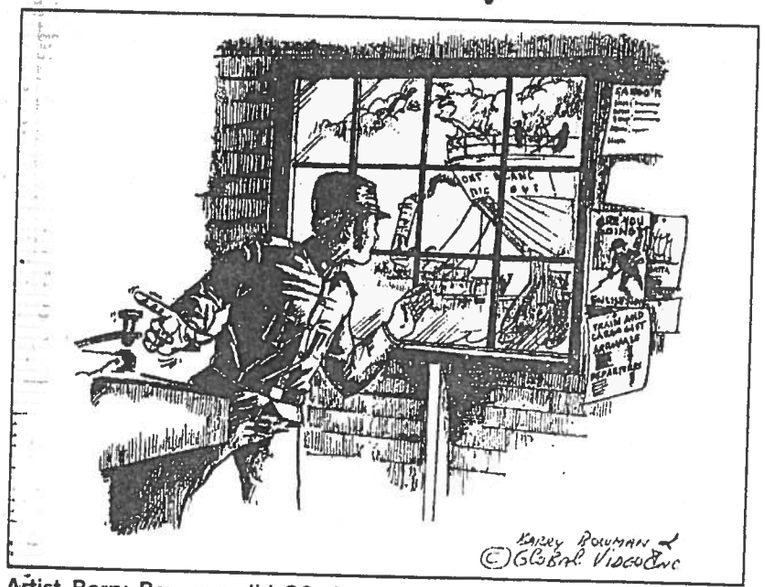
See also file
re "Fort Needham
Memorial Bells"

Entertainment

Documentary on Halifax Explosion seen through artist's eyes



Artist Barry Bowman did 30 drawings including the above of heroic telegraph operator Vincent Coleman, illustrating the people and events of the 1917 Halifax Explosion for John Versteege's video documentary Thunder in the Sky.

By Elissa Barnard
ARTS REPORTER

Dartmouth documentary filmmaker John Versteege was surprised to find the daughter of Halifax Explosion hero Vincent Coleman for his 80-minute video documentary Thunder in the Sky.

Coleman is the telegraph operator who warned incoming trains of the Explosion minutes before it occurred and he was killed. His daughter, Nita Nolen, displays a photographic portrait of him in Thunder in the Sky.

Through lucky connections and advertising Versteege found survivors who'd never before been interviewed like 84-year-old Bill Carter who still picks glass out of his brow or Nellie Flynn, who recounts what happened to her family and the Mic Mac Indian community in Tufts Cove.

Versteege's search took him by fax to Marseilles for a photograph of the French munitions ship Mont Blanc and to the Falkland Islands, where he hired an underwater photographer to shoot the wreck of the Belgian relief steamer Imo.

Versteege didn't want to make a standard cut-for-TV documentary with the omnipresent narrator. "I decided to go right to the people and have them tell us. I was in some cases literally sitting on the edge of a sofa using direct light," says Versteege.

"I wanted the raw emotion of people remembering what happened. I didn't want all the lights and soundmen. People are mesmerized by all that technology and they freeze.

"In one clip a woman suddenly remembers she had a sister. I was dumbfounded and I said: What happened?"

He splices the oral history with interviews with Explosion experts, old photographs (some panned to look like a moving film image), 30 detailed drawings by artist Barry Bowman and four songs written by Truro songwriter Eric Young. Versteege builds dramatic tension leading up to the Explosion by filming the gears of the Town Clock.

Versteege's day job is running his Dartmouth video transfer service company Impact Videographic Services Ltd. As a filmmaker with his sister company Global Video, he has travelled all over the world and produced documentaries on cerebral palsy, a Calcutta street clinic, an educational project in Gambia and Peggy's Cove.

He is selling Thunder in the Sky through Impact Videographic and bookstores for $29.95. He wants to sell it to television but "TV is not my prime market," says Versteege, "My market is education and the general public.

"I'm not a journalist. In my eyes I'm an artist. If you do something full-time you have to compromise. If I was doing documentary for a TV network it would have to be in their style."

Versteege worked on Thunder in the Sky for two years because he thought there should be a video on the Explosion and a record of survivors before it was too late. "I think it's so important to put it on tape because they're all going to be gone. I was in tears many times."

Mail Star Friday, Dec 4/1992

'A terrible day'

North End woman recalls horror of Halifax Explosion

By Susan LeBlanc
STAFF REPORTER

Word of a disaster in the North End spread quickly to downtown Halifax on the crisp, sunny morning of Thursday, Dec. 6, 1917.

People didn't realize there had been an explosion, although they knew something terrible had happened. At Woolworth's on Barrington Street, the 16-year-old girl at the candy counter just knew she had to get home.

Stella Hartlen and another North Ender who worked in the store hitched a ride on a horse-drawn flatbed wagon, and headed towards Richmond.

"One sad sight I saw was a little girl sitting on the floor (of a store) with her schoolbag on her back — dead. She must have been blown there," Stella recalls. "It was a terrible day."

The girls were dropped off at Russell Street and went to a nearby field where neighbors had assembled. "My next-door neighbor, when she saw me, said, 'You needn't look: they're all gone," Stella says.

Albert Street, where the Hartlens had lived, was in flames.

■ See Terrible / A2

David Grandy/Clark Photographic

■ Stella (Hartlen) Johns, 91, moved into the Hydrostone soon after the Halifax Explosion.

EXPLOSION!
ANNIVERSARY EDITION

To mark the 75th anniversary of the Halifax Explosion, The Novascotian presents a special, four-page look at the blast that changed our history.

■ The Novascotian / B1-B4

Terrible day

■ continued from / A1

Gone were the family's two-storey house and lovely garden.

Stella didn't know the fate of her mother and two sisters, who had been at home that morning.

Dazed, she somehow made her way to the city's west end, vaguely hoping relatives would be at another sister's house, on Preston Street.

The explosion affected the Hartlen family — parents Albert and Catherine and 11 children — in various ways.

Eighteen-year-old Florrie, who also worked at Woolworth's, had stayed home that morning because she'd been up all night with a toothache. Badly cut in the blast, she escaped through a basement window. Her face would secrete shards of glass for years.

Upstairs, her mother and eldest sister, Blanche, weren't so fortunate.

Family members would eventually find "a handful of bones" in the ruins of the house. "That was my mother and my sister — we presumed it was them," says Stella. The remains were placed in a baby's boot box and dutifully turned over to the morgue. Catherine Hartlen had been a midwife, assisting in many Richmond births.

Twelve-year-old Percy, meanwhile, was lost until the night of Dec. 6. His family found him on top of Fort Needham — probably carried there, as others had been, by the explosion's cyclone-like effects. He was OK.

Father Albert was lucky: an employee of the Acadia Sugar Refinery, he'd been transferred only days before to the Dartmouth site. Dozens of people died at the Halifax refinery.

Ned Hartlen, a married son living on Veith Street, suffered particular hardships.

Just off the night shift and in bed when the blast occurred, he escaped from his house with two of his three children. But he couldn't find his pregnant wife, who, unknown to him, had been blown through a window and into a nearby apple orchard. (Their baby would be born disabled.)

Barefoot and bleeding, Ned was making his way down the street when a stranger grabbed the eldest child from his arms.

The boy's whereabouts were a mystery for days until the family learned he'd been sent to New Glasgow for medical care. A local family was about to adopt the boy when Ned stepped in.

Those Hartlens who could assembled at the Preston Street home the night of Dec. 6. They would stay there almost until Christmas.

In the mornings, father Albert and two of Stella's older brothers would visit the morgue in search of Ned's wife. "He had passed her bed many times in Camp Hill Hospital, but he didn't recognize her, her face was cut up so bad," Stella says.

Finally, during one hospital visit, the woman recognized her husband.

Meanwhile, Stella — "I was the only one that had anything decent to wear" — took Florrie to a Quinpool Road clinic each day for treatment. Stella was also forced into the role of homemaker.

Before Christmas, Stella, her father, three brothers and two sisters crammed into two North Park Street rooms offered by an acquaintance.

The Hartlens later moved into temporary quarters on the Exhibition Grounds and then to the Hydrostone. Albert Hartlen and son Ned rented two of the first Hydrostone homes on Duffus Street. Another son got one on Merkel Place.

"We've been living in the Hydrostone houses ever since," Stella says with a laugh. "You can't beat them."

She married Fred Johns in 1923, and the couple rented a flat on Livingstone Place. They and their children later moved to Hennessey Place, where Stella remains.

Today, she cherishes two rosebushes that grew from a cutting taken from the ashes of the Hartlens' old home. "My father always went in for roses and pansies and gladiolus. Those were the flowers he liked."

Seeing the Halifax Explosion through young people's eyes

By Roy Thorpe

A conference marking the 75th anniversary of the Halifax Explosion this weekend gains a theatrical element with a play telling the story of the disaster through young people's eyes.

The Young Neptune Company production of The Explosion, written and directed by Jennette White, will be staged 8 p.m. Saturday at the Saint Mary's University Art Gallery as part of a conference put on by the Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies.

Tickets are $5 and are available at the door.

"I didn't want to do a play that was just facts. I want kids in 1992 to see that they're not a whole lot different from kids in 1917, they feel the same sorrow and tragedy," says White, Neptune Theatre School's director.

The play started as a project in White's Advanced Youth Collective class last spring. Research for the play continued into the fall.

White consulted several books about the explosion, including Janet Kitz's Shattered City, Michael Bird's Town That Died, newspapers of the time, and resources available at the Dartmouth Heritage Museum and Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.

From this research the characters and story of White's play began to emerge. White says she tried to adapt real stories, and the young people are composites of real and fictionalized characters.

"There are loads of heroes you never find out about - ordinary people," says White.

These heroes include a young boy on crutches giving out free editions of the Halifax Herald a few days after the explosion, and a young girl who helped doctors and nurses at the Camp Hill Hospital treat the injured.

She survived the blast because she was upstairs for morning prayers at the Halifax Academy when the explosion ripped through the city. Much of the Academy's main floor classrooms below her were destroyed.

"The biggest challenge was to reveal the people, the human beings that were there to be discovered," says White.

The Young Neptune Company actors Troy Adams, Kelti MacMillan, Scott Mealey and Kiersten Tough, and stage manager Denise Dolliver toured the province with the play for nine weeks, staging it mostly in school gyms with minimal sets and no lighting. The tour continues after Saturday's conference.

George Georgakakos

Young Neptune Theatre will present The Explosion 8 p.m. Saturday at the Saint Mary's University Art Gallery. From left, are, back row, Troy Adams and Scott Mealey and front, Kiersten Tough and Kelti MacMillan.

The reaction has been great, says White.

"We've already extended the tour by two weeks but we could have extended it by four to six weeks we've had so many orders," she says.

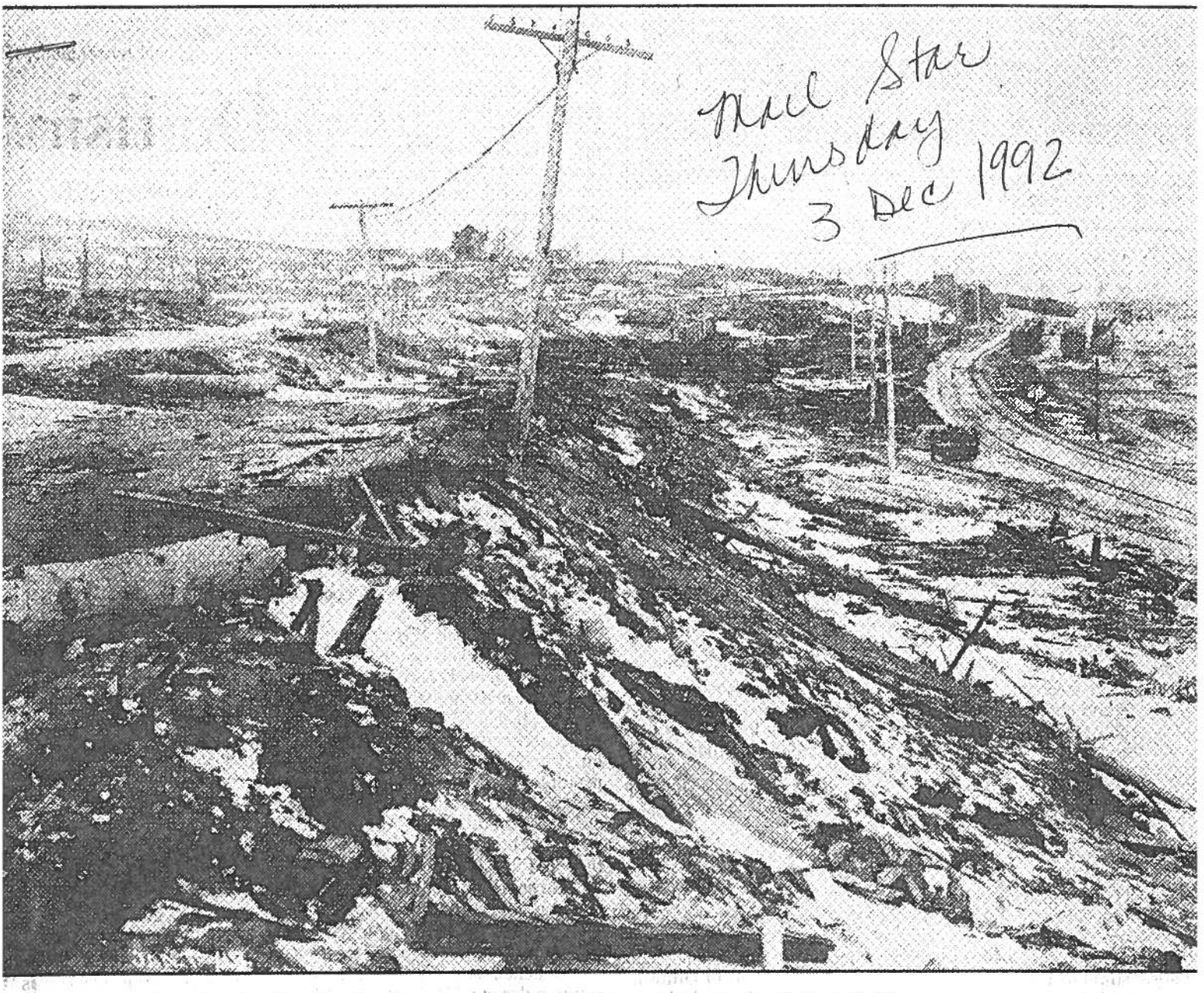
The company hands out a study guide and works with the schools to plan activities and discussions.

"It's really important for them (the kids) to get to know their own history," says White.

"I find the way children look at life much more fascinating than adults who have already built up barriers," she says. "But you still have to do quality work, they're not stupid."

White says she learned things about the Halifax Explosion she didn't know before and tried to include some of in the production. The play includes elements of the less well known Dartmouth side of the explosion, which included the destruction of a Micmac settlement at Turtle Grove, now called Tufts Cove.

■ Director Jennette White



Mail Star
Thursday
3 Dec 1992

This file photo taken shortly after the disaster shows some of the devastation in North End Halifax.

Defusing explosion myths

Halifax Explosion bumped down list of worst pre-atomic man-made blasts

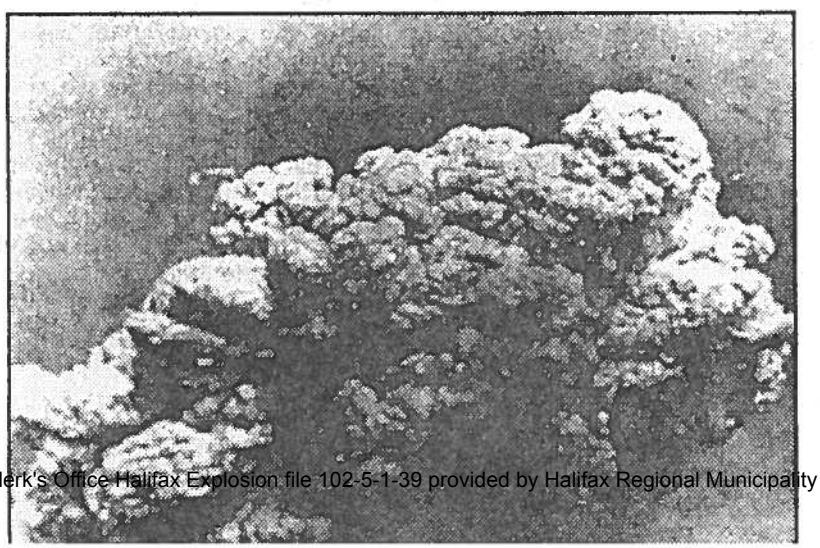
By Susan LeBlanc
STAFF REPORTER

The 1917 Halifax Explosion was not the world's largest man-made blast before Hiroshima, experts in Canada and the United States now say.

Although researchers hesitate to name number 1, they say the Halifax blast, long called the greatest pre-atomic explosion, ranks second or third.

And scientists are using new information and technologies to debunk other myths about the explosion, which occurred 75 years ago this Sunday.

The Dec. 6 explosion "may be overshadowed by one and possibly



EXPLOSION EVENTS

A sampling of Halifax Explosi events:

- Saint Mary's University conference Dec. 3-6, The 1917 E plosion: Collision in Halifax Harbour and its Consequences cludes public lecture 7:30 p.m day, SMU McNally Building. Dalhousie University historian David Sutherland describes H in 1917.
- At Dartmouth's Christ Churc Hall 7:30 p.m. Friday, author Payzant on Dartmouth's explc experience; Jennifer Burke discusses the lost Micmac village
- 9 a.m. Friday, memorial ser for schoolchildren, Fort Needl Bell Tower.
- 10 p.m. Saturday at St. Geo Anglican Church, Halifax, the matic monologue. Voices of th

Defusing

■ continued from / A1

"The implication is (the Halifax Explosion) is sort of a once-in-a-century event, but it wasn't," he said. "It was one in a series of events, and they're inevitable when you take a very large quantity of a very dangerous product and put it in the hands of fallible human beings."

Mr. Ruffman said the German and English blasts probably had more oomph than Halifax, while the 1944 explosion of a munitions ship in Bombay harbor probably took more lives. At least 2,000 people died in Bombay.

A conference on the explosion this weekend at Saint Mary's University in Halifax has prompted academics to re-examine these questions. As well, information is now available on incidents including the one at Burton-on-Trent, kept secret during wartime.

Still, comparing explosions is tricky because different materials caused the blasts, said Mr. Simpson.

The seismographic station at Halifax's Dalhousie University didn't give scientists and historians many clues: on Dec. 6, the seismograph stopped working at 9:04 a.m. — the time of the explosion.

The resulting blast was the greatest accidental explosion up to then. And researchers don't downplay its importance.

Scientists working on the atomic bomb studied Halifax to get an estimate of the effects of a large bomb dropped on an urban area.

But while "people allude to a crater" in the Halifax Harbour floor, there isn't one, said Gordon Fader, a marine geologist at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography.

"Underneath the keel of the Mont Blanc," Nova Scotian Hugh MacLennan wrote in his 1941 novel, Barometer Rising, "the water opened and the harbour bottom was deepened six metres along the channel of the narrows."

Yet when staff from the Bedford institute used sonar a few years ago to scan the harbor bottom, they found no crater.

File photo

The retrieval of bodies following the explosion was a nightmare. Sometimes victims were piled together, above. Rescuers dug through rubble and often found pitiful, charred remains.

Stranger than fiction

Tales from blast tragic, bizarre

By Susan LeBlanc
STAFF REPORTER

THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION has become such an accepted part of local history, we sometimes forget the sheer power of the story.

Hollywood writers couldn't have topped it: a massive wartime disaster strikes, killing at least 1,600. The misery is compounded in the following days by the worst blizzard in years; rumors fly about German sabotage; the world reacts generously.

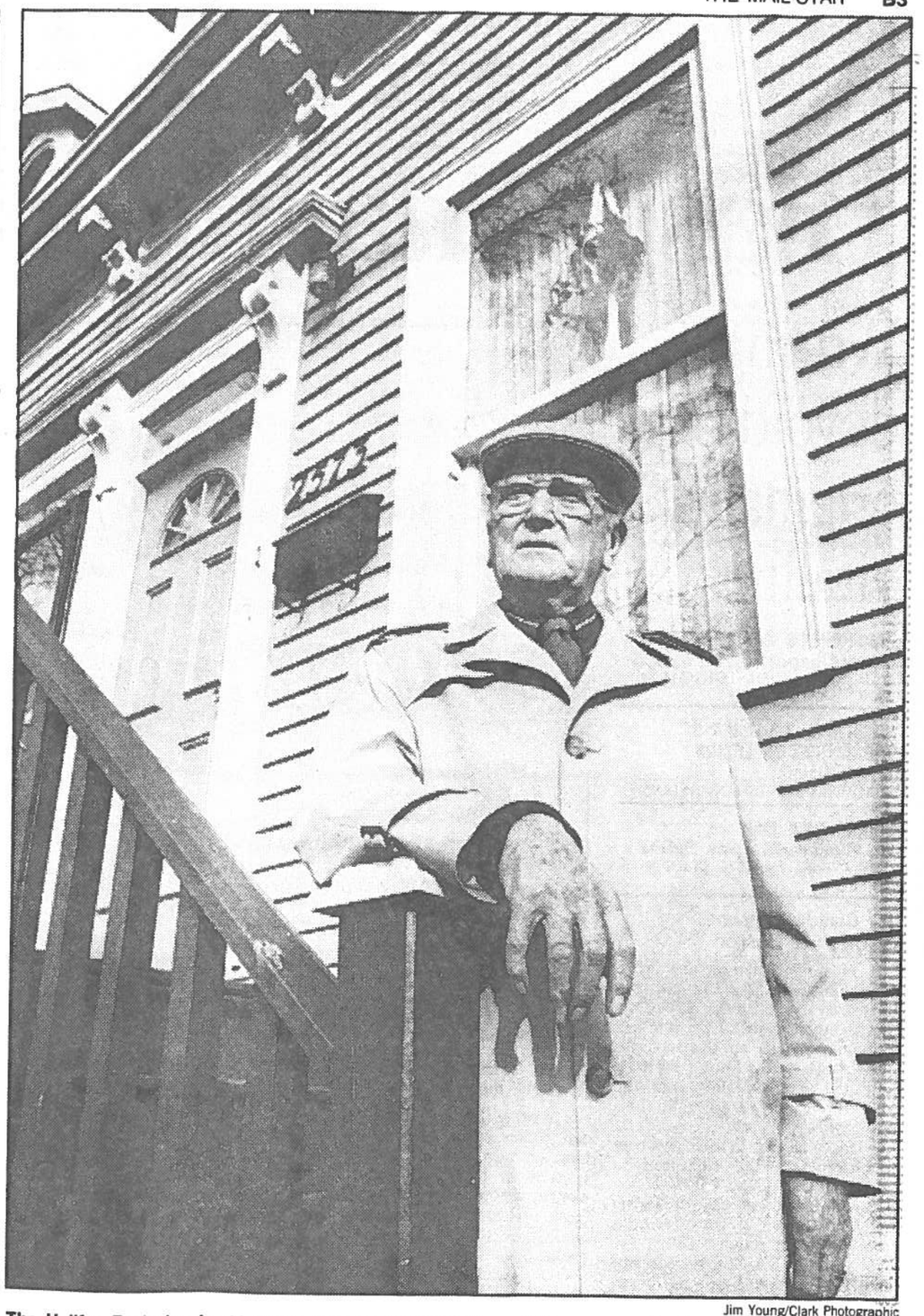
At the same time, events become mythologized, and 75 years later, researchers are still debunking those myths.

Yet it's worth noting many of these stories come from reports done soon after the blast, and were based on personal interviews.

They were the sorts of tales that would later be deemed fateful or ironic. On Dec. 6, 1917, they were incredible.

Copy of City Clerk's Office Halifax Explosion file 102-5-1-39 provided by Halifax Regional Municipality Archives

■ **Steel fragments** from the 2,652-tonne Mont Blanc flew everywhere:



Jim Young/Clark Photographic

The Halifax Explosion buckled this Brunswick Street house "like an accordian" when Leo Flinn, above, occupied the house with his family. Aged 6, he escaped with just a badly cut lip, but three family members each lost an eye because of injuries suffered in buildings around town.

■ In **Africville**, towards the Bedford Basin from the blast, damage was minimal, with mostly blown-in windows. The explosion sent 16-month-old Leo Carvery flying be-

■ J. Prentice Murphy, of the Boston Children's Aid Society, toured Richmond and wrote: "A **team of horses** was caught in the full blast

part of her anchor shank, weighing 513 kilograms, travelled more than two miles. The ship disintegrated.

The anchor chain of the nearby tugboat Weatherspoon coiled around and around a boxcar in the railyard.

Total devastation stretched 130 hectares. Windows shattered 80 kilometres away; the shock was felt in Sydney, more than 435 kilometres away.

■ **"The dead,** the dying and the severely injured lay about the streets, amid ghastly, bleeding fragments of what had been human beings' heads and limbs. Here was a man with his side torn open and his entrails exposed. There was a woman cut in two and gasping her last," Archibald MacMechan reported for the Halifax Disaster Record Office.

MacMechan tells the tale of a naked, dazed woman seen walking down the street, holding her left breast in her hand.

■ Stories abound of people being **transported through the air** or finding themselves naked.

Most of those carried uphill didn't survive, but schoolgirl Barbara Orr did. She awoke on top

File photo

Msgr. T.J. Buchanan, curate of St. Joseph's Church, surveys the snow-covered ruins of his church.

of Fort Needham, a quarter of a mile away from where she'd been. Her foot and leg were crushed, and one of her tightly laced boots was missing.

■ Survivors carried pitiful remains of loved ones to the **mortuary.** As Janet Kitz writes, one mortuary tag read, "Two or possibly three children."

■ An ensuing **tidal wave** 10-20 metres high swept up streets and pulled people to their deaths.

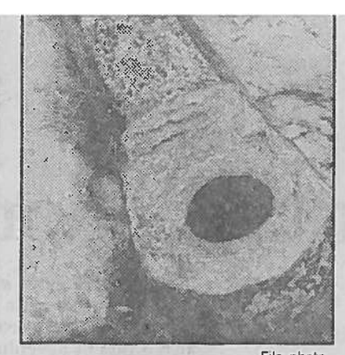
■ In **Dartmouth,** a stand of spruce trees fell, their tops pointing away from the explosion. Nearby, trees were felled in the opposite direction — their tops pointing toward the harbor.

■ An hour after the explosion, soldiers ordered people from their homes, due to a fear the **Wellington Barracks magazine** would explode, too. (It didn't.) People fled to Citadel Hill, Point Pleasant Park and outlying parts of town. The North End was deserted.

Observers called it a strange, pitiful parade that probably contributed to more misery and death. "The greatest hardship was endured by those who had found shelter, had their wounds dressed, and now had to be carried out of the different refuges and laid on the ground," wrote MacMechan.

■ The shock of the explosion sent many women into **premature labor.** One woman, the story goes, gave birth amid the throng who waited on the Halifax Commons during the scare of a second blast.

■ **Air compression** from the blast jammed the doors of the Kidd



File photo

This part of the Mont Blanc's anchor landed at the Edmonds Grounds on the North West Arm.

house on Agricola Street.

Fifteen-year-old Violet Kidd and her sister, Edith, were in the kitchen when it caved in. When they tried to escape, they couldn't open any doors.

Then Violet saw a soldier's boot burst through the door. "When I saw the puttee, I thought it was the Germans," says Violet.

The boot belonged to Edith's husband, Robert Barratt, who'd been on the stoop. His action released the air pressure, and the doors opened.

always used to tell me that."

One Africville woman died after being injured on her way to work.

■ **The ferry** was about five minutes from the Dartmouth dock when the Mont Blanc blew. No one was seriously injured, and the ferry continued on its way. Ferry service never stopped.

■ The military erected tents on the Commons for emergency shelter — 400 within hours. The **tent city** went largely unoccupied that first, cold night.

■ Lt.-Gov. MacCallum Grant and his family were forced to live in the basement of **Government House** after 900 panes of glass were broken in the official residence.

■ By Dec. 12, the **devastated Richmond area** was surrounded by an armed, mounted guard. People needed passes to get in. Looting was feared, and authorities didn't want the enemy, Germany, to know about the explosion, says Alan Ruffman, an organizer of this weekend's explosion conference at Saint Mary's University in Halifax.

they were partly erect and covered with a sheathing of ice so that the horses looked like a piece of statuary."

■ Western Union in Halifax received an average of **5,000 telegrams** daily in December.

■ More than 1,000 offers to adopt **explosion orphans** arrived, blue-eyed, fair-haired children being preferred. One man was willing to take two healthy children, aged 10-12, provided they had happy dispositions, good family backgrounds and pleasant manners.

He did not want children with red hair, turned-up noses or weak chins.

■ Enterprising people tried to capitalize on the disaster immediately, with **photo books,** postcards and the like.

SOURCES: The Halifax Explosion, by Graham Metson (McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd.); Shattered City, by Janet Kitz (Nimbus); Heart Throbs of the Halifax Horror (Gerald E. Weir), by Stanley K. Smith; interviews.

Explosion wiped out Tufts Cove Micmac community

By Claudia Pinsent
BOOK PAGE EDITOR

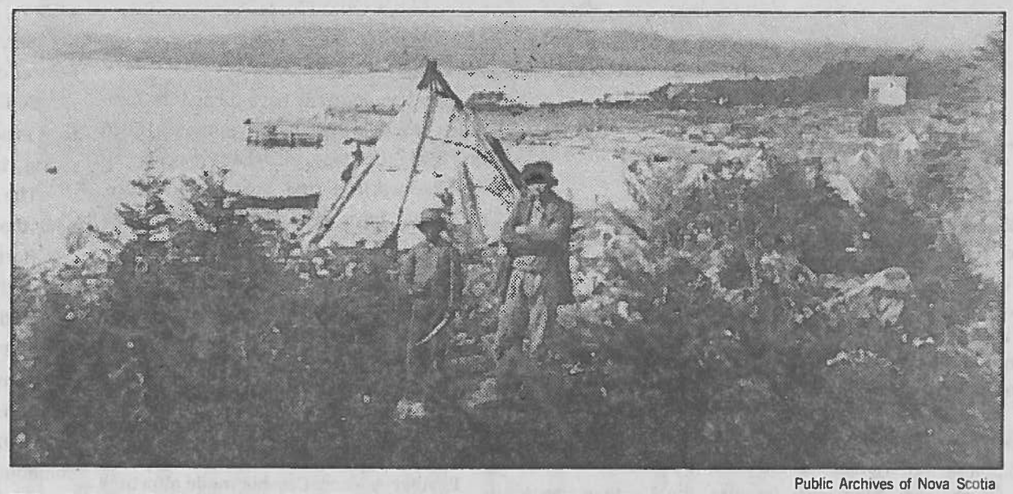
On April 9, 1917, four of the Micmac families living along the Dartmouth shore at Tufts Cove wrote yet another letter to the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa. In it Frank, Jim and Joe Brooks and Jeremiah Bartlett Alexis asked that money owed them be put toward construction of homes at Spring Brook near Shubenacadie.

Then on Nov. 27, 1917, members of that same Micmac encampment sent another letter to Ottawa. In it they pointed out that a Mr. Farrell of Halifax claimed ownership of the land on which they had settled at Tufts Cove, north of Halifax Breweries Ltd.

Writing on behalf of fellow Micmacs, Alexis (also known as Jerry Lonecloud) said that the Micmac had had encampments near the harbor Narrows "since time out of mind." But, he wrote, they had been told to leave within two weeks.

Whether either letter was ever answered ceased to matter on the morning of Dec. 6, 1917.

Like numerous people living



Public Archives of Nova Scotia

This photograph shows part of the Micmac encampment at Tufts Cove, destroyed by the Halifax Explosion.

near both sides of the harbor, many Micmacs had ventured closer to the shore to get a better look at two ships that had collided near the Narrows.

The Mont Blanc flew no red flag warning of explosives aboard. So, like thousands of others, the Micmacs had no inkling of what was to come.

Provincial museum curator Harry Piers recorded that on Dec. 31, 1917, Lonecloud provided him with the following information: "Pieces of iron were hurled about them (the Micmacs). The settlement consisted of seven shanties in the spruce woods there. These shanties were destroyed. There were 21 Indians in the settlement, of whom nine were instantly killed or afterwards died from injuries received, and 12 escaped but mostly badly injured."

Ironically, among the dead was 71-year-old Frank Brooks, one of those who had wanted to move to Spring Brook, and Lonecloud's daughter Hannah, 15. Also killed were three women and three other children, one an infant. Later, another of Lonecloud's daughters, 30-year-old Rosie, died after being pinned beneath timbers. Two of the dead, Janet Gloade, 32, and Benjamin Labrador, 13, of Milton, Queens County, had been visiting the encampment.

Subsequently, the Micmacs learned that George F. Richardson, principal of their small school, located in what was then a sparsely inhabited area north of Dartmouth, had been killed instantly as he watched the collision from the Halifax shore.

In their reminiscences recorded in Harry Chapman's new book Dartmouth's Day of Anguish, sisters Margaret and Mollie Campbell, who boarded on Windmill Road, said they "proceeded north to Tufts Cove where they found numerous children in the Indian School, who were badly cut and bleeding."

Among the estimated 2,500 people listed in newspapers of the day as being in hospital appeared the names of seven more Micmacs, all from Tufts Cove. Richard Nebin (Nevin) was taken to Victoria General Hospital, as were infants Philip and Howard Nebin (Nevin). A Mrs. Paul and her unnamed son were treated at the Nova Scotia Hospital, while Madeline and Peter Joe Paul received medical attention elsewhere in the town.

Lonecloud also related that six of the dead were buried in a single grave "in the Roman Catholic cemetery at Dartmouth, on Thursday, 20th December, the Rev. Father Underwood officiating, and a large number of Indians following the remains."

Following the explosion, the Micmacs were in "absolute destitute conditions," having lost everything. Lonecloud reported that homes were built for the survivors near the schoolhouse, which, Chapman says, was destroyed and never replaced. Dartmouth's relief commission and the Department of Indian Affairs provided necessary help.

But despite those efforts, most of the Micmacs never returned to Tufts Cove.

Blast's magnitude compromised

Writing devoid of originality, vitality

DARTMOUTH'S DAY OF ANGUISH
Harry Chapman
DARTMOUTH HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION ($12)

SURVIVORS: CHILDREN OF THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION
Janet Kitz
NIMBUS PUBLISHING ($12.95)

WORSE THAN WAR
M. Pauline Murphy Sutow
FOUR EAST PUBLICATIONS ($4.95)

By Claudia Pinsent
BOOK PAGE EDITOR

Most of us by now are aware that Sunday marks the 75th anniversary of the Halifax Explosion. So it comes as no surprise to see four new books on the topic — three written for young readers, and the fourth dealing with the disaster from a Dartmouth perspective.

Since all four in their own way commemorate this milestone, it isn't unreasonable to have expected material at least bordering on the exceptional. Unfortunately, that isn't the case.

Granted, it's difficult to locate fresh information on an event which has generated so much material over the years. And, it's difficult to avoid repetition, even when the viewpoint does explore basically uncharted territory as is the case with Dartmouth.

Realizing those factors, three of the authors chose to write for a younger audience, one largely unfamiliar with details of the catastrophe yet old enough to learn more. Interestingly enough, Joan Payzant's fictional account

Courtesy Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

In the aftermath of the Halifax Explosion, it became obvious that destruction in north-end Dartmouth was as severe as in Halifax. Fortunately, north Dartmouth was sparsely populated.

Writing that packs a punch can make even familiar details take on new life and substance. Regardless of the intended audience, writing style and strategy have seriously compromised the quality of three of these new books.

In Dartmouth's Day of Anguish, author Harry Chapman rewards us with some enlightening information and rarely seen photographs reflecting a point of view that has barely been examined in the last seven decades.

He embarks on this 45-page history by describing Dartmouth as it appeared in 1917 against a First World War backdrop. From there he devotes details leading up to the collision and to the explosion which for many years had

lated north end, killing an estimated 50 residents, including almost half of the 21 Micmacs living in an encampment at Tufts Cove, near the Narrows.

Next Chapman moves on to rescue and relief efforts and follows this with 11 personal accounts, some of which are published here for the first time.

The final chapter deals with the explosion's aftermath and the process of rebuilding, while the last page provides a list of those killed as recorded at the time in the Dartmouth Patriot, McAlpine's Halifax City Directory and church documents.

Dartmouth's Day of Anguish is not meant to be a comprehensive history and that could

sociation are to be complimented for getting this material into print.

Through it we come to understand that the Halifax and Dartmouth experiences differed only in magnitude. Northend Dartmouth, including the Tufts Cove area, was less developed and consequently lacked the population density of its Halifax counterpart. Fewer people resulted in fewer deaths, but that does not diminish similarities in individual experiences, injuries and hardships.

Day of Anguish falls short of capitalizing on its novel point of view. Instead, it reads like a recitation of facts rather than the riveting story of a catastrophe that affected thousands and grabbed

Survivors is a follow-up to Shattered City, one of the most detailed and well researched books written on the topic, and admittedly a hard act to follow.

Although written for young readers, Kitz' latest book basically regurgitates the experiences of five or six young survivors whose stories are already documented in Shattered City.

It succeeds in putting faces to what had been a litany of names and numbers, and it does a convincing job of recreating a child's daily routine in 1917, before the devastating events of Dec. 6.

However, the writing is generally flat — sometimes even condescending — and is further belabored by repetition which ex-

FURTHER READING

Several books and portions of books have been written about the Halifax Explosion. The following selection is readily available.

NON-FICTION

Shattered City, Janet Kitz, Nimbus Publishing, 1989

The Town That Died, Michael Bird, 1962

Halifax Explosion (In More Tales Told Under the Old Town Clock), W.C. Borrett, Imperial Publishing, 1943

The Penalties of War (In Historic Halifax), W.C. Borrett, Ryerson, 1948

Halifax's Other Hill, Paul Erickson, Saint Mary's University, 1984

Halifax, December 6, 1917, Graham Metson, West House Museum, 1977

Miracles and Mysteries, Mary Ann Monnon, Lancelot Press, 1977

FICTION

Burden of Desire, Robert MacNeil, Doubleday, 1992

The Sixth of December, Lotz, Jim, Paperjacks, 1981

Barometer Rising, Hugh MacLennan, Duell, 1941

It's obviously meant for juvenile readers, but fails to clearly delineate a specific age group. Consequently, although it avoids jargon and does explain terminology, it ends up being a hodgepodge of language sometimes only a notch above simplistic.

One unique aspect of this publication is its reproduction of pen and ink drawings executed at the time by Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer. Another plus involves the inclusion of diagrams showing the paths of the Imo and

catastrophe yet old enough to learn more. Interestingly enough, Joan Payzant's fictional account, Who's A Scaredy-cat?, also set in Dartmouth and reviewed separately, is the sole member of this trio that really works. It succeeds because it exudes vitality.

there he reviews events leading up to the collision and to the explosion which for many years had the dubious distinction of being the world's most powerful man-made blast.

We learn that it shattered much of the town's thinly popu-

Dartmouth's Day of Anguish is not meant to be a comprehensive history and that could have acted in its favor, allowing more flexibility. Instead, the finished product is highly predictable, even though Chapman and The Dartmouth Historical As-

iteration of facts rather than the riveting story of a catastrophe that affected thousands and grabbed worldwide attention.

Janet Kitz' second book on the disaster, Survivors: Children of the Halifax Explosion, is deficient in much the same way.

descending — and is further belabored by repetition which extends even to the reproduction of the young survivors' photographs.

Lastly comes Worse Than War. This is a kind of primer, an overview of the Halifax Explosion, complete with illustrations.

volves the inclusion of diagrams showing the paths of the Imo and the Mont Blanc prior to impact. The balance of its now-familiar illustrations are drawn mainly from the James Collection in the City of Toronto Archives.

Payzant's fiction a believable adventure

WHO'S A SCAREDY-CAT?
Joan Payzant
Illustrator Marijke Simons
WINDMILL PRESS ($9.95)

By Susan Hughes
STAFF REPORTER

The Halifax Explosion has been the subject of many books but few have been written through the eyes of a child.

The explosion claimed many young victims: children attending schools located close to Halifax Harbour and youngsters in the area who died when their homes were destroyed on that cold December day 75 years ago.

However, Joan Payzant's new novel, Who's a Scaredy-cat?, does not dwell exclusively on the bloody aftermath of the tragedy. While the story describes how two 12-year-old girls cope with the disaster's resulting terror and confusion, it's also a tale of adventure.

It's unusual too since it is set in Dartmouth and draws a dramatic picture of how the explosion affected that town.

Payzant has recreated an historically correct setting in her novel. The book is sprinkled with references to actual sites and conditions. That authenticity extends to daily practices in 1917 such as the milkmen going from house to house, using large milk cans to fill pitchers.

I gave the book to my nine-year-old niece from Saint John, N.B. who pronounced it "great."

She liked the way the two girls complemented each other. Flossie is a mischievious prankster, while Isobel is quieter and more dutiful. But despite Flossie's flair for getting into trouble, her search for her family amid the ruins of various Dartmouth neighborhoods is heroic.

My niece had previously not known about the Halifax Explosion. "It was really good," she said, after reading the book practically non-stop. "It was exciting. Things were always happening, especially during the explosion."

She also had high praise for the book's pen-and-ink drawings which were executed by Marijke Simons of Dartmouth.

However, the tragedy of the incident was not lost on her. "I really would not like to have lived in those times."

Whose a Scaredy-cat? is written for children between eight and 12. However, the book is loaded with local color and historical references so that it has a nostalgic attraction for older readers too.

Also worthy of note, on this the 75th anniversary of the explosion, is a short story by Halifax resident Sharon Gibson Palermo called I am Hilda Burrows.

Published in The Blue Jean Collection by Thistledown Press Ltd., the story is also about a young girl's search for her family in the aftermath of the explosion.

It contains wrenching descriptions of injured children and grieving parents. The bloody effects of the disaster are dramatically portrayed. The heroine herself is badly hurt and the reader is made intensely aware of her physical and mental agonies.

Palermo's writing is simple yet effective. The story is a good depiction of a city in pain.

BEST SELLERS

This week's hard and softcover fiction and non-fiction books as compiled by by Maclean's magazine. the nova Scotia list is compiled by the Book Room, Halifax.

FICTION
1 (1) The English Patient — Ondaatje
2 (2) Mostly Harmless — Adams
3 (3) Griffin and Sabine — Bantock
4 (-) Dolores Claiborne — King
5 (4) Sabine's Notebook — Bantock
6 (5) The Tale of the Body Thief — Rice
7 (6) Good Bones — Atwood
8 (-) Domes of Fire — Eddings
9 (7) Driving Force — Francis
10 (9) The Children of Men — James

NON-FICTION
1 (1) Sex — Madonna
2 (2) Welcome Home — McLean
3 (5) Every Little Thing — Herriot
4 (8) The Change — Greer
5 (3) The Mother Zone — Jackson
6 (6) Voltaire's Bastards — Saul
7 (10) Nobody Nowhere — Williams
8 (4) The Te of Piglet — Hoff
9 (7) A Woman's Place — McLaughlin
10 (-) The Tapestry of War — Gwyn

NOVA SCOTIA BOOKS
1 (4) Map of the Province of Nova Scotia — Formac Publishing, Province of Nova Scotia
2 (2) Survivors: Children of the Halifax Explosion — Kitz
3 (1) Out of the Depths — Knockwood
4 (-) Coal in Our Blood — Hoegg Ryan
5 (5) Thine Own Keeper — Ripley

Rare Ambition epic in theme, scope

RARE AMBITION: THE CROSBIES OF NEWFOUNDLAND
Michael Harris
VIKING ($29.99)

By Jim Meek

A scholarly buffoon, a wealthy skinflint, a shy bully and an ambitious recluse, John Crosbie is a tough subject for any biographer.

But Michael Harris has done a conjurer's job of bringing Crosbie — and the Crosbie clan — to life. Rare Ambition really does cast a spell over the reader.

Harris has been criticized as a writer in search of an editor. But if Rare Ambition is overwritten in places, so is Paradise Lost. And make no mistake about it: this book is epic in its theme, scope and ambition.

Harris started from the assumption that there was too much "cultural clutter" in modern Canadian publishing — especially in the area of politics.

Rather than write another instant book, or even a comprehensive biography of John Crosbie himself, the author set out to tell the family saga.

He traces the Crosbies back to the Isle of Man, circa 980 AD, where they were the island's governors.

The first family member to set foot on Newfoundland soil was George Graham Crosbie, a plasterer who left New Brunswick for Newfoundland in 1858. John Crosbie's great grandfather went on to build a commercial empire in hotels and property.

His descendents — right down to John's late brother Andrew — made and lost great fortunes in the most perilous and definitive Newfoundland industry, the fishery.

Like most families, the Crosbies were pursued across the generations by their own demons — including alcoholism and other fatal attractions. The family was peopled by its share of drunks, adulterers, matriarchs, rowdymen and heroes.

And they all lived, somehow, on a grander scale. They rose higher — to the ruling caste of island society — and fell harder and further.

Harris could easily have turned the family history into a tabloid-style potboiler, filled with fistfights, long drunken sprees, internecine warfare and sexual escapades. That would have been the easier book to write.

Instead, he manages to show the reader how inextricably linked were the lives and character of the Crosbies to the complexities and ironies of Newfoundland life itself.

John entered public life determined to fight the demagogic style and corrupt government of Joey Smallwood.

Brother Andrew Crosbie made a fortune from patronage contracts wrested from his good friend Joey, whose campaign he ran when John dared to oppose Smallwood for the Liberal leadership in 1969.

One of John's early Liberal supporters was Brian Peckford. Both men ended up switching to the Tories. One later became premier, the other Newfoundland's senior federal cabinet minister.

Suffice to say that Newfoundland's history inside Canada is a short one, and the ruling class has been a small one.

The Crosbies have always been at or near the centre of that class.

Harris's accomplishment is weaving together the epic story of the Crosbies and the troubled history of Newfoundland. The reader really is left with the sense the you can't have one without the other.

Given the book's strengths, then, it is mere carping to complain about the author's sometimes overwrought prose style.

From its opening-chapter description of Smallwood's funeral in 1991 — where Brian Mulroney and Clyde Wells managed to stage a constitutional debate — Rare Ambition is simply a great read.

Jim Meek is senior editorial writer for The Chronicle-Herald and The Mail-Star.

Mike Harvey/Clark Photographic

Dr. Arthur Hinch, Halifax, lived in the Young Street home, above, with other relatives who'd survived the Halifax Explosion. The family lost 42 members in the disaster, including four in the demolished Barrington Street house also pictured.

'Unholy horror'

North End family decimated; 42 members lost in Explosion

By Susan LeBlanc
STAFF REPORTER

Dr. Arthur Hinch wasn't even born when the Halifax Explosion occurred, but it lurked in the shadows of his childhood.

Born in the Hydrostone in 1920, Hinch grew up in a household of explosion survivors — many maimed and blinded.

Those 10 people were all the relatives he had: the Hinch family had lost 42 members on Dec. 6, 1917.

That day "was just an unholy horror. The whole family was affected," says Hinch, a 72-year-old retired dentist living in Rockingham.

The family death toll was calculated by Hinch's father, Ned, a railway master mechanic. He lost his two-year-old child, his sister, a niece and a nephew in a three-storey house on north Barrington Street. The house had been flattened.

A north-end fixture since the early 19th century, the Hinch clan and assorted relations lived on Barrington, Acadia, Young and Veith streets.

In the days following the blast, Ned Hinch would comb those streets, as well as the morgue, for his family.

For instance, "Grandma" Margaret Stokes, mother of Ned's sister-in-law and the only grandmotherly figure Arthur would know, was thought lost for two days.

Family finally rescued her — blinded and scarred — from the basement of her decimated Acadia Street home. Her husband, John, had been killed. One son was missing. A daughter had a leg amputated, and a son had been blinded.

> **"I can remember the first day in that house. Toward me Grandma came along — she was scarred somewhat, awful, no eyes. She was putting her hands out like the (newly) blind do. (My cousins) Tom and Alan were doing the same thing."**
>
> **Dr. Arthur Hinch**
> **Halifax**

Arthur got to know Grandma Stokes well after he and his twice-widowed father moved in with her and the rest of the extended family in 1926. They shared a large house on Young Street on the ruins of a destroyed building.

"I can remember the first day in that house," says Hinch. "Toward me Grandma came along — she was scarred somewhat, awful, no eyes. She was putting her hands out like the (newly) blind do. (My cousins) Tom and Alan were doing the same thing."

Although Hinch says his childhood wasn't hard, just different, he does not remember any visitors or any parties. He never brought home his chums from Alexander McKay School.

Instead, when he wasn't playing among nearby ruins, young Arthur spent a lot of time watching out for his blind grandmother and two male cousins who were about 5 when the explosion hit.

Tom was particularly disfigured after a beam had fallen on his forehead. Arthur was able to place two fingers in the cavity in Tom's forehead before it was closed years later by plastic surgery.

Yet no one ever mentioned the disaster.

"I never even knew how Kathleen lost her leg," Hinch says.

Despite their misfortune, both blinded boys earned university degrees; Tom also became skilled in mechanics, married and had five children.

Grandma Stokes' five daughters did especially well: Kathleen, who lost a leg, received her doctorate and taught in the United States; Agnes, who lost an eye and was badly injured, went on to marry and raise a family; badly cut, Francis studied to be an American public health nurse.

Helen, unhurt in the explosion, played violin for a time with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and Mary, the wife of Hinch's uncle John, held the patchwork family together.

Her husband, John, had lost his sight in one eye but never let on to his long-time employers at the railway.

"I often wondered what it would be like to have all those (lost) relatives," Hinch muses. "Gee, I wouldn't know what I'd do with them."

Impact of disaster: The path to recovery

■ continued from / B1

Other improvements to daily

Today 7,000 would die

Halifax's public health system. The city went from having a dismal record to having "the finest public program and most complete public health organization in the Dominion," Samuel Prince said in 1920.

The establishment of a full-service health centre, appointment of a doctor of public health and the strengthening of sanitation rules could all be traced to the arrival of outside experts after the explosion.

Yet despite the demands of daily life, the city remained on edge. By 1920, fear of disaster had twice emptied the schools.

Officials did what they could to ease the transition after the explosion. The Dominion government, on Jan. 22, 1918, appointed the Halifax Relief Commission to oversee the rebuilding of the North End and compensate people for injuries and property loss.

The totally blinded could receive a lump sum payment of about $500 or a pension that remained small for many years.

Today, 22 people get pensions from the Halifax Relief Commission Pension Fund, now administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Their monthly payments range from $72.09 to $766.98, for the totally blind.

NEW NORTH END

The Halifax hit by the explosion was unattractive, poorly serviced and outmoded, said sociologist Samuel Prince.

"Halifax had been complacent and academic rather than practical in her outlook upon the world and her general attitude toward life," he wrote. "Tourists had returned year after year and found her unaltered. 'Dear, dirty old Halifax' they had called her."

The rebuilding offered a chance to change that. The Halifax Relief Commission was given wide powers and about $30 million in donated funds to do the job.

While most city buildings needed new windows, the North End — particularly the area around Fort Needham known as Richmond — was practically steamrolled. It looked like "some blackened hillside which a farmer had burned for fallow in the spring," said Prince.

For the new North End, Thomas Adams created an ambitious scheme. Town planning expert for the national Conservation Commission, Adams envisioned curving and diagonal streets north of Duffus Street, and a community square bordered by a school, a library, a church and an apartment building.

The diagonal streets — Devonshire and Dartmouth avenues — were built. But only the new Richmond School, was built on the square. The commission said it couldn't afford other innovations.

Adams, once president of the British Town Planning Institute, did get the relief commission to buy the eight-acre Fort Needham as a public park.

Meanwhile, Montreal architect George Ross insisted the new residences be fireproof, have indoor toilets, and not be monotonous in appearance. He also wanted to avoid quick replacement housing that would turn into slums.

Thus came the "Hydrostone" row houses, named after the concrete blocks used in their construction. The 328 rental dwellings, 15 stores and three offices were built in various combinations and were punctuated by wide boulevards.

Free-standing houses in the Ross style were also built throughout the North End, including many of the houses on Union and Needham streets. As well, some families used relief money to reconstruct their homes.

In Dartmouth, about 100 houses were rebuilt, plus churches, schools, and a rink on the site of the Dartmouth Sportsplex.

Halifax "became something of a training ground for a number of Canadian and American exponents of new professions related to social policy and planning, not the least of which was town planning," John C. Weaver wrote in Plan Canada in 1976.

Weaver calls the Hydrostone "an exceptional episode in the history of Canadian cities." But he also blasts planners for being paternalistic and for engaging in "rigid social engineering."

The Hydrostone row houses were intended as "a social curtain," he says, between larger replacement homes on the Richmond slope below Gottingen Street, and poorer-quality frame houses west of the Hydrostone.

Yet Janet Kitz, who has written two books on the explosion and takes a special interest in survivors, says North Enders didn't want extravagant reconstruction. People said as much at the time, and wanted what they'd lost.

Although it was the industrial part of Halifax when the explosion hit, the North End was blessed with lots of open space and rural living, she says. And, she says, it improved with the reconstruction.

Today young, well-off families are moving into the row houses. On the north shore of the harbor, shipyards and dockyards still operate.

But never rebuilt there were three piers, a railway station, a sugar refinery and other 19th-century industrial facilities. The devastation sped up plans to develop piers in the city's south end, and gave early life to a planned south-end rail station.

LITERATURE

It's surprising that out of the sadness and hard work that followed the explosion, a novel should appear within the year. Lt.-Col. F. McKelvey Bell, chairman of the medical relief committee, unveiled A Romance of the Halifax Disaster in 1918. The devastation has inspired writers ever since.

Perhaps half a dozen fiction writers from Hugh MacLennan to writer-publisher Lesley Choyce have tackled the topic, says Donna Smyth of Acadia University's English department.

"I'm intrigued by how the human imagination takes hold of such an event and proceeds to change it to suit a point of view or to suit a text," Smyth says.

The best-known work is MacLennan's 1941 novel, Barometer Rising. MacLennan, age 10 in 1917, was undoubtedly struck by the experiences of his father, a doctor who participated in relief efforts.

"I believe that Hugh MacLennan was profoundly affected by that experience," says Smyth. "He said it was really what set him on the road to being a writer."

Nova Scotia writer Thomas Raddall would discuss the event in Halifax, Warden of the North. Halifax writer Jim Lotz used it as a device in his 1981 thriller, The Sixth of December. Choyce wrote The Sixth of December: The Halifax Solution as a starting point for a discussion of nuclear attack. Most recently, Halifax native Robert MacNeil used it as a backdrop to his novel Burden of Desire.

In non-fiction, many historians haven't been native Nova Scotians, says marine geologist and Ontario native Alan Ruffman.

Janet Kitz, originally from Scotland, says that is understandable. Some Nova Scotians refused to discuss it for years.

Archibald MacMechan's fascinating report of the Halifax Disaster Record Office remained unpublished until 1978 when Graham Metson edited it for his book, The Halifax Explosion.

MacMechan, Metson writes, seemed "unable or unwilling to complete a final chapter entitled 'The City Heroic'.... As we read his powerful document today we realise as he must have that no final chapter is possible to such a history, for its repercussions still affect us."

Public Archives of Nova Scotia

TOP: Photograph taken just after the explosion by W.G. MacLaughlin, from Gottingen Street in the vicinity of Kane, Livingstone, Stairs and Stanley streets. BOTTOM: The photographer moved about half a block south in 1921 for this shot of the newly-built Hydrostone.

Would we be ready?

Disaster planning in Halifax today can barely be compared with that of 1917: there wasn't any.

After the explosion, rescuers' experiences caused some quick changes. Fire hoses were standardized throughout Nova Scotia because fire equipment rushed in from other communities was unusable.

If a major disaster occurred today, metro officials would refer to a detailed plan, says Tom Abraham, Halifax's emergency planning director. Emergency measures representatives from the four metro municipalities meet about once a month.

Abraham says each city department would have a role to play, while a few municipal buildings would operate on backup power to give officials a headquarters.

Hospitals have a coordination plan. Dalhousie Medical School has a plan. Emergency assembly areas plus evacuation procedures and routes are listed in the yellow pages.

Also, in 1990, the province staged an emergency response simulation of the explosion to find planning defects. Experts estimate 7,000 would die if the explosion occurred today.

Susan LeBlanc, Staff Reporter

The Novascotian:
75th Anniversary
of Halifax Explosion

THE HALIFAX HERALD

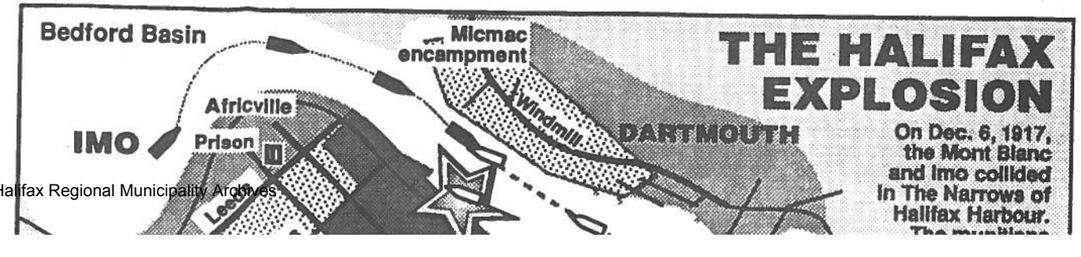
Nova Scotia's
Win-the-War
Newspaper

FOUNDED FEBRUARY 14, 1875 HALIFAX, CANADA, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1917 VOLUME XLIII, NO. 298

HALIFAX WRECKED

This area of Barrington Street, Halifax, near the Narrows where the munitions ship Mont Blanc exploded, was completely razed by the blast on Dec. 6, 1917. File photo

IMPACT



DISASTER

EXPLOSIVE REVERBERATIONS: On Dec. 6, 1917, the Halifax Explosion devastated the north end of Halifax and sections of Dartmouth. The blast killed hundreds, ruined lives and changed the courses of others. And the explosion gave us literature, architecture and laws that, 75 years later, still affect us.

By Susan LeBlanc
STAFF REPORTER

LEO FLINN only began talking about the Halifax Explosion a year ago.

Flinn was 6 on Dec. 6, 1917, and escaped relatively unscathed with a badly cut lip. But his brother, father and grandmother each lost an eye.

Their Brunswick Street house, which still stands near North Street, "went together like an accordion," Flinn recalls.

The family smashed its way out, and those who needed help went to hospital. Leo and his nine-year-old brother, Harold, the one who'd lose his eye, sat in Camp Hill Hospital all day waiting for treatment. They never got it.

His father, injured in his Water Street office at Black and Flinn's wharf, retrieved the boys around suppertime after their mother realized two of their nine children were missing.

"It was a nightmarish day, I'll tell you that," says Flinn.

Other families fared worse. For many, the harbor collision of the ships Mont Blanc and Imo meant the end. More than 1,600 people died after the Mont Blanc's 2,652 tonnes of munitions ignited on impact. In Dartmouth, about 50 died.

The blast injured another 9,000 people, toppled wood stoves and set houses alight, razing 130 hectares in Halifax. Material losses approached $35 million.

That moment in time disrupted lives, transformed cities and changed the world.

People had never seen anything like it. The scientists of the atom bomb would study it.

And 75 years later, people still sift through its effects.

In his 1920 examination of the Halifax Explosion, King's College sociologist Samuel Prince quotes St. Augustine: "This awful catastrophe is not the end but the beginning. History does not end so. It is the way its chapters open."

EXPLOSION NUMBERS

KILLED: Officially more than 1,600 in Halifax; about 50 in Dartmouth. Nearly 200 drowned. Many feel the total should exceed 2,000.

INJURED: 9,000 people. 600 suffered eye injuries — more than half of those lost at least one eye. 38 people were totally blinded. Doctors in hospital treated 262 bone fractures. There were 31 amputees.

HOMELESS: 6,000. 25,000 residents were left with inadequate housing.

OTHER EFFECTS: Premature births soared. Exact figures aren't known, but relief organizers advertised around town for midwives. Hundreds of children were orphaned. Many people remarried.

SOURCES: Interviews, various books and published accounts.

TRAGEDY TO TRANSITION

"Before one could take two breaths, their friendly shelters had fallen upon the living, sentient beings within and condemned them to all kinds of horrible death. . . .Whole families were killed at once."

So reported Halifax professor Archibald MacMechan soon after the blast.

Despite the official casualty counts and the social workers' reports, it is impossible to calculate the human impact.

Many lives were changed forever. Certainly, anyone who survived the explosion or worked in relief was never the same.

The memories drove many survivors to breakdowns months later. A doctor, haunted by what he'd seen, hanged himself; a railroad man who'd lost his wife and children attempted suicide.

People were left with few, if any, mementoes of loved ones. Hundreds were orphaned, and some people were never found.

With four per cent of Halifax's population wiped out — about half of those under age 30 — mourning clothes were in short supply.

Officials attempted to register the dead, injured and homeless.

"Identification of infants, for example, was often difficult, and tragic mistakes were occasionally made. Amid the initial confusion, unauthorized adoptions even took place, causing years of uncertainty and misery," Janet Kitz wrote in her 1989 book Shattered City.

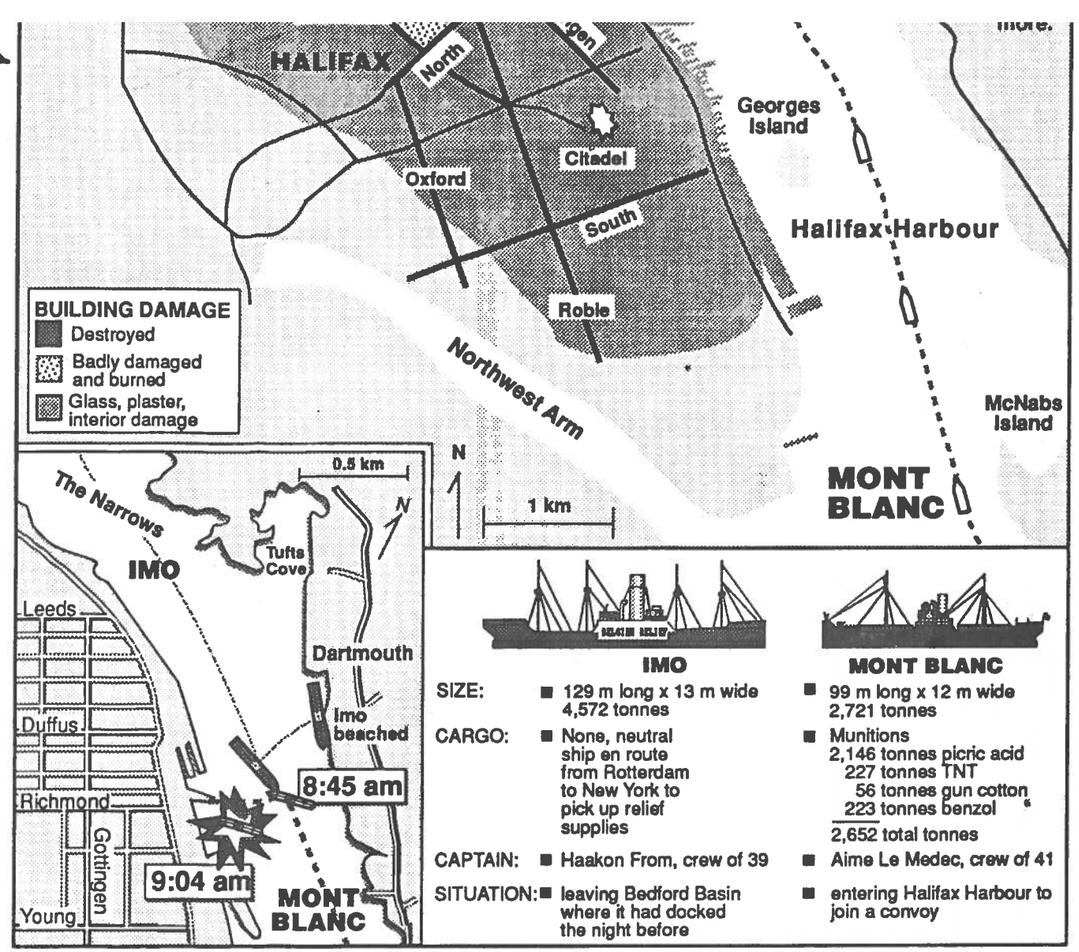
Survivors carried on, but plans changed: people moved in with distant relatives or never returned to their neighborhoods. Some never returned to school or work.

Then aged 15 and enrolled in Grade 7 at Bloomfield School, Violet (Kidd) Prest was among those who never returned. "It was a long time before the schools were rebuilt. I didn't go back after that," she says.

Other survivors had to learn braille or learn new trades. Hundreds of households were left without breadwinners.

The massive reconstruction that followed opened traditionally male jobs to women. Halifax's first female streetcar conductors appeared in 1918. The obsolete tramway system itself would be replaced by a state-of-the-art one.

■ See Disaster / B2



Sources: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Saint Mary's University, Janet Kitz, Alan Ruffman

Tina Leighton / Peggy McCalla

THE EFFECTS: From human tragedy to health care improvements, the explosion's legacy lives on. / **B1**

DEVASTATED FAMILY: The North End's Hinch family lost 42 members, with others injured or blinded. / **B2**

MICMAC TRAGEDY: Native people lost relatives and an ancestral community in Tufts Cove in Dartmouth. / **B3**

STRANGE TALES: A miscellany of file photos and touching and bizarre stories about the Explosion. / **B3**

BOOK PAGE: Reviews of four new books about the Halifax Explosion, plus a reading list. / **B4**

Verwig Road,
Cardigan
W. Wales
22nd November 1973.

"Dear Mayor"

Please forgive me for writing to you, but I still have a great interest in Halifax Nova Scotia, I am one of the survivors of the disaster of the explosion that struck your town on December 6th 1917. I have the book of the "town that died" by. Michael J Bird. the story of the World's greatest man made explosion before Hiroshima. It is as vivid in my mind to day, as it happened on that morning, Thursday December 6th 1917. although many years have gone by since that time, and no doubt the younger generation, have no interest in what took place in that town 56 years ago, and rightly so. to me, it will always be regarded as a red letter day in my life. I was aboard S.S. Picton when the "Mont Blanc" and the S.S Imo collided in the Straits. The "Mont Blanc" had a deck cargo of benzine which went on fire, before she finally blew up after 25 minutes, and the terrible devastation that killed and injured so many of the citizens and around the Docks that morning, really. It was "the Town that died" really and truly. I was and am still, thankfull to the citizens of Halifax, for having given me the kindness and succour to a young British seaman; I have been in contact with 2. mayors. the first was Mr Charles Vaughan 1964 and I believe the name of the second was Mr Murphy. I had a full report from Mr Vaughan of the killed and injured and also the number of homeless. I had a very large numbers of letters from the citizens of the province, I had proposed to visit the

the town on the 50th anniversary, but that time my dear wife died, but if I can get around to it. I shall be glad to pay a visit. If my health still is good enough to stand the trip I therefore shall now conclude. May I thro you, extend my very Kindest wishes to the citizen of your town and may I wish you personally a very Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year.

I remain
Yours very Sincerely
E. T Davies

P.S.
It was Nov 22 1917 that we struck a submerged reef on the way in to Halifax We lost a rudder and propellor

TO OPEN SLIT HERE

SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS (PLEASE SHOW YOUR POSTCODE)

Mr E.T Davies
"Bronwydd"
Verwig Road
Cardigan
West Wales

AN AIR LETTER SHOULD
NOT CONTAIN ANY ENCLOSURE;
IF IT DOES IT MAY BE SURCHARGED
OR SENT BY ORDINARY MAIL

SECOND FOLD HERE

BY AIR MAIL
AIR LETTER
PAR AVION AEROGRAMME

CARDIGAN 3 30PM 23 NOV 1973

5p

The "Mayor"
Mayors Parlour. Office
Halifax
Nova Scotia
Canada

B3J 3A5 December 6, 1973

Mr. E. T. Davies
Bronwydd
Werwig Road
Cardigan
West Wales

Dear Mr. Davies

Thank you for your letter of November 22, relating your very interesting experience on December 6, 1917. It certainly was a terrible tragedy which not only took a dreadful toll of life but which devastated the Northern section of the City.

Halifax has experienced many changes since that eventful day 56 years ago, but the most dramatic changes have taken place since the end of World War II and especially within the last ten years. Halifax's image is rapidly changing from that of a useful port in war time to one of a modern and successful city on the move. I am sure that you would note a great many changes, as few of the old landmarks remain; however, we are not forgetting our past or our heritage and City Council has taken steps to preserve a number of the historic buildings in the waterfront area and in other parts of the City so that the emerging Halifax will have the proper blending of old and new edifices.

I purposely delayed replying to your letter so that I could enclose a clipping from today's Halifax Mail Star referring to the "Explosion". I am also forwarding, under separate cover, material and pictures showing Halifax as it is today which I am sure will be of interest to you.

Dec 11/73

.../2

If it should be your good fortune to pay a return visit to Halifax, I would be pleased to receive you in my office at City Hall, which by the way, is still in the same location as it way in 1917. I wish you continued good health and I do hope that you have a pleasant holiday season.

Yours very truly

Walter R. Fitzgerald
M A Y O R

Halifax Explosion

B3J 3A5

February 17, 1986

Nova Scotia Archives
Dalhousie Campus
Coburg Road
Halifax
Nova Scotia

Dear Sirs

Attached are copies of a letter and photos received from D. L. Vasbinder of Upland, California, which you might care to add to your file on the Halifax Explosion.

Yours very truly

W. J. CLANCEY
INFORMATION OFFICER

WJC/rm

Encls.

B3J 3A5

February 16, 1976

Mr. D. L. Vasbindern
P.O. Box 206
Upland
California
U.S.A. 91786

Dear Mr. Vasbinder

Thank you for your letter of February 3, 1976 and the enclosed copies of photos taken in Halifax in 1917 at the time of the "Explosion" in Halifax Habbour. They are, indeed, unusual pictures as they were obviously taken by a crew member of the U.S.S. "St. Louis" shortly after the tragic event.

As you were kind enough to send two copies of each picture, I am taking the liberty of sending a cppy of each to the Nova Scotia Archives where they will be available for viewing by the public.

The explosion that followed the collision of the Belgian relief ship "IMO" and the French munition ship "Mount Blanc" devastated the Northern slope of Halifax causing damage in the millions of dollars and a heavy loss of life, but relief poured in quickly from many points, including the New England States, and that section of the City was eventually re-built; and, of course, over the intervening 58 years, Halifax has grown and changed.

I am enclosing material which indicated the extend to which Halifax has changed as this may be of interest to you.

Yours very truly

W. J. CLANCEY
INFORMATION OFFICER

WJC/rem

Upland Calif.
Feb.3,1976.

City Government,
Halifax,Nova Scotia.
Gentlemen;
Enclosed are some pictures of your city in 1917.They are badly
after many years but I thought you might be interested in these
s.
The ship partly shown in the foreground is the bow of the
.St.Louis.
The photos show the Belgian relief ship that caused the
sion partly grounded in one of the photos,the other shows the
e slope where the city stood before the explosion.

Respectfully,

Signature redacted

D.L.Vasbinder
P.O.Bx.206
Upland Calif. 91786.

D. L. VASBINDER
P O BOX 206
UPLAND, CAL.
91786

Upland Calif.
Feb.23,1976.

Mr.J.W.Clancey,
Halifax N.S.

Deaf Mr.Clancey;

Thank you for your fine letter and the folder of modern Nova Scotia.As a bit of background,I served in navy in war one,a gunner on U.S.S.Rochester,a sister ship of the U.S.S.St. Louis.I am also SCD from the Spanish flu I got in Queenstown in 1918 and still badly affected from it.I was one who survived.

You are correct on you r statement the pictures were evidently made by a crew member of St.Louis.His name was Wm.McCaleb,a chief yeoman of the St. Louis.Their ship was close by at the time of the explosion and they were radiod to stop and unload all surplus food and clothing which they did.

The Los Angeles Times printed a fine story of the expolsion in July,1975.

I am enclosing another bit of history of your remarkable city that was made at the same time as the other pictured.The pictures of the fine modern city you people have rebuilt speaks well for the vitality of your city and nation.It was really a small town in 1917,I believe the Times stated the population was around 2500 and of these,300 to 400 were killed and about 1500 more injured.

My compliments to your fine city and hopes for continued well being.

Again thank you for the fine letter and the many brochures of present day Halifax.Incidentally your harbor at that time was named Bay of Fundy.

Sincerely

Signature redacted

D.L.Vasbinder.
P.O.Bx.206
Upland Calif. 91786.

The hill where Halifax stood night before
A belgian relief shil collided in fog in Bay
of Fundy ship that exploded was loaded
with TNT mines and swept the hill bare.

POST CARD

CORRESPONDENCE

ADDRESS

▲ A Z O ▲
A PLACE A
Z STAMP Z
O HERE O
▼ A Z O ▼

POST CARD

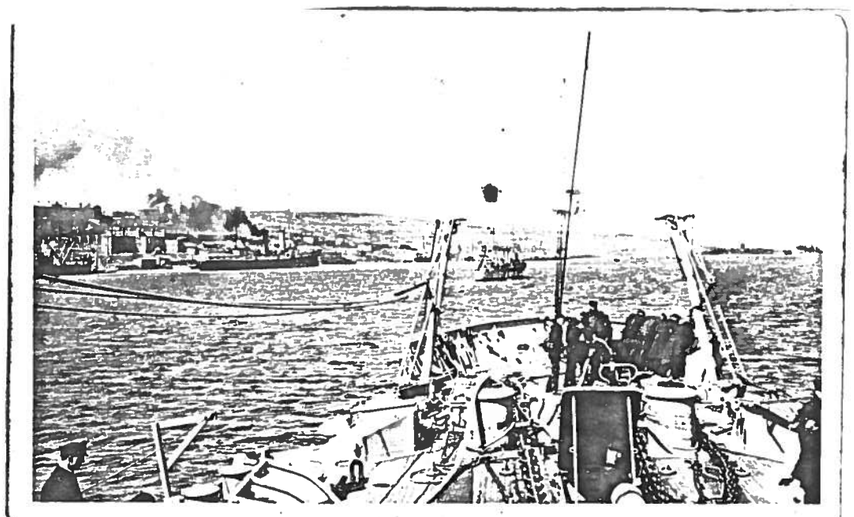
CORRESPONDENCE

ADDRESS

▲ A Z O ▲
A PLACE A
Z STAMP Z
O HERE O
▼ A Z O ▼

Candy dock at halifax Nova Scotia.
Ship loading small stores due to sugar
shortage in U.S.

U.S.S.St.Louis



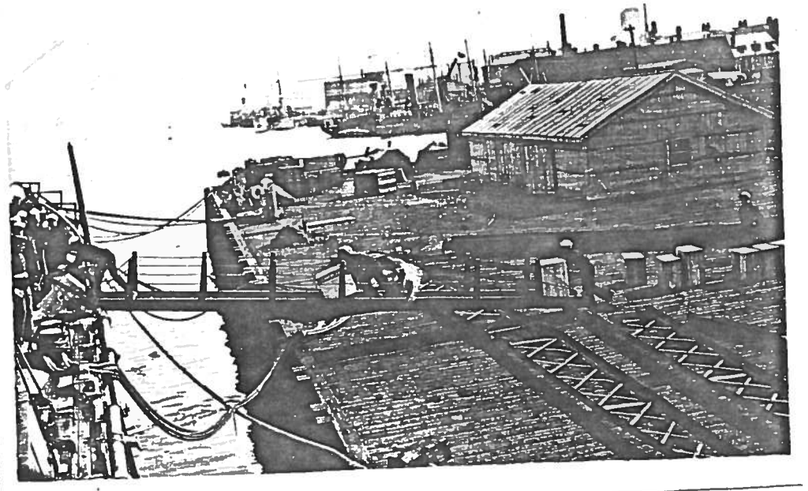
The elgian relief ship that collided.
At low tide is grounded
Halifax Nove Scotia

POST CARD

CORRESPONDENCE

ADDRESS

▲ A Z O ▲
A PLACE A
Z STAMP Z
O HERE O
▼ A Z O ▼



AFTERNOON SESSION.

4.10 o'clock,

COUNCIL CHAMBER, CITY HALL,

June 4, 1918.

An informal meeting of the City Council was held this afternoon at the above named hour; present His Worship the Mayor, Controllers Finlay, Hines, Murphy and Taylor, Aldermen Macnab, H. S. Colwell, Gillis, R. B. Colwell, Kelly, Foley, Hart, Day, Guildford, Godwin and Parker, and a large number of representative citizens.

The Council was summoned to meet the members of the Halifax Relief Commission.

Mayor Hawkins.

The Council was called together, as well as the Municipality of Dartmouth, at Mr. Rogers' instance. The City Council Advisory Committee are unfamiliar with the statement that the Commission is prepared to give us. I understand they have a statement prepared regarding their intentions re the work in the devastated area. I will call upon the Commissioner without any further remarks.

T. S. Rogers.

I am afraid the Mayor knows more of the contents of the statement than he has just said. The Commission has, according to its promise, kept as closely as it could, in touch with the Mayor and Committee from the Council, but necessarily, in the progress of great undertakings such as this, it was quite impossible to discuss in full, details of matters of this sort until they are crystalized into some kind of shape. I though it better to commit what I have to writing, and copies will be handed to the members. I shall read it now, so that you will be familiar with it, and may discuss it at this meeting.

OUTLINE OF STATEMENT OF T. S. ROGERS, K. C., CHAIRMAN HALIFAX RELIEF COMMISSION,

As to policy of restoration, made before City Council of Halifax and Town Council of Dartmouth and other public bodies, June 4, 1918.

1. For many reasons beyond the control of the Commission, a general statement of its policy as to rebuilding the destroyed houses and the restoration of the affected district structurally has had to be deferred until the present moment. The Commission was delayed for many weeks awaiting settlement of its powers by the Legislature; it then had to submit its proposals to the Federal Government, which Government along with the Imperial Government made the large grants enabling a modern and progressive development possible; it had to await the reports and advice of its architects and engineers, the making of important contracts for essential reconstruction materials, and it felt bound, as far as it reasonably could, to ascertain the individual wishes of the home owners likely to be affected by its proposals. These matters though not fully overtaken have been sufficiently grappled with

to enable us to take the public into our full confidence to-day. The Mayor has been conferred with on several occasions, and the Board of Control has been made aware of the main outlines of our policies, and the Commission has every reason to hope for the widest co-operation with us of the civic and other authorities concerned as well as the public generally.

2. Under the provisions of the Act of legislature recently passed, the Commission has defined the devastated district to include that portion of the City bounded westerly by Robie Street and Longard Road, easterly by Campbell Road, northerly by Leeds Street (running past the Rockhead property) and southerly by the Wellington Barracks property and Russell Street extension. The area containing about three hundred and twenty-five acres.

3. That part of this district lying between North Creighton Street on the west and Campbell Road on the east is to be more particularly subject to the Commission's regulations as to rebuilding. This portion includes the Richmond district from Russell Street north and both sides of Gottingen Street from East Young Street north. It is the Commission's ambition to make this district one of the best residential portions of the City for persons of moderate means.

4. The Commission has acquired the Fort Needham property containing about eight and a half acres, the Blackader property to the north, containing over three acres, and is proceeding to expropriate the large vacant lot south of Fort Needham, and the six blocks on Gottingen Street north of Fort Needham extending to Duffus Street and eastwardly on this frontage practically to Albert Street. On the west side of Gottingen Street it is expropriating all the blocks lying between North Creighton Street and Gottingen Street and extending from East Young Street to Cabot Street. The owners in the expropriated territory have, so far as possible, been personally interviewed, and it is felt that comparatively few within these areas will be unduly disturbed. Due compensation will of course be made for the land, the market value of which had been well established and has been further tested by a number of purchases on behalf of the Commission. If the house owners within this district desire to rebuild they will be promptly interviewed and their individual wishes be met so far as is consistent with the Commission's general plan of development.

5. Albert Street will be reached from Campbell Road by an easy gradient either through the military property (negotiations as to which are proceeding) or from a point on Campbell Road at the northeast corner of the military property. Albert Street will be widened so as to become a leading thoroughfare, and at or about Richmond Street will be an easy grade ascent across Acadia Street to Gottingen Street. There will also be a diagonal street running from Campbell Road following an easy gradient and passing upon or near the Richmond School property and thence across Acadia Square and reaching Gottingen Street at the northern base of Fort Needham. Pending the exact location of these streets, on which engineers have been working for some weeks, permits for the restoration of buildings on the few sites likely to be affected will not be issued. At the point where these two streets converge, reservations will be made for public buildings such as schools and churches, and the centralized development at this point will be worthy of the best art of the Commission's engineers and architects.

6. The Fort Needham property will, it is hoped, in a large part be devoted to park purposes, though considerable land facing new streets which following natural contours will encircle its base, will be made available for building purposes. The City no doubt will place in the hands of the Commission the lands known as Mulgrave Park, Acadia Square and other City property in that vicinity in exchange for other public property devoted to

streets and parks. The Commission's work in this respect is City work, and no differences are anticipated and even so they must prove easy of adjustment. The opportunity of developing Fort Needham and surrounding property is unique. The Commission trusts that this eminence will be retained on behalf of the public of Halifax as a memorial to those who lost their lives in the disaster, and to the courage, fortitude and patience of the sufferers who survived.

7. The Commission will require that all buildings lying between Campbell Road on the east and North Creighton St. on the west and Duffus St. on the north and Russell St. on the south, a district to be known as the "restricted area" shall be of first class or fireproof construction, and in this area, though as far as possible individual preferences will be respected, the Commission will insist on such rules and regulations as will lead to the development of the slope on both sides in accordance with its plans. Those who desire to rebuild have been conferred with for some time past, and those who do not wish to rebuild will be dealt with on a reasonable basis. If they desire to rebuild on particular lots required for other purposes, exchanges will be arranged for or decisions may be postponed pending the further development of the Commission's plans. Opportunities of acquiring completed houses will be open to the former house owners.

8. The lands on the west side of Gottingen St. will be developed by the construction of a large number of houses of the lower cost type. These houses can be acquired by former house owners in that district against the appraised value of their former holdings. Other purchasers affected by the disaster can acquire them on the instalment plan of payment, and others will be let at reasonable rentals. All owners who cannot be provided with new houses during this season will have the first opportunity of occupying until next season, the houses which will be erected by the Commission for letting.

9. It is hoped that Russell, Kaye, East Young, Union and Albert Streets, in fact, the whole Richmond slope, will be developed into a most desirable residential district. Home owners in this district will be got in touch with as quickly as possible, and provisions will be made it is hoped to their general satisfaction, for rebuilding. The architects have completed many designs for housing and have under preparation many more and will without delay let contracts not only for construction of the individual houses but also a large number of tenements. The number will only be limited by the ability to obtain contractors to undertake the work.

10. The Commission is prepared to set aside out of the capital sum of the Pension Fund the sum of one million dollars or more to be devoted to the building of modern tenements and small ownership housing, the income from which will be devoted to the payment of pensions established for the victims of the disaster. The Commission is likewise prepared to expend a sum as large as may be necessary, possibly another million dollars, in restoring the damaged houses of individual owners. Due allowance will be made for the fact that homes cannot be restored for the former market or appraised value, and the disposition of the Commission will be to aid through its housing problem those who would otherwise suffer from the fact that their property cannot be restored for the sums awarded. Each of these cases must be dealt with on its merits, and greater proportionate consideration must be afforded to those whose houses were of low cost type.

11. The building material for reconstruction in the specially restricted area will be of pressed concrete known as hydro-stone. This material is manufactured under pressure of seventy thousand pounds, and it must not be confused with the concrete blocks now used to some extent in Halifax. The blocks can be faced in the process of manufacture so as to produce variety of effect. Stucco will also be made use of and it is hoped that brick will also to some extent for the sake of variety, be one of the materials used.

12. In that portion of the devastated district not included in the specially restricted area, the Commission cannot undertake to control building operations except in accordance with the City laws as heretofore enforced. If, however, the City Council is of the opinion that there should be further restrictions, the Commission will be glad to meet them in conference and come to a conclusion which will be in the general best interests. Many of these houses not in the restricted district are under repair, and it would be quite impossible to enforce such a development as is proposed in regard to the specially restricted area.

13. The same remarks apply to the Town of Dartmouth and outlying sections, the reconstruction of which areas will continue to be largely of wood, but the Commission will as far as possible endeavor by its advice and counsel to encourage every reasonable improvement in all building operations undertaken. Steps are on the way towards the rebuilding of many wooden houses throughout the whole district.

14. A contract has been awarded to the Nova Scotia Construction Company for the manufacture at Eastern Passage of the hydrostone in large quantities. The experts have pronounced the gravel and sand at that point as of the highest quality. The necessary machinery is on the way, and when the work once begins, construction will proceed with great rapidity. Arrangements are quickly developing for the building also of the houses not within the restricted area.

15. The architects are the well known firm of Messrs. Ross and McDonald of Montreal, who have been studying the problem on behalf of the Commission for many weeks past. The street changes and general planning development are proceeding under the advice of Thomas Adams of the Commission of Conservation, Ottawa, who has had an assistant on the ground for some time. The Commission has had the continued aid ever since its appointment, of Mr. H. W. Johnston, C. E., Asst. City Engineer, whose co-operation has been of the greatest value. His advice has been freely adopted in the replanning of the devastated area.

16. The new manager of the Reconstruction Department who will continue the important work of repair and will co-operate with the architects and engineers in the Commission's rehousing plan, is Mr. Geo. H. Archibald, a native of Nova Scotia although a resident of Toronto and a well known engineer and contractor in that City. He rendered valuable voluntary services to the City for weeks following the disaster, and the Commission feels it has done well to secure his services at the present time. Col. Low, after six months of the most arduous work carried on under great difficulties and without remuneration, feels compelled to retire in order to personally supervise the many large contracts which have recently been awarded to his firm.

17. The work of the Commission in other departments is making due progress, but on this occasion it is not intended to make more than a passing reference to the work of the Rehabilitation Department under the competent leadership of Dr. Cutten and his coadjutors Miss Wisdom and Miss Haliburburton. The work is thoroughly organized and the dependents and sufferers are receiving admirable attention at the hands of most capable departmental heads and industrious assistants.

18. The Commission once more appeals to a considerate public for co-operation in its further tasks and more especially in the great work of rebuilding the ruined housing. The efforts of the Commission in dealing in-

dividually with so many cases can only succeed when the people affected realize that there is a sincere desire on the part of the Commission to help them out of their difficulties, and any person, whether occupying a public position or not, who by word or act does anything that tends to create in the minds of those affected by the disaster a feeling of unsettlement and dissatisfaction, hampers the Commission in its work and injures the sufferers and the community at large. The Commission therefore appeals hopefully for united and sympathetic support.

T. S. Rogers:

I would like to add a word or two to this, which may be of interest to you. That portion of the public not closely in touch with the work of the Commission, can hardly have any realization of what had to be undertaken by your commissioners during the last few months. It is interesting to know that at the first of this month we had considered no less than 13,193 claims for loss of personal effects and property, and there are 6,000 yet to be considered, and adding to those, claims of small traders, etc., the total to-day is about 13,888 which have been considered, the great majority of which have been settled. We have disbursed on this account the sum of over two million dollars. Our appraisal board has appraised to date over 750 damaged properties and destroyed houses. There are on the list for repairs at this very hour, 3,500 houses. A great many of them are in process of repair to a greater or less extent, so you can realize what this involves in the way of work, particularly in these difficult times when labor is so scarce and so high and materials likewise. Cash disbursements up to the present time have been upwards of five millions. In the Pension Board not less than 577 pensions have been dealt with, involving a capital sum of $1,750,000. This does not include the cases of disability which are still under Dr. Cutten, his staff and our medical board.

Mayor Hawkins:

From this you will get some idea of the magnitude of the undertaking of the Relief Commission. In my position I am not supposed to discuss any question, but the meeting is open for discussion of questions, not only by the Council itself, but any of the gentlemen in the audience.

Ald. Godwin:

There is a question I would like to ask: If the Appraisal Board appraise a property for $3,000 and the Commission build a house of the same kind which would at this date cost, say, $5,000, do they take a $2,000 mortgage on it?

T. S. Rogers:

Not without the consent of the owner. We provide a house worth $3,000 at least. It may cost us more than $3,000, but each of those cases must be dealt with individually. It is impossible to lay down any principle which can bind us in every particular case. A man may have a house valued at $1700, which would cost him at least $2500 to rebuild. We are not going to ask him to provide the difference. You can understand it would be impossible to lay down a principle that is applicable to all such cases. The aim of the Commission is to be as fair as it possibly can, and that is as far as we can go at the present time.

Ald. Godwin:

The values the appraisal board have set on the properties have been much lower than what the properties could be rebuilt for. The people in the North End want to know if they have to take the amount awarded or if they will get their property rebuilt. They are prepared to carry a mortgage if they previously had one, if they get the same building, but if they had no mortgage they do not want to carry one.

T. S. Rogers:

In some cases it has been suggested by the property owners themselves that we build them a better house and they give us the difference, and we have always gladly said we would. As to whether or not we would put a bathroom and heating apparatus in houses where there was nothing of this kind before, we will encourage any man to have ordinary plumbing and heating and let him pay for it, but we will not insist upon it or urge it unduly.

Ald. Parker.

There are a number of people in the North End at the present time who have small houses there without hot water heating or plumbing. Those people when they go to rebuild will be glad to pay the difference to have a bathroom with hot and cold water. They are asking for it. There are also a number of people who have gone to the trouble to have plans prepared. Will those plans be considered? You may have to rearrange them and have perhaps a different design on the outside, but I have been asked if you will consider those plans.

T. S. Rogers:

The answer is that we have already done so in a number of instances. The question of good taste has two sides to it, and one of them is the individual side. The Commission hesitates to interfere with individual taste. Of course, individual taste at times is peculiar, and if you are going to improve your City, individual taste must be subject to the approval of our architects. We will endeavor as far as possible to meet the views of the people in this regard. A number of plans submitted have been accepted in effect.

Mayor Hawkins:

What is your intention about building on streets where there is no water or sewer?

T. S. Rogers:

We will have to confer with the City Council on that subject. It may be necessary to have some sewer and water extensions made, and it is only fair that in those streets the cost of the work should be charged against the properties in the usual way. We have not thought it necessary to deal with it as it is a matter of adjustment.

Controller Murphy:

It is to be assumed that within the restricted area there are lots where the houses would be assessed anywhere from $1000 to $1500. Assuming the class of structure it is proposed to construct, the lowest price they could put up a house there for, would be from $2800 to $3000. I understand from Mr. Rogers' explanation that each house will be treated on its merits, but there must be some general principle in dealing with such cases. What is the policy to be when a man says he is not prepared to carry a mortgage; what option he has in retaining his lot within that restricted area,

T. S. Rogers:

Of course, it is quite impossible to pledge the Commission as to what its policy will be in any particular case. In fact, I am unable to say what we would do in an extraordinary case of this kind. If we meet cases like that we shall deal with them all on the same basis. They will have something better than they had. If a man says he is not prepared to accept a house such as we propose, we will do our best to satisfy him, but if he is within the restricted area, he must relinquish what he wants, for the general good, provided he will not accept a cash payment.

Ald. Kelly:
You are not limiting the value of the houses in the restricted area? Provided the property is fireproof, he will not be compelled to pay for an expensive house?

T. S. Rogers:
Undoubtedly—there will be many houses attractive in appearance and with modern conveniences, at small cost.

Ald. Parker:
In having these matters arranged, would it be possible to meet the people in the district, instead of requesting them to come down to the office? If you can do that, it is going to facilitate matters wonderfully. If you could send out capable men and meet the people at their holdings.

T. S. Rogers:
We have been doing so for six weeks. We were very glad to endeavor to take the hint. It has been impossible up to this date to disclose our plans. Now that our plans are known, we shall redouble our efforts to get in touch with the people. Of course, there is a great deal of anxiety, but our efforts to defer to these people have been met very wll indeed. The exact location of streets has not been fixed for obvious reasons, and therefore it may not be practicable to deal with all those cases right away, but within ten days those street lines will be fixed.

Mayor Hawkins:
There are numbers of people who own houses in the North End that were comfortable and were their own homes—some of them had modern conveniences. They have gone to contractors and asked them what it would cost to put back their houses. Say the house originally cost $2000—they get a figure nearer $4000, and they get an offer from the appraisal board for house and land, less than what the house cost them. The appraisal board do not seem to know the house they have appraised. Will you build the house for him and give it back to him with no burden on it?

T. S. Rogers:
We will do the best we can under the circumstances. Of course, the contractors at the present time are filled up with work and naturally their prices will be high. We have had no difficulty in dealing with any cases that have come to us.

Ald. Kelly:
Do you know the average increase of the appraisal value over the assessed value?

T. S. Rogers:
I should think personal property about four times the assessment and real estate over double.

Rod Macdonald:
Have you, up to this, been able to arrive at a correct estimate of the loss? Are you in a position to say what the losses amounted to and what sum you have in hand to meet those losses—what amount you intend to put on improvements and what fund the general improvements to the City will be provided from—will it be provided out of the fund voted for the sufferers?

T. S. Rogers:
I wish I could answer Mr. Macdonald's question, but it will not be known until the appraisal board completes its work. Our estimates and first report to the Federal authorities were based on a hurried examination of all properties in the City and Dartmouth extending over a period of two weeks. Necessarily there could be no detailed appraisement of the damage caused. These details are now being dealt with by the appraisal board and reconstruction committee, and until they are completed, it will be impossible for us to say what the damage has been. We are also eliminating at present the larger companies and the wealthier classes who are quite able to take care of themselves, so that it may be two or three years before the damages will be complete. Our administration of the fund is approved by those who granted the fund. The funds are those of the British and Federal governments, and our appraisements have been submitted to them and have their approval. There is no engineer, citizen or architect who has examined that site and realizes what ought to be done to improve it, who has not concurred with the suggestions that have been submitted to this meeting to-day.

Meeting adjourned 5.20.

Diaries detail fateful blast

By Elissa Barnard

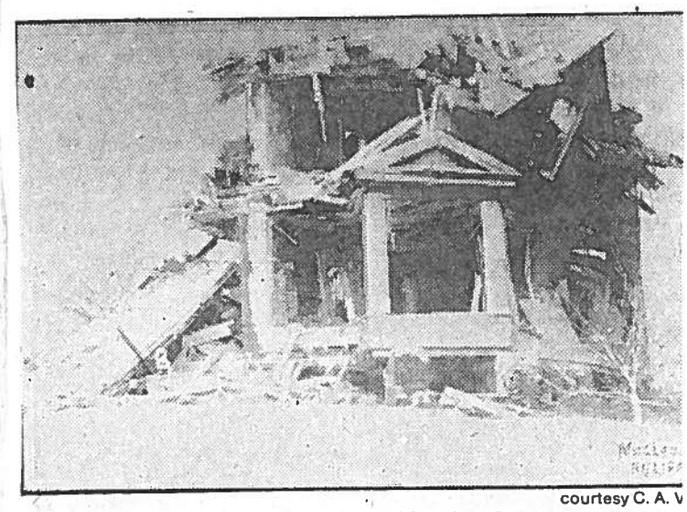
Sixty-six years ago today, Jean Lindsay Ross was reading in the MacDonald Library at Dalhousie University when the French ammunition ship Mont Blanc collided with the Belgian relief ship Imo in Halifax Harbour.

Jean was not injured in the ensuing explosion which destroyed the city's northend; she left Halifax for her Lunenburg home a few days after the disaster, but the Halifax Explosion left such an impression with her that she recorded her experiences in a diary.

The two scribblers, sent recently by Ms. Ross, now living in New Rochelle, New York, to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, are "the only (diaries) we have," of the explosion says Julie Morris, geneological archivist. Other personal accounts are in notes, letters and newspapers.

Ms. Ross writes that she felt an "obsession" two years after the event to write her account. In unsentimental prose, she records her daily activity from Thursday morning, the day of the explosion, until Sunday night when she caught the train to Lunenburg.

Boarding at Halifax Ladies College, on the corner of Harvey and Pleasant streets, now Barrington Street, she and the other girls were asked to help with the wounded at Camp Hill Hospital. Here and in walks about the city she witnessed the horror of the explosion, which left close to 2,000 dead, more than 9,000 injured and thousands homeless in the city of 65,000.



courtesy C. A. V

House destroyed on north side of Duffus Street.

At first she had thought the university was hit by a bomb. Studying in the library with a friend, she had gotten a book of required reading for one of her classes.

"I put it on the table and stood facing the top of the room . . . I didn't have time to sit down. There was the most awful crash followed by a roar like reverberating thunder."

She and her friend rushed out of the library; windows were broken, glass was everywhere and some teachers and students were cut.

On LeMarchant Street she and her friend saw "men in trousers, pyjamas, coats and slippers, women in kimonos, slippers and boudoir caps." They proceeded along Morris Street towards the ladies college:

"The windows of the Children's Hospital, VG and Blind School were all out. . . . On Morris Street we met a grocer's team driving a boy of about 12 with his head covered with guaze bandages. The Cathedral had no windows broken on the south side so we thought it came off very well. However, I guess all the rest of the glass was broken. By this time we wondered if we could study peacefully in our room."

Their residence windows were blown out, and along with a huge crowd they walked to the "cut of the terminal" because rumour had it the dockyard magazine was on fire. Waiting here, she wrote her mother and later put a call through to her father in Lunenburg who had not yet gotten news of the disaster.

In the afternoon she and her friends walked into the northend and into the train station which had been levelled.

"The place where the trains come, the news office, ticket office, were just one heap of ruins. . . . As far as I know now most of the station force were lying under the ruins at the time, but I did not know. Neither did I know what was in the straw the trucks were hauling. No one was allowed to go out farther than the bridge over the railway cut. All the city was on fire beyond that."

The first day Jean decided not to volunteer at Camp Hill Hospital, but went during a blizzard the next evening after a friend told her of the horrors at the overcrowded Rockhead Hospital in Richmond, where drugs and antiseptics were unavailable.

The details of Ms. Ross's account are very accurate and similar to newspaper accounts, Ms. Morris said — the city in ruins, people covered with blue TNT-soot, transportation made difficult because of the snow drifts, crowds at hospital doors seeking missing relatives.

At the hospital Ms. Ross tells of an old woman who recovered from pneumonia, of a French girl who'd lost her eyes and was calling to her mother, of a boy who called for his father all night then died, and of a two-and-a-half-year-old boy who couldn't say his name — "His vocabulary was wonderful. He did nothing but swear furiously."

She was scolded for sitting on the boy's bed and holding his hands, to prevent him from tearing at the stitches on his face. Before the boy died as did his brothers and sisters in the explosion, his father found him.

Not all of Ms. Ross's account is grim. She recalls soldiers giving her a toboggan ride home, worrying about a missing cheque, not wanting to sleep in a different bed, and despising a woman at the hospital who wore a fur coat and gave biscuits to the patients.

"What sent me home, however, was orders from a woman in an elegant sealskin coat doling out sweet biscuits and seating herself at each bedside in turn to hear the story . . . I thought she was just as well able to run after glasses of water as I was. That I was more suitably dressed was a witness to my sense not hers. . . . Coming outside there was only one car at the door. We had understood that all cars were commandeered and that once we got there we need not worry about getting home. Abbie finally picked up courage to inquire if it was available and was most indignantly answered that it was (our sealskin friend's) car. We had hard work to tell directions with the blinding snow."

On Jean's last night at the hospital she was told drugs and nurses were coming and the city had requested all those who were able to leave in order to preserve the food supply. She returned to Halifax on Jan. 3 when classes resumed.

6 YEARS AGO — Survivors of the 1917 Halifax Explosion, above, grimly ort through remains of their home in this photo from the Toronto Archives. ower photo shows Nova Scotia Archives worker Julie Morris perusing dia

Nova Scotia's Win-the-War Newspaper

THE HALIFAX HERALD

ALL THE NEWS. HONEST VIEWS. HONEST ADVERTISING.

Nova Scotia's Win-the-War Newspaper

FOUNDED FEBRUARY 14, 1875. HALIFAX, CANADA, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1917 VOLUME XLIII., NO 290.

HALIFAX WRECKED

More Than One Thousand Killed In This City, Many Thousands Are Injured And Homeless.

MORE than one thousand dead and probably five thousand injured, many of them fatally, is the result of the explosion yesterday on French steamship Mont Blanc, loaded with nitroglycerine and trinitrotuol. All of Halifax north and west of the depot is a mass of ruins and many thousands of people are homeless. The Belgian Relief steamer Imo, coming down from Bedford Basin, collided with the Mont Blanc. which immediately took fire and was headed in for Pier No. 8 and exploded. Buildings over a great area collapsed,burying men, women and children. Tug boats and smaller vessels were engulfed and then a great wave washed up over Campbell Road. Fires broke out and became uncontrollable, stopping the work of rescue. Not a house in Halifax escaped some damage, and the region bounded on the east by the harbor, south by North street and west by Windsor street, is absolutely devastated.

THE wounded and homeless are in different institutions and homes over the city. The Halifax Herald is collecting information regarding the missing, and citizens who have victims of the disaster at their homes are requested to telephone to The Herald office. Hundreds of the bodies which were taken from the ruins are unrecognizable and morgues have been opened in different parts of the city. Citizens' committees are being formed for rescue work. Bulletins will be issued thruout the day giving information for the assistance of those who have lost relatives and friends. While practically every home in tbe city is damaged, those who are able to give any temporary accommodation are asked to notify some of the committees.

Military and naval patrols are keeping order and superintending the rescue work.

THE AWFUL STORY OF DISASTER

AT 9.05 o'clock yesterday morning a terrific explosion wrecked Halifax killing over a thousand. wounding at least five thousand, and laying in ruins at least one-fifth of the city.

The Belgian Relief steamer Imo coming down out of the Basin in charge of Pilot William Hayes collided with the French steamship Mont Blanc in charge of Pilot Frank MacKay. The French steamer was loaded with nitro glycerine and trinitrotuol. Fire broke out on the Mont Blanc and she was headed in for Pier 8. It was eighteen minutes after the collision when the explosion occurred. The old sugar refinery, and all the buildings for a great distance collapsed. Tug boats and steamers were engulfed and then a great wave rushed over Campbell road carrying up debris and the corpses of hundreds of men who were at work on the piers and steamers.

Without the loss of a moment hundreds of survivors rushed to the rescue of those buried in the ruins. Fire broke out in scores of places and soon the great mass of wreckage was in the grip of an uncontrollable fire checking the work of rescue.

The military and naval authorities almost immediately took charge of the situation. Fearing that the fire would reach local magazines of explosives military messengers were sent over the city warning the people out of the buildings and advising them to take to the citiadel and open spaces. This was not by authority.

Practically every house in the city was damaged. The entire business district was windowless and to prevent pillaging patrols from warships in port were paraded thru the streets.

All along Gottingen street and throughout the northwest part of the city there was a pitiful scene as women and children lacerated with flying fragments of glass rushed from their homes. Truckmen, hackmen, and taxi-cab drivers rushed victims to the hospitals for dressing. At the Naval hospital many of the sick sailors were badly cut and,fearing an explosion from the magazine at the Wellington barracks, they were taken away.

THE home of The Halifax Herald and The Evening Mail is badly wrecked. Every pane of glass and window in the building is smashed. Partitions have been blown down. Our press is filled with glass. Some employees have lost their homes and families. Our power service is cut off.

We are sending out a copy of this hand printed bulletin to every town in order that as many of our readers as possible may know at least some of the details of the disaster. We hope to be in a position to publish tomorrow. In the meantime we ask for patience.

A public meeting is called for city hall at 11

HALIFAX EXPLOSION
Dec. 6th, 1917
MEMORIAL TOWER

PRESS RELEASE

Monument Design Unveiled

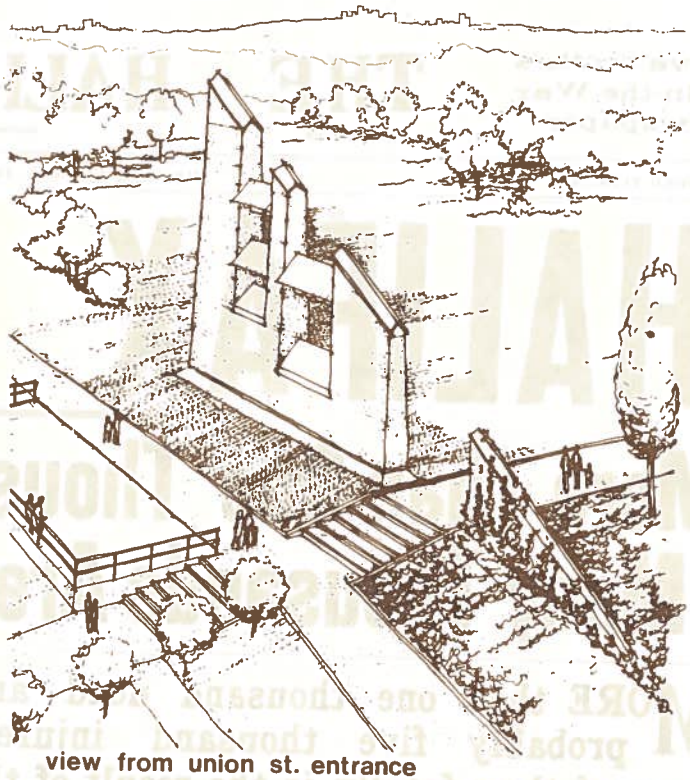
HALIFAX, N.S. — The design of a bell tower to commemorate the 1917 Halifax Explosion was announced last evening at a public meeting in United Memorial Church.

Reginald A. Prest, Chairman of the Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Committee said the design was selected because it makes a dramatic statement suggesting an image of destruction while similtaneously evoking the energetic civic renewal that followed the devastation.

Placed on a granite platform, the $200,000 structure is proposed for the north-east corner of Needham Park. The site, donated to the city years ago by the Halifax Relief Commission, overlooks the Narrows where the collision of the Imo and Mont Blanc took place. The monument will be clearly visible from both the surrounding area and the Harbour shores.

The narrow, angular construction will be 60' at the highest point, sloping 150° to disappear into the side of the hill. Several rectangular openings will house bells of the carollon donated in 1921 to United Memorial Church in memory of the Samuel Orr family. Placed perpendicular to the harbour, the form will direct viewer attention to the explosion site.

Monolithic hydrostone will be the principal building material, with copper sheathing for the inclined surfaced and to protect the bell enclosures. "Traditional materials will reflect the history and character of the adjacent neighbourhood and project a



view from union st. entrance

HALIFAX EXPLOSION MEMORIAL BELLS

by core design group,
keith l. graham with
n. fowler, j. rowe, j. thomson

feeling of stability and permanance," Prest noted.

Ornamental plantings will compliment the structural form. There will be opportunities for commemorative tree installations around the base. Walkways and paths will be upgraded minimally in the immediate area and strong lighting installed to highlight the monument.

It will be possible to play the carollon from both United Memorial Church and the monument platform.

Prest stated, "We feel that the structure, with its simplicity, boldness of form and sympathetic setting will become an important addition to Needham Park and its vacinity, as well as a significant feature of the Halifax-Dartmouth area."

The project dedication date is December 6th, 1984, the 67th anniversary of the Explosion.

Support the Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Fund

HALIFAX EXPLOSION
MEMORIAL BELLS COMMITTEE
P.O. Box 1363, Halifax
North Postal Stn. B3K 5H4

READER'S DIGEST
DECEMBER 1977

THE GREAT HALIFAX DISASTER OF 1917

By Adrian Waller

Sixty years ago this month a French munitions ship blew up in Halifax Harbor. A shower of death rained down upon an unsuspecting populace. Amid scenes of tragedy and valor, nearly 2000 people lost their lives and 9000 were injured. For many of the survivors, the scars of that hideous day never healed.

PHOTO: P. 233 COURTESY OF NOVA SCOTIA PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES
PHOTO: P. 234 © ROYAL PRINT & LITHO LTD.

THE early morning was crisp and clear over Halifax. A light frost had coated the harbor slopes overnight and a mist had risen from the sea. But as dawn broke, both gave way to glorious sunshine in a cloudless sky. It was Thursday, December 6, 1917, and, as Haligonians awoke, the 3121-ton French freighter *Mont Blanc* steamed steadily into their harbor, en route to Bedford Basin to join a convoy waiting to escort her to Bordeaux, France. On the bridge was Francis Mackey, a stockily built pilot of 45 with powerful hands – and 24 accident-free years of guiding ships in and out of the busy port.

Around 8:10 a.m., he took the *Mont Blanc* through the harbor at four knots – just as the 5043-ton Norwegian tramp steamer *Imo* weighed anchor in Bedford Basin, bound for New York to collect a cargo of clothing and grain for starving Belgian victims of World War I. She was to have left the day before, but had been delayed when her agents failed to deliver a supply of coal for her boilers.

Her pilot, William Hayes, and Captain Haakon From, stood together on the bridge, determined to make good time. They zigzagged their vessel between other ships that blocked their passage, and were soon making seven knots. By the time they entered a mile-long stretch of water called the Narrows, which joins the inner basin with Halifax Harbor, their speed was increasing.

The *Mont Blanc*, meanwhile, had entered the Narrows from the other end, still making four knots. She passed the 5600-ton British cruiser HMS *Highflyer*, on Atlantic escort duty, and dipped her colors. The *Highflyer* lowered her ensign in acknowledgment. Lt. Richard Woollams, its officer of the watch, noticed the heavy cargo of steel drums packed on the *Mont Blanc's* deck.

"Fuel oil, perhaps – or petrol," he mused. "Whatever it is, it's damned sloppy loading."

Then, Francis Mackey sighted the *Imo* heading dangerously toward him. "Why the devil doesn't she move over?" he muttered tersely to Capt. Aimé Le Medec at his side in the wheelhouse. "Looks as though the fool's in our water."

Le Medec, a short, black-bearded man with dark, darting eyes, nodded. Mackey gave the ship's whistle one short blast. Normally, the signal would tell the *Imo* that the *Mont Blanc* was altering course to starboard. Without moving his gaze from the approaching vessel, Mackey now meant it to establish his claim to his present passage, close to the Dartmouth shore. To his horror, the *Imo* replied with two short blasts indicating that she, too, was doing precisely the same.

Mackey and Le Medec felt a chill of fear. Again, the *Mont Blanc* sounded a single blast of her whis-

tle; again the *Imo* replied with two.

"Stop!" Captain Le Medec screamed to his helmsman. "Cut the engines!"

The helmsman obeyed – but as the water between the two ships narrowed fast, Mackey realized there was only one course left. He reached for the whistle chord and this time sounded two blasts, warning the *Imo* that the *Mont Blanc* was swinging away from Dartmouth to midchannel. Then, just as his ship began the turn, the Norwegian vessel sounded three whistle blasts, also veering south. And even though the French ship's engines had been stopped, the weight of her cargo kept her moving forward.

Shortly after 8:30 a.m., the huge *Imo* ploughed ten feet through the plating of the *Mont Blanc's* No. 1 hold. "The collision was so noiseless," said Alfred Kingsford, third engineer on a nearby steamer, "that I didn't think they'd even broken an egg." On board the cruiser HMCS *Niobe*, Master-at-Arms John Gammon had just finished his breakfast and was leaving for Pier 4 to supervise the construction of a concrete foundation for a crane. He gave a casual glance, but took no further notice. "I'd seen vessels collide before," he said later. "This one seemed no different."

Floating Time Bomb

REVERSING their engines, the ships eventually managed to free themselves. But as they drew apart, metal rasped against metal, and a shower of sparks flew up. About 8:40 a.m., a flicker of blue flame appeared on the *Mont Blanc's* deck. Soon fire was snaking skyward, billowing black smoke so thick that residents overlooking the Narrows were drawn to their windows.

Others went casually about their business. Thirty-three-year-old Mrs. Hannah Vaughan, for instance, told her five-year-old son Bernie that she was going next door to help a neighbor compile a grocery list. "And when I've gone," she added, "I don't want you going into the bedroom and picking up baby Charlie from his cot. You let him sleep!"

Just along the road, Mrs. Frances Coleman ate breakfast with daughters Juanita, 13, away from school with a cold, and Aileen, 18 months. Another son, Gerald, 11, was serving Mass at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church. Her husband, Vincent, a train dispatcher for the Intercolonial Railway Company, was working at Richmond Yard station where he tapped out messages in Morse code.

By 8:45 a.m., telephones throughout Dockyard offices began to ring with warning of the blaze. Fred Pasco, acting Captain Superintendent of the Dockyard, phoned the transport office telling them to send as many fire-fighting tugs as possible. "There's a merchantman

burning," he said. "I don't know what she's carrying, but whatever it is, it's burning like hell!" On board the *Mont Blanc,* however, Captain Le Medec and Pilot Mackey watched aghast as the 36-man crew worked frantically to quell the blaze.

Known only to them, the ship was a floating time bomb. The steel drums encased a 35-ton cargo of benzol – a perfect lighter fuel for the 200 tons of TNT, 2300 tons of wet and dry picric acid, and ten tons of gun cotton which jammed her lower holds. As the blaze grew more furious, and a pall of oily smoke rose 400 feet, Halifax had only a few minutes of that bright December morning left.

Mackey's solution was to drive the *Mont Blanc* at full speed into the harbor, so that water would gush into the gaping hole in the No. 1 hold and dampen the explosives while the crew continued to fight the flaming benzol on deck. Drum after drum exploded as the heat intensified. "Full speed ahead!" Mackey shouted.

Le Medec, however, appeared not to hear him and screamed simultaneously: "Abandon ship!"

There was a wild rush for ladders and ropes, and the crew set the two lifeboats afloat, one on each side of the ship. Mackey was one of the men rowing frantically for Dartmouth in the first; the second waited for Le Medec, who was concerned that his chief engineer was still in the engine room. Even when the engineer was accounted for, Le Medec wanted to stay behind.

"You go," he told his first officer. "I must stay with the ship."

"We'll *both* go," the first officer insisted. And he ushered Le Medec into the lifeboat.

As the first boat neared the Dartmouth beach, Mackey caught sight of Lt. Comdr. James Murray, the Sea Transport Officer, entering the Narrows on board the tug, *Hilford* – and moving precariously near the *Mont Blanc.* "That ship's going to explode!" Mackey roared through cupped hands. The *Hilford* kept on course, so he yelled at Murray again.

This time, the *Hilford* heeled away and sped to Pier 9, where Murray relayed a general warning that spread quickly through the Dockyard. But it was too late to deter the spectators. Hundreds of people on their way to work and school had assembled along the shore and on sunlit Fort Needham hill. They saw the *Imo,* relatively undamaged, nose toward Dartmouth – and the *Mont Blanc,* blazing more furiously than ever, float haphazardly toward Richmond, a community of wooden houses sprawling on a slope in north-end Halifax.

For a while, Edith and Lulu O'Connell were content to watch from their window. Then their Aunt Helena arrived with her daughter, Mary, and took all three girls outside for a closer view. Over in Dartmouth, the *Mont Blanc's* crew lined up for roll call in a cluster of trees. And a sailor, sent by Lt. Comdr. Murray, burst into train dispatcher Vincent Coleman's office, just 200 yards from where the ship was burning.

"Everyone out!" he shouted. "Run like hell!"

Coleman and Chief Clerk William Lovett left together and ran across the railway tracks. Suddenly, Coleman stopped and started to turn back.

"Where are you going?" Lovett asked incredulously.

"I've got to warn those in-bound trains," Coleman replied. And he dashed back toward his office.

Time was running out. The City Hall clock struck nine, and grocer Constant Upham, serving in his Dockyard shop, decided to turn in the fire alarm. Immediately, the city's first new motor pumper, the "Patricia," clanged noisily to the scene with Fire Chief Edward Condon following by car. The *Niobe,* and the cruiser, *Highflyer,* dispatched launches equipped with hoses in a last, futile attempt to quell the flames.

At 9:05 a.m., men from the *Niobe's* pinnace successfully grabbed the *Mont Blanc's* bosun's ladder. Shrinking from the heat, they scrambled halfway up, intent on securing ropes so the tug *Stella Maris* could tow the freighter away from the already blazing pier. The crowd of onlookers grew larger. Bernie Vaughan disobeyed his mother and picked baby Charlie from his cot. And Vincent Coleman dashed into his office in a flurry of gray coattails to tap out the warning. "Ammunition ship is on fire and making for Pier 8," he signaled. "Good-bye." It was his last message.

An Inferno

AT 9:06 a.m., the *Mont Blanc* blew up. She disappeared in an earsplitting explosion and a ball of gasses that flung her half-ton anchor shank two miles and sent a column of red flames skyward for more than a mile. The sea around her boiled and parted, exposing rocks on the harbor bed, 60 feet below. A huge tidal wave surged shoreward, smashing concrete jetties in its path. Ships broke moorings, and 304 freight cars were damaged, some being swept by the sea into the harbor, 100 yards from their sidings.

In Truro, 60 miles away, windows rattled and a clock was torn from a wall in the Learmont Hotel and thrown across the room. Prince Edward Islanders, at breakfast 125 miles away, saw their plates move. Two hundred miles north in Sydney, N.S., houses shook. Ships well out to sea watched the sky turn red – and a pall of black smoke rise above Halifax like a gigantic mushroom.

Beneath the black-red canopy, death struck instantly. The *Imo's* captain and six of her crew were killed. Twenty men died when the *Stella Maris* was tossed over Pier 8 like a matchbox. Twenty men died on the *Niobe,* and 18 others were injured. Aboard the *Highflyer,* nine men perished, with 50 seriously hurt. A huge rock from the water bed was hurtled onto a pier, crushing 64 workmen. Blown into the air and stripped of her clothing, Edith O'Connell survived. But her mother, sister Lulu, two-year-old brother, Herman, Aunt Helena and Mary, all died as the force of the blast surged inland.

Vincent Coleman perished under the debris and fallen power lines in the demolished Richmond Yard station. And in the narrow streets on the slope beyond – which felt the full, brutal impact – more than 50 workhorses fell dead, trees were uprooted and bodies were strewn across the pavements.

Panic-stricken people ran for the open spaces as the glass and iron roof of North Street Station crumpled like paper, killing many people waiting for the train Vincent Coleman's message had delayed. Only two of 75 workmen escaped from the razed Hillis' Foundry, where a blacksmith was found dead, still holding his hammer. One survivor, Robert Simmons, rushed home to find his house reduced to rubble, his family injured by flying glass and masonry. Baby Madelyn was blinded in one eye; Frances in both. Gashed at the throat, their mother lay dead.

The tower of the Acadia Sugar Refinery snapped like a piece of chalk and plummeted on bystanders below. Two hundred children, the matron and her staff were killed when the walls and roof of the Protestant Orphanage fell in. The King Edward Hotel and the Home for the Deaf also crashed in ruins. One hundred pupils died at Richmond School. Just along the road, another 50 children were killed at St. Joseph's Girls' School, where ten year-old Mabel Young was dragged from the rubble with a severely gashed eye and head wounds. Her sister, Florence, Vincent Coleman's stenographer, had been killed while fleeing the Richmond Yard station.

Half a mile away, Bernie Vaughan stood safe but petrified in the kitchen – with baby Charlie still in his arms. His disobedience had probably saved his little brother's life: Charlie's bedroom was now strewn with daggers of glass. Mass at St. Joseph's Church had just finished and Gerald Coleman was in the basement, changing his vestments. Suddenly the roof caved in. Gerald escaped unhurt, but just a few blocks away, Juanita Coleman was dragging her mother and sister from the blazing ruins of their home. "The whole street," she remembers, "was an inferno."

The sky rained molten metal,

and houses collapsed onto burning stoves. A butcher living above his shop was roasted to death when the floor beneath him gave way, trapping him upside down by one foot above a fire burning downstairs. Firemen did their best without their pumper; the "Patricia" and its wagon were found demolished near the waterfront. The only survivor of the eight-man crew was driver Billy Wells, blown from the vehicle and still clutching part of the steering wheel.

"It was awful," he said. "People were hanging out of windows and over telegraph wires. Some had no heads."

John Gammon, *Niobe*'s chief master-at-arms, ran from the ravaged dockside and into the pandemonium in the streets, searching for his family. The heat from the flaming houses was so intense that he had to protect his face by pulling up the hood of his heavy winter coat. On past shrieking women and children he barreled until, at last, he reached his home. It was completely gutted, and he knelt down and prayed for his wife, Maude, Freddie, three and Laura, 14 months. He was sure they all lay dead beneath the smoldering wreckage.

Then he remembered his two eldest daughters, Ena May, five, and Dorothy, seven, and rushed off to St. Joseph's Girls' School to find them. On the way he bandaged a little girl's arm and finally arrived at the demolished school to find several pupils lying with two nuns on the sidewalk outside. One of the nuns had broken her leg and Gammon applied a rough splint and carried her to the sisters' residence. "Have you seen my daughters?" he asked. The nuns shook their heads sadly.

Gammon searched the rubble. When he saw his efforts were fruitless, he wandered away heartbroken to see if his wife's best friend had any news. She did. Maude Gammon, Freddie and Laura, she said, were dead. She had seen them burn to death. John Gammon collapsed and wept.

Fearing that more fires might break out, army trucks moved into Richmond shortly after noon, the soldiers shouting "Into the streets! Into the streets!" Dazed residents emerged from their shattered homes with hastily gathered belongings and hurried to Halifax Common, Citadel Hill and Point Pleasant Park, where the crowds soon numbered in the thousands. A young woman clutched the headless body of her infant son. A bloodstained child with one eye led the way for five sightless adults.

Makeshift mortuaries were established where day-long queues of bereft friends and relatives searched for a familiar face or belonging. Florence Young's father identified his daughter by a little maple-leaf brooch her soldier brother had sent

her. Charles Vaughan, his two sons safe with friends, looked for his daughter, Helen, who also attended St. Joseph's Girls' School, but found no trace. He discovered her later, badly injured in Camp Hill Hospital – lying near her mother, who had lost an eye.

Hospitals operated ceaselessly and overworked doctors performed surgery with bare hands and unsterilized instruments, stitching wounds with needle and thread. Beds were at a premium; the injured were packed on ward floors and in corridors. One of them was Billy Wells, who waited two days for a bed, the flesh from his right arm stripped away as he had driven the "Patricia" into the full force of the blast.

Many of the injured had taken the impact in their faces. Having heard the searing explosion, they'd turned toward their windows to see what it was, only to meet a wall of broken glass. Doctors plucked hundreds of daggerlike slivers from victims' faces or removed eyeballs from their sockets. Nurses spent hours picking glass from limbs.

Grim Aftermath

NIGHT, lit only by torches and lanterns, fell with utter desolation. For now the statistical litany could be recited: Nearly 2000 people were dead, and another 9000 injured, 200 of them blinded. Two square miles of Richmond had been totally leveled – 1600 buildings, including 600 homes. Within a radius of 16 miles, another 12,000 homes were damaged, many beyond repair. The cost: $50 million.

Driven by gale-force winds, Halifax's worst blizzard in years began to rage, while 20,000 people found themselves without food or shelter. Rescue operations were hampered by the drifts, and pneumonia threatened those huddled in the ruins. Tents set up to accommodate the homeless on Halifax Common and Paradise Baseball Park were blown down, and snow drove relentlessly into windowless homes where the young and the old crouched disconsolately around stoves, nursing their wounds.

Fortunately, help was on the way. A train had already left Boston with medical supplies and another was being loaded. It would bring 25 doctors, two obstetricians, 68 nurses, eight orderlies and enough equipment for a 500-bed hospital. New York City was sending 500 cots, 18,000 garments, 10,000 blankets, 20 cases of disinfectant, 160 cases of surgical supplies, a carload of food and more doctors and social workers.

Steamships were loaded with building supplies. The *Calvin Austin* would carry much-needed glass; the *Northland* packed a $150,000-cargo comprising 2084 packages of beaver board, 510 packages of secondhand clothing, 51 kegs of

nails, 23 drums of cement, 13 cases of dry goods, 837 cases of glass, 94 cases of rubbers, 1045 cases of boots and shoes and ten trucks with their drivers. With this help, Halifax would soon roll up its sleeves and bring Richmond back from the dead.

Early the following day, John Gammon heard that Dorothy had been taken in by a bank employe and, in blinding snow, he went off to meet her. "Daddy!" Dorothy cried. "I heard you were all killed and I had no one in the world!" Her father was overcome. He took the child, placed her with a friend – then searched for Ena May. A few hours later, he found her unharmed. She had been discovered wandering aimlessly on the street three miles from her school and was being cared for by nuns at Mount St. Vincent Convent.

Gammon was overjoyed, and in a last effort to find his wife and two younger children, he went to the Halifax *Evening Mail* and placed an advertisement:

> MISSING
> From 39 Union Street
> Mrs. Maude Gammon
> Freddie Gammon, 3 years
> Laura Gammon, 14 months
>
> Any trace of same, please communicate to Mr. Gammon, Chief, M.A.A., *Niobe*.

As the hours wore on, his hopes faded. "YET MORE APPALLING," said headlines in the Halifax *Herald*. "THE DEATH ROLL STILL GROWS." Rescue workers continued to scour rubble for signs of life, and undertakers searched disfigured remains for identity clues. When all failed, the Mortuary Committee also advertised:

> No. 81. Female – head gone. One ring, with two stones missing, and a number of small pearls. Had sum of money and two car tickets in pockets.
>
> No. C. 581. Charred remains taken from 41 North Albert Street, brought in old trunk.
>
> No. 592. Charred remains of man taken from Dockyard. Wrapped in rubber sheet with brown overcoat containing broken rule.

Gammon began gleaning columns like these. Then on Saturday, December 8, a shipmate told him that a small boy with a similar family name had appeared in the daily casualty list, and been taken to Camp Hill Hospital. Gammon rushed to see the young patient. The visit was fruitless. As he turned to leave, however, a nurse told him that a Mrs. Gammon had undergone an operation earlier that day. Bracing himself for another disappointment, the master-at-arms approached a bed where a woman lay heavily bandaged and semi-conscious. It was his wife. He bent down and kissed her.

Wrecked houses along Campbell Road, a busy thoroughfare near the waterfront in the Richmond section of Halifax. In the town of Sydney, 200 miles to the north, people sitting down to breakfast saw their plates move

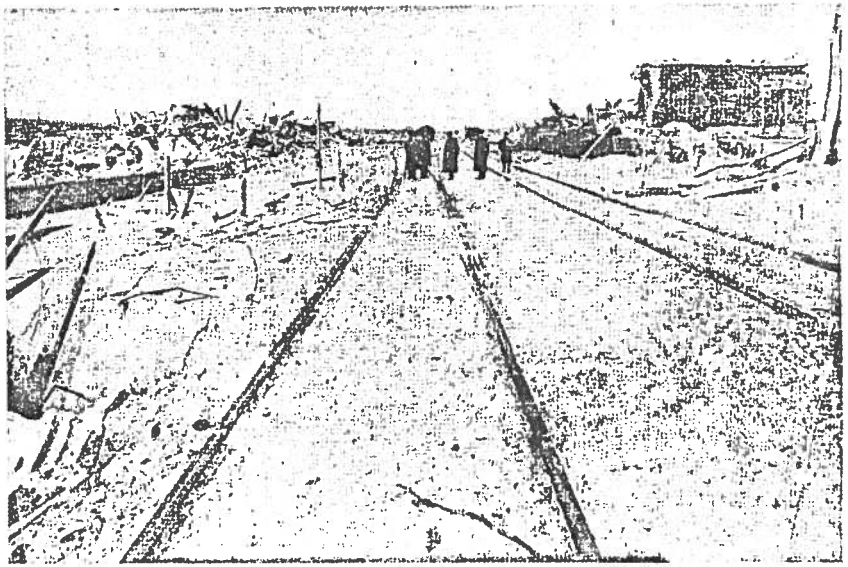
But of Freddie and Laura there was never any news. Gammon concluded that they had been burnt to ashes.

By Monday, December 17, nearly 200 unclaimed bodies lay in rows of coffins outside the main mortuary in Chebucto School, awaiting mass burial. A large crowd braced itself against a bitter wind cutting up from the harbor and sang "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" and "Abide With Me." The band of the 66th Regiment played "The Dead March" from Handel's oratorio *Saul* as the coffins moved off in horse-drawn wagons, half to the Protestant Fairview Cemetery and half to the Roman Catholic Mount Olivet Cemetery. These victims of the Great Disaster, as it was already being called, were buried in graves six feet deep, eight feet wide and 12 feet long, dug by sailors.

Court Battle

TOLLING somberly, church bells could be heard in the old courthouse on the other side of town, where witnesses were appearing before an inquiry by the Canadian government's Wreck Commission. It was the beginning of a series of long, bitter court hearings.

His key witnesses now dead, C. J. Burchell, counsel for the South Pacific Whaling Co. of Oslo, owners of the *Imo,* could do little more than try to weaken the cred-



All that remained of several large buildings in the devastated area where the full force of the explosion was felt. Following the blast, a tidal wave surged toward the shore and swept railway freight cars into the harbor

ibility of the *Mont Blanc's* crew. He sought to establish that Mackey found French too difficult to speak and was, therefore, unable to hold a conversation with Captain Le Medec, who did not speak English. In fact, a dash of grim humor broke the tension when Pilot Mackey said that he would instruct a Frenchman to cut the engines to half speed by shouting: *"Demitasse!"*

Asked through an interpreter how he would react to such an order, the *Mont Blanc*'s third officer, Joseph Léveque, replied: "Naturally, I would go below for a cup of coffee."

Then Burchell attempted to impugn the integrity of both Mackey and Le Medec, insinuating that they were cowards to flee the blazing ship. The lawyer's face reddened with anger. "You know there were some people killed in this explosion?" he asked Mackey.

"Yes," Mackey said.

"Did you know that there were some thousands injured and wounded for life?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the bells are ringing now for this funeral?"

"I have not heard them."

"I want to ask you now, knowing that this is the hour for the funeral, if you are willing to admit frankly that you have been deliberately perjuring yourself for the past two days?"

"No," Mackey replied.

Burchell paused and mopped his brow, while a packed gallery watched. Mackey stood solidly, resting his thick hands on the rail before him. Silence fell. Burchell broke it.

"Are you a hard drinker?" he asked sarcastically.

"No," replied Mackey, a response confirmed by other witnesses.

"A man who frequently gets drunk?"

"No."

"*Sometimes* you get drunk?"

"Not lately. I have, sometimes – a long while ago."

"You drink quite a bit? What is known as a constant drinker?"

"No," Mackey insisted. "Not a heavy drinker."

And so it went. Captain Le Medec fidgeted nervously with a white handkerchief and claimed, through an interpreter, that the *Imo* had cut across the *Mont Blanc's* course. His ship, he admitted, carried no red-flag warning of explosives on board – in case it attracted German U-boats prowling nearby waters.

Surviving members of the *Imo,* in turn, conceded that their ship was on the wrong side of the Narrows, but not through negligence. The second officer maintained that the vessel had cut northward toward Dartmouth to avoid hitting an American steamer. Before she could change course, the *Stella Maris* was sighted dangerously near, and the crew elected to keep her on her present path to avert again the chance of an accident.

The officer then claimed that the *Imo* had blown a one-blast signal, warning the *Mont Blanc* to stay close to Dartmouth so she could pass freely to her left. Instead, he said, the French ship began to angle south, making a collision inevitable.

Some testimony claimed that Comdr. Frederick Evans Wyatt, the Chief Examining Officer, was also to blame because he allowed the *Imo* to depart knowing that she and the *Mont Blanc* would pass each other dangerously close in the Narrows.

Immediately after the Wreck Commission had heard its last witness, in fact, Wyatt, Mackey and Captain Le Medec were taken into custody and charged with the manslaughter of William Hayes, the *Imo*'s pilot. Through lack of evidence all charges were dropped.

Civil proceedings then began. On January 11, the *Mont Blanc's* owners, the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, filed suit for two million dollars in damages against the owners of the *Imo*, who immediately counterclaimed for the same amount. At first the *Mont Blanc* was found negligent but, following a final appeal, the three lords of Britain's Privy Council Judicial Committee ruled unanimously that *both* vessels were to blame since

each had broken the rules of the sea. Claims for damages were dismissed, and Mr. Justice Arthur Drysdale of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia asked the French government to strip Le Medec of his captain's license. He was ignored.

On a happier note, several people were honored for bravery. Two divers had been working on a concrete crane foundation when the explosion blew away the men manning their air pump. As the sea receded before the great tidal wave, John Gammon saw the divers floundering helplessly in mud up to their armpits. In the few seconds available before the water rushed back, he swung down a steel ladder, untangled their twisted air-supply lines and pulled them to safety onto the quayside. He received the O.B.E. Able Seaman Walter Critch, who helped him, got the Meritorious Service Medal. Other awards went posthumously to crew members of the *Highflyer* and the *Niobe,* who had drawn close to the *Mont Blanc* in that last heroic effort to extinguish the blaze.

Rebuilding the Ruins

Now Haligonians turned to the awesome task of rebuilding Richmond and aiding the injured and destitute. For this they needed more money, and a shocked world rose to the occasion generously. The federal government voted six million dollars with another $12 million to follow. Britain sent nearly five million dollars, Australia $250,000. With contributions from other countries and from cities throughout Britain, the United States and Canada, the amount soon approached $28 million. And on January 22, 1918, the Halifax Relief Commission was formed to manage it.

First, the Commission hired 4000 men, boarded them for $1 a day in camps, then set them working on 500 temporary, pitch-roofed apartment buildings of board and tar paper to replace the tents. Within six months the mission was achieved and attention turned to repairing damaged homes, where residents had spent the winter with tar paper over windows and doors to keep out the cold.

By August 1918, nearly 350 new homes were under construction. Given sweeping powers under the War Measures Act, the Commission rezoned, expropriated, widened streets and planned parks. Because of the risk of fire, they decided that no more homes would be built of wood; in their place emerged houses and small apartment buildings made of concrete blocks produced by the Hydrostone Company of Chicago. While 100 men made doors and window sashes in the refurbished Nova Scotia Car Works, a Hydrostone plant was set up locally to cut transportation costs. The results were heartening. Within only a few months, the first homes were ready

to be allocated to the neediest tenants – at minimal rents of between $25 and $35 monthly.

Oland's Brewery, which had spewed beer into the streets as the explosion ripped it apart, was reconstructed from rubble. The damaged Acadia Sugar Refinery was removed brick by brick and completely reassembled – work which revealed more human remains. Last to be tackled were the tumbled Exhibition Buildings. And there in a cattle shed, a year after the disaster, lay the crushed corpse of a tramp – the last body to be found.

As Richmond rose again, the Commission provided urgent financial relief for 6000 of the injured, much of it geared to rehabilitation. When 36-year-old Alfred Crofts' leg was amputated, the Commission paid his medical bills of $121, then handed him a lump sum of $1807 to help him back to work. It also paid $73 worth of medical bills for shopkeeper Harvey Hunt, who was totally blinded. As part of a $250,000-program for the sightless, it sent him to the Halifax School for the Blind to learn piano tuning, cobbling and typing. Harvey eventually decided to start life again as a cobbler, and the Commission donated tools and stock for that purpose.

In the confusion which followed the disaster, parents eagerly accepted ludicrously small settlements – not only for their own injuries, but for their children's as well. Wisely, many of the injured waited until 1920 when the Commission began assessing lifelong pensions, averaging $25 a month. Among the 1028 who received them were 200 widows, including Coleman's wife, Frances, and 500 orphans. At 18, Madelyn Simmons (now 61 and a carpenter's wife) became one of 199 people pensioned through partial or total blindness. A further 100 victims were so badly maimed that they were classed as having "general disability."

"Getting a monthly check can never replace a loved one or restore the disabled," said Mabel Mason, who died last May at 81. "But it helped us raise our family." (She lost two brothers in the blast. Her husband, blinded and paralyzed, died in 1941 at age 46. A sister lost both eyes.)

Though permanently injured, some Haligonians ignored pensions – Mabel Young, for one. She spent a year in hospital with a concussion and a severely lacerated eye; then, grateful to be alive, returned to school.

Graduating in 1924, she went to work as the Commission's typist and eventually did everything – from manning the phone and handing out relief money, to collecting rents on the Hydrostone homes and keeping the thick, brown ledgers in a diligent copperplate hand.

From behind a wicket in a dimly

lit office, she listened to those who remembered: people who'd not slept well since; people who sobbed in their sleep whenever they heard a cab backfire. "For many years," says Bernie Vaughan, now a Halifax building contractor, "I had an awful fear of the house burning down. And mother was petrified by thunder and lightning."

Mabel remembers how the Commission invested its assets in bonds, debentures and mortgages to ensure that it was always poised to fulfill its needs. She recalls the Commission tending victims' graves and helping to defray the cost of the Halifax North Memorial Library in 1966. The city's mayor at the time: Charlie Vaughan.

Most of all, Mabel saw Hydrostone tenants buy the homes they once rented – and the number of pensioners dwindle, often through their injuries, as the explosion slipped farther into history. "Whenever I read the obituary column," she recalls, "one of them was invariably listed there."

On June 11, 1976, however, after six decades of loyal service, the Halifax Relief Commission was dissolved. And in a little ceremony in its office on the Hydrostone site, white-haired Mabel Young and Edgar Crooks, the manager, handed over their ledgers to two officials of the Canadian Pension Commission – plus its remaining $1.5 million, to defray future pensions and medical costs. Today there are only 57 pensioners left, receiving an average of $145 monthly.

And Mabel? She's retired – "to forget." But it's hard. "The ledgers may be closed," she says, "but that terrible morning will live on in the hearts of Haligonians for a long, long time."

Comparing Notes

EVERY time government enacts a new regulation, it places itself in the position of the elephant who stepped on the quail, and then tried to help her out by sitting on her nest of eggs to keep them warm.

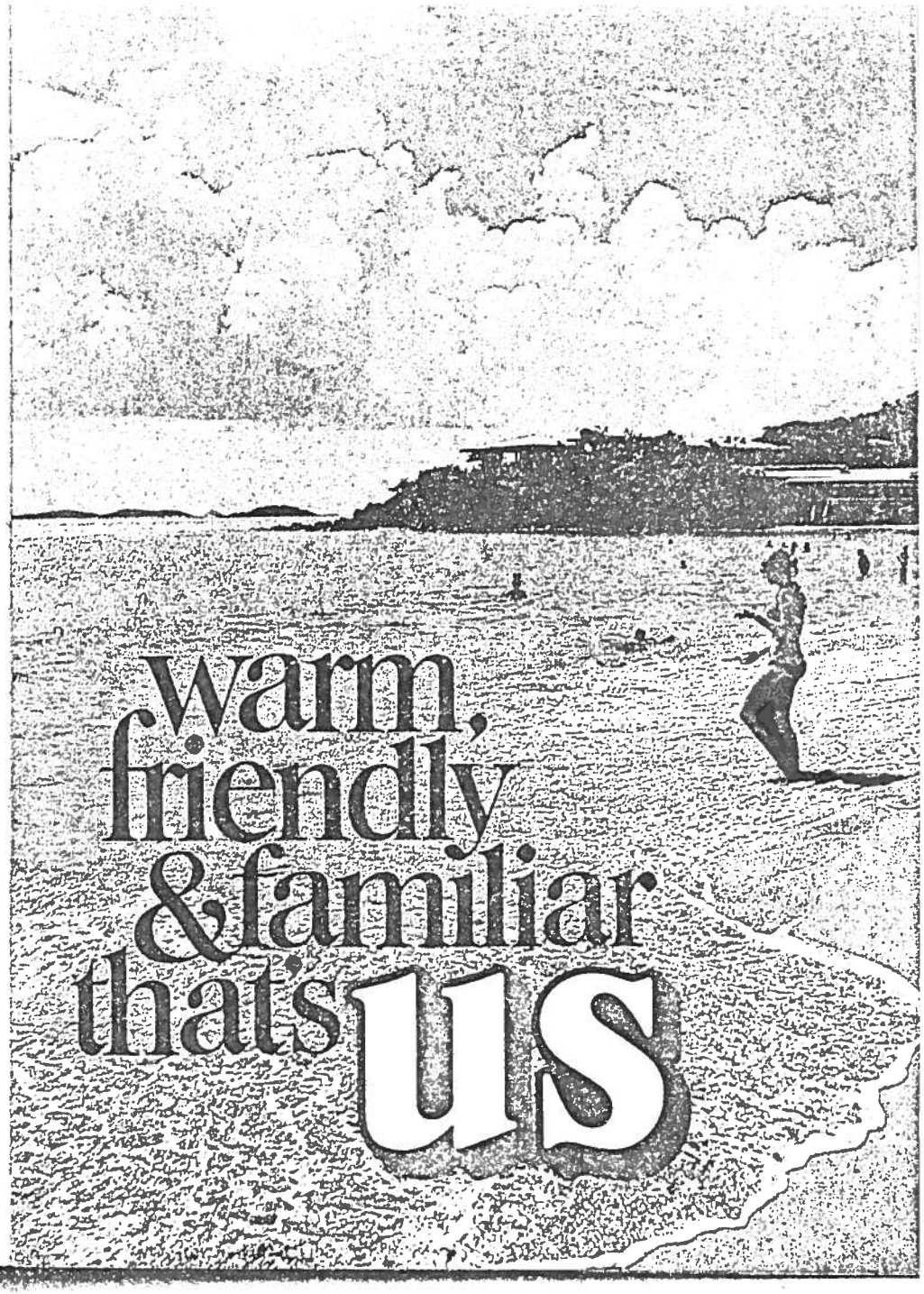
— Quoted in *Forbes Magazine*

CHILD psychologist Dr. Haim Ginott used to say that if you hold in your anger, it's like stepping on the gas pedal and brake at the same time — ruins the car, ruins you.

— Phyllis Battelle, King Features

DR. JACOB BRONOWSKI, creator of the TV series, "The Ascent of Man," was at first doubtful about participating in a television project because of the trivial use made of the medium. He said, "It is as if the printing press had been used exclusively to print comic strips."

— Dwight Whitney in *TV Guide*



Dec. 6, 1917

The explosion that rocked Halifax

By MICHAEL PUNCH

(Editor's Note: Mr. Punch is a Halifax resident.)

There is little that I can say relative to the explo-on, which has not already been written in depth. owever, I shall give a brief account.

At approximately 8:40 a.m. Dec. 6, 1917, a rench munition ship, the Mont Blanc was proceed-g up the harbour towards the Narrows. She was la-en with 2,300 tons of picric acid (dry and moist), 225 ns of TNT, 61 tons of gun cotton and drums of ben-ne on deck.

Seemingly every precaution had been taken to nsure safety. However, she veered while entering the arrows, colliding with the outward bound Belgian elief ship Imo. The Imo struck the starboard side of ie Mont Blanc crushing several plates.

They separated with, apparently, only superfi-ial damage. The Imo stopped engines and com-nenced drifting towards Dartmouth, where she eached.

The Mount Blanc was afire, the crew, captain nd pilot, doubtless aware of danger, immediately ook to lifeboats and commenced rowing towards artmouth. The uncontrolled, abandoned ship was ft to drift to pier 8.

The fire, according to testimony at an enquiry ter, was due to grinding of metal upon metal at the me of the impact, creating a shower of sparks, ig-iting the picric acid which, in turn, set the benzine fire.

Harbour fireboats and the Halifax Fire Depart-ent were alerted. Meanwhile, a tugboat unsuccess-lly attempted placing a line aboard.

About 20 minutes later the entire volatile cargo lew up, resulting in great loss of life and property ithin an area of two square miles.

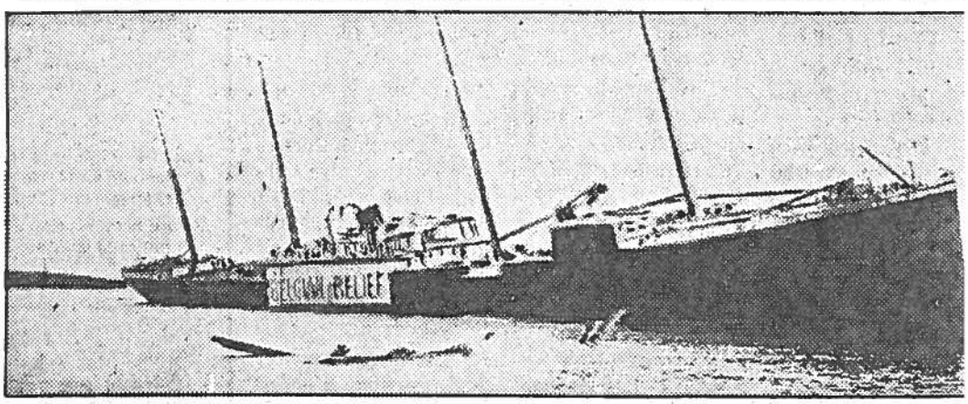
Immediately following the eruption the harbour aters receded, like the Red Sea during the Exodus, nen returning in the form of a colossal wave, engulf-g everything in its path and leaving bodies and ebris in its wake.

Final statistics show 1,963 killed, 9,000 injured, 9 blinded, 25,000 homeless (or without adequate elter), 6,000 lost their houses, 1,630 buildings total-destroyed and 12,000 damaged to a lesser degree. he monetary loss was conservatively estimated at 5 million.

Conflicting evidence was produced at the official nquiry. However, an explosion had occurred, and of magnitude considerably greater than any previous-experienced.

Shrapnel-like hot metal rained over the city, ome pieces being found later, as far away as Arm-ale and Albro Lake. A black oily soot, comparable liquid tar also descended. This was said to be un-onsumed carbon of the explosives.

The scenes throughout the north end were lik-ned to "The Inferno." Buildings collapsed and were eft burning, while wraith-like figures, some serious-injured and only partially clothed, congested the



In the top photograph people inspect the damage in the devastated northend the city. In the lower photograph the Belgian relief ship Imo is on her side in t harbour.

highways, aimlessly seeking succour and, or, asylum or refuge.

Later in the morning the military ordered all out of buildings, for fear of a second explosion at the ammunition dumps. Thousands were taken to open spaces, such as the Commons.

As soon as possible, after the danger failed to materialize, the city became a hive of industry: assisting the injured, arranging for the disposal of the casualties, setting up temporary morgues, and finding accommodations for the destitute.

The next evening a blizzard struck, giving little comfort or warmth for those temporarily housed. However, in their mutual adversity all bore up magnificently.

The temperatures were normal for the time of year, but, with inadequate heat and shelter, many suffered intensely, especially throughout the ensuing winter, with its high winds, snow, ice, limited provisions, lack of transportation and, of course, through enervation.

Depots were set up to distribute food, clothing, blankets, etc. Most of such relief being gratuito provided by governments, charitable organizat and generous individuals, from as far away as antipodes.

Twenty minutes prior to the explosion, Vinc Coleman, a telegrapher at Richmond sent the foll ing prophetic message to Truro, "Munition s afire, making for pier 8, goodbye."

Following the explosion news soon went abr And, by late the same night, limited aid was fo coming from many provincial points.

I shall purposely omit names of Halifax's be factors, all rendering services and supplies wit their capabilities; and few were lacking in the dis sition of their time, talents and money.

Despite the march of time and the works man, some physical reminders till remain throu out the devastated area. The cemeteries too, v their quotas of identified as well as unidentified tims, will ever bear mute testimony of a brave p ple in the face of calamity. May They Rest In Pea

What, no explosion memorial?

By Jim Gowen

It took a British architect visiting the metro area less than two weeks to identify something missing from Halifax — a Halifax Explosion memorial.

Brian Carter, a member of the London architectural firm of Arub and Associates, is a guest lecturer at the Technical University of Nova Scotia.

Here for two weeks as part of a program sponsored by the university to introduce students to practicing architects who specialize in various types of design, Mr. Carter saw Halifax had no permanent memorial to the thousands of Haligonians who died in the Halifax Explosion of Dec. 6, 1917.

Breaking his class into syndicates he assigned a project which requires them to design a small building on the Halifax waterfront, in the vicinity of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. The proposed building is to include space for displays in two wings, other features the students are required to include in their designs are amenities, office space and a viewing area with a view of the harbor. Unfortunately the plans will never go beyond that stage being an academic exercise only.

"The Halifax Explosion had a profound effect on the city so I thought I would like to do something to mark the explosion as a project for my students," he said in an interview.

Mr. Carter said that Halifax provides a wide variety of styles of architecture which would test the budding architect's imagination in blending their design with existing structures.

He said that Halifax had been given a chance extended to few cities. Pointing to the Hydrostone area, completely devastated in the explosion, as an example of the re-design potential available at that time.

Having been involved in many exhibition-type design competitions, Mr.Carter is well qualified to lecture on the subject. His London-based firm is one of the design finalists for an extension to the National Gallery in London's Trafalgar Square. Mr. Carter leaves Halifaxtoday to return to London.

While Mr. Carter is correct in that there is no explosion memorial at this time, there is one in the planning stage. There is a committee called The Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Committee headed by Halifax businessman R.A. Prest.

This group has taken the carillon, donated to United Memorial Church by Mrs. T.W. Thompson, the sole-survivor of the Samuel Orr family, in its memory, and which was removed from the building for structural reasons. The group is now in the process of selecting a design for a memorial in the Fort Needham area.

This memorial will take the form of a tower incorporating the carillon which will be capable of being played either on site or, by remote control, from the church on Kaye Street.

Morris contends:

Needham should be site

By Estelle Small
Staff Reporter

The site for the Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells tower should be at Fort Needham, not Seaview Memorial, Social Services Minister Edmund Morris said last night.

He said the proposed Seaview Memorial, a remembrance of the 1917 explosion, is an inappropriate site.

Seaview Park lacks pedestrian access, is on the outer edge of the peninsular city, and is topographically unsuited, he said.

"Compared with Fort Needham, it is relatively a security risk," he said.

Alderman Gerald O'Malley is obstructing the approval for the tower for his own political purposes, the Halifax-Needham MLA said.

The alderman's proposal for the Seaview Memorial would cost taxpayers money, and since the city is unlikely to allocate funds for that purpose, it probably won't get done, Mr. Morris said.

The bells' electrical link to United Memorial Church from Seaview would also be more costly, he said. The site for the explosion's memorial has been referred to city staff.

The $200,000 bells are a gift to the city from Barbara Orr whose family died in the explosion. Mr. Morris contends their place should be within view of the site of the 1917 explosion. The Fort Needham property, donated to the city years ago by the Halifax Relief Commission, overlooks the Harbour Narrows where the vessels Imo and Mont Blanc collided 66 years ago causing the devastating explosion.

Reginald A. Prest, chairman of the Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Committee, said in a news release the design was selected because "it makes a dramatic statement suggesting an image of destruction while simultaneously evoking the energetic civic renewal that followed the devastation."

Wambolt-Waterfield

Edmund Morris, minister of social services, left, discusses plans for the Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Tower with Judge Robert E. Inglis and Reginald A. Prest.

Diaries detail fateful blast

By Elissa Barnard

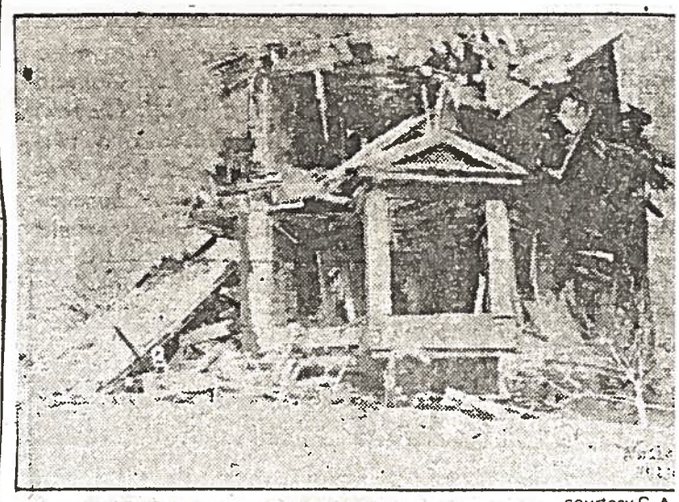
Sixty-six years ago today, Jean Lindsay Ross was reading in the MacDonald Library at Dalhousie University when the French ammunition ship Mont Blanc collided with the Belgian relief ship Imo in Halifax Harbour.

Jean was not injured in the ensuing explosion which destroyed the city's northend; she left Halifax for her Lunenburg home a few days after the disaster, but the Halifax Explosion left such an impression with her that she recorded her experiences in a diary.

The two scribblers, sent recently by Ms. Ross, now living in New Rochelle, New York, to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, are "the only (diaries) we have," of the explosion says Julie Morris, geneological archivist. Other personal accounts are in notes, letters and newspapers.

Ms. Ross writes that she felt an "obsession" two years after the event to write her account. In unsentimental prose, she records her daily activity from Thursday morning, the day of the explosion, until Sunday night when she caught the train to Lunenburg.

Boarding at Halifax Ladies College, on the corner of Harvey and Pleasant streets, now Barrington Street, she and the other girls were asked to help with the wounded at Camp Hill Hospital. Here and in walks about the city she witnessed the horror of the explosion, which left close to 2,000 dead, more than 9,000 injured and thousands homeless in the city of 65,000.



courtesy C. A.

House destroyed on north side of Duffus Street.

At first she had thought the university was hit by a bomb. Studying in the library with a friend, she had gotten a book of required reading for one of her classes.

"I put it on the table and stood facing the top of the room . . . I didn't have time to sit down. There was the most awful crash followed by a roar like reverberating thunder."

She and her friend rushed out of the library; windows were broken, glass was everywhere and some teachers and students were cut.

On LeMarchant Street she and her friend saw "men in trousers, pyjamas, coats and slippers, women in kimonos, slippers and boudoir caps." They proceeded along Morris Street towards the ladies college:

"The windows of the Children's Hospital, VG and Blind School were all out. . . . On Morris Street we met a grocer's team driving a boy of about 12 with his head covered with guaze bandages. The Cathedral had no windows broken on the south side so we thought it came off very well. However, I guess all the rest of the glass was broken. By this time we wondered if we could study peacefully in our room."

Their residence windows were blown out, and along with a huge crowd they walked to the "cut of the terminal" because rumour had it the dockyard magazine was on fire. Waiting here, she wrote her mother and later put a call through to her father in Lunenburg who had not yet gotten news of the disaster.

In the afternoon she and her friends walked into the northend and into the train station which had been levelled.

"The place where the trains come, the news office, ticket office, were just one heap of ruins. . . . As far as I know now most of the station force were lying under the ruins at the time, but I did not know. Neither did I know what was in the straw the trucks were hauling. No one was allowed to go out farther than the bridge over the railway cut. All the city was on fire beyond that."

The first day Jean decided not to volunteer at Camp Hill Hospital, but went during a blizzard the next evening after a friend told her of the horrors at the overcrowded Rockhead Hospital in Richmond, where drugs and antiseptics were unavailable.

The details of Ms. Ross's account are very accurate and similar to newspaper accounts, Ms. Morris said — the city in ruins, people covered with blue TNT-soot, transportation made difficult because of the snow drifts, crowds at hospital doors seeking missing relatives.

At the hospital Ms. Ross tells of an old woman who recovered from pneumonia, of a French girl who'd lost her eyes and was calling to her mother, of a boy who called for his father all night then died, and of a two-and-a-half-year-old boy who couldn't say his name — "His vocabulary was wonderful. He did nothing but swear furiously."

She was scolded for sitting on the boy's bed and holding his hands, to prevent him from tearing at the stitches on his face. Before the boy died as did his brothers and sisters in the explosion, his father found him.

Not all of Ms. Ross's account is grim. She recalls soldiers giving her a toboggan ride home, worrying about a missing cheque, not wanting to sleep in a different bed, and despising a woman at the hospital who wore a fur coat and gave biscuits to the patients.

"What sent me home, however, was orders from a woman in an elegant sealskin coat doling out sweet biscuits and seating herself at each bedside in turn to hear the story . . . I thought she was just as well able to run after glasses of water as I was. That I was more suitably dressed was a witness to my sense not hers. . . . Coming outside there was only one car at the door. We had understood that all cars were commandeered and that once we got there we need not worry about getting home. Abbie finally picked up courage to inquire if it was available and was most indignantly answered that it was (our sealskin friend's) car. We had hard work to tell directions with the blinding snow."

On Jean's last night at the hospital she was told drugs and nurses were coming and the city had requested all those who were able to leave in order to preserve the food supply. She returned to Halifax on Jan. 3 when classes resumed.

YEARS AGO — Survivors of the 1917 Halifax Explosion, above, grimly through remains of their home in this photo from the Toronto Archives. er photo shows Nova Scotia Archives worker Julie Morris perusing dia-

Campaign launched to raise funds for memoria

By JIM GOWEN

n 1977 Edmund Morris s mayor of Halifax. was also "a northend ," who grew up in the a hardest hit by histo- 's largest man-made olosion in a non-labo- tory envir nment. owing up in the area, was thoroughly amil- with the stories of the c. 6, 1917 blas , al ugh it had o curred eral years before he s born.

He was a o well are that though t ere several small monu- nts to the explosion in ious parts of the city — Fort Needham itself is a living memorial, having been deeded to the city of Halifax as a memorial park by the Halifax Relief Commission — there was no clearly defined site which could be refered to as THE memorial to the victims of the explosion.

This fact led eventually to a conversation between Mr. Morris and Dr. Ian MacGregor, an elder of Memorial United Church. Mr. Morris and Dr. MacGregor were friends from their days at Dalhousie University.

As Mr. Morris put it "I' was in law and he was in the medical school but with the enrolment in the Dal of those days, you got to know everyone else." The subject under discussion was a chime of bells, a carillon, which had been donated to United Memorial Church in the 1920's by Mrs T.W. Thompson (Barbara Orr) in memory of Mrs. Thompson's family, the Orrs, who had died in the blast.

The carillon was originally hung in the bell tower of the church, however, age, vibration and the weather had taken their toll and the bells were lowered to the ground as the tower was considered to have deteriorated to such an extent it could no longer safely support the 10 massive bells.

Mayor Morris, with both his personal and political feet firmly anchored in the north end, was looking for a memorial which would symbolize the city "rising from the ashes like the Phoenix of mythology."

"After all, except for a few shells on the Atlantic coast of the United States, Halifax was the only part of the western hemisphere to feel the brunt of the war. In addition, four churches, St. Marks Anglican, St. Joseph's Roman Catholic, Grove Street Presbyterian and Kaye Street Methodist disappeared in the holocaust."

Mr. Morris said "It is appropriate for Halifax, which is becoming one of the greatest small cities in the world, to have a memorial to commemerate to all generations of Haligonians the resurrection of the city after this catastrophe."

Further discussions were held later with Judge Robert E. Inglis and the elders of Memorial United Church (itself a memorial to the regenerative spirit demonstrated by the residents of Halifax north and created when the congregations of two north end churches destroyed in the explosion combined) with a view to incorporating the bells in a structure dedicated to the memory of the victims of the explosion.

The state of the bells was evaluated by their manufacturer who considered them suitable for continued use. By this time Mr. Morris had left the mayor's chair and the matter of the bells, and the memorial, went into limbo until July of this year when Mr. Morris — now MLA for Halifax-Needham and provincial minister of social services — met with interested parties to renew the drive for a memorial.

An exchange of letters took place and the elders of the church made a provisional offer to loan the bells to the Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Committee for inclusion in a tower to be erected on Fort Needham, the highest point in the area.

Bells are removed from United Memorial Church for storage pending installation in the memorial tower.

A committee was formed under the chairmanship of north end businessman Reginald A. Prest and having as members Dr. Ian MacGregor, Judge Robert E. Inglis, Roy Wilson, Mrs. Janet F. Kitz, a Halifax historian specializing in the period of the Halifax explosion, R. H. Dick MacLean, Bruce Nickerson, Fred R. Nickerson, Bernard D. Allard, Jean Harrington, Frank Harrington, J. Rod McLeod, William B. Orr, Harold Shea, Terry Sullivan, Charles A Vaughan and R. Lorne White.

Edmund Morris, and Judge R. E. Inglis, were appointed honorary co-chairmen of a drive to raise $200,000 dollars to construct a monument on Fort Needham which would integrate the bells in a permanent structure.

The committee will, in reality, only have to raise $100,000 as the province of Nova Scotia has made a promise to match funds raised on a dollar-for-dollar basis to a maximum of $100,000.

The committee functions under a mandate which requires the bells to be erected and in operation on the 67th anniversary of the explosion, Dec. 6, 1984.

Should the committee fail to meet its objective or be blocked in its efforts to complete the project by Halifax city council, the bells would revert to the church and, as was pointed out by a visiting British architect this summer, there would be no permanent memorial to those who died in the explosion.

Summarizing his feelings as the campaign to raise $100,000 begins, Mr. Morris said "This is one of the most evocative things to happen in the north end for years."

Time of explosion decided?

By Estelle Small
Staff Reporter

A local geophysicist and a U.S. scientist might finally give history an exact time on the Halifax Explosion's occurrence in 1917, putting to rest 66 years of speculation as to what time devastation hit the city that day.

The explosion's impact equalled that of an earthquake, sending tremors as far away as northern New Brunswick, Alan Ruffman, a principal with Geomarine Associates, said last night at the Nova Scotia Museum. Its damage was just as great, with 1,500 deaths and several thousand injuries.

Mr. Ruffman pointed out that Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, coordinator of the development of the atomic bomb, used the Halifax Explosion as a comparison of the impact of a nuclear weapon.

The explosion was the result of a collision between ships Imo and Mont Blanc, a munitions vessel with 580 tons of TNT and benzine aboard. It was the worst man-made explosion prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Mr. Ruffman and Dr. David Simpson of the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory in Columbia University, N.Y. have noted the impact of the tremors from the recordings of a 1917 seismograph at Dalhousie University.

While most historical accounts peg the time of the disaster to 9:05-06 a.m., some people, among them sports writer Ace Foley of the Halifax Herald Ltd., say the explosion occurred before nine o'clock on Thursday, Dec. 6.

Mr. Foley said in a 1977 column in the Herald, he had to be to school by nine, and he was on his way to school the day the explosion took place.

Mr. Ruffman said Mr. Foley's column generated about 57 letters-to-the editor in the paper and only 17 people believed the explosion occurred after 9 a.m.

Dalhousie University seismograph recordings, now stored at Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory, show jagged lines in the graph between 9:04 and 9:10 a.m. A photograph of the 1917 seismograph recordings also shows a short series of crooked lines again at 10:07 a.m.

Mr. Ruffman said he and Dr. Simpson do not see any evidence of a later explosion, even though witnesses have related of how rumblings first occurred, followed by an explosion.

The time on the seismograph corresponds to watches and clocks on Dec. 6, 1917 which stopped shortly after nine.

Then, what about the recounts of Ace Foley and others like him?

Mr. Ruffman's explanation is that local schools had just switched to their winter hours, which meant students now had to be to class by 9:15 a.m. or 9:30 a.m. Most of the explosion's witnesses might remember going to school, but neglected to recall the new winter hours. They had to be there at 9:30 a.m., not nine.

Above photo is a view looking north shortly after the 1917 disaster with ruins of the Atlantic sugar refinery in the foreground. Remains of the Hillis Foundry are seen in the distance. Men on left are standing along Campbell Road, renamed Barrington Street.

The Novascotian
Saturday, December 3, 1983

Things they left behind

page 5

Inside:
SPORTSWEEK

Bells will ring again page 7

People we meet

By Harold Shea

At 44, Charles Spittal Robb is already a pretty successful politician. But his friends in Virginia like to speculate, to any reporter who comes within reach, that the Democratic governor will one day become a major national figure in the United States.

How does Governor Robb feel? The question, which we put to him during a conversation in Williamsburg, Virginia, this past summer, tended to surprise him, and he blushed in embarrassment — a reaction which surprised this writer, since few politicians we've met seem bothered by shyness. His verbal response, however, was fairly predictable — right out of the politicians' manual:

"My ambition is to serve this state, and help create better opportunity for its people to help themselves. I have no thoughts beyond that."

His reference to "better opportunity," did open the door to an insight into his philosophy, or at least one segment of it. Helping to promote trade, commerce and tourism is certainly part of that mandate, said the former U.S. Marine Corps company commander who was decorated for gallantry and leadership (10 decorations no less, including the Cross of Gallantry, and the Silver Star and Bronze Star). But the more beneficial way, he said, is through education; offer people a greater opportunity to ready themselves for the workforce, and retrain those whose jobs have become redundant through computerization and robotics.

That's the message he's been enunciating since he entered politics, and even before, when he served on the boards of the University of Virginia, the University of Richmond, Hampton Institute, and on the executive committee of Jobs For American Graduates, Inc. He has also been a strong advocate of raising education standards.

Just a couple of days before we met, Governor Robb, whose wife is Lynda Johnson Robb, daughter of the late President Lyndon Johnson, called members of the state's board of education to the Governor's Mansion in Richmond to urge them on in their campaign to demand higher qualifications from high school graduates prior to their acceptance by universities.

The state requires that a student pass at least one year of mathematics and one year of science before entering university. The education board proposed to up that to a minimum of two years. The governor wants to go beyond that, for a pass in both subjects in each high school year, plus a longer school day, and a longer school year.

In this day and age, he reasons, students need more math and more science, and the place to start is in the high school, before they get to college and start to prepare themselves for the computer environment.

Putting money where his mouth is, Governor Robb told the school board representatives he is making increased financing for education "a top priority" of his administration. Linked to that pledge, he said, there must be a commitment from schools and the education system as a whole to insist on higher standards.

In last week's column, I buried the wrong Merle. Merle Haggard is alive; Merle Travis is dead. Sorry. ■

The Novascotian

Volume 2 Number 48 **Saturday, December 3, 1983**

Cover story

Four apartments, collapsed

page 5

Persistent detective work yields important details of the lives of people killed, injured, and lost in the Halifax explosion of December 6, 1917. Current research also permits microscopic examinations of the event; one example is the harrowing tale of the men, women and children who lived at 14 Duffus Street. Cover photograph, courtesy Nova Scotia Museum; cover design, Robin Edmiston.

A little girl, a memorial

page 7

A little girl walks down a street, loses consciousness, and wakens on Fort Needham's hill. Her story is the starting-point of a campaign to build a memorial to those who suffered during the Halifax explosion of December 6, 1917.

An energetic investigator

page 23

Janet Kitz is a busy woman, who has found a new way to look at an old, and much publicized subject. Readers who suffer Halifax explosion ennui may find their interest revived.

All color separations by Maritime Photoengravers Limited

The Novascotian

Disaster causes a wide range of human reactions, and the Halifax explosion produced them in full measure. Heroic deeds are often recalled, and many have passed into local legend. But there were other things: pain, grief, bitterness, and yearning to return to that elusive state called "normal."

The pages of the Herald reflected these reactions. With its rival, the Chronicle, it served as a clearing-house of information about the dead, and the whereabouts of the living. The newspaper also passed briefly through a period of white-hot resentment. The publisher, Senator William Dennis, told Prime Minister Robert Borden privately that the the explosion was traceable to the "dense stupidity or criminal carelessness" of Dominion and Imperial port authorities. His newspaper publicly followed the same line, and its mood became ugly when criminal prosecutions failed against a harbor pilot, the master of the Mont Blanc, and a Royal Navy officer, who was serving as chief examining officer for pilots. The bereaved and the maimed, an editorial writer grumbled, would have "opinions of their own regarding any government which will allow a matter of such tremendous importance to pass without further and drastic action."

Sunnier ways, however, quickly gained the upper hand, and an evocative account of those tumultuous times in Thomas H. Raddall's memoirs illustrates the human ability to return quickly to the commonplace. A student at the heavily damaged Chebucto School, Mr. Raddall and his contemporaries were transferred to the Halifax Academy. His last sentence on the subject of the disaster: "It was a long walk there and back in the capricious weather of a Nova Scotia spring, but of course to kids of that era walking was the natural way of getting anywhere in any weather."

Getting on with life also became a preoccupation at the Herald. An editorial writer (the same one made apoplectic by the explosion-related court cases?) argued for a "public campaign that would encourage the people of this continent to keep up their business relations with Halifax — the same as before the explosion." Three and a half months after the event, the Mail produced a massive, 448-column reconstruction edition, in which the astounding claim was made that Halifax was "more prosperous than ever." An obsessional interest in misery was not, apparently, common coin in Halifax, Dartmouth, and district.

All of which does not mean that historical investigations of man-made disasters should not continue. Janet Kitz's excellent work, described, in part, in this issue, is illuminating. It also reminds us of the appalling destruction humankind manages to inflict upon itself from time to time, and that the human virtues and failures of 1917 will have no meaning after any future nuclear war, limited or unlimited. Ask any physicist. ■

— William March

The Novascotian is published weekly by The Halifax Herald Limited, for insertion in the Saturday edition of The Chronicle-Herald and The Mail-Star. The corporate offices are situated on 1650 Argyle Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3J 2T2. Telephone (news) (902) 426-3053; telex 019-22703. While every reasonable care will be taken, neither The Novascotian nor The Halifax Herald Limited will accept liability for loss or damage to any material submitted for publication.

Memories

Suffer, the little children

By Glen Hancock

It is the children who always suffer most in war. Maimed and orphaned, and innocent of the violence they don't understand, they are left among the debris to live the afterdays of unbelieving horror.

Though it was thousands of miles away from the war that was raging in Europe in 1917, Halifax was as much a victim of the conflict on that fateful day of December 6 as if it had itself stood in the fields of Flanders.

The explosion left an indelible scar on the memory of all who survived, and now, 66 years later, most of those who are still left to remember are the children who were there.

Reid Sweet, a prominent Halifax businessman, was only six years old.

"It was a beautiful, cold day," Mr. Sweet recalls, "and my brother *Laurier and I were standing* on the sidewalk by the school (Richmond Academy) watching two ships in the narrows of the harbor. Every once in a while there would be an interesting puff of smoke go up from one of them. We didn't know what was happening, but we were fascinated, and a crowd of people soon gathered to watch."

The Imo, of course, had already rammed the Mont Blanc, the latter's holds containing 580 tons of TNT and many tanks of benzene. The fires on the munitions ship were the prelude to the most violent man-made explosion until Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But for a few moments the curious puffs of smoke provided entertainment for Reid and Laurier Sweet, and gave them an excuse for not being in school.

Then it happened. Reid doesn't remember anything about the blast, only that he regained his senses lying in pools of tar (that was being used on the streets or for the school roof) inside the fenced school yard at the back of Richmond Academy. The conclusion later made was that the powerful concussion from the explosion had thrown the boy either around the building or over the roof. Happenings just as strange occurred that day.

"I wasn't hurt, except for the tar, but I had no idea of what was going on. A man appeared and told us all (there were apparently other children in the yard) to keep quiet. Many Haligonians had expected an attack from the German navy, and it took little imagination to believe it had finally come."

Stunned though he was, Reid's thoughts went to his brother, who was nowhere in sight, and to his

Reid Sweet in the early 1960s: 'We sat shivering in the wagon'

Man poses calmly amid wreckage in Richmond, the area in which the Sweet family lived

mother and another brother at home at 49 Duffus Street, only a block or so away. His father, William Sweet, would be at work.

It would be only hours before the harsh reality of war would be made known to him, in a series of shocking revelations that would change his life.

The Sweets had come to Nova Scotia with the Planters in 1765. Reid's mother's family had settled in Ellershouse, a farming community in Hants County, which takes its name from a German immigrant named Francis von Ellerhausen. Reid was born there in 1911.

In 1915, William Sweet took a job in Halifax with Imperial Oil, driving a horse-drawn tank wagon, and the family, a happy, loving coterie, settled in the city's North End, near Richmond Academy. Besides Reid, there were twin boys, Laurier, named after Sir Wilfrid, Liberal prime minister of Canada from 1896 until 1911, and Borden, named after Sir Robert, the Conservative-Unionist who was Canada's wartime prime minister. Politics seemed to intrigue the Sweets, for Reid himself was named after Dr. James William (Jim) Reid, of Windsor, who delivered Reid and won his first election to the Assembly as a Liberal MLA for Hants County on the same day.

William Sweet was an industrious, hard-working man with a zest for life. On the crisp morning of December 6, 1917, he took off as usual on his delivery rounds.

Reid doesn't remember how it happened, but by chance, somewhere among the burning ruins of Halifax, he found Laurier, wandering dazed. The boy had been blown against a church wall, and his head was split open, but he was still alive. He would later be evacuated to Windsor hospital

As the two embraced, they were seen by a neighbor who drove a wagon for Adam's Transport. He picked them up and drove through the chaos of smoke and confusion. "We sat shivering in the wagon, watching people stumbling about, pulling at bodies caught in the rubble," says Reid. "A man went by with his eyeball hanging on his cheek."

In a smaller coffin lay his mother, a brother

In the wagon lay the neighbor's wife, dying in her bloodied nightgown.

There was an immediate response of relief from the whole world to the Nova Scotia tragedy, and shelters and relief stations were set up in the city with miraculous haste. Children whose families were dead or missing were billeted that first night in bunks hastily fashioned in remaining buildings.

"At this time," recalls Reid, "we knew nothing of the rest of the family. But the next day, on December 7, our grandfather (mother's father from Ellershouse) found us and took us home with him. We were slowly beginning to realize what had happened to our happy family."

After all these years, Reid's voice still fails him when he remembers being told that his mother and Laurier's twin, Borden, died in the burning ruins of the house at 49 Duffus Street.

"My uncle picked me up in his arms and took me to see my father as he lay in his coffin. He seemed peaceful. His body was found at the top of North Street with his horses. They were all dead. I wonder why at such a time I could only think of the first time I ever crossed the harbor on the ferry, sitting atop my father's tank wagon.

"In a smaller coffin, beside my father's, was all that remained of my mother and Borden, just a few charred bones."

The two boys were taken to Ellershouse by their grandparents, where they would grow up. But the grandfather died three weeks after the explosion, a victim of shock and grief.

The explosion, like all acts of war, reached out beyond the site of its devastation.

Now retired at 72, Reid Sweet, a quiet, thoughtful man, has a positive view of the explosion and the changes it made in his life.

"I thank God, of course, that I was spared, and that I have lived as long and as happily as I have. My brother, Laurier, who became a Dominion Atlantic Railway agent, died when he was only 45, probably due to his injuries. But, more than anything, I am thankful for a kind and caring grandmother, who filled the emptiness left by my mother's death."

Reid's grandmother was, indeed, a gracious woman. The Halifax Relief Commission provided a small allowance for him until he was 16. Despite the fact that the family at Ellershouse was supported solely by an uncle, who was a surveyor for a lumber company, she saved the allowance and made it possible for Reid to take a year at the Maritime Business College. Even so, he ran out of money and took a job at Eaton's at $12 a week.

"I opened my own photographic store on Blowers Street on September 12, 1939, a few days after the beginning of World War II. It was one of only two such stores in Halifax, and it did well."

The Sweets now live at Glen Margaret.

When December 6 comes around each year, Reid Sweet says a quiet prayer, not only for his own deliverance, but for the children of many countries who, suffer bereavement in wars they do not understand.

Reid made it. Will they? ■

Glen Hancock is a retired public relations officer, who lives in Wolfville

Cover story

Life at 14 Duffus

By Stephen Thorne

Janet Kitz pored over the mortuary bags until she reached No. 1074. The label read "Found at 14 Duffus Street."

Then she studied the 1917 descriptions of unidentified dead, and found an account of a young woman. She was about 20 years old. She had dark brown hair, fair complexion, white blouse.

She wore a brown striped underwaist and chemise, short corsets, blue petticoat, light, ribbed pink underwear, and long, black stockings. She owned patent leather, No. 4 laced boots, a narrow gold ring, and a Tiffany-style gold wedding ring. Also in the bag: a gilt brooch, open pattern, with a heart at its centre implanted in blue stone.

And she had lived at 14 Duffus Street.

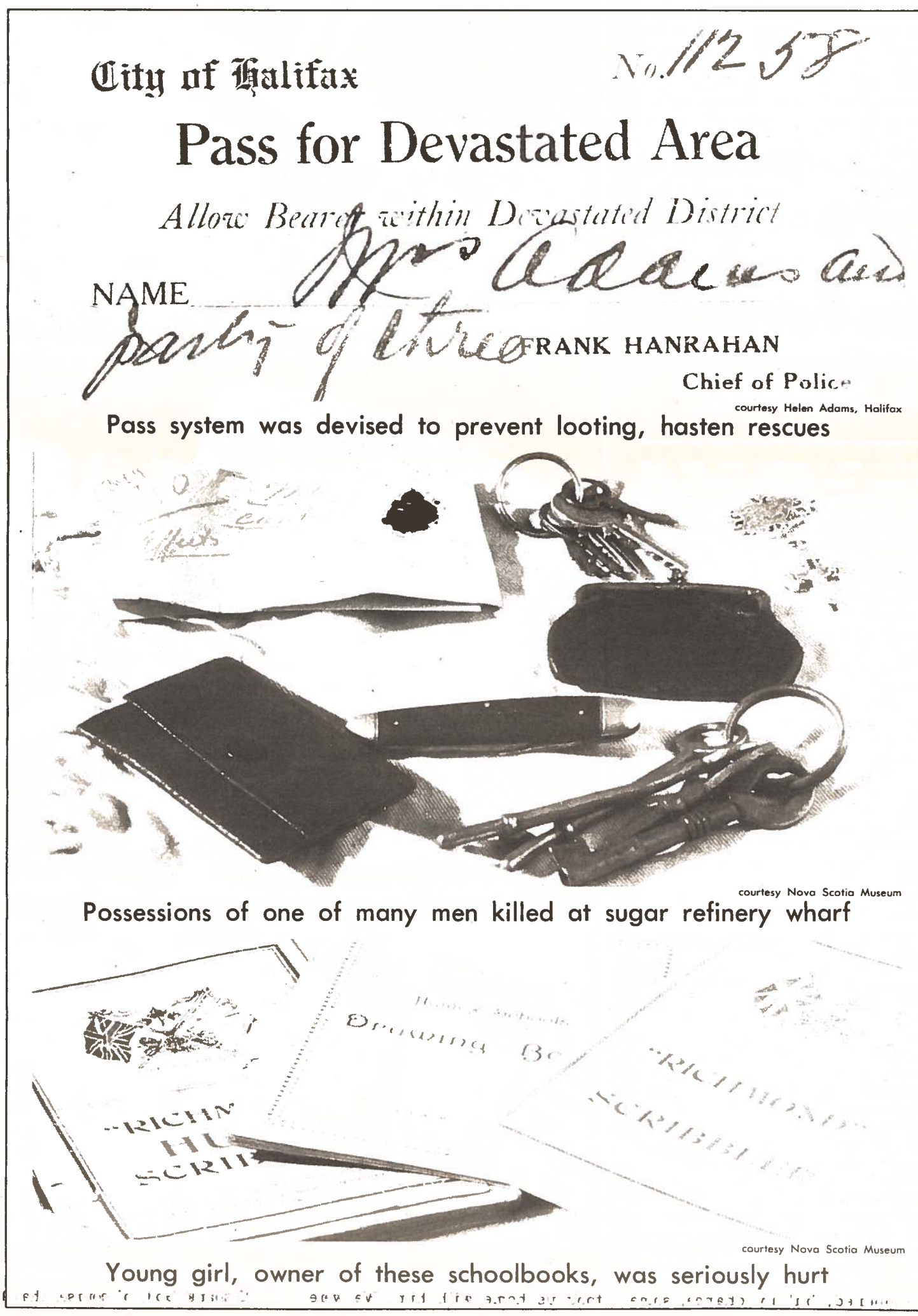
Janet Kitz was puzzled. Why had no identification been made? She pulled out the 1917 city directory and looked up the names of all those listed as living at 14 Duffus Street. Since it had been printed in July, five months before the explosion, she assumed it was up to date. Then she turned to the lists of identified dead, and she found most of the residents of 14 Duffus Street, a small apartment house.

Finally, Janet Kitz reviewed the

A puzzle — Why had no identification been made?

The cover

A 30-year-old English immigrant worker was smoking a cigarette at the Acadia sugar refinery wharf when the Halifax explosion of 1917 occurred on a clear, cold December morning. He was killed, but his package of Player's Navy Cut Medium still holds the smokes he hoped to enjoy later. He also owned the tramway tickets and the pencil.


City of Halifax

No. 11257

Pass for Devastated Area

Allow Bearer within Devastated District

NAME Mrs Adams and party of three

FRANK HANRAHAN

Chief of Police

courtesy Helen Adams, Halifax

Pass system was devised to prevent looting, hasten rescues

courtesy Nova Scotia Museum

Possessions of one of many men killed at sugar refinery wharf

courtesy Nova Scotia Museum

Young girl, owner of these schoolbooks, was seriously hurt

Halifax Relief Commission's reports and found out what happened to every individual.

Four families rented apartments at 14 Duffus. The young woman, who may have lodged with one of them, or was visiting, probably died in her bedroom as she made her last preparations to go out for the day. The building collapsed.

In one apartment were a husband and wife, in their 60s, with one son living at home, one at war, and another married and living elsewhere in Halifax. When the explosion occurred, the father was injured on the stairs. He recovered, but after two weeks with his son, he left Halifax, despondent and still nursing his wounds. He never returned. Both his wife and son had died in their apartment. His married son died of influenza less than a year later.

In another apartment at 14

Unknown one may have perished in a bedroom

Duffus was a soldier who had just eturned from England after a medcal discharge. With him were his vife and three children. Three died, eaving a 12-year-old girl and even-year-old boy. At first believed ead, they were later found, she in "house of ill fame," and he in 'ruro, where he had been sent. oth were taken to live with an unt in Cape Breton.

Four of a family of five were illed in 14 Duffus's third apartent. The lone survivor, a seven-ear-old boy, was found wandering the streets, lost and hopeless. He as taken to a detention home, here he was later found by his randmother and taken to her home Kentville.

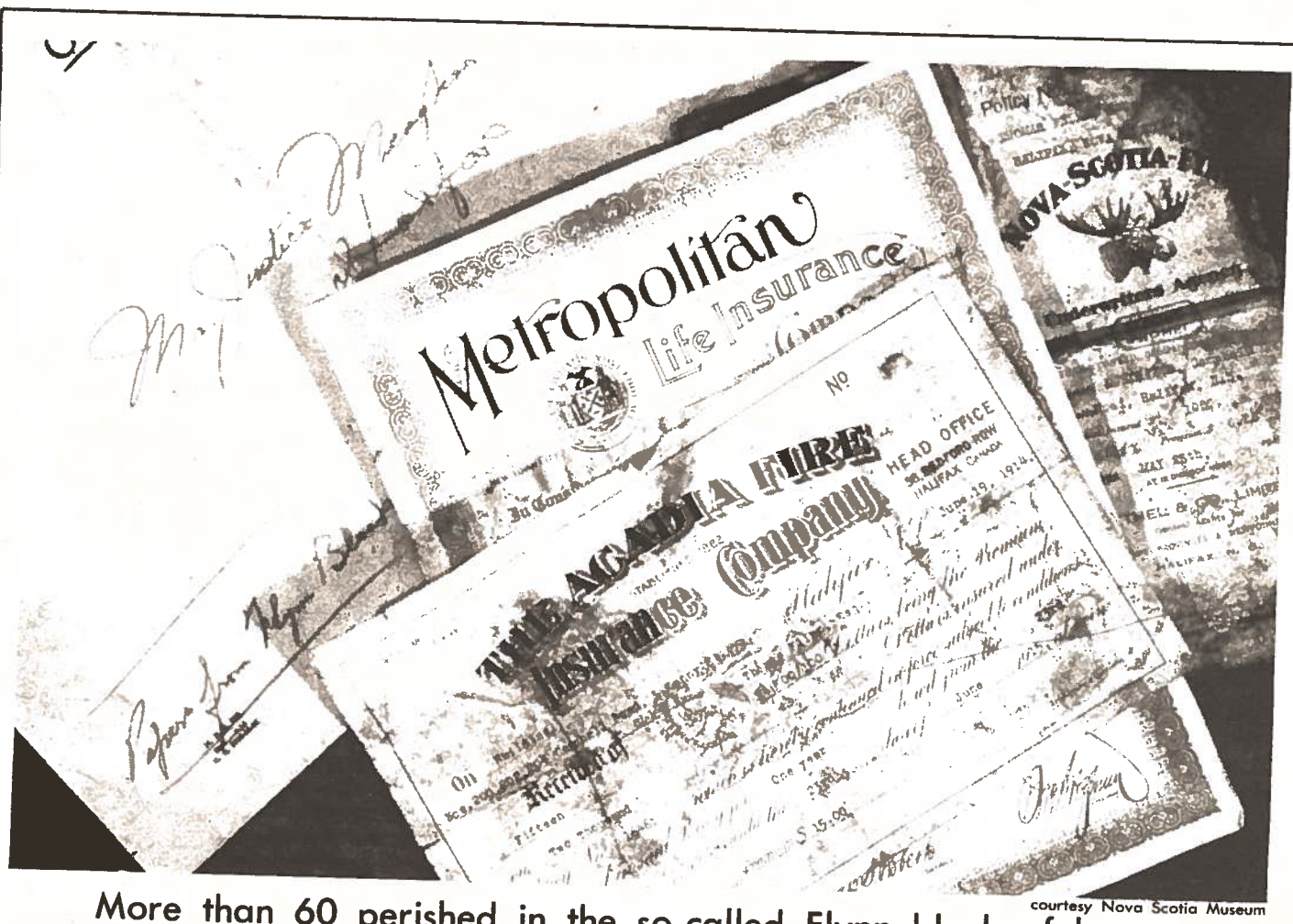
All four of another family were lled at 14 Duffus, and a woman d her baby also died there.

Under the circumstances, it was t surprising that the young wom- with the dark brown hair, fair mplexion, and white blouse, had t been identified.

As Janet Kitz examined the maial, she found more:

At the Acadia sugar refinery harf, just a few blocks from ffus Street, a 30-year-old English ckyard worker was smoking his st cigarette of the day. In the Denber cold he wore overalls, blue t sweater, blue vest and pants. was a sensible man, right down his gray, ribbed underwear, wool ks and military boots.

He'd come to work before 8 a.m. l carried with him eight trolley tickets. He was one of many tish workers who'd brought their lls to Halifax in 1917, but he l on the wharf before he could y establish himself in his new ntry. ■

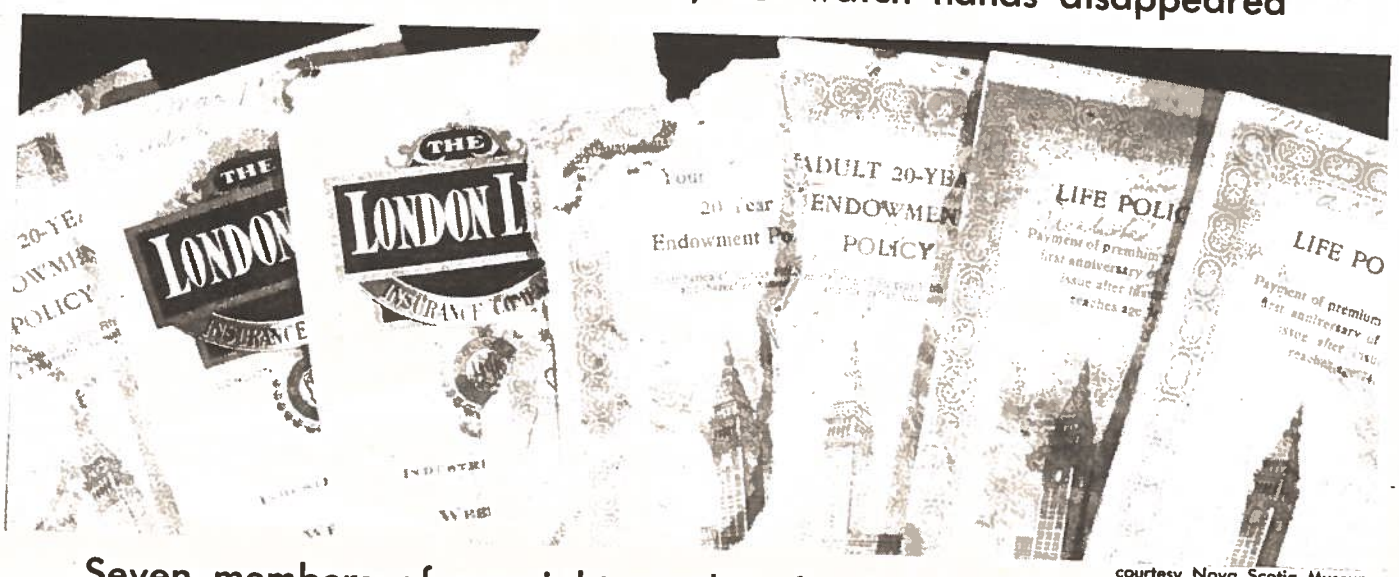


More than 60 perished in the so-called Flynn block of houses

courtesy Nova Scotia Museum

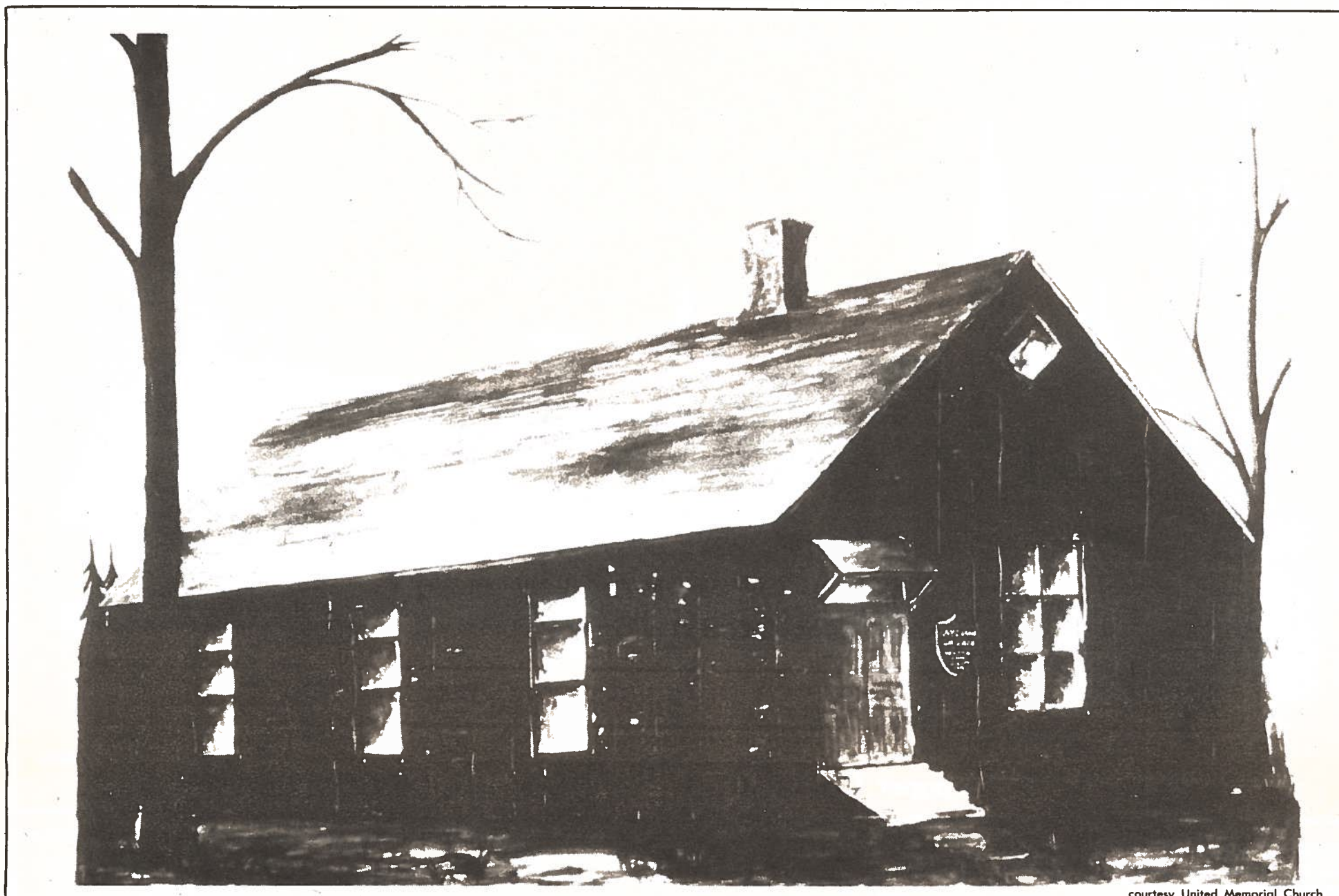
Victim's glasses are unbroken, but watch hands disappeared

courtesy Nova Scotia Museum



Seven members of an eight-member family died in their home

courtesy Nova Scotia Museum



courtesy United Memorial Church

The 'Tarpaper Church' served Methodists and Presbyterians from 1918 until 1920

She was in great pain

By Stephen Thorne with Janet Kitz

Allenby was approaching Hebron; Jerusalem soon would fall. Revolutionaries in Portugal had overthrown the government. Doubts were being expressed in Britain about United States President Wilson's intentions in Europe. Within a year, the First World War (The Great War, The War To End All Wars) would be over. The date was December 6, 1917.

The streets of Halifax were busy. It was a bright, clear morning, and the shoppers soon would be out in force. Most could not see much past Christmas.

The Orr family had just moved into their new house on Kenny Street, south of the Narrows. It overlooked Halifax harbor. William, the grandfather, had left early that morning for the family-owned Richmond Printing Works. Samuel, his son and the father of six children, left sometime later.

The children did not go to school that day. One was recovering from the measles; so, all stayed home. Just before nine, Barbara and Ian, the two oldest, were watching the harbor from the big bay window in the dining room. Two ships were on a collision course. Mother was summoned, and soon all seven were watching the drama unfold before them.

Mother was summoned, and soon all were watching the drama unfold before them

The collision occurred. Smoke trickled from one of the ships. Ian commented that it looked like an ammunition boat. Barbara wondered whether it might explode. Mother was not alarmed, and the older children went outside to have a closer look.

Barbara thought she would summon a friend. As she ran down the hill, she could hear the crew of the burning vessel shouting, and she saw them abandon ship. Suddenly, a huge column of smoke rose, great fireballs soaring up through it. There was no sound.

Then, Barbara Orr had the sensation of being violently moved, and of going down into one deep hole after another. She recovered consciousness on top of Fort Needham, soaking wet, probably carried there by a giant wave that followed the explosion.

The city had been devastated. Barbara's left boot had vanished, and she was in great pain. She crawled, looking for shelter. There was no point in going to her own house; in that direction, there was nothing but wreckage, and smoke. She headed toward a relative's home on Gottingen Street, where ho ises were standing, but badly damage .

Finally, she was taken to Camp Hill Hospital in a fish truck.

Newspaper reporters searched places of refuge and the hospitals, both temporary and permanent, listing names and locations for publication. An aunt traced Barbara, unrecognizably blackened. She carries blue TNT marks on her body to this day.

Barbara Orr survived. Her family did not. Her father did not reach the printing works. Her mother and the three youngest children were killed when the house collapsed. The other two died somewhere between the house and the harbor. An uncle, and more than 30 others at the printing works were killed. Her grandfather was injured.

There were four churches in the

courtesy United Memorial Church

A partner in the Tarpaper Church: Grove Presbyterian Church (before explosion)

Richmond district in 1917, Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican and Roman Catholic.

Grove Presbyterian had been built in 1872 on the northern slope of Fort Needham. Kaye Street Methodist Church had opened in 1869; it was situated on the southern slope of the hill. Both were flattened; 239 parishioners were killed, and many more were blinded or maimed. Almost all were left homeless.

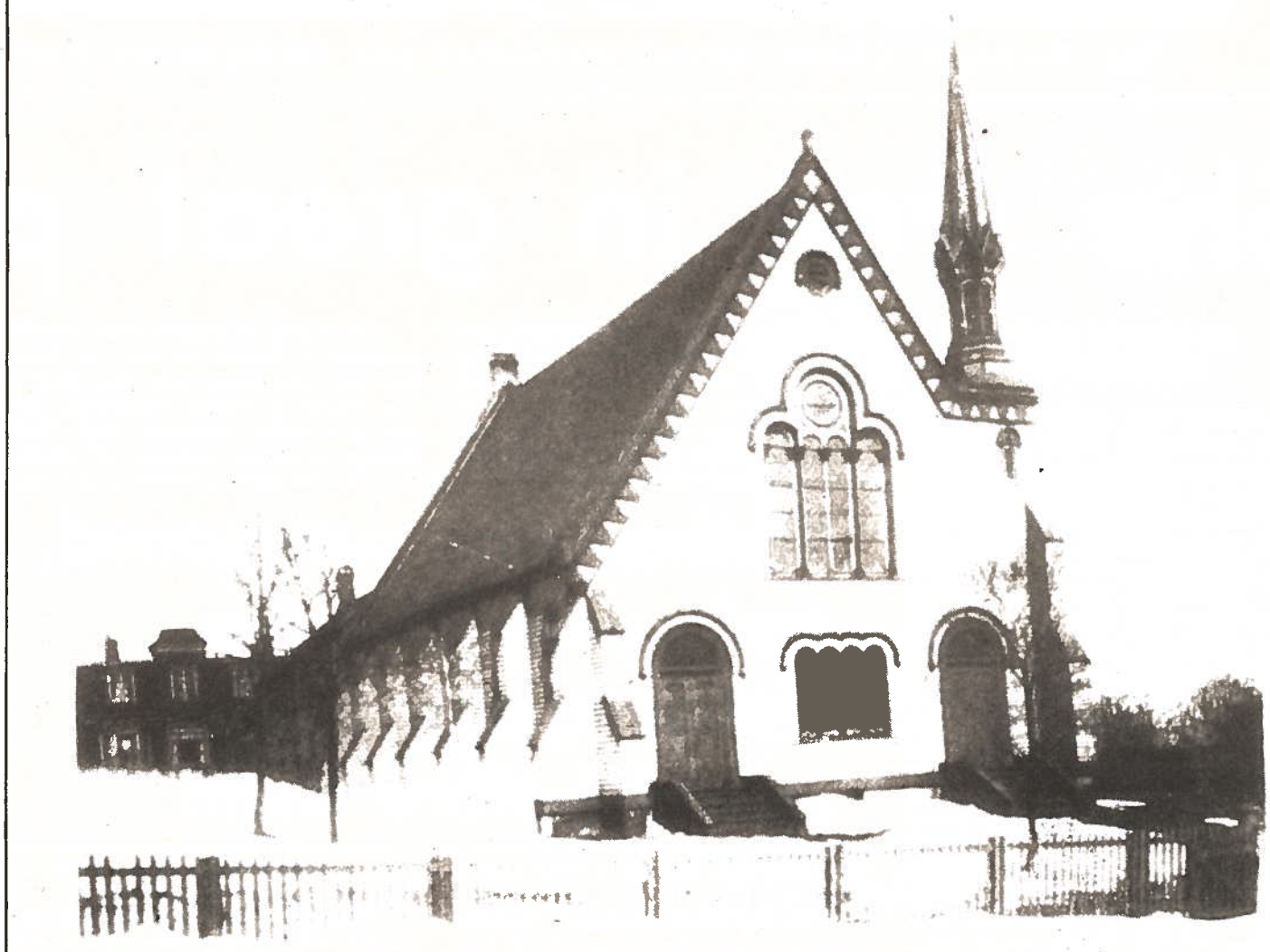
New church planned by pioneers

St. Mark's Anglican and St. Joseph's Roman Catholic churches also were in ruins.

For 100 days, other churches held services on their behalf. On March 17, 1918, a tarpaper church, a temporary structure built with Methodist and Presbyterian funds, was opened to parishioners of all four Richmond district churches.

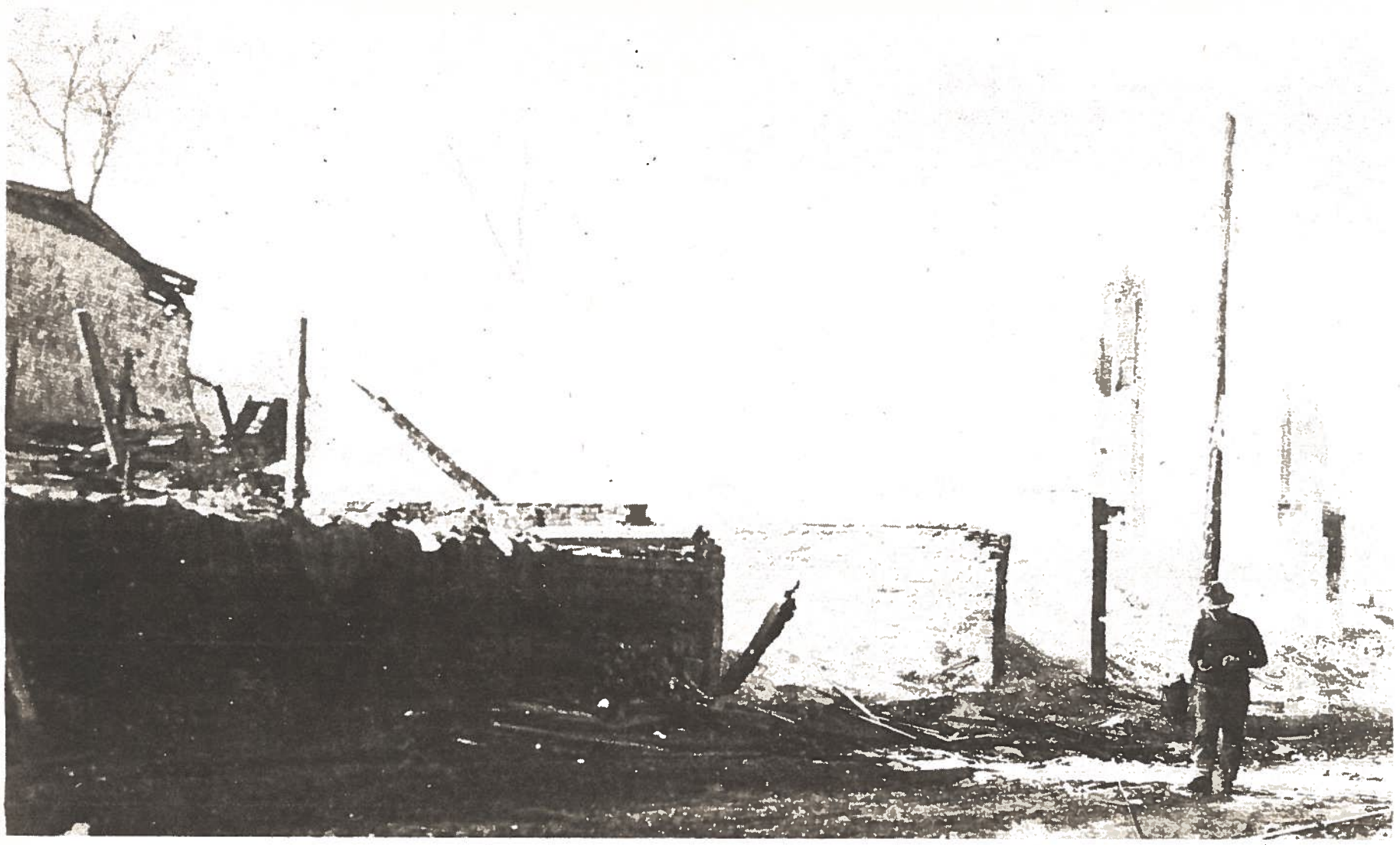
A new church was planned by the Methodists and Presbyterians, who agreed to union, and the minister of Grove, C. J. Crowdis, was asked to act as minister of the united congregation.

The union was officially recognized by both congregations in June, 1920, and the name of the church was changed to United Memorial. It was a sign of things to



courtesy United Memorial Church

The second partner: Kaye Street Methodist (before explosion)



courtesy Helen Adams, Halifax

Head bowed, a man walks by a ruined home in Halifax's ravished Richmond district

come; late in 1924 the United Church of Canada was established.

With the local union, and the new church building, came the chime of bells, dedicated by Barbara Orr in memory of her family: her parents, Samuel and Annie, and children Ian, Mary, Archie, Isabel and James. Her grandfather arranged the purchase, and Barbara played the carillon at the opening ceremony.

The bells remained for nearly 50 years. By 1965, however, structural weaknesses became evident in the the church's tower. Estimates of repair and renovation costs were high, and in 1975 the decision was made to remove the bells.

They lay covered in tarpaulins on the church's front lawn until last July, shortly after the 17-member Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Committee was established. The committee, which wants to build a permanent memorial to victims of the explosion, removed them for restoration and safekeeping.

CORE Design Group, of Halifax, won an architectural competition for the design of a structure, which would house the carillon and serve as a memorial to all those who suffered in the explosion. Fort Needham is the proposed site; if built there, it will rise 60 feet above, and sweep 150 feet out and over, land donated by the Halifax Relief Commission. The provincial government and private donors are providing construction money.

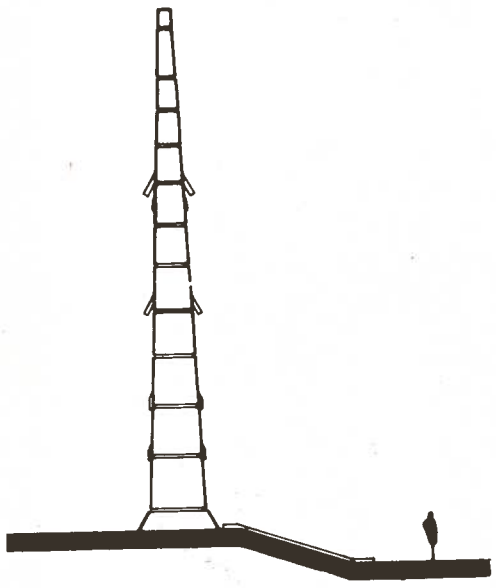
Soon, committee members hope, the Orr family bells will find a second, and sturdier, home. ■

More, pages 10 and 23

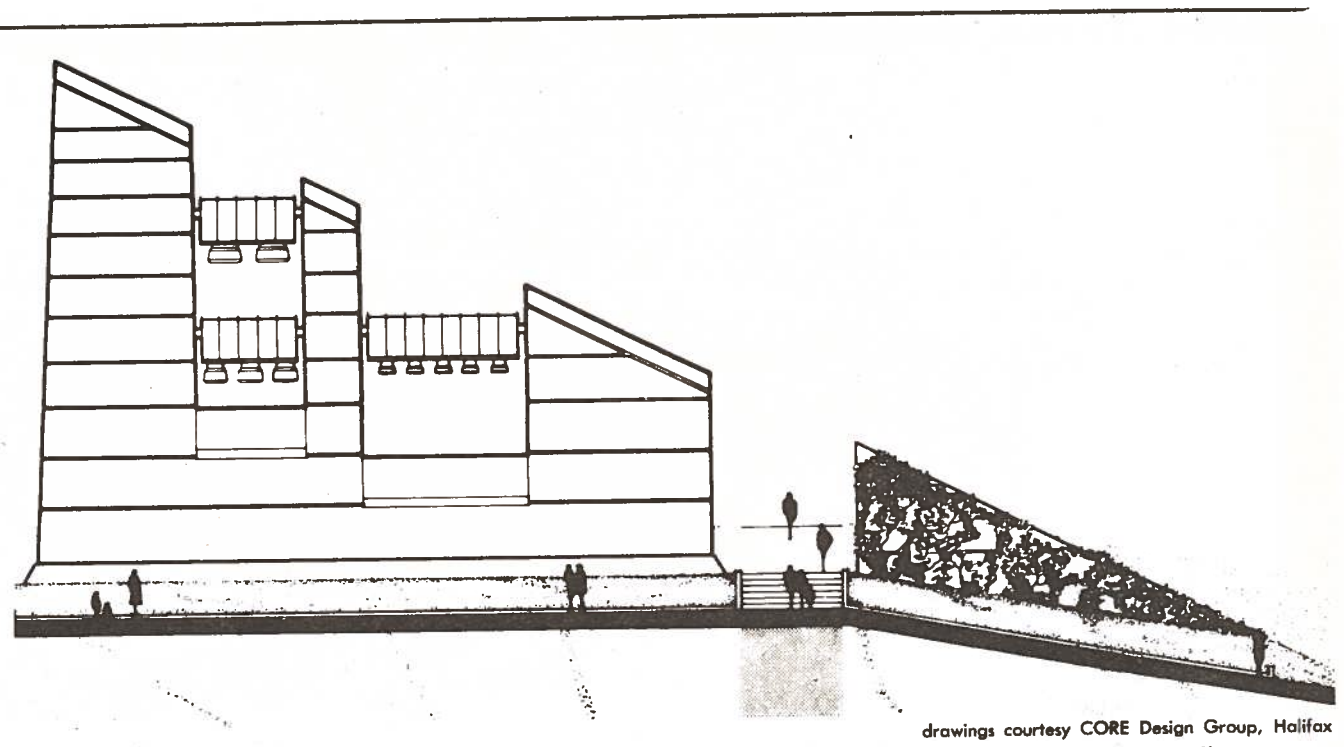
courtesy Helen Adams, Halifax

A damaged tramway car stands, despite fury of explosion

Memorial — five views

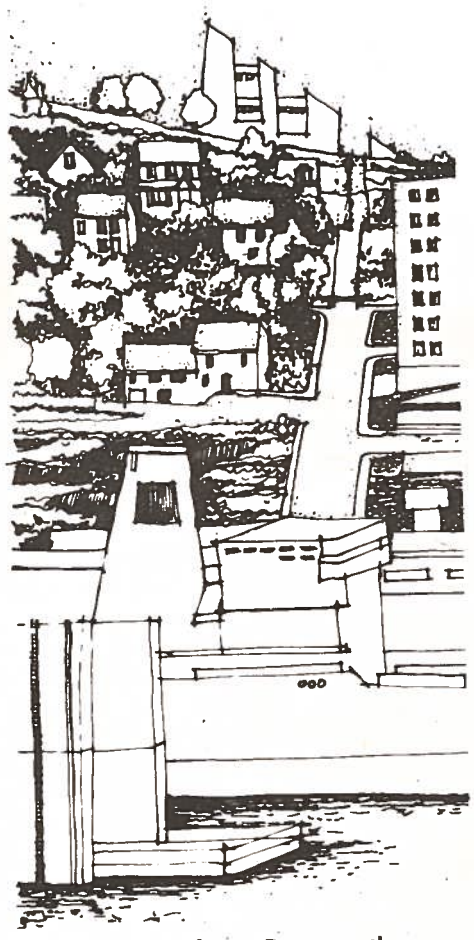


End view — a slim silhouette

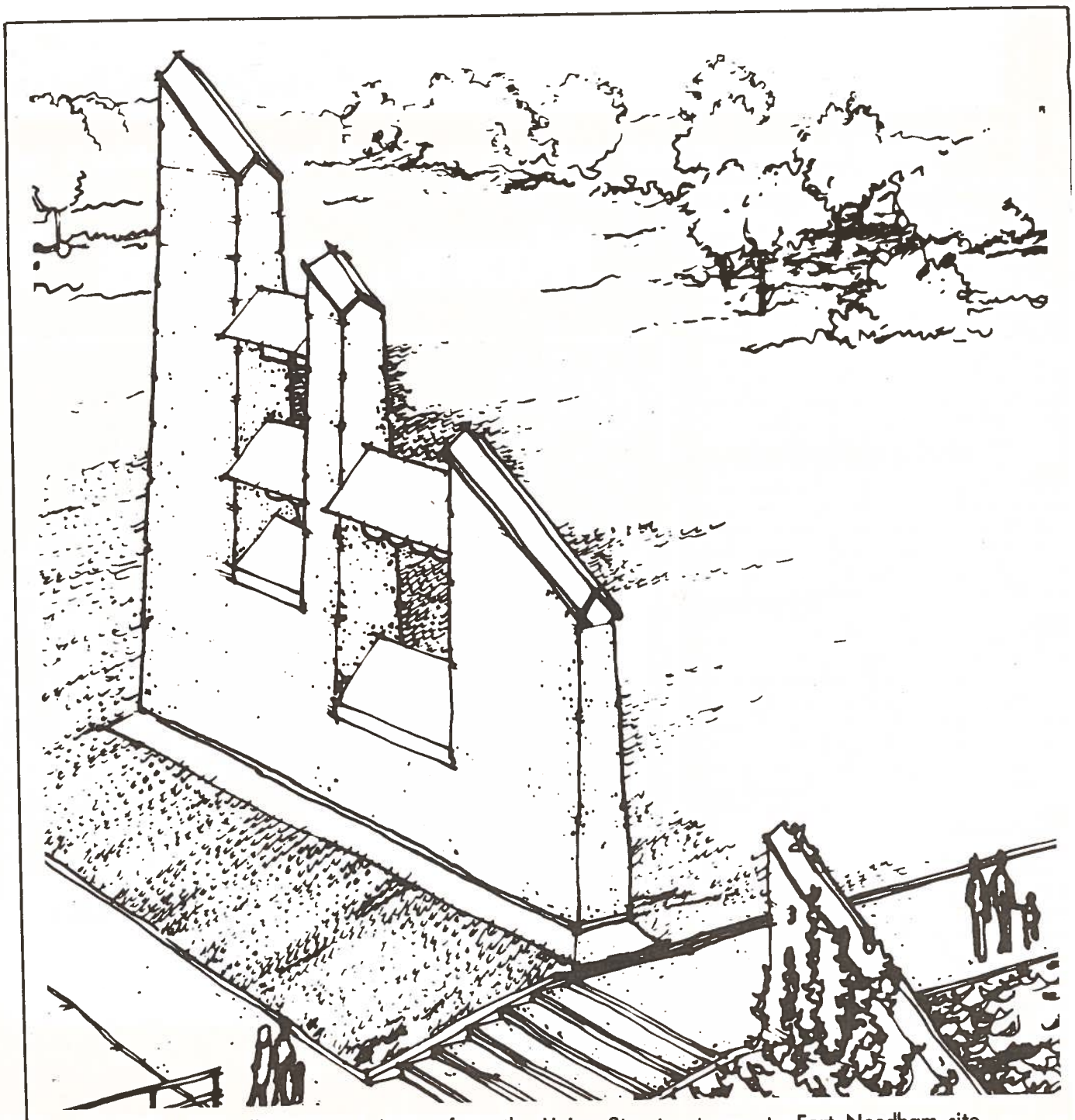


drawings courtesy CORE Design Group, Halifax

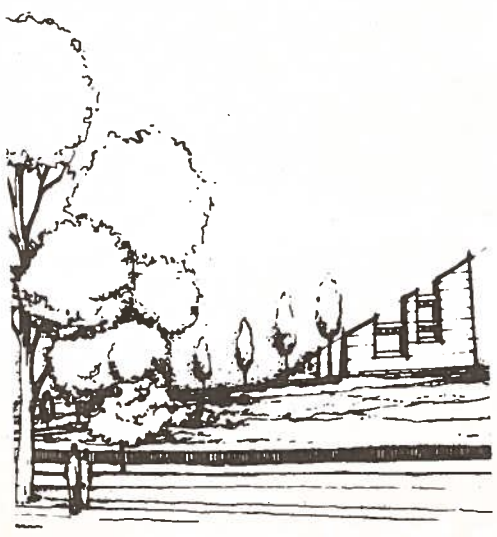
Side view — a commanding, graceful, hydrostone structure to house an historic carillon



The view from Dartmouth



The most telling perspective — from the Union Street entrance to Fort Needham site



View from Gottingen Street

Profile

Stephen Thorne

At home, Janet Kitz, in rare repose, with Brittany spaniels Becky (left) and Matilda

Where is little Mary?

When Janet Kitz plunged into an anthropology course at Saint Mary's University two years ago, she had no idea what she was in for. The Carnwath, Scotland, native had an interest in archaeology, and had studied the subject at Edinburgh. She liked Saint Mary's, because it offered a program in local studies. When time came for her final research paper, which was to be an exercise in as many facets of anthropological study as possible, she chose the Halifax explosion.

She scoured secondhand bookstores for old papers, photo albums and books. She interviewed survivors. Then, she interviewed the dead.

Janet Kitz did not engage in the occult, not even one seance. What she and Nova Scotia Museum curator Marie Elwood did was unearth from the basement of Province House 300 mortuary bags containing possessions from unidentified victims of the explosion. They had not been thoroughly examined since 1918, and the stories they told gave Janet Kitz an intimate look at day-to-day life in the Halifax of 1917.

Working from bag labels, Mrs. Kitz linked descriptions with names, names with addresses, and addresses with ways of life. Some of the possessions had been placed with the wrong people; a nine year-old girl doesn't smoke a pipe, or carry military discharge papers. With Scottish tenacity, Mrs. Kitz worked to find out to whom they did belong.

Mary Monovan's schoolbooks (photograph, page 5) were among the first objects to catch her eye. They were lying with other materials in a box, and inside were samples of long division: 943,275,842 divided by 9,865, and other appalling mind-benders.

The doodlings and exercises in spelling ("Here is an example of my best writting," with two t's) gave Janet Kitz an intimate view into the daily existence of a 10-year-old schoolgirl in early 20th-century Halifax.

The question of what had become of this little girl began to trouble the investigator. Mrs. Kitz was afraid she was dead; it seemed likely the girl would have died alongside many of her classmates amid the ruins of her Richmond school. So, she began the grim task of looking for little Mary Monovan among the lists of identified dead. With some relief, she could not find her.

Still, she could have been buried among the hundreds of unidentified. The family, Mrs. Kitz learned, lived on Merkel Street. But she could find no records of dead Monovans from Merkel Street. Finally, with the release of Halifax Relief Commission reports last year, Janet Kitz received good news: Although badly hurt, the 10-year-old had survived, her fate, however, unknown.

Thus began Janet Kitz's arduous inquiry into the Halifax explosion, and into a world many of us will never know. "I started with the idea of cataloguing the articles by object. But I was dealing with the very effects the people carried in their own pockets. It made it much more of a human disaster, and it didn't take long to realize that it was the people that were more important." ■

—Stephen Thorne