

IOWA HISTORY

by Cheryl Mullenbach



Fire! Fire! Fire!

It was a scene of complete chaos in downtown Cedar Rapids on May 3, 1919. An explosion had occurred at the Douglas Starch Works. Wrecking crews searched the debris for bodies as women gathered outside the gates of the factory hoping for word of their husbands who worked inside. Fire fighters struggled to contain the fire that erupted after the explosion. They fought to free men imprisoned in the rubble. The fire burned into the night. A heavy rain aided fire fighters who managed to bring the flames under control by 7 a.m. the next day.

The blast occurred about 6:30 p.m. as cries were heard coming from the drying room. Employees who escaped the inferno said they believed a boiler had exploded. They claimed a vacuum had not been turned on in the starch dryers—causing dust to accumulate. They described the terror as the explosion caused heavy equipment on the top floors to crash through to the lower levels. Police said escaping steam from the machinery blinded many employees preventing them from escaping. The intense heat from the fire made it impossible for firemen to cut their way into the building.

Early reports estimated the death toll at 32 with 40 injured and taken to the hospital. Many employees were unaccounted for. The blast had caused people passing by the factory to be injured by flying wreckage and broken glass. Windows in nearby businesses were blown out and people working in neighboring offices were cut by flying glass.

A newspaper reported “every window in the central city” was blown out. Chimneys caved in on families at supper as a result of the force of the explosion. J.D. Boorman, a Chicago businessman staying at a downtown hotel, was cut and bruised by a shattered window. It was reported his nose “was almost cut off” by glass shards. Other hotel guests in the dining room were thrown from their seats. The front of city hall and the YMCA were damaged by debris. Ticket sellers at a nearby movie theater were injured by the flying glass. Water mains in the area were cut by the force of the explosion, making it difficult for fire fighters to fight the flames.

The Red Cross set up stations to treat victims. Crowds watched as charred bodies were pulled from the wreckage. Men had been thrown out of the building by the explosion. One man was taken out of the river—having been thrown 40 feet from the Starch Works building. Another employee was found 50 feet from the plant. Both were in so much pain they “begged to be shot.”

Coe College volunteered its Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) members to help guard the facility. More than 100 police “with loaded guns” were at the plant to control an “unmanageable” crowd that had gathered. They were ordered to “use clubbed guns” if the crowd “attempts to break into the ruins.”

It was too early to determine exactly what had happened to cause the disaster. The management said they had no theories to offer, but they estimated the loss to be around \$1.5 million. County Coroner David King said he planned to call a grand jury to investigate and “fix blame” for the explosion.

Sources

“12 Dead in Cedar Rapids,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1919.

“25 Dead, 100 Hurt in Big Explosion at Cedar Rapids,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1919.

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