

When Disaster Strikes: Genealogy and Mother Nature

DIANE L. RICHARD LOOKS AT A WEBSITE DEDICATED TO THE DISASTERS AND TRAGIC ACCIDENTS THAT AFFECTED OUR ANCESTORS' LIVES

PART OF RESEARCHING ancestry is learning something about the places where people lived and the events that impacted their lives. As everyone knows, disasters are events that greatly impact lives, including those of our ancestors! GenDisasters, www.gendisasters.com, is devoted to those tragic events — it's "a genealogy site, compiling information on the historic disasters, events, and tragic accidents our ancestors endured, as well as information about their life and death."

The types of disasters covered at GenDisasters are:

- **Accidents:** Work related accidents, automobile wrecks, building collapses, etc.
- **Air Disasters:** Airplane crashes, balloon and zep-pelin mishaps.

- **Building Collapses:** Tower collapses, walls falling, etc.
- **Drownings:** Rescues and near drownings.
- **Earthquakes:** Seismic anomalies, tremors.
- **Explosions:** Powder, gas, mine explosions & blasts.
- **Fires:** Forest fires, prairie fires, house fires.
- **Floods:** High water, dams breaking.
- **Hurricanes:** Tropical storms, tsunamis, etc.
- **Mining Disasters:** Explosions, cave-ins, accidents.
- **Shipwrecks:** Ship disasters, capsizing, boating accidents, etc.
- **Storms:** Lightning strikes, wind, dust, hail, snow, etc.
- **Tornadoes:** Cyclones and twisters.
- **Train Wrecks:** Railroad accidents, trolley, interurban, street car, traction train wrecks.

Where available, there are pictures and newspaper articles from the time. This is a work in progress and not all the events listed have details provided. For example: The Norton, Kansas Tornado of 1909 and the Marietta Ohio Flood of 1913 both

Survivors sift through the rubble following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

have images of newspaper articles reporting on the events as they occurred and in the immediate aftermath. For other events, there are photos or articles or they are just listed as having occurred.

There are three ways to navigate this website. You can choose a type of disaster. The events themselves are organized by state and then alphabetically by locale. If there are only a few entries, you will see each listed and can click on the provided link (if it is an event for which further details are provided) or if there are many such events for the state (e.g. tornados for Kansas), then you click on the state name to see a complete list of the events.

When researching family in Pennsylvania and other states where mining was, and continues to be, a hazardous occupation, I chose to look at Explosions → Mining Explosions. I didn't expect to find any listing for Alabama, yet there were several entries including Acmar, Alabama, Mine No. 6 Explosion, July 1941. And, the report of the explosion included a list of those who had died. One almost hopes to not find an ancestor listed on this website, yet it may explain the disappearance of someone that you have been struggling to learn more about.

The other way to navigate is to use the "browse" feature of the "search and browse" options. When you choose a state, the website refreshes to bring you all the events listed for that state. These are arranged alphabetically

by type of disaster. For example, when you choose North Carolina (where I live), you see a list of disasters that occurred in this state.

I had never heard of the Alta Pass explosion in May 1907 and learned of an "explosion which

names are not found, and the surname Sanders resulted in six entries. Beyond that, I couldn't find a surname that I have personally researched, although I did stop after looking for 10 names.

Remember that, beyond individuals being injured or dying in a disaster, there is typically destruction of businesses, housing, crops, etc. It may be that the affected individuals decided to stay and rebuild or a disastrous event may explain why they decided to migrate.

As I toured the website, I remembered that Salem, Massachusetts experienced a large fire in the early 20th century. Though my dad wasn't yet born, his parents and grandparents were living in Salem, after emigrating to the area.

Interestingly, though the website has an image of this fire, there is no corresponding page yet. You can read more about this fire on Wikipedia,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Salem_Fire_of_1914.

Additionally, as you navigate the website, you will see links that direct you to further resources. Though these links don't always indicate where you are being re-directed, you will quickly learn that they lead to



Above: Image of the Marietta, Ohio flood in 1913. Property damage was estimated at two million dollars! Right: On 24 June 1909, the rural community of Northwestern Norton County Kansas was devastated by eight tornadoes.



occurred on the South and Western Railway, near Alta Pass, North Carolina, Saturday afternoon, and in which nine persons met instant death and four others were fatally injured...". As above, names were provided for many of those killed or injured.

Since there are many newspaper articles detailing the names of people and places, you can do a "search" (part of "search and browse"). As expected, the surname Smith brings up many entries (146), however, many sur-

Panorama of Salem, Massachusetts after the Great Salem Fire of 1914.



websites like Ancestry, www.ancestry.com, Footnote, www.footnote.com, World VitalRecords, www.worldvitalrecords.com, GenealogyBank, www.genealogybank.com and others.

There are companion websites to this one, such as Family Old Photos, www.familyoldphotos.com and Old Yearbooks, <http://www.old-yearbooks.com>.

Though I will admit to feeling a bit like a voyeur as I looked at this website and read story after story about human suffering, I know that such disasters

are part of the fabric of many people's lives. Whether one person or hundreds of families were affected, the legacy of these disasters are an important element of the story and heritage of our ancestors! This website reminds us to not always focus on the "nice" bits of family history.

Though you may find it harder to learn about the misfortunes that befell your family and/or their community, you will learn a lot more about them and their community by knowing about and understanding the

disasters that affected them.



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ILLINOIS DEATH CERTIFICATES

- 1916-1947, - **The Illinois State Genealogical Society (ISGS)** has established this project to assist members and researchers who do not have easy access to the Illinois State Archives to obtain death certificate copies. Cost per certificate is \$6.00 for ISGS members, \$10.00 for non-members. For non-certified copies of 1916-1947 death certificates go the ISGS web site at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilsgs/index.html>, click on the link for death certificates

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilsgs/projects/deathcerts.html> and follow the ordering directions.

OKLAHOMA BASED

RESEARCHER. Will research at the Oklahoma Historical Society Library with access to over 4,000 Newspaper titles and 30,000 reels of microfilm for the 77 counties some prior to statehood. I can also visit area county court houses, libraries and societies. See my rates at: <http://www.frederick.dittmar.org/ddg.html>

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