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Healing After Disasters in Early-20th-Century Texas

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This historical study analyzes 2 disasters in Texas in the early 20th century: the 1937 school explosion in New London and the 1947 Texas City ship explosion. Disaster narratives and commemoration activities are examined as means of healing and restoration after a catastrophic event. Specifically, this article discusses contextual factors of time and place, Coastal and East Texas between 1937 and 1947, and shows how these factors shaped the ways in which people made sense of their disaster experiences. This included not only the influence of geography but also economics, social position, racial characterizations, and religious beliefs. The article also considers conflicting and biased factors that can occur regarding time and place and how these factors influenced narrative constructions. **Key words:** *disaster*, *explosions*, *geography*, *narratives*, *nursing history*, *racial identification*, *social boundaries*

THIS HISTORICAL STUDY explores 2 disasters that occurred in early-20th-century Texas. It examines narratives and commemoration as means of healing and restoration after a catastrophic event. The narratives in this study demonstrate Rozario's argument that "our ongoing yearning for stories . . . help[s] us come to terms with major disasters."[1(p46)] I am interested in values and attitudes held by particular groups in particular places at particular time. With this in mind, this article discusses contextual factors of time and place, Coastal and East Texas between 1937 and 1947, and shows how these factors shaped the ways in which people made sense of their disaster experiences. This included not only the influence of geography but also economics, social position, racial characterizations, and religious beliefs. The following questions are addressed: How does a regional focus shape disaster narratives? More specifically, how did the nature of place affect people's attempts to impose order after disasters? The article also considers conflicting and biased factors that can occur regarding time and place and how these factors influenced narrative constructions.

The analysis is done in the context of 2 disasters that are as follows: the 1937 natural gas explosion in New London, Texas, that leveled a school; and the 1947 Texas City ship explosion. The focus on Texas allows race to be introduced in the analysis. These disasters led to the collapse not only of physical structures but also of social boundaries. It is acknowledged that in disasters of any kind, boundaries can be temporarily crossed, blurred, or collapsed entirely. Time and place are only 2 of many factors that influence these changes. Other variables should be addressed in future studies, such as political and economic forces, the scale of the disaster, and the role of gender in how people handle tragedies.

Today's disasters are increasingly gaining a global audience. The Katrina catastrophe, the Southeast Asia tsunami, and the public debates they spawned serve as a time to look back at the range of discourses people drew upon when interpreting disasters of the past. Recent work by historians has focused on architectural rebuilding of cities after disasters.[2] Influenced by earlier work on disasters,

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nursing studies have examined narrative picturing as an interviewing technique.[3,5] This historical study uncovers the experiences of those in Texas who lived through 2 disasters, and it stresses the value of understanding regional cultures and local responses to more fully appreciate the experiences of those who survive disasters.

In 1947, the *New York Times* alluded to the importance of the 2 disasters that are the focus of this study when it described the Texas City explosion as the "worst in Texas history, exceeding even the new London school explosion in 1937."[6(p1)] Each disaster illustrates a different cause, and analysis of each will draw upon different sources. Both disasters were accidents related to changes that reflected the growth of the oil and manufacturing industries in Texas in the first half of the twentieth century. The New London disaster killed more than 300 children. It is used to illustrate the theme of popular expressions of mourning and public commemoration by examining how survivors made sense of the tragedy during the course of grieving and healing. It also looks at what point in time people choose to create an infrastructure for memorializing and what they choose to include. The Texas City disaster killed more than 500 people. This section is used to demonstrate a complicated story that brought about conflicts over race and allocation of credit for heroic rescue operations.

Campbell[7] argues that Texans developed an "outsized emphasis on many of the qualities and characteristics regarded as being especially American." These included "a fierce devotion to personal liberty, rampant individualism, and admiration for the superrich." Thus, "its history has become myth-encrusted, not because it is so greatly different from the other states but because it is such an exaggerated version of the United States." Texans, in particular, see themselves as exceptional. This perception influenced how city leaders and some in the media reacted to disasters in the state. During the first half of the twentieth century, Jim Crow laws were in effect in the Southern and border states, which legally sanctioned racial segregation, especially of blacks, in all public facilities. This affected those whose narratives were heard and those whose were not. In New London, segregation of schools and housing directly influenced casualty lists.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes narratives, or stories constructed in various mediums, as data sources. In her discussion of narrative inquiry for nurses, Duffy argues that narratives "are the primary way that people make sense of their experience and through some form of oral or written conversation reveal and share that experience with others."[8] Each of the disasters examined in this study provided the impetus for reflection by city leaders, reporters, newspaper editors, filmmakers, survivors, and healthcare workers in the form of letters, memoirs, oral histories, newspaper stories, and professional publications. It is these "disaster narratives" that are the focus of this article. Their examination can enhance nurses' understandings of the ways in which people perceive disasters that have befallen them, how region affects perceptions, and how people try to heal and restore their shattered lives even as they rebuild their physical structures.

The study involves a close examination of archival documents using interpretive frameworks from the fields of history, cultural studies, and urban studies. Theoretical underpinnings concern narrative expressions as noted by Rozario[1] and Linenthal's work on progressive, redemptive, and toxic narratives of survivors of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.[9] Progressive narratives are often constructed to make sense of the horror by emphasizing reassuring rhetoric of civic reconstruction. Redemptive narratives mobilize religious traditions as a means of healing and restoration. Morevoer, toxic narratives focus on the persistence of intense mourning and strained relationships. Although many similarities can be found between this study and Rozario's

and Linenthal's work, in other areas the stories diverged due to differences in time and place.

Rozario asserts that when buildings are destroyed, "it is necessary not only to manufacture new material structures but also to repair torn cultural fabrics and damaged psyches." This involves looking at how disasters are "interpreted and commemorated" by writers, journalists, filmmakers, city leaders, and survivors themselves. Indeed, the ways in which "people apprehend, feel, and process," or "'narrate'... calamities," are important in helping them "make sense of that which seems most senseless."[1(p33)] To analyze what people remember also requires looking at "how what is remembered gets selected, when, and by whom."[10(p13)]

Some caveats are in order. The narratives are not unproblematic reflections of their times. First, sometimes people "remember" not only what they did but also what they wish they had done, or what they believed they were doing at the time. Second, in many narratives, time allows the interviewees to "rewrite" events in their own minds, and they recall what they now think their actions were.[11] Third, although efforts have been made to include African American and Mexican American voices, most of the writers of these stories were white, and they wrote for a white readership. Thus, their memoirs, letters, and publications only tell a partial story. Some were laborers from the working class, and others were from the middle and upper-middle classes. Although they help reconstruct a representation of the past, many of their views could not be countered by other narratives. Still, these stories can serve as important sources for historians interested in the experiences of people who typically do not leave written documents.[12,13]

COMMEMORATION AND MEMORIALIZATION

On March 18, 1937, a natural gas leak led to a school explosion in the East Texas oil town of New London. London School was nearly demolished, and more than 300 children and 14 teachers died. Narratives particularly made use of the power of place in this disaster. One of the local newspapers, the *Overton Press*, described itself as "Covering Rusk and Adjoining Counties in East Texas—World's Greatest Oilfield."[14] Located in northwest Rusk County, New London had what some called the richest rural school in America. The consolidated junior and senior high school served residents in the East Texas oilfields, and its growth had taken off after the discovery of oil in 1930 in Rusk County. Thousands of derricks surrounded the school. In most of the oil fields, natural gas was also produced. Rather than using a boiler for heat, as most schools did, London School relied on free gas. This was especially appreciated because people were still in the midst of the Great Depression, but it was a leak from this gas that led to the blast.

Many of the casualties were children of oil workers. Significantly, they were all white because segregation prevented blacks from attending the school. The importance of time and place not only affected who was injured but also the quick response of workers in the nearby oil fields. After hearing the explosion, they ran to the scene and began rescue operations, bringing their heavy trucks, draglines, portable generators, and shovels with them. They cleared the debris within 17 hours, a feat that did not go unnoticed by local residents. One doctor, writing about the disaster to his parents, noted that the school was "one of the wealthiest and biggest rural schools in the world—right in the middle of the oil field." Had it "not been for the big oil companies, who immediately sent all their big 10-ton trucks and caterpillars, and oil field men who knew how to work, they would still be digging in the ruins."[15] Years later, however, 1 of those workers remembered a different aspect of the past: "Most of the rubble was moved with bare hands, not machinery. A guy came by with a truckload of peach baskets, and the workers formed a line and passed the baskets" full of body parts and debris.[16]

The local news media spread the news of the disaster over the radio, and doctors, nurses, and ambulances came from all over the state. Newspapers reported "hundreds of white-clad nurses with doctors and interns from scores of hospitals" at the scene, along with morticians and hearses. The highways leading into the small town were filled with automobiles.[17] The American Red Cross arrived by 4 AM. Drug stores and hospitals drained their stores of bandages and disinfectants and sent them to the wreckage site. Rescue workers gave first aid to survivors, carried them to the highway, and put them in passing automobiles that rushed them to nearby hospitals. All of the small towns surrounding New London had clinics and they also were full of casualties. Fifty Red Cross nurses from Texas and the national association assisted regular hospital personnel and visited patients in their homes. One of the Red Cross nursing tasks was to accompany the families at funerals. When 6 different families lost 3 children each, nurses were sorely needed.[18]

The disaster made national and international headlines and regional variations in disaster coverage can be seen. East Texas newspapers focused on photographs of disaster scenes of survivors who just missed being killed. Emotional language was especially evident when reporters wrote personal stories of well-known community residents who had died. The *New York Times* testified to the importance of place on page 14, where it showed a Texas map with New London's location. To excite the imagination of its readers, a reporter contributed to the mystique of oil-rich Texas in describing "the inevitable oil-well derricks, which, having provided tax money from which the school was built, encroached even on the playgrounds." Then the article highlighted the largest oil fields in the area: Humble Oil, Gulf, and the Tidewater Oil Company, which sent more than 1000 workers for rescue operations.[19]

As the school collapsed, this disaster also brought about a crumbling of social boundaries. Texas newspapers reported the huge outpouring of support. Race emerged as an issue in 1 newspaper when it noted that "many Negro [*sic*] ambulances were used and several Negro [*sic*] doctors assisted with the relief work." They worked alongside members of the American Legion, Texas Rangers, and National Guard.[20] Social class was highlighted in the *New York Times* report: "oil field workers, farmers, and white collar men from the communities surrounding New London" all participated in the rescue operations.[21] Telegrams and letters came to New London from schoolchildren as far away as Japan and South Africa, and even Adolf Hitler sent his condolences.[17]

In this predominantly rural evangelical Protestant community, many people relied on their faith to get them through the hard times. Linenthal describes "redemptive narratives" as common to disaster survivors of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing,[9] and an historical parallel can be seen in the New London community in 1937. One woman saw her escape from death as an act of God, although she could not understand why she lived and others did not.[22] In expressing its sympathy, the local Masonic Lodge focused on God's will in removing "from our midst a great many of the dearest of our brethren."[23(p1)] The religious scene was prominent because local churches held funeral services, and religious leaders mobilized resources to help people deal with the tragedy. Overton Baptist Church became a temporary hospital. Then on Easter Sunday following the tragedy, Protestant churches in the area held a combined memorial service at the disaster site that was nationally broadcast by radio. The governor of Texas spoke, and pastors of a Methodist church, a Church of Christ, and 2 Baptist churches gave messages.[24]

Doubts concerning the culpability of the New London disaster lingered. A court of inquiry heard testimony regarding the cause of the explosion and several government agencies also investigated. Each inquiry agreed that the explosion resulted from a gas leak in the heating system under the building, but none held any 1 group or person ultimately responsible. This was especially problematic for

families, who blamed the local school board and gas company. Their anger was highlighted in a narrative in which a survivor recalled, "One lady told my dad to talk to her husband, who was getting ready to shoot the superintendent or whoever let this happen." Her father calmed him down.[16] Eventually, New Londoners petitioned the state legislature to require a malodorant that could be used in all gases so that future leaks could be detected.

In the immediate aftermath of the horrible tragedy, the townspeople, perhaps partially in an effort to keep their personal traumas at bay, directed their energies into rebuilding the school close to the site of the old one. Attachment to this particular place overcame any concerns to build elsewhere. The building was not constructed directly over the original site, however, because of reminiscences of so many bodily remains scattered over the area. To be sure, optimistic narratives surfaced. One author writing about the disaster in 1938 stated:

> Anywhere you touch this school, there is a feeling of confidence. The great throngs that often packed the auditorium, even to the overflowing point, inspired absolute confidence that the New London community still has its old spirit of confidence.[25]

This rebuilding project served survivors and their families well, giving people a collective purpose and reducing their sense of powerlessness.

Then in 1938, city leaders, together with an executive committee and architectural firm, began planning its first permanent memorial site on the main street's median, a cenotaph that had each person's name inscribed on it to honor the dead. A cenotaph is a monument for persons whose remains are elsewhere, and townspeople deemed this the most appropriate form of commemoration. To pay for it, individuals (including children) donated money, and the city sought a grant from the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal agency that built many public buildings and roads during the Great Depression.[26]

Inevitably, however, that temporary respite from the full brunt of grief would end. It was then that the tragic memories became, for most of the townspeople, literally unspeakable horrors. For the next 40 years, most consciously people chose not to speak in depth again of the event, as if doing so would resubject them to extreme emotional pain they felt they could neither escape nor personally endure. In 1977, 2 survivors organized the first reunion of former students, and they finally were able to discuss their childhood traumas.

The urge to memorialize took another form in 1998. One woman who by chance had left school early that day in 1937 and survived was instrumental in developing a museum. Visitors could see the cenotaph and the reconstructed school located across the street.[27] As news of the planned museum spread, survivors and their family members donated items and told their stories. To remember and retell the past, the artifacts that townspeople chose for display included actual debris found at the scene, such as children's shoes, books, clothes, photographs, and 1 of the peach baskets used in the rescue. These tangible artifacts aided cognitive recall in rekindling memories and commemorating those who died.

Although the time period in which the disaster occurred influenced how people narrated the events, an important point of this article is that between the collection of the memory and the events it purports to describe, many other events have taken place. As people remember the disaster, their interpretations may have changed in the interval. In a commemorative edition of a local newspaper, some of the eyewitnesses remembered that fateful day. Several of the oilfield laborers who rushed to the scene eventually fought in World War II, and their memoirs of 1937 made analogies to the battlefield. One recalled, "I was in the South Pacific Theatre and saw a lot of death, but never anything like that night in [New] London. Those were children. . .. I'll never get over it." Another wrote, "You know, we were known as 'oilfield trash,' but that night we all worked together. I saw a lot of bad things in the war, but it wasn't the same."[28(p1)]

Then in 2005 and again in 2007, various journalists asked survivors to share their memories for other commemorative publications. Questions focused on where people had been and what they had heard and felt at the time of the explosion. One of their greatest needs was for expunging guilt, and survivors also discussed the ironies of the historic event. One man recalled that, as a fifth grader at the time, "I asked a student to change seats with me so I could flirt with a little girl in front of her." The first girl died in the explosion, whereas the boy survived. He buried his guilt feelings all those years, and it was not until the reunion that he could admit to her sister what he had done. "I had to unburden myself of this guilt," he stated. Like many other survivors, he found the reunions to be a place for healing.[16,29,30] One woman recalled looking at her dead sister in her casket. "It didn't look like her at all. That stays with you a long time."[16(p276)] These narratives reveal the lasting impact of mass death, similar to Linenthal's "toxic" narrative in which people continued to struggle with enduring pain and loss.[9]

The cenotaph memorial, the museum, and the oral histories are more than commemorations. They also are opportunities for engagement.[9] The stories of individual courage and irony had a growing number of supporters whose lives were intimately connected to the disaster. Today, along with some of the remaining survivors and their family members, volunteers lead visitors through the museum's halls and tell stories about particular people who died. The museum also has videotapes in the *Americana Histories* series, among them a 1937 newsreel that focuses on emotional eyewitness accounts and recovery scenes, a tape of survivors at one of the reunions, and the voice of Walter Cronkite who reported on the disaster. These tapes can help present-day visitors experience the emotions felt by eyewitnesses and survivors, thereby facilitating a greater appreciation of the tragedy in ways not possible with traditional exhibits.

Some families left East Texas after losing 1 or more children in the disaster, and others moved away when the economic base of support changed as the oil industry in East Texas declined. Commemoration of the 1937 disaster remains, however. The next generation of students after the explosion interviewed survivors, rescue workers, and national guardsmen who were first responders. In 2000, an anniversary newspaper focused attention on the progressive narrative with its headline, "School Blends Hope for Present, Respect of Past."[31] Third-generation students learn the history of their school and participate in memorial events. The museum has brought an event that happened many years ago into clearer focus and has led to an important dialogue with the past. In sum, it has assured that a collective memory of the 1937 New London school explosion is maintained.

CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

On April 16 and 17, 1947, the worst industrial catastrophe in the US history occurred when ammonium nitrate fertilizer on 2 merchant ships exploded in the Texas City docks, killing more than 500 people.[32,33] The disaster was a result of the shipping of fertilizer to Europe under the Marshall Plan and the lack of enforced safety regulations. The 2 ships did not explode simultaneously but hours apart. After the first, a substitute school teacher in Texas City "thought of the New London disaster" and feared they would all be dead before anyone found them.[34]

In the interim between 1900 and 1947, Texas City, just across the bay from Galveston, had undergone a series of radical social and economic changes. It had dredged a passage for ocean-going vessels through a natural channel and had surpassed Galveston's tonnage by 1937. After World War II, oil and manufacturing were major influences in the city's move to an industrial economy. The city had oil refineries, railroads, a grain elevator, chemical companies, and a huge tin smelter.[7] Many of these facilities were located close to the docks. A social geography

was evident as well. One historian referred to Texas City as having "three cities in one": the uptown neighborhoods where company executives and employees lived; the waterfront where dockworkers, longshoremen, fishermen, and refinery men assembled; and the poor neighborhoods—El Barrio for Mexican Americans and The Bottom for African Americans.[33] In tune with the South's segregated history, this housing was located in the most undesirable area—next to the industrial complex and docks. In the midst of these areas were racial tensions aggravated by the Ku Klux Klan. Only 4 years earlier, one of the worst race riots in American history had occurred in nearby Beaumont, Texas.

When the first of the ships, the *Grandcamp*, exploded on April 16, it caused smoke to rise 2000 ft in the air and flaming cargo to fly over a 1-mile radius. The nearby Monsanto Chemical Plant caught fire from flying steel and burning debris, killing 145 workers. Every firefighter who initially responded died, decimating the local fire department. Two planes flying over the docks at the time of the explosion were struck by debris and crashed, and windows shattered in Houston, Galveston, and other Texas cities. In addition to the many deaths, more than 3000 injuries occurred, a third of all city dwellings were demolished, and 2 500 people lost their homes.[32,35,36] The worst areas hit were the African American and Mexican American residential sites.

Reminiscences of World War II, which ended only 2 years before, led some reporters to liken the explosion to an atomic bomb. In searching for a distinctive experience for Texas, 1 correspondent constructed a rather dramatic narrative that compared the destruction to the bomb damage at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whereas the damage to the Japanese cities was "completed within 24 hours of the initial flash blast. . .today more than 48 hours after the French ship *Grandcamp* exploded with titanic power great fires are still ravaging the multi-million-dollar oil storage tank farm that makes up the wealth of Texas City."[35(p1)] In that 1 comparative area, then, he described the disaster as surpassing that of the World War II event.

With no disaster plan in place, the mayor and police chief had to recruit volunteers, and the disaster response initially was piecemeal. Without a local hospital, Texas City physicians and nurses organized a clearing station where they sorted casualties, with the most serious moved to hospitals in surrounding cities and towns. Texas City clinics were full, as well, and physicians and nurses worked with no water or electricity. The resources of other healthcare teams quickly organized a clearing station. John Sealy Hospital, having weathered several hurricanes, already had a disaster plan in place. Alerted by smoke columns across Galveston Bay, surgeons, residents, nurses, and medical and nursing students immediately left for Texas City with plasma, blood, and other supplies. Within an hour after the initial explosion, local American Red Cross chapters began mobilizing. Late on the evening of the first explosion, the director of Nursing Service from the Red Cross Midwestern Area arrived from St Louis and started recruiting nurses from Texas and nearby states.

The medical response also attests to the power of place. During World War II, Texas had established 15 army posts and 40 air bases. It was from these posts that skilled medical and nursing personnel came to Texas City. They brought gas masks, blood plasma, medicines, and dressings.[37] In all, 3000 persons required sudden medical assistance, and casualties went to 21 area hospitals. Many were hospitalized at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB). At John Sealy Hospital, the majority of the medical residents were World War II veterans who were skilled in handling many casualties at once. The wounded people began arriving within an hour, and all medical personnel were placed on 24-hour call. Soon, several bus loads of volunteer nurses, under motorcycle escort, came to Texas City and eventually went to Galveston hospitals.[38] Red Cross and local public health nurses made home visits to care for the injured, seeing 2231 patients in their

homes.[37] Once again, one of the most difficult tasks was to work with grieving families. City officials set up a temporary morgue in the local high school gymnasium, but they had no system for identifying the dead. Trained nurses accompanied families attempting to locate their missing relatives as they pulled back blankets and viewed the bodies, some so mangled that they were never identified.[39]

On April 18, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that a newsreel of the Texas City tragedy was set to be released by the end of the first week. Fox-Movietone, Southwestern's representative looked for heroes and heroines, and he found them in the rescuers. He stated that he had "never before seen such heroism as was displayed by some of the young rescue workers at Texas City." He was particularly impressed with the "gallant work of the young nurses and stretcher bearers at the danger spots." He also sensationalized the event by obtaining close-ups of the dead, of refugees, and of "some dramatic scenes of the fires and general rescue activities."[40]

Students from the Schools of Nursing at John Sealy and St. Mary's Hospitals, part of UTMB, worked with teams to care for casualties, both at the scene and in hospitals. Narratives from 2 students reveal a sense of pride that they were able to perform new assessments and expand their roles. One constructed her story in the *American Journal of Nursing* (*Am J Nurs*). She worked on the pediatric ward at Sealy and helped transfer children to other sites to make room for 40 injured adults. Patients came in ambulances, private automobiles, trucks, and milk wagons. She learned to fill 20-, 30-, and 50-cc syringes with morphine and give it by changing needles between patients. Without regular charts, nurses pinned tags on patients' clothes with dose and time the medication was given.[41] Written shortly after the disaster, she noted, "We are getting back to normal. The children are coming back and I suppose it will be the same old Pediatrics in a few days."[41(p414)] Having participated in events of catastrophic proportions, routine care could seem quite mundane.

A year after the explosion, another student from Sealy composed a memoir of the events. An operating room supervisor had recruited her to Texas City as the student walked down the steps of the hospital. She was still in her nursing uniform, and, in the first part of the narrative, the form of her language conformed to the image of the student she was taught to be. She said she "didn't have permission from the nursing office" to go. The supervisor cried, "It doesn't matter. I give you permission!" While there, the student administered first aid to severely burned patients and gave morphine for pain. She had an "open order to administer hypodermics of pain relievers as I saw the need. . .. In a situation like this," she wrote, "you are oblivious to anything except doing the job at hand. Somehow, everything you have ever learned in this area comes to the surface and you do the best you can." Her language changed after she narrated these events. Her image of a compliant nurse who had to follow orders and adhere to set routines was altered. She wrote, "I will never forget that day from the time I felt the vibrations of the explosion coming down those steps of the main building to now when I realize what a confident twenty year old nurse I was."[42]

Other healthcare personnel reconstructed the events with a sense of gratification. In a letter to the *Am J Nurs*, the dean of the University of Texas School of Nursing at Galveston wrote, "We were proud of the performance of the whole organization, and particularly of the nurses and doctors—they just clicked and came up to par in a wonderful fashion. I had never seen morale quite so high in this institution."[43] A medical student wrote to his parents. "I have just been through one of the greatest experiences that will ever occur in my life."[44] After working all night, "I intended to get some sleep, but we were all so tired, and so interested that we talked and talked."[44]

Even as these progressive narratives were constructed, conflicts arose over who would get credit for the heroic rescue work. Tensions developed as communication difficulties escalated. Regular units of the armed

forces arrived on the afternoon of April 16, but they worked independently of the Red Cross. This led the mayor to publicly criticize the Red Cross in the newspaper. He expressed his concern to an official that the Red Cross was "taking credit for everything that is being done in the way of relief." For one thing, its workers "went down to the gymnasium morgue and took it over from our people . . . after [Texas City residents] had worked there ever since the explosion." Furthermore, the Red Cross had called a press conference that featured physicians it had brought in from the outside. "What about 10 of our local doctors that worked night and day?" the mayor retorted. "What is being said about them to those reporters?"[45] These tensions belied any rhetoric of optimism or progress and pointed out the competition over who would be the rescuers.

On April 19, the African American newspaper, the *Informer*, reported on topics similar to the white newspapers. It described the disaster, provided photographs, and told stories of dramatic escapes and heroic rescues on the part of African Americans. Black physicians and nurses from Houston cared for African American survivors at John Sealy Hospital, and they also rendered aid at the scene. African American morticians and embalmers came to help, and 2 ministers from local black churches carried the injured and dying in their cars to hospitals in Galveston.[46,47]

It seems that, once again after a disaster, rigid social boundaries blurred when a tragedy of such magnitude occurred, at least from the standpoint of the white population. A medical student wrote, "For the first time in my life, I didn't care whether a man was white or black. I worked with both equally at ease. It didn't make a bit of difference as both were sick, and all needed to be cared for."[44(p2)] One of the nursing students was amazed at how, when she was at the disaster scene, "everything began to fall into place and regardless of rank or race we were a team. . . ."[41(p414)]

African American narratives, however, told a conflicting story. The ministers who helped at the disaster site reported that "when they began their rescue work, the Negro [*sic*] injured were being walked over while the whites were being rescued."[48(p10)] This account differed significantly from the white medical and nursing students who may have been less conscious of racial inequities. Indeed, bias and conflicting points of view encroached upon all these narratives. In reading from Caucasian newspapers and other sources, one would think that whites and blacks worked together in harmony without prejudice or discrimination. The African American newspaper story, however, took a different perspective and reported on the continued neglect of black casualties. It is probable that these disparate accounts were all true as they applied to specific situations. When one considers the historical influences of racial segregation in the South at that time, however, one can surmise that whites, who were less attuned to the reality of racial discrimination, were more likely to remember the instances when blacks were treated "like everyone else." Black observers were less inclined to see such aberrations in the racial mores. White healthcare workers used race to emphasize the removal of racial boundaries, whereas the black ministers' narratives emphasized racial inequity. Neither would have focused on these areas had racial segregation not so fundamentally shaped their lives.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, racial identity was obscured. One company executive recalled, "It struck me as rather peculiar, knowing that I was a white man, that I would be in among so many colored people. I did not realize until several hours afterward that I was the same color myself." Some black residents appeared white from the dust from asbestos, whereas many whites were covered with oil and looked black. White patients were admitted to segregated hospital wards for African Americans, even though it was socially unacceptable for white and black patients to be together in the hospital. Some stayed for days until relatives or friends found them and moved them to white wards. Other survivors constructed identities in opposition to blacks. In an effort to underline racial

distinctions, a white railroad car loader stated that he couldn't wait until he was "at last clean and look[ed] . . . to be among the white race again."[33]

One moment that brought everyone together came when the first mixed-race memorial service in Texas City history was held shortly after the disaster. Another occurred when a mass burial was held for the unidentified dead. As both blacks and whites could not be buried together, and the unidentified remains could not be sorted by race, the leaders of Texas City created a new cemetery specifically for this purpose. This event made a significant impact on some black, Hispanic, and white survivors, who recalled that their shared agony reduced social barriers.[32,33]

After the disaster, among those receiving praise were the medical responders. They used guidelines for hurricane plans, and they possessed the skills and discipline appropriate for emergencies.[32] Writing in 1947, the dean of UTMB opined that the successful disaster response was due to the application of "military medical principles to civilian casualties, especially through effective cooperative teamwork of skilled specialists in a specialty-organized hospital." This included first aid by trained rescue personnel; rapid diagnosis and sorting by a team of specialty physicians; surgery with adequate wound drainage; generous administration of plasma and whole blood; use of penicillin, tetanus, and gas gangrene antitoxins; fluid control; and careful record-keeping.[49] Nurses no doubt participated.

In 1948, a Texas City resident, Elizabeth Lee Wheaton, collected memories of local residents for the benefit of a memorial library. By 1945, industrial growth had brought many women into the workforce, including office positions in telephone, oil, railroad, and chemical companies. Wheaton solicited their accounts and those of businessmen, radio broadcasters, and newspaper editors. The author's purpose was to refute inaccurate media reports by collecting eyewitness accounts from people at dockside, in the city itself, and in surrounding towns. There was 1 African American, a young student at Booker T. Washington School, who was injured but was able to get home to help her blind grandfather to safety. A Texas City drug store owner described how he opened a first aid station, and, along with some volunteers, began bandaging the injured. Conscious of the racial norms of the day, it was important for him to point out, "We bandaged everyone, whites, Negroes [*sic*], Mexicans."[34] The book also featured newspaper editorials with typical progressive narratives, such as the one from Beaumont that announced, "The dauntless spirit of the people is already asserting itself. . . . In due time, [Texas City] will be more important, and more prosperous industrially than it was before. . . ."[34] Another editorial hailed the heroic acts by doctors and firefighters and praised nurses who "worked under the greatest difficulty with the injured."[34(p25)]

Wheaton also chose to include copies of official Army, Navy, and medical reports in the book and a letter of commendation from the Mexican Consulate in Galveston. This was particularly telling for its progressive rhetoric. The letter began, "I wish to point out the fact that every one of the [Mexican American] victims received immediate care and proper attention according to the prevailing circumstances. The spirit of cooperation in this country is admirable." He thanked the Red Cross, Texas City officials, and particularly Dr Guillermo de Hoyes, staff physician at John Sealy Hospital, and praised "the extent of what people can do if the will to work together exists."[34]

The final narrative to be considered is one that was written 50 years after the disaster by Dr John M Thiel, illustrating how interpretations of a disaster's significance may change as the narrator's frame of reference changes. In his memoir, he drew on the drama of rescues during wartime. A 34-year-old surgeon at the time was on the UTMB faculty when the explosion occurred, and he went to John Sealy Hospital to care for the casualties. His memories were shaped by recollections of a television program widely viewed in the 1990s: "The scene was reminiscent of a battle

field, or an evacuation hospital in a war. . . . In more recent times the T.V. program 'MASH' portrayed in a way, what we experienced in attending the casualties of the Texas City Disaster." Indeed, his frontline experiences were framed by how closely they resembled the fictional account of the 4077 Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Korea. If Thiel had initially experienced any sense of exhilaration, it had faded from a duration of 50 years. "I remember the details very vividly," he wrote, "and it is a subject that brings back anguish in remembering them."[50]

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Rozario[1] and Linenthal,[9] in their work on a diverse array of cities and regions after disasters, have theorized that parallels and disjunctures occur because people try to rebound from disaster. As Rozario[1] notes, narrative theory maintains that "humans are . . . driven to tell stories to make sense of the chaos and flux of experience, to make life meaningful and purposeful, [and] to cope with adversity. . . ."[1] These narratives, however, are not unchanging forces. Rather, context is important. The conditions of life in Texas in 1937 and 1947 were such that narratives worked differently and had different effects. Nevertheless, data from this study, along with other studies on disaster narratives, reveal that some conventions over the years persisted and continued to organize people's emotional and conceptual responses to catastrophes.[1,9] In each of the Texas disasters, the outpouring of generosity and selflessness was moving, and progressive narratives of courage and heroism were evident. In addition, particularly after the New London explosion, religious understandings based on rural evangelical values shaped some responses. Other people, influenced by recent wartime experiences, drew dramatic parallels to war scenes. Family members and survivors also lived out stories that were traumatic. And healthcare professionals, often caught up in the excitement of the moment, constructed narratives that revealed pride in what they were able to accomplish.

Although some consistencies in narratives can be seen, contextual factors of time and place influenced the realities and perceptions of those who lived through disasters. This study interprets the disparate experiences of people in 2 different areas in Texas within a broader framework of "place," which includes not only the influence of geography but also culture, economics, class, religion, and race. Although processes of discrimination and exclusion influenced minority communities' responses to disasters, some survivors remembered that the catastrophes blurred racial and social class boundaries, even if only temporarily. The influence of geography reveals that 1 disaster occurred in a section of the country rich in oil and gas reserves, and the second in a city dominated by the petrochemical industry. In 1937, New London was a small East Texas town rooted in evangelical Protestantism. It originally had an agricultural economy but was transformed by the discovery of oil and gas. It was tragic irony that the industry that brought wealth and prosperity to many citizens also led to the death and misery of many others when a gas leak resulted in a devastating explosion. In 1947, Texas City was a shipping center with a large working-class population and corporate elite. After World War II, it grew to be a major manufacturing center with a port that harbored large quantities of hazardous products. Arguably, the explosions of 2 ships carrying such products were disasters waiting to happen.

The difficulty and pain of reconstructing an event can be seen in survivors' responses after the 1937 New London school explosion. While they constructed a memorial within a year of the tragedy, it must be pointed out that this was before the days of grief counseling at the scene. East Texas in the 1930s was an area permeated with rural values, and survivors relied on their tenacity and their faith in God to help them get through the tragedy. Rather than dwelling on the past, they chose to remain silent. It was not

until 40 years later that they met to discuss the tragedy, during which time they chose to remember the ironies that surrounded the disaster. These narratives had catharsis and healing purposes. Thus, after many years, community bonds were restored that were rooted in shared memories, as defined by the reunions survivors and family members established, the cenotaph they erected, the museum they built where they preserved their remembrances, and their willingness to participate in oral histories. This made a strong statement that dialogue with the past is still important.

Who a society considers heroic tells us much about the cultural values of that society. In 1937, special attention was given to rescue workers from the oilfields who rapidly cleared debris after the New London school explosion. Then in 1947, newspapers and film documentaries attributed doctors, nurses, ministers, and other rescuers as important heroic figures. However, nurses and other healthcare responders remembered themselves not as valorous, self-sacrificial, or heroic, but as skilled and often exhausted professionals. Significantly, white newspapers emphasized the heroism of whites, a black newspaper commended African Americans rescuers, and a representative from Galveston's Mexican Consulate singled out a Mexican American staff physician at John Sealy Hospital for praise. Perhaps in an effort to lessen racial barriers, 1 local reporter in New London pointed out that African American doctors also worked as rescuers, even though school segregation meant that only whites were casualties of the explosion. Without each of these narratives, one would get an incomplete picture of the disaster response. Not surprising, then, it was after the Texas City disaster that competition developed over just who would be considered heroes, the Red Cross or local responders.

In each disaster, people reconstructed events through letters, memoirs, oral histories, and professional publications, which allowed them to discuss a Web of feelings behind their stories. These included guilt, pride, and increased self-esteem. Private narratives became public through newspapers, commemorative publications, professional journals, videos of reunions, and a museum. It must also be pointed out that the construction of memoirs and oral histories are affected by many factors, including questions that interviewers asked. For example, commemorative publications after the New London disaster[22,28–30] and Wheaton's *Texas City Remembers*[34] focused on what the person remembered about the disastrous event. Written after the fact, time allowed survivors to rework the disaster in their recreations. Areas still lacking are the African American and Mexican American voices. Scholars must read the context of other accounts, along with the few available newspaper stories, to piece together an African American or Mexican American experience.

Finally, throughout this article, the use of the New London disaster, which killed many children, is juxtaposed in stark contrast with the Texas City disaster, which dealt primarily with adults. Although some similarities were seen in grieving and eventual healing, there were also notable differences. The most significant was the relative age of the deceased. In New London, they were children who, hours earlier, had been fed, dressed, and sent off to school—children whose lives and futures rested firmly in the hands of their adult protectors and nurturers. The social norms that stressed the protective role of parents were especially strong within the Bible Belt of small-town Texas culture. That being so, the surviving parents and the other adults who saw themselves as extended parental figures perhaps shared not only a collective reaction of loss and grief but also a feeling of guilt that they had somehow failed in their primary roles of adult protectors. Thus, it was especially important for them to retain a place through which they could preserve memories of their children. The construction of a monument and the institutionalization of records in a museum, although primarily intended to honor the dead, likely had another effect—that of assuaging the feelings of guilt

of the adult survivors. These memorials allowed them to transform the past in a way that best addressed their needs. The commemorations also became expressions of restoration by the community at large.

CONCLUSIONS

Past disaster events entered people's memories in different ways, and individuals constructed various stories or narratives to help them deal with the trauma. This historical study offers a suggestive way for nurses to think about healing and restoration after current disasters. Today, as greater attention is being paid to the ability of affected communities to recover from disasters, it is important to understand that part of the restorative process for survivors is to establish meanings to help them regain control over their lives and futures. How people make sense of their experiences can provide significant information about culture, community, and self-identity. In addition, nurses can better comprehend or even challenge their own interpretations of human events by studying the variety of ways in which other people view their personal experiences.

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