



Volume 40

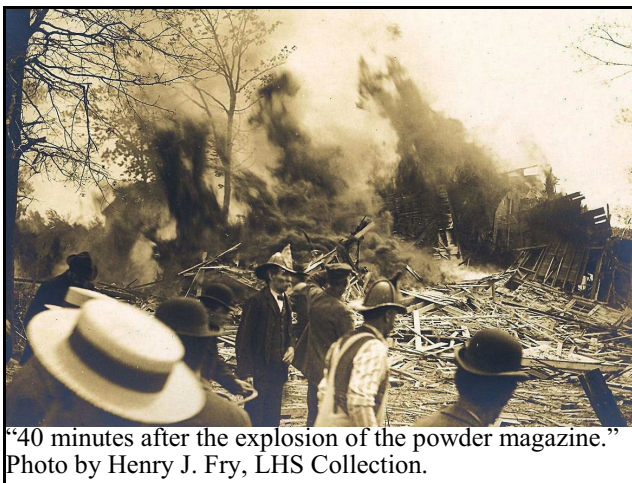
Spring Newsletter

May 2013

*Lowell Historical Society Program
Tuesday, May 21, 2013 from 6:30-8:30pm
Pollard Library Meeting Room
by Kim Zunino*

The 1903 U.S. Cartridge Company Magazine Explosion

On July 29, 1903, the Town of Tewksbury was rocked by a major explosion. That morning, two cartridge magazines owned by the U.S. Cartridge Company exploded, killing 22 people, injuring 70 more, and destroying the nearby neighborhood of Riverside Park. News of the event spread across the country, and tourists arrived to see the site *en masse*. The City of Lowell provided aid to the overwhelmed town, including militia to control the crowds. The magazines were located along the Concord River in what is now South Lowell. So why were there cartridges holding over 20 tons of black gunpowder and almost a ton of dynamite so close to a populated area? Join us for an in-depth look at the series of events leading up to the explosion and its aftermath.



"40 minutes after the explosion of the powder magazine."
Photo by Henry J. Fry, LHS Collection.

Growing Up In Lowell XVI John Leite

[In August, 1999, Gray Fitzsimons interviewed John Leite (pronounced John Late) as part of the Oral History Collection created as a joint project between the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and the Lowell National Historical Park. The following article represents a small segment of the information on John Leite as edited by Cliff Hoyt. The full text is on the website for the Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts (<http://library.uml.edu/clh>). It can be found under "Oral History" then "Eastern National Oral History Projects" and then "After the Last Generation I"]

My parents were Portuguese, originally from Graçiosa, the second smallest island of the Açores (Azores) Islands. They both came to Lowell separately when they were about 18. My dad was born somewhere around 1895. So he probably arrived around 1913. My father's first name was Belarmino but people in the mills never called him Belarmino. They started out calling him Bell which eventually became Bill. We used to get Christmas cards, "Mr. & Mrs. William Leite and Family". My father would ask, "where's this William come from?" His name had gone from Belarmino to Bell and then to Bill which formally must be William.

Like many people coming to a new country, Portuguese always went wherever the other families from home went. So the three main cities in Massachusetts were Lowell, Fall River, and New Bedford. My father knew my mother from the old country but they were not married. In Lowell they lived in separate boarding houses on Back Central Street. Men and women were not allowed to live together. They had a boarding house for women and a boarding house for the guys. My parents were married in Lowell

but after two daughters were born they moved to Manchester, NH. They were forced to follow the jobs in the mills. My mother started off as a bobbin girl. Then she became a weaver. My Dad started off as a weaver and then he became a loom fixer, because he was really good with his hands, and very mechanically skilled. He could make parts and all that kind of stuff. As a matter of fact, he designed a part for one of the looms to make it run better and he got zip for it. And management never came down and said, "Hey Mr. Leite, thanks, thanks a lot!" You know, but they felt the bulge in their pocket, because they didn't give one good crap about the workers, all they wanted was production, more production.

While living in Manchester my sister Helen was born and I was born in 1933. When I was three, my family moved to Lowell to what they used to call Swede Village, Upper Gorham Street, near the cemeteries. When I started school, I was living at 58 Bowden Street down near the end in Swede Village. I went to the Weed Street School, which was on Gorham Street. I think there's a package

store there now. It used to be one of those typical wooden buildings with four classrooms. When I was half way through the fourth grade we moved to lower A Street. So then I went to the Lincoln School, not the one that's there now, not the pretty one. My fourth grade teacher was Miss Keegan, beautiful blonde. I was in love with her. My whole life I was in love with Miss Keegan. Once, long after being out of school, we met in a store downtown, I think it was DeMoulas. She says, "John." And I turn around, it's this, still beautiful, gray haired lady. "Remember me?" I said, "Miss Keegan." She said, "How did you remember?" And I said, "I loved you, and I still love you." She was the one teacher that made the biggest impression on me until high school. The other big thing to happen in fourth grade was when the school decided to start a band. The band had World War I helmets that were painted silver, and white crossing guard belts like the cops used to wear. I said, "Whoa, I got to get into this thing." I took the sign-up sheet home to my father. Now my father was a musician. He played trombone on weekend gigs with Mal Hallett and the Pennsylvanians, besides working in the mills. I figured, of course he's going to sign the sheet, he's a musician. He looked at the sheet and he said, "No!" I said, "Why not?" "No drums!" I had signed up for drums. Every kid wants to whack a drum.

He said, "No drums! Anything else, but no drums." I said, "oh yeah, well then I won't be in band." He said, "okay." Then I started thinking that didn't work. So I wasn't in the band. I was stubborn until the eighth grade. By eighth grade I was in Morey Junior High, which now is an elementary school. The eighth grade band was starting to take little day trips. And I'm saying, "Whoa, I'm missing out on these little day trips out of school." So I went back to him, my tail between my legs, and I said, "I'll join the band now. What instruments should I play, dad?" And he said, "Well the only extra one I have is an old trumpet. So I'm going to start you on trumpet." I said, "Okay." I was ready to do whatever he wanted by this time. It took me four years to get in a band. He never gave in, which I respected him for later on.

Once I started band there was nothing else I wanted to do. While at Lowell High School, all I wanted to do was play my horn. I eventually went to Mr. Giblin, the band director, for lessons. He was a typical bandmaster who wore a white uniform with the gold braids. He was a great teacher and I used to limp out of lessons sometimes. We'd sit down and play,

and he used to be to my left. If I played a wrong note, or didn't tongue something right, he'd give me a noogy on the top of my knee with his middle knuckle. He'd whack my knee every time I played wrong! So if I came out limping, my father would say, "Uh hah! Bad lesson? You got to practice more now." I wound up practicing two and a half-hours a night. I was still living in the tenement on lower A Street. If I didn't practice one night, the neighbors would call up and ask if I was sick. I played a lot in high school. I became Captain of the band. Back then we also had the military thing, and everybody had to take sports or military training for gym. I wasn't interested in sports so I took military training. I always liked the regiment, because my life was always regimented for me.

I started working when I was ten when I was off from school during the summer. My father took me out to Avila's Farm where the Chelmsford High School is now. He went to Mr. Avila who was one son of a gun, and he said, "I'm going to leave him here for the summer. You're going to work him everyday. You don't have to pay him. I just want him to be working to learn something." So myself and Sonny, his youngest step-son, both worked on the farm driving tractors at ten years old. Pulling up weeds, doing all of the farm kind of stuff. Taking care of the cows, the bulls. We worked



John Leite at age three. (Photo courtesy of John Leite.)

hard, but we found a way to have a good time, sort of like kids do. There used to be a sandpit and there was water at the bottom. We'd go sliding down that sandpit into the water. You could hear his father screaming "Where the hell are the boys!" We were back in there in the little water hole. We'd come out all dripping wet. "Where were you?" "We were chasing the cows! One of the cows got loose." And here we are standing there dripping wet. And of course like he didn't notice it. But he was tough. He used to go after his son with the broom. He never hit me because my father would deck him, but he also would tell on me. So when I got home I got it anyway, so it didn't make any difference.

After the farm deal, when I got to be around thirteen or fourteen, my father took me to Tommy Spinney's garage and he said, "I want him to work here in the summer. You don't have to pay him." My father was very nice to me, right! You don't have to pay him, just make him work. So I worked there six days a week. I was starting to crank out some jobs after a year or two. So I went to Tommy, I said, "Hey, I'm doing brake and valve jobs and I'm getting zero. I should get paid". He came back with, "Your father said I didn't have to pay you." I said, "Yeah, bull, I should get something." So anyhow he gave me a buck a day. Six bucks for nine hours a day, six days a week.

We got our pay in little brown bank envelopes. Do you think I got to spend any of the money I earned?

When I got home on payday my whole family opened their envelopes and put down all the money out on the table. And my father would say, "Okay, this is for the ice man, this is for the coal man. He would pull out the money needed to pay all the bills. If there was anything left over he'd say, "Okay, who needs shoes?" And we'd all lift up our shoes. And the one that had the biggest holes and the biggest Hi-Ho Cracker box tops in there covering the holes, that one person would get a pair of shoes. That's the way we worked, the whole family worked to support the family. But we learned responsibility.

When I got out of high school, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to go to college, thirteen years straight was enough! Right, I'm out of prison now. I certainly did not want to work in the mills! That was not a possibility. So eventually I went to work at Jay's Radio on Bridge Street near the corner of French Street. I helped put up TV antennas.

While working at Jay's Radio, I also played in the Portuguese Colonial Band along with my father who was the trombonist and manager of the band. I started playing in the band when I was thirteen. Originally, they stuck me in between the two lead trumpet players and said "Get as many notes as you can." Eventually I wound up playing the first trumpet.

They used to do all the feasts in Lowell, Gloucester, Cambridge, New Bedford, and Fall River. We traveled



Portuguese Colonial Band of Lowell: 1st Row - Tony Silva fifth from left - Bass Drum - Founder of Band; 2nd Row - Third from left: John Leite - Trumpet age 16; 3rd Row - first on left: Augie Silva - Helicon Tuba - Founder of Band; 3rd Row - second from right: Belarmino Leite - Trombone - Founder of Band. (Photo courtesy of John Leite.)

a lot with the band, you know. We would play mostly at Portuguese feasts. We used to do parades in Lowell too. Memorial Day, that's when Lowell had parades. People were five deep on the sidewalk from St. Peter's, where St. Peter's church used to be, and where McDonough's Funeral Home is up there on Highland, from there all the way down, straight down Gorham Street, and then Central Street. And then bang a left when you hit the wall at Woolworth's, and down past City Hall. The Portuguese band became the band that would peel off to Cardinal O'Connor Parkway, turn around and face the parade group, and play for all non-musical groups. We played marches for all non-musical groups coming by.

I started playing trumpet in Lowell's old Cosmo Club when I was fifteen. It was on Market Street, but now it's closed up. When the trio I was in (trumpet, piano, and drums) played the Cosmo, I met Jack Kerouac. I was working two nights a week, Friday and Saturday, we got three bucks a night each. The union allowed us to play non-union, because every union band was working. They had so many beautiful places to play. So all the union guys, the older guys were playing in the nice places, and we played in the kind of not-so-nice places. Now that was a good training ground.

During the first year of working at Jay's Radio, I was studying trumpet in Boston with Mr. Coffey, who was the bass trombonist in the Boston Symphony. My Dad used to drive me in to Boston. During one of my lessons he said, "Hey kid, it's about time to get rid of those pimples and go in the service." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You know there's an opening at Fort Devens on Baritone Horn." I said, "I never played one of those." He said, "Look kid, it's the same thing. It's the same as the trumpet. Mouthpiece is a little different. He said, "You know, you got more talent than that. So you ought to go into the service and get started."

I went to the audition and found my self in the army. Back in those days you'd audition, and if you passed the audition you then had to do basic training, I went to Fort Dix in New Jersey, the hellhole of the United States I'm going to tell you. I went there for three months, December, January and February, three coldest months of the year. It was so cold that one day I literally froze to the ground. We wore these big long wool overcoats that were kind of greenish yellowy, thick thick wool, and they had these brass buttons. The coats extended below our knees. We were on a firing line with M1's, and laying on the ground. The ground was frozen and we finished our rounds. The sergeant says, "All right, get up, next squad." We couldn't get up because we were actually frozen to the ground. The Sergeant became very mad when we didn't get up, and yelled "all right get up now" (with expletives deleted). "We can't get up, we're stuck to the ground." He went to pull up one of our squad members and all the buttons stayed frozen to the ground popping off his coat.



Band on the Ship to Europe: John Leite / Trombone, Red Johnson / Piano, and Ronnie Klonel / Tenor Sax. (Photo courtesy of John Leite.)

After basic training, I came back to Lowell and was stationed in the 18th Army Band. After a couple of months, I got my orders to go to Germany. On the transport ship to Europe, I met Ronnie Klonel from North Chelmsford. He organized a band to play two shows a day on the ship. We got special privileges (eating with the crew and cleaning up in their quarters) for the gig. While in Germany, I passed the audition on bass trombone for the 7th Army Symphony. We played concerts throughout Germany and Austria at a time when there were still many bombed out buildings.

After my three year commitment, I came back to Lowell and attended Lowell Teachers College. During my four years of school, the school had four different names and I received my Bachelor of Science degree in Music Education from Lowell State College, with three certificates: Supervisor of Music, Special Subject Music Teacher K-12, and Elementary Ed K-8 any subject.

I taught in Milton, MA for two years and then got involved with four different bands playing all over the Northeast for 25 years. In 1980 I went back to teaching in Chelmsford, MA for 21 years where I received my Masters Degree in Education Technology. I also continued to perform while teaching. I have been a member of the Merrimack Valley Musicians #300 American Federation of Musicians (AFM) since 1955 and President/Secretary/Delegate for the past 20 years to the present time.

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

by Pauline M. Golec
Publication Committee

Lowell, mill city on the Merrimack, has long inspired poets and those who appreciate and promote their works.

Poetry written by "mill girls," including Lucy Larcom, graced the pages of their own publication, *The Lowell Offering*, in the early 1840s. A bit of unsubstantiated folklore is that Edgar Allan Poe, on visits to a lady friend in Lowell around the same time, was so captivated by the sounds of factory and church bells here that he penned his noted poem, *The Bells*.

About 100 years later, a national poetry magazine, *Alentour*, was published quarterly in Lowell at 3 Hart's Avenue. David Brooks was the editor and the printer was Michael Largay, whose own poems appeared in the magazine. Some volumes of the *Alentour* were recently donated to the Society by Anastasia Forsley.

Lowell's own Jack Kerouac, world renowned author, modified Haiku (traditional 3 lined poems of 17 syllables) to make his own simple "little pictures." R. Weinreich edited a book of Kerouac's Haiku poems including the following:

River wonderland -
The emptiness
Of the golden eternity

Could Kerouac have been thinking of the Merrimack River when he wrote the above?

Life along the Merrimack and Concord Rivers is remembered in Tom Sexton's Volume, *Bridge Street at Dusk*. Tom grew up in Lowell and headed to Alaska, where he taught and served as that state's Poet Laureate. His poetry suggests that Lowell will always be a vital part of his being and of his poems.

From the 1960s to the present, poetry has been much in evidence in the Spindle City ...Paul Marion's volumes of poetry about the city he loves.....poetry conference at UML where Robert Pinsky, nationally acclaimed poet, read to a large appreciative audience....Loom Press..... Whether motivated by Lowell itself or by the vibrancy of its cultural life, the muse is alive here.

Lowell Trivia

By Martha Mayo

1. Lowell was named after which Boston entrepreneur?
2. What natural disaster occurred in 1936?
3. Who from Lowell played for the Green Bay Packers?
Answers on page 6.

LHS Corporate Memberships

The Lowell Historical Society proudly acknowledge our 2013 Corporate members who demonstrated their organization's commitment to the preservation of Lowell's past and the dissemination of information to keep Lowell's heritage alive in the future. The following organizations have made this commitment:

Blue Taleh Restaurant
CARSTAR Atlantic Collision Ctr.
Dr. Evan Coravos, DMD
D'Youville Life and Wellness
Community
Enterprise Bank & Trust Co.
Fred C. Church Insurance
Fuse Bistro
Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union
Lowell Co-operative Bank
Lowell Five Cent Savings Bank
Lowell General Hospital
Lowell Sun Charities, Inc.
Mazur Park Apartments
Morse-Bayliss Funeral Home
Washington Savings Bank
Watermark

We would like to add the listing of your company here in the future.

2013 Corporate Membership

Enclosed is a \$100 tax deductible gift for a Lowell Historical Society Corporate Membership.

Name of Company: _____

Contact Person _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Approximate Number of Employees: _____

Send to Lowell Historical Society, PO Box 1826,
Lowell, MA 01853



The preservation of Lowell history depends heavily on your membership. If you have not yet sent in your membership renewal, please do so as soon as possible.

Lowell Historical Society

The Lowell Historical Society's Mission is to collect, preserve and publish materials related to Lowell and to promote the study of the history of the City. We are located at the Boott Cotton Mills Museum, 115 John Street, Fourth Floor, Downtown Lowell Massachusetts 01852.

The office is open 9:00 am to 12:00 Noon on Monday and Thursday. The site telephone number is 978- 970-5180 or on the Web at:
<http://www.lowellhistoricalsociety.org>.

Center for Lowell History

The Center for Lowell History, 40 French Street, currently is open on Monday through Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. For Saturday from 10 am to 3 pm.

The contact point for information is Martha Mayo, 978-934-4998. The Center's web address is:
<http://library.uml.edu/clh/>.

Calendar of Events

Program: Lowell Historical Society Annual Meeting: The 1903 U.S. Cartridge Company Magazine Explosion presented by Kim Zunino. On July 29, 1903, two cartridge magazines owned by the U.S. Cartridge Company exploded, killing 22 people, injuring 70 more, and destroying the nearby neighborhood of Riverside Park. Join us for an in in-depth look at the series of events leading up to the explosion and its aftermath.

Date: Tuesday, May 21, 2013 at 6:30pm.
Location: Pollard Library Meeting Room, Lowell, MA.



Answers to Trivia Questions

1) Francis Cabot Lowell, 2) A Flood, 3) Ray Riddick.