

# **Rescuers Work Heroically and at Midnight Estimated That 19 Men Had Been Killed by Impact**

## **ALL NEARBY MINES SEND MEN TO AID IN RESCUING VICTIMS**

### **Gas Believed to Have Been Cause, Though Mines Had Been Inspected Short Time Previously**

By REUBEN A. LEWIS

At 2 o'clock this morning, rescuers had located no more live men in the Bessie mine.

An explosion, followed by afterdamp, in the Bessie mine of the Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron company at 2:45 o'clock yesterday morning drew a toll of over 25 lives. Thirty-five miners, 11 white and 24 colored, were in the entries undercutting coal when the muffled roar of the terrific detonation that shook the western part of Jefferson county within a radius of 10 miles of the disaster issued forth from the pit of the mine.

Three white men and five negroes escaped death.

Three hours after the shock five miners, headed by John Drake, a fire boss, plodded wearily up the infrequently used slope that opens near Bessie junction. Two white men, John Drake and J. H. McGowan, and three negroes, Booth Reed, Henry Steele and P. H. Hollis, cheated death.

Crews of rescuers, equipped with oxygen helmets, threw themselves into the grim, ominously darkened slope of the mine with the dawn of day. The stout of heart, believing that some of the entombed men might have been saved from the deadly afterdamp, worked frantically for over 13 hours, hoping that some might be brought from the maw of the mine alive. This hope was swelled into reality at 6 o'clock yesterday afternoon when the precursors of the rescuers found bratticed in safety in the ninth right entry John Shell, the white fire boss, and two negro machine runners, Tom Sims and M. Williams.

## GLEAM OF HOPE

As the three were hauled to the pit of the mine at 7 o'clock a gleam of hope possessed the hundreds that grouped about the slope and on the hills that formed a vast amphitheater about the soot-covered opening that others might be saved from the grip of death. But this was dissipated, as 11 bodies with life extinct, were located by the rescuers near the eighth right entry and on the new slope at the eleventh left. The explosion and its subsequent fury of flames had not taken their lives, but afterdamp, the deadly gas that snuffed out their mortal coils in a twinkling, had exacted its harrowing toll.

At 1 o'clock this morning all of the men had not been accounted for, but it was believed that 27 had perished. They are:

White—Martin Jones, machine man, single; Lonnie Gray, scraper, single; Clint Hubbard, labor foreman, married; Otis Glover, miner, married; Glenn Woods, pumper, married; Raymond Raney, machine man, single; Fred Sharpe, pumper, single; Dave Bray, labor foreman, married.

Colored—Toilet Fearson, Dave Wilburn,

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## FEARFUL EXPLOSION IN BESSIE MINE ENTOMBS THIRTY; SEVERAL RESCUED

(Continued from Page One)

Will Caldwell, George Brown, Amos James, Will Latimer, Joe Robinson, John Robinson, George Washington, John Giles, Sam Taylor, Will Dobbins, Leroy Pearson, Charles Brown, John Dumas, W. Stallings, Jim Moore, Tom Elias and M. Clark.

The cause of the explosion remains unknown.

It is generally attributed to gas, and it is believed that the origin of the explosion was near the bottom of the slope, about the fifteenth or sixteenth entry. The force of the explosion was heaviest about the fourth entry of the slope. The explosion seemed to hug the top of the slope, for the massive concrete and stone brattices were broken into a thousand particles, while the track, in the slope, was unharmed by the explosion.

### FIRST RESCUERS

The death of two negroes was attributed to the force of the explosion. First rescuers, advancing to the fourth entry, found the decapitated bodies of two miners, who were burned white by the heat that accompanied the discharge. These men, with their bodies mangled and their bones broken, were removed from the slope about 8 o'clock yesterday morning but neither was identified until late last night, when one of the headless bodies was identified as George Washington. A shred from his trousers made this identification possible. The other man has not been claimed by relatives.

Crews of rescuers labored until sundown before effecting another recovery. About 5 o'clock the bodies of Will Dobbins and Leroy Pearson, two colored machine runners, were located in the eighth right entry, prone upon the bottom of the mine. The deadly afterdamp had caused their death, as there was no sign of injury done by the force of the explosion.

John Shell, with two negroes, was found bratticed in safety in the ninth right entry, and was brought to the surface next. Instead of being weak and weary from the ordeal and taken to the hospital, they were hungry. The white fire boss consumed a bowl of soup and other foods, while Tom Sims ate three bowls of soup and a great quantity of bacon, barbecue and bread. M. Williams set a steady pace.



### HOPE FADED AWAY

Hope that more might be recovered faded away an hour later. Martin Jones, Lonnie Gray and Fred Sharpe, two white machine runners and a scraper, were found dead from afterdamp in the eighth right entry.

When the helmet men penetrated the eleventh left entry, where the new slope was being driven, they located seven additional dead, two white men and five negroes. But at midnight these had not been identified.

Thus 12 miners were still entombed. Some believing that a few of the remaining might have had the presence of mind to find an air pipe, and brattice themselves away from the afterdamp, hoped that, with the coming of dawn, rescuers might find men alive, but admitted that the chance was slight. But the rescuers took nothing for granted and continued their labors in the bowels of the earth and hoped for the best.

Engaged in this menial task were first aid workers from every mine in the Birmingham district. Thirty oxygen helmets were available and over 200 expert men in doing rescue work. Crews from Flat Top, Palos, Sayreton, Mulga, Dolomite, Pratt City, Docena and other mines offered their aid.

### U. S. FIRST AID CAR

The bureau of mines' first aid car arrived on the scene early Saturday morning in charge of W. T. Burgess and E. B. Sutton. They brought 13 sets of breathing apparatus and aided in the work. C. H. Nesbitt, state inspector of mines; Dave Kelso, Hugh Lynch and Seth Thompson, assistant inspectors, were at Bessie a few hours after the explosion and were active in organizing and directing the rescuers in the mine.

J. Campbell Maben, Jr., and J. W. McQueen, vice president, and Jones G. Moore, general superintendent of coal mines of the Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron company, were among the first to arrive at Bessie. They were active all day and were aiding in the work when the vigil extended through the night.

The explosion, while terrific, was not intensely loud. It was more like a muffled roar, with a thunderous effect that shook the country for 10 miles around the mine. Mute evidence of its force was shown in the caved-in banks over the pit of the slope. The roofs of the two fan stations were blown off by the detonation, but officials of the company stated that the fans did not stop. Part of the roof on the tippie was carried away by the explosion, while windows were broken out in houses nearby.

Had the explosion occurred during the day, it would have exacted, in all probability, a toll that would run into hundreds. The Bessie mine employs 330 miners and has a capacity of 200 tons a day. It was inspected for gas two weeks ago Friday by the assistant state inspector of mines, Hugh Lynch, and had been pronounced safe in every particular. The laws of Alabama require an inspection every 90 days.

### EIGHT LIVES SAVED

To John Drake and John Shell, white fire bosses, is attributed the saving of the eight lives. Drake led John McGowan

and three negroes to safety from the seventh right entry, by cross-cuts in the back rooms of the entries. His presence of mind, with the advice and bravery of John McGowan, saved them.

John Shell was responsible for the lives of the two negroes. He, by fastening canvas across the ninth right entry, kept out the afterdamp and found an air pipe that afforded enough air to enable them to keep alive until the rescuers came. He held the negroes with him, when they wanted to go to the slope, where certain death faced them.

"I knew you were coming," he hailed the rescuers. "It took you so d— long.

At 1:30 the last of the 11 dead bodies discovered were brought from the mine. Dave Bray, a white man, was identified.

J. Campbell Maben, Jr., vice president of the Sloss-Sheffield company, expressed deep regret and sympathy for the men who had lost their lives.

During the rescue work, four men were overcome by afterdamp fumes, but were resuscitated.

There was no excitement about the pit of the mine. The work of constructing temporary brattices and carrying air in to the far entries caused the rescuers to proceed slowly, as is always the case. The men worked systematically, but effectively.