

John Ratledge – Elkin – 1956

From Facebook, May 23, 2020

Elkin volunteer fireman John E. Ratledge, 37, died of injuries sustained in the explosion of a service station on May 14, 1956. As the next day's Greensboro Daily News reported, the blast occurred at the service station that his father operated at the corner of Market Street and Gwyn Avenue. The blast occurred about 10:00 a.m., after Ratledge and fellow employee David Cooke had gone to the basement, to check the tank(s) that were being filled from a tanker. They found gasoline pouring onto the floor and were trying to "sweep out" the spilled gas with brooms with the explosion occurred. Subsequent reports--see second story, from unidentified newspaper--noted that there were two explosions. After the first, Ratledge escaped unharmed, but reentered to help Cooke, when a second explosion occurred. Said Fire Chief Ted Brown, "The first time Ratledge entered the basement he was acting like a service station man, but the second trip was as a fireman would act." Several store buildings on Main Street, which faced opposite from the service station, were heavily damaged. The blast blew out store fronts on both sides of the street. Ratledge died at 2:45 p.m. at Hugh Chatham Memorial Hospital, just a couple hours after Cooke, who passed away at 12:20 a.m. He was buried on May 16, 1956, at Crestwood Memorial Park. His name is listed on the North Carolina Fallen Firefighters Memorial.



BLAST KILLS MAN, BLOWS OUT STORE FRONTS

Shortly after a terrific service station gasoline blast shot flames through adjacent stores in Elkin today, volunteer firemen appeared on the scene. At left flames are pouring from the filling station pumps and over a tank truck which somehow managed to escape without exploding. A volunteer fireman is preparing to pour water on the truck. At right are the store fronts blown out by the blast. The store fronts face away from the service station tanks which exploded breaking windows and showering the street with debris from the stores. Volunteer firemen are working to prevent flames from gaining headway. John Ed Ratledge, son of the filling station owner, was killed in the blast.

Gas Station Blast Kills Elkin Man

Another Injured; Stores Damaged

BY BOB YARBOROUGH

ELKIN, May 14—One person was killed and one other is in critical condition as result of a gasoline explosion this morning at John Rattledge Service Station at the corner of Market Street and Gwyn Avenue here.

Victim of the explosion, which rocked the business district, was John Edd Rattledge, son of the owner. David Cooke, who was with young Rattledge at the time of the explosion is in critical condition at Hugh Chatham Memorial Hospital.

Rattledge died at 2:45 p.m. from burns suffered when the gasoline ignited at about 10 a.m. today.

Several store buildings on Main Street, which face in the opposite direction from the service station, were heavily damaged. The blast blew out windows and shattered store fronts on both sides of the street.

Heaviest Damage

Heaviest damage was sustained by the Factory Outlet Store, Downtown Shoe Store, Greenwood Auto Co., two empty buildings and the Home Furniture Store.

Cause of the blast was undetermined, but witnesses suspect static electricity. Clyde Combs, said at the time of the explosion he was connecting a new pump at the station. At the same time, a tanker truck owned by the State-Wide Transport Co. of Sanford, driven by Herbert Gaines of Bonise, was filling the station's tanks. The tanks are situated on the Main Street level in the basement of the station and to the rear of the stores.

Sweeping Out Gas

Young Rattledge and Cooke had gone into the basement to check the filling of the tanks and found that the gasoline had poured out onto the floor. They secured brooms and were trying to sweep out the gasoline when the blast occurred.

Minutes after the blast, the top of the tanker truck was ablaze but did not explode. Fireman say that if the tanker had exploded, damages and casualties would have been incalculable.

estimable.

Young Rattledge and Cooke were either blown or made their way through the rear of the stores and out onto Main Street where they were picked up by an ambulance and taken to the hospital.

Witnesses said the young men were burned beyond recognition. The only unburned portions of their bodies were their feet which were protected by their shoe tops.

Seven persons who occupied three apartments on East Main street all escaped injury with exception of Mrs. Peggy Calloway, who occupied an apartment above one of the stores in the blast area.

Mrs. Calloway, after hearing the blast and being stifled by smoke, kicked out a window of her second floor apartment and leaped to an awning from which she pulled her two children Beverly 2, and Randy 4, to safety and lowered them to the

Blast Kills One, Damages Stores

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street. Mrs. Calloway suffered minor cuts.

Roy Caudle, manager of the shoe store, also suffered minor cuts.

A third employe at the station, Wayne Pardue, was standing in the grease pit when the blast went off. He was drenched in gasoline and temporarily blinded, but managed to escape uninjured.

Investigators said a danger lingered on because one of the big tanks did not explode. They reported fumes strong in the area.

Fire Chief Fred Brown estimated damage at \$75,000.

Small cracks were found in a portion of a nearby bridge, on Route 67. Investigators said the bridge, however, appeared to be in good condition.

Clyde Combs, an electrician who

was working on an idle pump, gave this account:

"One of the tanks began overflowing and Ratledge and Cooke went down underneath the service station to find out the trouble around the tanks.

"Shortly after they disappeared below ground, I heard a violent explosion.

'I Ran'

"As soon as I heard that, I ran. That's the only reason I'm alive, I guess."

When he heard cries for help, he said, he ran down the steps which lead alongside the service station to the level of East Main St.

"I saw them coming out of the building and I helped them to a spot away from the blast area. Both their bodies were completely burned, it looked like to me, and practically all their clothes had

been burned off.

"Sreds of skin were hanging from each man's arms and his body. I helped put them in an ambulance."

Surviving young Ratledge, in addition to his father, are his wife, the former Miss Ruth Mull; his mother, Mrs. Elsie Jones Ratledge; one daughter, Judy, one son, John Edgar Ratledge Jr., both of the home; four brothers, Hayden of Marion, Bob and Fred Ratledge of Elkin, and Ray Ratledge of Winston-Salem; one sister, Mrs. Luke Irwin of Elkin.

Funeral services will be held Wednesday at 3 p.m. in First Methodist Church of which he was a member. The Rev. J. C. Reichard will officiate.

PTA TO MEET

The Summer PTA will meet at 8 o'clock tonight in the school auditorium.

blast here yesterday.

Death came to David Jackson Cook, 25, of Ronda, at 12:20 a.m., nearly 15 hours after the blast that also took the life of John Ed Ratledge of Elkin.

Both men were employees of the J. W. Ratledge Service Station, in the heart of Elkin's business district. Mr. Ratledge was son of the owner.

A story of heroism came to light today, a story overlooked in the confusion of yesterday's blast and its aftermath.

Mr. Ratledge, according to Fire Chief Ted Brown, had emerged unharmed from the station basement but re-entered to help Mr. Cook when a second blast occurred.

"The first time Ratledge entered the basement he was acting like a service station man, but the second trip was as a fireman would act," Chief Brown said.

Mr. Ratledge, a volunteer fireman, died about five hours after the explosion.

The two men had gone to the basement to see why a gasoline tank, being filled from a tanker, was overflowing.

The explosion badly damaged some of the stores on Main Street but no one else was injured.

Mr. Cook was born in Surry County on Nov. 10, 1930, the son of Mrs. I. M. Cook.