

# Boiler explosion at Gosport caused loss of life

"Persons who have seen such wrecks before say they never saw such utter destruction anywhere."

— *Bloomington Republican Progress*, Aug. 9, 1882.

It was business as usual on the morning of Aug. 1, 1882, at Rumbarger's saw mill in Gosport. There was only one slight problem — the pump that supplied water to the boiler was out of order.

Robert Rock, the foreman, sent most of the workers out into the log yard and proceeded to repair the pump. John McAlister, the engineer, was assisting Rock.

According to the *Bloomington Republican Progress* of Aug. 9, 1882, the boiler suddenly exploded, "literally tearing everything to pieces." Rock was so seriously injured that he died within an hour. McAlister was so seriously hurt that it was likely he would die, too.

The *Spencer Republican* also reported on the explosion. "The men had been on the yard but a short time when the crash came. This is



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

said to be the first time within a year that the mill had been clear of hands during working hours, and had the explosion occurred at almost any other time, the loss of life would certainly have been greater."

There were two visitors at the mill when the boiler exploded. According to the *Republican*. "One of them was blown clear of the wreck, how he cannot tell, but without waiting for explanations, started down the railroad as fast as he could go to the depot, with the blood streaming over his face from his lacerated scalp."

As the man ran down the tracks, he spread some misinformation. "He alarmed (that)

everybody about the mill was killed." That brought a great many spectators, which, fortunately included physicians.

There was at least one clear-headed eyewitness. "A man approaching the mill, a quarter of a mile away, was looking directly at the building. He says the whole roof raised about fifteen feet, then came the crash — steam, stones, brick, lumber, iron and boilers — burst through the roof — rising to a great height, flew in every direction, and settled down, a confused mass of ruins."

The force of the explosion was described by the newspaper. "There were two boilers in the mill. The flues and fragments of the one exploded were thrown into a pond 200 feet south, and the other one went end over end 100 feet up the hill west. One of the heaters was found 200 yards or more southeast."

Even some farmers who were threshing wheat a mile away heard the explosion and saw the flying debris. They, too, rushed to the scene.

The owner, a man by the name of Rumbarger, was fortunately out in the yard with most of the employees. He was nearly hit by a flying brick that went through the side of a railroad car. Another witness, a fireman at the mill, was hit by a piece of debris and slightly injured.

The *Spencer newspaper* reported that Rock (the *Bloomington* man who died) was "terribly mangled and unconscious." Nobody who had seen McAlister's injuries believed he would survive.

The *Bloomington newspaper* went out on a legal limb, saying that the explosion was caused by "carelessness." In the legal fallout of the tragedy, that statement may have been seized upon by an attorney with an interest in the case.

The men at the sawmill were not the only victims. Rock left a wife and two children. McAlister had several children.

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