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DALE MAY YORK: THE LAST VICTIM

by Robert Neiman

The 1930s will be remembered as the decade of The Great Depression. All over America, indeed all over the world, people were starving. Few could get a job, and once proud men stood on street corners begging money for the support of their families. The Dust Bowl destroyed farms, and everywhere destitution ruled supreme. Everywhere, that is, except the tiny East Texas community of Kilgore. While the rest of the world swam in a sea of poverty, Kilgore swam in a sea of oil: oil meant money, lots of money, and money meant jobs.

On October 3, 1930, Texas wildcatter Marion "Dad" Joiner brought in the Daisy Bradford Number Three just south of Kilgore. Then, on December 28, thirteen miles north of the Joiner find, the Lou Della Crim Number One came roaring in. Still further north of the Lou Della Crim, on January 26, 1931, Longview's Barney Skipper brought in the Lathrop Number One. This proved that the East Texas Oil Field was by far the largest oil field ever discovered in North America. Forty-five miles long, north to south, by twelve miles wide, east to west, at its widest – the colossal East Texas Oil Field was truly The Great Black Giant.¹

The population of the sleepy village of Kilgore exploded from 700 to 7,000 in twenty-four hours.² Towns such as Arp, Gladewater, Henderson, Longview, Overton, and Tyler also experienced growth. Such towns as Joinerville did not even exist before Dad Joiner's discovery. But they existed now, and they were blowing out the seams. Not only were towns experiencing unprecedented population explosions but the wells themselves were unbelievable. The Daisy Bradford came in at 6,800 barrels a day, the Lou Della Crim at 22,000, the Lathrop at 20,000, and these were considered only fair-to-average wells. Within a one-block area inside Kilgore there were forty-four producing wells. It truly earned its nickname, "the world's richest acre." Land that had sold for as little as fifty cents to one dollar an acre before The Boom now leased for \$5,000 and \$6,000 an acre for those lucky enough to find land not already under lease.

In the heart of The Great Black Giant lay the tiny village of London. It was no different from other towns in the field. Like most, it was unincorporated and had no need for a post office. Obviously, incorporating the town and opening a post office were essential to keep pace with the astronomical growth. Unfortunately, the name London was already in use in West Texas, so the name New London was adopted.

Growth created a major problem for all the communities: the schools could not keep up with the influx of new students. Nowhere was this problem more acute than in New London. At the beginning of The Boom, New London had a small, four-room school that housed four teachers and about 100 students. By 1932 New London proclaimed itself as the richest school district

in the world, and as such the community decided to build a new, state-of-the-art school. No expense was spared in its construction – no expense, that is, except in the heating system. To save money, a gas-steam heat system was substituted for a central steam heating system. Such systems were in use throughout the United States. However, it required gas lines to be run under the school.

By the 1936-1937 school year it seemed that nothing could dim the bright lights of the New London school. Its football stadium was the first illuminated field in East Texas. Its band had custom-tailored, gabardine uniforms.¹ Reminded that these were still growing boys and girls and they would be lucky to get more than one year's service out of the uniforms, critics were told not to worry. If new uniforms had to be purchased each year, new ones would be bought. No school anywhere in the country could boast of better teachers or a finer physical plant. The Manual Training Shop was the best money could buy. Indeed, things could not have looked better for the proud New London Wildcats.

Thursday, March 18, 1937, began like any other day. The community was looking forward to a long weekend. There would be no school on Friday because of an interscholastic meet in nearby Henderson. At 3:17 p.m.,⁴ eighteen minutes before school was to be dismissed for the week, everything changed forever. In the blink of an eye more than 300 people, mostly children, died. In one appalling instant the eyes of the world focused on the little community and its devastated school. Moments before the final bell sounded, shop teacher Lemmie Butler decided he had just enough time before school let out to check out "Old Sparky"⁵ a damaged shop sander he had repaired. One of the shop students, John Dial,⁶ remembered seeing Butler flip a switch that sent 220 volts of power surging to the sander. There was a spark, a flash, and the school was gone. The best estimate is that 305 students, faculty, and visitors were killed⁷ instantly.

One question, then and now, dominates any discussion of the New London School Disaster. How could this happen? No expense had been spared in building the school. After all, was this not the richest rural school district in the world? Barely three years old, the New London School was the pride of East Texas. How in the world could this have happened?

The Great Black Giant's killing agent was odorless, tasteless, natural gas. Early in the day the main two-inch feeder line in the crawl space under the building broke, filling the basement with deadly methane gas. When Butler threw the power switch, a spark from the sander caused an explosion. In the blink of an eye there was no more school, only tons of debris and more than 300 lifeless bodies.

All night and into the following day rescue workers removed the dead while praying they would find the living. By noon Friday all that could be done had been done. Slowly, painfully, the job of identifying and burying the dead began. By midday Sunday all the bodies had been identified and prepared for burial. All, that is, except one. The corpse of a young girl was at the American Legion Hall in Overton, mangled so badly that no one could identify her.

Since all the bodies had been identified except one, logic dictated that the body must be Wanda Louise Emberling, but A.P. Emberling knew that the girl in the American Legion Hall was not his daughter. Ever since the explosion, Emberling's father, like the other parents, had gone from morgue to morgue throughout the oil field looking for his little girl. Emberling was forced to do so alone because his wife, Mildred, had an even more tormenting task. She was keeping a deathwatch over their son, George. The top of the young boy's head had been practically torn off in the explosion, and death would come as surely as the morning sun.

Notices were posted throughout the area asking people to come by the American Legion Hall to try to identify the young lady. All day Saturday people filed by, took a quick glimpse at the mutilated body, and rushed from the scene. One man, Oscar Worrell,⁸ looked, turned quickly away, and left the room. Something familiar about the lifeless body forced him to return for another look. Again he could not bear to look for a moment before once again rushing from the room. He felt sure he knew the identity of the young lady, but he had to go back one more time to confirm it. He returned to the dead girl's side; this time he asked to look at her left foot. There it was: a scar under the left big toe, identical to one under Dale May's toe. In the pre-television days of the 1920s, children, especially farm children, occupied themselves the best way they could. While playing with a garden hoe Dale May had slipped and severely cut the underside of her left big toe, leaving a large, clear scar. There was no doubt in Worrell's mind as to the identity of this poor child. Being a cousin of the family, he had known Dale May all her life. He told officials the girl's name.

"Impossible," they said.

"No, there could be no doubt; the young lady was Dale May," he replied.

"No," he was told, "this could not be possible; Dale May York had already been buried!"

Dale May, the daughter of Jessie and Luna York, was born January 1, 1927,⁹ in Genoa, Arkansas. She had two older half-brothers, J.T. and Grady York. At the time of her death ten years later, she would have another brother, Doug, four years her junior. Dale, a peculiar first name for a girl, was named after the doctor who delivered her, Dr. Dale. Her middle name came from her mother's brother-in-law, Bill May. As a young lady in her early twenties, Luna had lived several years with the Mays. Dale spent nine of her ten years in several locations in Arkansas and Rusk County, Texas. On March 19, 1934,¹⁰ Jessie and Luna York moved to the Pleasant Hill community near New London. Jessie, a farmer, was one of the few men in the area who did not work in the oil field.

In 1934, children were not required to attend any certain school, but like most of the other children in her neighborhood Dale May attended the school closest to her home, Farmer's Institute. The Yorks were unaware that during the 1936-1937 school year Farmer's Institute had been consolidated into the New London system. As they usually did on the first day of school, Dale May

and her best friend, Mary Lois King, walked to school. When it was time for the girls to have returned home from school and they had not, Mrs. York and Mrs. King began to worry. Shortly thereafter Dale May and Mary Lois arrived home and told their mothers that a school bus had picked up all the kids at Farmer's Institute and taken them to New London.

After investigating and finding out that New London and Farmer's Institute had been consolidated, Luna asked how they liked the new school. The answer was swift; they did not. It was such a big school that the girls had been lost all day. They wanted to go back to Farmer's Institute. Assuring Dale May that the problem was not as large as it appeared, Luna told Dale May to take a piece of red crayon and mark the door of her homeroom. That way she would not have to worry about being lost. The next day Dale May came home and told her mother that she had marked the door and did not have any trouble finding her homeroom. In the cleanup after the explosion, the door sill was found and Dale's homeroom teacher, Ann Wright, showed the Yorks the sill. It was easily identified. It still had the red crayon mark on it.¹¹

Dale May adapted to her new surroundings and excelled in her studies. She was exceptionally pretty, and it was not long before she had a boyfriend, fellow fifth grader Preston Crim. It was a serious fifth-grade romance.

At the time of the explosion, Dale May's older brother, J.T. was at his home in New London. Hearing the explosion, he ran from his house to the ruins that had once been a school, and miraculously he found his sister's body almost immediately. Even finding his sister as quickly as he did, other alarmed families were already arriving at the school. He knew his father would be on the scene shortly, so he decided he would stand vigilantly over Dale May until then.

While J.T. stood guard over his sister, at the York home in the Pleasant Hill community, Luna and her neighbor, Ora King, heard the explosion and assumed it was another boiler exploding. Ironically, Luna said to Ora, "... well some poor old mother's heart's broken over something..."¹² There was no special reason for the women to think anything about a boiler exploding – this was a common occurrence. Shortly afterward, another neighbor, Mrs. Will McClellan, arrived at the York's home and told the ladies that it was not a boiler they heard. It was the school.

A frightened neighbor came by the York farm spreading the word of the disaster at the school. Dale May's father, Jessie, was frantic to get to the school, but he had no gas for the family car. Faced with no other choice, York ran from his house to the road connecting New London and Henderson where he caught a ride to New London.

Meanwhile, J.T., seeing that Dale May had been correctly identified, tagged, picked up, and sent to Crim's Funeral Home in Henderson, headed for his father's home. Along the way J.T. and York unknowingly passed one another. Unable to find either J.T. or Dale May, York returned home.¹³

While Jessie and J.T. were crossing paths, Ora King, Mary Lois' mother, came running into the York's yard and said she had just come from the home

of Preston Crim, where Preston's father had told her that the school had blown up. Ora said to Luna that they had to go back to the Crim's. If Preston was home, Mrs. King felt sure that Mary Lois and Dale May had to be all right. Grabbing up five-year-old Doug, Mrs. York and Mrs. King started for the Crim home. Arriving at their neighbor's home, they were met by both Mr. and Mrs. Crim. Yes, Preston was home, but "... Preston said Dale was dead." Mrs. York asked if she could see Preston. "... [N]o, Mrs. York, he's in no shape He and Dale were sweethearts He always said he was going to marry her."¹⁴

When J. T. arrived at his father's home, he found neither his father nor step-mother Luna at home, so he raced back to the school. Shortly thereafter, both Mr. and Mrs. York arrived home. Not knowing that J.T. had found Dale May, they proceeded to the makeshift morgue at the American Legion Hall in Overton. Years later Luna told Doug's wife, Cloe: "... and Cloe, I never in all of my life seen ... some with their heads off, some with their legs broke off, some with their feet gone. Oh, I never in my life. You'd have to raise the sheet; you see, they had sheets and put over 'em. Bloody and"¹⁵ Probably the Yorks looked at their own daughter and did not recognize her.

Later they found J.T., who told them that he had sent Dale May to Crim's Funeral Home in Henderson. Immediately the Yorks set out for Henderson to see Dale May. Arriving at Crim's Funeral Home they asked to see Dale May. They were refused. The body was too horribly mutilated to be observed. A schoolmate, Walter Freeman, who was sitting beside Dale May, reported that a large slab of concrete had crashed down on her.¹⁶

Not to be put off, Mrs. York insisted that she be allowed to see the body of her daughter. Again she was refused. Pleading, Mrs. York asked to at least be allowed to see her girl's left foot. She wanted to see for herself the identifying scar under her toe. Tragically she was again refused. The funeral director explained that Mr. York could look, but Mrs. York could not because he could not have women fainting, as he felt they would surely do, if they were allowed to see their children. Since his wife was not allowed to view their child, Jessie declined to look. From that moment on, Mrs. York insisted that was not her baby resting in the coffin.¹⁷ At the funeral and later at the burial she continued to insist that the girl in the coffin was not her Dale May.

But time waits for no one, not even bereaved families wanting to bury their dead. On Saturday, March 20, the Yorks, like dozens of other families, prepared to bury their child. At least the weather was cooperating. Dale May, her cousin Hazel Pearson, her best friend Mary Lois King, and seven other children's coffins were lined up outside the west wall of the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church. Their funerals were conducted by the Reverend John Buster Welsh.¹⁸ While Brother Welsh delivered his service, Bill May, Jr., Dale May's cousin, came over to his aunt and said, "Aunt Luna, that is not Dale May."

Mrs. York sadly replied, "... [H]oney, I know it's not Dale..." Later, as she left the graveside, she said, "Ya'll can believe it [if you want, but] ... it is not."¹⁹

As earlier stated, Luna had lived with her sister and her husband, Bill May, Sr. By 1937 the Mays were living in Winfield, Texas, and were only able

to get together with the Yorks once or twice a year. The Christmas before the explosion, the Mays were visiting the Yorks in Pleasant Hill during the holidays. Billy Jr., Dale May, Doug, and some other kids were playing outside. Doug became angry with Dale May because he thought his big sister was paying more attention to Billy Jr. than to him. Angrily he threw a rock at Dale May; it hit her in the mouth, chipping a tooth.²⁰ Somehow Billy Jr. knew that was not his cousin in the coffin. He said, "Aunt Luna, that's not Dale May!"²¹ Unfortunately, everyone else, including Dale May's father, thought it was Dale May and would not listen to Luna's pleas. Like countless others, the Yorks buried what all but Luna and Billy Jr. thought was their loved one.

Meanwhile, back in Overton, the Junior High School Principal of the destroyed New London School, Felton Waggoner,²² was asked if he could identify the unknown body. Entering the room, the first thing he saw was a little brown coat beside the sheet-covered body. The first words out of Principal Waggoner's mouth were, "Does that coat belong to that body under the sheet?" Told yes, Waggoner, without ever looking at the body, said, "Then that girl is Dale May York." Waggoner was told that this was impossible. Once again Waggoner asked, "Does that coat belong to that body?" Yes, but it could not possibly be Dale May York; she had already been identified and buried. Exasperated, Waggoner slammed his fist into the palm of his hand and said, "If that coat belongs to that body, then it is Dale May York!"

Asked how he could be so sure, Waggoner explained that Dale May had been sick with pneumonia and had not been attending school. That fateful Thursday was Dale May's first day back to school in two weeks.²³ Before she could get into any classes, she had to see Waggoner to get a pass, and he distinctively remembered Dale May's little brown coat. He knew, without doubt, that if that coat belonged to the little girl under the sheet, it could only be Dale May.

The truth began to settle on the community, a community that had already seen far too many awful truths. There was only one way to find out for sure; Dale May's grave had to be opened. The court was petitioned and exhumation orders obtained.

On Sunday, the Emberlings, Yorks, and a deputy sheriff arrived at Dale May's grave. Both the Emberlings were mentally and physically exhausted. Mrs. Emberling, having sat up with George for days, was no longer able to stand; she was on a stretcher.²⁴ Though also exhausted, Emberling was still on his feet.

Mrs. York had been given a sedative to soothe her nerves before going to the cemetery.²⁵ Throughout the exhumation she prayed, "Please Lord, don't let me faint. Please Lord, don't let me faint. Please Lord, don't let me faint." Later Mrs. York said that the Lord watched over her throughout the ordeal; she did not faint.

Once the grave was opened, Mrs. Emberling, unable to bring herself to look into the coffin, asked the deputy to look. She asked him if the toenails on the body had been colored in red by red crayon. The night before the explosion Wanda Louise had friends overnight. Playing "make-up," Wanda Louise had

taken red crayons and "painted" her toenails red. The deputy sadly told Mrs. Emberling that indeed the body had red crayon-colored toenails.²⁶ Mrs. Emberling immediately fainted.²⁷ There could be no doubt that it was Wanda Louise.

Wanda Louise Emberling's coffin was exhumed; a new grave was prepared near the main entrance gate and she was re-interred. Later that night Wanda Louise was joined in death by her brother, George, who succumbed to his injuries. Once more the Emberlings made the terribly lonely trip to Pleasant Hill Cemetery to lay the brother beside his sister.

One mystery was solved, but another remained. How could the mix-up in bodies have happened? J.T. York had positively identified his sister at the school grounds. He had stayed with her, seeing to it that she was correctly identified, tagged, and placed in a hearse that he thought was going to Crim's Funeral Home in Henderson. In the confusion, the body did not go to Henderson, but instead went to the American Legion building in Overton, and somewhere in the handling the name tag was lost. Even now no one knows how the mix-up came about; the York family has no idea. Considering the mass confusion and the mangled condition of the bodies, perhaps it is not really too difficult to understand how it happened.

Now that they knew for sure that the girl in the grave was not Dale May, there could be no doubt about the body at the American Legion building in Overton. Once more Jessie and Luna made the awful trip to Overton, and this time Mrs. York was not denied the chance to identify her daughter.

Now Mrs. York, who had been convinced that it was not her daughter who had been buried previously, had to bury her daughter again. Mrs. York insisted on a different gravesite than the one that had been occupied by Wanda Louise.²⁸ A new grave was prepared, ironically only a few plots south of Wanda Louise. Now, like hundreds of other families, the Yorks had to come to grips with the loss of a child, and in the case of the Emberlings, two children. It is said that time heals all wounds. That is not true; it does not.

This has been but two stories out of more than three hundred, each tragic in its own way. As you walk through the hundreds of graves in the Pleasant Hill Cemetery, you will see dozens of tombstones with a common notation: "Died - March 18, 1937 - Victim of London." Numerous tombstones have pictures of children mounted on them. One has a picture of a frail young lady, forever ten years old: Dale May York.

NOTES

¹James A. Clark and Michael T. Halbouty, *The Last Boom*, (Austin, Texas, 1972), p. 109.

²Data from a movie that is shown in the East Texas Oil Field Museum in Kilgore, Texas.

³Interview with John Fuhr at his home in Denton, Texas, on July 15, 1994. Fuhr was a member of the New London High School Band.

⁴Interview with Loyd Richardson, Henderson, Texas, November 9, 1994. Richardson's brother, Roy, worked during the night searching the wreckage for survivors. One piece of debris that he removed was a clock. It was stopped at 3:17 p.m.

⁹Interview with Jack Strickland in Overton, Texas, April 7, 1994. Strickland was in Butler's shop at the time of the explosion. He remembered the nickname the students had given to the sander.

¹⁰Michael Toon, "The New London School Disaster," Master of Arts Thesis, Stephen F. Austin State University, 1977.

¹¹Mollie Ward, a survivor, has done extensive research on this subject and has confirmed this number.

¹²Interview with Doug York, brother of Dale May York, March 19, 1994. York says that Oscar Worrell first identified his sister.

¹³Interview with Doug York, March 19, 1994.

¹⁴Sometime before her death on June 5, 1988, Dale May's mother, Luna, was visiting with her son, Doug. Unknown to her, her daughter-in-law, Cloe, had turned on a cassette recorder. I am thankful to Doug and Cloe York for giving me a copy of this tape. During Cloe's recording, Luna made the statement that she and Jessie had moved to the Pleasant Hill community on March 19, 1934.

¹⁵Tape of Luna York.

¹⁶Tape of Luna York.

¹⁷Interview with Doug York.

¹⁸Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

¹⁹Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

²⁰Interview with Doug York.

²¹Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

²²Interview with Doug York.

²³Interview with Bill May, Jr., first cousin of Dale May York, January 15, 1995, at Shepherd, Texas.

²⁴Bill May, Jr., January 15, 1995.

²⁵Interview with Doug York, and Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

²⁶The following information comes from an interview with Waggoner at his home in Monroe, Louisiana, on March 26, 1994.

²⁷Interview with Doug York.

²⁸Michael Toon's, "The New London School Disaster."

²⁹Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

³⁰Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

³¹Cloe York's interview with Luna York.

³²Today Dale May's/Wanda Louise's grave is occupied by Perry Lee Cox.