

Adkins mine claimed the lives of 4 other miners in 11 years

By Lee Mueller

East Kentucky Bureau

TOPMOST — As state and federal mining officials stood guard near the mine where eight men died Monday in a mysterious explosion, federal officials revealed yesterday that four other miners have died in fatal accidents at the same Adkins Coal Co. mine in the last 11 years.

Monday's disaster — the worst in Kentucky since two methane blasts in March 1976 killed 26 men at Scotia Coal Co. in Oven Fork — was the fifth fatal accident at the Knott County mine, according to John McGrath, spokesman for the Federal Mine Safety Administration.

□ Explosion traps 13 miners in Tennessee. Story, A2.

Records at the federal agency's Hazard office do not contain a mine number, McGrath said, "but it looks like the same property: the No. 11 mine."

Because of separate identification systems, state and federal mine-safety inspectors have different identification numbers for the mine, which is located about one mile from KY 7 on the Tater Branch of Right Beaver Creek, about three miles south of Topmost and 10 miles east of Hindman. The state lists it as No. 18; the federal government as No. 11.

After working all night to reach the men, who were found dead 2,500 feet inside the mine, workers removed the bodies at 2:28 a.m. yesterday.

State and federal officials plan to start their investigation at 8 a.m. today with a safety inspection of the mine. If no problems are encountered, inspectors will enter the mine at 10:30 a.m. They expect to complete the investigation today.

Kentucky State Police identified the victims as Robert Slone, 39, of Topmost; Roy Perry, 22, Pinetop; Clarence Perry, 28, Pinetop; Dillard Ashley, 40, Mousie; James Gibson, 24, Pippa Passes; Keith Craiger, 25,

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1981 Adkins No 11 Mine NEWS1

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Mine killed 4 men in 11 years

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Hueysville; Tommy Centers, 31, Vicco; and David Slone, 25, Kite.

The cause of the blast — which appeared to puzzle even state Mines and Minerals Commissioner Willard Stanley — was clouded further yesterday when Dr. George Nichols, the state medical examiner, ruled that the deaths were caused by smoke inhalation.

Stanley said early yesterday that he believed the miners had died immediately, but Knott County Coroner Danny Terry said the cause of death indicates the miners probably were alive after the blast.

"These guys had no sign of a blast injury at all," Nichols said, pointing out that none of the miners suffered broken bones.

Terry said all of the victims appeared to have suffered burns from the flash of an explosion.

A veteran Knott County miner, who asked not to be identified, said yesterday that a dynamite blast would have damaged both the roof and floor

of the mine. Earlier, however, Stanley said the explosion apparently had caused little damage to either the mine roof or mine floor.

The explosion apparently filled the mine with dust and rescuers apparently were forced to replace curtains to control air circulation in the mine during the rescue attempt, which took about six hours.

Terry refused to speculate about the cause of the blast, but pointed out that there are only two other explanations:

- Methane, a combustible, odorless gas that escapes coal seams and is nearly always in mines below the water table.

- Coal dust, which, suspended inside a mine, can be highly explosive.

There were unconfirmed reports yesterday, however, that the mine was "wet," which means the likelihood of a dust explosion was reduced. An Adkins' employee at the mine

also pointed out yesterday that the eight men who died had just begun working their shift at about 2:35 p.m. when the explosion occurred.

"They couldn't have had much time to do anything," said James Johnson, who works at another Adkins' operation on Sly Branch near here.

The mines are owned by Orville Adkins of Hueysville, a veteran coal operator who owns four Knott County mines.

Adkins could not be reached for comment yesterday, but one of his employees said all four mines "shoot from the solid" — a coal-mining term meaning that coal is blasted from the seam by using "permissible explosives" (various grades of dynamite).

Most larger underground coal companies use machines called continuous miners — a rotating, barrel-shaped device with metal teeth that digs coal from the seam. Smaller operations like Adkins' Tater Branch mine, however, are reluctant to spend the half-million purchase price for one of these machines.

Johnson, a roof-bolter, joined fed-

eral inspectors Ronald Honeycutt and Lester Banks inside the mine's tin-covered garage yesterday while state inspector Henry Martin of Martin waited outside behind the steering wheel of his white Dodge Ramcharger.

Inside the garage, Johnson watched Honeycutt feed a make-shift stove with coal from a nearby stockpile.

His brother-in-law, Bob Slone, 39, was foreman of the crew, he said.

Slone and his wife, Ora, who is Johnson's sister, had nine or 10 children, including two who had died, Johnson said. "One's buried here and one on Jones Fork."

His sister, he said, is expecting another child within the month.

Johnson said his brother-in-law had worked in the mines nearly 20 years, but had returned to Adkins' Tater Branch mine for the second time about two months ago.

As foreman, Slone would have been in charge Monday afternoon, Johnson said, but pointed out that each crew has "shot-firers."

According to John Ellis Bates, foreman for Adkins' day shift, the shot-firer for the second shift was Keith Crager. "He was pretty experienced," Bates said. "He'd been shooting coal for three or four years."

Johnson added:

"You can have 100 years (experience) and (he shook his head) something like that happens... Boy, these old mountains are old. You don't know what's going to happen when you start digging into them."

Bates said the cause of the blast, as far as he knew, was still a matter for speculation.

"Once it's all tore up in there, it's hard telling what happened," he said.

Johnson had stayed at the mine until nearly 5 a.m. yesterday. After a few hours' sleep, he returned to represent the company on guard duty.

In another hour or so, Johnson said, he would go up the road to "help out on the graveyard where Slone would be buried."

"He's got a baby buried there," he explained.

Past violations of mining law at the Tater Branch mine are, in some cases, linked to possible causes of the explosion.

State records in Lexington show that between August 1978 and Nov. 2, 1981, the mine was cited six times for insufficient use of a chalky substance called rock dust, which is used to prevent coal-dust explosions.

According to federal records, the first mining death at Adkins' operation occurred on Nov. 3, 1970, in a roof-fall accident when a miner dislodged a timber by running a piece of equipment into it.

Another accident on Jan. 25, 1973, was caused by similar circumstances.

On May 23, 1977, another man was killed in the mine after becoming pinned between a scoop and a mine support.

The latest fatality occurred on Oct. 8, 1980, when Haynard Hunter, 31, a roof-bolter, was fatally injured when explosives blasted through a mine wall into another section of the mine where he was working.

Grief shrouds the community where eight coal miners died

By Gary Cohn
and Jim Warren
Of The Herald Staff

TOPMOST — Ray and Timothy Slone took the day off from the mines yesterday to mourn the loss of their brother, David.

David Slone, 25, of Kite, "a quiet-turned guy" known for his skill repairing automobiles, was one of eight men who died after an explosion trapped them Monday afternoon at the Adkins No. 18 mine near Topmost in Knott County.

"It's a shock," Ray Slone, 28, said of his brother's death. "It hasn't sunk in yet. Someone who's 25, who's never had trouble with anybody — why does something like this have to happen to him?"

It was gloomy and overcast in Topmost yesterday as the friends and relatives of the miners grieved over their loss. Many miners stayed home from work to be with their families, and Beaver Creek Elementary School, where the families waited for word from the mine Monday night, was closed for the day.

Marcus Caudill said that business at Topmost Market was "extraordinarily slow. There's a lot of sadness in the community."

At Bobby Slone's house on Roaring Branch, his wife, Ora, and other survivors were mourning his death.

Mrs. Slone, who is expecting a child, was resting on a couch next to a potbellied stove.

The Slones had seven children — four daughters and three sons ranging in age from 3 to 20. Two other children died young. A daughter, Josephine, is a student at Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes.

Mrs. Slone, who hopes the new

cars and was so skilled that his friends would bring their cars around for him to work on them.

Ray Slone is scheduled to go back to work next week. He said he couldn't promise his mother that he would not go back in the mines.

"I've got three kids," Ray Slone said. "I've got to work." He said he made \$13 an hour in the mines, but if he could make \$6 an hour somewhere else he would take the job.

Ray Slone got his brother Tim a job at the mine about five months ago, but now wishes he had not. He had to agree to be with Tim at all times before their mother would let Tim go into the mines.

Ray and David Slone had not seen much of each other recently because David worked days and Ray worked nights. They saw each other for a few minutes on Sunday, and David talked about going to work in Magoffin County.

"This isn't the first time we've lost a family member," Slone said. "We've lost a cousin and an uncle at a shootout in the Hindman Courthouse."

Services for Bobby Slone will be at 10 a.m. Thursday at the Rebecca Regular Baptist Church at Hall with visitation there after 6 p.m. today. There will also be a service at 6 p.m. today. He was the son of Kennell and Myrtle Slone.

David Slone, 25, the son of Ralph and Clara Slone, is also survived by two brothers and four sisters. Services will be at 1 p.m. Friday at the Hollybush Regular Baptist Church. Visitation will begin at 1 p.m. today at Slone's home. Evening services will be at 7 p.m. today and Thursday.

Clarence Perry, 28, and Roy Perry, 21, both of Pine Top, were the

sons of Willie and Verna Perry. They are also survived by a brother and three sisters. Clarence is also survived by his wife, Bernice, two sons and two stepsons.

Services for the Perry brothers will be at 10 a.m. Saturday at the Rebecca Regular Baptist Church at Hall. Visitation will begin after 8 p.m. today at the Willie Perry home. Additional services will be at 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday.

Keith Crager, 25, of Hueysville, was the son of Homer and Imogene Crager. Services will be at 10 a.m. Thursday at Hall Funeral Home in Martin, with visitation after 1 p.m. today.

James Gibson, 24, of Pippa Passes, was the son of Sam and Ollie Gibson and the husband of Beulah Slone Gibson. He left five brothers and three sisters. Services will be at 10 a.m. Friday at the Mount Olive Regular Baptist Church. Visitation will begin at the church at 11 a.m. today, with evening services at 7 p.m. today and Thursday.

Tommy Centers, 31, of Vicco, was the son of Jasper and Artha Lee Centers and the husband of Jewell Centers. He had one son, two daughters, a stepson and a stepdaughter. Services will be at 1 p.m. Friday at the Kodak Church of the Living God, with visitation after 5 p.m. today at the church. Evening services will be at 7 p.m. today and Thursday.

Dillard Ashley, 40, of Mousie, was the son of Lundy and Alberta Ashley and the husband of Annis Ashley. He had one daughter, three brothers and three sisters. Services will be at 10 a.m. Friday at the Ball Branch Regular Baptist Church with visitation there after 1 p.m. today.