

## Answers Long Way Off In W. Va.

# Blast Site 'Too Hot' For Mine Probe

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FAIRMINGTON, W. Va.—It probably will be months before anyone knows precisely what caused the Consol No. 9 Mine disaster.

In fact, it could be months before anyone is able to launch the necessary investigation.

For regardless of whether the men entombed are ultimately declared dead or if—by some miracle—they survive and are rescued, the mine will be closed.

Most mining experts here agree Consol (short for Consolidation) No. 9 will be much too hot for minute investigation, even if rescue teams are sent down to search for the men.

And with each new explosion compounding the already desperate situation, the rescue possibility becomes more remote.

At best, the small hope that the men somehow survived has been based on even skimpier optimistic signs. When these vanish, a hope becomes a wish.

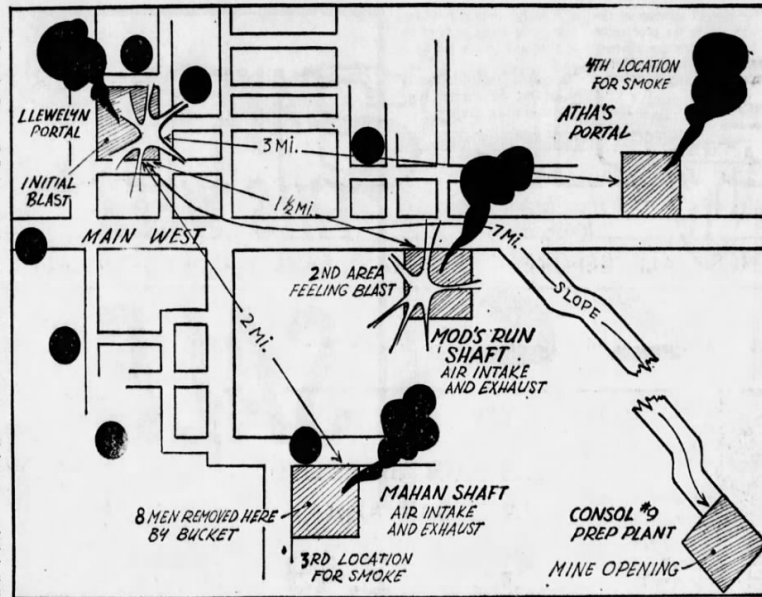
Moreover, if the mine is sealed because the raging fire below cannot be controlled from above by efforts to shift mine ventilation, it will stay sealed for months.

The sealing process cuts off the oxygen supply in a mine's tunnels.

Mine 9 was closed this way once before following a Nov. 13, 1954, explosion which took the lives of 16 miners, and it stayed sealed for 99 days.

At the moment, the only thing anybody can really say about the present disaster is that methane gas—combustible at 5 to 15 per cent of the atmosphere—was almost certainly the reason it was so violent.

Indeed, Lewis B. Evans, United Mine Workers (UMW) safety director and former



**VISUAL EVIDENCE OF THE DISASTER** sweeping the underground corridors of the Consol No. 9 Mine in Fairmont, W. Va., is slim on the surface. But the initial blast let go at the Llewellyn Portal, which belched huge clouds of smoke, fire, gas and rock. Later the mine shuddered with devastating explosions at the Mod's Run Shaft. Finally smoke billowed from the Mahan Shaft. Eight men had escaped by bucket at Mahan the first day, and recovery experts hoped to send rescue teams into the mine from that point if

Pennsylvania mines director, said:

"I think it's clear we had ignition of methane gas, and it was one of the most violent explosions I know of."

But, he adds, what caused it to build up and what triggered it will not be known until there's an investigation inside the mine as well as public hearings.

Both the West Virginia Dept.

of Mines and the U. S. Bureau of Mines will move in—as the law requires—to investigate the disaster.

They'll work co-operatively with company officials and the UMW, to examine anything that could have gone wrong with the ventilation system, check for rock falls, stoppings, faulty equipment or human error.

Right now, says one mine

safety engineer for the industry, it's reasonable to assume that the fire in Mine 9 is feeding on methane, coal dust, and roof timbers, as well as coal.

When investigators do enter the mine they will take their own air supply in with them to see if the fire is out and the mine safe to re-enter.

They will look for the "triggering agent", possibly an electrical or friction spark or maybe even that someone smoked in the mine, although it is illegal.

After the inquiry is over, both the State Mines Dept. and the U. S. Bureau will submit findings of fact, make recommendations.

Generally, mine disasters are caused by an explosion resulting from an accumulation of methane which is triggered into combustion by another accident.

Then, if the ignition is violent enough, it can cause an almost simultaneous dust explosion.

Explosives, too, have been known to cause disasters.

But, one mining engineer noted, explosives aren't used to mine coal at Mine 9.

Mining there is done by machines.

—Press Man by John Johns

the fires diminished. Then the Atha's Portal, too, vented smoke, leaving only one major mine opening free of smoke. It's the Prep Plant Portal located seven miles from the Llewellyn Portal. Black dots indicate where section crews of six men each were assigned at the time of the blast. But whether they stayed there when the first blast let go or managed to reach safety elsewhere is impossible to determine. Other men in the mine were assigned different tasks, and no one knows where they were then or now.

Other "remote" sources of explosions are possible, he says, such as a defect or misuse of an oxyacetylene torch used to weld machinery.

But, he noted, this is not a source of disaster peculiar to coal mines. Construction disasters above ground have been caused by the same thing, he said.

But whatever the cause of the Mine 9 explosion, it is the most serious mine disaster in modern West Virginia mining history.

The new mining era developed in the 1940s and early 1950s with mechanization.

In the mid-50s, there was tremendous adaptation of mechanization, with the advent of continuous mining machines that virtually eliminated explosives in the modern mines.



## Weis Pushes Light Firm Pact

Common Pleas Judge Joseph F. Weis hopes that striking Duquesne Light Co. employees will reconsider the three-year contract offer they rejected Friday night.

Judge Weis said yesterday that the offer — the second proposal turned down by the membership — is "substantially more attractive" than what was previously offered.

The judge — who entered the dispute a week ago in an attempt to end the walkout by 2500 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) — said he hopes to continue meeting with union and company officials.

"The problem is still there," Judge Weis said. "If we get

some bad weather, I'm afraid to think what might happen."

Duquesne Light furnishes electric power to 500,000 customers in Allegheny County and part of Beaver County. About 1000 supervisors have been maintaining service during the walkout now in its 38th day.

The supervisors — who have been working on a round-the-clock basis — would be hard pressed to restore service that is usually disrupted in heavy storms.

Under the three-year package engineered with Judge Weis' assistance, a first class lineman's wages would have gone from its present \$4.38 an hour to \$4.60 an hour immediately; \$4.84 next Oct. 1 and \$5.09 on Oct. 1, 1970.

The package amounted to a 17.12 per cent increase in wages and fringe benefits over three years.

"All in all, I think it is a good package," Judge Weis stated. "Both sides gave and I think the company gave more than the union. It took a great effort to put the package together and the union leadership pushed hard for its ratification."

He noted the vote was 1002 to 908 against ratification. The rejection came from a minority of the 2500 employees, he observed.

The second offer contained improved vacation and retirement benefits while there was no great demand for a wage increase over what was offered, he said.