

Hours Were Slow, Heavy For Mine Victims' Kin

By VERNON A. GUIDRY JR

CALUMET, La. (AP) — Wilbur Jenkins had only 40 minutes to work Tuesday night before climbing on the shaft elevator deep in the Belle Isle salt mine caverns. Then, he would head home to the wife and kids.

But, suddenly, fire at the base of the shaft blocked his path.

His pregnant wife expected him at their Abbeville, La., home by 2 a.m. Hours passed, until finally at 8 a.m., she called the mine headquarters at Calumet. She was shocked to learn her husband was one of 21 men trapped 1,200 feet underground.

Nine hundred and fifty miles away, Mrs. John Jenkins listened to a radio at Westville, Ill., and heard of the disaster. The Belle Isle mine? Her son works there. A telephone call confirmed he was trapped.

She had always felt her son's work was dangerous. "But," she said, "you are never ready for news like that."

LONG DRIVE

A hard, 16½-hour drive brought Mrs. Jenkins and her husband to Calumet, a swampy hamlet with little more than the Cargill office and a small bar with a loud juke-box. Up the road is a service station and restaurant.

Here, the Jenkins family gathered with some 70 other persons, mostly relatives of the 21 entombed miners. Some waited stoically; others with tears in the tin, barn-like shed converted to a cot-filled shelter by the Red Cross at the Cargill dock.

"We've all got the same thing on our minds — it's a living hell," the elder Mrs. Jenkins, daughter of a coal miner, said as she waited.

She recalled that her 26-year-old son had resisted family advice that he leave the job he held for four years. Bud, as he was called by the family, operated a front loader in the mine — a bulldozer-like machine that scoops up salt blasted from the towering cavern walls.

The younger Jenkins had two children. His young wife, thin and tired as she paced the shelter, is expecting a third.

HOURS ARE SLOW

Hours passed slowly until Friday morning. Called together they heard the news from a Cargill official, whose voice choked, as he said:

"I can not repeat this but once. It is tragic news. They found 16 bodies in the mine."

Gasps, screams and tears chilled the air. The Jenkins' family reacted like many who were at the time unsure whether they would be called on to mourn or give thanks. No one knew who the 16 victims were, so there was still reason to hope.

But, only three hours passed until the horrible news came, cold and complete. All the men were dead.

Nurses sent to the scene after the first announcement administered sedatives to many women. Those not overcome began to drift, dazed, to their automobiles. Some stayed to help others.

It was now 60 hours after Bud was due home. He would never return.

In the grief-stricken atmosphere that enveloped the shed, the young wife could only sit and sob. The mother repeated over and over:

"Oh my God, my son, my son."