

Mining Accident News No.0822

Thursday 25 September 2008

TAS: Last witness at Beaconsfield concludes today

Extract from ABC News Online, Aus

The final witness at an inquest into the death of Beaconsfield miner Larry Knight is expected to finish giving evidence today.

Matthew Gill was the mine's manager when a rockfall killed Mr Knight on Anzac Day 2006.



The final witness in the Beaconsfield inquest into the death of Larry Knight will finish giving evidence today. (ABC News)

Mr Gill had been working at the mine for more than a decade when Mr Knight was killed, and was the public face of the rescue of two other miners trapped underground for a fortnight.

He told the inquest yesterday that he'd been considering leaving Beaconsfield in the months before the rockfall.

The inquest was shown an email in which Mr Gill said he was worried it would be hard to find a job if things went "pear shaped" at the mine.

Mr Gill also said he'd lobbied the State Government for more resources for Workplace Standards, but had been disappointed by the response.

Update: Beaconsfield manager tells of distress at inquest

Extract from ABC News Online, Aus

A former Beaconsfield Mine Manager has told an inquest in northern Tasmania that it's been distressing having to re-live the events of Anzac Day 2006.

The Launceston inquest's last witness, Matthew Gill, has finished giving evidence.

Mr Gill was the public face of the gold mine after the collapse that killed Larry Knight and trapped Todd Russell and Brant Webb for a fortnight.

Mr Gill's evidence about the circumstances leading up to the rockfall has concluded 9 weeks of hearings from nearly 40 witnesses.

He said the events of Anzac Day and since had been very, very distressing for many people.

He told the court that "after two years it is still a matter of great regret that we lost a workmate in Larry Knight."

Mine "ramped up" production before rockfall

Earlier, Mr Gill was asked about miners statements that in the week before the rockfall production accelerated and the mine was "going flat out".

The counsel assisting the Coroner Michael O'Farrell showed Mr Gill figures where miners had only managed to haul out 10,000 tonnes of rock in the first 20 days of April.

The figures also showed there was another 6000 tonnes of gold ore extracted in just four days after a note from an underground manager urged miners to step up production and "make heroes of themselves".

The court has adjourned for 2 months while the lawyers prepare their final submissions.

VIC: Four hurt in Ballarat mine shaft

Extract from ABC News Online, Aus

A section of the Ballarat Gold mine operated by Lihir Gold has been cordoned off after four workers were injured in an accident.

The four men were building a ventilation shaft 200 metres underground last night when a winch rope snapped.

One of the men cracked a rib in the accident and another suffered an ankle injury.

All four workers were taken to the Ballarat Base Hospital with minor injuries and burns.

Hospital staff says the men were shaken and frightened by the ordeal, but all four returned to work this morning.

A spokesman for Lihir Gold says the affected part of the mine has been isolated and Worksafe will examine the site today.

SA: Man dies in coal mine plunge

Compiled from *ABC News Online, Aus and adelaidenow.com.au*

A man in his late 40s has died from a fall at the Leigh Creek coal mine in the far north of South Australia, 567km north of Adelaide.



A man dies from a fall into the coal mine at Leigh Creek (Photo by Rebecca Doble)

Police say he fell from a bulldozer at about 9:30am ACST, then over a ledge into the mine and landed on another ledge, where he was treated for his injuries before being lifted by a rescue team.

The man was rushed to the Leigh Creek Hospital, where he died from his injuries.

Police and SafeWork SA investigators have gone to the scene.

A report will be prepared for the Coroner.

Three Die in Ore Mine Collapse in Eastern China

Extract from *RedOrbit, Dallas, TX, USA*

HANGZHOU, Sept. 24 (Xinhua) -- Three workers were killed in an ore mine cave-in on Wednesday in east China's Zhejiang Province, according to the local government.

The accident took place at about 8 a.m. when five miners were reinforcing loose rocks in a

calcite mining pit in the small mine in Liaonan Village, Fuyang City.

A large volume of rocks and dirt suddenly fell from the pit roof, killing three on the spot. The other two workers escaped.

The local government was investigating the accident and working on compensation for the families of the victims.

The village-run mine was fully licensed.

Manila, Philippines: Hopes dimming for survivors in Benguet mines accident

Extract from *BusinessWorld Online*

RESCUE OPERATIONS for 13 miners trapped inside a gold mine in Benguet province was halted anew due to flooding and toxic gas in the site, and hopes are dimming for any survivors.

In a telephone interview with Defense reporters, Chief Superintendent Eugene Martin, Cordillera Administrative Region police director, said rescuers were forced to leave the site shortly before noon yesterday due to lack of equipment.

The Antamok gold field mines is in Poblacion village in the municipality of Itogon.

"We do not want to risk the lives of our rescuers. Aside from the strong current of water, they cannot stand the smell of the toxic gas," Mr. Martin said.

Armed only with ropes and flashlights, he said the rescuers are not equipped with oxygen supply and gas masks.

Friday 26 September 2008

TAS: Larry Knight's family thanks the Coroner

Extract from *ABC News Online, Aus*

The family of the miner who died in the 2006 Anzac Day rockfall at Beaconsfield in northern Tasmania is hopeful the inquest will prevent another mining accident.

The coroner has finished hearing 9 weeks of evidence from nearly 40 witnesses.

The former mine manager Matthew Gill was the face of Beaconsfield Gold after the ANZAC day rockfall that killed Larry Knight and trapped two other miners.

At the end of his evidence, Mr Gill said that for past and present managers and miners at Beaconsfield, reliving the mine collapse for the inquest has been very distressing.



Shane Knight, the brother of Larry Knight who was killed in the Beaconsfield mine disaster, hopes the inquest will prevent future accidents. (ABC News: Kathleen Dyett)

Mr Knight's brother Shane said the inquest has brought some important evidence to light.

"Hopefully something will come out of it which will make underground mining in Tasmania a safer place for the people that work there," said Mr Knight.

The family has also thanked a Tasmanian coroner for his thorough approach to the inquest into Larry Knight's death.

Shane Knight says he and the rest of the family are grateful to everyone who gave evidence.

"It is very hard it's been a very long process and there is nothing we can do to bring Larry back but hopefully through this we make it a safer work environment for the workers that are still there."

The inquest will resume in November when the lawyers will present their final submissions to the coroner, Rod Chandler.

USA: Kentucky Man Recovering Following Bulldozer Accident at Surface Mine

Extract from *Bristol Herald Courier, USA*

A Kentucky man is recovering at Johnson City Medical Center after suffering six cracked vertebrae in a mining accident late Wednesday in Wise County, Va.

Michael Wright said from his hospital bed that he has 20 years of surface mining experience and it was a freak accident when the bulldozer he was driving rolled off a 25-foot wall.

"I was trying to get a rock down off the highwall, and I was sitting on a rock, the solid rock bench, and when I pushed against the rock forward, the dozer slid around into some loose material," said Wright, 51, of Jenkins, Ky.

"The loose material ... wasn't heavy enough to hold the dozer up, and it started slipping sideways, and I tried to turn the dozer around forward ... but it just happened so fast I didn't get the time to turn around."

In addition to the cracked vertebrae, he suffered a broken rib and a contusion on his spleen. Recovery may take a while, he said.

The mine, which has been in operation since 2005 by Fairbanks Coal Co., has not been closed as a result of the accident, said Mike Abbott, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy.

He said DMME and the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration are investigating the accident, which occurred near the Roda community.

"It rolled one complete time, meaning it went over the wall, rolled one time and came back upright on his tracks," Abbott said. "Mr. Wright was wearing his seat belt, and so he was not ejected from the bulldozer."

Abbott said the accident occurred at 10:30 p.m. and Wright was airlifted to JCMC.

Wright said one of the owners of the company visited him in the hospital.

He complimented the rescuers who responded to the accident.

"They did a real good job of getting me out of the dozer, and I want to thank them for all their help," he said.

SA: Production stops after fatal mine accident at Leigh Ck

Extract from ABC News Online, Aus

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union says production levels are being put ahead of safety in the mining industry.

A mine worker was killed at Leigh Creek in the far north of South Australia yesterday.

It is believed the man in his 40s fell from a bulldozer, then down a ledge into the mine.

The union's state secretary, Martin O'Malley, says such accidents highlight the need for more stringent safety mechanisms.

"When the push is on to get things produced at a very rapid rate, the mines are traditionally notorious, especially pit mines as opposed to open cut, for injury," he said.

"They're right up there in Australia with the construction industry as the worst industry, so it's always a problem."

SafeWork SA investigators visited police in Port Augusta overnight to discuss the incident before going to the site to meet mine management.

USA: 2 men injured in Cochise County mine accident recovering

Extract from Arizona Daily Star, Tucson, AZ, USA

Two workers who were hospitalized after a gust of wind caused a 20,000 pound piece of sheet metal to strike them were released Friday.

A third man also suffered an injury to his left leg but was treated at the scene.

The incident occurred Thursday morning at the Johnson Camp Mine east of Benson - approximately one mile north of Interstate 10 on North 7 Dash Road, according to a news

release from the Cochise County Sheriff's Office.

Three men ages 21, 38 and 52 were working in a deep pit while the large piece of sheet metal was suspended from an overhead crane, the release said.

A strong gust of wind caught the metal and caused it to swing downward, hitting the men, the release said.

The 21-year-old man suffered possible internal injuries while the 38-year-old had an injury to his left foot. The 52-year-old sustained the leg injury.

The 21-year-old and the 38-year-old were flown to University Medical Center because of the remote location, the release said.

The men were part of a crew working for Hunter Contracting in Tucson.

Sunday 28 September 2008

Philippines: Rescuers to pump water out of tragedy-hit Benguet mine

Extract from GMA News.TV, Philippines

MANILA, Philippines - Rescue operations for 13 other miners trapped in an underground gold mine in Itogon town in Benguet province have included the use of hoses to extract water from the flooded tunnel.

A GMA Flash Report on Sunday said that high floodwaters hampered rescue efforts of the Mines and Geosciences Bureau.

On Thursday, rescuers found the bodies of three miners but only two were recovered. The two were identified as Joel Bulga from Aglipay town, Quirino province, and Vincent Himmayod of San Dionisio, Nagtipunan town, Quirino province. The third cadaver has not been brought out of a tunnel as hopes of finding trapped miners were dampened by Saturday's heavy downpour.

Meanwhile, the MGB offered a suggestion to blow up a portion of the gold mine to let

floodwaters flow out of the mine shaft, to which Itogon residents protested.

Nearly 100 rescuers have been battling heavy rains and rising water to look for the miners, who went into the shafts Monday amid a typhoon that rapidly flooded the tunnels.

Some of the miners may have found a ledge to stand on in one of the underground tunnels about 400-700 feet (120-210 meters) underground, and they might still be saved if found in time.

The underground tunnels, dug decades ago in mountainous Benguet province, were abandoned in the late 1990s by a gold mining company, which posted guards at two entrances to prevent accidents.

The trapped miners — who were working on their own with no permit — dug a narrow passageway to gain access to the tunnels, said George Baywong, a mines bureau official.

China: Mine Crimes

Extract from Beijing Review.com.cn, China

A deadly ore mine accident in Shanxi Province is a shocking reminder about the grim reality of the country's mining industry



RESCUERS IN ACTION: The local government mobilized a large number of rescue workers to pull out survivors from the wall of sludge and minimize the losses caused by the mudslide

An iron ore mine disaster in Shanxi Province, which killed hundreds of people on the morning of September 8, abruptly ended the tranquility and served as a reminder about how unsafe some of the country's mines are.

The accident occurred in a mine waste reservoir at the Tashan Mine owned by Xinta Mining Co. Ltd. (Xinta) in Xiangfen County, Linfen City. Local officials said heavy rains, which broke a retaining wall in a mine waste reservoir, caused a massive mudslide down a 50-meter-high hillside. A deluge of mud, several meters high, roared through a nearby marketplace and covered some buildings to their roofs, witnesses told Xinhua News Agency. The surrounding houses and a three-story office building were destroyed in minutes, and a village that was home to about 1,300 residents was buried under a wall of sludge.

Rescuers wasted no time rushing to the scene. Around 100 local villagers, firefighters and policemen raced against clock to hunt for survivors trapped in the sea of mud, which covered 74 acres. Rescuers managed to pull out 41 survivors, but hopes of finding more appeared dim two days after the disaster. So far, the death toll has risen to 265, with another 35 injured.

Rescue workers had continued to search for other survivors despite fading hope. President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao ordered all-out efforts in rescue operations and a thorough investigation into the cause of the accident. Ma Kai, State Councillor and Secretary-General of the State Council, rushed to the accident scene to direct rescue efforts. By September 12, a total of 4,700 rescuers and health workers had participated in the disaster relief work and helped to disinfect the affected area.

The government has pledged to pay 200,000 yuan (\$29,261) to the families of each identified victim and give financial help to those who were injured, according to Xiangfen County's relief program. Those who were displaced have been resettled in temporary shelters, and the local government will subsidize the reconstruction of their homes.

In another move, Meng Xuenong, Governor of Shanxi Province, took the blame for the accident and resigned after only eight months

in office. He was replaced by Wang Jun, Minister of the State Administration of Work Safety, who was named acting governor. Zhang Jianmin, Vice Governor of Shanxi Province in charge of work safety, was removed from office. A number of other local officials also were suspended from their duties, and the mine's president and a few senior managers were arrested.

A man-made disaster

County officials at first blamed a downpour for the collapse of the mine waste dump and the mud-rock flow and called it a natural disaster. But this turned out to be unfounded. Local villagers told Xinhua News Agency that the officials' statement was totally deceptive, because it only drizzled for a while on the morning of September 8.

Data from the Meteorological Bureau of Xiangfen County offered more clues. The whole county had received only a minimum rainfall amounting to 1.5 mm since the beginning of September, according to the Xiangfen bureau. This amount was not enough to sufficiently wet the ground, let alone cause a mudslide, said specialists at the China Meteorological Bureau.

The statement by local government officials and the high death toll prodded the Central Government to delve deeper into the cause of the catastrophe. On September 11, it set up a special investigation team headed by Wang Jun. The team was composed of investigators from several national departments, including the Ministry of Land and Resources, the State Administration of Work Safety and the Ministry of Supervision.

The team's initial probe found that stored waste iron ore dregs had exceeded the holding capacity of the reservoir, causing the walls to collapse. Although it had increased its production of iron ore, the Tashan Mine was poorly equipped with safety facilities and had no regard for possible dangers, Wang Jun told Xinhua News Agency.

The province currently has more than 500 mine waste dumps, according to data from the Shanxi Provincial Administration of Work Safety. Local reports estimate that more than half of them currently operate illegally without safety licenses. Xinta's production-safety license was revoked in 2006, and the company did not renew its mining license when it expired in August 2007, the Xinhua article said. Furthermore, Xinta did not build a new iron ore waste dump as required by local safety rules, but overfilled the already fragile old one, despite complaints from the miners and local residents.

"The mine managers could not be clearer about the hidden dangers of the reservoir, but they did nothing," Liang Zhihong, a migrant worker at the mine, told the *Outlook Weekly*. "It was not a natural disaster; it was man-made."

Peng Guohua, another miner, was quoted by the *Outlook Weekly* as saying, "The black-hearted bosses make their fortune and leave behind a deadly mess."

Zhang Genhu, Director of Shanxi Provincial Administration of Work Safety, publicly said that unscrupulous mine owners had profited handsomely from reckless mining. The owners were not interested in investing in safety equipment, because it would cost much more than having to pay off the families of those who were killed in any accidents, said a report in *China Daily*.

Zhang added that the iron ore mines have not attracted much attention from government regulators, because most of the mines are open pits and less likely than coalmines to collapse and kill workers trapped inside them.

A battle of interests

Despite years of safety campaigns and clean-up efforts, China's mining sector still remains vulnerable to life-threatening accidents. The September 8 mudslide was the latest in a string of disasters to rock Linfen, a city with more than 400 mines. An appalling coalmine

gas explosion in Hongdong County last December 15 claimed 105 lives.

In the wake of the September 8 calamity, the Chinese Government ordered urgent checks on mines throughout the country and a crackdown on disqualified mines to curb the recent upsurge in accidents.

But some insiders of the mining sector say they are concerned that the order may not have any immediate effect, because some grassroots governments may be less motivated to shut down illegal mines out of fear of hurting local employment levels and tax revenue.

Besides this, the country's brisk demand for iron ore for its booming industry also may make the safety orders difficult to enforce at the grass-roots level. Because iron ore is currently in short supply in China, the high profits from its sale have driven some mine owners to push their production levels beyond safety limits.

An additional problem is that some corrupt local officials have colluded with coalmine owners and usually have turned a blind eye to rampant illegal mining activities in return for a share of the profits. Some have even helped cover up the illegal activities of mine owners to protect their vested interests.

According to local news reports, the Work Safety Bureau of Xiangfen County had ordered Xinta to improve its safety equipment before the accident, but the company ignored it and relevant government departments did not crack down on the company and allowed it to continue operating.

More findings

The investigation team also has raised concerns about the part played by corrupt local officials in the disaster. Huang Yi, Spokesman of the State Administration of Work Safety, told Xinhua News Agency that it was likely that the unlicensed mining company had been operating with the tacit support of

local officials. Otherwise, the mine should have been closed down long ago, he said.

Wang also raised questions about previous inspections of the mine. "Any inspection of the mine could have detected such a huge leaky ore waste reservoir, and how could it have escaped the safety tests?" he said.

Some central government officials say the collusion between mine owners and local bureaucrats defies any rigid safety regulatory system, so that only severe punishments could pose a deterrence for both of them.

Monday 29 September 2008

QLD: Mine study finds work fatigue, drinking similarities

Extract from ABC News Online, Aus

A new study into miner fatigue has revealed working while tired results in similar effects to being drunk.

The research examined 55 workers at a north Queensland mine and showed after eight consecutive 12-hour day shifts, workers behaved like they had a blood alcohol level of 0.05.

Dr Tony Carter from the James Cook University says there were also adverse effects after the miners' second and third night shifts.

"On the first two to three night shifts, the end of those night shifts were their worst cognitive processing times," he said.

"So we would certainly recommend increasing the number of consecutive night shifts beyond four, which are typically seen in the Bowen Basin, to around seven or eight to adapt the change in circadian rhythm."

Philippines: Two rescued after a week in flooded mine

Extract from Independent Online, Cape Town, South Africa

Manila - Two miners trapped for a week in a flooded gold mine in the northern Philippines were brought out alive on Monday, officials said.

At least 18 people were trapped in the gold mine in the province of Benguet after a shaft was flooded by heavy rain brought by a typhoon on September 22.

Nestor Fongwan, the governor of Benguet, told ABS-CBN television that the two men were rescued by navy frogmen. They were immediately taken to hospital, radio reports said.

Rescuers have found the bodies of two miners so far and Fongwan said there could be some others still alive.

"The rescuers heard some screaming so there's a big possibility that there could be others still alive," he said.

Heavy rain and a lack of oxygen tanks had hampered the rescue operation and last week officials had said there was virtually no hope of finding any of the miners alive.

Landslides and flash floods are common across the Philippine archipelago during the monsoon months between May and October, particularly near mining areas, as well as low-lying and coastal areas.

Coal mine accident kills six in southwest China

Extract from Xinhua, China

KUNMING - A coal and gas outburst left six miners dead in southwest China's Yunnan Province on Monday, local authorities said.

The accident happened at about 3:30 p.m. at the Xiaowuqie Coal Mine in the Zhaxi Township of Weixin County, a county government spokesman said, providing no further details.

It was not immediately known how many people were working in the shaft when the accident took place.

Outburst is a phenomenon characterized by ejection of gas and coal from the solid face into the mine, where the gas is a mixture of methane and carbon dioxide.

Investigation into the accident is underway.

USA: Two Hurt in Mine Accident, State Officials Investigate

Extract from WSAZ-TV, Huntington, WV, USA

NICHOLAS COUNTY, W.Va. - Mine investigators in West Virginia are on the scene of a serious accident that happened early Monday morning in Nicholas County.

The incident happened just after midnight at the Alex Energy No. 1 Surface Mine.

According to Jama Jarrett, spokesperson for Miners' Health Safety and Training, a mechanic received severe head and facial injuries while performing maintenance work on a highwall mining machine.

The man was taken to a hospital in Nicholas County, but later transferred to CAMC in Charleston. Jarrett says his injuries are life-threatening.

Another man was hurt in the accident, but his injuries are not believed to be serious.

UPDATE: WVa investigates mine accident that injures 2

Extract from Charlestown Daily Mail, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - State Office of Miners' Health Safety and Training inspectors are at a Nicholas County mine investigating an accident that injured two.

The accident occurred about midnight Monday when a mechanic working on a highwall mining machine suffered severe head and facial injuries.

Miners' Health Safety and Training spokeswoman Jama Jarrett says the man was taken to Charleston Area Medical Center.

A second person was injured, but Jarrett says his injuries are not believed to be serious.

The accident occurred at the Alex Energy No. 1 mine.

The names of the injured have not been released.

USA: MSHA extends drug rule comment period

Extract from *The Charleston Gazette, USA*

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Federal mine safety officials have extended for three weeks the public comment period on a proposed rule to require drug testing of miners who work in "safety sensitive" jobs in the nation's coal and non-coal mines.

The U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration also scheduled a public hearing for Oct. 14 in Washington, D.C., and announced plans to show the hearing via videoconference at three other locations.

United Mine Workers officials and Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., said the plan does not satisfy their concerns that MSHA was rushing the rule through without adequate public involvement.

Byrd said the coal industry shares at least some of his concerns about the proposed rule.

"The rule is being rushed in the waning days of the administration, despite opposition from coal operators and the miners and their representatives, which is very troubling," Byrd said.

The proposed rule would replace existing standards for drugs and alcohol at metal and non-metal mines with an industry-wide rule that also covers coal operations.

It would designate certain substances -- alcohol and a list of controlled substances -- that could not be possessed on mine property or used while performing "safety-sensitive" job duties, unless they were being used according to a valid prescription.

Mine operators would be required to establish an alcohol- and drug-free program, including a written policy, employee education, supervisory training and drug testing for miners in safety-sensitive jobs and their supervisors. Safety-sensitive jobs are defined as "any type of work activity where a momentary lapse of critical concentration could result in an accident, injury or death."

Company policies must also include treatment referrals for miners who violate the policy. The proposed rule would also require those who violate the prohibitions to be removed from the performance of job-sensitive duties until they complete recommended treatment and their alcohol- and drug-free status is confirmed by testing.

When MSHA initially proposed the rule on Sept. 8, the agency allowed a 30-day comment period -- less than half the time provided for two other rules proposed by the agency this year. Also, MSHA originally did not schedule a public hearing. MSHA held four public hearings around the country on each of the other two rules proposed this year.

On Friday, MSHA announced it would extend the comment period for another 21 days, to Oct. 29.

MSHA also said it would hold a hearing on Oct. 14. The hearing will be available via videoconference hookup at locations in Pittsburgh, Englewood, Colo., Birmingham, Ala., and at the MSHA academy outside Beckley.

Earlier this month, UMW safety director Dennis O'Dell urged MSHA chief Richard Stickler to withdraw the rule.

Phil Smith, the union's press spokesman, said that the new MSHA plan still doesn't allow adequate public input. "This isn't the way the process is supposed to work," Smith said.

China has 25,000-strong mining rescuers

Press release *China Internet Information Center, China*

China's mining rescue efforts have had solid achievements, with the number of rescue teams reaching 397 and trained rescuers reaching 25,000, according to the State Administration of Work Safety (SAWS).

In addition, 18 mining medical rescue bases and 24 medical rescue teams have been established, involving 8,000 medical workers, SAWS sources said.

Since 2004, national mining rescue teams have worked on 13,864 mining accidents and rescued 18,775 people, saving the lives of 6,315.

China's mining accidents and related deaths have been dropping sharply this year, the coal mining industry, for example, had 25.5 percent fewer accidents and 23.7 percent fewer deaths in the first seven months.

However, the actual number of deaths is still high. In the three months from May to July, coal mine accidents left 903 dead, according to SAWS figures.

Historical Mining Accidents

The Great Cherry Coal Mine Disaster, Illinois, USA

13 November 1909

On November 13, 1909, a fire trapped 480 coal miners--men and boys--400 feet below ground in a mine at Cherry, Illinois. Only 221 escaped. Not until the following March were the bodies retrieved and buried. Hundreds of women were widowed and nearly 500 children were orphaned in what was the worst coal mine fire in U.S. history.

Adapted from an article by Steve Stout appearing in the JOURNAL of the Illinois State Historical Society, February, 1979. Vol LXII, Number 1.

Work in the underground tunnels of the early coal mines in Illinois was dark, dirty, and always dangerous. There was always the likelihood of death or injury faced by the men and boys as they dug coal from the often narrow seams, sometimes lying many hundreds of feet below the surface.

Worst of all were the great disasters; an explosion under ground, the sudden flooding of the shafts, the silent spread of poisonous gasses, or fire. In the early years of mining, there were few safety regulations or procedures required by the State. The mining companies showed minimum concern for the safety of the workers.

Replacements could always be found from among the immigrant workers pouring into

America from Europe. Financial liability to injured or even killed workmen was limited. Since they were paid by how much coal they had dug by the end of the day, miners went about their work in a hurry with little time and attention to safe practices.

The wives and mothers of the miners lived in dread of the wail of the mine whistle, sounding the alarm that an accident had happened.

The coal fields in northern Illinois experienced more than a few such dreadful disasters. One of the worst took place on November 13, 1909 in a mine near the little town of Cherry, just a few miles north of La Salle, Ill. on Illinois Highway 13. By 7:00 a.m. that morning 481 men and boys had descended the shaft to reach the coal, in some cases more than 500 feet below the surface.

It began as a day like any other, except that the electrical system had broken down and the mines were lit the old-fashioned way. Kerosene torches were placed along the walls; but the miners were used to that and nobody was alarmed.

Around lunch time several bales of hay were dropped down the hoist to feed the mules. Forty mules, were stabled underground. Their job was to pull the little cars, which had been loaded with coal by the miners through the tunnels to the elevator hoist.

Now, 15-year old Matt Francesco and another man pushed one of the cars piled with the hay over to the stable area. They gave it a final shove down the track, and then went on their way. Unfortunately, the car came to rest under one of the open torches. Soon the hay caught fire. Efforts to move the car out of danger only spread the fire. The heat and smoke became overpowering, as the fire began to spread.

At last the signal to clear out the mine was given, but it was too late for many. Listen to the voice of 16-year-old Peter Donna who led his father through the smoke and darkness toward an escape route.

"After my father and I got to the second level the fire blocked us off. It singed my hair on the side of my face and my head. We circled around the burning section and made our way to the main lift. The smoke almost overtook us. "I led the way All the lights were out and our matches wouldn't stay lit. We met only a few others who came with us on the way. When we finally reached the lift, there was no trouble getting on it and up the shaft. It took several seconds for my eyes to get adjusted to the bright light of the surface. When I finally could see, I couldn't find my father. "I wanted to go back down into the mine and get him, but they stopped me. After a couple more cage-loads of men came up, my father stepped off with an old man he had saved."



Orphans of miners who died at the St. Paul Mine at Cherry, Illinois, in November 1909.

But there were 259 men and boys who were never saved despite great deeds of heroism by volunteer rescue teams. Sadly, that heroism was rewarded with death for no less than twelve of the rescuers. They were a hastily assembled team of people from the town who went down in the cage six times, each time dragging more miners to safety. From the seventh trip into the hell below, however, none returned alive.

There were tales of unbelievable suffering and endurance. One group of miners, 500 feet underground, had built a wall of mud, rocks, and timbers to block off the poisonous gasses. They were in total darkness with only a pool of water leaking from a coal seam to drink.

After eight days of confinement, they could bear it no longer. They tore down the barricade and began crawling through the tunnels. Finally, they heard the sounds of a search party. Twenty-one men still alive from this group were rescued.

After 25 days the Cherry mine was sealed. The question of compensation for the lost lives of the miners and rescuers remained to be resolved. The laws governing worker's compensation and employer liability were not yet on the Illinois statute books, and the mine company had gone into bankruptcy. At length, it was agreed that the settlement of claims would be based on standards set in the Workmen's Compensation Act, which had recently passed in the British Parliament.

A relief commission was set up in June of the following year. It included a representative of the United Mine Workers of America, the union of the coal miners. They administered a relief fund collected from the public, plus a contribution by the coal company, which was actually owned by the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. It came to enough to give about 1,800 dollars to the bereaved families.

Impelled by the public outcry over the tragedy, in 1910 the Illinois legislature established stronger fire and safety regulations governing mines. A year later, the State adopted a liability act, which later developed into the Illinois Workmens' Compensation Act.

Mining dictionary

A guide to common mining terminology

L

longwall mining Method of extracting coal on a continual working face. The space behind the wall, from which coal has been extracted, was in early forms of this method supported by stone packing, but later the roof was allowed to collapse behind the working area, where it was held by steel beams and hydraulic rams. Traditional longwall operations occurred in Australia collieries from the turn of the century at least, though infrequently. Continuous mechanical longwall extraction is a relatively recent introduction in Australia, from the 1950s and 60s onwards.

- Ed.