

'Stay Out — Stay Alive' Warns About Abandoned Mine Shafts

BY GREG BURTON

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Ten years ago, it happened in Tooele County to then 10-year-old Joshua Dennis. Two years later, in Sandy, the same thing happened to Adam Smolenski. In 1995, it struck Mark Hoefnagel and Anthony Ballif in Tooele County.

Last year? Todd Meeks in Iron County. This year? Tip, a dog, in Tooele County.

Alien abductions?

No, all five — boy, three men and a dog — survived encounters with the deep end of Utah mine shafts.

Not so lucky was 18-year-old spelunker Jeremiah Etherington of Magna, who in 1996 fell 600 feet to his death at the Honorine Mine in Tooele County. And, earlier this year, 26-year-old Robert Bartholomew of American Fork was killed when he drove an ATV into a mine shaft in west Cedar Valley, west of Utah Lake in Utah County.

Etherington is one of four Rocky Mountain-region residents whose deaths were highlighted this week in a campaign aimed at reducing fatal mine encounters.

"Abandoned underground mines often contain decaying timbers, loose rock and tunnels that can collapse at any time," U.S. Department of Labor Secretary Alexis M. Herman said in a release launching "Stay Out — Stay Alive."

"Playing at such sites may seem like harmless fun, but every year, dozens of children and adults become seriously hurt or fatally injured while playing on active or abandoned mine property," Herman said. "Surface mine sites can have dangerous highwalls, undetonated explosives and other hazards. Old, flooded quarries can have icy temperatures, deceptive depths and dangerous, undetectable mining equipment just below the water's surface."

In response to the recent deaths of a 13-year-old Oklahoma girl who drowned while swimming in an inactive strip mine and a 6-year-old Maryland boy who died in a 100-foot fall down a quarry, federal officials have designed a mine education program for children and teens.

Their "Mines and Minors" don't mix campaign has sched-

uled stops at schools nationwide.

In Utah, the passer-by who stumbles down a poorly marked but wide-open mine shaft is as common as the inquisitive youngster who can't resist exploring.

In January, Bartholomew was riding with his father and brother-in-law when "they came in up on top of what they thought was a flat area, but was really a 50-foot-deep mine shaft," said Tooele County Sheriff Frank Scharmann.

Bartholomew was dead before rescuers reached the bottom of the mine, Scharmann said.

The area where he died is owned by the Bureau of Land Management and is open for ATV riding, but pockmarked with unmarked shafts. Two years ago a truck was driven into a nearby shaft, although two men escaped fatal injury.

Open but abandoned mines are a well-documented Beehive State hazard.

There are an estimated 20,000 abandoned hard-rock mines in Utah, according to officials with the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Program of the state Division of Oil, Gas and Mining. Across the West, there are at least 250,000 abandoned coal and metals-excavating mines that pose hazards.

Utah's reclamation project has closed about 1,500 mine openings since 1982. Two years ago, with the help of the National Mining Association and the Western Governors' Association, the project was accelerated.

Safely sealing the maws of Utah's abandoned mines would cost an estimated \$30.5 million, and despite available funding for such projects, the federal Office of Surface Mining lists a backlog of \$2.5 billion in high-priority projects, nearly three-quarters of them in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky.

"Accidents happen in traditional mining area like the coalfields of Appalachia and the remote areas of the West," said Labor Secretary Herman. "The threat is anywhere there are active or abandoned quarries, sand and gravel pits, underground mines or other mining operations."

"Stay Out — Stay Alive is a simple safety message," he said. "We want kids to be kids. We want them to create unforgettable memories this summer — away from active or abandoned mines."