

The Great Standard Oil Fire

With a roar that rocked the walls of the Savage Tire Company three hundred yards away, shook a trolley car on the rails five blocks off, and rattled the windows in the houses within the radius of over a mile, the Standard Oil Company's 250,000-gallon distillate tanks blew up yesterday just before noon . . .

--San Diego Union, October 6, 1913

It was the most spectacular fire San Diego had ever seen. On Sunday morning, October 5, 1913, oil tanks at the Standard Oil Company plant at the foot of 26th Street exploded. The fire quickly spread, blackening the sky and threatening surrounding rail and lumber yards. Firemen battled the waterfront blaze for the three days and spectators from all over San Diego came to view the inferno.

The cause of the fire was a mystery. Static electricity or sparks from a passing train were popular theories. Some witnesses decided a tank had been pumped too full of crude oil and expanding gases ignited. "It just exploded," was all company officials would admit.

The initial blast occurred in tank of fuel oil. The roof of the tank was launched a hundred feet in the air before it crumpled on the ground. More tanks ignited as flaming fuel rained down.

Led by Fire Chief Louis Almgren, six companies rushed to the scene and began directing heavy streams of water on the tanks to keep them cool. "The heat was terrific," a newsman reported.

The metal shields which the men wore on the front of their helmets became red hot, so that they had to be knocked off with stones and axes. The high picket fence which surrounds the tanks at a distance of several yards was fired by the radiation from the blazing oil, and it became necessary to turn the water and chemicals on the blazing wood.

Water on the burning oil had little effect. As the inferno spread, firemen worried over one huge tank containing 250,000 gallons of gasoline. Dirt and sand was shoveled on flames that crept close to the threatened tank. "Luckily," reported the *Union*, "the wind carried the flames from the boiling oil away from the gasoline, or the tank would have been hopelessly doomed."

Volunteers joined the firemen in fighting the blaze, carrying heavy fire hose and bringing sacks of sand to dam the rivers of oil and gasoline. Councilman Percy Benbough brought sandwiches and coffee for the firefighters who worked for hours without a break.

The fire drew the curious by the thousands. "Never has such a spectacle been seen in San Diego," the *Union* noted.

Places of amusement which had been wont to draw the huge crowds of pleasure seekers were practically deserted because of the new and terrible attraction offered. Streetcars were crowded, the 'Take the next car' sign being hung out on every other one. The streets leading to and from the Standard Oil plant were jammed with automobiles, motorcycles, carriages and bicycles.

Most of the San Diego police force had to be used for crowd control. Chief Keno Wilson established fire lines a thousand yards from the burning tanks. The patrolmen were kept busy by managing the "excited men and small boys who swarmed all over the place."

By Monday evening eleven out twelve fuel tanks were ablaze or destroyed. The climax came near midnight when the threatened gasoline tank exploded with a roar.

The flash woke up people in East San Diego, four miles away, and for a second illuminated the city with a brilliance that surpassed the brightest sunshine. The shock of the explosion awoke residents of Mission Hills, five miles from the fire, and sent them scurrying to the telephone to discover what had happened.

The eruption threw burning oil in all directions, igniting the grounds of the nearby Whiting-Mead Corp. and spreading flames to the yard of the Buchanan Lumber Company two blocks south. It also set fire to the Standard Oil wharf where spectators had gathered to watch the action. They were rescued by other onlookers who had been watching the fire from sailboats in the bay.

The firemen continued the fight throughout the night and managed to save most the lumber yards. By Tuesday afternoon nearly all of the oil had burned itself up. The final flames flickered out under a stream of water at 5:45 p.m., drawing a big cheer from tired firefighters and onlookers.

The fire left the Standard Oil plant in ruins with the 1/2 -inch thick steel tanks crumpled and smoldering. Company officials estimated the loss at a quarter of million dollars, mostly from the lost petroleum (worth \$15 a barrel, adjusted for inflation). Incredibly, no one was killed or seriously injured in the fire, "the most disastrous that has ever occurred in San Diego," thought the *Union*, "and by far the most spectacular."

WATCH SAN DIEGO GROW

Year	Population	Area	Population	Area	Population	Area	
1850	1,000	100	1860	2,000	150	1870	3,000
1880	4,000	200	1890	8,000	300	1900	15,000
1910	30,000	500	1920	50,000	700	1930	70,000

The San Diego Union

AND DAILY NEWS

THE PIONEER NEWSPAPER OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, TUESDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 7, 1913

WATCH SAN DIEGO GROW

Building Permits

From January 1, 1913, to Date

\$5,855,730

WAVE OF BLAZING OIL SWEEPS LUMBER YARDS

NEGRO PRISONER CAPTURED IN SAN DIEGO CONFESSES TO MURDER OF MRS. GAY

BURR HARRIS DECLARES HE WAS INSANE WHEN HE BATTERED HER TO DEATH

Confronted by Newspapermen With Proof That His Carefully Faked Alibi Had Been Shattered, Negro Slayer Collapses In Jail and Admits Hideously Brutal Crime in Holy City Office Building

MYSTERIOUS WHITE MAN WHO FIGURES IN CASE IS STILL TO BE EXPLAINED BY THE PRISONER

Murderer's Story Leaves Many Details Connected With the Murder Vague; Los Angeles Detective's Believe That the Man Was Bribed to Slay Venerable Woman Victim in Her Own Rooms

BURR L. HARRIS murdered Mrs. Rebecca Gay at her office in Los Angeles. He confessed this in the office of the city jail at half-past eleven o'clock last night after three newspaper men—D. W. Green and Earl Armstrong of Los Angeles and a Union reporter—had shown him conclusively that his faced-up alibi, upon which he relied to escape the consequences of his crime, had been utterly destroyed by investigation.

Harris gave no reason, no motive for this, one of the most brutal



Remarkable Photograph of Blazing Lumber Yard and Firemen Fighting Flames. This Photograph Was Taken Early This Morning by Union Staff Photographer by Light of Fire Only.

QUARTER MILLION GALLON GASOLINE TANK BLOWS UP SCATTERING FIRE ABOARD

Flaming Oil Spreads Out Over Bay and Attacks the Lumber Yards of Buchanan and Whitney - Mead Companies; All Firemen Escape, Although It Was Rumored Some Were Caught in Sea of Flames

SPECTATORS REPORTED TO BE MAROONED ON WHARF; REPORT IS NOT VERIFIED AS YET

Flee From Explosion to Standard Oil Wharf, Which Blazed Behind Them; Flames Were Balked of Prey by Rescuers in Boats; Warehouse Also Ablaze; Fire Still Raging at 3 O'Clock This Morning

WHEN a roar and a flash that was heard and seen in every quarter of the city, the 200,000-gallon gasoline tank at the Standard Oil Works exploded at 11 o'clock last night and cast a wave of flame in all directions that threatened to destroy all the buildings on the southeastern waterfront.

The explosion came after the fire had burned for thirty-five hours and had attracted tens of thousands to the foot of Twenty-sixth street to watch the conflagration.

Returns, Rich, to Serve Out Chain-Gang Term He Evaded by Flight

Now Married, But Goes to Jail When Told He Cannot Pay Fine

CITY MUST HAVE FIRE TUG, ASSERTS CHIEF

"This is the luckiest thing I have ever seen," said Albersen when

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