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Three Decades Before Porter Ranch, a Methane Explosion Derailed L.A.'s Subway Plans

By Nathan Masters

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A 1985 methane explosion in L.A.'s Fairfax district turned a Ross Dress for Less into a disaster scene. Photo by Dean Musgrove, courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection - Los Angeles Public Library.

Ancient forces lurk beneath the paved surfaces of Los Angeles - powerful natural processes that, when touched by humanity and its creations, threaten public safety.

Not even a disaster on the scale of the Porter Ranch leak, which pumped 80,000 metric tons of natural gas into the atmosphere until it was **finally tamed yesterday**, effectively demonstrates the power of those forces. Thousands of residents have been displaced, but the leak lacks the visual markers of a disaster.

Thirty-one years ago, however, the Southland's hydrocarbons made themselves visible in a surreal way.

Methane from a mysterious underground source had silently been seeping into the basement of the Ross Dress for Less in L.A.'s Fairfax District when, on the afternoon of March 24, 1985, an employee punched his timesheet in an adjoining room, emitting a spark and igniting the pool of odorless gas. The ensuing explosion launched the store's roof into the sky. It blew out the windows. It twisted the discount clothing racks into pieces of flying shrapnel. Horrified and bloodied shoppers ran outside, only to find themselves surrounded by an even more hellish landscape: the ground itself was on fire,

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~~agree on the gas's origins. The Ross Dress for Less sat atop the old salt lake on hold,~~
and one theory suggested that gas had escaped from the depths by way of an improperly capped well. Another looked to a shallower source: the decay of organic matter in the underlying soil. Yet another pointed to the role of small faults opened up in historic times by hydraulic fracturing.

The aftermath of the 1985 explosion. Photo by Michael Haering, courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection - Los Angeles Public Library

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After the explosion, a drill probed the ground beneath the Ross in search of methane gas pockets. Photo by Mike Sergieff, courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection - Los Angeles Public Library.

Amid the scientific uncertainty, a political resolution emerged.

Beneath the Fairfax district lay not only methane pockets and ancient oil reservoirs, but also **the proposed route of the Metro Rail subway**. Plans approved in the early 1980s showed the rapid-transit line tunneling beneath Wilshire Boulevard between downtown and the Fairfax district, then turning north toward West Hollywood - a route that made sense as a transit corridor between major job and population centers, but which residents of surrounding neighborhoods bitterly opposed for **a host of controversial reasons**.

Their elected representatives, led by U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, seized on the explosion as another rationale against the project. Biblical imagery of a land on fire was all they needed to derail an already-controversial project. By the end of 1985, officials had rerouted the subway around from the Fairfax district and its methane fields. Instead, it would tunnel up Vermont Avenue toward Hollywood.

Three decades later, advances in boring machines and construction methods have (**somewhat**) quelled concerns about tunneling through a methane field -- **the Purple Line extension** now under construction will track straight down Wilshire -- but the Ross Dress for Less explosion remains a powerful reminder of the natural forces hidden deep beneath the city's pavement.

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Before the Ross explosion, the Metro Rail subway was to travel directly through the Fairfax district and its methane fields. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

1983 rendering for the planned subway station at Wilshire and Fairfax - a casualty of the Ross explosion. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

Further Reading

- Elkind, Ethan N. *Railtown: The Fight for the Los Angeles Metro Rail and the Future of the City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- Fox, William L. *Making Time: Essays on the Nature of Los Angeles*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007.
- Manaugh, Geoff. "[The Fiery Underground Oil Pit Eating L.A.](#)" *The Daily Beast*,

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Lost Cemeteries of Early L.A.: The Forgotten Burial Sites of the City's Earliest Settlers

The deaths of early Angelenos didn't always lead to eternal rest. When the first Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cemeteries in Los Angeles were abandoned by 1910, the displaced dead were scattered to other cemeteries — but not all were found and reburied.

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1930s L.A. Illustrated: Angel's Flight, the Old Plaza, A Secret Garden and More

In November 1935, Los Angeles Times reporter Timothy Turner and staff artist Charles Owens began a year-long ramble through the historic core of downtown. The Times published more than 40 vignettes of the city's aging Victorian mansions, derelict theaters and other survivals of the 19th century.

How L.A.'s Little Manila Disappeared Without a Trace

L.A.'s Little Manila district (around what is now Little Tokyo) bustled in the 1920s and 1930s and was a hub for Filipinos who began migrating in large numbers to Los Angeles in the early 20th

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