

Dynamite Blast from Road Construction Destroys Otto Blum's Barn in 1924 - Part 1

One might say that Otto Blum's Thursday did not go the way he would have wanted it to on June 26, 1924. His farm was located along what is now Highway 81 with parts of the 240 acres in Jordan and Monroe townships. A road crew was working on loosening up ground so they could remove a hill on the highway, so they placed 100 pounds of dynamite 30 feet into the ground in each of five holes. All were set off at once and Mr. Blum's large, modern barn was completely wrecked. The hill was being cut down for the new concrete road to be constructed from the Junction House hill over the Skinner Creek bottom. The culverts had already been put in and they had been grading for the previous four weeks.

The road, which was known then as Highway 61, was in major need of change. As one was traveling west going down the hill on the highway and approaching what is now Skinner Hollow Road going to the north, there were two dangerous turns. A quick look at the property in the 1918 Green County plat book shows that there were two bends in the road that appear to be right angles to go around the buildings.

It was amazing how much detail was shared in the newspaper. "The damage was done by percussion. The action was upward and the violence was outward in the direction of the barn standing at the bottom of a high embankment on the opposite side of the highway 150 feet away.



This photo, from the collection of Bob and Deb Blum, was taken on June 26, 1924 after a dynamite blast in Jordan township took down the family barn that was less than four years old. What is now called Highway 81 was being straightened out for easier driving when the blast went wrong.

The force of the explosion hit the building before tons of sand and loose sandrock that were blown into the air could strike it, shoving over the sides and roof as easily and as quickly as it had been made of cards."

The barn was 120 feet long and 38 feet wide and the east side laid flat on the floor except what was held up by 35 tons of hay that remained in the loft from the previous year. The entire west side was blown off the frame and laid in the barnyard. Much of the roof came down between the side wall and the west foundation.

The 18-inch thick west wall was cracked through at both ends and blown out of line at least a foot. The frame of the building itself was moved a foot on the foundation. The end gables, which were 60

feet off the ground, were pulled in and torn from the frame that rested on the rock foundation. Three large ventilators went down with the roof. The hay and some machinery was all that supported the sides nearest the road and held up the ends.

Across the barnyard, which was about 75 feet wide, two sections of board fence with more than half a dozen heavy oak posts were broken off at the ground and were flat in the field adjoining where several loads of sand covered the grass. Inside the barn a foot of sand covered the hay in some places. In addition, much sand was scattered over the wreckage.

A stone weighing more than 10 pounds was hurled nearly 200 feet, striking and breaking off one of the braces supporting the steel frame of the windmill. A 40-foot cement silo at the east end of the barn appeared to be undamaged except that part of the chute on its side was torn away.

It was reported that the dynamite charges went off with a sound that was heard by farmers up to two miles away. Many tons of sand had to be removed to make the roadway passable after the explosion.

An expert blaster, more than 50 years old from Mineral Point, had been in charge of the job. He had years of experience and had been secured by Albany contractor Webb & Dixon to conduct this phase of the work. He was protected by the road bank on the other side of the hill with two other men. As one would expect, he was completely upset by the disaster and sat silently on the side of the hill for quite some time following the blast. The reason for the "blow-out" was not understood because dynamic usually tends to loosen the dirt downward.

A hayloader that was stored in the barn had been wrecked. The hay tedder and rake were not damaged. Forty bushels of grain was not harmed, nor were two carloads of cement stored in bags in the basement by contractor W. A. Liljequist, of Freeport, who was doing the culvert work.

Horses were still being quartered in the basement stalls the following day. Even though this section of the barn was intact, cracked walls and twisted timbers gave evidence of the blast's force.

Mr. Blum happened to be in the city at the time of the explosion. His sons, Will and Oscar, were planting potatoes in a field near Skinner Creek at the time. Mrs. Oscar Blum was working in the house near her 2-month-old son when she heard the terrific blast. The family said that they were not aware that the blast was to be set off at that time. Even Webb & Dixon had not been informed that the blast was to be made. Mr. Blum learned of the destruction of the barn while he was in town. He hurried home to find that the damage was "worse than it might have been had the blast gone off directly under the structure.

More details of this incident will be shared in the column next week.