

'Black damp' victims recovered from mine

By PAUL KRZA

ROCK SPRINGS — The bodies of two people who died in an abandoned coal mine near here were recovered late Saturday night.

Dead were Sidney Levi Lott, 22, of Price, Utah, and Wayne Roberts, 24, of Rock Springs.

The bodies were brought to the surface at about 11:30 Saturday night, according to Sweetwater County Coroner Peter Vase.

The two victims and friends Fred Crnich, 19, and Charlotte White, 18, both of Rock Springs, had entered the old Stansbury mine Saturday afternoon when they encountered a pocket of what mine officials call "black damp". The term means "absence of oxygen," officials said.

Lott and Roberts were overcome by the condition, while Crnich and White managed to escape.

The couple, along with Floyd Martinez, 21, also of Rock Springs and who had not gone into the mine, summoned help from Bill Cummings, who was working nearby.

Cummings notified authorities in Rock Springs, and the fire department there sent five men equipped with oxygen to the mine.

Of the five, only one entered the mine. He was Fireman Mike Cantwell.

Others in the first rescue party were Frank LeBar, chief engineer for Rocky Mountain Energy and owner of the mine;

James Mecca, former mine inspector, Tom Overy, present state deputy mine inspector; and Coroner Vase.

They entered the mine at 7 p.m., found the bodies, but were unable to recover them.

A special mine rescue team from FMC Corporation's trona mine were then called to the scene.

That team and some members of the Rock Springs Search and Rescue Group re-entered the mine and effected the recovery.

The bodies were found approximately one and one-fourth miles from the mine entrance.

Vase said Lott and Roberts apparently died a short time after entering the black damp area, apparently about 3 or 4 p.m. Saturday.

According to LeBar, who helped seal the mine when it was closed in 1957, entry to the area was gained after a sturdy steel door was somehow opened.

LeBar said some sort of tools, like sledge hammers, would have to be used to accomplish the task, but he said that he saw no evidence of such tools.

State Mine Inspector Al Shafer of Rock Springs told the Star-Tribune the mine entrance had been barricaded by Union Pacific Railroad Co. as prescribed by law.

He added that at this time it was not known who had knocked the doors down to gain entry into the mine.

LeBar also noted that one of the surviving members of the group told authorities they had been in the mine several times earlier.

Shafer said as far as he knew, no state charges would be filed in connection with the incident.

The deputy sheriff who investigated was unavailable for comment.

Two federal mine safety inspectors from the Bureau of mines in Rawlins were at the mine site Sunday for what was termed a "routine inspection", according to Shafer.

LeBar said the mine was sealed so "no one could get in or out of the workings."

When the ventilation is cut off, the coal and wood timbers in a mine tend to absorb oxygen, creating the condition known as black damp, he said.

Vase told the Star-Tribune he had asked one of the three survivors why they had gone into the mine, and he told Vase they were "just messing around."

He said an inquest will be held, but a time had not been set.

The abandoned mine is located at Stansbury, one of several old coal camps in the Rock Springs area.

That community, along with neighboring Dines and Winton were mining towns but were abandoned when the demand for coal waned in the late 1950's.

Only Reliance, a few miles from Rock Springs, and near Stansbury, survived as an inhabited town.

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