

The Powder House Explosion

Work is said to be a panacea for many things and once in my case it was a life preserver. But for the fortuitous circumstance of being employed, I might have been with my boyhood friends when the powder house exploded. On many occasions we had played around the building at the north edge of town where H. L. Spencer stored powder to be used for blasting in the coal mines. We had been together at noon on the tragic day, and talked of going out to the powder magazine for target practice with a new repeating rifle. But I had to forego that pleasure.

During the summer of 1881 I had worked for W. S. Mays, an early Oskaloosa pharmacist, and when school began in the fall I had contracted to put in certain hours at the drug store. And so, on January 5, 1882, I had to spend the afternoon washing a big consignment of bottles that had been unloaded at the store. The washing was done in a large iron sink, and after the bottles had been dried and fitted with corks they were placed on shelves above the sink. Something like ten gross of the bottles had been thus treated and made ready for instant use as occasion demanded.

Above the drug store, a Dr. Johnson had his office, and he had just installed an air-pressure atomizer, one of the first apparatus of its kind brought to town. Mr. Mays and a couple of other gentlemen were seated about the stove, and W. A. Wells, the prescription clerk, was selling an old-fashioned music box — one of those that contained pronged cylinders which picked off tunes by coming in contact with needles of various lengths and thicknesses.

Suddenly there was a terrific shock. As the store rocked from the concussion, every bottle above me crashed into the iron sink, and about a third of the big shelf bottles fell to the floor. The plate glass windows in the store front fell out and consternation seized every one. The silence that followed the crash was broken by Mr. Mays who exclaimed, "There goes Doc Johnson's air machine." But a moment later Dr. Johnson came running down to see what had happened. A hurried conference with the people in Huber's hardware store next door led to another surmise. All agreed it must have been the big boiler in "Johnson's novelty iron works" that had exploded. Being a boy of fourteen it was easy for me to beat the crowd to the foundry a block away. We found the boiler intact and the employees with their grimy faces as much at sea as we were. There

were few telephones in those days, and it took some time for the news to spread around as to what had really happened.

Early in the evening the editor of the *Oskaloosa Herald* issued an "Extra" describing the tragedy in detail. The story carried by that faded sheet of paper can not now be better told than to quote extensively.

"Oskaloosa, Iowa, Thursday, 5 P. M., January 5, 1882. At about four o'clock this afternoon the city was startled by a terrible shock, that caused every building to shake and sway as if it dangled in the lap of an earthquake. Instant examination was made, after the general shower of broken glass had been watched and escaped in nearly all of the buildings of the city. All the steam boilers being found intact, attention was directed to the powder magazine of H. L. Spencer & Co., situated in an open space about one-half mile north of the public square and about two hundred and fifty yards east of Market Street, and to which the crowd at once sped.

"A terrible sight there met them. On the north side of a great pit that had once been the powder magazine the bodies of three boys were found shattered, mangled, and disemboweled — all of them having their heads or portions of them blown away, while their poor bodies were burned full of

rents, almost beyond recognition. When friends identified them, it was found that John Phillips, son of the Mayor of the city, Jerald Joyce, and John Steadham, were the victims of the calamity.

“Two of the boys — Phillips and Steadman — were members of the High School and Prof. H. H. Seerley speaks of them in the highest praise, as boys of great promise and good in all things that make up a good scholar. Johnny Phillips was a pupil in Miss Perry’s room, and was one of her brightest scholars. One of his last acts in the school room was distributing the Christmas presents from the teacher to each of her pupils. Joyce was in the intermediate department and was a bright boy.

“The cause of the woe that has thus come upon these families and of the great damage inflicted upon hundreds of houses was found to be in the fact that these unfortunate boys had used the powder magazine as a target — the weapon being a magazine breech-loading rifle which the Mayor had drawn on New Years in a small raffle. The boys were seen shooting at the building from a short distance and then going up to see the results of their skill. They afterward fired another shot, and then came the horror of explosion — and that is all that can now be learned of it.”

Upon further inquiry the fact was established

“that the magazine had been used as a target by a great many grown men — large-eared asses — that it was peppered full of holes by shot guns and rifles. One person who has been delivering powder at the magazine states that on one occasion he went there and found that some one had shot into the building, cutting a hole in a keg, so that the powder emptied itself on the floor. The town has been fortunate to escape the calamity as long as it did.

“L. F. Cole, John Shaw, and Phillip Mitchell were engaged at carpenter work on Mr. White’s new residence, about three hundred yards to the northwest of the magazine. They saw the boys shoot and called to them to quit it. But they went up close to the magazine, looking at the target, having fired several shots. The boys were then seen quite close to the magazine, one leaning on it, the other two being near by. Next the men found themselves knocked down, but not seriously injured. They were first on the ground.

“The body of the son of Mr. Phillips was found about fifty yards down the hill. His clothing was nearly all gone; the back portion of the head carried away, and his body otherwise mangled and bruised. John Steadham was blown through a wire fence about one hundred yards away, and fearfully torn and mangled. Jerald Joyce was

found in the creek about one hundred and fifty yards away, with his head almost completely gone. Fragments of their bodies were found widely scattered, and tenderly gathered up and placed with the remains.

“There were two rifles found in the wreck, the Joyce boy having taken a combined rifle and shotgun belonging to his uncle, John Harkness, to test it with young Phillips’s gun. Our city is saddened by this great and sudden calamity, and the sympathy of all will go out to the bereaved parents, whose homes have thus been made disconsolate and woeful.

“The damage done is very great. Most of the houses in the north half of the city are badly wrecked — doors and windows, and all light wood work broken and shattered; stables completely wrecked; chimneys all toppled and flues cracked from top to bottom. The wreck of the plate glass windows on the business streets was nearly complete, and the real money damage can not be covered by less than fifty to one thousand dollars. The powder was owned by the American Powder Company, of Boston, and numbered about five hundred kegs.

“Take that part of the city bounded by Harrison Street on the south, and extending east and west to the city limits — about three quarters of a

mile wide and two miles long — and nearly every house is injured — ranging in damage from \$5 to \$2,000. Many of the residences were wrecked — the walls being driven in or askew, and badly twisted, rendering the damage enormous. Among the houses which are the worst wrecked is that of John Hoffman, whose fine house situated northwest of the magazine was shattered and wrecked very badly, and it will cost \$1,000 to repair it. Milo Rice will suffer a loss of \$800. Prof. Tebbetts suffers as badly as Mr. Hoffman and in addition a fifty pound rock, one of the magazine's foundation stones, was hurled through the house on the east side, and crushed the interior. Mrs. Edison also received a similar visitor which entered the dormitory and knocked a hole in the chimney — her damage is not less than \$500, if not much more. The John L. Roberts residence is a bad wreck and suffered from a bombardment of stone. Mr. Moorman's house, one of the nearest, is completely wrecked. Penn College is in a most dilapidated state — some fifty lights of glass, with many sash being broken out. Doors and locks were swept away in sad wreck."

So extensive was the destruction that the schools were closed for a week. Some families had to seek shelter with neighbors and "quite a number of persons", according to the newspaper,

had "to be aided to repair and reconstruct" their homes. "Our people will have to make large donations and to this end, that aid may be properly administered, the city relief association will take immediate action."

Building material was in great demand and carpenters had more than they could do. Fortunately there was a good stock of window glass of ordinary size in town. To obtain plate glass for store windows the telegraph was freely used.

The damage was not entirely confined to property. Besides the boys who lost their lives, a few persons were hurt by falling debris. At the home of Levi Hambleton, where a piece of glass was driven through an inch board and into a brick wall, two children of R. H. McCoskey were cut by flying glass. A child of H. B. Drake was severely injured by falling plaster.

The shock of the explosion was felt far beyond the city limits of Oskaloosa. At John Fry's farm, four miles north, "glass was broken, and doors forced open. Plastering was also broken at the house of W. H. Prine, five miles west. Mr. Jarvis, from Rose Hill (ten miles distant), says that the shock was felt severely there; doors were jarred open, and things set to dancing; cattle were knocked down where they were standing in the field. At New Sharon (twelve miles away), Mr.

H. J. Vail reports that nearly everybody rushed into the streets, supposing that a boiler had exploded; doors were opened as far away as that, and chimneys damaged. Judge L. C. Blanchard was over at Montezuma (25 miles away) attending court. The concussion there was sufficiently strong to set all the windows rattling, shaking the building, and people rushed out, supposing that a cyclone had struck their town."

It later developed that the shock was felt for distances of thirty-five to forty miles in all directions. Judge D. W. Hamilton of Grinnell was teaching school at the time in the northeast corner of Keokuk County thirty miles from Oskaloosa and he was sure he had felt an earthquake. It was several days before he found out what had happened.

As stated in the *Herald* "Extra", there was scarcely a pane of glass left intact in town. The stocks of window glass on hand were soon exhausted, but they lasted longer than did the supply of putty. The aforesaid prescription clerk, W. A. Wells, was filled with many bright ideas, and in this case was far too resourceful in my youthful opinion. He knew that whiting and linseed oil ground together would make good putty. So we started our hand-power drug mill and for two days kept it moving. Maybe you think I was

not glad that we had only a barrel and a half of whiting and less than a barrel of oil on hand. That was enough for me.

And what queer things people will do. Though the entire community was saddened by the occasion, many people had watch chains and all kinds of jewelry made from bits of plate glass windows, and wore the ornaments for years as mementoes of the great catastrophe.

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