

Sunday Times

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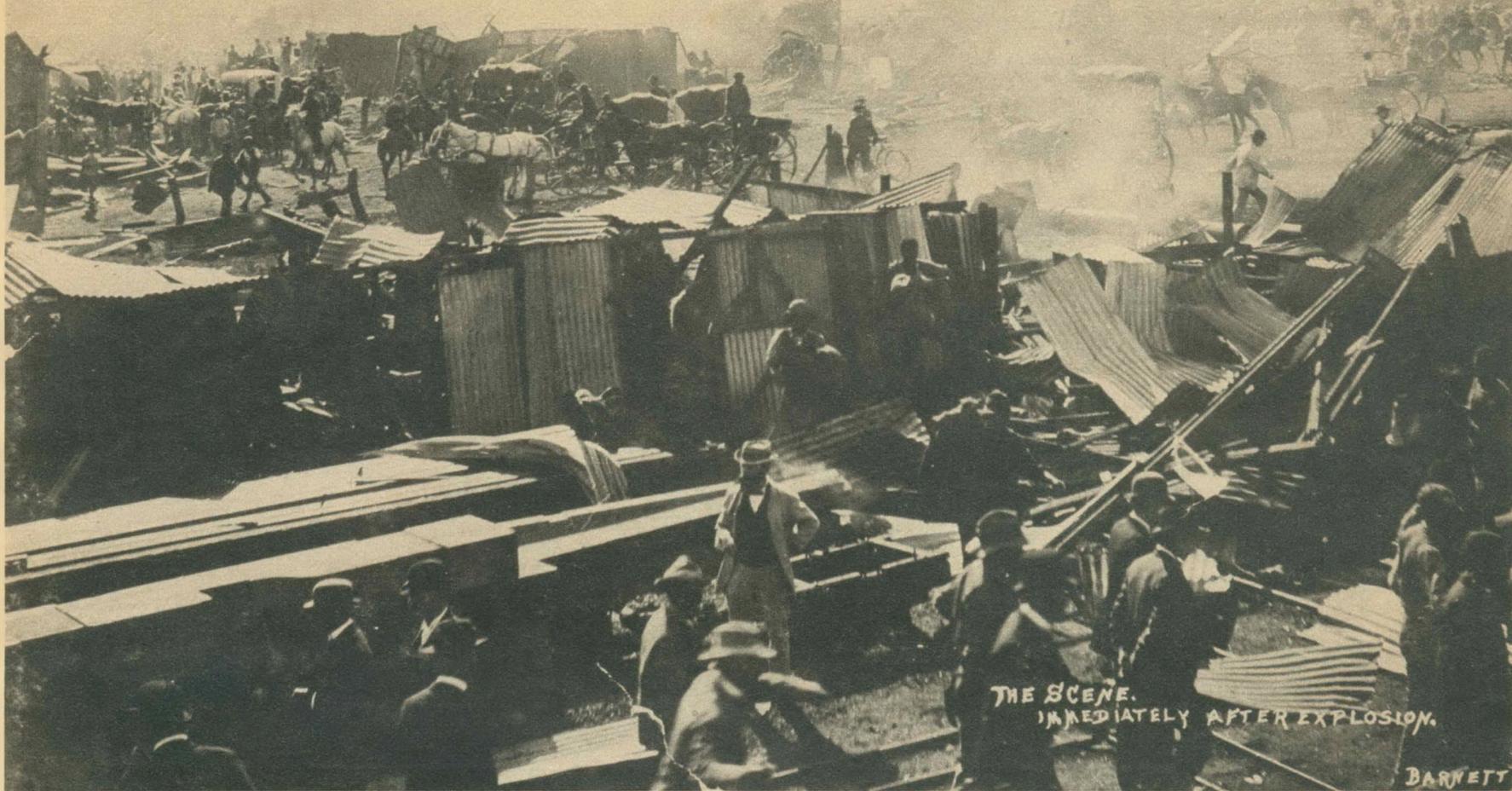
HISTORY BY

THE

PAGE 6

TRUNKLOAD

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BRAAMFONTEIN'S BIG BANG

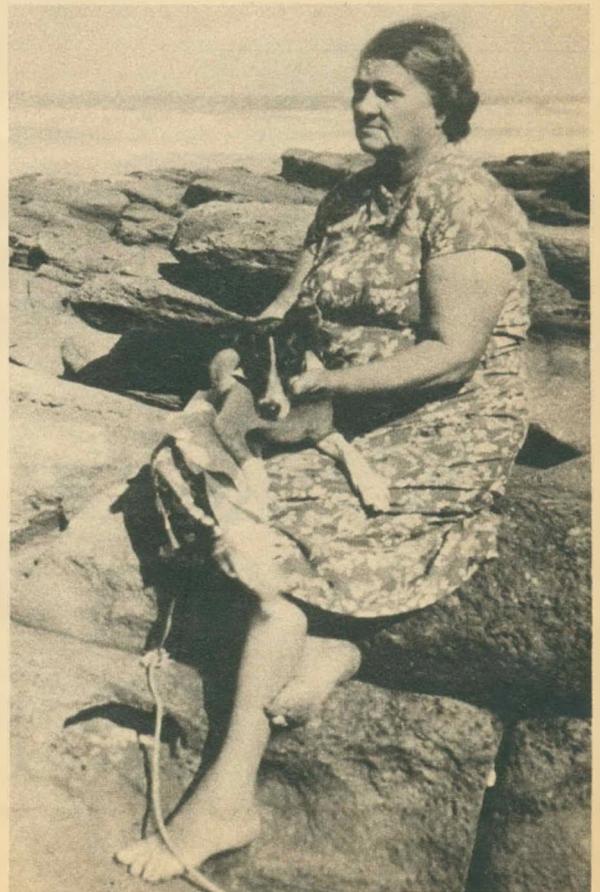
One of South Africa's more spectacular explosions occurred on February 19, 1896, when a dynamite train blew up, killing more than 100 people. For an 85-year-old woman, Mrs. Nellie Hall (right), the memory of the carnage lives on. By JACK FOX

THE BLAST CANNOT be described. It razed dozens of houses to the ground in a twisted, tortured mass of bricks, corrugated iron and timber. Beneath the debris were scores of dead and dying people. The streets were littered with broken furniture and human limbs, the air was filled with flying glass and dense black smoke.

Ten trucks carrying dynamite which had been left in the sun for several days were carelessly shunted into a buffer. The resulting explosion blasted a gigantic crater in the ground 91 metres long, 18 metres wide and 15 metres deep, killed more than 100 people, injured 200, razed 300 houses and left 1 500 people homeless. Rails were twisted into grotesque shapes and at each end of the chasm, they stood upright, as if in horrified protest.

Hurt and very frightened, a small schoolgirl crawled out from under her schoolroom desk to find herself part of a nightmare she was to remember for the rest of her life.

There can be very few people living who can actually recall the moment of the explosion and were



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BLAST continued

eye-witnesses to the dreadful aftermath of the great Braamfontein train dynamite explosion of 1896. Mrs. Nellie Hall, an active and alert 85-year-old, still bears the scars across her face to remind her of that terrifying February morning when she was eight years old. She can still describe it in detail.

"It is 77 years ago now but I can see the blue haze over Johannesburg as my sister Martha and I left home to go to school. It was another beautiful day and we were young and happy. With our satchels over our shoulders we played our usual game of hop-scotch, laughing and singing on our way to the fence surrounding the Braamfontein Goods Yard. We stopped longer than usual to gaze at the trains shunting the goods wagons back and forth and waved at a passenger train before continuing on our way.

"About 150 metres from the school was old Wong's shop. He was a very fat man whom Martha always liked, but as usual I stuck my tongue out at him, which would send him off into peels of laughter. I remember someone telling me when I was very small that the Chinese ate little girls so I was quite terrified of him. Martha had no such silly ideas and accepted the sweets he gave us each morning as we passed his shop.

"Braamfontein school in those days was an unattractive wood and galvanised-zinc building with three long classrooms. The old pinewood desks seated two of us and I had the misfortune of sharing mine with Jannie Barnard. I hated him as he was always pulling my hair and putting bent pins on to everyone's seats. Now and again we got our own back on him when he was caught and made to stand in the corner wearing the dunce cap.

"I DON'T remember my teacher with any kind memories, she was her usual stern self on this morning while she read the prayers. We were then told to get out our slates and draw wild flowers. This I always loved, and often brought flowers from home to copy.

"We had just started the next lesson when the explosion rent the air. Flying glass and planks of wood filled the classroom as the roof caved in. I felt a terrible pain in my face. With everyone around me screaming and moaning I dived under my desk, choking on the dust and black smoke that filled the room. I can't remember how long I lay huddled beneath my desk crying for my mother but I suppose I realised she wouldn't come, so eventually I crawled out of the hole where the classroom door had been and set off for home as fast as I could go, my tattered, bloodstained dress flapping around my knees. In my fear I had completely forgotten to look for my sister. Passing old Wong's shop brought on a fresh bout of tears. All that was left of it

was a pile of rubble and one tin of jam lying on the ground at my feet. By now I was surrounded by injured people all making for the hospital, some with gaping wounds, others with dirty bloodstained towels wrapped round their injuries.

"As I reached the top of the hill I could see my mother standing outside our house. I fell into her arms sobbing my heart out but got

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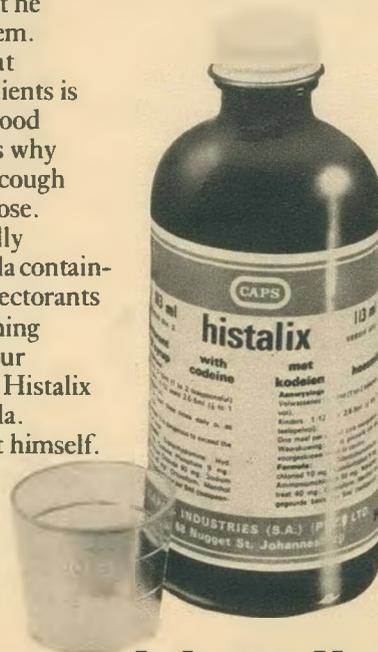
Nellie Hall and her sister, Martha. Nellie was 12 years old here and Martha 14.



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The growing-up spread.

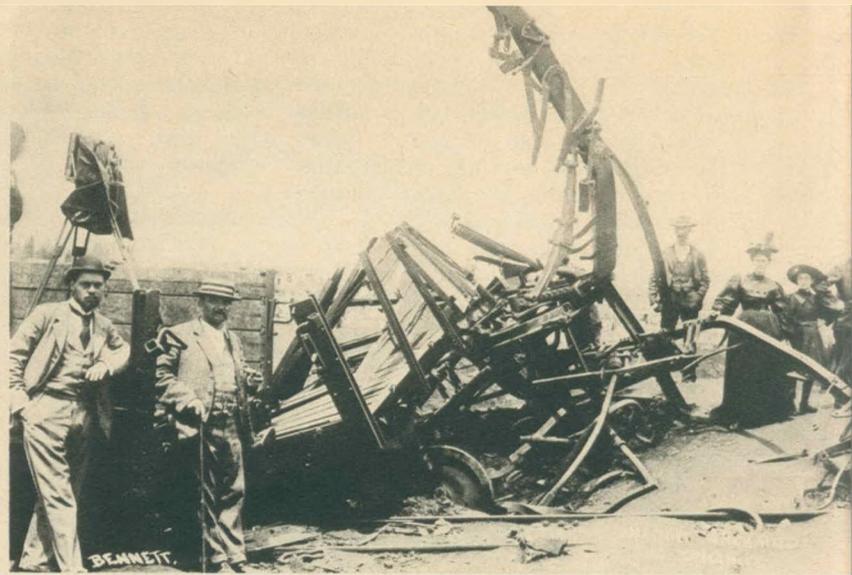
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THE GROWING UP
SPREAD



The wreckage of the truck which contained the dynamite.

BLAST continued

no comfort from her. She was standing perfectly still just looking down to the goods yard in a kind of stupor — I realise now she was suffering from shock. When the explosion occurred she had just come out of the house on her way to visit a sick friend and was thrown to the ground. Where she had been sitting in the house only moments before was now a heap of bricks and mortar. God was with my mother that morning for she should have surely been killed. When my father appeared — he was a police sergeant at the Braamfontein station — my mother seemed to recover and immediately wanted to know what had happened to Martha. To our great joy we saw her running towards us from the direction of the school quite unhurt. She said the school was in ruins and many of our friends had been killed. After washing and bandaging my face, my father set off to help at the goods yard. Mother left with him, instructing us to stay exactly where we were until they came back. But like all children we had got over our fear quickly and were now consumed with curiosity to find out what had happened.

“It was difficult making our way to the goods yard because of all the debris lying around. All vehicles, including hansom-cabs, had been commandeered by the police for taking the dead and injured to the hospitals. One passed us with a huge canvas covering the bodies. Further down the path we came across what remained of a horse, its halter still round its neck. The animal had been pulling a cart, but no remains were ever found of the driver.

“Martha and I joined the hundreds of people milling around, some crying for their dead, others searching through the chaos for survivors, over an area extending

upwards to a mile, so great had been the blast. It was reported that it even caused bottles to fall off a bar shelf in Krugersdorp.

“We met up with Mother just as a man was pulling away a sack covering the head and hand of some poor person. I remember feeling very sick. We staggered off to the school to see if any more help was needed. As we passed Wong's place many people were busy digging in the rubble and they later discovered his crushed body. Martha was very upset when she heard that he was among the casualties.

“At what was left of the school, we found the police helping in the search for children. Mothers were standing round crying as their little ones were dragged from the rubble. Jannie was there, his ear and arm very badly cut. I realised that I didn't hate him as much as I thought and rushed over to give him a hug.

“In the evening we collected our few remaining belongings from our home and moved to stay with friends in Johannesburg. The following day a very exhausted doctor came to stitch up my face, all the horrors of the day before etched into his.

“They rebuilt Braamfontein school but we never went back as father was transferred shortly after the disaster to Victoria West.

“Although I was very thankful I survived this disaster I always feel very sad when I think about it — a sorrow not just for the other people who died in this tragedy, but for my sister, Martha.

“She experienced two explosions in her lifetime. In the second one she lost her life and her body was never found. A bomb hit Britain's Air Ministry factory where she was working during the Second World War, leaving a void in my life that has never been filled. While my family mourned her death she was just another war statistic — **MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD.**”

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