



My Boys and Girls Are in There: The 1937 New London School Explosion

Ron Rozelle

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On March 18, 1937, a spark ignited a vast pool of natural gas that had collected beneath the school building in New London, a tiny community in East Texas. The resulting explosion leveled the four-year-old structure and resulted in a death toll of more than three hundred—most of them children. To this day, it is the worst school disaster in the history of the United States. The tragedy and its aftermath were the first big stories covered by Walter Cronkite, then a young wire service reporter stationed in Dallas. He would later say that no war story he ever covered—during World War II or Vietnam—was as heart-wrenching.

In the weeks following the tragedy, a fact-finding committee sought to determine who was to blame. It soon became apparent that the New London school district had, along with almost all local businesses and residents, tapped into pipelines carrying unrefined gas from the plentiful oil fields of the area. It was technically illegal, but natural gas was in abundance in the “Oil Patch.” The jerry-rigged conduits leaked the odorless “green” gas that would destroy the school.

A long-term effect of the disaster was the shared guilt experienced—for the rest of their lives—by most of the survivors. There is, perhaps, no better example than Bill Thompson, who was in his fifth grade English class and “in the mood to flirt” with Billie Sue Hall, who was sitting two seats away. Thompson asked another girl to trade seats with him. She agreed—and was killed in the explosion, while Thompson and Hall both survived and lived long lives, never quite coming to terms with their good fortune.

My Boys and Girls Are in There: The 1937 New London School Explosion is a meticulous, candid account by veteran educator and experienced author Ron Rozelle. Unfolding with the narrative pace of a novel, the story woven by Rozelle—beginning with the title—combines the anguished words of eyewitnesses with telling details from the historical and legal record. Released to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the New London School disaster, *My Boys and Girls Are in There* paints an intensely human portrait of this horrific event.

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