusk County, had one of the richest rural school districts in the United States. Community residents in the **East Texas oilfield** were proud of the beautiful, modern, steel-framed, E-shaped school building. On March 18 students prepared for the next day's Interscholastic Meet in Henderson. At the gymnasium, the PTA met. At 3:05 P.M. Lemmie R. Butler, instructor of manual training, turned on a sanding machine in an area which, unknown to him, was filled with a mixture of gas and air. The switch ignited the mixture and carried the flame into a nearly closed space beneath the building, 253 feet long and fifty-six feet wide. Immediately the building seemed to lift in the air and then smashed to the ground. Walls collapsed. The roof fell in and buried its victims in a mass of brick, steel, and concrete debris. The explosion was heard four miles away and it hurled a two-ton concrete slab 200 feet away, where it crushed a car. The tragedy is etched into my memory forever even though I was not born until eight and a half years after that awful day. 298 souls lost their lives while 130 were injured. Hundreds of volunteers rushed to help at the scene.

My dad, **Melvin F. Cox** of Overton, TX, was only twenty years old at the time of the tragedy. My mother, Zelma Sheffield, living with her parents, had celebrated her fourteenth birthday only four months earlier. They were both so young and impressionable when the sorrow hit. Dad told of working at the skating rink in Overton where he acted as floor disciplinarian. He was also an instructor teaching children to skate. He said he remembered many of the boys and girls laughing and skating around the rink. He was heartbroken that many of them had perished in the explosion. Later he could hardly tell the story of how the rink had been a place to put some of the bodies for identification. He and his brothers, **Odis** and **Lee**, along with their dad **Marcus "Carrol" Cox**, helped transport bodies to temporary morgue locations and the injured to area hospitals. Mom said she remembers being with her parents, Eugene and Dorothy Sheffield, at the temporary morgue of the old skating rink. Granddaddy was helping friends find their children. He would not allow the women inside. The site was simply too painful. Granddaddy wept openly with the scars of his heart seemingly ripped open when the story was retold years later. The following year, 1938, Mom's family (the Sheffield's) traded their Gulf Oil lease house in Kilgore, with the Grigg family living in a Gulf Oil lease house near New London. They had lost their son Edwin Grigg in the explosion and could no longer bear living there. So my grandfather in the purest act of loving friendship, traded company lease homes with the grieving family allowing the Grigg's to live in Kilgore. As a result, Mom finished her high school years and graduated from New London in 1940.

Mom, Zelma Sheffield Cox, continued to stay in touch with her classmates and enjoyed going to the reunions. Mom left this life in January, 2011. But until then, each March 18<sup>th</sup> she recalled the grief and sorrow of that dreadful day. We always comforted her as best we could comfort her. She had pictures enlarged of the victims, all of them, and created a *commemorative* album to honor those who died so early in their lives and early in her life.

My older sister Ladean, my little brother Melvin and I grew up knowing the story of the day that broke the hearts of so many. We *have* taken family pilgrimages to Pleasant Hill cemetery where the grave of one then another would bring back sad memories. We have visited the monument many times reading names. Each time, remembering the day of pain that shook the world of our uncles, parents and grandparents.

I remember being in junior high science class in Houston when my teacher was discussing the "odor" of natural gas. He explained that the odor was manmade and by law must be added. He was about to change the subject when I raised my hand. I astonished the teacher and the class as I began to tell the story of how the gas leak at London school caused the odorless natural gas to go up three stories into the walls undetected. Then an ignition in the basement exploded the building upward. This caused many to be killed being crushed when it fell. This was the *event* that caused the laws to be passed making the "odor" required for natural gas. I remember also telling them to be sure and visit the monument when they go through East Texas. In my 14 yr old mind, I felt it was something everyone should know and I was astonished that so many of them had *never* heard it until my generation told them.

Yes, I grew up with the story. The story of loving people who reached out to help others in the depths of grief. London High School is part of me. It is as much a part of who I am as the oil patch and the rich piney woods of our *beloved* East Texas. Another generation continues to tell the story and continues to be sure the compassion of my Cox / Sheffield family will always be remembered.

**\*Gr gr granddaughter of Daniel and Amy Cox. - Gr granddaughter of Joseph and Mary Cox  
- Granddaughter of Marcus and Gertie Cox – Daughter of Melvin and Zelma Cox**