

THE GROVER DISASTER

BY DEREK A. CANAVAN

THERE WAS A TIME NOT LONG AGO WHEN THE MEN AND WOMEN OF BROCKTON WERE THE MOST HIGHLY SKILLED SHOEMAKERS IN THE WORLD. IN 1900, IF YOU WANTED TO WEAR THE BEST SHOES AVAILABLE, YOU PURCHASED SHOES MADE IN BROCKTON. THE TWO BIGGEST SHOE MAKERS IN BROCKTON IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY WERE THE W.L. DOUGLAS Co. AND THE GEORGE E. KEITH Co. LOCATED ON THE CITY'S NORTH AND SOUTH SIDES RESPECTIVELY, THESE TWO SHOE COMPANIES WERE CALLED THE "BOOKENDS OF BROCKTON." DOUGLAS' SHOES AND GEORGE E. KEITH'S WALK-OVER SHOES WERE THE PEPSI AND COCA-COLA OF THE SHOE INDUSTRY. HOWEVER, DOUGLAS AND KEITH WERE NOT THE ONLY MAKERS OF FINE SHOES IN BROCKTON. MR. R. B. GROVER WAS THE OWNER OF THE R.B. GROVER SHOE Co. LIKE W.L. DOUGLAS, GROVER WAS AN OFFICER IN THE UNION ARMY DURING THE US CIVIL WAR. AFTER THE WAR HE CAME TO BROCKTON AND SOON STARTED MAKING SHOES. AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, R.B. GROVER Co. WAS THE MAKER OF THE POPULAR EMERSON SHOE. THE EMERSON WAS ONE OF THE BEST SHOES AVAILABLE. DESIGNED TO BE FASHIONABLE YET AFFORDABLE, R.B. GROVER MADE EACH EMERSON SHOE FROM THE FINEST LEATHER AND THE SHOE WAS DESIGNED WITH A CUSTOM LAST PROVIDING MAXIMUM COMFORT AND DURABILITY. THOUGH NOT THE MANUFACTURING GOLIATH OF THE DOUGLAS OR KEITH COMPANIES, BY 1905 R. B. GROVER Co. HAD THIRTY-THREE STORES AND SKYROCKETING SALES. GROVER WAS A FORCE IN THE MARKET.

THE EMERSON SHOE WAS SO STYLISH AND AFFORDABLE THAT THE R. B. GROVER Co. WAS FORCED TO ADD AN ENTIRE FLOOR TO ITS FACTORY JUST TO KEEP PACE WITH THE DEMAND. THE GROVER FACTORY WAS A LARGE AND MODERN BUILDING. MR. GROVER MADE SURE HIS EMPLOYEES WORKED IN A CLEAN AND WELL VENTILATED WORKPLACE AND THE GROVER EMPLOYEES WERE TRAINED TO USE THE MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED SHOEMAKING MACHINERY IN THE BUSINESS. THOUGH THE COMPANY INCREASED PRODUCTION BY ADDING ANOTHER FLOOR ONTO THE BUILDING, NO EVIDENCE EXISTS SAYING WHETHER OR NOT THE ENGINEERS WHO EXPANDED THE FACTORY EVER ADDRESSED THE ISSUE OF A PRESSURE-BOILER DESIGNED TO SERVE THREE FLOORS THAT NOW SERVED FOUR. THIS OVERSIGHT WOULD LATER PROVE DISASTROUS.

THINGS WERE GOING WELL FOR THE R.B. GROVER Co. IN FEBRUARY OF 1905, THE SHOE FACTORIES OF BROCKTON SHIPPED ALMOST FIFTY-SIX THOUSAND CASES OF SHOES. PRODUCTION WAS AT AN ALL TIME HIGH AND THE MORE

THAN FOUR-HUNDRED EMPLOYEES OF MR. R.B. GROVER'S FACTORY BEGAN THE MONTH OF MARCH 1905 LOOKING TO INCREASE THEIR PRODUCTIVITY EVEN FURTHER. LITTLE DID THEY KNOW THAT A GREAT TRAGEDY WAS ABOUT TO BEFALL THEM.

LOCATED ON THE CORNER OF MAIN AND CALMAR STREETS IN THE LARGELY SWEDISH NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE CAMPELLO SECTION OF BROCKTON, THE GROVER FACTORY BURST INTO FLAMES AT 7:50 AM ON MARCH 20, 1905. THE OVER-WORKED PRESSURE BOILER EXPLODED TEARING THROUGH THE FOUR STORY BUILDING AND TURNING IT INTO A CREMATORIUM. THE FACTORY ROOF COLLAPSED AND THE FOUR FLOORS CRASHED DOWN ON EACH OTHER. THOSE WORKERS WHO SURVIVED THE EXPLOSION AND COLLAPSE WERE NOW ENTOMBED BENEATH HEAVY TIMBERS, FLOORING AND THOUSANDS OF POUNDS OF THE LATEST SHOE MANUFACTURING EQUIPMENT. UNABLE TO MOVE, THE WORKERS WERE HELPLESS AND COULD ONLY WAIT FOR THE FLAMES TO CONSUME THEM. IT WOULD NOT TAKE LONG BECAUSE THE GAS LINES THAT FED THE FACTORY WERE BROKEN AND HIGHLY FLAMMABLE GAS FUELED THE FIRE. THE GROVER WAS A MODERN BUILDING AND THE MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED GLASS WINDOWS, WHICH HAD ALLOWED THE FACTORY FLOOR TO BE BATHED IN SUNLIGHT, NOW CONTRIBUTED TO THE CHIMNEY EFFECT. OXYGEN WAS PULLED IN THROUGH THESE WINDOWS CAUSING THE FIRE TO BURN HOTTER AND FASTER THAN ANY FIRE THE CITY'S FIRE DEPARTMENT HAD EVER ENCOUNTERED. THE COMBINATION OF AIR, GAS AND VENTILATION, THE LAST BEING THE LACK OF A ROOF ON THE FACTORY, TURNED THIS FACTORY, AND THE BUILDINGS AROUND IT INTO A FOUR ACRE CAULDRON OF DEATH. OF THE THREE HUNDRED PLUS WORKERS WHO WERE IN THE BUILDING, ROUGHLY ONE-HUNDRED MADE IT OUT UNSCATHED. FIFTY-EIGHT PEOPLE WERE KILLED, INCLUDING SOME FROM SURROUNDING BUILDINGS THAT ALSO BURNED TO THE GROUND, AND AN ADDITIONAL ONE-HUNDRED FIFTY PEOPLE WERE INJURED. THIS WAS THE LARGEST BOILER DISASTER IN AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL HISTORY UP TO THAT POINT AND IF NOT FOR THE STEAMSHIP SULTANA EXPLOSION IN 1865 IN WHICH FIVE-HUNDRED RETURNING UNION SOLDIERS WERE KILLED, THE GROVER DISASTER WOULD HAVE HAD THE LARGEST DEATH TOLL OF ANY BOILER EXPLOSION IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

TRAGIC AS THIS EVENT WAS, THE DISASTER BROUGHT OUT THE BEST IN THE MEN AND WOMEN OF BROCKTON. THE PAGES OF THE BROCKTON ENTERPRISE AND THE BROCKTON TIMES FOR LATE MARCH ARE FULL OF THESE STORIES OF HEROISM. THE CAMPELLO FIRE STATION SHARED THE BLOCK WITH THE GROVER FACTORY AND THOUGH IT WAS NOT BURNED, IT WAS SAID THAT THE BRICKS ON ITS SOUTH FACING WALL WERE WARM TO THE TOUCH FOR TWO DAYS AFTER THE FIRE. THE MEN OF THE CAMPELLO FIREHOUSE WERE HEROES THAT DAY. AS HUNDREDS OF WORKERS AND RESIDENTS OF THE CAMPELLO

NEIGHBORHOOD RAN FROM THE FIRE, THE CAMPELLO FIREFIGHTERS CHARGED INTO THE INFERNO LOOKING FOR WORKERS WHOSE CRIES FOR HELP WERE BARELY AUDIBLE OVER THE ROAR OF THE FLAMES. ACCOUNTS OF THE DAY RECORD ONE FIREFIGHTER NAMED MOORE, WHO RAN INTO THE BUILDING AND ARMED ONLY WITH A FIREFIGHTER'S AXE, BEGAN HACKING AWAY AT A THICK METAL GATE THAT BLOCKED THE ESCAPE OF THREE WORKERS. REPORTS INDICATE THESE THREE WORKERS WERE SAVED.

THE PASTOR OF ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH, THEN A WOODEN STRUCTURE JUST ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE BLAZE AND ITSELF IN DANGER FROM THE FLAMES, RAN INTO THE FACTORY JUST AFTER THE ROOF COLLAPSE. IGNORING THE FLAMES, SMOKE AND INTENSE HEAT SURROUNDING HIM, THE PRIEST MANAGED TO LIFT HEAVY FLOOR JOISTS OFF OF SOME TRAPPED WORKERS AND ESCORT THEM TO SAFETY. THE PASTOR WENT BACK IN TO REPEAT HIS TASK AND HE HIMSELF WAS SERIOUSLY INJURED WHEN PART OF THE BUILDING FELL ON HIM.

THE FULL ACCOUNT OF THE DISASTER, PUBLISHED IN 1907, MAKES SPECIFIC MENTION OF MR. GEORGE E. SMITH, AN EMPLOYEE OF THE R.B. GROVER CO. WHO WAS TRAPPED AND PINNED TO THE FLOOR BY HIS FEET. UNABLE TO MOVE OR ESCAPE THE FLAMES HIMSELF, SMITH, "LARGE OF FRAME AND BIG OF HEART" STILL MANAGED, USING ONLY HIS ARMS, TO RESCUE HIS NEPHEW AND PULL A MRS. LENA S. BAKER OUT FROM UNDER SOME DEBRIS. MRS. BAKER OWED HER LIFE TO HER RESCUER BUT WOULD NEVER GET THE OPPORTUNITY TO THANK HIM. GEORGE E. SMITH BURNED TO DEATH IN THE FLAMES. OLIVE SMITH WAS LEFT TO EXPLAIN TO HER AND GEORGE'S THREE YOUNG DAUGHTERS WHY THEIR FATHER WAS NOT GOING TO COME HOME FROM THE FACTORY THAT DAY. YOUNG VIOLA, LILLIAN AND MATTIE SMITH WERE THREE OF THE FIFTY-FIVE DEPENDENT CHILDREN WHO LOST A MOTHER OR FATHER THAT DAY. BABY LEONIS M. FINAL'S MOTHER HAD DIED SOMETIME BEFORE HIS SECOND BIRTHDAY. HE WAS TWO YEARS OLD WHEN HIS FATHER, WALLACE DIED IN THE GROVER FIRE. LEONIS WAS LEFT IN THE CARE OF A GUARDIAN. HE WOULD NEVER KNOW HIS PARENTS.

UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THEN MAYOR, THE HON. EDWARD H. KEITH, THE SITE OF THE DISASTER WAS SEARCHED FOR THE BODIES OF THOSE WHO DIED. IN FACT, MAYOR KEITH PERSONALLY SUPERVISED THE FINAL SEARCH HIMSELF AND ONCE THAT SEARCH WAS COMPLETE, MAYOR KEITH ORDERED ONE MORE SEARCH AT THE REQUEST OF DOZENS OF GRIEVING FAMILY MEMBERS WHO WATCHED FROM THE SIDEWALK. THE REMAINS OF THE VICTIMS WERE FOR THE MOST PART NOT IDENTIFIABLE. ACCOUNTS OF THE RECOVERY EFFORT DETAIL JUST HOW GRISLY AN AFFAIR IT WAS. THE SEARCHERS REPORTED FINDING ONLY SMALL FRAGMENTS OF BONE IN SOME AREAS CLOSEST TO DENTON

STREET, OR THE REAR OF THE FACTORY. ALL OF THE REMAINS WERE TAKEN TO A BUILDING IN THE DOWNTOWN SECTION OF BROCKTON AND HELD THERE UNTIL APRIL WHEN A PROPER BURIAL SITE HAD BEEN PREPARED.

MAYOR KEITH WAS VERY AGGRESSIVE IN HIS RESPONSE TO THIS DISASTER. BEFORE THE LAST BODY HAD BEEN CLEARED, MAYOR KEITH AND THE CIVIC AND BUSINESS LEADERS IN THE CITY HAD CREATED THE BROCKTON RELIEF FUND TO AID THE SUFFERERS FROM THE DISASTER AND THEIR MANY DEPENDENTS. UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF MAYOR KEITH, THIS FUND WOULD GO ON TO DISTRIBUTE NEARLY \$ 105,000 IN CASH RELIEF TO THOSE IN NEED. THE ADMINISTRATORS OF THE FUND MANAGED TO DO THIS WHILE KEEPING ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS DOWN TO LESS THAN ONE-FOURTH OF ONE PERCENT. THE WRITTEN ACCOUNT OF THE FUND EXPLAINS IT THIS WAY, "IT TOOK ONE CENT TO DISTRIBUTE FOUR DOLLARS."

THE CITY COUNCIL APPROVED EXPENDITURE FOR A GRAVE AND MEMORIAL AT MELROSE CEMETERY ON PEARL STREET ON THE CITY'S WEST SIDE. THE LARGE GRANITE MONUMENT IS VISIBLE IN THE SOUTHEAST SECTION OF THE CEMETERY AND THOSE INTERESTED IN THE GROVER DISASTER WOULD BE WELL SERVED TO GO AND VIEW IT. THERE ARE FORTY VICTIMS BURIED ON THE SITE AND THEIR BODIES ARE LAID OUT LIKE "SPOKES IN THE WHEEL ALL POINTING TO A COMMON CENTER" WHICH IS THE GRANITE MONUMENT ITSELF.

IN THE WAKE OF THIS TRAGEDY, THE ENTIRE CITY MOURNED. THERE WERE FUNERAL MARCHES AND CHURCH SERVICES ALL AROUND THE CITY. THE ROLE OF BROCKTON'S CHURCH COMMUNITIES, AS VARIED IN DENOMINATION AS THEY WERE, CANNOT BE OVERSTATED. LOSS AND SUFFERING BRINGS PEOPLE TO THEIR HOUSES OF WORSHIP. WE SAW THAT IN THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001. IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE GROVER FIRE, THE LOCAL CHURCHES HELD COUNTLESS SERVICES, ADMINISTERED TO THE BEREAVED AND TOOK CARE OF THOSE IN NEED. THE LUTHERANS CARED FOR THE BAPTISTS AND THE CATHOLICS GAVE CLOTHING TO THE METHODISTS. EACH CHURCH COMMUNITY REACHED OUT TO EACH OTHER'S FLOCK REGARDLESS OF CREED. THE CITY OF BROCKTON WAS UNITED IN TRAGEDY.

THE GOVERNOR OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS AT THE TIME WAS BROCKTON'S OWN W.L. DOUGLAS. IN THE MONTHS FOLLOWING THE GROVER DISASTER, MASSACHUSETTS WOULD CREATE THE MOST STRINGENT LAWS GOVERNING BOILERS AND THEIR CAPACITY IN THE COUNTRY. THE MASSACHUSETTS BOILER CODE WOULD LATER BE USED AS THE NATIONAL MODEL. THE SITE OF THE R.B. GROVER FACTORY ITSELF LAY FALLOW FOR ONLY A FEW YEARS. RECORDS INDICATE THAT BY 1919, AN AUTOMOBILE DEALERSHIP WAS BUILT. A STUDEBAKER DEALERSHIP WOULD LATER OCCUPY

THE SITE AS WOULD A SMALL FOOD MARKET. MUCH OF THE AREA HAS CHANGED DRASTICALLY SINCE 1905. THE CAMPELLO FIRE STATION IS STILL THE PLACE TO FIND HEROES THOUGH THE BUILDING'S FAÇADE HAS BEEN ALTERED. THE ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH WAS BUILT AND CLOSED, VICTIM OF POROUS ROCK IN ITS WALLS AND A RE-ORGANIZATION PLAN OF THE BOSTON ARCHDIOCESE. WHAT HAS NOT CHANGED IS THE SPIRIT OF THE BROCKTONIANS WHO LIVE IN THE AREA. THEY REMAIN A PEOPLE UNBOWED BY GREAT CHALLENGES AND READY FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE.

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