

## **The Moberly Mine Disaster**

### **Esry Mine Fire**

Moberly, Randolph County, Missouri

August 18, 1936

No. Killed – 2

### **Successful Rescue**

Authored by the Randolph County Historical Society

Following a 72 hour entrapment in the burning Esry Mine near Moberly, Missouri, two of four men were rescued. The deceased were Ed Stoner, one of the owners, and George Dameron. The rescued men were Demmer Sexton and Jack McMann.

In August of 1936, at the Esry Mine near Moberly, a huge fan in a wooden shack that was used to ventilate the mine shafts overheated, and the wood structure housing caught fire and then spread down the timbers into the mine shaft.

Four men and a mule were trapped in the mine shaft by the fire, which slowly descended toward their location. The mule was being used to haul coal from the side shafts to the central shaft where it could be hoisted to the surface.

Ed Stoner and Demmer Sexton had opened the abandoned mine shaft near Moberly the summer before. They figured a small crew could bring out enough coal to pay expenses and make them a meager living. They hired Jack McMann to help them mine the coal, George Dameron to work the mule and a third man to operate the hoist from above.

On Tuesday, August 18, Stoner, Sexton, McMann and Dameron went down in the shaft to work while the other hired man operated the hoist that was powered by a "wheezing Buick engine" as one news story reported. When the fire broke out, the hoist operator spread the alarm. As the fire burned the supporting timbers, they collapsed into the shaft along with a great deal of debris.

Fortunately, the four men were in one of the horizontal shafts and were not crushed. But they had to worry about getting enough air and not succumbing to toxic fumes.

The miners had to deal with what was called blackdamp. Blackdamp is a mixture of gases remaining after the oxygen is depleted in coal mines and includes carbon dioxide, nitrogen and water vapor. The word damp comes from the German word dampf, meaning vapors.

By the time other miners from the area arrived at the Esry Mine, the main shaft was beginning to fill with debris.

The rescuers knew that time was of the essence, and they worked through the night.

Only two men could go down into the 7-foot-wide shaft at a time and pile timber and rocks into a 1,000-pound capacity bucket. They took turns working 20 minutes at a time, while a third man watched them for any signs they were being overcome by noxious fumes. Despite that, several workers were overcome and had to be pulled out.

The pile of debris was over 40 feet high in the 110-foot-deep shaft, however 15 feet of that was the hoist cage that was covered up at the bottom of the shaft. Family, friends, rescuers and spectators numbered around 3,000 people at the mine site by the second night of rescue efforts. Two hundred of those were miners from other mines in central Missouri who were there to work as rescuers.

A giant hose was used to pump fresh air down to the rescue workers. It was Thursday night before the miners made it far enough down that they uncovered the top of the cage at the bottom of the 110-foot deep shaft. Next they had to aerate the horizontal shafts to make it safe to enter them to search for the four men.

It was Friday before the rescuers heard the shouts of one of the trapped miners. They radioed to the surface that they had heard the trapped men's

voices. Because of that, word quickly spread through the crowd, including the families of the trapped men, that they were alive.

However, when the rescuers finally got to the four trapped miners, two of the men — one of the owners, Ed Stoner, and the mule wrangler, George Dameron — were dead. The oldest of the four, A. W. McCann, who was 50 years old, was in the best condition. The other survivor, co-owner Demmer Sexton was in critical condition when they pulled him out.

McCann said that Stoner was the first to die about two hours after the fire and cave-in. Dameron succumbed not long after that. He said Sexton was unconscious most of the 72 hours they were trapped. Rescuers worked on Sexton an hour and a half before they could even bring him to the surface.