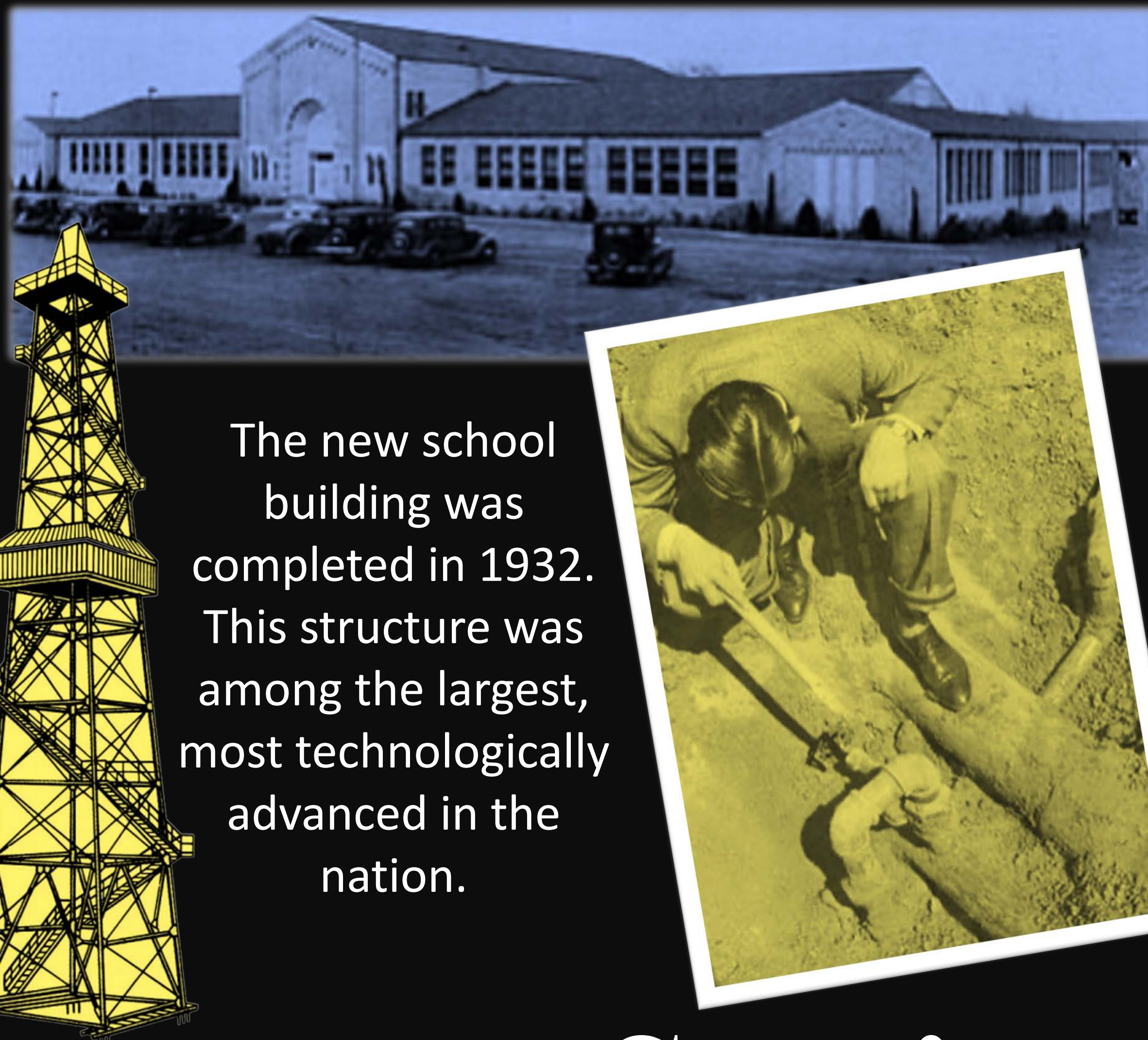


# Boomtown Beginnings

The first oil well in what would soon become the East Texas Oil Field was discovered October 5, 1930, a few miles from New London. The massive population influx left the small-town school grounds over-crowded. New London quickly became one of the richest districts in the country. The district was also extraordinarily financially prosperous from the tax revenue from the local oil field properties. The school also had numerous oil wells on campus. The school's income was approximately \$250,000 per year. By 1937, the district's property tax revenue was valued at over \$20,000,000.

Photos Courtesy of: New London Texas School Explosion Museum (<http://nlsd.net/>) Stephen F Austin State University (<https://www.sfasu.edu/>) PNGEGG (<https://www.pngegg.com/>)



The new school building was completed in 1932. This structure was among the largest, most technologically advanced in the nation.



# Poorly Pinching Pennies

Despite the district's wealth, the mindset of the Great Depression was carried over to the finances of the school. The first penny pinching act from the school board was ignoring the architect's heating plans for a boiler system and instead opting for 72 natural gas-powered heaters. The building was not designed for this, and the natural gas lines resided in the 64,000 cubic feet dead space, with no proper ventilation. United Gas Public Service Company provided and monitored the gas until January 18, 1937, when school board members decided to rid of the \$250/month gas bill. Instead, they used "waste gas" by connecting to the nearby oil wells owned by Parade Gas Company. The "waste gas" used was more impure and unregulated.

# Tragic Lesson Learned

A message that rang true in ways science teacher, Mr. Wright never expected was found amongst the rubble, seemingly unscathed. Upon the blackboard was a message read: "Oil and natural gas are East Texas' greatest mineral blessing. Without them this school would not be here and none of us would be here learning our lesson."

On May 17, 1937, a bill was passed by the Congress that mandated stronger natural gas regulation and safety standards. This bill required the addition of a malodorant to prevent the future gas leaks from going unnoticed. The familiar smell of natural gas we know today comes from mercaptan, a harmless chemical additive.

# Forgotten Stories of the New London School Tragedy

Authored by Clayton Jones  
Sponsored by Dr. Perky Beisel

# 3:17 Explosion

A mere 15 minutes before dismissal, the New London School explodes killing 295 people, mostly children. The unscented natural gas buildup went unnoticed, until it was ignited by a spark from a power tool being used in the industrial-arts shop.



Miss Masel Hanna (below), selflessly died attempting to save the students. When she ran back into the burning, it collapsed. The only identifiers of her body was her memorable green dress and the SFA class ring that bore her graduation date.



# SFA State Teachers College

Of the teachers lost in the explosion, eleven were former graduates of SFA. The tragedy left the campus especially somber during the following days. One quote from a local newspaper clipping reads "Every college student has expressed his sympathy and condolences. There were, in the wreckage, the bodies of those who went to college here, and whom we knew and loved. There were relatives of our friends and neighbors who were touched in this tragedy."

"It is impossible for me to express the deep sorrow caused by the tragedy at London yesterday. [...] The loss is irreparable. And, then the teachers, [...] many of them had been graduated college from here. They were our children. I had seen them grow; I loved them. We are all poorer because of their untimely death. I wish there was some way to make my sympathy felt to every sorrowing heart. I wish I could speak some words of encouragement. Words are too poor. May God in his infinite goodness bless them all."  
Alton Birdwell, SFASTC President



Mrs. Tom Parmley, escaped into a nearby car where she was nearly crushed. After getting out of the destroyed car, she recalls running toward a young girl whose leg was amputated by the shrapnel. "I tried to stop the flow of blood, but she [died] there in my hands."

# Evoking International Sympathy

"On the of occasion of the terrible explosion at New London, Tex. Which took so many young lives. I want to assure your excellency of my and the German people's sincere sympathy."  
Adolf Hitler, German Chancellor

"I want to express my deepest sympathy to you and the citizens of London in the horrible tragedy which has come to them."  
Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady

