



Tales of Texas Newsletter



January 2026

This issue of Tales of Texas details a tragic fire on the Homefront in World War 2. Above photo is 1943 Mack Fire Truck.

Photos from public domain, taken by author, or courtesy of South Park Cemetery. Comments? Go to website listed below.

Wartime Industry and Tragedy in Houston

The year 1943 marked a halfway point of sorts for World War Two, or, at least, the U.S. participation in the worldwide conflict. The year found Houston to be a leader in wartime production. Houston's two largest industries should come as no surprise: shipbuilding and

petrochemicals. Houston Shipbuilding Corp alone had 21,000 workers. Those men (and women) had already launched sixty-six merchant cargo ships for the war effort while another company, Brown Shipyards, worked on U.S naval vessels.

The other industry was petrochemicals. Shell-Deer Park and Humble Oil specialized in high octane aviation fuel and chemicals for explosives like TNT. If allied planes were in the air, there was a good chance that the fuel they burned came from Houston.

Tens of thousands of workers flocked to Houston looking for full-time employment. It was easier to find a job than to find a place to live. This was not a Houston problem alone. America's production centers lacked housing for factories and plants. Tent cities sprung up in places like Washington DC, Oakland, Detroit, Los Angeles, and other production centers. The Pentagon just completed construction and put the military in a central location and moved them out of tents scattered across the national mall.



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The Gulf Hotel, 314 Louisiana St



Houston Chronicle Headline

The year saw another unprecedented event: a hurricane with no warning. A Cat 2 hurricane struck Bolivar and drove inland on July 27, killing 19 people and setting our industry back with power failures, etc. Housing construction stalled as workers rallied to restore the critically needed plants for aviation fuel and explosives. The hurricane is “unprecedented” not because it was a hurricane that struck the upper Texas coast and Houston, but because of the secrecy involved. Due to German U-boats prowling the Gulf, ships were prohibited from radioing warnings and storm positions to the weather bureau which had been the custom.

Colonel Joe Duckworth of the Air Corps flew an AT-Texan to the hurricane and into the eyewall, becoming the first “hurricane hunter” in history. Unfortunately, his feat and the information it contained fell victim to censorship. Wartime secrecy of our plants and the conditions they might be enduring, were more important than warning people about the hurricane.

This hurricane complicated an already overburdened construction sector.

With the extraordinary demand for housing, workers had to find places to live. Many of them were from out of town and had no family connections to Houston. The old “flophouse” type of hotels in downtown Houston, saw a resurgence. The bus station and train station, the main travel hubs of the city, were mere footsteps from these old hotels.

As men arrived in Houston, many of them opted to stay in the hotels. A room with a bed was 40 cents, double occupancy. Some of the old common areas like ball rooms were converted to barracks style accommodations with cots scattered throughout the room. A cot was 20 cents a night.

Fire marshals targeted these dilapidated buildings and issued warnings, calling them “firetraps.” But, Houston being Houston, the fire marshals only had civil authority. No criminal sanctions could be carried out, nor did they have the power to shut down an unsafe building. Additionally, regulations of any kind might hamper production.

A mere seven weeks after the devastating hurricane, a hotel clerk was managing the desk at the hotel located at 314 Louisiana @ Preston. He smelled smoke and ran to the affected room and took a smoldering sheet off a bed and doused it with water. Then he threw it in a closet for the day manager to dispose of. Unfortunately, the sheet hadn’t been put completely out. The closet was full of cleaning



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1943 Hurricane

and other solvents. The old firetrap the City Fire Marshal had been complaining about, exploded into a fire the likes of which HFD had never seen.

According to Brady Hutchinson, a college history instructor, it took two hours for HFD to get the blaze under control.

During the two-hour hellish interval, Captain A.C. Martindale of HPD Homicide ran down the street from his office to the scene. He saw men jumping from the top (third) floor to their deaths. He saw others die at the windows and the so-called fire escape. Reporters and photographers ran to the macabre scene to record the event for posterity.

Of the fifty-five men who died, twenty-three victims were never identified. The bodies were burned beyond recognition and, of course, DNA had not been discovered yet. At least one man was tentatively identified because of the laundry mark on his shirt. Kind of spotty reporting on the face of it, but by this time in 1943, the U.S. had over a quarter of a million war casualties. Believe it or not, the U.S. had over 17,500 industrial/factory deaths in 1943 alone. The homefront was incredibly risky. No OSHA. No nuthin'. Wartime safety was not a premium consideration. Even so, this fire made headlines in Houston and put the firetraps on display. No substantial regulations were put into place. Again, bigger fish to fry with Nazis and fanatical Japanese breathin' down our necks.

The American Red Cross organized a fund to pay for burial services for the twenty-three unclaimed victims. A war weary public chipped in and paid for an interfaith memorial service at South Park Cemetery in Pearland, Texas.

Like most things, historical, this part of the story may have been lost except for the efforts of a historian working at the South Park Funeral Home. "I see this as a calling," she said. "Most people like to know something about the place where they will rest with loved ones." Dianne DeArmond, Community Service Supervisor, arrived in Pearland and heard of the 1943 fire and the unidentified victims. Thankfully, she and another staffer launched an investigation to find out what they could about the burial mentioned in news sources, but nobody had any firsthand information. A card, however, was found in a file.

The unmarked grave was located by the superintendent. It has been described as a "trench." I suppose that it is a trench, but DeArmond is quick to point out that each person was buried individually in their grave in their own casket. She provided the photo in this article, and it supports her belief about the individual graves.

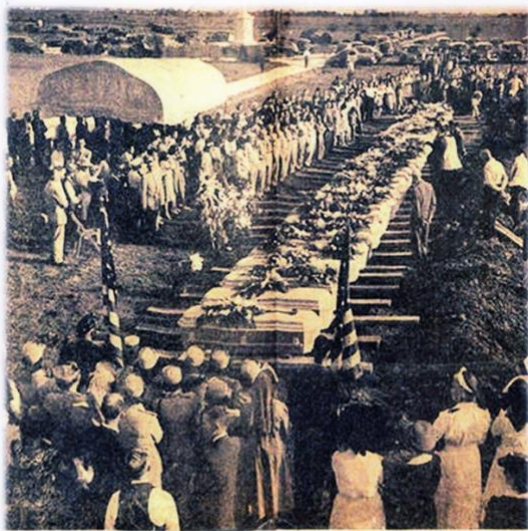


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She gave me the cemetery map and marked it. I have scanned it and submitted it with this article in the event anyone wants to pay their respects. In the photos one can see the vantage point and landmarks so one can easily find the unmarked graves.

September 7, 1943, in World War 2 history is known for the following: the U.S. Army invaded the Gulf of Salerno in Italy. The German Army began an agonizing retreat from Ukraine. The Australians suffered devastating losses in Papua. The Eighth Air Force conducted strategic daylight bombing of targets in France with high losses. And the Gulf Hotel in Downtown Houston, Texas, erupted in a fire that produced the worst loss of life due to fire in the city's history to this very day.

When we reflect on the lives lost in World War Two on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific, and in the skies and seas beyond them, we must also remember those who died on the Homefront. Many workers labored under dangerous conditions, believing their work sustained those in combat. Even today, industrial accidents claim lives despite modern protections. In 1943, those protections were nonexistent. Most went to work out of duty. Some never knew a hurricane was closing in on them. And others were forced to live in unsafe firetraps like the Gulf Hotel.



Burial of Unknown Victims at South Park Cemetery, 1943



Unknown Graves at South Park Cemetery, Present Day

For Cemetery Map, Please See Following Page



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Map and Above Photos Are Courtesy of Dianne DeArmond
South Park Cemetery

