

# TOLL MAY BE WORST FOR U. S. IN 23 YEARS

**By VINCENT H. SANDERS,  
Globe-Democrat Staff Writer.**

WEST FRANKFORT, ILL., Dec. 23.—With 91 miners known dead and 30 others unaccounted for, it appeared tonight that the toll in the Orient No. 2 mine explosion near here might exceed the 111 death count in the Centralia disaster and be recorded as the worst mine tragedy in the United States in 23 years.

1951 Orient Mine Explosion NEWS

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Estimates of the death toll late tonight by state, mine and union officials ranged from 105 to 119.

John R. Foster, superintendent of the mine, making an upward revision of his earlier estimates, said the death list might reach 105 to 110. Walter Eadie, Illinois Director of Mines and Minerals, expressed fear the toll would reach "at least 105." Sherman Whitlow, president of the United Mine Workers' local here, said he believed the death count would reach 119.

Weary rescue workers, who still had not reached all parts of the mine, tonight had brought out 84 bodies and counted six others. This made a total of 90 known dead either removed to a temporary morgue or still in the mine.

#### **INJURED MAN DIES**

In addition, an injured miner, Ralph Kent, 47, of Marion, removed from the mine by rescuers Saturday, died tonight at the United Mine Workers Hospital here. His death brought the known toll to 91.

Superintendent Foster expressed hope that all of the bodies in the mine would be recovered not later than noon tomorrow.

Of the 220 men in the mine at the time of the explosion, 121 are either dead or unaccounted for among the survivors, Eadie said.

#### **RESCUERS GIVE UP HOPE**

Rescuers today gave up hope that any miners trapped in the mine by the explosion, which occurred Friday night, would be found alive.

Eadie expressed the faint hope that some of the men now listed as "lost and unaccounted for" had been assisting in rescue work and thus are only temporarily unaccounted for.

Each miner is assigned a number, which is imprinted on his head lamp and punched on a metal disc he carries in his pocket. The number also appears on

a board in the lamp house, where the lamps are kept when not in use. Mine officials assume that when the lamp is not in the lamp house, its owner is in the mine.

If the Orient No. 2 death toll exceeds the 111 deaths in the Mar. 25, 1947, mine explosion at Centralia, it will be the worst mine disaster in the nation since May 19, 1928. On that date, 195 miners were killed at Mather, Pa.

#### **WORST AT CHERRY, ILL.**

Up to the time of the Orient No. 2 explosion, the Centralia mine tragedy was the second worst in the history of Illinois. The worst Illinois mine disaster was at Cherry (in northern Illinois), on Nov. 13, 1909, when 259 were killed.

Of the bodies recovered from the mine here, 81 had been identified tonight. The bodies are being taken to the Junior High School auditorium here, which has been converted into a temporary morgue.

Meanwhile, rescue teams were continuing the gruelling, back-breaking task of carrying bodies out of the mine. Rescuers, working in relays, and sometimes crawling on hands and knees, had to carry bodies as far as two miles before they could be loaded on an underground motor car.

#### **EVIDENCE OF DUST BLAST**

As rescuers penetrated toward the blast center, about 550 feet underground and two miles west of the main portal, they found added evidence of the violence of the explosion.

First reports from the scene attributed the disaster to an explosion of methane, a type of gas frequently found in coal mines. The widespread nature of the blast, however, added to a growing belief that there also were coal dust explosions, set off by the explosion of methane.

Omar Lingo, a Jefferson County, Ill., mine inspector, who participated in rescue operations, said, "There were bodies scattered all over the explosion area. Most of the bodies were lying face down, some of them badly mangled. Many were burned beyond recognition.

"It appeared as though a fire had sped down the tunnelway like a shot, flashing brightly and blasting everything in front of it.

"I saw a 15-ton motor car which had been overturned, and five-ton coal cars twisted and bent and knocked off the track. Railroad ties were pushed together."

#### DISPATCHER'S ACCOUNT

One of the injured miners, 53-year-old Paul Donahue, night signal man at the mine, told today of trying to spread the alarm when the explosion struck. His station was about 350 feet from the main shaft.

"There was a terrific sound, like a thud," Donahue said. "It numbed my ears, I yelled, 'Boys there's an explosion. We better get out!'"

He said he tried to spread the alarm through the mine but was unable to do so because the switchboard power had been cut off. Four or five minutes later, he said, there was a terrific roaring wind which filled the tunnelway with dust. He followed a railroad track to the elevator in the main shaft before he lost consciousness. He is recovering in the hospital here.

#### AGENCIES GIVING HELP

The grim work of trying to aid the families of dead or missing miners was being carried on by the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and other agencies.

About 25 volunteers from the Franklin County Red Cross chapter spent the day contacting the grief-stricken families to offer aid in cases of hardship. Red Cross workers were taking care of younger children in some families.

The Red Cross set up a welfare inquiry center to answer calls from out-of-town relatives and servicemen. A canteen is being operated in the Junior High School on a 24-hour basis. Rescue workers are being transported by school bus from the mine to local restaurants for hot meals paid for by the Red Cross.

The United Mine Workers, Local 1265, of which the dead miners were members, held an emergency meeting today to plan help for families affected by the tragedy. The UMW will pay \$1000 to each woman widowed by the disaster and lesser amounts in the case of single men killed by the explosion, depending upon family circumstances.

#### UNION TO AID FAMILIES

Whitlow, president of the union local, said he understood that company insurance carried on the miners would provide benefits up to a maximum of \$5500, in the case of a miner leaving a widow and dependent children. Insurance benefits would range downward to a minimum of \$500, in the case of a single man without dependents, he said.

At Springfield, Illinois Attorney General Ivan A. Elliott issued an emergency order today allowing families of victims of the mine blast to open safe deposit boxes and to transfer bank accounts of the deceased miners. Elliott said he issued the order to help alleviate hardship. Ordinarily, applications must be made through the bank to open a safe deposit box or transfer bank accounts of a deceased person.