That explosion took place at an Equitable Gas Co. plant at Reedsdale and Fontella streets, not far from where the Carnegie Science Center sits today on the North Side. At 8:43 a.m. on November 14, 1927, the neighborhood got an early science lesson—on the chemical properties of methane gas.

That morning, a 13-man crew was repairing a supposedly empty 5 million-cubic-foot natural gas-storage tank. According to the Allegheny Centennial Committee’s Story of Old Allegheny, a spark from a worker’s blowtorch may have ignited “just the proper proportion of gas and air... within the empty tank....” That explosion ruptured two other tanks, whose contents fueled the blast. (Incidentally, a similar case, where a spark ignited fuel vapors mixing with air in a near-empty tank, may explain the crash a few years back of TWA Flight 800 off the Long Island coast.)

No one can be entirely sure of the blast’s origins, the Centennial Committee noted, because the workmen involved “were blown to bits.” But however mysterious the cause, the effect is certain.

The explosion shattered windows as far away as Carrick and East Liberty, and people 20 miles from Pittsburgh thought there’d been an earthquake. One thousand windows of the W.W. Lawrence Paint Co. (its abandoned building still stands at the foot of the Duquesne Incline) were shattered, as were windows in many school buildings. Some of your schoolmates were injured by flying glass; others were simply terrified. “The peal of the school bell had hardly died away when a blast thundered through the streets,” the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported. “Bewildered boys and girls ceased their games. ... [H]appy laughter turned to screams.”

In addition to 13 repairmen, 15 others were killed in the blast, most of whom made clay pots at a factory across the street. Another 450 people were hospitalized and hundreds more were treated for injuries. Thousands were left homeless.

The Pittsburgh Press described the blast as “lurid in its vividness,” an apt summary of the press coverage as well. The Press waxed biblical—“the earth was without form and void”—and described a “sheet of fire gryating in a formless mass ... flashing up into the heavens like some body from the abyss.” Using the kind of sparkling metaphor you can still find today in the prose of editor John Craig Jr., the Post-Gazette likened the smoldering ruins to “a gigantic ant hill kicked apart by a giant.”

Perhaps the greatest tragedy was that the disaster could have been avoided if the workers had used a gas detector, which had been used routinely in mine shafts for years. Why such a detector wasn’t used at the Equitable plant raises a larger question: why giant tanks of explosive gas were put in the densely populated neighborhood to begin with. Civic groups had opposed the tanks from the beginning, and after the explosion, officials moved to ban such facilities within city limits.

Today, in the name of progress, we use a slower, more thorough method of wiping out North Side neighborhoods—by building highways and suburban-style shopping malls.
WHAT DOES THE 33 ON THE ROLLING ROCK LABEL STAND FOR?

ROLLING ROCK MAY BE THE PERFECT BEVERAGE FOR THOSE OF US WHO DRINK TO FORGET, BECAUSE EVEN THE PEOPLE WHO BREW IT CAN’T REMEMBER WHAT THE “33” MEANS.

“We’re really not holding out on people,” insists Scott Quincy, spokesperson for Labatt’s, the Connecticut-based brewing company that bought Rolling Rock in 1987. “There’s no written record explaining it. We know it doesn’t mean anything bad, so whatever it does mean is OK with us. If it was a 666, we might have some concerns.”

Quincy has heard numerous possible explanations for the 33, many of which are probably familiar:

- That it refers to 1933, the year prohibition was repealed
- That it takes 33 steps to get from the brewmaster’s office to the brewing floor
- That the name “Rolling Rock” and the brewing pledge on the back of the bottle total 33 words
- That it was the name of the horse on the label
- That there are 33 streams (“those would be mountain-fed streams, of course,” Quincy stresses) feeding into the reservoir from which the brewery draws its water.

“And then Groundhog Day is the 33rd day of the year, and that’s a big holiday in Pennsylvania.”

But what do groundhogs have to do with brewing beer?

“Well, hopefully nothing. I think a few guys still working there know,” Quincy added, “but they’re not telling us.”

Must be union.

Quincy then referred me to a very nice woman named Tammy, who gives tours at the Latrobe brewery. “When people ask me what the 33 means,” she says, “I ask them what they’ve heard. They come up with all kinds of theories.”

The strangest? “That the owner bet $33 on horse No. 33, and bought the brewery with the winnings in 1933.” (In fact, the brewery was purchased in 1933.)

The number has been on the label since Rolling Rock was first brewed in 1939, but Tammy doubts anyone still knows what the 33 means. “About 10 of the old-timers working here say they know, but when you ask them separately, they give four different answers,” she says. Even if one of them really does know, she points out, without any corroborating evidence there’s no way to be sure they’re right.

Maybe we don’t even want to know. Wouldn’t you be disappointed if there were conclusive proof that the 33 referred only to a year, or to the number of steps to the brewmaster’s office? The only reason those answers aren’t boring is that we don’t know they’re right. Otherwise, they’d be just plain dull.

In the end, perhaps the 33 is just a symbol, a cipher for all our hopes and desires. That’s what any self-respecting beer promises, anyway... most beers just offer it at the bottom of the bottle.