On the back of the photograph shown here is the phrase “Pittsburgh North Side—The Tank that Blew Up.” When people browse through the General Photograph Collection, this inscription prompts many to question its meaning. When I first saw the image, my thoughts went back to the first time I’d heard the story of the “great gas explosion” on the North Side. It was while sitting in a pew at the Calvary United Methodist Church. I was admiring the beautiful sanctuary with its massive Tiffany windows while listening to a docent give a short talk on the history of the congregation and building. The docent pointed to a round section of the window on the south wall and explained how it had blown out when the gas tank exploded at the Equitable Gas Works. Miraculously, that section of stained glass had landed safely on a cushioned pew.

The explosion occurred early on Tuesday, November 15, 1927, a cold winter’s day. A gas tank, technically called a “gasometer,” ignited while workers performed repairs on it. The tank had been assumed empty. Susan (Cooper) Walker lived on Western Avenue not far from the gas works and recorded her recollections on this “catastrophe” in her published memoir, *When I Look Back And Think*. Walker, drinking coffee in her den when the blast took place, was knocked unconscious. When she woke she found “the air full of plaster dust from fallen ceilings, and everything in a jumble. The 12 big plate-glass windows in the end of the dining room were shattered. Most of the windows in the house were out. Nearly all of the ceilings were down. Two maids had been cut slightly by flying glass.” Her damaged home was not restored until the following March.

Ernie Ziga, a long-time volunteer in the History Center’s Library & Archives, was in first grade at Westlake School in the Elliott section of Pittsburgh in 1927. His family lived on Valonia Street, and on the day of the explosion he was walking down Lorenz Avenue to school with his sister Mary Lou. They heard the big blast, looked back towards the river to see a huge cloud of smoke rising up in the air, and were so frightened they ran home to their mother. The only damage their home incurred was a cracked window, but Ernie and his family would learn later that day that their neighbor, Mrs. Florence Shelton, who worked on the North Side, was one of the many injured.

The Walkers and the Zigas were fortunate that they suffered only property damage from the explosion. For 26 others, that day ended in tragedy. Twenty-six people lost their lives and over 450 were injured. Both the Salvation Army and Red Cross were called in to provide relief to the victims. The explosion resulted in four to five million dollars worth of property damage around Allegheny City.

As a result of the devastation caused by this event, legislation was passed preventing the construction of “gasometers” in residential areas. Today, the site of the former gas works is undergoing another transformation. It will be the location of Pittsburgh’s new casino along the riverfront.

We are grateful that this photograph was saved and that someone was thoughtful enough to jot down a quick inscription on the back, linking the image to one of Pittsburgh’s greatest disaster episodes. The photograph was a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hunt in 1986.

The Library & Archives collects material related to the history and culture of Western Pennsylvania. The Library & Archives Reading Room is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. To view materials from the L&A collections online, go to the Historic Pittsburgh website: http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh/.
The writing on the back of this “gasometer” image relayed a bit of Pittsburgh history. This tank blew up on November 15, 1927. HC L&A.