



*Workers at the Rochester Fireworks Company on Baird Road*

The Rochester Fireworks Company was started around 1836 by Peter Palmer and was first located on the site currently occupied by the Blue Cross Arena. In 1927, the George H. Robinson Importing Company bought out the Palmers' interests and merged with the growing company. The new firm imported many types of fireworks displays and "other sundries" from the Far East. In 1930, looking for more space, the company moved to a rather isolated area of Perinton at the corner of Baird and West Whitney Roads. The land had previously belonged to the Lincoln Mills estate and had been occupied by a silk factory and a mulberry grove.

The factory subsequently comprised about 40 buildings, well spaced to avoid fire, and employed about 40 men and 15 women, all local. Until 1939 and the rising need for munitions, the factory produced Roman candles, rockets, wheels and many other types of fireworks displays. Once World War II was underway, the factory expanded its work force and ran three shifts per day producing ammunition for the Army and Navy, work they continued until the end of the war.

On the afternoon of November 6, 1942, Mrs. John Hanson, who lived on West Whitney, saw "just a puff" from the Rochester Fireworks Company across the street, and then saw fire engulf one of the fourteen buildings on the site. Samuel Kirkpatrick and Arthur Salmon, who were driving along Whitney Road, at first heard a muffled explosion and saw black smoke. Calling in the alarm, they subsequently saw fire and people, mostly women, running and screaming. Anna Morreale, who had just that week started work at the factory, managed to escape with minor burns on her hands, and helped others smother their flaming clothing. She remembered seeing one boy coming out terribly burned. "He just rolled on the ground screaming," she recalled.

An explosion had caused the fire. The fire developed so fast that the women who were working inside the building had no chance to get out. Eight people died instantly in the explosion, three more would

die in the ensuing days, and many were treated in area hospitals for burns. All but one of the victims were women who had gone to work in the factory feeling that they were contributing to the war effort. The victims, all residents of Fairport and East Rochester, had been so severely burned that survivors had to rely on jewelry, dental fillings, and miscellaneous items of clothing for identification.

The legacy of the explosion still resonates today. In 1992 the families of the victims marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragedy and in 2003 the families again met to honor the victims of one of the most disastrous nonresidential fires in area history and the area's only major disaster during World War II. In 2003, a plaque with the names of the victims was put on display in the East Rochester Village Hall, remembering those who gave their lives for the war effort on the home front.