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SCIENTIST'S FATAL BLAST EXPLAINED



BLAST INVESTIGATOR—Criminalist Don Harding, Pasadena police, examines chemical after explosion cost life of Scientist John W. Parsons. He shield some jars with a newspaper on possibility the photo flash might trigger another explosion.

Police theorized last night that the explosion which took the life of John W. Parsons, 37-year-old rocket and jet-propulsion expert, in his Pasadena laboratory Tuesday resulted from his dropping a can of fulminate of mercury.

Pasadena Police chemist Don M. Harding, completing his examination of the remains of the blast, said it was definitely established that the fulminate of mercury, a sensitive explosive used only as a detonator, was set off by a shock at floor level.

Quantity Not Determined

Harding said the quantity of fulminate of mercury could not be determined but he reported that the coffee can in which Parsons

apparently was mixing the batch was shredded into shrapnel. There was a large quantity of other types of explosives in the laboratory, many of an experimental nature, Harding said.

Police said it had been reported that Parsons was manufacturing small quantities of the fulminate of mercury for commercial purposes.

The blast on the grounds of the former F. G. Cruickshank estate at 1071 S Orange Grove Ave., Pasadena, shattered the garage laboratory and inflicted injuries on Parsons that caused his death an hour later.

The scientist's mother, Mrs. Ruth Virginia Parsons, 58, of 21 W Glenarm St., Pasadena, swallowed 45 sleeping pills and died after hearing of the tragedy.

National Authority

Parsons was identified as one of the nation's leading authorities on explosives and jet propulsion. With five other original stockholders, he founded Aerojet Engineering Corp, in 1942, but sold out his interest three years later.

"He was a loner," recalled T. E. Beehan, secretary-treasurer of Aerojet. "He liked to wander. But he was one of the top men in his field."

Many of the basic patents for JATO (jet assisted take-off) were obtained under Parsons' name. While a vice-president of Aerojet he headed the solid propellant development project. Associates said he was not known to have done any work on atomic power.

Parsons had been with the Bermite Powder Co. of Saugus for a year until last Friday, when he left intending to go to Mexico. There, he told associates, he planned to do further research with explosives and miniature special effects for motion pictures.

At the Saugus firm Parsons headed one of the rocket propellant detonation and pyrotechnic short-interval delay projects, a confidential research and development program.

"He stayed until Friday to finish his project," said J. H. Arnold, treasurer and superintendent of Bermite, "I tried to get him to stay for tests, but he was anxious to get to Mexico. He had been working hard."

Parsons was extremely safety-conscious, Arnold said. He worked carefully, had a thorough knowledge of his job and was scrupulously neat, the superintendent recalled.

Arnold was surprised that Parsons had explosives in the small makeshift laboratory near his room—a violation of the Pasadena fire ordinance. The superintendent said, however, that Parsons had a powder magazine at one time near Rialto and six or eight months ago had planned to go into the dynamite business.

Harding said enough explosives remained in the laboratory to "blow up half the block."

Stored for Six Months

The explosives had been stored there for six months or longer, police learned.

Examination of the blast scene disclosed that the explosion was concentrated within a small area. Apparently Parsons received the full, terrible force directly against his body. A hole was blown through the floor directly under the section upon which Parsons presumably was standing.

The blast broke windows in an adjoining estate, owned by W. W. Burris. Martin Foshaug, his mother, Mrs. Alta Foshaug; Sal Ganel, an artist, and Jo Anne Price, a model, were on the second floor of the converted barn at the time of the explosion.

"Everything fell off the walls," Ganel said. "The piano was knocked over, its leg broken. We were staggered."

Ganel said he had expected "something to happen" as a result of Parsons' preoccupation with explosives. The chemist frequently warned neighbors that his experimental materials were unstable.

Harding was so skeptical of the explosives left in the laboratory that he shielded them flash bulbs as photographers took pictures.

Mrs. Parsons, hysterical at news of the tragedy, was administered two sleeping capsules under a physician's order as she mourned with a friend, Mrs. Helen Rowan, at 424 Arroyo Terrace, Pasadena. Suddenly she gulped down all but three capsules in a bottle by her hand while Mrs. Rowan, confined to a wheel chair, watched helplessly.

Self-Trained

Parsons, it was disclosed, attained his eminence as an explosives expert principally by self-training. Born here, he was graduated from high school but took only two years of night study at SC.

Although Parsons had no formal degree, he went from SC to Caltech as a research assistant in aeronautics and with Dr. Theodore von Karman founded the Caltech jet laboratory.

He was a member of the American Chemical Society, the Institute of Aeronautical Science, the Army Ordnance Association and Sigma Xi fraternity. He had refused a number of honorary degrees.