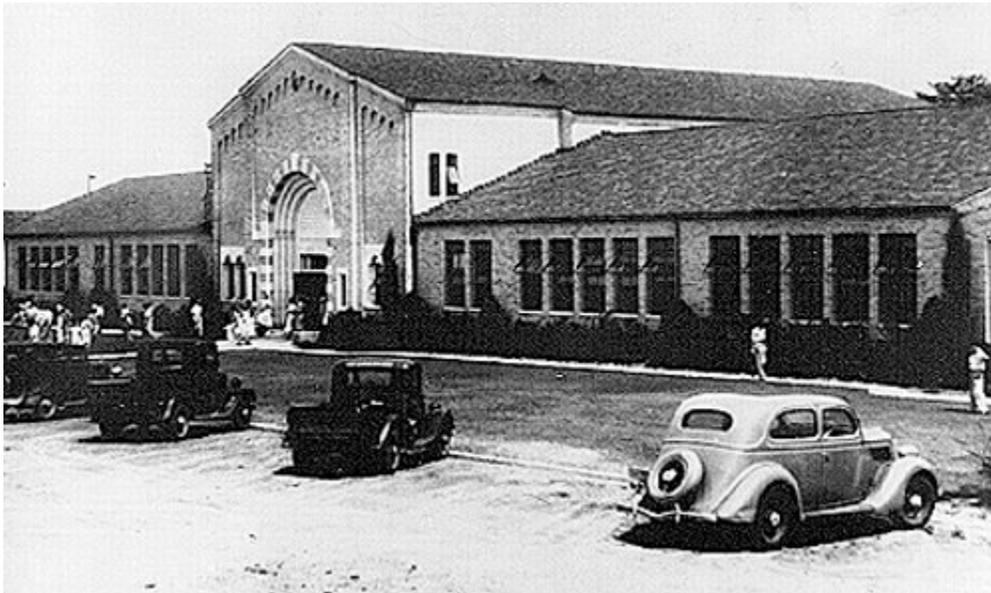


# The New London School Explosion



**March 18, 1937**

## *The Day The Clock Stood Still*

When I was in television, I wore many hats. One such hat was as a video photographer. In 1973, I was privileged to be one of the photographers for a 30 minute documentary that was being produced by Michael Brown for KLTV, Channel 7 about the New London explosion. It was entitled, "New London: The Day The Clock Stood Still". We researched and photographed for days. We interviewed survivors of the incident and talked with several eyewitnesses.

I have always been interested in true stories. Tell me the facts to a historical event and I'm yours for the duration. This disaster not only intrigues me, but tugs at my heart each time I think about it.

The [New London School Explosion](#) occurred at 3:17pm on March 18, 1937 in New London, Texas. Men, women and children died in that blast which originated in the basement of the school. Natural gas filled the basement undetected from a pipe believed to be exposed from a first floor auditorium. Through interviews with some of the survivors, we found that as children entered the auditorium, they would kick the pipe eventually causing it to crack and leak into the basement below. Another theory is that since the New London School tapped into and used waste gas from nearby oil wells for heating, pressure was not regulated properly which caused the pipes in the basement to leak. The explosion was later ignited by a spark from a person using an electric sander in shop class.



Robert Hilliard, cameraman and videographer,  
KLTV-TV, 1972



New London School after the explosion that evening.

Almost all of the school was leveled within an instant. A school teeming with children, teachers and parents, quickly turned into a vast pile of bricks, cement and broken wooden beams. The blast was so great that it destroyed the entire campus including the garden sheds, and hurled a one ton slab of concrete across the parking lot and demolished an automobile.

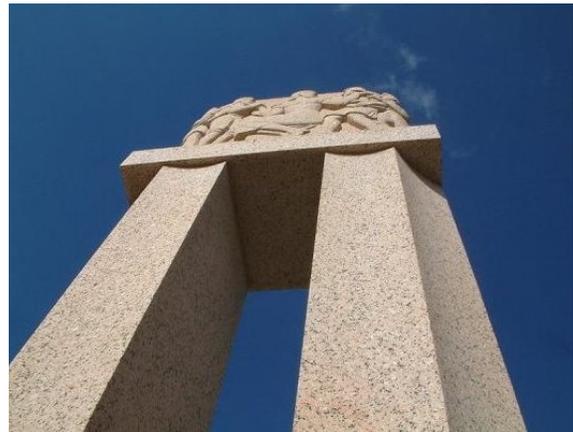
Immediately after the explosion, everyone in the community rushed to the scene to try and help. School buses took the surviving children to their neighborhoods only to greet tearful mothers waiting, hoping to see if their child would step off the bus. Many didn't. Volunteers and workmen from the east Texas oil fields started digging through the rubble trying to find survivors. These men were also fathers and sadly, many found what they were looking for, the broken bodies of their children.

were made in the local Pleasant Hill cemetery that to this day, still symbolize the great loss that families endured. Many of the grave sites display porcelain pictures of the victims. Marbles that were once played with were pushed into the cement border outlining the graves. Epitaphs on the grave markers were etched with phrases trying to comfort as best they can.

A temporary morgue was set up near the school as well as nearby Overton and Henderson. Many burials

It's estimated that 294 people died that day. A monument listing each name, each soul that perished was erected in 1939. Additional monuments have been set listing additional names. They stand in front of a new school finished in 1938, built with such care that it has been hailed as the safest school in America. The labor and craftsmanship built into the new school, is a testament to the commitment that a disaster like this must not happen again. It was later enacted into law that natural gas would have an odorant added for immediate detection. All due to the New London School Explosion.

As March rolls around each year, I am again reminded of the horror, the suffering and the magnificent courage that was displayed.



Monument erected in 1938 in memory of those who died.

It was the day a generation died. A day that whole families were changed forever. A day the clock stood still. For many years, survivors couldn't talk about it, the pain was too horrific. But now stories are being told and memories relived for the purpose of healing. This website page was created in memory of those who died on that fateful day...and for those who survived.

- Robert Hilliard  
[www.newlondonschool.org](http://www.newlondonschool.org)