

Krebs to honor 100 slain miners

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KREBS - As a third-generation coal miner, Donalee Boatright is all too familiar with the perils of his former profession.

He's seen people die from black lung disease; a fate common to miners who inhaled too much coal dust. He can tell you about escaping "black damp," a condition in which miners ran into pockets of oxygen-depleted air and fell dead. And his uncle, killed in a 1943 mining accident, had his name carved into a coal miner's memorial in McAlester.

He also can talk at length about the worst event in Oklahoma's mining past.

On Jan. 7, 1892, a massive explosion killed 100 Krebs miners, marking the worst mining accident in state history. But for more than a century, there's been nothing in the city to commemorate the sacrifices of those who died.

That will change Saturday when the town dedicates a memorial built to honor those who died on Krebs' darkest day.

"We need to honor them," Boatright, 71, said. "Those people paid the ultimate price."

Little Dixie's big treasure

Well before statehood, prospectors found that the hill country of what is southeastern Oklahoma was filled with coal. East Coast and Midwest mining companies flocked to Krebs and the surrounding communities to build their fortunes.

Mining towns sprouted up and men by the thousands descended daily into the dark, cramped coal mines. At the time, Indian Territory mines produced a million tons of coal per year. Miners earned about \$2.40 a day. Jobs were plentiful. But the work was dangerous. Mining companies were more concerned about production and profits than they were about their workers.

Plenty of signs indicated hazards in the mines. An explosion in 1885 killed 12 people in Krebs. Mining accidents were such a concern that Congress passed new safety regulations in 1891. But deep inside Indian Territory, the recurring disasters and congressional admonitions were nothing but unheeded warnings. That all changed on a fateful Thursday evening in January 1892.

5:07 p.m.

The Osage Coal and Mining Company's No. 11 mine was a nearly nonstop operation. The day-shift workers were just beginning their ascent to go home, with about 400 men waiting for the 470-foot ride to the top of the mine shaft. A steel cage, pulled up to the surface by a powered winch, lifted the men up six at a time. It had brought 30 people out already.

The end of the shift would clear the mine and allow for blasting. But someone was a little too eager to get started.

Published reports say someone placed a small explosive charge near a bed of coal and hurriedly set it off. The charge was set off too soon and had been improperly set.

The charge didn't just light the explosives. It also set off a chemical chain reaction, igniting trapped methane gas and coal dust. The explosion hurled the 3,000-pound elevator cage up the shaft and 100 feet in the air. A flash fire filled the mine's passages. The roar of the explosion could be heard for miles as flames belched out of the mine's openings.

Moments later, burned and mangled miners began crawling out of the mine's smoking airshafts. One miner climbed the 470-foot mine shaft despite having a broken leg and severe burns.

Thousands of frightened women and children congregated at Mine No. 11. A few more survivors were found. But 100 bodies - some mere body parts, others too badly burned to recognize - buried Krebs in a shroud of mourning.

"Every family was affected by this," said Denise Owens, curator of the Krebs Heritage Museum. "Every household had a father or possibly one or two sons who died in that mine."

No hospitals were in the area; there were only two or three doctors. Some of the injured languished for as long as 18 days before succumbing to their wounds, a Muskogee newspaper report said.

Some of the dead were buried individually. Many others, whose bodies were never identified, were put to rest in a mass grave.

Paying tribute

As a former miner and a lifelong resident of Oklahoma's coal country, Boatright sees a need to teach people about this tragic chapter in Krebs' history.

The mine closed in 1905. There is no sign of the No. 11 shaft's entrance - it's in an overgrown thicket .

"It's going to be forgotten," Boatright said. "There's people here who don't know the mines were here."

But he and some of his friends decided three years ago to make sure people remember. They raised about \$12,000 and received donations of labor and materials to build a memorial - a tall, gray granite marker displaying the names of those killed there.

On Saturday, locals will gather around the memorial and reflect on their heritage and the awful price that came with it, Boatright said.

"It's something very dear to me. We're probably 100 years too late."

