

Joint Mine Probe Begun At Kitzmiller

The fan house fire which brought death to five coal miners last Thursday at the George E. Nethken Coal Company mine near Kitzmiller is the object of a joint probe by federal and state mine inspectors.

Indications, meanwhile, were that improper conditions may have been behind the gasoline-fed blaze that fed smoke into the No. 1 shaft of the company, fatally choking four diggers and a fifth who went below to warn them of the danger.

The fumes, driven into the mine by the gasoline-powered fan until Robert Jackson, 25, shut it off and went underground to his death, came from a fan house built of heavy mine timbers.

The federal mine-safety code, quoted this morning in Washington by J. J. Forbes, chief of the Health and Safety Division, United States Bureau of Mines provides that "all main fans shall be installed on the surface, in fire-proof housing."

The code, Forbes said, is enforceable only by recommendation, not by law.

The Maryland mine code does not contain in Section 102 on ventilation, any provision about fireproof fanhouses.

The Nethken shaft, Forbes said, had never been inspected by officials of the Federal Bureau of Mines.

Explaining that unless someone makes specific request or complaint, federal inspectors ordinarily do not visit mines employing fewer than 25 men, he said that his records listed only six employes for the Nethken mine.

He said that W. Dan Walker, Jr., engineer in charge of the district inspection office at Fairmont, W. Va., has filed a preliminary report. Formal investigation started last Friday with two other federal inspectors present.

For the State of Maryland, Dr. J. J. Rutledge, Baltimore, chief mine engineer and head of the State Bureau of Mines, has also been at the scene. Aiding him have been Inspectors Frank Powers of Frostburg, and Clyde E. Rowe, of Westernport.

The Nethken mine, according to reports, is a recent one, dug since the end of the war.

There was no word as yet on what ignited gasoline in the fan house, causing the fatal fire.

Calling this type of suffocation accident unusual, Forbes recalled, however, various precedents in mining history.