

A September 11th Catastrophe You've Probably Never Heard About

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On September 11, 1957, 55 years ago tomorrow, a national catastrophe was unfolding, one you likely have never heard about before. At the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility near Denver, inside the plutonium processing building, a fire had started in an area designed to be fireproof.

Soon it was roaring over, through, and around the carefully constricted plutonium as one Cold-War-era safety feature after another failed. The roof of the building, the building itself, were threatened. And plumes of radioactive smoke went straight up into Colorado's late summer night air. High into the air, if you believe the witnesses.

For 13 hours on the night of the 11th, into the morning the next day, the fire raged inside that building, until firefighters put it out (with water -- exposing themselves, and perhaps the entire front range of Colorado, to an even greater risk of radiation). When it was over, Energy Department officials, and the Dow Chemical officials who then ran the facility, did not share the extent of the catastrophe, or the radiation danger, with local officials or the media.

For years, no one really knew how bad it had been, what it meant for those exposed to the radiation, or how such a dangerous event could be prevented in the future.

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