

# Benton fireworks disaster

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The **Benton fireworks disaster** was an industrial disaster that occurred on May 27, 1983 on a farm near Benton, Tennessee. An explosion killed eleven, injured one, caused damage within a radius of several miles, and revealed a secret unlicensed factory producing illegal fireworks. The operation was by far the largest and most successful known illegal fireworks operation.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Background
- 2 Explosion and response
- 3 Investigation
- 4 Aftermath
- 5 See also
- 6 References

## Benton fireworks disaster

<b>Time</b>	9:15 AM (EST)
<b>Date</b>	May 27, 1983
<b>Location</b>	Webb's Bait Farm, Benton, Tennessee
<b>Also known as</b>	Webb Farm disaster
<b>Cause</b>	Dangerous illegal fireworks operation
<b>Deaths</b>	11
<b>Injuries</b>	1
<b>Accused</b>	Dan Lee Webb, owner
<b>Convicted</b>	Dan Lee Webb

## Background

Webb's Bait Farm, located along State Route 314 in rural Polk County, grew/manufactured worms and other fishing bait and sold fishing equipment and was owned by Dan Lee Webb, aged 30 at the time of the disaster.<sup>[2]</sup>

In December 1982, Webb, Howard Emmett Bramblett of nearby Ocoee, and relative David Parks decided to start manufacturing illegal M-80 and M-100 fireworks in an old metal dairy barn on the farm.<sup>[2]</sup> They employed several family members of Webb and Parks.<sup>[2]</sup> Between December 1982 and the date of the explosion, at least 1,542,000 of the M-series fireworks were reported to have been manufactured at the factory and distributed to at least twelve states.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Explosion and response

On May 27, 1983 at approximately 9:15 AM, eleven workers were on duty when a cache of M-80 and M-100 explosives, flash powder, and other chemicals in the 40-by-70-foot (12 m × 21 m) barn detonated producing a massive explosion, instantly killing all eleven workers and leveling the barn.<sup>[4]</sup> The initial blast was followed by several smaller blasts witnesses described as sounding like shotguns, and are believed to have been of individual firework cases that were not detonated in the initial blast.<sup>[5]</sup> Dan Lee Webb's cousin Tommy Lee Webb, who was mowing the grass near the site, was thrown more than 70 yards.<sup>[6]</sup> The blast also threw debris as far as 200 yards away from the site, and produced a shock wave which leveled trees as far as 100 yards away.<sup>[6]</sup> Bodies were hurled through the roofs of the nearby house and carport and as far away as 500 feet from the site.<sup>[6]</sup> Nothing in the barn was left intact; all of the bodies had lost limbs and six were decapitated.<sup>[4]</sup> Some were stripped by the force of the blast.<sup>[4]</sup> Several witnesses claimed to have seen a white mushroom cloud which was estimated to be 600 to 800 feet tall, and the blast was heard and felt in Cleveland over 20 miles away.<sup>[4]</sup> Several 911 calls were received moments after the initial blast, and within minutes, several police units arrived on the scene. Tommy Lee Webb, who was critically injured, was taken to Erlanger Medical Center in Chattanooga with burns on about 35 percent of his body.<sup>[5]</sup> A Tennessee Emergency Management Association (TEMA) crew, which included forensic anthropologist Dr. William M. Bass, later arrived on the scene to identify the victims.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Investigation

Authorities were unable to determine the cause of the explosion, but concluded that it probably occurred while explosives were being mixed. The charred remains of an electric drill with a paint-stirring attachment were found, and it was suggested that a spark from the drill's motor reached the mixture.<sup>[1]</sup> Other possible theories include the scraping of boots on the floor causing ignition of highly explosive fumes, a cigarette being lit, and sparking from an electrical wire.<sup>[7]</sup> TEMA later identified the dead as Faye Trentham, daughter Tanya Trentham (19), Doris Burns Longmire (38), David Nelce Webb (brother of Dan Lee Webb), Sybil Duggan, William Lee Burns, Beatrice Webb (51, mother of Dan Lee Webb), Dixie Freeman, David Parks and his wife Judy, and Albert Kenneth Johnson (52).<sup>[7]</sup> Authorities found a cache of about 30 to 40 boxes of unexploded fireworks<sup>[8]</sup> and six 55-gallon steel drums full of chemical explosives in a nearby trailer.<sup>[9]</sup> Federal firearms agents also found husks eight to ten inches wide and three to four inches in diameter which prompted Polk

County sheriffs to speculate that "more than just fireworks" were involved.<sup>[8]</sup> They were buried in the ground on the farm and later detonated in an open pit in nearby Copperhill having been used as evidence in Webb's trial.<sup>[10]</sup> A total of 172 cases of fireworks were found.<sup>[7]</sup> The farm was also found to be guarded with an elaborate security system which consisted of surveillance cameras, electric fences, alarms, guard dogs, and warning signs.<sup>[7]</sup> Polk County Sheriff Frank Payne told reporters that he thought that they were gearing up for the Fourth of July, and that the explosives could be used by terrorists.<sup>[7]</sup>

Polk County police interviewed several people living near the farm. Paul Wilson, a factory worker, said that the blast shattered his windows and blew sheetrock off his ceiling.<sup>[11]</sup> He had been told three months before by the Webbs that they did not want his children to go near the barn.<sup>[11]</sup> Another neighbor, Howard Haulk, said he heard one large blast followed by several smaller blasts over the course of about 20 minutes.<sup>[11]</sup> The initial blast shattered glass in the Haulks' living room.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Aftermath

Dan Lee Webb, who had been in Lansing, Michigan delivering 86,400 M-80s during the event, surrendered at the Polk County Jail two days later.<sup>[6]</sup> He was charged with eleven counts of involuntary manslaughter and illegally manufacturing and possessing explosives and jailed under \$300,000 bond.<sup>[6]</sup> His wife Linda Sue, who was in the house when the barn exploded, was held on a \$50,000 bail as a material witness.<sup>[6]</sup> She told her defense attorney that she believed that her husband was in the New York-New Jersey area at the time of the blast.<sup>[6]</sup> On April 19, 1984 Dan Lee Webb received a ten-year federal prison sentence for manufacturing explosives without a license.<sup>[12]</sup> On May 1, 1984, he pleaded guilty to the manslaughter charges and received a ten-year prison sentence.<sup>[12]</sup> He served it concurrently with the federal sentence and in addition was fined \$10,000.<sup>[12]</sup>

In August 1985, twenty men were indicted on federal charges for conspiring to manufacture and distribute the illegal fireworks made at the farm to as many as twelve states including Tennessee, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.<sup>[3]</sup> Fifteen others were charged with transporting the fireworks or causing them to be transported.<sup>[13]</sup>

A similar incident occurred on May 29, 1983 in Rowesville, South Carolina.<sup>[14]</sup> An explosion at an illegal fireworks operation, to which Bramblett was connected, killed two and injured five.<sup>[14]</sup>

American author Jefferson Bass' 2007 novel *Beyond the Body Farm* is about Dr. Bass' investigation of the victims of the blast.<sup>[15]</sup>

## See also

- Enschede fireworks disaster
- Istanbul fireworks explosion
- List of industrial disasters
- PEPCON disaster
- Sivakasi factory explosion

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