

Cause of Disaster at Mine Puzzles Experts

Coroner's Jury Holds Tragedy at Carolina Mine An
'Unavoidable Accident'

FOUR STATE CONVICTS
DEAD; SEVEN INJURED

Broken Coupling Pin Generally Blamed; Pou To Make Investigation Today

By CHARLES PARKER.
(Staff Correspondent)

Coal Glenn, Dec. 27.—Disaster that has stalked efforts of Tar Heels to recover the buried wealth of the Deep River coal fields was apparent again today as a coroner's jury investigated the accident in the Carolina mine last night which claimed the lives of four State's convicts and brought injury to seven more.

"Unavoidable accident" was the verdict of the jury of six Chatham County citizens impaneled by Coroner George H. Brooks after examining seven witnesses, but just what caused the accident and exactly how it happened remained hedged about with conjecture.

Nothing like it had ever happened before at the Carolina mine. Veteran miners scratched their heads and looked puzzled when asked just what happened and how.

Think Pin Broke.

The explanation generally accepted was that a coupling pin broke in the train of cars bringing the men to surface, sending eight cars loaded with 40 Negro convicts hurtling back into the mine.

Three and a half years ago when an explosion brought death to 53 miners in the Carolina mine the State was appalled, but yesterday's disaster, though far less in magnitude, promises to touch a quicker public pulse. The men who were killed in the explosion of 1925 were free laborers in the mine under no compulsion. The men who died yesterday were charges of the State of North Carolina, under court sentence to do the State's bidding — which in this case was to work in the coal mine.

There was some public opposition expressed to sending prisoners into the mine last spring when the first contingent was sent down, but it died. There was assurance of prison officials that the mine has been inspected and found as safe as a mine could be. In fact, Superintendent George Ross Pou, pointed out, coal mining was not regarded as any more dangerous than quarrying, an occupation in which prisoners had been engaged in for some time.

CLINTON GILBERT PRAISES STEDMAN

Threats of Contest Put Venerable Tar Heel in Spotlight of Publicity

News and Observer Bureau
1160 National Press Bldg.,
By JOHN A. LIVINGSTONE.

Washington, Dec. 27.—Major Stedman has never received notice of a contest against his election by Charles A. Jonas, Republican national committeeman and recently elected Republican Congressman from North Carolina.

While Major Stedman is hearing nothing from Tar Heel Republicans, the country is hearing much about Major Stedman since Jonas got into action as pinch-hitter for June Harden.

The latest newspaper comment on the action of North Carolina Republicans appears in today's Philadelphia Public Ledger, a dyed-in-the-wool Republican paper. Clinton W. Gilbert, nationally known author of "The Mirrors of Washington," devotes his column in the Ledger today to "the last remaining Confederate soldier in Congress."

Poor Policy.

"Anyone who knows what a Confederate soldier means in the South will perceive that Representative Jonas has not chosen the best way of building up a Republican party in North Carolina in trying to deprive one of them of his seat in Congress," says Mr. Gilbert, who before coming to Washington a decade ago was for five years associate editor of the Republican New York Tribune.

"There is not much chance that even in a Republican House a contest to unseat him would be successful," concludes Mr. Gilbert after reviewing the heroic life of Major Stedman.

"Old Major Stedman is a kind of sacred figure down in his State," Mr. Gilbert explains. "His district would go on re-electing him to the House, even though he should have to be carried into the chamber on a stretcher."

"The veterans of the Civil War are heroes of the South. Naturally, there are not many of them left."

With that for a beginning, the writer for the hidebound reactionary Republican Philadelphia paper gets down to his knitting. He sketches the life of Major Stedman.

Mine Was Inspected.

The investigation yesterday brought out that the mine had been inspected, and is inspected regularly by a member of the Federal Bureau of Mines staff, and the last inspection was in September and made by Federal Inspector F. E. Cash, of Birmingham and Frank D. Grist, State Commissioner of Labor and Printing. A number of recommendations for the safety of miners were made and officials of the Carolina Coal and By-Products Co., operators of the mine, informed Prison authorities they were being placed into effect as soon as possible.

The coroner's jury did not have the recommendations before it yesterday and made no inquiry as to whether the recommendations had been carried out.

Volunteer To Go Back.

The 170 prisoners left at the mine had enforced holiday today while the coroner's investigation was in progress, but tonight 24 volunteered to return to work, F. G. Baker, supervisor of the mine camp, informed George Ross Pou, Superintendent of State's Prison.

Superintendent Pou, who was in Washington visiting his father, Congressman E. W. Pou, when informed of the disaster and did not reach Raleigh until tonight, is expected here early this morning to make a first hand survey of the situation and then to report to the Governor and the Prison Board. The status of prison labor in mines is not expected to be settled until action is taken on these reports.

Chester O. Bell, Assistant Superintendent of the Prison, was here this morning in conference with Super-

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visor Baker but did not remain for the inquest.

Relatives of the dead men had been notified and the bodies were ready to be sent where directed. The State is bearing all funeral expenses.

The names of the dead and injured, which were unobtainable last night due to lack of communication facilities at the mine prison camp, follow:

The dead:

James Ray, Wake County, sentenced in February, 1928, to serve 2 to 8 years for housebreaking and larceny.

Waddell Dortch, Durham County, sentenced in October, 1927, to serve from 7 to 10 years for burglary in second degree.

Albert Spencer, Johnston County, sentenced in March, 1928, to serve 3 years for assault with intent to kill.

Henry Simmons, alias Chas. Bennett, alias Ben Woodbury, Bertie County, sentenced in February, 1926, to serve 30 years for murder.

The injured: Mewlee McEachin, Hoke County; Walter Bailey, Mecklenburg County; George Berry, Brunswick; James Parker, Guilford; Mathew White, Craven; John Henry Adams, Polk; and Ostelle Redick, Beaufort.

Ray and Dortch were dead when taken from the mine. Spencer and Simmons died in the prison hospital at Raleigh, where they were brought about 2 o'clock this morning after being given first aid by Doctors Knight and Scott, of Sanford.

It was reported last night that the seven injured men were in no apparent danger.

Tells Lurid Story.

The high light in the coroner's inquest was the testimony of Robert McLeod, Lee county Negro, serving 25 years for murder, who survived the wild ride back into the mine without a scratch.

McLeod said he was in the third car of the train of nine cars, which are drawn up from the mine by a cable. He said first the intimation of trouble was a sharp creak when the train was about 200 feet from the mouth of the mine. Then he said the eight rear cars started backward down the steep slope giving a terrific speed. He told of grasping the iron coupling bar running through the middle of the car and holding on for dear life.

"Lord have mercy, we're all gone now," he said he remembered crying out.

"The cars bounced and jolted," he said, relating how a thousand things rushed through his mind and he couldn't choose between jumping and sticking to the cars. He stuck, and said all the rest stayed with the cars, all the time believing death to be at the end of the track.

"We stopped sudden," he stated, describing how the cars piled up and how the uninjured leaped on and surveyed the scene with the aid of the few cap-lamps that hadn't been extinguished or jolted off.

Perspiration stood out in beads on the Negro's face as he related the scene of horror 1,000 feet from the mouth of the mine.

Mine Chief Testifies.

The other witnesses were the five men in the first car, which did not break loose, and O. A. Wakefield, general superintendent of the mine.

Mr. Wakefield was not present at the time of the accident, but testified that he did not see how a coupling pin which is secured with a cotter pin, could have come out, yet expressing the opinion that was the only thing that could have happened.

Remains of the car where the break occurred were assembled but the pin could not be found.

Mr. Wakefield testified that every precaution was taken and that the cars were being brought at the usual speed for a "man trip", 3 miles an

hour, and they bore the regular load, five men to a car—less than half the load carried by the cars were used for hauling coal.

Then, he said, they bear a ton.

He pointed out that the cars had been hauling coal for ten hours before they were used for the "man trip" and had handled the heavier loads without mishap.

John Cutley, mine superintendent, a grizzled veteran, was a occupant of the first car. He also expressed the opinion that the accident was caused by a pin pulling out.

Cantley told how 45 men of the day shift got into the train of nine cars to be pulled to the surface at 5:15 o'clock. He said he was in the first car with D. W. Roberts, a white miner, and S. F. Ross, white guard. The three were the only white men in the train. Two Negro prisoners, Fleet Melvin and Nathaniel Simmons, were the other occupants of the first cars.

The foreman said that the "man trip" had reached about 200 feet of the mouth of the mine when suddenly the eight rear cars parted from the head of the train, rushing back while the first car was jerked violently forward by the released cable tension. He said he continued to the surface and sent five cars back into the mine as soon as it could be done. He testified he inspected the cars after the dead and injured had been brought out and found nothing broken. He expressed the opinion that the accident was caused by the coupling pin getting out—how, he said he did not know. Supervisor Baker was notified and doctors were gotten to the camp and the injured treated promptly, he said.

Roberts' testimony was along the same line as that of the foreman.

Melvin, one of the prisoners in the first car, said he went back into the mine, but didn't reach the wreck, returning to get aid. He said he heard a snap just before the train parted.

Simmons, from his testimony, appeared to have been more active in the rescue. He said he walked back into the mine and found the cars criss-crossed on the tracks and helped get Ray and Dortch out from under the wreckage, but said they were dead before they could bring them up to "First Left"—about 700 feet from the mouth—where the rescue train picked them up. He said the injured were lying about the cars, but that apparently none had jumped.

Of the 40 convicts in the cars that broke loose, 29 escaped without injury or with injuries too minor to bring them to the hospital, and from the evidence given it appeared that the four who were killed were crushed to death under or between the cars when they jumped the track and halted abruptly.

The coroner's jury was composed of L. D. Underwood, employe of the Carolina Coal Company, W. T. Giles, A. G. Wilder, Everett Freeman, Albert Sengroves and W. H. Winebarger, all residents of the Coal Glen section.

Sheriff G. W. Blair, of Chatham county, who had charge of policing the crowd in the 1925 disaster, was present for the inquest.

1928 Carolina Mine Hoisting Accident NEWS

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