

[Morgan County Democrat]

Sunday Afternoon Explosion and Fire at Walker Garage Leaves Town in Sadness

One Man burned Up in Building, Four Other Men, One Little Boy and Two Women Die From Burns and Many Suffer Comparatively Slight Wounds That Ordinarily Would be Considered Serious.

THE DEAD

Chester Travis Walker, 29 Single,

Frank Bruce Walker, 27 married, sons of Harry Walker and wife. Owners of Walker Garage,

Edward Elmer Sheets, 31 mechanic, single, son of T.B. Sheets and wife,

Herman B. Hook, 20, son of Henry Hook and Wife, of Stockport, engaged to be married.

Mrs. Leonard Rardin of Pennsville.

Mrs. W. H. Chappellear, of Shinn.

Ernest Ridgley, 23, son of William Ridgley and wife, married about two years ago to Miss Bernice Carder, and now living in Malta.

Frankie Bartlett, 11 years old, adopted son of Ned Bartlett and wife of Malta.

THE INJURED

Willie Lighthizer, 19, of near Neelyville, terribly burned about the face and hands. Has a fighting chance to live. Doctors Leeper and Jewett in attendance.

Dr. Stull, burned about the hands while trying to put out the fire on clothing of Frank and Chester Walker.

Les Benjamin, slight burns.

W. H. Chappellear, badly burned about the hands, but doing very well.

Three year old baby of Mr. and Mrs. Rardin, very slightly hurt.

The strange meanderings of fate, and yet the simple workings of everyday life, brought the above men, women and children, -common everyday citizens just like ourselves, our neighbors and friends – together Sunday afternoon at the Walker Garage at about twenty minutes past four, and a drum of high pressure gasoline brought in from Chesterhill was the instrument in the hands of fate to snuff the life out of eight of them and to hold one life in the balance between two worlds all three days with doctors and loving friends fighting against the demon who seemed to demand the last heart throb of the last unfortunate victim of his insatiable thirst.

A book might be written about the horrors of the explosion and fire which followed at the Walker garage Sunday. Everyone who witnessed it could tell of thrilling incidents that perhaps others did not see. The poor victims who retained consciousness long enough to tell of the circumstances could have made your very blood run cold with the anguish of their pitiful stories. We must be very brief about it and will confine ourselves to the facts that stand out after the first shock has passed and the true situation reveals itself to a horror stricken community.

Everything was running along normal in McConnelsville Sunday. The Chautauqua had opened Friday night with a record breaking crowd, another followed Saturday night and on Sunday morning and for the afternoon lecture the attendance was better than on any opening Sunday in years. P. Marlon Simms had finished his lecture and Col. Shields was beginning his nature talk, “The Tragedies of the Wild.” The Chautauqua crowd was lingering on the grounds for the most part and the streets were comparatively bare.

The Walker Garage had been thronged with their regular business and the extra business incident to Chautauqua. Everybody was overworked. The gasoline supply in town had run short and Chester Walker, senior member of the firm, had gone to Chesterhill to get a drum of the high pressure kind to tide them over. He struck town and made for his garage, reached the door and drove in. Edward Sheets was working on a car which had been driven in by the Rardin – and Chappellear – families. Herman Hook was doing some repair work on his motorcycle and little Frankie Bartlett, on his way home from Chautauqua, and very much interested in motorcycles, had stopped in to see what was being done. Willie Lighthizer was walking past on the sidewalk. Frank Walker and Ernest Ridgley were at work in the front of the room, and when Chester came in with the gasoline they went to help him take it out of the car and draw a supply to fill some cars that were waiting. Unscrewing the top, the gas which had formed began to shoot out and spread over the room. Sheets left his work and all hands tried to stop the escaping gas and gasoline. A cry came from Sheets, look out for matches! But evidently all forgot or overlooked the fact that there was torch lighted in the rear, and without warning gas and fire met and all within the building were hurled into the street or ran in panic from the rear of the room. In a second the flames were leaping thirty feet high from all parts of the garage and by the time the fire department reached the scene it looked like nothing could save any part of the building or the other buildings in the square around it.

Soon the streets were full of people and all kinds of stories of tragedy were in the air. Men, women and children, living torches, had been seen to run, or be thrown, from the building and the nearby houses and hotels were turned into emergency hospitals. All the doctors were needed and the nurses from the Rocky Glen Sanitarium were quick to respond. Others who were handy at first were assisting. Friends and relatives were frantic about missing ones – everything was pandemonium.

The fire department did noble work and the Malta department helped valiantly. Soon the great sheets of flame reached their maximum except when a can of carbide would ignite or when a tank of gasoline in one of the many cars in the garage would give way. Dean Johnson hurried to the engine house to keep the water supply from failing, notwithstanding his father's house with everything in it, was burning. By and by the flames found their master in the valiant firemen armed with the great streams of water which plowed into them. When the fire was under control it was found that the walls of the garage were about intact, with the roof, windows, door and front all gone, the front having been blown nearly across the street with the first explosion. The Johnson house just below was burned worthless on the side next to the garage, but the other side may be usable. The Beckett house, east of the garage was damaged very heavily on the end nearest the garage, but in the hands of carpenters can be restored.

As soon as it was safe to enter the garage building a little exploration disclosed a body lying near the front, burned beyond recognition, with face and head and feet almost gone. The watch and keys identified it as being the body of poor Edward Sheets, who evidently had started for the fire extinguishers. The body was carried to the undertaking shop of C. E. Fisher.

The garage was full of cars, including the \$2000 Peerless belonging to James Connor, a Studebaker Six and a Studebaker Four belonging to the garage, an old model Overland and several new Fords, and a Ford belonging to Mr. Crooks of Marietta, and one or two motorcycles, besides hundreds of dollars worth of tires, tanks, fixtures, etc. Everything was destroyed and there was no insurance on any of it. Neither was there any insurance on the Johnson property. The damage to the Beckett house is largely covered by insurance, but the occupants of this house lost heavily. Paul Ray, who was away from home, lost everything; Calendines saved most of their furniture; Isabel Fulton was away and all of her goods were lost; Margaret Travis also lost everything; George Savage and family lost heavily. As many of these were flood sufferers only a year ago, it is a pretty sore loss to them, but in the presence of death property loss seems trifling even to the owners of it.

Now, to briefly take up the victims from the time they left or were hurled from the building. The confusion at the time makes it difficult to get the facts accurately even now. Mr. and Mrs. Rardin were taken to the Rocky Glen Sanitarium, where Mrs. Rardin died Monday morning. She was taken to Tabor for burial Tuesday afternoon. Mrs. Chapplear died Tuesday forenoon and the funeral was held at the home of Mrs. Delana Sillery Wednesday morning and the body was taken to Chesterhill for burial. Rev. R. J. Mills conducted the service here.

Ernest Ridgley died Tuesday afternoon, and the funeral was conducted by Rev. Johnson Wednesday afternoon at 4 o'clock.

Little Frankie Bartlett was taken to the home of Robert Savage until Sunday evening, then taken to the home of his father, Ned Bartlett, where he died at ten o'clock Sunday evening.

Herman Hook was taken to Dr. Leeper's office and then to the home of V. A. Vanhorn and wife, where he died early Monday morning. He was taken to Stockport for burial Monday morning. Miss Mildred Bishop of Hooksburg, who was engaged to him, attended the funeral.

Ed Sheets, it is thought was killed by an explosion of carbide and probably died with very little suffering. He alone failed to get out of the building. His funeral was held Tuesday at 9:30 conducted by Rev. Williams and Rev. Lyons, of Philo. The Woodmen and Maccabees had charge of the service.

Frank and Chester Walker ran to the Franklin Hotel where everything possible was done to relieve their suffering and save their lives, but death came both about the same time, but after suffering far into the night. Their funerals were held from the home of their parents, Harry Walker and wife, at 4 o'clock Monday, in charge of the Masons, and the Maccabees attending in a body. All business houses closed during the funeral. Chester Walker was unmarried, Frank was married to Miss Helen Dunnington in February 1912.

THE LIVING

Death has now claimed eight of the ten unfortunates who were seriously burned Sunday and the other two are making a hard fight for their lives. Mr. Chappellear developed a rather unfavorable fever Tuesday and Wednesday, but on Wednesday was considered well enough to be taken from the home of Mrs. Sillery to his own home at Shinn. It is believed he will recover.

Willie Lighthizer, Son of Robert Lighthizer, is still in a very serious condition at the home of Fred Ralph, where he is receiving the best of care at the hands of his parents and is attended by the doctors Leeper. He rested very well all day Wednesday, though his head is swollen nearly twice its normal size, his eyes closed, and his face, neck and hands terribly burned. The doctors still think there is a chance for him.

WILL START UP AGAIN

Although the building is a wreck, the books and records destroyed, and the two proprietors of the Walker Garage are dead, the business is not to stop. Ralph Walker, a younger brother, and Harry Walker, the father, have set a force of men to work cleaning away the debris preparatory to rebuilding at once. Ralph had just walked across the bridge with some companions when the explosion occurred and his father and mother were out riding in a car. Byron Whipple, another employee, was just backing in from the street and the car was burned. Howard Price was in the country on a trip and Harry Triplett and Virgil Lochary were out with cars.

POCKETBOOK LOST

A pocketbook containing about \$50 was lost in the excitement by Mrs. Chapple and Mr. Hale and Grace Sillery saw a young man pick it up, stating he would deliver it to its owner. He has not done so yet. Mr. Chapple will wait a little longer on him.