

# FIRST DRAFT

## Locals rattled in 1943 when shells on military train began to explode

*"Newspapers produce the first rough draft of history." — Philip Graham*

When they saw flashes of light and heard loud booms in the early morning hours of June 27, 1943, Alf Giles and his family thought Grand Junction was under attack.

"We thought the Japanese were bombing us," he recalled. Bombs were going off — or

more accurately, artillery shells — but they were U.S. weapons. The

brakes on a train car full of military ordnance had sparked a fire as the train rolled into the city, causing the shells to explode. They would continue to do so from 2 to 6 a.m.

It was "a blitzkrieg of battlefront proportions," according to The Daily Sentinel, a scary thought for a nation in the midst of World War II.

Four people were initially injured by the explosions. Most serious was Fire Chief Charles Downing, who lost an arm to shrapnel after a shell exploded while he directed fire crews in protecting nearby buildings.

Giles was 14 in 1943, living at 25 and H roads. And like many in the rural areas around the city, he and his family had no way of knowing what occurred.

The Giles family had a radio, a homemade crystal set that Alf had built, but it was of little value that night because the only local radio station didn't broadcast news of the disaster for some time.

The Daily Sentinel put out its first edition with news of the explosion — and lots of photos — the afternoon of the 28th, a Monday. But that did the Giles family little good because they



This unidentified man may not have attended the class the U.S. Army gave on June 28 on proper handling of unexploded shells. Grand Junction authorities initially had a difficult time keeping looky-loos from stopping and backing up traffic on the Grand Avenue bridge, as well as keeping local residents from picking up souvenirs.



Photos SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL/Museum of Western Colorado

Fire rages as fire department crews try to prevent it from spreading after two train cars filled with artillery shells caught fire during the early morning hours of June 27, 1943. The fire caused the shells to explode, and they would continue to do so from 2 to 6 a.m. "We thought the Japanese were bombing us," recalled Alf Giles, who lived with his family in Grand Junction when the incident occurred.

did not receive the newspaper in their neighborhood.

The family and many of their neighbors had no telephones. Giles's father had an old Model T Ford, but it didn't run at the time.

"I didn't even have a bicycle" to travel to view the explosion site, he said.

It's probably just as well, because one of the biggest problems the Grand Junction Police Department and Fire Department faced in the wake of the explosion was keeping looky-loos from stopping and backing up traffic on the Grand Avenue bridge over the railroad tracks, just north of the explosion site.

Initially, keeping local residents from picking up souvenirs, such as pieces of shrapnel and even unexploded shells, was also an issue. But public warnings and late explosions put a halt to most of that activity, the Sentinel reported.

Military police who arrived Sunday by train from the U.S. Army's Camp Hale near Leadville helped in the effort. And soldiers from the camp assisted in the cleanup, the Sentinel said. More military personnel arrived Monday from Denver.

Greater damage was prevented by quick-acting railroad personnel, who moved the burning rail cars before the shells exploded.

The train arrived from the east and parked near the main train depot in the city, the depot now used for Amtrak trains.

"The highly dangerous cargo was realized and instructions were given at once to cut the cars away from the remainder of the train and remove them to a less dangerous part of the yard," the Sentinel said.

Fire department efforts to extinguish the blaze were halted by flying shrapnel from



The remains of the two wrecked cars on the railroad tracks, looking west toward the Riverside neighborhood.

the exploding shells and firefighters were ordered to back off. However, one unidentified soldier from Camp Hale, ignoring both the fire department's orders and those of military police, took up a fire hose and sprayed water on the burning rail cars as shells exploded and shrapnel whizzed around him until he, too, was finally forced to take cover.

A fifth injury occurred June 28, when a corporal from Camp Hale injured his hand when a detonator charge went off, but not the artillery shell itself, as he was helping to dispose of unexploded shells.

Others in the area experienced close calls, but no injuries. A large piece of shrapnel fell through the roof of a home at 132 Rood Ave. and landed on a bed. The occupant of the home likely would have been in the bed if she had not been on her front porch watching and listening to the explosions.

Residents of a house at 525 W. Main St. had plaster from their ceiling knocked down upon them before they fled their

home. On the morning of June 28, an artillery officer from Camp Hale instructed police and firefighters in the proper handling of unexploded shells.

By July 1, nearly all of the unexploded munitions had been discovered and either detonated or placed in storage for later detonation. That included more than a dozen live shells that somebody apparently hauled to the edge of the Bookcliffs north of Grand Junction in the immediate aftermath of the explosion.

The attack on Grand Junction that Giles and others initially believed was under way had ended.

*Thanks to Alf Giles for his recollections and to Frank Nemanich and Marie Tipping, volunteers with the Museum of Western Colorado, for their assistance.*

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## Aspen-area poor have trouble accessing health care

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ASPEN — About 4,500 county residents in the Aspen area live at or below the federal poverty level, and Pitkin County health officials are trying to find options to help the area's low-income families receive the care they need because many doctors are not accepting public health insurance.

Liz Stark, Pitkin County public health director, said many low-income and Medicare-eligible residents have to drive 70 miles to Rifle to get treatment.

"We have a growing public health crisis regarding limited access to affordable care for low-income adults," Stark said. "This has to do with dental, behavioral health, physical health, all our types of health care."

Stark blamed financial impacts from the Great Reces-

sion, changes in the health care system from the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid expansion in Colorado.

Commissioner George Newman seemed surprised by the numbers, noting that with how affluent Pitkin County is, many people are still below the poverty level, the Aspen Daily News reported.

The West Mountain Regional Health Alliance was formed in 2010 to help provide needed health care to low-income citizens.

Since that time the group has expanded its membership extensively, and continues to work on this access to care issue, Stark said.

Stark said a number of local physicians won't accept government insurance because of a very low reimbursement rate.

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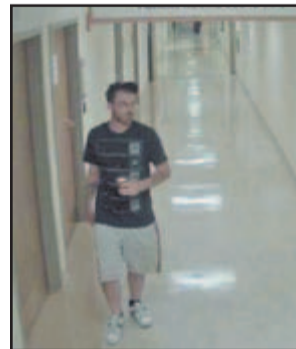
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## BLOTTER

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### Theft at hospital suspected

The Grand Junction Police Department wants to identify a man suspected of stealing someone's wallet in the intensive care unit of St. Mary's Hospital. Some-



time between 11:30 p.m. and midnight on March 18, a black, 7-inch-long Coach wallet, with a "C" pattern, which contained cash and personal identification cards, was reported stolen. Surveillance cameras captured a white male, late 20s to early

30s, wearing white and light gray basketball shorts, a black T-shirt and a dark baseball cap. The photo can be viewed at [www.241STOP.com](http://www.241STOP.com). Anyone with information on the suspect is asked to call Crime Stoppers at 241-STOP, or go online, [www.241-STOP.com](http://www.241-STOP.com). Up to \$1,000 is offered by Crime Stoppers for information leading to arrests.

### According to the Grand Junction Police Department:

■ Alexander Quijada-Rivas, 24, was cited Saturday on suspicion of driving without a valid license and driving without registration after a traffic stop at First Street and Pitkin Avenue.

■ Kyle Carey, 24, was cited Friday on suspicion of failing to stop at a stop sign, driving with a revoked license, driving without proof of insurance and driving with an open container of alcohol.

■ Ildebrando Holguin, 60, was cited Friday on suspicion of driving with a revoked

license after being contacted at 29 1/2 Road and Patterson Road.

■ A juvenile was cited Friday on suspicion of disorderly conduct at 29 1/2 and Patterson roads.

■ Jared Kemp, 37, was cited Friday on suspicion of driving with expired plates and speeding at U.S. 2400 Highway 6&50.

■ Daniel Weaver, 57, was cited on suspicion of third-degree assault in the 400 block of Pitkin Avenue.

■ Daniel Hindman, 33, was cited Wednesday on suspicion of disorderly conduct at 424 Pitkin Ave.

■ Kevin Menjiver, 24, was cited on suspicion of driving with a revoked license at Fourth Street and White Avenue. Brie Valentine, 34, was cited on suspicion of having an open marijuana container during the same contact.

The Mesa County Sheriff's Office on Sunday did not release jail booking or activity reports.

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