

COAL FATAL

U.S. BUREAU OF MINES (61)

1944-0017

FATALITIES - UNDERGROUND COAL MINE

(Meeting 5/18/45)

Five men overcome, four fatally, after entering an abandoned coal mine shaft in Indiana.

Five men were overcome by black damp, four of them fatally and the fifth was injured, when they were lowered in a cage to the bottom of a mine, in Indiana on the afternoon of August 11, 1944.

The men were employees of a cooperative organization, and were going to inspect the mine with the possibility of leasing it and again putting it in operation. The five men included the president and the mine superintendent of the company and three miners.

The mine has not been operated for about two years. It has only one opening; a wood-lined, three compartment shaft about 119 feet deep. Two of the compartments are for the cages and return air and the other compartment is for intake air, being separated from the cage compartment by a wooden partition.

On the day of the accident the boilers of the mine were fired about 7:00 a.m. to raise steam to operate the fan and hoist. A fireman was left in charge to look after the boilers and to see that the fan was kept operating. The fireman, who later was one of the victims, observed during the day that the intake air compartment appeared caved from the surface but he thought a hole through the cave was of sufficient size to allow some air to reach the bottom of the shaft. Some difficulty was encountered throughout the day in keeping the mine fan in operation.

About 3:45 p.m., the men were ready to go into the mine. There was no signal cord or bell rope from the hoist house to the shaft or extending into the shaft. It was agreed that the hoistman would lower the men to the bottom and then stand near the shaft collar and listen for the men to shout when they were ready to come out. The fireman suggested that he go down first to examine the air, but the superintendent stated that he thought the air was O.K. at the bottom and that they all go down together. Three of the men were equipped with electric cap lamps and two with carbide lights, but no flame safety lamp was carried. The survivor stated that, when half-way down the shaft, he said, "Boys, I am choking to death." He sat on a concrete block that was on the cage and the other four men stepped off the cage at the bottom, he remembered the superintendent calling to the hoisting engineer to raise the cage before he became unconscious.

The acting hoist engineer shoveled some coal on the fire after he lowered the cage to the bottom and then went to the shaft to await orders from the men. When he looked down the shaft he saw a light burning on the cage and also saw a man. He called several times and on receiving no reply decided that something was wrong so he returned to the hoist house and raised the cage. The cage contained the unconscious president of the

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company, with one leg over the guide side of the cage. He removed the man and aroused him enough to learn the details. It was estimated that the cage was returned to the surface about 15 minutes after it was lowered. It was necessary to operate the cage slowly due to the defective condition of the hoisting equipment, shaft lining and guides. The carbide lamp worn by the survivor was still burning when the cage returned to the surface.

The State Mine Rescue Truck was called and, after its arrival at about 5:30 p.m., a flame safety lamp attached to a rope was lowered into the shaft and it was extinguished when about half-way down. Two members of the State Mine Rescue Crew wearing 1-hour McCaa self-contained rescue apparatus were lowered in the cage to the shaft bottom. Having no signal cord in the shaft, one of these men removed the mouthpiece and shouted for the cage to be raised. They reported that they saw three of the men in the bottom of the shaft and that the cage was upon them.

After these men came from the shaft bottom, the fire had to be pulled from the boiler while the boiler was repaired; however, a tractor was used to furnish power for operating the fan. About 9:30 p.m., a flame safety lamp was again lowered and was extinguished about 90 feet from the surface.

The Vincennes station was notified and the Mine Rescue Truck and six of the personnel of the station arrived at the mine about 11:15 p.m. Two of the Bureau of Mines men, wearing self-contained rescue apparatus were lowered to the bottom of the shaft and recovered one body. Three other men were lowered and recovered another body and later this crew recovered the other two bodies. A life line was used as a means of signaling to the surface for the operation of the cage. The three trips made to recover the bodies were necessary due to the small size of the cage. All four bodies were found at the shaft bottom and were recovered within approximately an hour after rescue work was started.

Lessons to be learned:

This is the old story of entering a shaft or mine without first ascertaining the condition of the air. Some of these men evidently realized the hazard but "took a chance" and as a result lost their lives.

The tragedy might have been averted if a signal or bell line had been lowered in the shaft so the men could have been raised immediately when they realized the danger; and, it was foolhardy for these men to enter the mine without a safety lamp. Here is a case where carbide lamps (two of them) were used and one continued to burn even though 5 men had been made unconscious. Presumably there was a deficiency of oxygen; this indicates that the carbide lamp is by no means dependable in giving warning as to oxygen deficient air.