

Catastrophic Explosion on Parce Avenue

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

It was just after 3:00 pm, July 29, 1930, and the attendant at the Jesse & Morrison gas station at the corner of North Main and Parce Avenue had begun pumping fuel into a car occupied by Flora Schummer and Ethel Bumpus. Suddenly an enormous explosion shook the earth, and the frightened women saw the roof of a house at 44-46 Parce Avenue blown into the air, followed by a massive cloud of smoke. Fred Jesse ran to the scene, just a few houses west from his gas station.



The four apartment house was occupied by several families. Phoebe DeDomenico and Guido George had been married a month earlier, and shared one apartment. Members of the Hess, Cramer, and Noll families also resided in apartments at the house.

In the early afternoon, Phoebe George and two of the Hess children noticed a strong natural gas odor in the house. She spotted a man operating a steam shovel in front of the house near the street, and told him of the gas odor. The contractor, who was installing storm sewer pipes, had inadvertently broken a water line with the steam shovel. While maneuvering his shovel out of the water-filled ditch, the

contractor pulled up a length of the water line, as well as a section of the gas service pipe to the house. In his testimony to the coroner, the contractor denied that he was told the house was filled with gas, a contradiction to the testimony of Phoebe George.

Three people were killed as a result of the explosion: Fern Cramer, 23; Edna Hess, 17; and Betty Lou Hess, two years old. The Hess children were two of eleven born to Camille and Louise Hess, the largest family residing in the home. The parents were at work when the explosion occurred. Two of their children, Elmer, 22, and Gertrude, 20, were working across the street at the can factory at the time of the horrific blast.

An additional eleven people were injured, including three members of the Hess family, other residents of the house, and neighbors on Parce Avenue. The explosion was heard from a distance of three miles away. Stan Scarth, superintendent of the Fairport municipal water and light plant, was at the site at the time of the blast, called after the water line had been broken. He was standing across the street by the American Can factory when the house exploded.

Several legal suits resulted from the blast and the resulting deaths and injuries. The contractor was found negligent for failing to alert residents of the house and nearby neighbors that the gas line had been broken during excavation.

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