

MINE DISASTER LATE YESTERDAY TAKES TOLL OF TWENTY-NINE MEN

Fatal Black damp in Little Betty mine in Jefferson township yesterday afternoon about three o'clock took the lives of twenty-nine miners as the day shift of the mine was coming to the top. About one hundred and fifty men are employed in the mine and the disaster would have been far more disastrous if many of the men at work on the day shift had not already reached the top.

Twelve of the dead are Sullivan and Sullivan county miners. Lee Hoffditz of Dugger, one of the men killed, was a member of the Elks band of this city. Pete Donie of Linton, who was superintendent of the mine, was a brother of Martin Donie of Sullivan, who lost his life in the disaster.

The disaster was the second major mine disaster in this county within six years, the first being February 20th, 1925, when the City mine of Sullivan was wrecked by an explosion that claimed a toll of 51 miners.

Seven men who were believed dead in the mine were brought to the top alive this morning at 6:30 o'clock. They were Losie Hale, William Bedwell, Jess Crouse, Ben Snyder, Charles Love and Herman Brown, all of Linton, and Jule Wellington. When Wellington arrived at his home here this morning, miners had gathered at the home to console the widow, as it was believed that he had died in the disaster. His coming was like one from the dead and the scene was the most heart rendering.

A special edition of the Linton Citizen published this forenoon in connection with the disaster says:

John Ingleman, mine boss at the Twin Templeton No. 1, was one of the first to arrive at the scene of the Little Betty disaster yesterday and organized the first rescue crew to go down in the mine. The following story of his experiences after being lowered to the bottom of the mine with six volunteer workers of his crew was related to a

member of the Linton Daily Citizen editorial staff.

"I arrived at the Little Betty Mine at 4 o'clock and organized the first relief team to go down to the bottom of the mine. Seven men, Reese Harbin, James White, Jack Hays, Lovel Secil, Alf Millon, Ernest South and Al Woodward were the members of the crew and each man served until he was too exhausted or overcome to continue.

We went to the bottom not knowing what had actually happened, how many men, if any, were injured, or what equipment would be necessary in our relief work. Arriving at the bottom we took the air course and worked our way in, using curtains to carry the air with us to advance thru the dense afterdamp. Before we could make any headway we had considerable trouble getting air into 3rd and 4th cross entries to get to the men. It took four hours of continuous labor before we located all the bodies on these cross entries. We were the first advance party and were ahead of all the others except George Wall, Little Betty mine boss.

"The first man I saw was Don Burris, one of the two survivors, and the next was Earl Bedwell. Then I saw Louis Mitchell, who was dead, and the others were in such bad condition I did not recognize them. After Mitchell we next ran across nine men who were lying around in a radius of possibly 50 feet. Then we found seven more out of the 3rd and 4th cross entries. All these men were dead and in bad condition. Six were in one room together and in a little while these would have been covered up by a cave-in.

"We continued working our way through the mine clearing the air and looking for injured until 11 o'clock when we were relieved by another crew."

Another interesting account of the experience of a relief crew was given by another volunteer rescue worker, Crede

Fitzpatrick, superintendent of Ebbw Vale Coal company of Sullivan. Fitzpatrick organized the crew that relieved Ingleman.

"The afterdamp was still bad when we went in a 7 o'clock. We explored far enough to know that nobody was alive in the section we were in. We then started taking bodies to a fresh air base where another crew took the bodies to the shaft. Then we started to restore ventilation in another section of the mine until relieved at midnight by another crew. Some of the members of my crew that I remember were John Onions, Allen Mair, Sammy Masters, Geo. Gallagher and John Hays. All these men deserve credit for the work they did. John Onions gave artificial respiration to Joe Wallace which brought him back to consciousness."

Sullivan Union, January 29, 1931

Mine Rescue Crews Face Odds

While funeral plans for the 29 miners who lost their lives in a blast in the Little Betty mine near here Wednesday afternoon were progressing, an inquiry to determine the cause of the fatal blast which trapped 38 miners 300 feet below the earth surface was being launched. The investigation will sift the matter to the bottom to determine responsibility for the explosion it was stated by officials today.

The mine yielded its last body shortly before 9 o'clock when Fred Reed, one the 29 who failed to survive the blast and after damps, was brought to the top by weary rescue workers who had toiled throughout the night searching for bodies and dragging them laboriously to the mine bottom to be hoisted to the top for identification by a group of fellow miners who lingered near the mine shaft.

Many of the bodies of the dead miners were badly mutilated and burned, and it was several hours after some of them were brought from the mine and removed to the morgue before positive identification was established.

Two bodies identified as Carl Love and Ben Snyder were taken to funeral parlors in Linton.

Shortly after 6 o'clock this morning when the seven miners who had escaped the

death that claimed 29 other miners, were brought from the shaft, two of the survivors were identified as Snyder and Love.

Recovery of the dead bodies was slow work. At 6 o'clock this morning only six bodies had been removed from the mine. From that hour the work of removing the bodies progressed more rapidly and before 9 o'clock that last victim of the blast had been brought to the top and taken to the morgue.

Rescue workers described the task that confronted them. A part of the entry had been almost blocked by coal and slate resultant from the explosion.

To reach sections of the mine where the bodies were found, it was necessary to crawl snake-like through the small opening and bring the bodies back in the same manner. The bodies, wrapped in blankets were carried to the bottom of the mine, ready to be hoisted to the top.

Rescue workers labored in shifts, being relieved at intervals by other workers who entered the mine to carry on the work of locating dead bodies, and possible survivors.

As the night progressed and body after body was brought to the top, hope began to wane that there might be any living men found in the mine. Relatives of trapped miners remained on the ground near the shaft eagerly seeking information as the rescue workers came to the top.

The first news that men were found alive in the mine came about 6 o'clock this morning, when a rescue team entered the company office and asked that doctors be hastily summoned.

The first belief was that some of the rescue workers had been overcome.

Then came the first word of cheer throughout the entire long night's vigil:

"Seven men have been found alive in the Tenth North."

Physicians were hastily summoned.

Men with blankets stepped on the cage and were lowered down the 300-foot shaft.

Crowded around the shaft awaited an eager group of men and boys. Many of them had sons or brothers down there in the black hole.

The four blasts of the whistle announced that those waiting at the bottom were ready to be hoisted. Then the cage appeared at the top. Three men, carefully covered with

blankets and supported by rescue workers, were led through the crowd of spectators over to the office.

Jule Wellington, one of the survivors, recognized a friend in the group crowding around the shaft and called to him that he was all right.

Again the cage was lowered and soon came to the top again, this time with the four remaining survivors.

They were all taken to the office rooms where they received medical attention.

Jesse Crouse and Jule Wellington sustained burns about the hands and face, but their condition was not serious, and they began chatting with friends who gathered about them.

"We had just started for the bottom," Hall stated, "when the cyclone of fire swept through the mine. We knew what that meant."

Hall declared that as the blast flashed through the mine, the men dropped to their faces. They then got up and started to make their way toward the bottom.

"We did not get very far," Hall said, "before the smoke and bad air warned us that it would be sure death to try to go forward.

"There was only one thing to do – retreat, and seek safety in one of the side rooms, waiting to be rescued before death overtook us."

Slowly making their way back to the north entry, the trapped miners found a curtain at the entrance of rooms nine and 10.

This was their only chance of safety.

Entering the room, they hastily constructed brattices to keep out the poisonous gas.

They knew there was enough oxygen in the rooms to keep them alive for a few hours if they could keep out the black damps which filled the rest of the mine. With seven men in the two small rooms it was estimated that the air might be kept sufficiently fresh to keep them alive for fourteen or fifteen hours.

Laying low in the room they waited. Hour after hour they waited and wondered what their probable fate would be. Out in the mine they knew the blast had claimed its toll of victims. Their experience in trying to reach the bottom convinced them that any man farther down toward the shaft could not possibly have escaped death.

Removing most of their clothing, the seven men took turns fanning the air to prolong the oxygen.

The hours rolled slowly by. Each hour seemed an eternity. But they retained their hope of rescue.

Finally after long hours of waiting they heard noise of rescue workers. They seemed a long distance away.

With relief in sight the seven survivors began calling to the men searching for bodies and possible survivors.

Finally their cries were heard, and in a short time, their rescuers reached them, and assisted them to the bottom of the mine.

"It was cold down there", Hall said. "We did not have on many clothes, and lying down there on the damp floor soon chilled us through and through."

Families of the rescued men, notified that they had been found, soon gathered in the mine office. It was a happy reunion.

The seven survivors found in the room where they spent fifteen hours battling for life were William Bedwell, Jule Wellington, Herman Brown, Ben Snyder, Lossie Hall, Jesse Crouse, and Carl Love.

It was Wellington's second escape from a mine disaster. His comrades said his craftiness in erecting a barricade against the after damp probably saved all their lives.

The Vincennes Commercial, Friday, January 30, 1931

The explosion was generally attributed to ignition of 600 pounds of blasting powder which was carried into the mine for the shot firers. Later, however, reports were current that the blast was caused by gas. Debris filled the entries, hampering rescue work as well as investigation of the cause.

Leader of Mine Rescue Team Describes Tragedy at Linton

"A flashing cyclone" was the description placed on the Little Betty mine gas explosion here yesterday by Andrew Docherty, Paxton, Ind., leader of the first rescue team to descend the shaft where 28 miners lost their lives.

Docherty, hero of many mine rescues during his 37 years experience throughout America and Scotland, today told the United Press how eagerly fellow miners sought to

risk their lives in a search of the mine passages, filled with poisonous fumes.

Equipped with safety lamps which detect the presence of gas, the first crew felt its way cautiously through nearly a mile of mud and slime of the ill-fated mine floor.

"Aside from a flickering of the safety lamps, which indicated the presence of a slight amount of carbon monoxide gas, there was nothing to show that anything had happened," Docherty related, "but as we neared the seat of the explosion we could see bodies all around on the mine floor.

"They were mangled and torn and most of them were burned badly. As we approached to within a few feet of them, our lights flashed the danger sign and we could do nothing more than retreat, without touching the bodies. We came to the surface and made plans for restoring the ventilation system. This work proceeded slowly and it was several hours before we could reach the first bodies, although we could distinctly see them. We were sure they were dead, so we stacked them in piles to clear the way, and proceeded deeper into the mine.

"It was necessary several times to jerk back and get pretty tough with some of the younger members of the crew, who tried to forge ahead. They were anxious to reach their buddies and did not seem to care about the danger of the deadly after-damp.

"When we had stayed in the mine two hours our heads throbbed and it was hard to breathe. We had no masks, so we went back to the surface and another willing crew took up the work.

"When I came out I saw Mrs. Letote standing near the shaft entrance. She hurried over, clutched my arm, and asked if I had seen her two sons. I had. They were both down there, stretched in the mud, but I couldn't tell her. I brought out two other sons of hers a few years ago, when an explosion like this occurred in Sullivan, Ind. Her husband got out alive this time."

Andy relaxed in his chair, drew a deep inhale from his strong pipe, and continued reflectively.

"You know we think the structural steel workers have a dangerous job because we always see their danger, but those who sit down beside a warm fire give no thought to the risks we run to get the coal to make the heat for them. Those charred men piled up

down there 200 feet underground and a mile from the nearest exit, are real soldiers. But all the danger doesn't bother us. We'll be back tomorrow at work just the same, so we can help the families those poor fellows left behind them."

Vincennes Sun, January 29, 1931

Last Known Survivor recalls 50-Year-Old Mine Explosion

It's been 50 years, but the memory of the 28 men killed in the Little Betty Mine explosion is as vivid as ever to Don Burris, the last known survivor.

Burris, 79, is disabled by black lung and has been unable to mine for the last 20 years because of a mine accident which crushed his back.

But none of these hardships seems as firmly rooted in his memory as the mine blast southwest of Linton in Southern Indiana.

"We were loading our last (coal) car, and we were going to take off for quitting time, then we heard it coming," he said. "It sounded like a windstorm. We settled down to see what would happen and finally the pressure went out in the room."

With the walls collapsed around him, Burris found himself separated with seven other men, all struggling for air in the mine's darkness.

"It was pitiful, everybody trying to breathe. There just wasn't no air there," he said.

The air was filled with fine particles of coal knocked loose in the blast. The men began walking, holding onto the loading car trolley wire, trying to reach safety.

"I don't know how far the others got," Burris remembers. "I was fortunate in that I fell by a brattice that was leaking air."

Another miner with Burris, Earl Bedwell, began groaning and caught the attention of two people who broke through the debris to pull Burris and Bedwell from the mine.

"I always felt like Earl was the one that might've saved my life," Burris recalled.

Help came soon enough for Burris, but Bedwell died before the night was over. One other man in Burris' group was saved. The five others suffocated.

Burris, just 28 years old at the time of the accident, was so weakened by poisonous gases he inhaled that he was unable to work as a miner for the next five years.

There was workman's compensation of \$16 a week, and the governor's office sent relief funds to provide for some groceries and other necessities.

Burris finally returned to mining in the Dugger Martin Mines. Then, more bad news. "They had an explosion down there after I started working," Burris said. "I missed it by two hours." Two of his friends were killed in that blast. "I helped clean it up," he said.

After Little Betty, Burris says he never forgot the danger of mines. "I was always expecting something to happen," he said. "But it'd wear off. Then I'd get to thinking sometimes what could happen again.

"But jobs were scarce along the line," he said, "and I knew the only thing left to do was try to make out, take my chance."

Indianapolis Star, March 30, 1981



Little Betty. . .

This photo shows the back of the Little Betty Mine. *Photo courtesy Frank and Polly Miller.*