

Miners' deaths underscore hazards of coal mining

By Bryan Hunt

Breese Journal Editor

The Breese Historical Society is planning a dedication ceremony of the miners' memorial on Sunday, Oct. 23, at 12:30 p.m., at Miners Park/Southside Park in Breese.

Dec. 22, 1906, would begin as a normal workday, like any other, for miners Henry Midde-

ke, Herman Schleper, Walter Schaffner, August Foppe, Frank Zehrer and Hermann Holtmann.

In a few short minutes, they would be no more and their families' lives tragically changed forever.

At 6:30 a.m., the six men were headed to work, descending the shaft of the Breese and Trenton Coal Co.'s East Mine, — about 300 feet of their 400-

foot trip — when for reasons unknown the elevator failed, plummeting into a sump at the shaft's bottom.

The six men were killed instantly, according to reports.

Miners who were already in the shaft immediately began rescue work, "and as soon as others could be lowered, every

MINING/3A

1906 Breese-Trenton Mine Hoisting Disaster IL

Clipped By:
usmra_rob
Oct 20, 2024

◆ Mining (Continued from 1A)

effort was made to speedily remove the debris," according to a report from the Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Republican newspaper.

According to the Republican, Foppe reportedly jumped from the plunging cage.

His five colleagues were thought to have drowned.

The sump, or sump hole, held water that collected as levels were drained. The sump was believed to have held 15 feet of water.

Mine manager William Fritz was at the bottom of the mine shaft when the cage, loaded with the doomed miners, fell.

Fritz was struck in the back by debris from the incident; no other injuries were reported.

The last men to enter and leave the East Mine were Gus Elling, Pete Petermeyer, Martin Johnson, Fred Dorries and Art Feltrop.

A staff correspondent of the Belleville News-Democrat wrote: "The miners always realize that danger lurks in the mine itself. They become so accustomed to this feature of their hazardous calling that they become unconscious of it and never worry about it, and sometimes even joke about it in a good-natured way."

A coroner's jury, headed by coroner J.J. Maroney, met all day the Saturday and Sunday following the accident. "It located no blame on no one. The

cage got away from the engineer. No one seems to know the direct cause," wrote the News-Democrat correspondent.

A continued investigation by the jury would find that an old air chamber in the shaft, extending from the shaft's top to its bottom, and in use only when the shaft was sunk for the protection of diggers and abandoned when the shaft was completed, was back-fitted with cinders and slack in an unworkmanlike and insecure manner.

The jury also found that a portion of the backfill gave way on the morning of the disaster.

It was found that some of the buried water pipe, concealed in imperfect casing and running

parallel to the shaft, was dislodged with a dirt slide that morning of the accident.

Sections of that piping were missing and could not be found in the shaft, according to reports.

The state mining board was present at the coroner's inquest, which also found the engineer operating the elevator not to have been at fault.

General sentiment among the people of the town was that the company was to blame for the accident.

Residents believed the company to have been negligent in providing a safe shaft for the miners.

The men's deaths left a great

1906 Breese-Trenton Mine Hoisting Disaster IL

Clipped By:
usmra_rob
Oct 20, 2024



The East Coal Mine in Breese in an undated photograph. The mine was sunk in 1886 with operations beginning in 1887. Mining operations stopped for two years, in 1932, because of the Great Depression. In early 1960, members voted to cease operations at the East Mine. *SUBMITTED PHOTO/BREESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

void on the home front as well:

- Henry Middeke left a widow and nine children
- Hermann Holtmann left a widow and four children
- Frank Zehrer left a widow and three children
- Walter Schaffner left a widow — daughter of Breese Postmaster Fritz Dorries — and two children

- August Foppe left a widow and a child

- Hermann Schleper left a widow

Five of the victims, being Catholic, were buried at St. Dominic/St. Augustine Cemetery in Breese. The fifth, Schaffner, was of the Lutheran faith and is buried at Breese Cemetery. All were laid to rest on the same day.

TIMELINES

with the
Breese Historical Society
Monthly News and Featured Photos from the Past

Announcement

Several projects are being planned at the present time to complete the 2016 year.

In the next few months committees will finalize the project planning. One of the projects being planned is being featured this month in Timelines. The Breese Historical Society is asking for help from anyone who may have information, photos or contacts from people who are relatives of the six miners killed on Dec. 22, 1906, in the former East Mine in Breese.

Our next meeting will be a social with only a minimum amount of business, a "Show & Tell" of any old or memorable articles, a sing-along and entertainment by Bob Eversgerd and Blanche, followed by ice cream and cookies, all provided by Breese Historical Society. This social will be held at Legacy Place, 13887 Progress Drive in Breese on Wednesday, Aug. 31 at 7 p.m. All residents are invited to attend along with our members and any guests interested in the history of our community.

Hope to see a lot of you there — come join us!

Featured this month:

The East Mine accident of Dec. 22, 1906 Six miners lost their lives in this mine, located in the area which is now Southside Park in Breese.

If anyone has any information to share about the accident, please contact the Breese Historical Society (see contact information with the continuation of the article on page 5D).

"We lived by the mine whistles, set our clocks by them, went to work by them, mourned our dead by them"

Back in 1886, the first owners purchased the East Coal Mine in Breese. This coal mine had many different owners, and even closed from 1930 to 1932. During the heart of the Depression, a group known as the Citizens Coal Company reopened the coal mine until 1956, with nearly 90 men working there.

The closing of the East Coal Mine in 1962 brought an end to the coal mining history of Clinton County until the Monterey Coal Company opened its No. 2 Mine in Albers, Illinois, in 1977.

When it disbanded, the East Mine was the second oldest mine in operation in the state. During the years from 1932 to 1962, over 2 million tons of coal were mined and 11 mil-

lion tons of coal were hoisted up the shaft in the 75 year history of the mine.

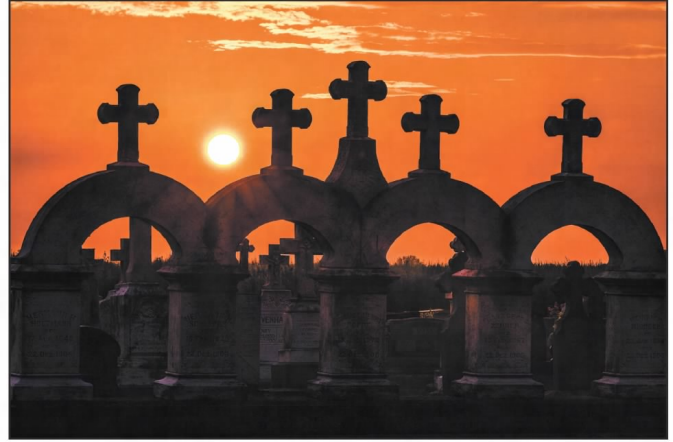
On Dec. 22, 1906, at 6:30 a.m., a very horrible accident occurred in the East Mine. Six men, all mineworkers, were on their way to their day's work in the mine. They had boarded the cage and were descending down the shaft when part of the way down the hole, suddenly something gave way. The iron cage loaded with human freight was sent crashing into the sump at the bottom of the shaft. All six men were instantly killed: Henry Middeke, Herman Schleper, Walter Schaffner, August Foppe, Frank Zehrer and Hermann Holtmann.

The general sentiment in Breese was that the company

was to blame for the accident. The people believed that the company was negligent in its duty to provide a safe shaft for the men to go down in or a safe mine to work in.

The Coroner's jury, in its investigation, disclosed the fact that the old air chamber in the shaft, extending from top to bottom of the shaft, and which was in use only when the shaft was sunk for the protection of the diggers and abandoned when the shaft was finished, was backfilled with cinders and slack in an unworkmanlike and insecure manner. It was found that an old water pipe was left lodged in the unsafe backfill.

It found that a portion of the backfill gave way on the morning of the fatal disaster. The



The stone monument for five of the miners is in St. Dominic/St. Augustine cemetery. One miner, Walter Schaffner, was buried in Breese Cemetery on Mater Dei Drive. The Historical Society is unable to locate the stone monument at this time.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLEN "BUTCH" HUELSKAMP

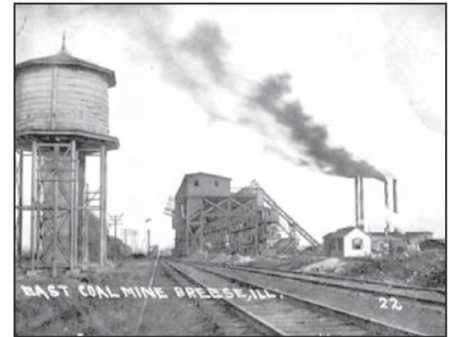


This building remains and is the only thing left of the East Mine today. It is the original stone-block building with a new roof. Allen "Butch" Huelskamp of Breese, who took this photo, remembers when he was a young boy, about 8 years of age, he would go to this building from time to time to pick up his father's paycheck from the mine. This was a weigh station and payroll office. The current owner is Jansen Milk Hauling Service.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLEN "BUTCH" HUELSKAMP

report stated that some of the buried water pipe, concealed in imperfect casing and running parallel to the shaft, was dislodged with the dirt slide on the fatal morning, and that a considerable section of this pipe mysteriously was missing and could not be located. In short, its findings clearly made the company liable for the tragic and untimely deaths of the miners who were killed in the disaster. Evidence before the Coroner's jury proved that the engineer was not at fault.

One local miner, a Breese resident, was well known for his early arrival at the mine each day, but on that fatal day he happened to be running a



East Coal Mine 1887-1962.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BREESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY PICTORIAL HISTORY — 150 YEARS — 1856-2006

TIMELINES / 5D

1906 Breese Historical Society memorial

Clipped By:
usmra_rob
Oct 20, 2024