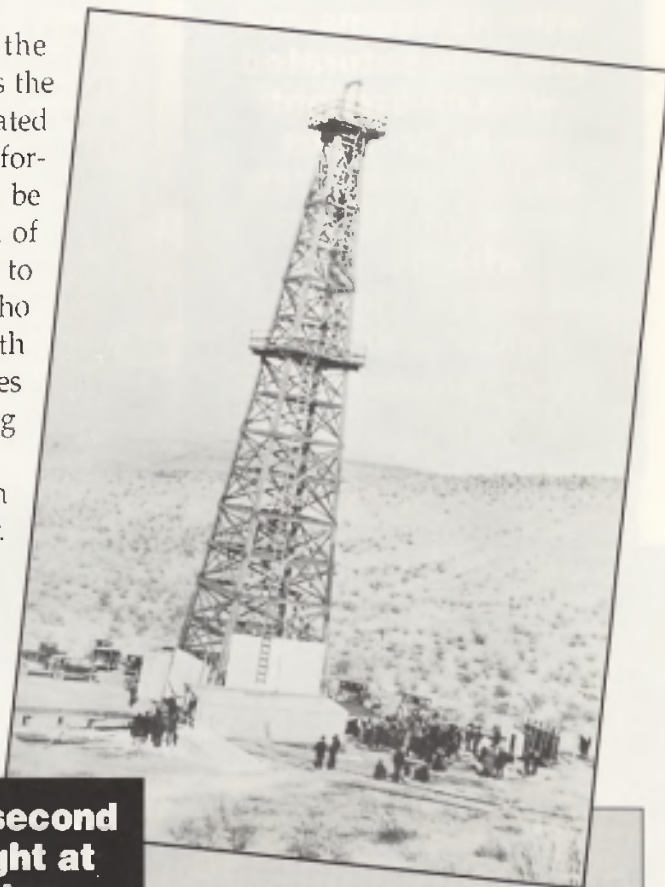


# Dixie's Darkest Day

*March 6, 1935, the day that rocked southern Utah.*

**M**odern day southern Utahns would likely name the Quail Creek Dike failure of New Year's Day 1989, as the most notable disaster in the area's history. An estimated \$12 million in damage resulted from the flood. Yet, fortunately, no lives were lost in the tragedy. The same cannot be said of the fatal explosion that rocked Utah's Dixie in March of 1935. At least ten persons were killed as they stood by ready to see history made. They were among some 100 townspeople who gathered at the site of a hopeful oil well, just a few miles south of what is now Bloomington Hills, where a charge of explosives was sure to "bring in" the well and send St. George gushing into the future.

Instead, those who survived witnessed what must have been the most devastating single moment in southern Utah history. Before the charge could be lowered into the well, it accidentally exploded. In one milli-second the blast ended the lives of company employees and innocent spectators, and brought down the curtains on many an oil-drenched dream. It was the beginning of the end of oil business in Utah's Dixie.



**"It took a split second Wednesday night at 9:30 o'clock to turn a semicivic celebration into a catastrophe..."**

**W**ithin a few minutes after first news of the oil well explosion reached Salt Lake City on Wednesday night, March 6, 1935, the Salt Lake Tribune-Telegram dispatched two staff members to cover the story. Through the cooperation of Western Air Express, which made an unscheduled landing in St. George to pick up photographic plates, the Tribune was able to get pictures back in time to run in the Friday Morning, March 8, edition. The paper ran a long and detailed account of the tragedy and its aftermath. The following information is quoted directly from the March 8, 1935 edition of the Salt Lake Tribune.

ST. GEORGE, March 7—The capital of Utah's Dixieland today counted its dead from Wednesday night's oil well explosion at 10, with an eleventh death expected momentarily; gave up the search for four victims, and planned to hold memorial service for those whose bodies were blown to

bits and were beyond recovery in the wreckage of the rig and derrick of the Escalante #2, in the barren hills seven miles south of here. Throughout this pioneer L.D.S. settlement today the pall of tragedy was felt, with quiet groups gathering on the streets and relatives of the victims drawn together in their homes by a mutual grief that stunned the entire community.

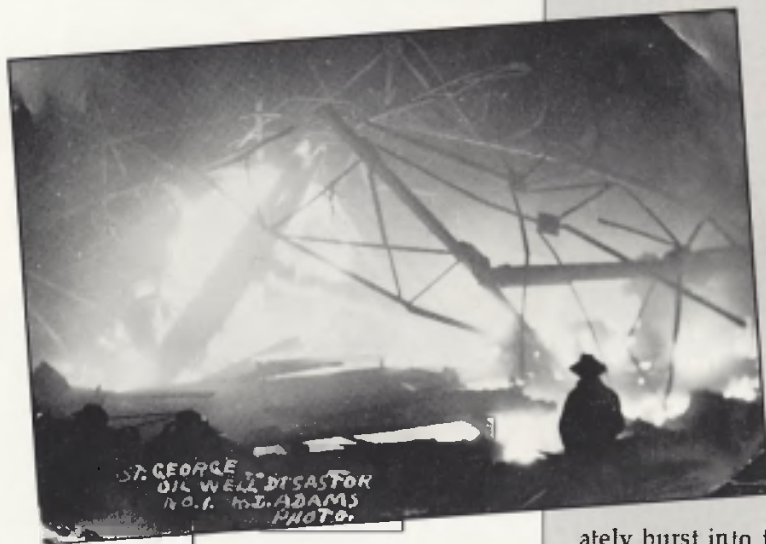
It took a split second Wednesday night at 9:30 o'clock to turn a semicivic celebration into a catastrophe when the 750 pounds of giant powder, intended for use in "shooting in" the well, exploded on the surface, hurling death and destruction into the closely packed crowd of almost a hundred spectators gathered about the well.

Nine persons were almost instantly killed, their bodies mangled beyond physical recognition; a tenth died at 3 a.m. in a hospital, and physicians had given up hope for an eleventh, who was dying from loss of blood, a gaping wound in the right side and a punctured right lung....

A coroner's jury returned an "accidental" verdict after visiting the scene....

Those instantly killed included Mr. Charles D. Alsop [47, promoter of the well], Mabel Boyce Alsop [46, wife of Charles and a spectator], C.M. Flickinger [50, oil driller and powder expert], Joseph F. Kitterman [46, pharmacist from Salt Lake City], William Maloney [16, residing with the G. W. Hail family at the Liberty Hotel in St. George], Ray B. Nelson [22, of St. George]. Walt Brooks said Ray, his best friend, was identified by his "Dixie" belt buckle., Joseph Empey, Jr. [47, St. George electrician

**"The derrick, with its beams and planking saturated with oil brought up by previous shots, immediately burst into flames, with the fire casting a blood-red glow over the macabre scene..."**



*This photo, taken by R.D. Adams, is one of a series of shots taken soon after the explosion at the oil well south of St. George on March 6, 1935.*

employed by the oil company), Cail A. Nicholson [22, oil well employee working with his father-in-law Joseph Empey. Nicholson had married Empey's daughter, Naomi, just five months earlier.], and Mrs. Olive Bleak Snow [62, wife of Washington County Democratic Chairman, Joseph F. Snow]. Leah Cottam [25, a spectator from St. George] died early Thursday in a hospital. The injured were Rosamond Snow [secretary and bookkeeper for Arrowhead Petroleum Corp.], B.L. Covington, A. Sampson, and Elmer Erickson. Physicians resorted to two blood transfusions in an effort to save Erickson's life.

Six cartridges, each 10 feet long, were suspended on the thin steel cable of the rig, ready to be lowered 4,300 feet down the galvanized iron housing when the blast occurred.

The explosion ripped into the crowd, hurling it back in all directions. The steel housing was shattered into thousands of bits and, acting much as shrapnel, pierced the bodies of the nearest victims.

The derrick, with its beams and planking saturated with oil brought up by previous shots, immediately

burst into flames, with the fire casting a blood-red glow over the macabre scene....

The investigation was conducted by Justice of the Peace Harold S. Snow and Washington County Attorney Orval Hafen. They heard testimony from Sheriff John M. Cottam and Frank Bethea, oil worker, who left the well just before the explosion occurred.

The well was known as the Escalante No. 2 and was being drilled by the Arrowhead Petroleum Corporation on the Bloomington Dome seven miles

south of St. George. Three previous "shots" had been made, and traces of oil and gas brought up by these had made officials of the company so jubilant they invited a number of stockholders and friends to be present when the final shot was to be set off.... C.M. Flickinger, powder expert who has supervised such work in many oil fields, was in charge of the "shooting." He was one of the victims....

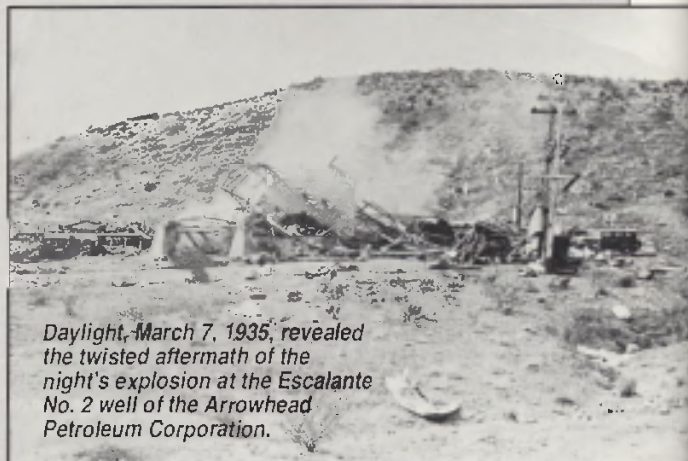
Most of those who lost their lives had been standing within the rig itself, hoping to obtain a better view of the operations.... Nearby automobiles were virtually demolished, some with their tops and sides blown completely away. Mr. Alsop's machine, which was painted black, turned red following the explosion and the fire. The four tires were intact, as were those on the car owned by Mr. Empey....

Cars that were not put out of commission by the blast were pressed into service and rushed the dead and injured to St. George....

Joint funeral and memorial services will be held by the three L.D.S. wards in St. George at 2 p.m. Friday. The body of Kitterman was taken to Lehi Thursday for services and burial while the body of Mrs. Alsop was sent to Long Beach, Cal.

Speakers at the services will be David H. Morris and George W. Worthen, it was announced today by President William O. Bentley of the St. George Stake....

Blast victims from the East Ward are Mrs. Snow, Mr. Nelson and Mr. Maloney. Mr. Empey and Mr. Nicholson were members of the West Ward, while Miss Cottam resided in the South Ward. ■



*Daylight, March 7, 1935, revealed the twisted aftermath of the night's explosion at the Escalante No. 2 well of the Arrowhead Petroleum Corporation.*



R.D. Adams titled this photograph "Joint Services For St. George Oil Well Disaster." Seven caskets were brought into the St. George Tabernacle where the service was held on Friday, March 8, 1935.



This group, assembled near the site of the Escalante No. 2, posed for a photo probably on the Sunday before the fatal explosion. Charles Alsop, the well promoter, is likely among the men in the photo. He and his wife Mabel were both killed in the blast.

## Telling the Story

Photos and research materials for this article were provided by Lynne Clark-Brunson whose forthcoming book, "Faces of Faith: A Pictorial History of Utah's Dixie" will feature a complete section on the rise and fall of the oil industry in southern Utah. Lynne has compiled a great deal of information on the oil well disaster, as well as a variety of excellent, telling photos. She hopes that anyone with more information or photos will come forward and help put all the pieces of the puzzle together.