

REPORT OF A BLASTING DISASTER AT LEHIGH PORTLAND CEMENT CO.'S
SANDTS EDDY QUARRY - MARCH 26, 1942
LOWER MOUNT BETHEL TOWNSHIP
NORTHAMPTON COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA
31 KILLED

HAUNTING ECHOES OF TRAGEDY
SANDTS EDDY QUARRY EXPLOSION
OCCURRED 50 YEARS AGO TODAY
BY FRANK WHELAN (OF THE MORNING CALL)

When long-time Morning Call photographer/cartoonist William R. "Bud" Tamblyn talked about the old days, he had a lot of stories to tell. And one event he recalled vividly was the explosion that took 31 lives at the Lehigh Portland Cement Co.'s quarry near Sandt Eddy, Lower Mount Bethel Township, Northampton County, 50 years ago today.

"We were down at the Central Railroad of New Jersey station [in Allenton] taking pictures of some movies star or other. She was a really beautiful girl," said the late Tamblyn of the tragedy that took place on Thursday, March 26, 1942.

Old news clips show the woman Tamblyn was talking about was Elissa Landi, a stage and screen actress turned author. She had arrived from Hazelton to talk about her new book, a romantic novel about stage live.

Landi was waiting to board a train for New York when three young Navy recruits, Richard Desch and Fred Goodling of Allentown and Harry Phillips of Bethlehem, showed up. Tamblyn had them get in the picture with her.

"Then," recalled Tamblyn, "there was this explosion. It was rocked by an earthquake." Tamblyn got word from the newspaper office to get to the source of the blast, the Lehigh Portland Cement Co.'s quarry at Sandts Eddy.

Tamblyn and a reporter headed for the little industrial community along the Delaware River five miles north of Easton. What they found was sheer chaos. "It was horrible. Body parts were hanging from trees. Corpses were lying all over the ground."

When the body count was done, 31 people were declared dead, although only seven of the bodies could be identified. But for Bud Tamblyn that contrast of the beautiful woman in the morning and the horror of Sandts Eddy in the afternoon were vivid images that would remain with him for the rest of his life.

According to Lehigh University geologist Benjamin Leroy Miller's 1939 geological study of Northampton County, Sandts Eddy sits on the Jacksonburg cement rock formation. Natural cement was first produced from cement rock in Northampton County in the 1820s. In 1872, cement maker David O. Saylor began transforming the rock into portland cement. So named because it resembles portland limestone, from Portland, England, portland cement was more durable, of better quality and harder than natural cement. It was created from a mixture of the clay-like limestone and other

materials cooked in kilns under very high heat.

The Lehigh Portland Cement Co., founded in 1897 by a group of investors that included Gen. Harry C. Trexler, was one of the largest cement companies in the region in 1942. Its plant at Sandts Eddy had first been for the Quaker Cement Co. in 1911.

Lehigh Portland began operations there in 1926. the quarry from which the limestone was taken is on a hillside about one mile northwest of the plant. According to geologist Miller, at one place the quarry was 135 feet deep. Its face along the slope of the hillside was 680 feet long.

The process of blasting the limestone loose followed a set pattern. In the past wrote Miller, only small blasts were used. "Now [1939], however, the companies have found it more economical to blow down enormous masses of rock at one time, at some blasts more than 60,000 tons."

As Miller described it, a series of drill holes were placed about 10 to 15 feet back from the face of the quarry. Each hole was 10 to 15 feet away from the next hole. They were drilled roughly 100 feet deep. "These holes are then charged with dynamite and exploded simultaneously, an electric detonator being used."

A blast at the Sandts Eddy quarry in 1939 using 14 tons of dynamite was photographed by The Morning Call. It tore away 90,000 tons of cement rock along a 360 foot strip of the quarry face.

The dynamite process used in Northampton County cement quarries was second nature to George B. Hadesy Jr. A native of Pottsville, in 1942 he was living in Allentown. Hadesy had worked for 26 years for the Hercules Powder Co. A World War I veteran, he was active in Allentown's Herbert Paul Lentz American Legion Post and was well known in local Masonic circles. Hadesy had just turned 49 on the Sunday before the big blast that would take his life.

It was Hercules Powder that Handled the dynamiting for Lehigh Portland. As the company's East Coast district sales manager, Hadesy had been in Philadelphia on Monday, Baltimore on Tuesday, and Allentown on Wednesday. He had come to Easton on Wednesday afternoon, March 25, to begin preparations for the next day's blast at Sandts Eddy.

It was around 9:15 a.m. March 26 when the men had just taken a break for a mid-morning snack. Lunch boxes were opened. About 20 tons of dynamite--4,000 sticks of TNT (estimated by experts to be enough to dislodge 120,000 tons of cement rock)--had arrived from the Hercules Powder plant at Belvidere, N. J. William Follweiler Sr., his son, William Jr., Jim Edmonds, Howard Bowen and Buster Eckert, all of Catasauqua, were part of the crew that had dropped it off. Now they were headed back to Catasauqua.

Some of the explosives were already placed in the drill holes. State experts later concluded that the crew was placing the dynamite in hole No. 33 at the time of the blast. John Patti, assistant quarry foreman, had just walked away from the blast site. With him were seven workmen, Foster Smith, Harry DiMido, Lewis Goryfi, Peter Luscege, Victor Lup, Emmanuel Minardo and Jacob Hober. They had a task to complete on the other side of the

quarry. In the quarry pit below the blast site, Chester A. Kniper was at work. His son, Melvin, a recent graduate of Easton High School, had been assigned to the cement plant's power house a couple of miles away.

A small airplane was lazily flying overhead. In it was a commercial flying instructor and some students from Lafayette College. A mile away, students at the Lehigh Consolidated School, a two-story stone and brick structure built in 1928, were studying.

The explosion came without warning. Twenty tons of TNT went up all at once. For a radius of 100 miles the ground shook. A sheet of flame swept the quarry, killing all in its path. Bodies of quarry workers were ripped limb from limb. Hadesy's private car, parked nearby, melted into a metal mass. Chester Kniper and his friends were stunned as the blast shot out several feet over their heads. The students at Lehigh Consolidated School felt their entire building shake. Glass shattered, cutting those who were in its path. Seven year old Orrin Stevens was cut so badly that he had to be taken to Easton Hospital. Farmer George Taylor of Mud Run, three quarters of a mile away from the blast site, was knocked off his tractor.

In downtown Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton, department store window glass shattered. A man getting a shave was seriously cut by a slip of the barber's razor. A woman about to do her wash was scalded by hot water. And all over the Lehigh Valley, there were telephone calls to police, city officials and The Morning Call, making a mockery of wartime regulations about non-essential phone use. The panic was worse than when the Nov. 12, 1940, Trojan Powder explosion in South Whitehall Township took three lives.

Allentonian Randolph Kulp was working in the accounting office on the 10th floor of Bethlehem Steel Corp.'s 13-story headquarters building. Suddenly, he heard a big bang. "My first thought was to try and find out who it was that had slammed the door so hard."

Kupls' boss rushed in and told him that the noise was a blast, not a door slam. Randy Kulp's mother called his sister, Althea, who worked as a secretary in the Steel's manufacturing division. "I just heard Johnny VanSant [a local radio announcer and later state senator] say on WSAN radio that Bethlehem Steel has blown up," said Mrs. Kulp. Randy Kulp admits that his mother's concern for her children may have caused her to hear something VanSant never said. But her daughter reassured Mrs. Kulp that there had been no explosion at Bethlehem Steel.

The first accurate word of the blast came from Bell Telephone Co. workers. A repair crew, headed by Tom Ridges of Easton, was about 1.25 miles from the quarry. They were dismantling a telephone line. The blast knocked Henry Krauss of Bangor off his feet. Ridge and Krauss got in their truck and quickly drove in the direction of the blast.

They came upon a house. A woman with blood streaming down her face walked toward them. Krauss quickly broke out the firstaid kit and did what he could. Ridge went inside and used the phone to call the company. An operator spread the word through the Bell system. The phone company quickly dispatched a first-aid team.

Soon, many rescue crews were headed to Sandts Eddy. But the terrible blast did not leave much for them to work with. Easton Hospital sent two ambulances, 12 doctors and several nurses, but, the former Evening Chronicle reported, "on their arrival, they were told their services were not required." Nazareth Fire Chief William Miller was one of the first to arrive. "There were bodies scattered around an eighth of a mile," he said. "I saw a leg here and there. They were terribly mangled."

The rest of the day family members and the curious flocked to the site. Route 611 along the Delaware was clogged for miles. Police and armed soldiers permitted only officials and relatives to pass. Crying women and children attempted to find what was left of their fathers and husbands. "Is John all right?" "Have you seen my mister? Please tell me if is alive," were echoed in sad litany over the Sandts Eddy quarry. The final count showed the explosion left behind 18 widows and 63 fatherless children.

State and local inspectors swarmed over the quarry, trying to make sense out of what had happened. But the blast left behind no evidence Thomas Quigley, chief of the State Bureau of Mines and Quarries said, "There has been nothing as perplexing in the history of explosive accidents in Pennsylvania. Everything was blown away. There's nothing to go on. The cause probably will be known."

But this statement did not stop the experts from trying. On April 10, 1942, state Labor and Industry Department Secretary Lewis G. Hines issued a press release about the tragedy. His inspectors had discovered that 1,000 5-to 6-year old delayed action blasting caps that the Hercules Powder Co. had been ordered to be destroyed because they were unsafe, were actually being used at the Sandts Eddy quarry.

Harry D. Immel, director of the department's Bureau of Inspectors, pointed out that these old caps were very unstable. A premature explosion, probably caused a rock falling on a cap in hole No. 33 was in the inspectors' opinion, what set off the blast. While not naming anyone, Hines' release called into question the judgment of the Hercules Powder experts at Sandts Eddy. They were, he said guilty of one of the most flagrant violations of safety that I or any of the other investigators have ever heard of."

Hercules Powder quickly issued a statement of its own, saying that it was not responsible for the defective blasting caps. Working with the industry he did so.

According to retired Lehigh Portland executive Kramer Schatzlein, the Sandts Eddy quarry was closed by the company in 1960. Its plant survived the blast with limited damage. Today it is owned by ABE Materials of Easton. Although some small-scale blasting is still done, ABE official Bobby Grimes says current safety rules make any repeat of the Sandts Eddy blast highly unlikely.

A memorial Mass will be held at 8 a.m. today at St. Rocco's Catholic Church, Martins Creek, in memory of the 31 men who lost their lives in the Sandts Eddy blast.

Cause of Blast Is Deep Mystery

All Clues Wiped Out With Lives of 31 in Quarry Explosion

EASTON, Pa., March 27.—(AP)—Cause of a thunderous dynamite blast which killed 31 workmen and shattered windows in a 20-mile radius "probably never will be known," a State investigator said today, "because all the witnesses are dead."

"There has been nothing as perplexing in the history of explosive accidents in Pennsylvania," said Thomas Quigley, chief of the State Bureau of Mines and Quarries. "Everything was blown away; there's nothing to go on."

STEP-BY-STEP HUNT

Nevertheless, a dozen agencies began tracing step-by-step the route followed in bringing the 21 tons of explosive from a New Jersey powder plant to the Lehigh Portland Cement Company's quarry, five miles north of Easton where yesterday's disaster occurred.

A group of 40 workmen had placed the open boxes of dynamite beside holes drilled in the ground preparatory to blasting away the side of the quarry. Nine left for the bottom of the pit.

When they reached the bottom, one related, the blast let go and "the whole world just seemed to shake."

BLOWN TO PIECES

The men on the top were blown to pieces and parts of bodies were hurled 300 yards. Twelve children and two teachers in a school half a mile away were cut by flying glass. Houses 20 miles distant were jarred and the concussion was reported in Philadelphia, 67 miles south.

James A. Gish, company superintendent, told of a report that three airplanes had been flying over the quarry and said it was possible a missile dropped from one of them may have set off the explosive. He and F.B.I. agents discounted, however, the theory of sabotage.

Gish said operations at the quarry would be delayed possibly three months because the powder crew was wiped out, and added that "95 per cent of our production now is in war work."

Rescue workers described the scene of the blast as "a terrible sight."

"Bodies were scattered around for an eighth of a mile," said one. "I saw a leg here and an arm there. They were terribly mangled."

PEACE, AS WELL AS WAR, TAKES FATALITY TOLL



Scene in the Easton, Pa., quarry of the Lehigh Portland Cement Company where 31 workers were killed in a pre-

ature dynamite explosion, the concussion of which was felt 50 miles. In circle are some of the bodies.—A.P. Wirephoto.

Weller Obtains 'Battle of Java' Closeup From 2 Rescued Gobs