



The day 'Jumbo' exploded

A reported faulty boiler exploded at the York Rolling Mill on Aug. 10, 1908.

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This is a piece of the boiler that flew through the air and crashed into a home on North Queen Street. The piece went through the roof and hit a dresser in a bedroom, according to 'The Gazette' at the time.



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(York County Heritage Trust)

One hundred years ago, a boiler nicknamed "Jumbo" exploded at the York Rolling Mill plant just outside York.

The blast killed 10 men and injured nearly 20 others.

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It hurled a piece of the boiler, which weighed up to two tons, into the back of a home on North Queen Street.

And it attracted a crowd of about 5,000 people who either heard the explosion or felt the earth shake.

The explosion happened just before 3 p.m. Monday, Aug. 10, 1908, and the headlines in "The Gazette" the following day declared it to be the "most horrible catastrophe" in the city's history.

To this day, it's a piece of history that's still discussed.

The National Board of Boiler and Pressure Vessel Inspectors published a brief article in its bulletin two years ago. It noted how one expert called the boiler "rotten."

It was catastrophes such as the one in York that led to regulations that helped prevent such explosions.

What did rolling mills make?

Rolling mills took iron, made it hot and ran it through rolls operated by steam

engines to form rods of all shapes, said Jack Loose, a historian and editor-in-chief with the Lancaster County Historical Society. The steam to operate those engines came from boilers.

The mills made hardware, such as girders for

buildings and rails for railroads.

What was the cause of the blast at the York Rolling Mill?

Articles from the day after the explosion to a coroner's inquest into the deaths indicated a problem with "Jumbo." The boiler was reported to be "defective" in an article the day after the explosion.

A coroner's jury found the iron of the boiler had been pitted and corroded to such an extent that there wasn't more than one-sixteenth of an inch of metal thickness in many places, according to a copy of the handwritten report at the York County Heritage Trust.

That's why the jury believed the boiler was unable to stand the steam pressure and exploded.

How have times changed?

Boiler explosions were problematic for a long time in American history, said David Hounshell, a professor of technology and social change at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Thousands of people died in steamboat explosions in the 19th century, he said. Regulations, such as restricting steamboat racing, helped to lower those accidents.

In factories, codes didn't exist to regulate how

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boilers were operated, Hounshell said. People just accepted explosions as a part of progress.

But with the rise of the scientific research method and universities adding mechanical engineering departments, the knowledge and skills evolved on how to build safer boilers and operate them.

In 1916, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers received approval for a boiler code. Most of the explosions since that time have been attributed to operator error or improper maintenance, he said.

Boiler explosions are fairly uncommon. One of the last major boiler explosions killed six at a Ford's River Rouge plant in Michigan in 1999, Hounshell said.

Is the York Rolling Mill explosion still considered to be the largest industrial accident in York County's history?

"It's certainly the worst one that I know of," local historian Scott Butcher said. "It was just such a big event."

What's at the spot where the rolling mill used to stand?

The property where the rolling mill once stood is now owned by Metso Minerals. There's a parking lot on the property now.

The rolling mill in 1908 was owned by a different company, the Susquehanna Iron and Steel Co.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE EXPLOSION

Raymond Jacob Sechrist recalled the blast at the York Rolling Mill in his 1991 book "Skinny Dipping in the Codorus."

Here's what he had to say about it:

"We kids were playing in the basement of one of the houses down on Water Street at the time. We heard this terrific blast and rushed out like kids would and the neighbors started coming out to see what happened. Nobody knew, because the blast was about a mile away.

"A little later on, we had gone back in and started playing again when we heard the train whistles. Oh, they were blowing and blowing and we thought, 'What's going on?' We kids stopped playing again and after awhile a pusher engine -- one that pushes the cars around in the yard -- came rushing by with the whistle open and blowing all the time. It came up through Water Street and had one box car on it. In that box car were some of the injured people being taken up to York Hospital. York Hospital was there by the College Avenue bridge at that time.

". . . About a half-hour later, here came another shifter with another box car. They might have made three or four trips that way until they got all the injured men from this blast up to the hospital."

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The headlines in "The York Gazette" proclaimed "BOILER EXPLOSION AT YORK ROLLING MILL KILLS 9 MEN; 20 INJURED" the day after the blast. Here's a scene described in the article:

"Men who happened to be in the neighborhood say they heard a great noise like that of an explosion of dynamite. Looking toward the rolling mill, they saw a huge cloud of dust that looked like smoke. Then they heard a crashing of timbers and they saw the centre of the big mill sink down to the earth. This mass had sunk upon nearly two score of workmen and the hurried search soon revealed the imprisoned men beneath."

The Rev. G.W. Enders, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, preached on the explosion during an evening church service the following Sunday. Here's what he had to say:

"York has been visited by a terrible calamity within the past few days. Ten men were killed and there are widows and orphans to mourn, while there are others crippled and some, perhaps, will never get over it.

". . . Mine explosions, railroad wrecks, boiler explosions are becoming so common as to excite comparatively little notice. The tendency of the times is to have little regard for life and limb, but to look to the piling up of money."

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