

Billberg propane explosion *(Al George's recollection of the accident)*

Then in January of '69, Rudy and Dorothy (*Eberhardt*) took Bessie into work and came back and the propane tank exploded...

A: Hadn't they been in the house a while before it exploded?

Al: The story we had was that they came back from town—it was a fifty below day—to stock the stove and while they were there they made a bowl of soup and Rudy started outside to start the car and the door swung out and hit this five gallon propane tank and apparently it tapped it on the weld. That plus the fact of the fifty below weather, the thing split. Rudy heard it and knew instantly what it was and went tearing on out. The gas followed him and burned his fanny and the gas went into the house where Dorothy was and was ignited and it blew. One side of the wanigan was about all window, and it blew that window out about twenty feet from the building and laid it down on the snow and didn't break one pane of glass. On the other side of the building was a hundred pound tank, leaning against the building. Remember when we could hear—sounded almost like a siren. That was the end blowing off the tank and it was jetting straight up in the air.

But when Rudy got outside, he could hear Dorothy yelling inside and so he went back in a got her.... There's a formula that first aiders use that gives a percentage factor on areas of the body. It's 18 for each leg, 9 for each arm and so on and according to my calculations ninety-three percent of her body was burned.

They drove up here and in the process of doing that, Rudy couldn't hang on to the steering wheel because his hands were so badly burned the skin was sliding, so he had to stop and put on a pair of mittens...

They came up here into our driveway and beeped the horn. The kids were home from school, and I was trying to figure out, "Whose the smart-ass beeping their horn in my yard." He's just getting out and says, "We need help. Can you give us a hand?" About this time, Dorothy speaks up. I recognized her voice, but to look at her—her hair was singed, tight up against her head.

We got her into the house and onto our couch and she started to bubble from her nose, indication of a burned throat. We called for the ambulance and, miracle of miracles, the ambulance came. At that time, the procedure was that a state trooper responds first to see if an ambulance was really necessary. Unfortunately, the ambulance got lost, the ice fog was bad, it took forty-five minutes to get here but they did respond.

V: You went out to meet them, didn't you?

Al: Somebody did. Harold was going to come in and take her in his car. I thought she was going to die right there, and I decided, it's not going to be something that Harold's going to want to remember the rest of his life that his sister died in his car, so I said "Why don't you wait another five minutes. They'll have oxygen." So he eased off and about then the ambulance showed up....

Later, I asked the hospital to pay especial attention to various body areas because we'd just been working on something on campus concerning burns and cold temperatures. When have you ever seen a burn this bad that was exposed to fifty below weather? Does it make any difference? The medics I talked to thought I was some kind of a dinky...