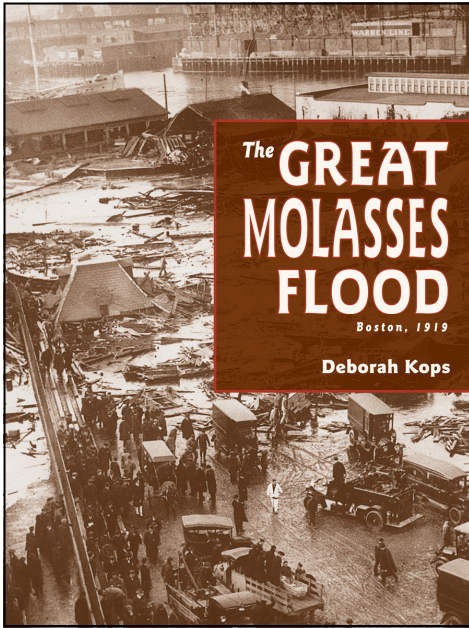


The Great Molasses Flood

Boston, 1919



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Ages 9–12

Discussion & Activity Guide

January 15, 1919, started off as a normal day in Boston’s North End. Workers took a break for lunch, children played in the park, trains made trips between North and South Stations. Then all of a sudden a large tank of molasses exploded, sending shards of metal hundreds of feet away, collapsing buildings, and coating the harborfront community with a thick layer of sticky-sweet sludge.

Deborah Kops takes the reader through this bizarre and relatively unknown disaster, including the cleanup and court proceedings that followed. What happened? Why did the tank explode? Many people died or were injured in the accident—who was to blame? Kops focuses on several individuals involved in the events of that day, creating a more personal look at this terrible tragedy.

Discussion and Essay Topics

- 1) A large portion of *The Great Molasses Flood* is told through the eyes of certain individuals involved in the events of the day—for example, Antonio DiStasio, John Flynn, and Martin Clougherty. Did you like this way of presenting the information? How did it differ from other books that you have read about historical events?
- 2) What did the molasses disaster have to do with prohibition and the end of the Great War?
- 3) Which character did you find the most interesting? Who would you like to learn more about and why?
- 4) Chief Justice Wilfred Bolster believed that while the molasses tank was not built strong enough, the people of Boston were also to blame. Why did he think this? Do you agree with his reasoning? How do you think you would have reacted to this statement if you were a citizen of Boston in 1919?
- 5) Did it surprise you when Charles Choate, the lawyer for USIA, suggested that eleven-year-old Maria DiStasio might be the bomber? Why or why not?
- 6) What effect did groups like the American Anarchists have on how Boston citizens treated Italian American immigrants who lived in the city? Do you think this kind of prejudice occurs in America today?

Activities & Research Projects

Government

- 1) The ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment on January 16, 1919, the day after the molasses flood, marked the beginning of the Prohibition era in America. It meant that a year later, on January 16, 1920, the manufacturing and sale of alcohol was illegal by law. How does an amendment become a law? What are the steps that need to happen?
- 2) *The Great Molasses Flood* briefly introduces another important amendment in American history—the amendment giving women the right to vote. This amendment was ratified after the molasses flood. What amendment was this? What were the arguments for each side? Who were the important figures in the struggle to make this amendment law? Split up into two groups, one for the amendment, one against it. Stage a mock debate in which each side explains their beliefs.
- 3) In chapter three, Deborah Kops mentions how the Anarchist Exclusion Act was put into place in 1918. What were the specifics of this act? What did this mean for many people who immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s? Why did some people think that the Anarchist Exclusion Act violated the First Amendment?



Suffolk County Courthouse, Pemberton Square

Photo courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department

Historical Studies

- 1) John Fitzgerald, a former mayor of Boston, was very popular among the citizens of Boston. We learn a little about him in the book, but what else can you find out about him? What were his political views? Why was he such a beloved figure in American politics? How do you think his Irish family background affected his views on anti-immigration laws that his opponents, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, were proposing at the time?
- 2) Even though the courts determined that a bomber was not responsible for the molasses flood, the idea made some sense, given the time period. Groups like the American Anarchists had been making threats and even bombing places like churches, police stations, and Wall Street. What does the term “anarchy” mean? What did these groups want? Who were some of the major leaders of these groups?

Activities & Research Projects (cont.)

Language Arts

- 1) *The Great Molasses Flood* is a work of historical nonfiction—it tells a story about real people who were involved in a real event from the past. The author Deborah Kops wrote from the perspective of these people, using court documents to find actual quotations to use in her narrative. What if the author could have interviewed the characters? What if one of the people highlighted in the book had left behind a journal or a letter about his or her experience? Choose any character from the book and conduct an interview with him or her. Or write a journal entry or letter from that person.
- 2) If you were a lawyer in the court case that followed the molasses flood disaster, what would you say in your closing statement? Choose a side in the trial. Was the flood the USIA's fault? Or an anarchist bomber's? Write a one-page summary arguing your side, and present it to the class.



Photo courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Newspaper Archive

Front page of the January 16, 1919, Boston Post, documenting the disaster

Science/Mathematics

- 1) What does “fermentation” mean? What happens during the process of fermentation?
- 2) The only way the rescue crews were able to get rid of the molasses was by spraying the streets with seawater from the harbor. Why did the seawater break down the molasses, while the freshwater from the fireman’s hoses did not?



Engine 31, the Thomas A. Ring

Photo courtesy of Frank Fitzgerald and the Boston Sparks Association

- 3) On the day of the molasses flood, there were 2,319,525 gallons of molasses in the tank. The molasses weighed about 13,000 tons (page 3).

a) If there are 26,000,000 pounds in 13,000 tons, how many pounds are in 1 ton?*

b) If there are 3.79 liters in 1 gallon, how many liters of molasses were in the tank that day? How many 2-liter bottles of lemonade is that? (Remember, for your answer to make sense, you’ll need to round to the nearest whole number.)*

(*Answers on page 8)

Reader's Theater

Developed by Deborah Kops

Cast of Characters:

Narrator One

Narrator Two

Narrator Three

Martin Clougherty [CLOFF-er-tee]

Teresa Clougherty

Antonio DiStasio

John Flynn

Arthur Jell

Elizabeth O'Brien

Lawyer for US Industrial Alcohol (USIA)

Lawyer for the plaintiffs (victims and victims' families)

Sound

Narrator 1: January 15, 1919, started out like any other weekday in the North End, near Boston's harbor. At noon most workers were taking their lunch break and enjoying warmer weather.

Sound: [A giant yawn]

Narrator 2: But not Martin Clougherty. He was just waking up. Clougherty had been working until late at night at his bar. His sister, Teresa, entered his room.

Teresa Clougherty: Martin, it's time to get up and eat. Mother has just put the food on the table.

Narrator 3: The Cloughertys' house was near Commercial Street, which was wide and busy. Right across the street from the Cloughertys' house was a giant tank filled with molasses. The molasses was made into alcohol, which was later used to make ammunition.

Narrator 1: Tiny streams of molasses leaked from the seams of the giant tank. Nine-year-old Antonio DiStasio was catching molasses drips with a stick and licking them off.

Antonio DiStasio: [Loudly] Don't you want some molasses, Maria? I just found a good place on the tank to catch the drips.

Narrator 2: But Maria shook her head no. She was busy gathering wood near the railroad tracks. The wood she collected helped their parents keep their apartment warm.

Narrator 3: The molasses was next to a busy train yard. John Flynn worked in the yard. He was just back from a haircut. He was heading for a room in Number 3 freight house to have lunch with his friends.

Narrator 1: Mrs. O'Brien lived near the train yard. She was in the back of the apartment she shared with her sister. Mrs. O'Brien was washing some clothes in a washtub.

Mrs. O'Brien: What a lovely day. I'll just finish up the wash and hang my clothes outside to dry.

Sound: [A loud noise—BAM! Then rivets popping—RAT-A-TAT-TAT. Then a giant WHOOSH!]

Narrator 2: Teresa Clougherty was still in Martin's room. She looked out the window.

Teresa Clougherty: Martin! Something terrible has happened to the molasses tank!

Martin Clougherty: Stay here. I'll go see.

Sound: [A loud scream, in a woman's voice. AHHHHH!]

Martin Clougherty: Mother?

Narrator 3: The molasses tank had burst and more than two million gallons of molasses poured out. A minute later, Martin Clougherty went sailing through the air. He didn't realize it, but a giant wave of molasses moved his house off its foundation.

Martin Clougherty: Where am I? In the harbor? The water is so dark and sticky!

Narrator 1: Clougherty found a floating mattress and climbed on top. He saw a hand sticking out of the goo.

Martin Clougherty: Teresa?

Narrator 2: Martin pulled someone out of the molasses and onto the mattress.

Martin Clougherty: Oh, Teresa! Thank goodness you're alive! But you look dazed.

Teresa Clougherty: [Mumbling] Mother.

Martin Clougherty: Mother! Where is she?

Narrator 3: Meanwhile, the molasses had knocked Antonio DiStasio right off his feet.

Antonio: Ouch!

Narrator 1: Antonio bumped into a curb. Then the churning sea of molasses pushed him toward the harbor. He called to his sister:

Antonio: Maria! Where are you? Help!

Narrator 2: John Flynn had just stepped onto the platform of Number 3 freight house when he heard the explosion.

John Flynn: What was that?

Narrator 3: Suddenly cars, horse wagons, and even trucks seemed to be moving in Flynn's direction. A truck went right through the freight house and landed in the harbor. John Flynn landed there, too.

John Flynn: Oh, this water is freezing!

Narrator 1: Flynn looked up and saw one of his buddies on the roof.

John Flynn: How did you get up there? I don't know how long I'm going to last down here.

Narrator 2: Mrs. O'Brien heard the explosion, too. A moment later . . .

Sound: [THUD. BANG.]

Narrator 3: Mrs. O'Brien was lying on the floor with the metal washtub over her.

Mrs. O'Brien: Oh my goodness! I'm soaking wet!

Narrator 1: She went looking for her sister. But her sister wasn't there. And neither was the rest of her apartment.

Narrator 2: Soon the entire neighborhood rang with the sound of ambulances.

Sound: [WOO, WOO, WOO, WOO!]

Narrator 3: Martin and Teresa made it safely out of the molasses. Firemen rescued Antonio and Mrs. O'Brien. And a man in a boat pulled John Flynn out of the water.

Narrator 1: But Martin and Teresa's mother drowned. So did Antonio's sister Maria. Twenty-one people died.

Narrator 2: Houses and businesses were destroyed.

Narrator 3: And the streets and sidewalks of the North End were coated with sticky molasses.

Narrator 1: Everyone had the same question:

Narrators 1, 2, 3: Who is responsible for the molasses flood? Someone has to pay!

Narrator 1: Hugh Ogden was going to find out. He was acting as a judge in a giant court case about the molasses flood.

Narrator 2: The lawyer for the molasses tank owner had some questions for John Flynn. The owner of the tank was US Industrial Alcohol, or USIA.

Lawyer for USIA: Now, is there any object or thing that stands out in your mind before you ended up in the water?

John Flynn: I seen everything coming toward me: automobiles, horses and wagons, and freight cars.

Lawyer for USIA: What kind of noise was this that you heard when you stepped up on the platform?

John Flynn: It sounded to me as though something was cracking and ripping.

Narrator 3: Antonio DiStasio and his father came to court a week after John Flynn. He was eleven years old now.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: What is your full name?

Antonio DiStasio: [very quietly] Antonio.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: Now, you know, if there was a fellow on the other side of the street and you wanted him, you wouldn't talk in that tone of voice. You would holler out loud. Now, speak loudly so everybody can hear. Tell everyone what you were doing when the molasses tank collapsed.

Antonio DiStasio: [a little louder] I was playing with my sister, Maria.

Narrator 1: The lawyer for USIA had some questions, too.

Lawyer for USIA: Did Maria run into the yard where the tank was?

Antonio DiStasio: No.

Lawyer for USIA: Did you?

Antonio DiStasio: No.

Narrator 2: Antonio was afraid to tell the truth. He knew he and Maria weren't supposed to be in the train yard or anywhere near the molasses tank.

Narrator 3: Mrs. O'Brien had her turn in court, too.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: Tell us what happened to you after the explosion.

Mrs. O'Brien: Well, I opened a door to my apartment, and I could see that it had collapsed. I was horrified! A fireman put up his hand for me to step back, you know. So I waited until the fireman came over.

Narrator 1: A lawyer for the plaintiffs went to New York to see Arthur Jell. He worked for USIA. Jell had been in charge of the molasses tank when it collapsed.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: When did the tank receive its first load of molasses?

Arthur Jell: December 31, 1915.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: Did you, while the tank was being built, fill it with water to be sure it would be able to hold more than two million gallons of liquid without leaking?

Arthur Jell: I did not.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: Why not?

Arthur Jell: For one reason, there was no time. We were expecting a delivery of molasses very soon.

Narrator 2: The molasses trial went on for three years. At the end, the lawyers from each side had a chance to say why they thought the tank collapsed. The lawyers for USIA said it exploded because someone put a bomb in the tank. The lawyer for the plaintiffs disagreed.

Lawyer for the plaintiffs: Did a mythical bomber climb at high noon up the side of the fifty-foot molasses tank? In the heart of a busy city, with hundreds of people about? And then he or she disappeared into thin air? Not very likely.

Narrator 3: The bomb theory sounds crazy today. But it didn't sound completely crazy to people in 1919. Some people in the United States wanted to overthrow the government. And they did plant bombs.

Narrator 1: But Hugh Ogden, the acting judge, did not believe anyone planted a bomb in the molasses tank. He decided that USIA was in too much of a rush to build a tank in the middle of a big city.

Narrator 2: The tank wasn't strong enough. And when USIA realized the tank leaked, it kept right on filling it with millions of gallons of heavy molasses.

Narrator 3: Something good did come of this tragedy. The Boston Building Department became stricter. It asked for more information before it allowed anyone to build a large building or tank. Other cities in the country followed Boston's example.

Narrator 1: The molasses flood was the strangest accident in Boston's history.

Narrator 2: It was unforgettable, especially in the summer. For many years hot weather reminded people of the flood. Whenever they got near Martin Clougherty and Mrs. O'Brien's neighborhood they smelled . . .

Narrators 1, 2, and 3: Molasses!

Answers

Mathematics (page 3)

Use cross multiplication to find the answers. The number you are looking for is your "X."

a) **Answer: There are 2,000 lbs in 1 ton.**

$$\frac{26,000,000 \text{ lbs}}{13,000 \text{ tons}} = \frac{\text{X lbs}}{1 \text{ ton}} \quad 26,000,000 \times 1 = 13,000\text{X} \quad \text{X} = 2,000 \text{ lbs}$$

b) **Answer: There were 8,790,999.7 liters of molasses in the tank. That equals 4,395,499 full 2-liter bottles of lemonade!**

$$\frac{3.79 \text{ liters}}{1 \text{ gallon}} = \frac{\text{X liters}}{2,319,525 \text{ gallons}} \quad 3.79 \times 2,319,525 = 1\text{X} \quad \text{X} = 8,790,999.7 \text{ liters}$$

$$\frac{2 \text{ liters}}{1 \text{ bottle}} = \frac{8,790,999.7 \text{ liters}}{\text{X bottles}} \quad 2\text{X} = 1 \times 8,790,999.7 \quad \text{X} = 4,395,499.8 \text{ bottles, or } 4,395,499 \text{ full bottles}$$

Meet the Author

Deborah Kops



Deborah Kops began writing in the fourth grade, when a wonderful teacher, Mrs. Silvers, encouraged the class to make up lots of stories. She has written more than twenty books for children and young adults, including a biography of Abraham Lincoln and *Were Potato Chips Really Invented by an Angry Chef? and Other Questions about Food*.

Before becoming a children's book writer, she edited books on American history at Northeastern University Press, and later, nonfiction books for children at Blackbirch Press. Deborah lives with her husband and son in Greater Boston, and enjoys exploring old towns and neighborhoods on the Atlantic coast, including the North End, where the Great Molasses Flood occurred.

Charlesbridge: Why did you want to tell the story of the molasses flood?

Deborah Kops: It was such a bizarre disaster! I was sure kids would want to read about it. Can you imagine your neighborhood awash in thick, dark, sticky molasses? The flood was also a terrible tragedy, though. Twenty-one people died, and homes and businesses were destroyed, too.

There was also another reason I wanted to write about the flood. It happened during such an interesting time in American history. World War I had just ended, and American soldiers were coming home from Europe. But this country was not exactly a peaceful place. In Boston, a church and a police station were bombed a few years before the molasses flood. And just days before the tank burst, a group of anarchists threatened more violence. At least one historian has called this period America's first age of terror.

CB: How did you conduct the research for the book?

DK: I read newspaper accounts from the period, and Stephen Puleo's book about the flood, *Dark Tide*. I also spent time walking the old historic streets of the North End, and found the site where the molasses tank stood. But the most interesting and time-consuming research involved going through all 25,000 pages of the court transcript from the molasses flood hearings. The transcript contained the stories of the many people who were affected by the flood. One man, for example, was working in the train yard near the molasses tank when it burst. He said he felt like he was being pushed by a big gust of wind—right into the Charles River. I was able to read the transcript in the very same courthouse in downtown Boston where the hearings had taken place, more than ninety years ago. I loved that.

CB: As you wrote the book, did you find yourself drawn to a specific character more than any others?

DK: I thought a lot about poor Antonio DiStasio, who was only nine years old when he was swept off his feet by the giant wave of molasses. And I liked Elizabeth O'Brien, who had a sense of humor. She was doing her wash when the tank burst. She, too, was knocked off her feet. When she got up, soaking wet, she said she went looking for sympathy from her sister, with whom she shared her apartment. But her sister, and part of their apartment, were missing.

Visit www.charlesbridge.com for a complete interview with Deborah.