



The Blast

Fifty years later

2009 Umpqua Edition

The News-Review



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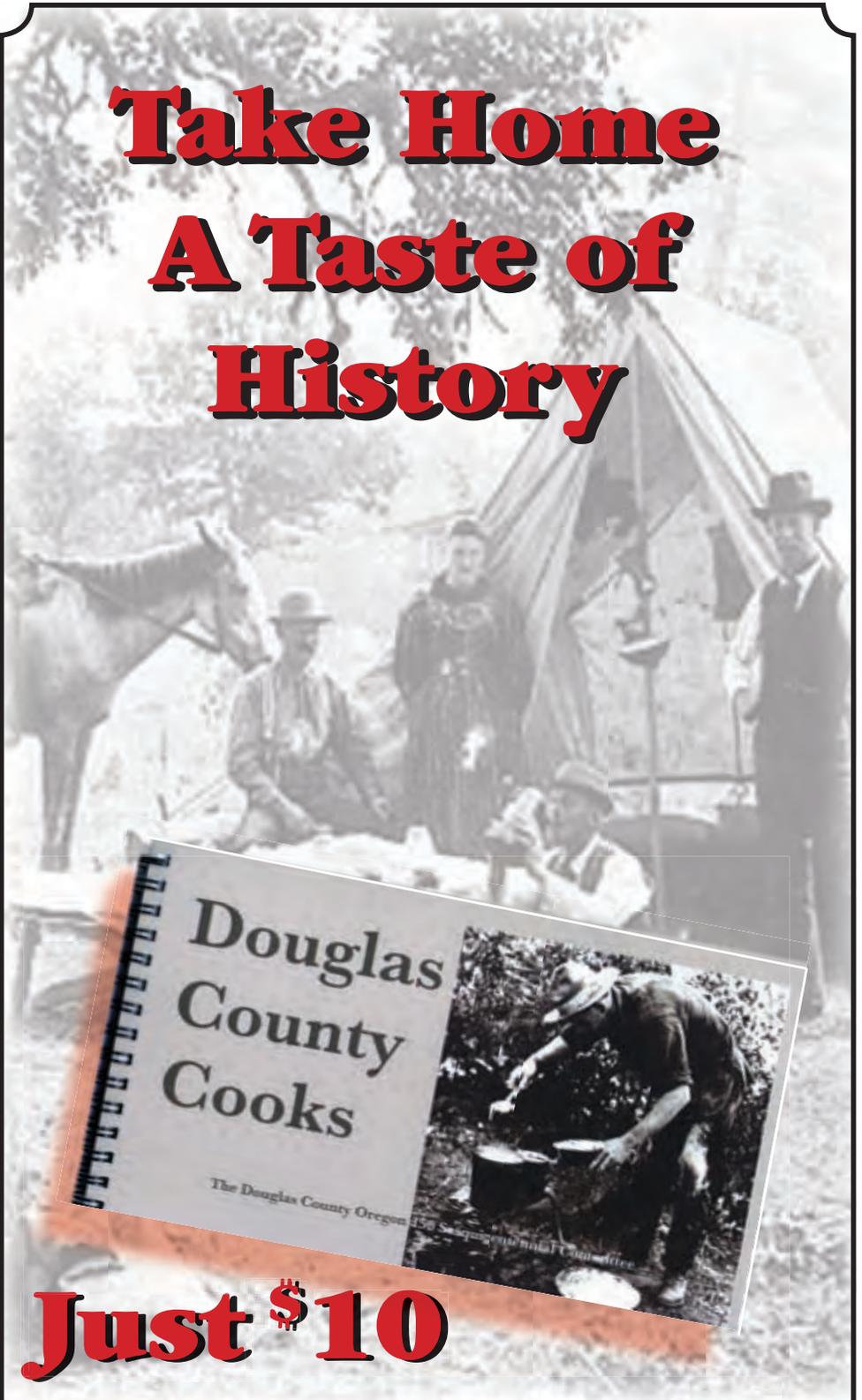


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Fifty years later, The Blast still resonates

JOHN SOWELL

The News-Review

Today marks the 50th anniversary of the day that shook Roseburg to its core.

Known around the state as the Roseburg Blast — but shortened locally to simply the Blast — the Aug. 7, 1959, explosion of a freight truck caused the death of 14 people and injured 125.

The truck was loaded with two tons of

dynamite and four and a half tons of a blasting agent made from ammonium nitrate, ground walnut shells and peanut oil. The products were scheduled to be delivered to customers later that morning.

George Rutherford, a driver with the Pacific Powder Co. of Tenino, Wash., parked his truck about 1 a.m. outside Gerretsen Building Supply, then located at Oak and Pine Streets in downtown Roseburg, and then went to the nearby Umpqua Hotel. Days earlier, the company had been warned not to leave such

trucks unattended.

The explosion, set off by a fire in nearby trash containers, created a crater 50 feet across and 20 feet deep and leveled much of downtown. Six blocks of businesses, homes and apartments were destroyed by the blast and resulting fires; altogether, a 23-block area was damaged.

The Blast caused \$12 million in damage. Pacific Powder was later assessed \$1.2 million but was acquitted of criminal charges.

Southern Oregon Public Television produced a 2005 documentary on the Blast. It

was narrated by veteran ABC News reporter Barry Serafin, a Roseburg teenager at the time of the explosion.

An Associated Press account of The Blast from the day of the explosion is available online at <http://tinyurl.com/5jfpdp>. A Time Magazine story is posted at <http://tinyurl.com/5rbdnd>.

You can reach reporter John Sowell at 957-4209 or by e-mail at jsowell@nrto-day.com.

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On the cover

Ruth Brady holds a photo of The Blast while standing in the spot where the dynamite truck blew up. She was living on the corner of Douglas Avenue and Jackson Street when The Blast occurred on Aug. 7, 1959.

Her story can be read on page 13. More Blast stories will be published in today's paper and upcoming Sunday Life sections.

Photo by ROBIN LOZNAK/The News-Review

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Cigarettes saved his life on the night of the Blast

BY PAT SULLIVAN

As told to Tricia Jones

The Blast took place soon after the 13-year reunion of the Roseburg High School Class of 1946, which hadn't had a reunion until that year.

Our classmates met on Saturday, Aug. 1, at the Roseburg Country Club, and there were 110 people in attendance. So several friends of mine were in town. At the time I was employed at Umpqua Dairy; I had worked at the plant in various jobs and was sales manager during 1954-55.

On the night of the Blast, several of the guys and I got together and had a gab fest and were kicking memories around. We broke up about 12:30, 12:45 a.m. and Don Gerretsen and Daun Lillard and I decided to go out for a beer. We parked at the Rainbow Cafe on Stephens Street and shot the breeze for a while, and I bought a pack of Marlboros and put it in my pocket.

As we walked outside, we heard all the sirens and Don said, "I think that's by the (Gerretsen Building Supply) plant," so we got into the car and drove down and

turned right on Pine Street. As we stopped, Don said, "Pat, get your car out of here; that's a dynamite truck!"

He and Daun jumped out and headed to what was then the Gerretsen office. I backed up the car and headed over to Bill Stock's Motors, a car dealer, and I parked right by the Eagles Lodge and got out of the car and locked it. I went into the tavern around the corner on Cass Avenue and phoned my wife to tell her where we were. I went out and ran down the street toward the fire — I was headed back to Gerretsen's to get Don and Daun out of there — and was about 30 feet from Pine Street when I saw the edge of the dynamite truck blow. Silhouetted against the truck was the Roseburg police officer, (Donald) De Sues, who was killed. He was the last thing I

saw. It was a centennial year, and the police were dressed in cowboy outfits, with a white Stetson and tight jeans. They never found any of him.

Next thing I knew I was falling down and was hit in the chest with a piece of the engine block from the truck. It was about the size of a 50-cent piece and shaped like a diamond. It went through



Sullivan



Courtesy of Summer James

the pack of cigarettes and lodged between two ribs below the left nipple. I was in shock. I hit the ground and everything went black.

When I started to get up, there was no fire visible at that time. I started to get up, and I got knocked down again. I was

told later it was the air rushing back in after the blast.

There was no light whatsoever in town; it was pitch black. I headed back to where the car was and all I could see was

Turn to **SULLIVAN**, page 6



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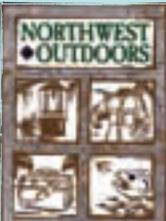
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Curiosity drove couple to view Blast devastation

NOVA BAILEY

The temperature soared well into the 90s on Aug. 6, 1959. That's not unusual for August in Roseburg. I recall nothing to distinguish that day from any other hot summer day. The night would become unforgettable!

Bob and I were living in an 8-x-27-foot trailer in a small court on S.E. Short Street right across from the Umpqua Dairy plant. We had retired that evening at our usual time. Because of the heat we had left all windows open.

About 1:15 a.m. we were jolted awake by the movement of the trailer and a horrendous noise. My first thought was, "The Russians are here. We've been attacked." (Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was at that time planning a tour of the United States.)

Immediately, all of the tenants in the court were outside. We could see a huge fire to the north. There was much speculation as to the cause. Some thought perhaps a plane had crashed since the airport was on the north side of town. Or maybe one of the lumber mills was ablaze. We milled around and continued to wonder about the fire. Then slowly people returned to their



Courtesy of John and Myra Boyd

own trailers.

I was getting back into bed when I noticed that Bob was getting dressed. "Why are you getting dressed?" I asked. "I'm going to see what is going on," he answered.

"You're not going without me. Wait till I get my clothes on."

We left our trailer and headed north on Mill Street. By now all of Roseburg was awake and many people were in the streets surging toward the fire. After several blocks we were stopped and told we could go no farther.

"There's danger of the propane storage tanks by the railroad tracks exploding.

They are hosing water on them to keep them cooled down," we were told.

With that the crowd turned right and many of us headed toward downtown. Bob and I made a loop through the area, which looked like a war zone. Windows were shattered. Glass and debris littered the streets. Brick walls were damaged. Looters were helping themselves to merchandise through the broken windows. We personally saw a man lift through two sewing machines from a store window. At first I thought he was probably the owner of the business, but later doubted it.

Downtown Roseburg was in chaos. We should not have been there. The potential for mortal danger existed. No one yet knew whether walls might collapse. We walked the length of Jackson Street, the main downtown business street, eventually threading our way to Southeast Stephens Street, the business route southbound through town.

As we neared the home of our elderly friends, Carlos and Lenora Page, we found them sitting on their front porch as if it were mid-afternoon instead of 3 a.m.

"Bob and Nova," Carlos called out when he saw us. "Come up, sit awhile, and

Turn to **BAILEY**, page 6

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Sullivan:

Continued from page 4

electrical lines snapping around. It looked like a bunch of snakes. I got into the car and turned into the intersection of Pine and Cass and turned left on Lane and went home, up on Cascade Court, directly above town.

I went into the house and my wife, Edith, had cuts all over her hands and legs. She had been standing in front of the 8-by-10 plate glass window in her shorty nightgown in the living room when the explosion went off. She had put her hands in front of her face and there was glass all the way around her.

I laid down on the bed and she pulled the piece of metal out of my chest. She said later maybe she shouldn't have, but

she did. At about that time a neighbor of ours, Lee Wimberly, came down and looked at me and said, "We've got to get him to the hospital." He brought his car down and put me in the back of his station wagon and somehow or other wended his way down the street to Mercy Hospital.

They put me in a room and Dr. (John) Unruh came in and patched me up and put a bandage on the wound and gave my wife something to wipe off her legs and arms. They said they were short of rooms and there was so much going on anyway, could we get out?

Wimberly took us to my folks' home in Hucrest. He dropped me off and somehow he took my wife back up to our house so she could get some clothes. When they got there, our porch was full of lawn chairs with people sitting out there, watching downtown. Lee Wimberly kicked the people off our front porch.

The Blast blew all the windows out of

our house. My wife went back to the house again the next morning and the principal of Hucrest Elementary School, Joe Scallion, was nailing plywood all over the windows. It took a while to get glass. There was not a glass window left in the town of Roseburg, I don't think. They were shipping it from all over.

I really don't have health problems to this day from the night of the Blast except I have to wear hearing aids, and I'm convinced that the Blast damaged my eardrums. I don't have any proof of that, but I've had problems with my hearing since then.

On a side note, that night I figured both Don Gerretsen and Daun Lillard were dead. I had last seen them running to Gerretsen's. Daun Lillard had been running back to my car with a file from Gerretsen's to put in my car, so he and I passed each other on Pine Street, but I didn't see him. He ran into an alcove thing near the Eagles

Lodge and was there when the Blast went off.

Don Gerretsen had left Gerretsen's and had run to the Coca-Cola plant. He passed people who were later killed. He was phoning his father when the Blast occurred and it blew him onto a lawn. He had a sprained ankle.

That piece of triangular metal that lodged between my ribs — I'm convinced that my ribs and the cigarette pack stopped it from going in too deep.

I've never talked about it too much, but I fully believe I was the closest person to the Blast who was an eyewitness and who lived. I guess it was just plain Irish luck.

Pat Sullivan retired from Umpqua Dairy in 1990 and now lives in Bend. He stopped smoking in 1982 following a heart attack and hasn't had a pack of cigarettes in his pocket since then.

Bailey:

Continued from page 5

tell us all you know about the situation."

We told them we had been through town and of the destruction we'd seen. At that hour, none of us knew what really had happened. Later we would learn the details of the greatest disaster in Roseburg history.

By early morning the National Guard had been called in to assist. The damaged area was restricted from public access. There was fear of walls possibly collapsing before they could be inspected. Most businesses were shut down for days.

As I stated earlier we should not have gone into the area to see the massive destruction. But I've always been glad we did. That was our only chance to see firsthand the results of the explosion.

The initial cause of the calamity was a fire in some trash cans alongside Gerretsen Building and Supply. It could have result-



Bailey

ed in just another building and business lost to a fire.

Except for a truck parked beside the business — a truck from Pacific Powder Company of Tenino, Wash., a truck loaded with six tons of explosives.

There was two tons of dynamite. And there was a blasting agent, a

mixture of prilled ammonium nitrate, ground walnut shells and diesel oil. The truck had arrived in Roseburg about 8:30 p.m., too late to deliver its fateful cargo.

The denotation caused more than \$9 million in damage, spread 50 city blocks, injured about 125 people and killed 13. Another would die from injuries a year later. He was a teenage boy from our neighborhood. He and a friend were returning from a movie when the fire began and they went to go see what was happening. A bolt from the truck struck

him in the head and he never came out of the coma.

Many Roseburg citizens saw a silver lining in the timing of the catastrophe. Had it happened 12 hours earlier or later when the streets were full of cars, and businesses full of people, how much worse the pain and anguish of loss would have been.

As the dust cleared from the tremen-

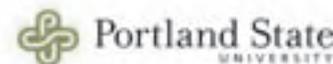
dous damage, residents of Roseburg began making plans to rebuild. And rebuild they did. Today, more than 50 years later, there is little evidence to remind one of that fateful night except in the scarred memories of the people who experienced it. No way could we ever forget an event, which left such an indelible imprint on our minds and souls.

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CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

The night the town was on fire



GRACE "GAY" FARENBAUGH

Those who lived in the 1940s would ask each other, "Where were you and what were you doing when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?" In the 1960s it was, "Where were you when JFK was killed?" The current generation recounts what they were doing on 9/11.

For those who were from Roseburg in 1959, it is, "Where were you when the Blast happened?"

Here is my story.

I was 6 years old, a month away from first grade and living at 1348 S.E. Overlook Ave., which was up the hill and on the way to Terrace Avenue, the hillside residential area overlooking a good portion of the town. My father, Al Farenbaugh, owned F&W Floor Covering, which was at 527 S.E. Cass Ave., on the corner of Pine Street.

On that night, my mom, Allena Farenbaugh, was awakened by the sound of several fire trucks. She used to say that she was a light sleeper, so over the years she would wake up and claim she heard a car door slam, there was rustling in the bushes outside the bedroom, she heard voices outside the front door, etc.

That night, she heard something big. And for whatever reason, she didn't wake my dad, but scurried downstairs to my grandpa's (W.R. Brown) room. They hurried to the redwood fence in the backyard that faced downtown and tried to see what was on fire. Mom decided to get a better look and climbed the fence. She could see fire trucks down near my dad's floor covering store and was afraid it was on fire. It was then that the explosion happened.

My first memory was of my dad turning on the light in my bedroom, looking at me for an instant and then rushing down the hall. I had never seen him



Grace Farenbaugh, 7, is seen with her grandfather, W.R. Brown, at the Blast site.

look so scared. I was aware that a loud sound had just occurred and wanted to see what everyone was rushing to, so I put on my red Keds tennis shoes, my pride and joy, and ran down the hall through the kitchen and out the back door.

The next few minutes are kind of a blur, as everyone was now in our terraced backyard, yelling out questions and answers.

"What in God's name happened?" "There was an explosion downtown, near the railroad tracks!" "Gerretsen's! That's across the street from the

store!" "Why are you bleeding?"

"I fell off the fence and into the rose bushes." "The explosion looked like a mushroom, just like an atom bomb." "I thought the Judds' house blew up!" (The Judds were our next door neighbors) "Was it a train wreck?" "She was rolling back and forth in her bed covered in glass!"

The blur cleared up as I noticed my dad, mom, grandpa and 17 year-old-sister all look at me at once.

"She was covered in glass?" my mom yelled. She ran over to me to make sure that I was OK. Not finding any

cuts, she hugged me. I probably started to cry and do remember asking her if we were going to burn down, but I don't remember her answer.

For a while the air was filled with everyone retelling the same thing over and over, my dad using the binoculars to look downtown and someone probably calling the police or turning on the radio, and I was just standing there in my pajamas and red sneakers taking it all in.

At some point, someone came out from the house and said that the big mirror in the bathroom had fallen down and shattered. "Gee, what if I have to go to the bathroom," I wondered to myself.

I don't remember this, but I am sure that everyone else started assessing other damage. Apparently, several windows in our house broke. But all I remember was the big window in my bedroom and of course the inability to get into the bathroom because of the broken mirror. And I was feeling embarrassed that mom had fallen into the rose bushes while in her nightgown, her hair in pin curls and a bandanna.

I kept asking Grandpa if I could look through the binoculars and he finally let me. All I remember seeing was a fireman standing on the corner next to our store aiming the big fire hose at the flames across the street.

My mom started to cry and yell at my dad because he was going to go down to the store. He walked down the steps from our upper yard as she pleaded with him to stay. To me, it was OK. He could do anything and nothing would ever hurt him; why didn't she feel that way?

"What if the building collapses on you?" "You could get burned!" "If the propane tanks go, we are all goners."

Windows shattered but baby was unharmed in Blast

PAM SMITH

At the time of the Blast my husband, Fred, and I were living on the corner of Mill Street and Floed Avenue.

My mother had been living with us and occupied the bedroom on the front of the house on Mill Street, but she was away at the time. We had two children at that time, a 7-year-old girl in second grade, a level-headed, good student and quite reliable. That was Corinne. The baby, Linda, was a happy, contented little thing, 18 months old, and we all delighted in her.

That morning, since Mom was gone, I moved the bed for Corinne against the far wall and the baby crib under the window, which had a blind but no curtains up yet.

Fred and I went to bed around 10 p.m. I was thinking of my mother on her long journey home, unable to sleep and wondering if I might get up and have a cup of tea. Quite suddenly, the lace curtains blew inward, almost touching the ceiling. Then a heavy blast of hot air pushed me against the headboard and went down into my throat — more air than one could breathe.

By the time the noise reached us, Fred woke and I had already decided it was a bomb. As we scrambled out of bed, our conversation was short and fearful: "That was a bomb, wasn't it?" "Those damned Russians," and we



Courtesy of John and Myra Boyd

hurried to the children's room.

For one second we looked hard at each other, afraid to face what might be. The noise of shattering glass was on our minds. Corinne, almost in a whisper, said "Don't look, Mommy, the baby is under there."

I will never forget that little crib, not a sound coming from it. The blind with rollers still attached was as if someone had laid it carefully the length of the crib, and it was holding almost the whole window of broken glass.

No glass had reached Corinne, and I

begged her not to get out of bed. At the crib, Fred took one end of the blind and I took the other and we carefully lifted it, like a hammock. We didn't dare drop any of it. Then we went to see what we had to face. There Linda was, sound asleep, her little curls clinging to her damp forehead.

I then went to put the kettle on. Fred dressed and said he was going to see if he could help someone, so I dressed the girls, made the tea, got the candles and packed a few things, because one never knew what might



Smith

happen. Sure enough, here came Fred. The fireman and police had warned him the fire was so hot that the tanks of combustibles might blow, so go home and get the family out.

So he started home and stopped by

Lucille Lent's house, which was badly damaged, two blocks closer than we were. When they arrived at our house, they were badly shaken. Lucille, being a nurse, needed to get to work. So we had tea while Fred loaded up the station wagon and we set off to Southgate, where we had a dear friend we knew we could stay with. We dropped Lucille, children and dog at that house. It was a sad but short trip. The children were quite traumatized and crying.

The traffic was just terrible. So much of it was coming in from the south. We were trying to get to Southgate and until the police got there, we couldn't cross for traffic.

By this time we were pretty much calmed down and had learned the cause of the Blast was dynamite.

We had our two lovely children safe and we spent a long night with a dear British friend. And we felt so fortunate, but were well aware of the catastrophe that was playing itself out in our newfound town.

Stench and heat drove family to cabin on the North Umpqua

ROGER HELLIWELL

The night of Aug. 7, 1959, my friend, Mike Lorenzen, and I were sleeping out on our patio, overlooking downtown Roseburg near the telephone building. It was very hot and being active 12-year-olds we were not asleep when sometime after midnight the fire sirens started.

Normally we would get on our bikes and follow the fire trucks, but for some reason we didn't. After a bit we could see a glow down by the railroad tracks, then more sirens. Our view included Mount Nebo. All of a sudden there was a flash that lit the face of the mountain like midday, and immediately following a tremendous explosion with a



Roger Helliwell kept this Blast souvenir.

flaming mushroom cloud erupting directly above us with flaming debris.

Next, my dad, a World War II veteran, came out from the house and told me to start hosing down the roof of the house. My mother came out and men-

tioned that maybe the Russians were attacking, since that was a concern at the time. My dad chuckled over that since Roseburg wasn't exactly a prime target.

Eventually we gathered with neighbors on Main Street trying to figure out what was happening, and with growing fires, whether we needed to think about escaping if the routes weren't blocked. One rumor was that the propane tanks might blow up by the tracks, causing catastrophic damage.

Our house had some broken windows and cracked walls and ceilings. The burning debris from the explosion drifted some to the south and there were some spot fires in the south end of town. The fires and sirens continued into the next day. Jackson Street was

splattered with broken glass. The smell from many foul sources was nauseating. The next morning we discovered a galvanized pipe cap went through the carport roof a few feet in front of where we had been standing. I still have the memento.

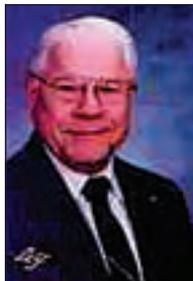
I'll never forget how wonderful it was to escape from town to a friend's cabin on the North Umpqua, to get away from the heat and stench, and swim.

Of course the junior high I was to enter shortly was condemned, and we had to double shift at Joseph Lane Junior High for two years. For a few years after, when the sirens went off at night, I would crawl under the bed. I also kept hearing sirens for some time. The loss of life was tragic.

Shoe store one of many shops damaged by Blast

LOYD HASTINGS

On the evening of Aug. 6, 1959, I was trimming windows at Karl's Shoe Store at 556 S.E. Jackson St. My crew and I finished trimming after midnight, said goodnight and returned home. My helper lived downtown in the McClellan Hotel where today's City Hall stands. At about 4:00 a.m. Aug. 7 the phone rang. My helper said the store was destroyed. I looked out my back door on Killdeer Street and saw a big fireball in the sky downtown. My employee said he was in the store, and since he did not have a key, I asked how he got into the store. He told me all the glass in the store was gone and he just walked in.



Hastings

I dressed quickly and drove toward downtown and got as far as the high school and saw the road blocked. I took the freeway to Garden Valley to Stephens and was again stopped at the crest of the hill by the National Guard troopers, and was told only owners or managers were allowed into the downtown area. I located a trooper who knew me and was allowed to walk downtown. All along the way I walked through glass-filled sidewalks and other items from the Blast.

I was in total shock as I approached

the core of downtown. Broken glass looked like snow in the streets. Every window was gone to shreds and structures were hanging in all kinds of odd shapes. It looked like a war zone you see in the movies. When I did reach my store I was shocked to see how much damage there was to the structure. As I approached the lobby, it was full of the shoes that had been in the windows the night before, along with glass everywhere. Shelves were down in the back room, boxes were on the floor, purses were scattered everywhere as the glass shelves were shattered. We could see the fire burning just blocks away and the smell and smoke made it hard to breathe.

The damage was everywhere. I looked down the street to see Jack West, a jeweler, on his hands and knees looking for diamonds among the glass in the street. Across the street above Dr. Tuck's office was a 2-by-4 sticking out of the front of the building. More damage was around than any one could comprehend.

At 8:00 a.m. I called the head office in Los Angeles to tell them of the damage. They had heard of the Blast on the morning news and were concerned for our health. When I told them of the damage they could not believe it was that bad. Later I received a call from the vice



Courtesy of Marilyn Lewis

president of the company and owner of our building. He could not believe it could be as bad as I had described and said he would fly up and look for himself. That evening he arrived and had to be escorted to the downtown area by a National Guard man to see if he was indeed who he said he was. He looked at the building and store and was in shock. I told him I thought all shoes were damaged, even in the boxes. He said no way and stuck his hand inside a shoe and got

cut on glass. We then decided to send all shoes back to Los Angeles.

New shoes were sent and we set up shop along with all of the merchants in the fairground buildings about 10 days after the blast. It was a makeshift deal with curtains between stores in each room of the fairgrounds. We were there until almost Christmas when our stores were repaired and able to return to normal business.

Family pondered what might have been in Blast aftermath

GLORIA BEST

The acrid smell of smoke and devastation will stay in my memory forever. Other details may have become dimmer, but that never changes.

At the time of the Blast, we lived on Austin Road in Green. Daughter Susan, age 11, was at Camp Tyee for the week with her Campfire Girls group, and my husband was working swing shift at the plywood plant in Dillard. I was in bed asleep and daughter Linda, age 8, had crawled into bed with me. She probably was lonely in her room with "Sissie" being gone.

Suddenly our house came alive with the rattling of windows, accompanied by the sound of a huge explosion in the distance. We rushed to the window on the

north side of the bedroom, and from there, we saw billows of smoke rising like dark clouds in the distance, as well as a faint glare lighting up the sky and slowly growing brighter. Our little Chihuahua, Cutie, had disappeared under my bed and refused to come out until morning.



Best

I could feel only panic and amazement at what we were watching, having no idea yet of the scope of lives lost, the wounded and the property destruction, as well as countless acts of heroism that were taking place almost immediately.

My husband was on his way home from work when he saw the smoke and the sky becoming lit up. He began to drive toward town, but of course the road was closed by that time. I don't remember just how we heard the news, but it was at least a week before some of the

streets in Roseburg were opened to limited traffic.

What a strange and eerie feeling driving down past the Church's Drug Store location and other limited areas we were allowed to enter. Terrible devastation — sidewalks full of broken glass and debris, windows boarded up, buildings in ruins, and most of all the lingering smell of smoke, death, injury and fear.

As we heard of the death toll, the injuries and the extent of the damage, we thought of two "might-have-been" events in our own family. I had been discharged from the old Mercy Hospital just days before the Blast, following thyroid surgery; my room overlooked the river and downtown area. In the late evening of the day before the Blast, daughter Susan had suffered fairly severe stomach pains while at Camp Tyee and was brought to Mercy by a counselor for observation. She was kept overnight because the doctors suspected appendicitis. However,

she did well and was taken back to camp the next morning by a counselor.

After the Blast, some campers were told of the death of a camp counselor's relative but were advised to not talk about it and cause fear in other girls. Families in many other states were trying to contact relatives here when they heard the news.

Susan started junior high school in the fall and was on double-shifting that year due to the destruction of the old Central Junior High School in downtown Roseburg.

Gradually but surely the city of Roseburg healed and rebuilt, with much effort and cooperation. When the Farm Bureau finished rebuilding in the same location and had its grand opening, my husband signed up for a drawing and won a very nice covered casserole dish, metal with a heavy Teflon lining. I still use it even now. Each time, I remember.

48 hours: Life, death and destruction

JOHN BOYD AND MYRA BOYD

As told to Beth (Boyd) Griffin

Griffin notes: I have always been fascinated by this account from my parents. Most of all because they can tell it so matter of factly. To me, these life-changing events, stacked upon each other, would have been shattering.

John Boyd: It all started with the death of my father, Hal, on Aug. 5, 1959 at about 4 a.m. He had what was then called “spider cancer.” He was dead within six weeks of being diagnosed. Prior to that, he seemed perfectly healthy. His passion was farming. He would have worn a white shirt and tie on his tractor if he could. He passed away at Douglas Community Hospital at the young age of 49, just 20 days before his 50th birthday (Aug. 25).

Just hours later, my second son, Mark, was born. He arrived at the same hospital at 1:17 p.m. on Aug. 5. It’s hard to believe my son will turn 50 years old on this anniversary of the Blast. He and Myra were still hospitalized on Aug. 7 when the devastation occurred.

I, however, was standing outside my family’s home in Glide waiting up for relatives to arrive from California. It was around 1:14 a.m. on Aug. 7. All of a sudden, the windows rattled on the house, an explosive sound roared up the river, and the sky lit up as bright as day. It was as if the sun rose. My first thought was that the Union Oil bulk plant on Diamond Lake Boulevard blew. I immediately left and headed for town. It felt like it took only 10 minutes to get there. I parked on Fowler Street and walked in.

It’s somewhat of a blur, what exactly happened, because the whole town was on fire. I walked through town up Jackson Street to Mosher Avenue. The windows were blown out of everything. I literally walked on diamond rings and jewelry among the glass fragments. The jewelry store was in the Umpqua Hotel, but the only notable protection of property was at the Green Front Liquor Store on Rose Street, which was swarming with members of the National Guard. I kept my focus on getting to

the service station where I worked, Haven’s Shell. I wanted to make sure it was secure, but when I arrived, the owner was already there pumping gas for the emergency vehicles. The station was on the corner of Mosher and Stephens. A piece of the truck that exploded had blown through the window of the station office.

From there, I walked back to my car and headed down Garden Valley Boulevard to try to get over to the hospital. I was able to take the freeway to Harvard Avenue. When I arrived at Douglas Community Hospital, there were people lying all over the lobby — on counters, floors and every other surface available. One woman had a huge chunk of her

thigh missing. It was like a war zone. There were nurses and doctors running around trying to care for people. I remember a nurse picking up a child and it just went limp and folded backwards. To my relief, Myra and Mark were fine.

My brother and his wife arrived at the hospital with multiple glass cuts. Their house was on Spruce Street, where the ramp of the Washington Street bridge is today. They reported that a concrete block had come through the roof and lodged in the ceiling over their bed. They were so near the center of the Blast that the large, three-story house between their house and Gertsen Building Supply was gone. I remember going back to check out my brother’s house and we had to throw dirt on the rear tires of his car to put a fire out.

I don’t even recall when I found out what really happened. I’m not sure what day I finally went to bed. I do know we were fortunate that fateful day; there were no other injuries to our family. We just had a few cracked walls in the house to repair. When I returned to work, I remember having to have a permit to drive through town.

Myra Boyd: On Tuesday, Aug. 4, my water broke. About 7 p.m., the doctor told me to head for the hospital to check in. My father-in-law, Hal, was already there. When I arrived, John told me I’d better go see him for the last time. I then checked myself in and the nurses checked on me frequently through the night. One came into the



John and Myra Boyd are shown here in December 1957.

room and I told her I would try to have the baby the next morning so I wouldn’t wake the doctor. She said they already had to call him to tell him a patient had passed away. At that point I knew it was my father-in-law, but I didn’t have the courage to ask her who it was. The doctor came in about 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 5, and told me that Hal had passed away. He said, “God gives life and He takes it away.” After being induced, I started labor at about noon. Mark came at 1:17 p.m., two and a half weeks early and only 5 pounds. Since my first son was 9 pounds, Mark seemed very small and fragile.

I was awake when the Blast occurred, because the nurse had recently brought a baby in for the woman next to me to nurse. At 1:14 a.m. on Friday, Aug. 7, I found myself standing at the foot of the bed, unsure how I got there. I remember that the pull blinds on the hospital windows hit the ceiling and the sky lit up like a ball of fire. We heard glass crash and we were worried about the babies in the nursery. I stepped out to look, and the babies were all sound asleep. We found out the glass that broke was in the shower room.

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Boyd:

Continued from page 10

Eleanor Unrath, who lived between the Shell station and the Coca-Cola plant, was standing in the hall and she was white as a sheet. She was getting linens out of the closet. She said, "Gerretsen's has blown up and the bottling company has blown up and Bill (her husband) was somewhere inside the building." He had gone to help fight the fire, and he had died there. I was in such shock, I just went back to my bed. I could hear people in the hallway screaming and crying for help, but I

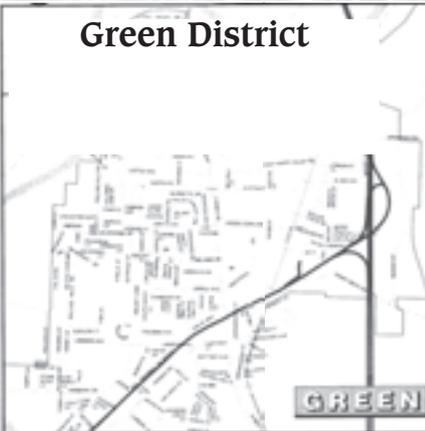
was too afraid to look. I got out of the hospital early on Saturday, Aug. 8, to go to Hal's funeral. I left my tiny baby in the hospital until Monday. We had to proceed with a graveside service at Roseburg Memorial Gardens, because the Chapel of the Roses, which was then downtown, was badly damaged. The next day, Sunday, Aug. 9, was John's 22nd birthday. I don't even remember if we celebrated. I returned to work at Roseburg Motors just two weeks after my baby was born. They were still doing roof repairs when I got there. During the Blast, the windows blew out of the building, and the roof had lifted up and come back down.

My dad, Deane, worked for Gerretsen's as a cabinet maker. His shop was just inside the door from where the fires started in a garbage can that night. The explosion scattered his tools all over town. He lost all of his tools and his job. I am so thankful the Blast didn't happen during the day, or I would have lost my father, too. He was an avid photographer, and I still have many pictures that he took that night of the fire and the aftermath in the days to follow. **Final thoughts:** The thing is, we just all moved on. We rebuilt, we resumed our lives. It's not like today, where everyone wants someone else to blame or fix it for them. People pulled together and did what they had to do.



John Boyd is seen here with his son, Mark.

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Blast doesn't blow up wedding plans

DONYA ADAMS

Most weddings are stressful enough without the town blowing up the day before the big event!

On Friday morning, Aug. 7, 1959, the prospective bride, Zoe Peery, and her roommate, Donna, were asleep in their downtown Roseburg upstairs apartment. They were suddenly awakened by the dynamite truck explosion several blocks away.

They could hear loud sirens and screams, and assumed that the town was being bombed. Disoriented and confused at the early hour of 1:30 a.m., the young ladies tried to hide under their bed. They were not too successful, since there was very little space under their hide-a-bed, and they soon gave up and began to assess the damage to their apartment.

The apartment windows had all been open that evening, and were not broken. But a lamp and a fan had been pulled out of a window, still plugged in, and the fan

was still running. The girls discovered that their medicine cabinet had burst open and its contents were now in the bathtub, and a kitchen wall cabinet had come off the wall, covering the floor with broken glass and dishes. Due to the shattered glass, the girls had trouble finding and safely reaching their shoes. Fortunately the wedding crystal was packed in a box under a coffee table and was safe.

The phone lines were still operable, so they called the prospective bridegroom, Ray Crowe, who lived with his invalid mother near the downtown area. The girls were certain he would promptly deliver them to a safe location. Ray explained that the loud bang was probably just the road workers using explosives on Mt. Nebo, and it was nothing to be worried about.

Shortly afterward, Ray did begin the slow drive downtown to get the girls. His mother had complained that she could see fire downtown through the missing parts of her own roof, which had been blown off by the blast. Traffic was slowed due to a serious concern that several huge propane



Zoe Peery and Ray Crowe were married on schedule despite the Blast.

tanks near the blast site might explode, and traffic was slowed by authorities trying to keep everyone safe.

Ray collected the girls, and began taking pictures while he was downtown. These pictures were later turned over to the City of Roseburg for historical records. The downtown streets were covered with glass

from store window fronts, and merchandise from the stores had been blown all over the streets. People were arriving to clean up, but also looters had arrived to haul off any valuables they could find. The

Turn to **ADAMS**, page 14

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THE BLAST



Courtesy of Marilyn Lewis

Blast lit up the phone switchboard

RUTH BRADY

On Aug. 7, 1959, at approximately 12:45 a.m., my roommate, Barbara Melhoff, and I arrived back at our apartment, which was located at the corner of Douglas Avenue and Jackson Street.

It was the old creamery building. We lived in the end apartment that faced Stephens Street. We were getting ready for bed when we heard all the sirens.

Looking out the end window that faced Stephens Street, I saw flames well above the old junior high building. We went to see what was happening. I had my hand on the door to go outside when the Blast occurred. Both Barbara and I were blown backward, the ceilings were cracking and we were covered with the silty stuff that comes from that.

We looked at each other and thought, "What the ...?" I had my car on the street with the windows up and not a piece of broken glass in it. In our apartment was fine debris and glass, even in the refrigerator. The window I was looking out of three minutes earlier was powdered into the whole small apartment and side windows broken and bowed in.

We walked out of town to the top of Stephens Street and someone took us to my parents' house on Sweetbrier Avenue. We were allowed into the city to clean, but had to be out by 6 p.m. I came in to work and to clean my apart-

ment. I found pieces of glass between the bottom sheet and the mattress without the sheet being torn.

I worked for the phone company at the time and at midnight there was only one operator on. She felt the building shake, looked up and every light on the boards was lit up. We worked around the clock for a long time to get messages in and out of Roseburg due to no circuits available and long delays.

My friend, Dennis Tandy, was the one who found the fire and sent his wife, Marilyn, to call in the fire. My uncle, Tuff Manning, and Dennis' father, Al Tandy, searched for a few hours and finally found Dennis' body in a makeshift morgue in the basement of Mercy Medical Center. My great aunt lived on Pine Street and the wall between her apartment and the neighbors came down.

If you want to call it luck, the Blast could have killed more people if it was not for the early hour that it happened. Grain elevators smoldered for months, boxcars twisted like toys, the devastation for loss of life was by far the worst, the rest was rebuilt.

Dennis Tandy is buried in Roseburg Memorial Gardens. He has no family left, and on Memorial Day he is not recognized. I put a single rose on his grave every year since I have returned to Roseburg. His marker states, "Hero of the Roseburg Blast."

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Adams:

Continued from page 12

National Guard soon arrived, barricaded the downtown area, and stopped the looting.

Since Zoe worked for the State of Oregon Public Utilities Commission, she was later issued a permit to pass through the National Guard barricades to examine the state office for damage and security issues. She discovered that the office door was blown in two and chunks of concrete had come down from the ceiling. The Highway Department later began moving valuables out of the building for safety.

While downtown, Zoe was able to enter her apartment to get her wedding dress and

crystal safely out, along with the candle lighter's dress and other essentials for the next day's wedding. Zoe had reserved the Umpqua Hotel for her wedding reception, but the hotel had been closed due to the Blast and was too damaged to be used. Zoe's wedding photographer was also unavailable, but he did send another photographer in his place. The florist had problems delivering the flowers, but the bride's parents from Grants Pass gathered gladiolas and brought them to the wedding.

Zoe spent the night at an empty house owned by friends, but in the confusion of the wedding day, no one arrived to take her to the church for her own wedding! She picked up her overnight case and her wedding veil, put on her wedding shoes, and began walking to the church. The roads were still busy with heavy traffic coming



Adams

and going from downtown, including dump trucks and emergency vehicles. When she finally arrived in her dusty clothes, her groom was standing outside in front of the church, greeting and welcoming guests to the wedding. Being so late to arrive, she quickly changed into her wedding dress, and doesn't recall even looking in a mirror before the ceremony.

Many guests assumed the wedding would be canceled, and didn't come. But the families were there, as well as attendants and minister. The Joseph Lane Middle School gymnasium was used for the wedding

reception, but there was no cleaning crew, so the bride and groom stayed, along with family, to clean up after the reception and wedding. Late that night, the day after the blast, the newlyweds departed for their honeymoon in their 1913 Model T Ford touring car.

After returning home after a week away, they learned more about the Roseburg Blast. They also discovered that Zoe's work office for PUC and Department of Motor Vehicle services had been moved into an old house on Roberts Street near the State Highway Division offices. Later, Ray would also begin working for DMV, and both retired from DMV after many years working for the State of Oregon.

Fortunately none of their family or acquaintances was seriously injured in the blast, and the wedding was lovely.

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Farenbaugh:

Continued from page 7

“We had better clean up the glass.” “That mirror in the bathroom will be a mess.” “The police might not let you through.” “Gay, you will have to use Grandpa’s potty downstairs.”

Apparently, everyone wanted to get a better view of the growing fire, so we climbed the back fence and sat down in the sloping open field and watched the town burn. I vividly remember the smell of the fire. It would change from burning wood to something else, something black and dirty and very scary.

“See that black smoke?” my grandpa asked me. I nodded yes. “That’s Carter Tire Company; that black smoke is their tires burning.”

So, there we sat, watching much of downtown burning, sirens blaring, flames rising and falling, waiting for dad to come home.

“There goes the Umpqua Hotel.” “Will the fire melt the railroad tracks?” “What was that little explosion?” “Hey, Mary Lynn, Central Junior High is burning.” “I wonder how many people were killed or hurt?” “Can the fire get up here?” “I see that the Lockwood’s are sitting on lawn chairs in their front yard.” (A neighbor, Fred Lockwood, owned Lockwood Ford and would end up relocating his dealership to the Blast site.)

No matter how many times someone tried to put me to sleep, I ended up in the backyard. Hypnotized by the flames, heat and noise, I can still see all the buildings burning with their different sizes and shapes of flames.

Once I heard that Dad was home and my sister, Mary Lynn, was talking about his taking someone to the hospital and there was blood on the passenger door of the car, I couldn’t race down to the garage fast enough. But,



Young Grace poses by Blast damage.

being 6 years old had its limits in my family, so even during mass panic, someone managed to keep me from the car. I am sure I stomped back upstairs all upset that I couldn’t see the blood.



Farenbaugh

Finally, falling asleep on the couch, I awoke to a single noise ... glass being swept. It echoed in the house and once outside even a louder echo on our street. It lasted all day. “I bet nearly every window in town is broken!” “Listen to that glass.” “So, it was Gerretsen’s that exploded?” “Some truck was full of dynamite and blasting caps.” “The axle of the truck was blown four blocks away, all the way down to Mosher and Pine!” “They say several people died and hundreds are injured.” “The store isn’t completely destroyed, but it will be closed for awhile.”

By the time I saw our car, the blood had been washed off and the man taken to the doctor, long fixed up and with

his family.

My dad’s store was not destroyed, but was heavily damaged. By the end of the day, all the rolls of carpet and linoleum that were intact were brought up to the house and stored in the garage. They looked ugly sitting in our garage. Once again, I was embarrassed by something that only a 6-year-old would find icky under such circumstances.

The following day, Mom, Grandpa and I walked downtown. While Mom was talking with some people, I talked Grandpa into taking me to Johnny’s Toy House and buying me some small toy. We then walked down to the store, toured the blast site and walked the many blocks so we could see where the “axle had been blown four blocks!!”

In all honesty, I don’t remember much of the walk, other than the fact that the Coca-Cola bottling company had been burned down. Worried that there would be no soda pop for awhile, I was further dismayed when I spotted a melted pale green glass Coke bottle in the wreckage.

Years later, when talking about the events, I learned that Dad’s first wife’s husband, who was a fire chief in Olympia, Wash., drove all night upon hearing about the Blast. He said that he could smell burning flesh and thought

that it looked like a war zone.

The building next to F&W was never rebuilt, but remained a torn down empty lot with pieces of melted glass hidden under dirt. I dug there more than once and found them.

A part of the truck was blown in the back wall of F&W. It was some sort of gear and a nice little sign explaining what was put next to it. Once, I was looking at it and pulled it out.

My mom yelled at me and shoved it back in, hoping no one would ever know that I had compromised the authenticity of its place in history.

Every fall, my Grandpa would burn a small pile of leaves in our backyard, and for a few years after the Blast, I would fill up my sand bucket with water and put out the fire. The fire was unattended and I was afraid that our house would burn. He would curse my actions, but never to my face.

I was looking at a World Almanac sometime back in the ’90s and saw that, under “disasters/explosions,” there was the Blast. Today’s almanacs don’t list it. I guess after 9/11 our explosion didn’t seem worth mentioning.

Oh, a friend of the family, Helen Randle, was visiting us on Aug. 7, 1959. She slept through the whole thing.

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Work after Blast nets reward

Bonnie Wetherell of Roseburg has a special Blast souvenir: a letter from the regional operations director for the U.S. Post Office's Portland office, commending her father for his actions following the Blast. Wetherell's father, Horace L. Roell, was a post office clerk in 1959; he then lived with his family on Main Street.

The letter appears as it was written below.

Dear Mr. Roell:
It has come to my attention that on August 7, 1959 following the terrific explosion that brought sudden desolation to the City of Roseburg, you made your way through the shattered ruins to the post office and along with other employees, applied yourself with such diligence that near-normal postal service was provided on that fateful day.

It gives me a great deal of pleasure to present to you a certificate of award and a check for \$25.00, less deductions, along with my personal thanks for your unselfish devotion to duty during this period of emergency.

Sincerely yours,

S.G. Schwartz
Regional Operations Director



Horace Roell, left, is seen at the post office circa 1955.

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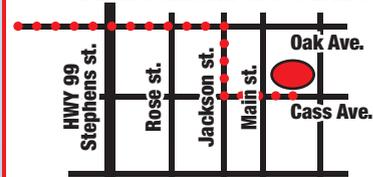
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Blast altered academic fate of junior high students

DALE GREENLEY

In midsummer of 1969, not long after NASA put a man on the moon, I was standing in the Seoul, Korea, USO. I was on my way back from R & R in Japan, awaiting transport back to my unit on the Korean DMZ. Another GI was also idling away some time and we struck up a conversation. As with any exchange between Americans in another part of the world, one of the first questions asked is "Where are you from?" He was from Massachusetts and when I announced "Roseburg, Oregon," his eyes expanded and with near reverence in his voice, he murmured, "The Blast!"

I should have been used to it by then, but it still surprised me every time it happened. Since the first day of basic training I had been amazed at how many GIs instantly said "The Blast" when they heard "Roseburg, Oregon." Having witnessed the Blast, I knew it was an impressive event, but I vastly underestimated the effect it had on the rest of the nation. I assume that in those early days of television, visual impressions of the devastation were more readily fixed in people's brains. In today's world, I think we are visually and mentally saturated with, and have become inured to, near daily televised images of violence and destruction. In the late '50s, those images were novel and more easily impressed in the nation's collective conscious. Coupled with "Life" magazine photographs and "Reader's Digest" coverage, images of Roseburg's blast were securely embedded in American minds.

I have a vision of the Blast that was



Central Junior High School is seen after the Blast had done its worst.

firmly fried into my brain on that hot, humid August night in 1959. It was about 1 a.m. I was 12, just getting ready to be a second-generation student at Central Junior High School. Mom thought it was neat that I was to attend the same school that she had attended as a young girl. I was lying atop the bedcovers, tossing and turning, unable to sleep in the heat. I was happy, however, as Dad had just built us a new, big house on the corner of Bradford Court and Broccoli Lane, a couple of miles out Harvard Avenue from the narrow, green, steel Oak Street Bridge. It was a solid house, built on a concrete slab with tile-covered floors. It felt like a fortress to me. The only worries in my mind at that time were the Cold War, and the fear of a nuclear attack. These discussions often included talk about building bomb shelters, and what provisions to stock them with. That was the backdrop for the panic that engulfed me when an

indescribably loud explosion and violent shock wave shook the house. It felt like something picked the house up a few inches and shook it like a rag doll. I bolted upright in bed. Centered in my open bedroom window, rising high into the sky, was a tall, narrow, orange col-

umn with white and yellow streaks arching out the sides of it. It lit up the whole sky and atop the column boiled the dreaded mushroom cloud! Of course, I instantly knew that was the end of the world, we were just dead men walking. The street quickly filled with neighbors in various states of undress, women and children crying and men in various states of panic running aimlessly back and forth. I have to hand it to my dad. He was one of the few who kept his cool. He had been through Japanese bombings in the Pacific during World War II and said it sounded like a 500-pound bomb. He scoffed at the mention of an atomic bomb with perfect logic saying, "If they did have one to drop on us, they sure as hell wouldn't have picked Roseburg to drop it on!"

Both the local radio station and television station were disabled and reliable news dribbled in slowly. The rumors flew wildly for a day or two while the devastation was sorted out. I remember one rumor that an apartment house between the railroad tracks and the river had been blown into the river and all the occupants were missing. The fact that no one could figure out where that

Turn to **GREENLEY**, page 18



Greenley

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Greenley:

Continued from page 17

apartment house was located just seemed to add extra fuel to the rumor. I don't recall how long it took for them to reopen the Oak Street bridge, but when we were finally able to drive through the Blast area, we knew that it would be awhile before life returned to normal.

The biggest deviation from normal life for me was a happy, fortuitous one. Central Junior High sat on the Northeast corner above Highway 99 and Washington Street, across from Wilbur Thompson's Signal service station. The

parking lot for the late Safeway grocery store is located on the site now. It was a scant two blocks from the epicenter of the blast and though the structure was still erect, it was irreparable. Lacking a home, a decision was made to have Central students double-shift at Joseph Lane. During the two years we double-shifted, Fullerton Grade School was converted to a junior high and a new Fullerton IV was built farther out Harvard in a big, vacant field across from our house on a new eastern extension of Bradford Court. What that meant for me was that the school bus came around noon to take us across town to Jo Lane. I have many happy memories of those two years of "sleeping in," spending the mornings playing baseball or fishing the South Umpqua off the

end of Broccoli. That was vast improvement over spending the morning sitting at a desk in a schoolroom. In the words of fellow classmate Jim Michalek, it was like a "gift from God."

In September of 1961 we started school at the new junior high as the first freshman class not to attend Roseburg High School in our memory. The previous system had been a 6-2-4, 6 years of elementary school, 2 years of junior high and 4 years of high school. I don't know what prompted the change, but 1961 was the first year of the new 6-3-3 system.

One of the first orders of business was to come up with a name for our new school. We held a contest with the students submitting their suggestions for a new name along with an essay

about why they thought that name should be chosen. The faculty chose three finalists and, at an assembly, those three students read their papers to the student body. Dave Leiken, son of State Rep. Sidney Leiken, submitted the winning name, John C. Fremont Junior High School.

The other submissions, according to the collective memory of Denise Doyle, Dave Leiken and Stan Smith, were "Nebo" and "Lewis and Clark." Unfortunately, the names of the students who submitted those names weren't recorded anywhere and even an extensive phone poll to more than 80 of the remaining students didn't locate them. With the new school completed and the Blast two years behind us, the transition to normalcy was complete.

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Blast set off explosive career for photojournalist

JOHN SOWELL

The News-Review

The Roseburg Blast didn't give David Hume Kennerly his start as a globe-trotting photojournalist. However, it may have provided the onetime Roseburg resident with a certain fearlessness that during his career drove him continuously into dangerous situations.

Kennerly, then 12, was asleep in the back bedroom of his family's home at 848 S.E. Blakely Ave. in the early morning hours of Aug. 7, 1959, when the loud wail of emergency sirens roused him. He peered out the open windows of his room and saw flames consuming a portion of downtown Roseburg.

Fire had engulfed the Gerretsen Building Supply building on Southeast Pine Street and Oak Avenue, eight blocks from the Kennerly home.

"I could see the flames. It was a huge fire," Kennerly said during a telephone interview from his home in Santa Monica, Calif.

Moments later, at 1:13 a.m., a truck parked on the street outside Gerretsen's loaded with 6 1/2 tons of dynamite blew up.

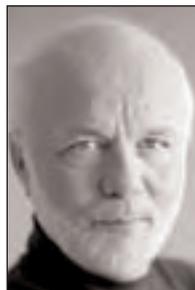
The blast leveled several blocks of downtown Roseburg and caused the death of 14 people. Another 125 people suffered injuries.

"It was like an exploding flash of light," Kennerly said in describing a mushroom cloud that developed. "It

knocked me back across the room."

Burning debris landed on the roof of the house and showered the neighborhood. Kennerly said his family sprayed down the roof with water from a hose to prevent the house from catching on fire.

The force of the blast broke all of the windows in the house, except for the two open ones that Kennerly looked out, he said.



Kennerly

At first, no one knew what caused the fire and the explosion. Kennerly recalled thinking it might be an invasion.

"There was this whole Com-mie thing, the Russians are coming scenario," he said.

The truth was far less sinister, but equally devastating. To this day, the Blast remains one of the biggest events of Kennerly's life.

During his career, he has photographed the Vietnam war, served as the White House photographer for President Gerald Ford and has covered assignments in more than 130 countries. His photographs have served as cover shots for Time and Newsweek more than 35 times. The Blast ranks up with all of those.

"It was like the most amazing thing I had ever seen," said Kennerly, who won a Pulitzer Prize at age 25 for a series of photographs taken during his time in Vietnam. "It's one of those events where you don't need to embellish anything. It was that big."

He just wishes he had been a little older.



Courtesy of Marilyn Lewis

"It's too bad I wasn't a photographer then. I would have gotten some great photographs," he said.

While he was still 12, Kennerly watched a garage burn down near his home. As he stood behind a police line and watched, the firefighters attacked the flames. He watched as a News-Review photographer crossed the line and started snapping photographs.

"He was able to go across the line and I thought that was just the most wonderful thing," he said, still amazed 50 years later at the access the press was given to go places others couldn't.

That, he said, started him on his career. He had his first photo published in 1963 in the Orange R, the Roseburg High

School paper. His family later moved to the Portland area, where he graduated from West Linn High School in 1965.

Watching The Blast unfold from his window didn't cause the young David Kennerly any concern about his own safety. Looking back on his career, he said that may have been one of the catalysts that allowed him to go into potentially dangerous situations without thinking about the possible personal harm.

"I found I wasn't afraid of going places," he said.

And he still isn't.

• You can reach reporter John Sowell at 957-4209 or by e-mail at jsowell@nrtoday.com.

Town came together to sift through the ruins, rebuild

**PATRICIA "PAT" MATTHEWS
LA LIBERTE**

I followed the truck in to town that night, it parked and I parked behind it. The driver got out, locked the doors, walked around the truck and left. I thought nothing of it. The truck was well marked "explosives."

My husband was a driver-salesman for Coca-Cola. I was waiting for him and was told he was going to be late getting in, so after about one hour I went home to wait for his call. About 10 p.m. he called for me to come pick him up. When I got there he took his billfold and keys into Mr. Unruh's house and left them on a table, and we went home, had a later dinner and then went to bed.

It seemed a short time later I heard sirens and more sirens. I went into the kitchen and saw smoke (our house was on a hill and you could see toward town).

I woke my husband and told him it looked like it was the Coke plant and he said it couldn't be as we had just left there. I went back into the kitchen to watch when it went, straight up, pure white and beautiful, right up into the dark sky. At the time, I thought, "This is what an atomic bomb looks like," but didn't think for one minute that it was.

My husband dressed and started for the plant to see how he could help. We didn't know what it was. Later in the night everyone on our street started to bring coffee down for whoever needed it.

In the morning when my husband

came home he told me all hell had broken loose but we still didn't know what happened. Two days later his billfold was found embedded in the fence between Unruh's house and the gas station with the money still in it. The keys were found later as a mess of twisted keys except for three that were fine. It was strange — those three did not have any copies. We still have those keys.

We were put on National Guard patrol. The town was closed unless you had a pass. I volunteered nights to work at the Armory to help feed the guards and the basement smelled heavy of gas. The mess sergeant said that in case of fire, we were to run any way out. Every time we lit the stove we wondered.

The back door was open and Sarge

told me if I heard shots not to go out. We heard shots and I stuck my head out to see what was happening. He pulled me back in (so much for following orders on my part). The food brought in was unbelievable.

Fresh corn, tomatoes and all the vegetables and fruit you could think of were brought by all people for the guards. One little older lady brought a pound of butter. She said it wasn't much, but thought we might be able to use it and we did. Everything was used. There are so many things you remember.

I would work until about 5 a.m. then go home to be with the children so my husband could go to the plant, what was

Turn to **LA LIBERTE**, page 25

Blast has young family scared for their lives

ARETA BASS

In 1959 I was a young 26-year-old mother of four children. I had left my undesirable, unloving husband of nine years behind.

I found a basement apartment close to town and close to a school. We would not be far from Diamond Lake Boulevard. The area was perfect.

I was hired at a hole-in-the-wall cafe close to the train depot. The boss was teaching me to fry cook on a big grill. In about two weeks I was getting the hang of flipping steaks and hamburgers. I closed up about 7 p.m. I had no car, but the walk made me feel relaxed by the time I arrived home. After letting the baby sitter go, I fed my young ones hamburgers I had brought home. We watched some TV. We always went to bed by 9 p.m.

The three girls had bunk beds in a large bedroom. They had wanted the bed in front of the window, but I had told them no, it was too dangerous. One of them might hit the window glass in her sleep and break it.

My son slept on a cot in the same room, but that night he did not feel very well, so I put his cot in the living room. Off the living room I had a small bedroom with a 4-by-4 window. After tucking my girls in bed, I let my 3-year-old son go to bed with me until he fell asleep, then I took him to his cot. I always left my door open so I could hear the kids if they needed me.

I do not know what time it was when my window blew out, covering my floor and bed. The bed tipped on its side, with the door wedged open about 2 inches. I could hear my baby's screaming and crying. I was crying and screaming myself.

I just knew the bomb had been dropped. Everyone had been talking about it for a good while.

I pulled and yanked on that door until I could squeeze out. Running barefooted into the living room I could see everything looked red. I screamed, "Everything's on fire."

The smell was acrid, burning my nose and throat. It looked like light smoke in the air. Three windows were covering the floor in shards. The living

“
I was screaming,
‘They dropped the
bomb on us, the
damned fools
dropped the bomb.’

Areta Bass

”

Turn to **BASS**, page 24



Areta Bass stands with her daughter, Jenine, in the late 1950s.

Woman remembers the night ‘a monster’ ate her house

CONSTANCE HAMMONS

We stood, choking and crying as we clung to each other, not taking our eyes off the morbidly fascinating fiery blast.

The blood-red heat seemed to be emanating from a raging, fire-breathing dragon. Mommy and we four children stood on the porch locked in a quaking embrace — frozen like a vibrating statue, a monument to the bewildered. Our wailing merged with that of sirens. Our glowing skin crawled as soot and perspiration accumulated and merged to make a sort of mud that began to slip down our cheeks with the tears.

I heard my mother sob. “Oh! Please, God! No!” she groaned. “They dropped the atom bomb!”

I knew what that meant. My class at



Hammons

Benson School, where I was in the second grade, had more bomb drills than fire drills. I was about to suggest that we get under the kitchen table and put our heads between our knees when I was kicked by the 2-year-old, who squirmed in my smothering embrace. My two younger siblings gripped my mother with the same intensity. I relaxed my hold and kissed the toddler.

As our crying subsided, we began to look around and finally disengaged; then walked around aimlessly, stumbling over broken windowpanes, pictures, and knickknacks. Our mother flipped the

light switch and got no response. I tripped over the deadbolt that still had a large chunk of the front door attached. As I examined it in the fading glow, I imagined — and half believed — that a monster had bitten the lock off the door. At the image of blazing fangs, my own teeth began to chatter.

I jumped and screamed as a voice over a bullhorn screeched from a police car patrolling the neighborhood.

“Evacuate!”

I looked at my mother, expecting some sort of duck-and-cover bomb drill designed for those times when it isn't a drill at all, but the real thing.

“We don't have anyplace to go,” was all she said. A knock at the door was accompanied by a flashlight, and a voice. “Is anybody in there?” The officer shouted instructions to go into the most sheltered room in the house and stay until we

were given the “all clear” signal. No, he didn't know what had happened, but we should take precautions.

We huddled in blankets in the kitchen away from the windows, listening in the night. People outside yelled and scampered around, and drove away. I rubbed my bruised elbow, injured when the bunk bed fell, ejecting me from the top berth and my sisters from the lower one.

Years later, our mother told us how, there in the darkness, she contemplated the vulnerability of her offspring. She wondered how long it would be before the radiation poisoning would begin to make us sick. How long would we live? How much would we suffer? She was deep in thought and yet incapable of thinking.

Turn to **HAMMONS**, page 25

Parakeet the only family casualty of Blast

MARY LOU JOHNSON

On the night of the Roseburg Blast, I had just gone to bed and was lying there when the fire sirens started blowing. I sat up in bed and was watching the flames that were about a block from our house. The home was next to the Oak Street Bridge, which is now a park.

I decided to wake my 8-year-old son, Kirk, who was sleeping in a screened porch next to my room. I knew if there was a big fire nearby and I hadn't awakened him to watch it with me, he would be unhappy.

I was making my way from the bed to the doorway when the Blast went off. I grabbed Kirk out of bed and hurried through the debris to the room where my younger two children were sleeping. The baby, Deanne, was in her crib, which was filled with glass and plaster. My middle son, Grant, who was 5, had put Butch Wax on his crew cut prior to going to bed and the plaster dust that had filled the house was stuck in his hair, giving him the appearance of a little ghost.

We managed to get out of the house and met up with our neighbors, Joe and Cordelia James, and their three boys, Melvin, Larry and Stephen. They were coming across the lawn to see if we



Courtesy of Summer James

could all get away in my car, as they could not find their car keys. We piled into my car, which had severe damage, but was still operable.

A large piece of the truck that had blown up lay in my front yard. We believed it to be the axle. We then drove across the Oak Street Bridge to

Cordelia's mother's place.

Fortunately, none of my children was hurt. The only injury in my family was a deep gash on my knee that I received as I waded through the glass and rubble to my children. The James family wasn't as lucky. Joe James, a policeman at the time, never fully recovered from the

injuries resulting from the Blast that night.

It was several days before we were allowed to go back to our homes, and then we were forced to walk across the bridge, only removing what we could carry. All of our doors, windows, and casings had been blown out. The chimney was blown off and bricks were all over the house.

The framing of the interior walls was all that remained standing inside. When I made my way through to my bedroom, there were big daggers of glass in the wall directly across from where I had been sitting. It was obvious that if I hadn't gotten up to go into the other room that night I would surely have died. The sole death in our family was a green and yellow parakeet.

Our furniture was completely destroyed, except for the piano, which my daughter still has. And for many years after the incident we picked out glass and bird feathers that had been blown into the piano from the explosion. Both our house and a neighboring home were so badly damaged they had to be torn down.

Many years passed before we stopped looking for a safe place to hide whenever we heard a fire siren. It was a terrifying experience.

Blast wiped out family's service station, trip

GENEE PARR COON

Fifty years ago on Aug. 7th a big change occurred in our lives as it did for many people living in Roseburg. All in all, we were very lucky.

I was 9 years old, Karen was 5 and Julee was 2. We lived on Alameda Street three houses from Stephens Street. Now it is the first house.

The night of the Blast, my Mom woke up and told Daddy that it felt like there had been an earthquake. She was from Southern California where earthquakes were common.

They got up and looked out the window toward town and saw smoke and flames. They turned on the radio and heard the first reports. Daddy got dressed, jumped into his '35 Ford and went to town. He was partners in a Union 76 station on the corner of

Stephens and Washington streets. Central Junior High School was right across the street, The Dairy Queen was on another corner and right behind the station was Al's Bike Shop and the house that the Kuykendall family lived in.

When Daddy got to town the police wouldn't let him through. Not to be stopped, he took a different route, parked the Ford and snuck into town. He got down to the station and there wasn't much to be done there. It was pretty well destroyed. He then got on a hose and with a bunch of other people hosed down a bunch of buildings to keep them from burning up. He was down there all night long and into the next day.

Meanwhile, Mom was at home with her three little girls asleep and listening to the radio saying that the gas tanks could blow up at any time. At that time on Stephens there was a service station on almost every corner. She was, need-

less to say, more than a little concerned.

When I woke up the next day it was to my sister, Karen, jumping on top of me in the bed telling me we weren't going to get to go to Disneyland. We were supposed to be going on our very first family vacation to Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm. I jumped up from the bed and went to see my Mom to see what Karen was talking about. We were very sad.

Much later on that day Daddy got home and looked just awful. He was very dirty and very sad, but both Mom and Daddy were not letting on to how bad things might be for us. As the days went by Daddy would go down to the station and get things cleared up and cleaned up.

One evening about a week after the Blast, I was riding my bicycle in the yard and fell off and cut my upper lip. It was a pretty bad cut and Mom and Daddy had to get the neighbor lady to

watch Karen and Julee while they took me to town to see the doctor. As we got closer to town, we were stopped by the National Guard.

They weren't going to let us in because Daddy had no more passes to get in to town. He told them to look at me bleeding in the back seat. They did and let us go on in to see the doctor. I got my lip stitched up and we went on home.

In about another week we left on our vacation and just had the most wonderful time. I often think about the horrible, traumatic month that our parents had in August of 1959 and how they never let on to us how worried they were. They were only 28 years old themselves and so brave and strong.

Genee Parr Coon's parents were Gene and Edythe Parr. Gene Parr had service stations in Roseburg from 1955 until he died in 2002.

Counting their blessings after the Blast

GARY OILAR

The blast of 1959 was a day I'll never forget. I was 11 years old at the time, and I remember how terrifying and perplexed everyone was. My dad had just got back into bed when he thought for sure we were being bombed by the Japanese. At any rate, he started yelling at everyone in our house to hurry and go downstairs into the basement. Without hesitation I was the first one to get there. I remember that lying there in my bed, the experience was like a gigantic wind that had come bursting through our house. First it blew one way, and then with equal force it came rushing right back from the opposite direction. There was a tremendously loud explosion that took place in sequence with the rushing wind. The force of the explosion reminded me of what I envisioned a riptide in the ocean would be like. Every single window in our house was blown out, with the doors being blown open as well. The only glass that didn't break was our chandeliers, along with the large, hanging mirror that

was in our small dining room.

Meanwhile, our house was covered with glass everywhere and we had to be very careful not to get our feet cut up walking around in it. After we got over the initial shock our family joined the many other families that were gathering out in the street.



Oilar

We lived directly across the river from where the initial explosion took place in Laurelwood. Neighbors were gathered all over in the street in their nightclothes, watching in amazement as our town looked as though it had been completely dismantled. It seemed like the town had big and little fires everywhere from our vantage point, with constant smaller explosions going off as well.

I still remember the constant sound of fire engines blaring throughout the rest of the morning. The stench of downtown seemed to linger forever after that, but in time, with the rebirthing of a town, it went away.

There was a big heavysset kid down the street who came up to me laughing about his even heavier older sister who was blown out of her bed. It did seem to



Courtesy of Marilyn Lewis

help lighten up the uneasiness of the moment. I remember that the force of wind made me hold onto the covers on my bed as if I was riding in a fierce storm, or the reins of a horse.

I also found out that another family was very fortunate to be out of town that morning. Upon their return they discovered a huge piece of glass that

had penetrated one of their daughter's beds.

Yes, the Blast could have been a whole lot worse for a lot of us, and those of us who lived to experienced it should count our blessings. If the explosion would have taken place during the middle of the afternoon, it could have been worse than tragic.

Renters luckily didn't have to pay for new windows



Courtesy of Bob and Frances Frasier

ROBERT "BOB" AND FRANCES FRASIER

We were living at 340 W. Military in a two-story house, where Denny's and the Texaco station now stand. Our neighbors to the east were Norman and Phyllis Wicks, who lived in the Old Bellows House; our neighbors to the west were Mr. and Mrs. Ben Irving.

It was a hot August night. Our two babies were out on the farm with their grandparents. We had retired for the evening with our windows open. Our upstairs bedroom faced the South Umpqua River. We were awakened by the sirens of fire trucks rolling down Harvard Avenue, passing our home and crossing the Oak Street Bridge. We ran to the window and saw a fire burning across the river but couldn't tell exactly where it was. The windows in our room were low, so we sat on the floor under the window and watched the fire burn larger and larger.

All of a sudden we saw a fireball go

up in the sky. It was just like the fireball from nuclear explosions we had seen in the newsreels. Immediately following the fireball, there was a tremendous concussion. Bob found himself lying across our bed in the middle of the room. Frances was sitting in the corner. We were unable to explain why we were not injured. Our home was not so lucky.

Every window in the house was broken, if not completely blown out. In the kitchen, large shards of glass were embedded in the cabinets. The front of the refrigerator looked like it had been sandblasted. Everything in the north wall cabinets was either on the counter or the floor. There was glass all over the carpeted stairway. There was a chimney plug in the dining room that had blown in, leaving soot all over. The tops of the two chimneys had broken at the roof line and toppled into the yard.

Bob operated the Standard Station across the street, where the 76 station is now. In addition to all the windows on the east side being gone, both rest-

room doors had completely blown off their hinges. Every ceiling joist was broken and the roof was sagging. All the light fixtures hung by their wires.

Cleanup was not fun. We had 48 windows that had to be replaced just in the house. We took three garbage cans full of glass out of that house. It took more than a month for all the windows to be replaced.

The carpet on the stairs still had glass in it the day the house was demolished. We picked up pipe fittings from Gerretsen Building Supply, enough to fill a 2-gallon bucket. The Oak Street Bridge was closed for more than a month, guarded by Oregon State Police troopers.

We were very lucky. The babies' cribs were full of glass. We had no injuries ourselves. We were renters, so we were not responsible for the cost of replacing the windows. Standard Oil owned the service station, so they paid to rebuild it. We had thought the propane tanks by the railroad tracks had blown up. We didn't find out until the next day what really happened.

New car didn't fare well in The Blast

LA VERNE WEST

All the neighborhood residents were up early on Estella Street in Glide on the morning of Aug. 7, 1959. The men preparing for a day's work in the woods as timber fellers or truck drivers, their spouses and children getting ready to catch the local school bus for the day of picking beans at a local field. A knock was heard at our door. A neighbor entered into the house, shouting, "Roseburg blew up last night!" We looked at him in disbelief. He added, "Turn on the radio."

Later that morning in the bean field between assigned bean rows, we picked the dew-dampened beans from the vines, dropping them into buckets. We all listened intently to The Blast news happenings from a few radios placed within the field. By looking to the horizon, 15 miles west from the bean field, a faint orange glow appeared behind the wind-whipped smoky haze, towering upward and spreading into the

morning sky of blue. The smell of smoke lingered in the area.

Not knowing the extent of the Blast area in Roseburg, my husband's greatest concern was the condition of his ordered 1959 Plymouth automobile currently displayed in the showroom dealership business located downtown. Late that afternoon, with a camera and passenger — Ralph, a teenage neighborhood youth — he drove into the city, getting as close as allowed near the Blast site, with Ralph snapping photos from the vehicle window. Ralph sometimes stepped onto the debris-blocked city streets for a better view of the destruction. Curious kids on bicycles roamed freely; a few adults gathered in groups. Police officers and city employees directed traffic and urged people to move back from roped areas. Not far from The Blast's center, the concrete framework of the automotive business building stood alone, the large display windows blown inward, the once new Plymouth a molten piece of metal resting on tire rims.



Richard and LaVerne West's new Plymouth looked like this after the Blast.



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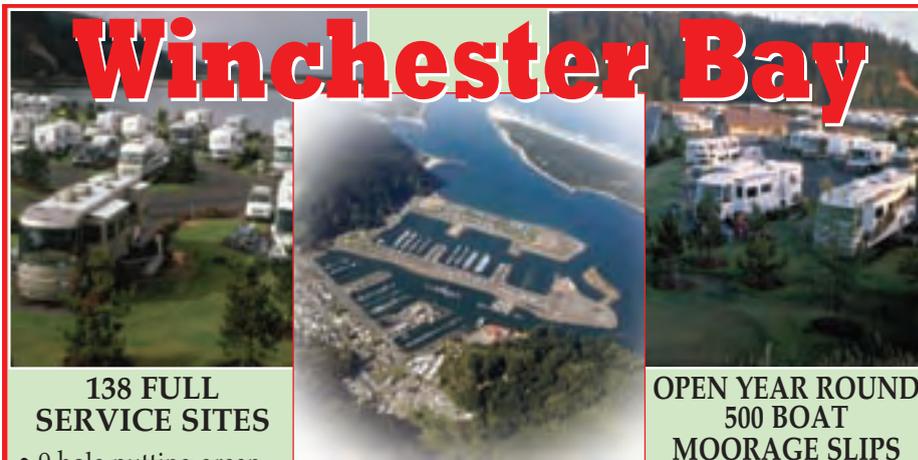
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Bass:

Continued from page 20

room door and the door in the hallway were blown off their hinges.

I made my way to my son. I picked him up and could see some small cuts on his feet. His cot was blocking the doorway into the hall. Yanking it out of the way I could see my three girls coming into the hall from their bedroom.

My oldest one was carrying the 18-month-old baby. We all rushed together hugging and crying.

I looked in the girls' room and saw glass from the blown-out window, covering most of the floor. The bunk bed

lay on its side across the room. I had some spare blankets and pillows in a dresser. Telling my kids to hold each other tight, that I would be right back, I went and got the blankets and put them in a corner of the kitchen where no glass had blown.

Finding shoes for our feet, we went out on the porch that faced downtown. What I saw and heard about drove me crazy. Sirens were blowing everywhere. Red lights were flashing all over town. I could see fire spreading like molten lava flowing. The taste in the mouth made us cough. It was hard to breathe.

I was screaming, "They dropped the bomb on us, the damned fools dropped the bomb." I could hear police cars with their sirens on out the street

behind us. They had bullhorns, yelling, "Evacuate, evacuate." But where can you evacuate to when you have no place to go?

A policeman came knocking on the front door. I put my kids on the blankets and went to talk to him. He asked if we had someplace to go and I said, "No."

I told him where I had my kids and he thought that was a good place. He told me he would come back when the "all clear" was sounded. He also said to keep the door locked so no one could get in and hurt us.

I went out back once more and looked downtown. The fire was still spreading. I went to my little ones and held them tight. I sang songs to them until they went to sleep.

When I woke to pounding on the door it was daylight. Rushing to the door, I asked who it was. It was the policeman. A policewoman was with him. They took us to a little house and gave us food and clothes.

It's been so many years ago, I cannot remember where the house was. And of course, I had no job, because the cafe was no more.

Still, to this day, when I try to explain to someone the feeling I had when the Blast happened, I want to cry and chills creep up my back.

I can feel for anyone who has been someplace where a bomb has been dropped and exploded, and the fallout that happens afterward.

I hope to God we never have one dropped in our country.

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Hammons:

Continued from page 20

She imagined us all bald and perhaps toothless. She thought about the baby.

“Well, you don’t have as many teeth or as much hair,” she thought, “so you have a head start on us.” Before the thought and the accompanying hysterical laugh could completely manifest themselves, she felt a stifled scream, which she managed to subdue so well that it came out as only a sob.

She smelled burning things — chemicals and gasoline, metal and rocks and asphalt, maybe hair? She dared not imagine further, so she began to rock us and to hum softly.

We lay in the corner, locked in a weary embrace — a quivering, sniveling mass of humanity — still bewildered. Our skin itched and our damp eyes burned. We sniffled, squirmed, and finally slept.

I dreamed of a large, red monster huffing and puffing in a hungry effort to blow down our house with a fiery blast and eat it.



Courtesy of Summer James

La Liberte:

Continued from page 19

left of it. They never missed a days’ work.

One morning when I answered the door, I was handed a subpoena for a closed hearing. There were 17 of us called.

Our home was being sold at the time and the lady who bought it was the mother of the fireman who was killed. The home that we bought was damaged by the shock wave so we couldn’t move in. My husband’s place of employment, the Coke plant, had to be rebuilt. We were touched all the way around by the Blast.

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Not all Blast memories are scary ones

SANDY (FROMDAHL) BROWN

I was 4 years old in August of 1959. We lived on Jackson Street, just blocks from what we now refer to as the epicenter of the famous Roseburg Blast. I don't remember the sound of the blast or our windows being blown out. What I do remember is the darkness. It was pitch black. I remember feeling the panic in my mother's voice as she told my brother, Tony, to help me get dressed. We fumbled in the dark to find my clothes and shoes. My sister, Jackie, was busy trying to find our cat who had just had kittens. My aunt, who was visiting from North Dakota, was asleep on the couch when the bay window shattered. She was crying and my dad was helping her. We HAD to get dressed and get in the car. I'm not sure if anyone knew where we were even going!

Now, in order to tell my story, I must venture off on another subject. In the '50s, clothing was different. Everything had to be ironed, at least in our house. That included shirts, blouses, sheets, pillowcases ... everything. Irons weren't equipped with spray or steam buttons. Clean clothes were "sprinkled" (at least that's what we called it)



Courtesy of Gail Withers

with water to dampen them, then rolled up, and placed in a basket, ready for the next step, ironing. My sister, Jackie, who was 15 at the time, was a master at ironing. After all, she had to do most of it, as both our parents worked and she was the oldest daughter. There were also two younger brothers followed by me, 11 years her junior. And,

like I said, it was the '50s and ironing was woman's work.

So, in the midst of the panic and chaos on that fateful August night, I will never forget what I saw as I climbed into the back seat of our big Oldsmobile. In the glow of the dome light was the basket of sprinkled clothes, and curled up on top, safe from

harm, was mama kitty and her tiny kittens. I know that my parents didn't have any idea of what had just happened. I learned later that they thought that we were at war and had been bombed. The important thing was that our family, including our kitty, was loaded up and heading for safer ground.

I don't recall anything about the days or months following that night. Over the years I've heard stories, seen photos and read numerous accounts of the lives lost and the devastation wrought as a result of the Blast. But for me, when the subject of the Blast comes up, I don't remember pain or suffering. My mind takes me back to being 4 years old and good memories of family and kittens.

I lost my sister to cancer last September, nearly 50 years after the event that caused her to save her first kitty. Her love for animals never changed. Just months before her death she "rescued" a 10-year-old cat from a local shelter, knowing that most people looking for a cat would want a cute little kitten and not 10-year-old Sylvia with health problems. And today, my brother, Tony, is making good on his promise to take care of Sylvia. Just more good memories for me, of family and kittens.

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Sharing with others is a big part of Cow Creek culture. The Cow Creek Tribe has always shared what it has with others. They believe when families and education are supported, communities can thrive.

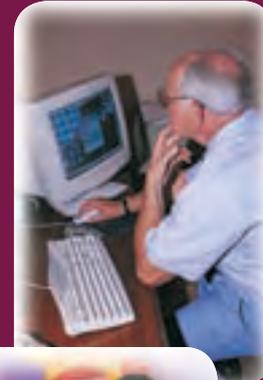
One of the many ways the Tribe gives to the communities is through the Cow Creek Umpqua Indian Foundation, which they established in 1997. Twice each year, the Foundation awards grants to non-profit organizations in seven southern Oregon counties: Douglas, Coos, Deschutes, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, and Lane.

Since the Foundation's beginning, it has awarded \$9,532,630 to several hundred different non-profit organizations. The Foundation's latest round of giving occurred on June 23, 2009, when 48 different non-profit organizations received \$382,370.

The mission of the Cow Creek Umpqua Indian Foundation is to provide assistance in youth education, strengthen youth and family, provide positive youth development, and add to the quality of life for people in Douglas, Coos, Deschutes, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, and Lane Counties.

“The Cow Creek Umpqua Indian Foundation giving continues to mirror the priorities of our ancestors by sharing what we have, in order to build strong communities and healthy families.”

**– Sue Shaffer, Chairman
Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians**



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