

3 brothers killed in mine never gave up

By LES ZAITZ
of The Oregonian staff

Nearly everytime the three Aho brothers of Portland came home from the mountains, they proclaimed their search for gold finally would pay off.

Nevertheless, the glimmer of prosperity went down the hill with useless tailings.

This week they will come home from the mountains near Quartzville for the last time.

Forty years of dreams of striking it rich and forming a big mining company were destroyed last weekend when a mining explosion killed William, 77, Wayne, 75, and Edward, 69.

"They never found gold in there in all these years. They always hoped they would," recalled David Aho, Gresham, Edward's son.

Ed Adams, manager of the Albany bureau of the federal Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration (MESA), said preliminary investigations indicate the brothers were using short fuses on the dynamite.

"They were pretty secretive about what they did. It was thought that (using short fuses) was some of their common practices. We talked to people in the area who had mined with them or around them," Adams explained.

Evidence indicates the brothers had set their last charge for the day "and they were preparing to leave the mine . . . when it went off," said Adams. Sheriff's detectives said the brothers were killed instantly.

The brothers had dreams of striking it rich and forming their own mining company, according to Carol Aho, Portland, daughter of Edward. "Talk about gold fever. They all had it. That's all they ever talked about," she said.

The mine is in steep terrain at about the 3,000-foot level of the Cascades, 28 miles northeast of Sweet Home.

William, oldest child of six, traditionally lit the fuse, said Miss Aho. He lived with brother Wayne at 9034 Crystal Spring Blvd. Edward lived at 3324 NE 54th Ave.

The Aho family was a mining family at heart, according to Miss Aho, though each worked at different jobs before retiring.

Raised in Montana, the three brothers first experienced mine work in Butte, working underground. When their father died in 1923 of miner's consumption, the family moved to Portland.

When the Depression



came, jobs disappeared and the family resorted to mining. "The whole family worked up there. They could live more cheaply in the mountains during the Depression," noted Miss Aho.

From 1933 to 1940, the brothers staked six claims for the Santiam Lilly, Relief, Velvet, Never Sweat, Silver Ridge and North Bend mines. They died in Silver Ridge.

Another brother, Elmer, chose the location for Silver Ridge after following the trail of gold particles in Quartzville Creek into the mountains to its supposed source.

Ever since, they've pursued gold in Silver Ridge. Downhill two miles, the men built a cabin to live in during the summer.

Edward Aho worked in the shipyards during World War II and was a sheet metal worker until retiring this year. Of six children, he was the only one to marry.

Brother Wayne worked for the U.S. Postal Service before retiring in 1965 and William was a construction worker until 1961.

Miss Aho said the men considered the jobs "temporary" until they struck the mother lode. For 40 years, weekends and summers were dedicated to that pursuit.

"It was the kind of men and atmosphere they had grown up in. To really be a man, you went into the mines to stand the dangers in the mines. It kept them alive in one

had any valuable ore.

Linn County Sheriff's Detective Dennis Slayter said the last entry in a log book found in the cabin was last Friday. A watch on one man was stopped at 5:02. "We're speculating it was Saturday and p.m. because they took lunches with them and they were eaten," said Slayter.

The log book indicated the miners usually packed two sticks of dynamite in each of five to 12 holes for a blast. "Just how many they had there, I couldn't say. There's no way to tell at all," said Slayter.

Slayter said the solid-rock mine was seven feet high, six feet wide and 200 feet long.

Miss Aho said the log registered disappointment, with "hard luck" and "more hard luck" written last week. The generator used to power a jackhammer failed. "They're luck just ran out," he said.

The bodies were discovered by the son, David, when the men failed to return home Sunday night as scheduled. With assistance from PicMac Logging Co. employees, he entered the mine Tuesday morning.

Besides David and Miss Aho, Edward also is survived by his wife Alice. Wayne and William had no other relatives.

Funeral services are pending at a Sweet Home funeral home.

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