

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Today in Texas History

By Bandera Spirits of Texas
The Bandera Prophet

On this day in 1937, a massive explosion caused the steel-framed school building in New London, in Rusk County, to collapse, killing a reported 298 people. It was the worst school disaster in United States history. Of the 500 students in the building, only about 130 escaped serious injury. The explosion, which was heard four miles away, occurred when a manual-arts teacher turned on a sanding machine and inadvertently ignited a mixture of gas and air.

Three days after the explosion, inquiries were held to determine the cause of the disaster. Investigators learned that in January 1937, to save gas expenses of \$300 a month, the school board and superintendent had authorized plumbers to tap a residue gas line of H. L. Hunt's Parade Gasoline Company. Apparently gas had escaped from a faulty connection and accumulated beneath the building. No school officials were found liable.

More than 70 lawsuits were filed for damages, but district judge Robert T. Brown dismissed the few cases that came to trial for lack of evidence. The thirty surviving seniors at New London finished their year in temporary buildings while a new school was built on nearly the same site.