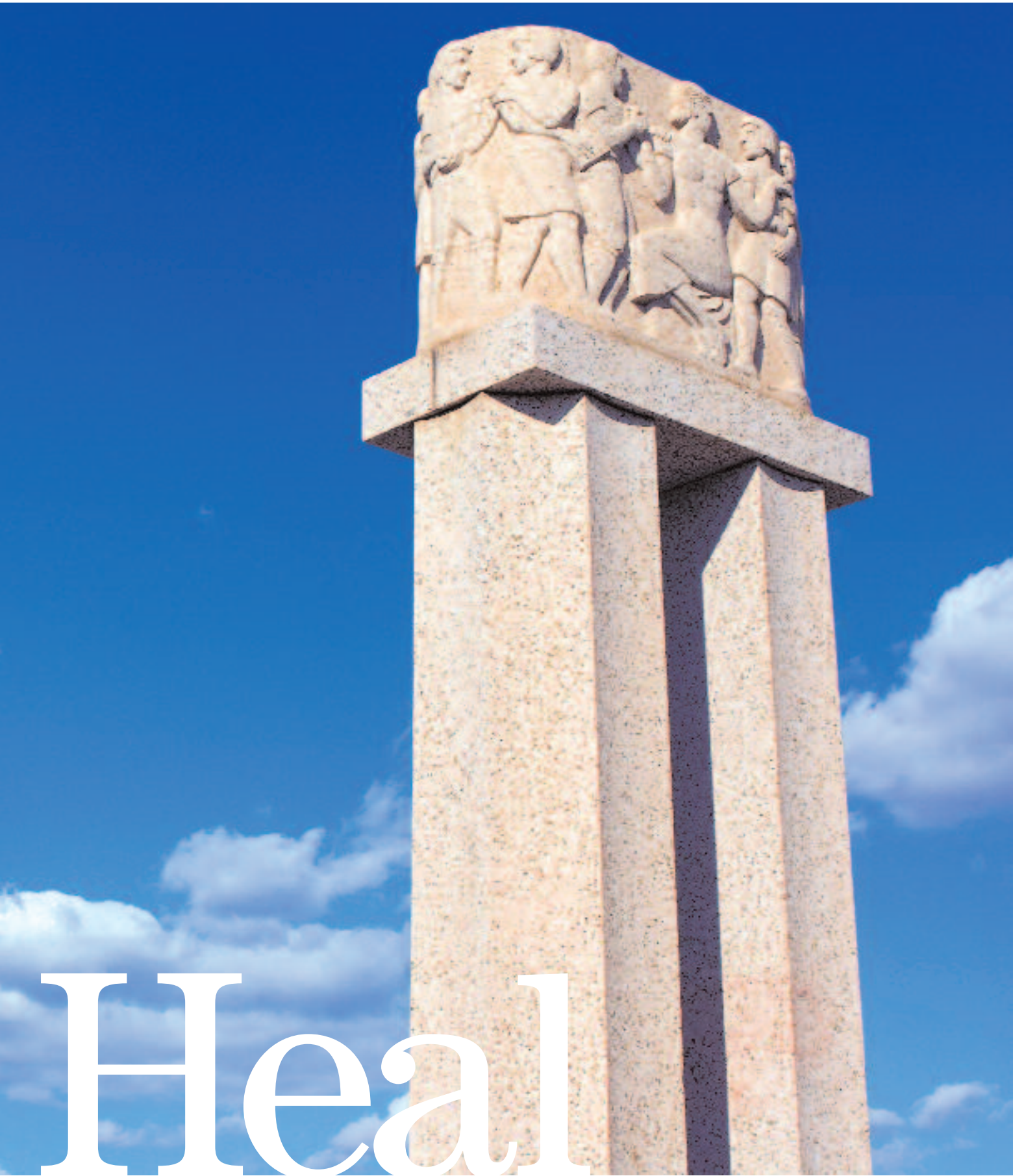


Seventy-one years  
after a tragic—and  
preventable—explosion,  
lessons still can  
be learned from the  
London School tragedy



Glenn Cook

# Time to







## The power of an image sticks with us all.

Remember the footage of the Hindenburg? On May 6, 1937, the German Zeppelin—then the largest aircraft ever built—exploded into flames as it tried to land at New Jersey's Lakehurst Naval Air Station. Thirty-six died, and a reporter's eyewitness account of “the humanity ... the horror” is played on The History Channel and in U.S. history classes to this day.

Six weeks earlier, another tragedy occurred, with a far greater loss of life. But unless you live in East Texas, or follow education history, chances are you won't know much about the United States' worst school disaster, one that then-22-year-old reporter Walter Cronkite described as “the day a generation died.”

An underground natural gas explosion at the London School, 125 miles southeast of Dallas, killed more than 300 students, staff, and townspeople on March 18, 1937. *ASBJ*, in an April 1937 editorial, called the explosion “the most distressing disaster in the history of American school life.”

How did such a tragedy fade from memory? Why is so little known about it today? And why, only in the past few years, are people trying to raise awareness about it again?

### The cenotaph

By all accounts, it should not have happened.

Built in 1932 to serve junior high and high school students, the London School was the centerpiece of Rusk County, which at the time had the largest oil field in North America. New London officials bragged that they had the world's richest school district, even though oil workers from out of state lived with their families in tents.

But the school board and administrators still cut corners, substituting natural gas for steam heat because the district could tie in to a free line that used gas residue from the oil fields. The gas was odorless, and a teacher did not smell the leak when he turned on a sanding machine. The mixture of gas and air ignited; the subsequent blast lifted the school off its foundation.

Jimmie Robinson, then in third grade, had walked over to the school “to see the Mexican hat dancers” at a PTA-sponsored event. She was buried in the rubble, with a half-dollar sized hole in her forehead. Her sister Elsie, three years older and injured herself, refused to leave until Jimmie was out.

“I wouldn't be here if it weren't for her,” says Robinson, whose father worked in the oil field. “They took me to the hospital, cleaned the dirt out of the hole in my forehead, and said if I lived 24 hours I might make it.”

The body count was staggering. Initial reports ranged from 250 to 500 killed. Today, the number is still not known; the best estimate is 319 dead.

“At that time, this was such a transient area,” says Miles Toler, who runs the London Museum and Tea Room. “A lot of them found their kids, had their bodies put in a casket, and went back to Oklahoma or Arkansas and buried them. We still don't know how many kids died.”

Robinson's family moved to Houston. “It was hard times for families right after the Depression,” she says. “People were just recovering. They had such a tough life and that was just one more blow, so after it was over with, they scattered. They didn't want to stay there.”

Across the nation, schoolchildren donated \$20,000 to build a 32-foot granite monument honoring the dead. The cenotaph—Greek for “empty tomb”—stands today on state Highway 42 between West Rusk High School and the museum.

The cenotaph is a constant reminder of the explosion. For the survivors, 71 years later, the memory of that day has been impossible to forget—no matter how much they wish they could.

### Chemical safety not a priority

Ellie Goldberg won't let people forget. The education activist, who runs the Healthy Kids: Back to Basics program in Newton, Mass., wants to see March 18 designated as a national day to raise awareness about explosives and other hazards in schools.

“It's not fear of death. It's fear of responsibility,” Goldberg says. “No one wants to raise this scary idea or have this scary conversation.”

And yet, dangers remain. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which started a schools chemical cleanout campaign ([www.epa.gov/sc3](http://www.epa.gov/sc3)), says 33,000 middle and high schools have outdated or improperly stored chemicals on site in maintenance closets or classrooms. In January 2008, a private school in Ohio paid an \$18.95 million settlement to two students critically burned in a chemistry-lab fire.



On Pages 44-46:  
The Cenotaph in  
New London and  
scenes from before  
and after the disaster.  
On Page 47,  
explosion survivor  
Joan Barton gets a  
hug from classmate  
Ken Darnell during the  
March 2007 New  
London Ex-Student  
Reunion and Memorial  
Association event at West  
Rusk High School, shown  
in the photo at right.

The Lessons 1937 project, available at the Healthy Kids website ([www.healthy-kids.info](http://www.healthy-kids.info)), reflects an ongoing evolution for Goldberg, who has worked on indoor air quality initiatives and coined the phrase “asthma friendly” schools.

“Schools need technically trained administrators for modern school systems,” Goldberg says. “They need to do rigid inspections and more widespread public education about avoiding and managing hazards, and they need a comprehensive, rational safety code.”

In the wake of the New London explosion, families filed more than 90 lawsuits against the school district and the Paradise Gasoline Company, “trying to blame somebody,” Toler says. Superintendent W.C. Shaw, who lost a son in the explosion, was forced to resign. Ultimately, a Court of Inquiry found no individuals responsible, saying school officials were “ignorant or indifferent to the need for precautionary measures, where they cannot, in their lack of knowledge, visualize a danger or a hazard.”

The explosion, however, is credited with the rotting cabbage smell that natural gas now emits. Mercaptans are now added during processing as a result of laws passed in Texas in 1938 and adopted nationwide.

Dwight Peavey, a senior scientist in the EPA’s Boston regional office, wants to see more done. He is working with schools in his six-state region to develop chemical management programs.

“Chemical management is not the highest priority ... because until there’s an accident or a crisis happens there’s no accountability,” Peavey says. “And everyone knows when there’s no accountability that you don’t do 55 mph on the freeway.”

Disposing of chemicals is costly, and schools are low on the list for federal, state, and local inspectors, Peavey says. Six states, he notes, still don’t require chemical hygiene plans.

“Environmental health and safety is a low priority now,” he says. “Most communities, let alone school districts, don’t have an individual who does just that. We’re trying to convince schools that they should take the binders off their shelves that have never been updated or implemented and do something about reducing their risks.

“Ultimately that’s going to save money. And it should save lives.”

### Decades of grieving

For four decades, the explosion hovered over New London. Survivors did not discuss it. They grieved lost siblings and friends, wondering why they lived when others did not.

“There were just a few little preachers and the good Lord to take care of you, and that was it,” says Toler, who grew up in New London and graduated from high school in 1958. “There was no outpouring of emotions. People just kept it inside and didn’t talk about it for 40 years.”

In 1977, the first reunion associated with the disaster was held. In 1992, Molly Ward helped form the organization that runs the museum. Reunions now are held annually.

Toler, the museum’s only paid employee, has a volunteer staff of 25 to 30 who conduct tours and tell the story of the explosion and the aftermath. Still photographs from the 1930s adorn the walls, and a handful of survivors—now long past Social Security age—come by often to share memories.

Joan Barton, a second-grader at the time, has volunteered at the museum since it opened. Barton and her husband both lost siblings as a result of the blast; today, she says, it remains difficult to discuss.

“We weren’t allowed to talk about it. We were not allowed to talk about it at all,” says Barton, whose sister died two years later from lupus that she contracted after the explosion. “It was just too sad. I still can’t talk about it without crying.”

Four hundred miles away, in Harrison, Ark., the son of a blast survivor works on a website ([www.nlse.org](http://www.nlse.org)) commemorating the tragedy. A decade ago, Bill Grigg Jr. started the site as a tribute to his father’s World War II exploits, but instead found a virtual community hungry for information about New London.

“It still bothers him to talk about it, especially around that time in March,” Grigg says of his father, Bill Sr., who lost a brother in the explosion. “Even now, he’s never looked at my website. We’ll talk about an e-mail I get, or I’ll ask him a question, and he’ll actually tear up. It’s harder for him to talk about that than the war.”

Seventy-one years have passed, and they’re still healing. ■

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