

The Brighton Explosions

Friday, September 21, 1951, was a beautiful, sunny day. Children were in school, fathers at work, mothers gardening and preparing for the weekend.

Workers near the corner of Monroe Avenue and Winton Road, near the Chateau restaurant, were making road repairs near an underground vault that contained a gas-regulating device. The device controlled the amount of gas released into the homes in the Meadowbrook, Roselawn, and Bel-Air neighborhoods. Somehow the control valve and its back up regulator malfunctioned and, at 1:20 p.m., the first explosion occurred. According to the 1952 Fire Underwriters' report, the "...explosions were the result of uncontrolled fuel gas accidentally released into a distribution system at a pressure far in excess of that which could be safely accommodated by the service accessories and domestic appliances."

Firefighters at the Twelve Corners station began receiving calls from homeowners describing gas stove pilot lights shooting up to the ceiling. As the explosions continued, firefighters and R.G & E. workers went door to door turning off the gas. Civil Defense personnel established a command post at the Brighton Town Hall, then located at 1795 Monroe Avenue (now Malek's Bakery). School children were rushed to playgrounds and athletic fields to await pick-up by parents.

Nineteen houses were completely destroyed by the internal explosions and fire that badly damaged twenty-five neighboring structures. Our Lady of Lourdes school was closed for a teachers' workshop, so Billy and Mary Ann Maas of Buckland Avenue were at home that day. Mary Ann was trying to call her father at Kodak when the house blew up. Louise Meyers of Antlers Drive succumbed to a heart attack while being evacuated. Ten people were injured.

The Gullen house on Buckland Avenue was the first to explode. Mrs. Gullen ran from a Twelve Corners hair salon in mid-permanent to find her Buckland Avenue house destroyed. Her son, Martin, a student at Our Lady of Lourdes School, was at the movies in downtown Rochester. He discovered the chaos when the bus was forced to let him off several stops before his street. Neighbors ran to him and hugged him because they thought he had been in the house when it blew up. Virginia Oberkoetter, also of Buckland Avenue, sent her children and their playmates to hold hands around the large tree in their front yard while she ran to a neighbor's house for help.

The smoke from Meadowbrook, the Kodak Employees' Realty Corporation development, was visible from Kodak Office in downtown Rochester. Frantic Kodak workers encountered roadblocks when they tried to reach their homes.

Seventy-two years later, there's little physical evidence of that terrible Friday in Brighton. New houses have replaced the burned and blown-up structures. The community established a memorial fund to honor the Maas children. What's left of the Brighton Disaster exists in yellowed newspaper clippings and the memories of older residents who pause in September to remember.

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