



An American Holocaust: The Story of Lataine's Ring

Kerry L. Barger

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On March 18, 1937 one of the most modern public school buildings in the U.S. exploded in a rural community decimating the student population and destroying innocent lives. Considered the worst public school disaster in U.S. history, controversial theories surrounding this tragedy are still debated to this day. The event sparked changes that soon reverberated around the world and continue to affect each of us in our homes, schools, businesses and places of worship. "An American Holocaust" is a story that begins with the giving of a child's Christmas gift in 1936. The explosion took place at the London School in New London, Texas. This story relays more than simple facts. It is a personal account of unprepared loss and shattered dreams, followed by unfathomable grief. It describes the feelings of those who died in their innocence and of those who witnessed horror and lived through the aftermath. An unresolved silence persisted for forty years among the entire community of scarred survivors. For those who spoke out, their stories have been told and re-told for over three quarters of a century, but most people have never heard them. Although the innocent still suffer from the ignorance and indifference of a few, especially those we should be able to trust with the lives and safety of our children, this is also a story of hope. Countless lives have been saved by bold actions that were taken in the wake of this unanticipated sacrifice of so many children who were literally consumed by fire on the day a generation died in Texas. The following is an editorial review by John E. Roper, The US Review of Books: "I remember being thrown up in the air like a toy... I keep turning and spinning. Then darkness." The attack on the World Trade Center in New York claimed almost 3,000 lives and changed America forever. A little-remembered explosion of a school in the 1930s resulted in just over 300 deaths, yet it, too, had a tremendous impact on society. Barger revives the story of one of the nation's most poignant tragedies in his highly-moving tale. The school in New London was considered one of the most modern facilities in the state for the time period, and the residents of the small East Texas town were extremely proud of it. Like in many of the small towns near the oil fields, school officials had decided to tap into the natural gas lines to cut heating costs at the facility. What they never realized was just how dangerous that practice could be. On March 18, 1937, a spark in the wood shop ignited the cloud of invisible and odorless gas that had slowly permeated the school. The resulting explosion killed children and teachers alike, littering the area with body parts and completely devastating a community. The catastrophe led Texas to mandate the inclusion of an additive to natural gas that would enable people to smell it. The nation and then much of the world soon followed suit. Barger's book follows the lives of several families affected by the tragedy, including his own. By giving the reader glimpses into the hopes and dreams of individuals like his cousin, Lataine, he builds a literary memorial to those who lost so much to make others safe in the future... it stands as a much-needed reminder of an event that should never be forgotten. www.theUSreview.com (Notice to literary agents, publishers and producers: all applicable rights are open for bid. Contact information is available at the end of the book.)

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From Reader Review An American Holocaust: The Story of Lataine's Ring for online ebook

Sue says

I won this book from here on Goodreads and was excited when I recieved it. I glanced through it prior to reading it and thought it was going to be a rather bland tale about the explosion at the school. Instead it surprised me by being a very touching story.

In it the author writes about this tragedy as told by her grandmother who was there when it happened. She gives us a look into the past as only a survivor can.

I recommend this book to anyone who likes to read about true history. I have 4 friends in line to read it already!

Thanks for a great book!

Amanda says

I read the blurb on this book and thought the story sounded interesting. While I still think the story is interesting, I was not at all impressed with the writing. The author spent too much space on other national and world events that were happening at the time of the story without tying them to the events of this story. I can understand setting the stage, but there was not an effort to tie them together.

The story was told in a documentary style. I don't have a problem with this style, but it kept me from connecting with any of the characters very well.

I made it halfway through the book but probably won't finish it.

Clifton McLendon says

A Touching Story, Well-told!

Kerry Barger writes a poignant human-interest story without making it mawkish, larding it with enough facts to qualify it as a scholarly article (especially so when the bibliography is considered!).

Judie Dooley says

I really enjoyed this book. Kerry Barger did a great job of telling this horrendous story. I liked the way way he followed a number of families telling how they survived (or didn't survive) the tragedy. I find it hard to believe that in my 71 yrs I never heard about this fire. If that were to happen now it would immediately be on the new across the country. I will be waiting for March 18th to see if there is any mention of it on the news. Kerry you did a great job of bringing this to the public . Makes me think about the fact that what "is new way of doing something is not always the best." looking forward to reading your other books.

Shan Walker says

. As a teacher, I am drawn to tragedies in schools. This one was especially personal as my dad grew up near where this happened and remembered it. There is a better book, but this one is worth your time.

Judith Copeland says

Heartbreaking

Just finished this thoughtfully written story. I live near the area and I wanted to learn more about what actually happened on that fateful day. This author did a good job of explaining the event, while humanizing it, so we could truly have a better perspective of what took place. I'd definitely recommend reading it for yourself and pay no attention to the couple of negative reviews that appear to be written because of a disagreement with the author over the title and the use of the word 'holocaust'. In my humble opinion, that shouldn't detract from reviewing the actual book, simply out of respect for the victims of this tragedy.

Kerry Barger says

"I remember being thrown up in the air like a toy... I keep turning and spinning. Then darkness."

The attack on the World Trade Center in New York claimed almost 3,000 lives and changed America forever. A little-remembered explosion of a school in the 1930s resulted in just over 300 deaths, yet it, too, had a tremendous impact on society. Barger revives the story of one of the nation's most poignant tragedies in his highly-moving tale.

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Barger's book follows the lives of several families affected by the tragedy, including his own. By giving the reader glimpses into the hopes and dreams of individuals like his cousin, Lataine, he builds a literary memorial to those who lost so much to make others safe in the future... an event that should never be forgotten. --John E. Roper, THE US REVIEW

John Roper is a freelance writer who has written articles for "The Arizona Republic", "The Daily Oklahoman" and several other newspapers and digital platforms over the past two decades. His play, "When I Was Five", has been produced in three countries. He received his degree in English literature from the

University of Central Oklahoma in 1985.

You can see John's editorial review of "An American Holocaust: The Story of Lataine's Ring" in 'The U.S. Review of Books' at <http://www.theusreview.com/reviews/Am...> .

Donna Amaral says

Good book about a horrible tragedy

This was a well written book about a subject that I knew nothing about. It was difficult to read of the loss and devastation that New London experienced. Having been born ten years later, I feel blessed to have benefited from the lessons learned on that tragic day. It was good to hear of survivors who were mentioned.

Norma Harrell says

This book is really one of the best reads I have ever had... I just want to encourage you to read it and tell you friends about it if you feel the same way. I don't think you'll regret it.

Courtney McAninch says

I grew up in East Texas and knew about the New London school explosion, but I had never read anything until now. I could not put it down. Such a tragedy. Quick read.

Videoclimber(AKA)MTsLilSis says

A heartbreaking mostly unknown historical story. By the end you will know why natural gas has a smell. You will also feel for the families who lost their loved ones in this tragedy. I enjoyed the way the book was written. Who knows how many lives have since been saved by what was learned from this tragedy!

Cathy says

I got this title free for Kindle.

Do you think the awful smell of natural gas is normal? Well, it isn't. It's because of the addition of a chemical called mercaptan that is put into natural gas specifically to make the smell recognizable. Natural gas has no odor without it.

Where you ever curious why natural gas was made to smell like this? I confess I never thought about it but this story tells the reason.

March 18, 1937 was the height of the oil/gas boom in Texas. New London, Texas was the site of many companies, both corporate and independent, all drilling like mad. The town was built for and by oilfield

workers. One of the highlights of the town was the London School that was, by far, probably the best in the state.

Jake McQuaid was the boss of one of the Humble Oil (later Exxon) rigs that was just at the edge of town. On March 17th, as the drilling progressed, the rig hit a small pocket of natural gas. Jake immediately shut down the drilling and started to monitor pressure gauges. He sent for the engineer. Once on scene the engineer took over and Jake and the crew were sent home for the evening.

Jake always liked going home to his loving wife, Winona, and the family: beautiful Lataine, a 5th grader at London School, and toddler twin boys. Lataine was her Daddy's pride and joy. She was a lovely blonde girl who already had her future husband picked out - Glenn - a neighbor and fellow classmate. His little girl was so proud of a small gold ring with a rose on it given her by a cousin for Christmas. She never took it off.

When Jake returned to work on the morning of the 18th he found the engineers ready to resume drilling. What happened to the gas pressure? According to the engineers it had disappeared, most likely just a very small pocket. Jack was puzzled but set up to restart the drill.

Something was going on at London School that should be mentioned. In an effort to save \$300 the school officials decided to heat the building by using "residual" gas. This type of natural gas is a by-product of the wells. (It is what you see burning off if you've ever seen an oilwell.) It wasn't the best choice (I'm not sure but it may have been illegal then. It is now.) but nobody seemed to think it was a bad idea. The lines to heat the building ran under the whole complex and were accessible through trapdoors and crawlspaces. These crawlspaces were also used for storage.

Most of the school had been dismissed for the day. The younger kids had started home on the buses. Some of the older kids were allowed out of class to perform dances for the parents at a PTA meeting being held in the auditorium. The remaining kids were still in their classrooms just finishing up for the day.

Several students in a shop class had been down in the crawlspace getting sets prior to the dances. They all complained about headaches and one boy's face was very red. In fact, for days, if not weeks, teachers had been opening classroom windows because of tearing eyes and headaches.

One of the shop students plugged in a sander and there was a massive explosion. Jake McQuaid looked up and saw the school flying apart. Within a few minutes the oilfield workers and others in town converged on the school to see a horrific sight. The main building was almost completely obliterated. Five miles away the blast knocked a young girl out of a tree.

Over the next few days even surviving students were called upon to help identify the dead. Some were only known by their clothes. In all, 311 people lost their lives (16 teachers and the rest students). Some of the missing were never found. All Jake ever found of beautiful Lataine was the ring - still on one finger, but her beloved Glenn survived.

Years later one of the survivors was arrested. He mumblingly told deputies that he had helped his uncle install the heating pipes beneath the school. In an effort to sell more gas they had used shoddy connections hoping a little gas might leak out. It was never confirmed if this was true.

A young Walter Cronkite reported on this story from New London. It was his first big story. Many years later, after all he had seen in his reporting career, he still called this tragedy one of the most horrific things he had ever seen.

When the story was first reported it captured the attention of the whole country and the world. Good wishes and condolences poured in from all over including from Adolf Hitler and other world leaders. Also included are several eyewitness accounts told to the author (whose ancestors were among the

survivors). Included is the transcript of a poem from which Latane's tombstone inscription was taken. It is The Rose Still Grows Beyond the Wall by A. L. Frink. It was a beautiful inclusion in the book.

Angela says

I skipped ahead to the actual tragedy and then skimmed the ending. This book is not one that held my attention, unfortunately. The topic was boring to me, oil and natural gases and the like went RIGHT over my head. Still, I wanted to know what happened so I skipped ahead. It is a shame that it takes these occurrences to change the ways things are done, and it's sad that some important stories are virtually unknown. I never thought twice about why gases smelled the way they do...it's sad that it took the horrific deaths of children to make us aware of how dangerous gases can be. I believe this is an important story that people should be aware of, and I believe it is an important part of American history. Millions of lives may have been saved by just changing how certain aspects of every day life are done. That, I think, is the most important part of knowing this historical event.

Kristin says

A very well-written story about a national tragedy that, like so many national tragedies in the US, seems to have been completely forgotten despite its scale, long-term effects and sheer horror. It's also a look into the lives of the families so grievously effected by the consolidated school explosion in New London, Texas in 1937. The school exploded due to a massive natural gas leak that went completely undetected due to the fact that natural gas has no odor, taste or color. This disaster is the reason why a special chemical, mercaptan, is added to all natural gas so it can be smelled and leaks easily detected. Also, the gas was being siphoned off "raw"--tapped into natural gas lines from the oil fields, unregulated and impossible to meter--which was a common practice in the houses and stores in the entire area. The night before the explosion, it is thought a huge amount of natural gas was injected into the main lines from a oil well activity.

As an aside, this was also one of the first stories Walter Cronkite, then a young reporter for a Dallas newspaper, ever covered. He later said it that nothing in his life or studies prepared him for the horror of that day and that none of the stories he covered after it were as horrible to him. Also, strangely enough, German Chancellor Adolph Hitler sent a sympathy telegram as this was shortly before the war started. It still exists in the New London historical memorial.

This is a very sad but affecting book about a part of American history that should be remembered. It also started me off on a disaster book tangent I am still on. Hence the neglect of the military junkie books...

Sarah says

This was a very powerful book about an extremely emotional tragedy. I definitely had tears in my eyes after reading this and just experiencing the book.

I felt connected to these children and their families by the author's format in telling the story. We got into all the individual's heads and see the events through their eyes and thoughts. That takes a special talent of writing, let me tell you. Someone who can pull off a 10 year old girl and then do a 180 and get into the head

of her father has some serious writing chops.

The first third of the book was dedicated to building the setting and the individual lives this tragedy affected. This was the one area in which the book suffered a bit. I did get a feel for all the players in the story, don't get me wrong. But the author tended to meander off the topic of New London completely into totally different stories like details about the Hindenburg and other events going on during this time frame. Now I can see where mentioning these events and going into them a bit does set the time for our story. But really?! Whole paragraphs and pages full?! It felt like overkill and really bogged down the first part of this book.

Once we got to the day of the tragedy, however, this book just slams the reader in the gut. We see the fates of all the people we got to know in the first part of the book. We get to see how the explosion effects our world and still stays with the survivors today. Just the sheer scope of the tragedy and the fate of all these children astounds my heart and brain even now. The book tells the story through the personal stories of the victims and survivors; yet, it also draws on some firsthand accounts of rescuers, journalists, and speeches given after these terrible events. The book is richer for these words directly from the mouths of people who saw the horror for themselves.

This book is one that I think everyone needs to read. It's powerful content and personalization of the victims, survivors, and their families makes the reader think, feel, and just mourn. Despite some meandering off topic in the first part, this book is very solid. I felt honored to have read it and to remember the unfortunate events in Texas in 1937.
