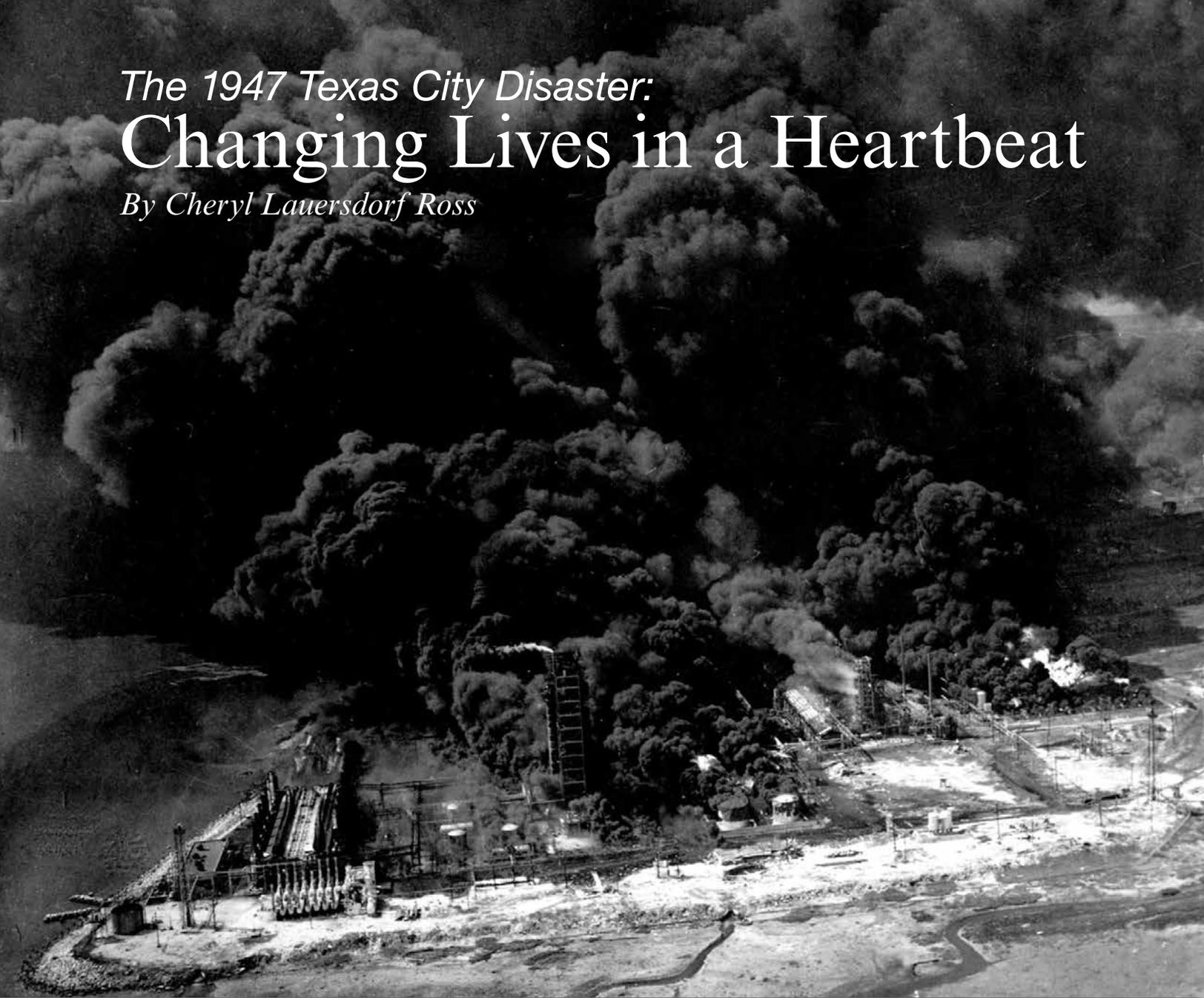


The 1947 Texas City Disaster: Changing Lives in a Heartbeat

By Cheryl Lauersdorf Ross



Dense, noxious smoke from explosions on the Grandcamp and at nearby refineries enveloped the sky over the north part of the Monsanto plant, covering Texas City and surrounding areas.

Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, veale-031.

On the morning of April 16, 1947, the SS *Grandcamp*, surrounded by refineries and chemical plants near the Texas City docks, exploded with a force comparable to the Nagasaki atomic bomb, taking the lives of nearly 600 people and injuring thousands more. When a catastrophe like this strikes, reports focus on the number of lives lost, the extent of damages, the estimated cost of reviving the area, and how much the government will contribute to the recovery, with little discussion of the emotional devastation. In the wake of this disaster, some plant workers did not want to return to their jobs and some residents moved away from the industrial city. For those who witnessed the damage to homes and businesses and observed the mangled bodies of the dying and injured, their lives were forever haunted by those harrowing memories. Despite the shock and grief, Texas City residents showed the same strength and courage demonstrated by Americans during World War II, creating a bond

of brotherhood that transcended barriers of race, ethnicity, and religion through their shared human experience.

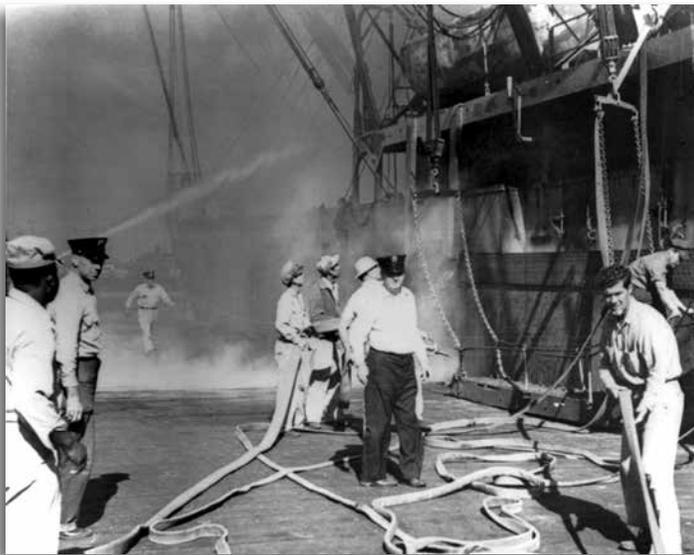
In 1941, the *Houston Port Book* identified Texas City as the fourth largest port in Texas and sixteenth in the United States based on its volume of business between 1938 and 1939, up from a national rank of thirtieth in 1936. Rapid growth continued during World War II mainly due to its location near the Gulf Coast and the Houston Ship Channel.¹

The docks bustled with warehouses, cotton compresses, the railroad yard, and a growing oil industry. Many refineries and chemical plants, such as Carbide and Carbon Chemical Company (later Union Carbide), Republic Oil Refining Company, Humble Pipe Line, Stone Oil Company, Richardson Refining, and Atlantic Pipe Line, called the area home. These companies located all aspects of their businesses near the waterfront, including the administrative and clerical offices. Monsanto Chemical Company was the

largest, employing over 600 men and women. The city also had the world's largest and only U.S. tin smelter, which the government had built for the war effort. Other war needs, such as high octane aviation gasoline, spurred the city's population growth from 5,000 to 18,000 residents.²

Following the war, the city continued its fast-paced growth. By 1947, most Texas City veterans had returned home and back to work, and people from other parts of the country came for the booming industry opportunities. The sudden population increase created overcrowded classrooms, requiring the district to divide the students into two shifts for a quick-fix. Grades first through sixth attended classes during the morning shift, and grades seventh and up went to school in the afternoon.³

On the morning of April 16, 1947, Texas City longshoremen on the docks of Pier 0 loaded the last of the ammonium nitrate fertilizer bound for the "war-starved farms of France" aboard the SS *Grandcamp*. Other cargo included tobacco, cotton, twine, and a few cases of ammunition. Someone noticed smoke coming from the lower part of Hold 4 where 100-pound sacks of fertilizer were stored. The two fire extinguishers on hand were insufficient to suppress the smoke, and Captain Charles de Guillebon did not want the rest of the cargo destroyed by using water. He ordered the smoke and flames extinguished by "having the hatches battened and covered with tarpaulins, the ventilators closed, and the steam system turned on." Witnesses described the smoke as unusual in color, "a pretty, gold yellow color" [that] attracted many onlookers." Galveston's radio station KGBC warned citizens to stay clear of the fire, but this only raised the curiosity of individuals and families who headed for the docks to witness the "salmon, orange, and purple" colored smoke.⁴



Fire captains and crewmen urgently struggle to suppress the smoke and fire building inside the Grandcamp.

Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, ntbkb-019.

Flares and fires at the docks and refineries occurred frequently, and no one considered them a serious safety concern. At that time, bags of ammonium nitrate fertilizer did not display any "highly flammable" warning labels. Even though ammonium nitrate was used to make explo-

sives during the war, tests concluded the chemical was safe from explosion while being transported. The only concerns were for the small amount of ammunition on board and the nitric acid fumes from the burning fertilizer.⁵

Families gathered at the docks with their young children to see the fire and smoke. Students assigned to the school's afternoon shift also watched the action. The crowd at the dock stood "two and three deep with sandwiches and soft drinks" in hand, enjoying all the excitement. The number of onlookers grew to about 300.⁶

At approximately 8:30 a.m., the SS *Grandcamp* sounded an alarm. The Texas City Volunteer Fire Department (TCVFD) of twenty-six men and four trucks arrived on the scene, "followed by the Republic Oil Refining Company's fire-fighting team." A twenty-one-year-old Army veteran, Clifford C. Reed Sr., working for Republic Oil and on the company's fire team, happened to be at the back of the refinery, causing him to miss the second and final run to help the *Grandcamp*.⁷



The cloud of smoke in this photograph, taken from a Galveston rooftop, explains why many descriptions compared the Grandcamp explosion to that of an atomic bomb.

Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, ntbkb-044.

At 9:12 a.m., an explosion, heard 150 miles away, ripped through the air forming a mushroom-shaped cloud of toxic smoke that shot 2,000 feet high, carrying chunks of metal and shards of the fractured *Grandcamp*. The Monsanto Chemical Company complex, reduced to chunks of brick, concrete, and twisted steel beams, "was subjected to an impact equal to 250 five-ton blockbusters [bombs] exploding simultaneously." Warehouse 0 simply disappeared. The *Grandcamp*'s 1.5-ton anchor was thrown two miles away, where it plunged ten feet deep into the ground.⁸

The explosion's force generated a "fifteen foot high tidal wave [that] crashed onto the dock, covering the [men, women, and children]." Some died instantly, while others were pulled into the water and drowned. Many of their bodies were never recovered. The power of the tidal wave lifted



The force of the Grandcamp explosion created a fifteen-foot tidal wave, pushing the Longhorn II ashore.

Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, ntbkb-unnumbered.

the *Longhorn II*, a 150-foot-long, thirty-ton steel barge, and pushed it on shore.⁹

The force obliterated the 10,419-ton *Grandcamp*, killing Captain de Guillebon, and thirty-two of the forty-two-man crew. Texas City's new fire truck had made its first and final run; the city's volunteer fire chief and his crew of twenty-six men were all killed. The only survivor of the TCVFD, Fred Dowdy, happened to be out of town.¹⁰

Fragments of the ship hit nearby chemical and refinery tanks and pipes causing numerous explosions and rivers of fire. Six oil tanks ruptured and caught fire at Stone Oil Refinery, and a gasoline tank at Richardson Refining went up in a huge fireball. The explosion destroyed the nearby S. W. Sugar and Molasses Company causing its three storage tanks to collapse and release thousands of barrels



The force of the blast destroyed residential areas, leaving scattered debris where homes once stood.

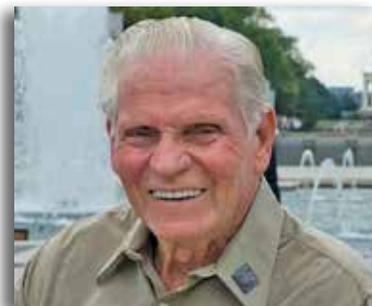
Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, ntbk-088.

of molasses to the ground that then mixed with the "oil, gasoline, benzoyl, propane, and ethyl benzene [that] shot out of ruptured pipes and collapsed storage tanks" from the refineries. Some of the chemicals and molasses that caught fire spread with the rushing waters of the tidal wave and "scalded those who survived the blast and ... cremated those who had fallen" in its path.¹¹

Several thousand people in Galveston, thinking either the communists had detonated an atomic bomb or an earthquake had occurred, fled from large, swaying buildings only to return for shelter from the flying debris and oil raining down on them. The seismograph at Regis College in Denver, Colorado, falsely registered the *Grandcamp* explosion as an earthquake. Buildings shook and windows shattered as far away as Baytown, twenty-five miles north of Texas City.¹² Few windows in Texas City remained intact.

Hal Boyle, a noted war correspondent, stated that the disaster "looked like Nagasaki after the atomic bomb struck." Men, women, and children, bloody and blackened by oil, were seen stumbling and crawling towards safety and help. The blast shredded most of their clothing, leaving some naked and shoeless. Frances Alexander left the laundromat and ran toward the explosion; she knew her twelve-year-old little brother had gone to watch the fire. She barely recognized the boy with the misshapen face, a broken arm, and an eyeball out of its socket. When she began crying, he told her, "Sister, don't cry; I'll be alright. Go see about mother and the others."¹³

While many people were in shock, others like Clifford C. Reed Sr., the only survivor of the Republic Oil Refinery's firefighting team, instinctively went into action rendering aid to the fallen. He vividly recalls the moments following the explosions: "I was the only one that survived out of the fire department. It just wasn't my day [to die], I guess. Then, I went up to the [administration]



Clifford C. Reed Sr., shown here in 2015, was the only survivor of the 1947 Republic Oil Refinery Fire Team that responded to the fire on the SS Grandcamp.

Photo courtesy of Clifford C. Reed Sr.

offices to try to help some people up there. All the windows were blown out, and they were all cut up, and people bleeding all over the place." When he got them to the street he found another horror. "People walking across the streets with no clothes on – they were just blown off. Everything. Everything was just blown away. Big pieces of metal were falling down – as big as a truck or car. . . . I was trying to help one guy on the street [get to a first aid station] — he was all messed up, all cut up."¹⁴

Able-bodied employees from other refineries were among the first of about 500 workers at the waterfront, including Galveston's district office of the Army Corps of Engineers, which brought "trucks and heavy moving equipment. Workers plunged into the still-burning wreckage, first seeking the injured and leaving the dead for the time being." With fear of another explosion looming, rescue workers

faced the challenge of noxious fumes, visually impairing smoke, and intense heat from flaming tanks. Trudging through knee-high oily water, they searched for victims amidst the wreckage of automobiles and homes, chunks of concrete, and smoldering, twisted steel from refinery structures, and fragments of the *Grandcamp*.¹⁵

Flatbed trucks, automobiles, buses, and anything else with wheels transported the hundreds of dead and wounded. “They just piled [the dead] up on the trucks and took ‘em over [to Galveston]. . . Hard to describe. There was just so damn many,” Reed recalled. The look of disbelief showed on his face as he brought to mind the horrific day.¹⁶

Texas City had three clinics and ten doctors who were overwhelmed within minutes of the blast. A nurse recalls, “All of a sudden, the casualties poured in on us, by foot, automobiles, trucks, ambulances, commandeered school buses. There were thousands of them, cut and bleeding.” With so many injured, responders used Texas City’s auditorium and the high school gymnasium as first-aid centers. The next day, the gym became a morgue where survivors entered in groups of twenty to search for their missing loved ones.¹⁷



Alongside a grain elevator, rescue and recovery crews search through a pile of metal girders, a collapsed roof, overturned and crushed cars, and other debris measuring nearly ten-feet high.

Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, ntbkb-056.



The Red Cross volunteers provided over two thousand cots, ten thousand blankets, medicine, food, water, and comfort to all in need.

Photo courtesy of the Moore Memorial Library and the Portal to Texas History, nitbkg-014.

Galveston quickly prepared its three hospitals, its doctors and nurses, the staff and medical students from the John Sealy teaching hospital, and fifty high school boys volunteering to carry stretchers. Volunteers formed a convoy of ambulances, buses, fire trucks, taxis, construction equipment, private cars, and fifty military vehicles from Fort Crockett. Within an hour of the explosion, Galveston had two Army first-aid teams arriving at Texas City in synergy with “an estimated 1,250 doctors, nurses, and first-aid workers from military services, the Red Cross, or private practice, working at the scene or in Galveston’s hospitals.” The Red Cross sent medicine, clean water, “about 10,000 blankets, and 2,600 cots.” The U.S. Coast Guard joined the rescue efforts, and “a U.S. Navy hospital ship was dispatched to the area.” By

noon, broadcasts from local and national radio stations brought volunteers from Houston and nearby towns and aid from most of the nation.¹⁸

Unbelievably, what survived the initial explosion was rocked again at 1:10 a.m. on April 17 when the *SS High Flyer*, loaded with ammonium nitrate ignited by flying debris from the *Grandcamp*, also exploded.¹⁹ This triggered another set of small explosions, fires, and further devastation from burning metal fragments propelled through the night sky like missiles, causing more injuries and devastation that slowed rescue efforts. Teams worked around the clock with hopes that some might be found alive. Twenty-six days after the explosion, they recovered the last body.²⁰

Local Boy Scouts were among the bravest heroes as they answered the call to duty, never wavering despite the dreadful images. Scout Charles Rice, a student from Galveston’s Ball High School, worked at the hospitals “setting up beds in hallways and carrying victims in from flatbed trucks and other vehicles.” Sixteen-year-old Joseph Dearing Jr. helped tag the dead bodies. He later served his country as a Marine overseas in the Korean War. Nunzio Marabella, age fourteen, joined other scouts in the back of an army truck going to the disaster site. He spent part of the day trying to deliver telegrams and was then sent to the gymnasium. He will never forget the experience when he entered the makeshift morgue, “There were dead bodies lying all over the [gymnasium] floor. I was assigned to a room . . . [where they placed] body parts that couldn’t be identified. . . . You didn’t see any complete bodies. The smell was awful. . . . My job was just to sweep . . . [and] what I was sweeping up was ash, charred flesh that fell off as they were carrying these body parts in.” Col. E. H. Mitchell, professor of military science and tactics at Ball High School, noted that “their Scout training, to quickly aid and assist when needed, was paying off.” Thirteen-year-old Fred Mitchell, the colonel’s son, felt like the other Boy Scouts that “it was [his] responsibility to obey orders as a good Scout.”²¹



The entrance to the Texas City Memorial Park and the Memorial Park Cemetery displays the Grandcamp's anchor. The names of those who perished in the 1947 disaster can be found on the bricks along the side wall. The cemetery remains exclusively for the sixty-three unidentified victims of the accident. Photo courtesy of author.

Clifford Reed's sense of duty to his fellow man propelled him into action. He humbly recalled, "I just did what I could to help them out . . . wasn't trying to be a hero or anything." The Republic Oil Refinery Company saw him as a hero, however, and presented him a gold watch inscribed with its appreciation for his courageous action on April 16-17, 1947.²²

Other heroes included fifth grade teacher Rosa Lee Curry who calmly and quickly guided the students to safety as the roof caved in on her classroom. A first-grader at the time, Lynn Ellison "remembers that his teacher pushed the children out the window because the [classroom] walls" were collapsing on them. Mr. Edwards, the music teacher at Danforth Elementary School, was seen lifting students up to safety. The frail man seemed to be lifting students who weighed as much as, if not more than, he did, saving a staggering number of children from being severely injured and crushed.²³

Many school children remained traumatized into their adult years by the frightening experience. Survivor Tommy Giles writes that he remembers "the sound of a siren or a warning whistle from a refinery would startle [the elementary students] and bring some to tears." Sylvia Newsome Smith, age nine when the disaster struck, says her memories will forever be haunted by "the sirens and the smell of blood and steel." Alex Pearson, who was in class at Danforth Elementary when the disaster struck, realizes "a large part of [his] childhood ended on April 16, 1947, and all of [those] who survived would create bonds of friendship," lasting a lifetime.²⁴

The level of destruction that occurred in a matter of seconds was beyond comprehension for the citizens who found themselves thrown into madness. More than 2,500 survivors suffered from injuries such as hearing impairment, the loss of limbs or eyes, burns, lacerations, sprains, and fractures. One out of three homes sustained damage to the point of

being unlivable. Approximately 25,000 people were instantly rendered homeless or jobless. The disaster damaged 1,100 cars and trucks, 362 freight cars, and completely totaled three locomotives.²⁵ They received no advance warning. No alarm or siren sounded, which many had been prepared to hear during wartime. The city had no time to prepare nor did the families of the nearly 600 men, women, and children who died.

In a letter to her parents, Lucille Burkhart describes the numerous days of continuous funeral processions, adding, "As sad as the funerals are — there are still sadder situations. . . . One poor woman searching for her husband looked through a whole bucket of hands trying to find even that much of him."²⁶

On June 22, the sixty-three bodies that remained unidentified were buried in individual graves at the newly created Texas City Memorial Cemetery, built exclusively for the disaster victims. Thousands attended, with every race, ethnicity, and religion represented at the services conducted by Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic officiants.²⁷

On May 1, 1947, the Texas City docks reopened for business. The damaged schools followed suit about three weeks later, although some were still in stages of repair. Resident Fred W. Litton, owner of Emken Funeral Home, wrote that the people of Texas City used their wits, intelligence, resourcefulness, generosity, and their cooperative spirit that recognized no social, racial, or political barriers.²⁸ The community, small business owners, and the oil industry faced the challenges, survived the devastation, and came through the disaster stronger than ever.

The many things learned on April 16, 1947, including how to prepare for a disaster and the need for warning labels on volatile chemicals like ammonium nitrate, have improved safety. However, the strength of the human spirit to persevere and the selfless kindness in giving to others are some of the lessons to remember from the Texas City Disaster. Today Texas City Memorial Park holds an annual service to remember those who perished in the blasts, honor the many volunteers, and remember the city's strength, unity, and resolve to overcome tragedy. The April 12, 2017, memorial service marked the seventieth anniversary of the disaster with city dignitaries, fire fighters, police officers, Boy Scouts, survivors, and several generations of Texas City residents in attendance. Julio Luna Jr. told the crowd he had been part of the crew that tried to contain the smoke from the *Grandcamp* and that he was the one who discovered the fertilizer was on fire. When the fire fighters arrived, they told Luna and his fellow crewmen to leave the ship. As he drove away from the dock, the *Grandcamp* exploded. He is still tormented by the image of the many young children he saw gathered at a fence to watch the smoke, ultimately placing them in harm's way.²⁹ Remembering this history brings awareness of needed changes, reminds us of our growth and perseverance, and, sometimes, comforts those whose memories forever scarred their heart.

Cheryl Lauersdorf Ross is a native Houstonian and graduated in May 2017 from the University of Houston Honors College with a BA in English literature. While at UH, she interned with *Houston History*.