

# The Primero Mine Explosion

## Primero, Colorado

### January 31, 1910



*A photo from 1910, of the fan beside opening No. 1, east of Primero, Colorado*

Written by: Geo. S. Rice (1910)

Monday, January 31, 1910, the day of the explosion was said to have been a clear warm day. About 110 men were reported to have gone into the mine on the day shift, and about 4:00 p.m. the miners of this shift began to come out of the mine. It is said that the fans were running regularly and the only incident of note reported was that several cars of the empty trip were off the track under the direction of the outside-foreman D.D. Dodge. About this time, pit boss David Williams telephoned to the slope engineer, probably from the station at the mouth of A-12 on the main slope. The last loaded trip had been hoisted from A-12 entry about 3:30 p.m., and Williams noting the delay, inquired of the slope engineer what the trouble was. When informed that the cars were off the track, he ordered the next trip of empties into entry A-8 and the loaded trip pulled out from this point. As there were 26 loaded cars waiting on the A-8 parting, it was arranged to hoist 14 on the first trip and the balance on the second.

The slope engineer, Lopez, was instructed to hoist the second loaded trip slowly as it passed into the main road from A-8 in order that Williams might get aboard. When the cars on the surface were replaced about 4:20 p.m., the branch tail-and-main ropes of A-8 had already been connected to the main slope ropes so that when the empty trip went down, it was all ready to run into A-8 as soon as the signal was received by the slope engineer. In five minutes more the empty trip, as shown by the engine indicator, had reached A-8 and, on receiving the signal to go ahead, the slope engineer ran the empty trip ahead about 300 feet into A-8 when the explosion occurred. On finding the ropes jammed, he shut off the engine.

In the meantime, about 35 miners of the day shift had left the mine. One had gone home, changed his clothes, and come back, and at 4:30 p.m., stood directly in front of the haulage slope, talking with three miners who had just emerged from the slope. Outside-foreman Dodge, having finished directing the gang which placed

the cars on the track, had just stepped 50 yards to the west of the slope, and J.C. Risher, assistant master mechanic, stood at the door of the machine shop 200 feet from the slope when the explosion took place. Therefore, both Dodge and Risher were close eye-witnesses of what happened.

Just at the instant of the explosion, a loaded trip of cars from one of the east mines, drawn by an electric locomotive, passed the mouth of the slope. The locomotive had barely passed when the explosion came out of the slope, striking the cars of the trip and throwing them from the track a short distance. According to Dodge and Risher, a vast volume of black smoke and dust shot out of the slope mouth, and catching the four men in its path, hurled three of them against and under the trip of cars, killing them. The fourth man was thrown entirely over the cars and landed 100 feet south of the slope opening. Although terribly burned, at the time the article was written, it was thought he would recover.

In the midst of the smoke and dust rolling from the slope mouth came a great flame which quickly subsided. The conclusion of the explosion was said to have been quite great, but only a few windows were broken in the town, although in a number of houses plaster was hurled from the walls.



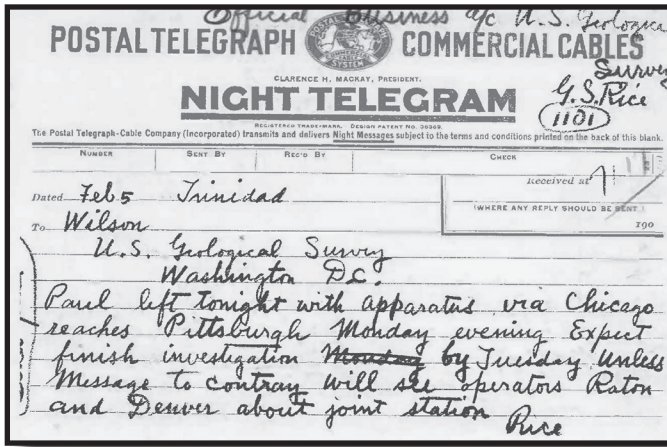
*Men cleaning caved slope, Main North Mine*



*Plan of Primero Mine*

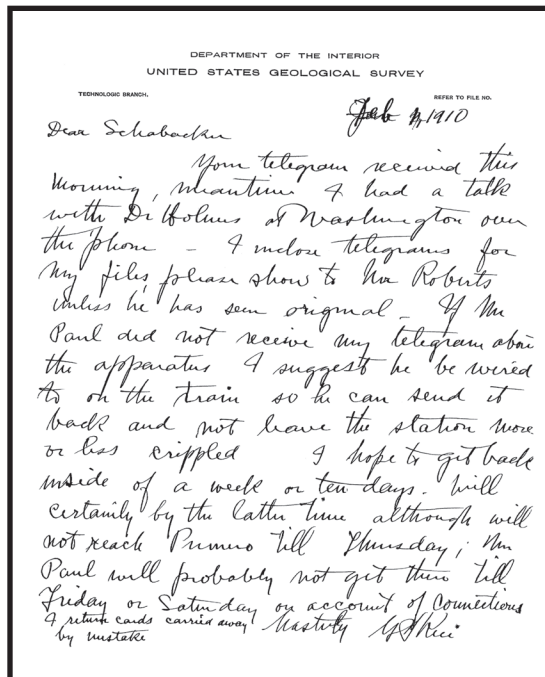
In a few moments, Dodge and Risher recovered from the shock and rushed to the fan, where they were soon joined by Superintendent William Kilpatrick and Dan Sullivan, boss carpenter. An inspection showed that although dirt and timbers had badly damaged the blades and blown out a portion of the casing, it could be repaired in a short time. The mouth of the main slope was blocked by a great fall, thus shutting off the normal intake. The fan at the "B" mine was not affected by the explosion and acting under instructions of Superintendent Kilpatrick, William Easton and Al Thompson ran to No. 1 east in "B" mine, accompanied by helpers and down the haulage road to a masonry air stop. Here Thompson and helpers started to tear down the masonry stopping while Easton and helpers erected a temporary stopping shutting off the "B" mine return a short distance away.

The temporary stopping had just been finished when those engaged at the masonry stopping blasted it down. Instantly the "B" fan began drawing the gases from the wrecked mine through the passage in which Easton and his helpers were traveling. Thompson and his party at once escaped into the neighboring intake while Easton and his helpers coming out the return had a race to keep ahead of the black-damp for



Correspondence telegram about investigations

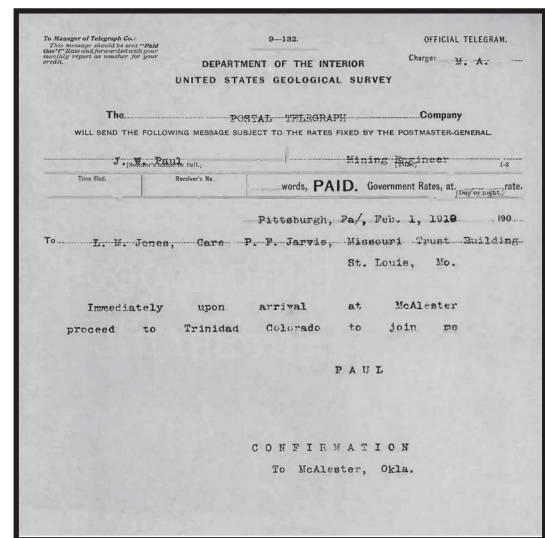
a distance of 1700 feet to the outside. Thus the "B" fan began to draw after-damp from the wrecked mine in about 45 minutes. About three hours later, the main fan, having been hurriedly repaired, was reversed to blow fresh air down the air-course upon which the rescuing party could advance. In other words, the "A" fan was forcing air in and the "B" fan, through the connection between the "A" and "B" mines, was pulling it out.



Correspondence letter

The air-course was free from large falls but the haulage slope was caved tight, for entrance purposes, for a distance of about 100 feet. The full efficiency of the fans was not obtained as the connections between the mines was restricted at a low point by the presence of water within a few feet of the roof.

In the meantime, the call for help had gone out to the neighboring mines, to which a prompt response was made. Division Superintendent James S. Thompson quickly organized a relief party at Trinidad and started for Primero on a special train, which picked up a number of



Instructional telegram of orders after the explosion

expert mining men on the way. By the time the two fans had partly restored ventilation near the entrance to the mine, Superintendent Thompson had organized the first rescue party, consisting of Joseph Ball, Superintendent of the second division, Superintendent Chas. Chambers of Sopris, Superintendent Wm. Morgan of Piedmont, mine inspector for C.F. & I. Co J.B. Manley, Superintendent Thomas Lee of Frederick; Superintendent Jas. Wilson, of Starkville; Bob McAllister, A.C. Larson and others.

Shortly after the arrival of the first party from Trinidad, a party from the neighboring Cokedale



mine of American Smelting and Refining Co., arrived, led by Manager Baylis and Superintendent Burt Lloyd, bringing with them three Draeger helmets. The Trinidad party had brought four helmets with them and the following morning, two more arrived from the Stag Canon Fuel Co. of Dawson, New Mexico, in charge of Jas. B. Morrow, the company expert in rescue work with these helmets.

Shortly after 9:00 p.m., the fans had restored ventilation sufficiently to allow the first rescue party under Superintendent Thompson to start into the mine through the air-course. The party advanced about 2400 feet down the air-course to entry B-3 and B-4 on the right and on the opposite side of the main slope to A-7 and A-8 by 2:00 a.m. About 14 bodies were recovered up to this time, all found on the main slopes and all badly burned, indicating that the men were on their way out when killed by the explosion.

Several of the rescue party were overcome by gas and carried out unconscious, among them being Superintendent Thompson. Division Superintendent Joseph Ball then assumed leadership and continued the work of exploration up entries A-7 and A-6. A-7 was found fairly clear of after-damp, and though there were many falls, it was not blocked as was the case in A-6. Rapid progress was made until near the diagonal haulage road leading from A-7 into A-8 rope road. Before reaching this point, there was a large amount of timber found strewn along the road, and at the haulage road, the standing timbers were found to be on fire. Portable chemical extinguishers were sent for and the fire was soon put out.

The main siding was located on A-8 just outside the haulage crosscut. As it was probable that men would be on this double parting prior to the explosion, the party went through the crosscut and turned back east. Here were found the largest group of bodies recovered. The rescuers passed over the bodies of a number of mules and six men; an electric flashlight was turned on the face of each body as it was passed. As the light was flashed on the face of the seventh



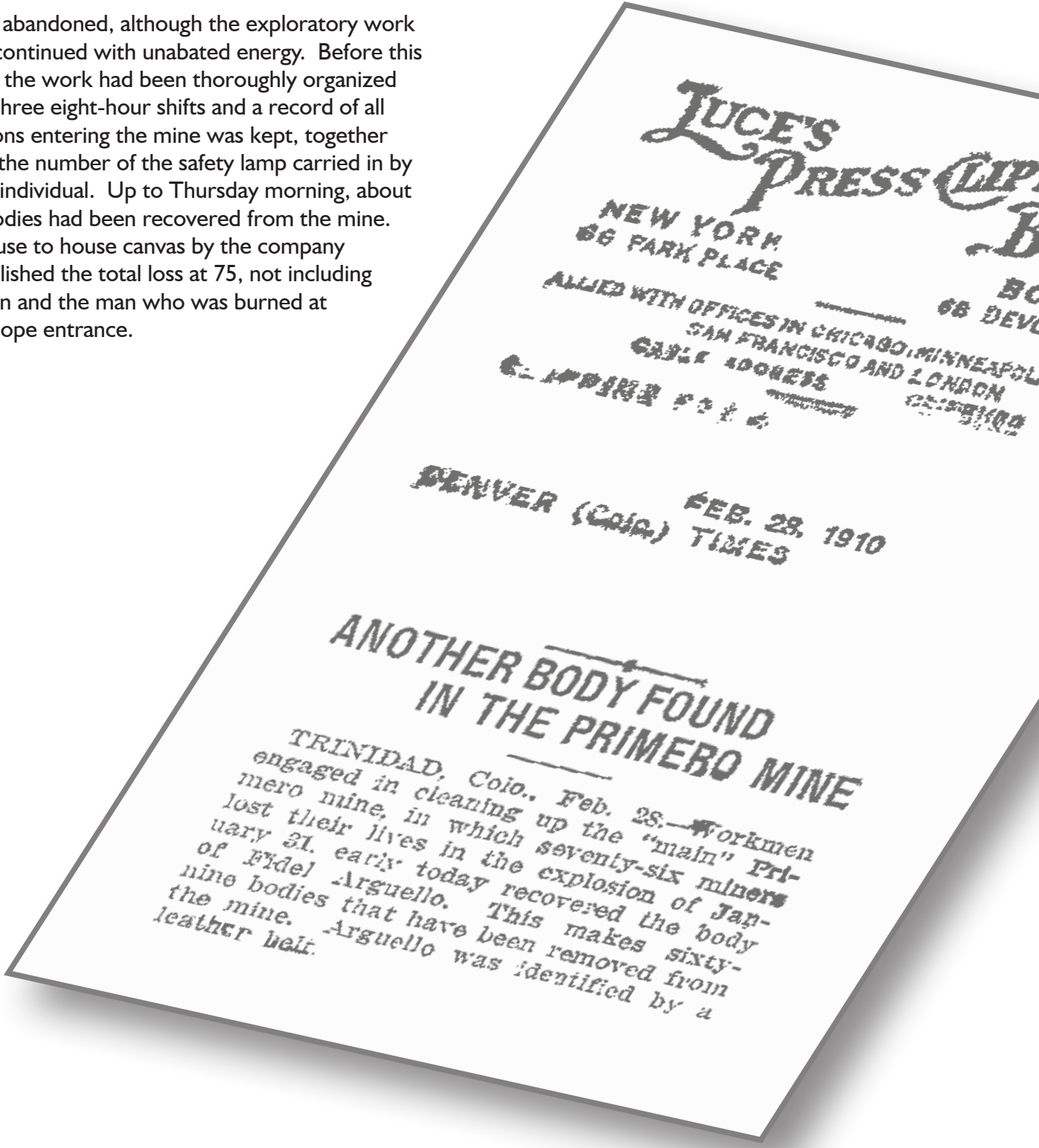
*C.F. & I. Officials in conference with government experts*

body, the man's eyes opened, and he sat up and spoke. This was Leonardo Virgen, a Mexican, beyond whom lay eight bodies, and beside him his dead Mexican buddy, with whom Virgen said he had conversed but a short time before. The body of this man was still warm at the time. Virgen walked part of the way out, but then was overcome, and was carried out the greater part of the way to the entrance. He was the only man recovered alive.

By Tuesday morning, the workings off A-7 and A-8 had been thoroughly explored and in all, about 28 bodies recovered. That morning, E.H. Weitzel, Manager, Fuel Department, of the C.F. & I. Co. arrived from Pueblo, together with State Mine Inspector John D. Jones and Deputy Inspector Griffiths, also Superintendent David Griffith of the Fremont County Mines, and Thomas Jolley, pit boss of the Victor Fuel Co.'s mine at Delagua.

The drainage of the black-damp from the lower portion of the mine progressed slowly. The ventilation was not on one current of air and the exit was restricted in the passageway between the "B" mine and the "A" mine, which as previously stated, was said to be half full of water. The temporary brattices put up hastily, leaked badly under the heavy pressure put on them by the fans. Not until Wednesday morning, February 2d, had the brattices been erected as far as the mouth of B-4 and B-5 and of the opposite A entries, 9 and 10. At this time, about 40 bodies had been recovered and all hope of rescuing any living had

been abandoned, although the exploratory work was continued with unabated energy. Before this time, the work had been thoroughly organized into three eight-hour shifts and a record of all persons entering the mine was kept, together with the number of the safety lamp carried in by each individual. Up to Thursday morning, about 50 bodies had been recovered from the mine. A house to house canvas by the company established the total loss at 75, not including Virgen and the man who was burned at the slope entrance.



Article from Luce's Press Clipping Bureau