

# Belle Isle salt mine explosion kills five

Rescue workers recovered the body of Adam Sampay, 24, of New Iberia, late yesterday afternoon after 32 hours of searching at Belle Isle salt mine in Calumet. Sampay's was the fifth body to be recovered after an explosion ripped through the mine at approximately 11:15 Friday night.

The bodies of Herman Zimmerman, 48, of Franklin, Donald Mayon, 38, of Baldwin and Richard Collins, 31, of Patterson were recovered at 10:00 a.m. Saturday morning and the body of Amedee Olivier, 23, of Jeanerette was recovered at 2 p.m. Saturday afternoon.

The blast occurred just minutes before the 22 miners, working 1200 feet underground, were to knock off work. Six of the workers were grouped in a safety meeting when the explosion occurred. They were the first to come out of the mine, approximately a half hour after the explosion. The other 11 survivors came up at about 12:30 Sunday morning.

The seventeen survivors were brought to Franklin Foundation hospital where they were examined. Thirteen were released and four remain in Foundation where they are listed in fair condition.

The four hospitalized were Prentis Shaw, 23, of Franklin; Alton J. Oppenheimer, 49, of Jeanerette; Jason Mayon, 23, of Franklin; and

Peggy Johnson Blaney, 31, of New Iberia.

"It could have been a lot worse," said hospital administrator Grady Wells. "There's 17 of them that should thank the good Lord that they got out."

Survivors said the blast came without warning.

"We were talking about safety, about how they hadn't had a major accident in two or three years," said Prentis Shaw Jr., one of those hospitalized.

"That's when we heard the wind coming out. First it was slow and then it got real fast. The wind was whipping everything around....It was something like a hurricane."

Shaw said he and 10 other workers in a truck were waiting to return to the surface when the blast hit. The mine's tunnels and rooms filled with smoke and went dark because the electricity went out. The miners used lights on their hats to make their way to the shaft, where cool, fresh air was rushing in.

"We sat there and waited for them to come down and get us, about an hour and a half," Shaw said.

St. Mary Parish Sheriff Chester Baudoin said the force of the explosion was so severe it shot an elevator cage up to the surface from the base of the shaft.

Leisz said that it will be an extensive time before the mine can be put back in operation.

The Belle Isle mine has killed scores of people in its long history.

A full crew of 21 miners died in March 1968 in a flash fire that filled the shaft and cut off their access to safety. Dozens of miners and their pack mules were buried alive in the mine in the late 1800s by a salt avalanche. Their bodies never were recovered.

A group of 10 rescue teams began operations to find the five miners at 8 a.m. Saturday morning. After checking the condition of the mine, two teams were allowed to enter at 9 a.m. to begin their search. Stuart Leisz, Asst. Vice president of Cargill, said that precautions had to be entered in a step by step method to insure the safety of rescue teams.

Cargill officials say that they have no idea what set off the explosion. Leisz said that would be determined by MSHA (Mining Safety Health Administrator), a government group of inspectors which has been on the scene at Cargill since Saturday morning.

Funeral services were held this morning for Donald Mayon, Sr. at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Baldwin and services for Herman Zimmerman were held at 1 p.m. at the Church of Assumption in Franklin. Services for Richard Collins were held at 11:30 this morning at the Lydia Catholic Church.