

Collection #
P 0538

**LAFLIN & RAND POWDER MILL EXPLOSION
COLLECTION
1907**

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Processed by

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: Six black-and-white mechanically produced postcards (in one folder stored with visual collections)

COLLECTION DATES: 1907

PROVENANCE: Anonymous gift, July 2003

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS:

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2003.0460

NOTES:

HISTORICAL SKETCH

On the morning of 15 October 1907 a series of explosions at the Laflin & Rand powder mill blasted the small mining town of Fontanet in the Nevins Township of Vigo County. The mill, which was owned by the DuPont Powder Company, produced blasting powder for use in the area's coal mines. Twenty-seven people were killed, hundreds were injured, and nearly all the homes in the area were damaged or destroyed. It was the deadliest explosion in Vigo County history.

The first explosion occurred at 9:08 that Tuesday morning in the glazing mill. The powder mill office, where superintendent Arthur Brown Monahan Jr. was meeting with T.T. Kellum, a DuPont representative from Wilmington, Delaware, was engulfed in flames, killing the two men. A huge tree was uprooted and landed on Monahan's house, killing his wife and niece. Monahan had feared a major explosion and had recently purchased a life insurance policy. He was also in the process of making arrangements to engage in other work. He recognized the danger at the powder plant, especially in dry weather, when there was increased danger of fire or an explosion from friction. It is believed that the initial blast was triggered by a spark from an overheated unit.

Thirty minutes later, there was a larger blast in the press mill. Of the mill's 150 employees, only 53 were working that morning; 22 were killed. This second explosion demolished businesses, churches, and homes, uprooted trees, and ignited fires. Then at least 31,000 kegs of dynamite detonated. In addition to the almost total destruction of Fontanet, two miles away the community of Coal Bluff saw several residences and a school detached from their foundations. Windows were broken in Terre Haute, Brazil, Carbon, Rockville, and Bridgeton. In Bloomington, a recitation was interrupted at the university when the building in which it was being held moved, leaving cracked walls and startling those present. Seismic instruments 215 miles away in St. Mary's, Ohio, recorded the explosion and shock waves were felt as far away as Seymour, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati.

Another victim, James Justice, was at the mill for a job interview. After the explosions, a special relief train left the Big Four station at Seventh and Tippecanoe streets in Terre Haute at 9:45 a.m. with a team of at least a dozen physicians. The train returned from Fontanet at 11 a.m., transporting wounded victims, some totally stripped of their clothing. Disemboweled by the blast, Justice died after being placed on the train. His body was removed and a living victim was put on the train in his place.

Terre Haute physician Wilmot Moore was visiting patients in Fontanet when the explosion occurred and went immediately to the scene. His face was cut by flying glass, but he continued to work as blood steamed into his eyes. He was killed less than six years later by the Easter Sunday tornado of March 1913.

One wounded mill worker, Elmer Bright, received further injuries when an ambulance transporting him was struck by an interurban train at Fifth Street and Wabash Avenue in Terre Haute. Bright died on 8 November.

The Fontanet township school was leveled with 190 students inside. Principal J.R. Shoptaugh and teacher Susie Bishop were seriously wounded, but the children escaped with minor injuries.

Although it was widely reported that no houses in Fontanet were left standing, Joseph R. Koch, author of *Nevins Township History and Pictorial*, disputes that claim. He stated that his great-grandparents' house was right next to the mill situated down in the Otter Creek ravine and that "apparently, the energy of the blast rose up and flew right over their house. It shook the house, but did not destroy it."

For the first time in area history, automobiles aided in a rescue effort. Not many people in Terre Haute owned autos at the time, but many who did readily loaned them. The wounded were treated at St. Anthony's Hospital where volunteer women made bandages, prepared cots, washed the victims, etc. Lambert's Mortuary, owned by Nevins Township trustee Harrison J. Lambert, quickly turned into a morgue. Wood coffins were built and stacked outside the mortuary.

Governor J. Frank Hanly arrived in Fontanet at 6 p.m. He directed Indiana National Guard units from Terre Haute and Indianapolis to protect the town from an invasion of thousands of sightseers. After five days of encampment, the National Guard left on Monday, 21 October, leaving security in the hands of Vigo County sheriff William Horsley and twenty deputies.

The Terre Haute City Council met in special session the night of the explosion and appropriated \$1000 to initiate the Fontanet Disaster Relief Fund. Further contributions came from businesses in Terre Haute and Brazil, the United Mine Workers and other labor unions, the Elks and other fraternal organizations, and hundreds of individuals.

The day of the explosion was also the wedding day of Alfred I. DuPont, vice president of E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., owner of the DuPont Powder Company. He married at noon in New York and then, after hearing the news, wired \$5000 to Governor Hanly with the promise of further assistance. He vowed to pay for the victims' funeral expenses and to rebuild the town and the mill. He postponed his honeymoon, traveling instead with his new wife to inspect the scene at Fontanet. Most homes were repaired or rebuilt at DuPont's expense within three months. At the behest of Fontanet residents, the mill was not reconstructed. When the nearby coal mines subsequently closed, the population of the community, which had once been 1,500, dwindled.

Those killed included nineteen mill workers from Fontanet: James Biggs, Elmer Bright, Harvey Chandler, Frank Cothrell, William Dalton Jr., John Dial, Sylvester Dial, Frank Engle, Sam Engle, J.H. Gibbs, August Girard, Henry Harrington, Hugh Miller, Edward Nevins, Sam Nevins, William Sherrow, James Strange, Merle Webster, and Earl Wood. Three of those killed were from Rosedale: mill workers Frederick Cress and Edward Cress and job applicant James Justice. One worker, L.M. "Doc" Carroll, was from Greenup, Illinois. The other four killed were Kellum from Delaware, Monahan and his wife, Anna

Ousley Monahan, and the Monahans' 28-year-old niece Ethel Taylor, from Martinsville, Ohio. The remains of Arthur (b. 4 January 1867) and Anna (b. 19 October 1874) Monahan, both originally from Ohio, were buried there in Jackson County in the same casket.

The Laflin & Rand Powder Company was a gunpowder and early smokeless powder manufacturer in New York notable for producing the smokeless powder used by United States Army infantry rifles from 1896 to 1908. In 1872 Laflin & Rand formed the United States Gunpowder Trade Association (popularly known as the powder trust) with DuPont, Hazard Powder Company, and three smaller gunpowder manufacturers. By 1900 Laflin & Rand and DuPont together commanded over two-thirds of the United States explosives and gunpowder industry. DuPont purchased Laflin & Rand in October 1902 and operated the company as a subsidiary until Federal antitrust action required divestiture in 1912.

Much conflicting information was found while researching this event.

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McCormick, Mike. "Blast forever changed Fontanet." In the *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, 5 October 1997. Wabash Valley Visions & Voices Digital Memory Project (<http://visions.indstate.edu:8888/cdm/singleitem/collection/vcpl/id/10090/rec/4>). Accessed 22 July 2014.

McCormick, Mike. "Powder-mill blast shakes community, shatters lives." In the *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, 13 October 2002, pages E1, E4.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of six postcards with mechanically-produced black-and-white images of the aftermath of the explosion at the Laflin & Rand powder mill in Fontanet, Indiana. The explosion at the mill owned by the DuPont Powder Company occurred in Vigo County on 15 October 1907. The images show damage done to houses, a school, and other buildings, and smoke from fires. Each postcard has the printed caption: "SOUVENIR – DuPont Powder Mill Explosion, Fontanet, Ind., Tuesday, October 15, 1907." Written in pencil on the front of each card is more specific information pertaining to the image on that card.

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"In this hollow is where the 1st magazine and then two cases of dynamite exploded."

"A house about one mile from the explosion."

"A house about 3 mi. from Fontanet Ave. _____?
in the barn yard."

"The school house from which 50 children escaped.
One little girl sustained a broken arm."

"West of Boiler room -- Sacks of burning cotton."

"A view of the wreckage looking east from one of the mills."

CONTAINER

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CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog:
<http://opac.indianahistory.org/>
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, P 0538).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.