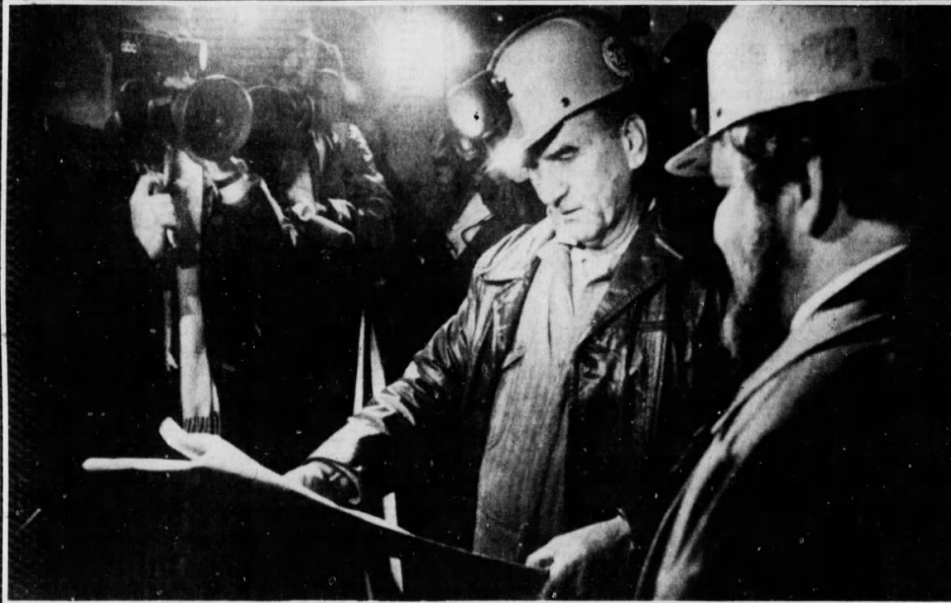




Willard Stanley (center) looks over map of mine with United Mine Workers President Sam Church

Autopsies: Miners Died Of Injuries, Poison Gas

PIKEVILLE, Ky. (AP) — The seven victims of a coal mine blast that may have been caused by explosives all died either of carbon monoxide poisoning or internal injuries, autopsies revealed yesterday.

As state and federal officials began investigating Wednesday's blast, Willard Stanley, state mines and minerals commissioner, speculated that explosives were to blame. Stanley said that puzzled him, because the miners had been to an eight-hour training session Friday on safe use of explosives.

The explosion in the R.F.H. Mining Co.'s No. 1 mine, a small family-owned union mine near Craynor in eastern Kentucky, was the fourth Appalachian coal mine disaster in seven weeks. Thirty-one men have died.

David Jones of the state Medical Examiner's Office, who helped perform the autopsies at Pikeville Medical Hospital, said three of the men died of internal injuries apparently caused by the explosion, and the four others evidently died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

"It's the same type death that you would get in a house fire," Jones said. "In essence what they did was inhale fire."

He said blood samples would be sent to a state laboratory in Frankfort to confirm the

conclusions.

Jones said the men who died of internal injuries died instantly, and the other lived only seconds after the blast — "three, four or five breaths, not very long."

Floyd County Coroner Roger Nelson said earlier that three or four of the victims "could possibly have lived a minute or two" after the explosion.

"Some of them did, there's no doubt about that," he said. "There was a respirator or two that was pulled, but they never got them on."

Blasting coal from the face of the seam, an old-fashioned but inexpensive technique, also was used in a mine at nearby Topmost, where eight men died in an explosion last month.

Wednesday's blast shot debris several hundred feet and spewed so much coal dust that it blackened a hill facing the mine, a witness said.

Stanley said the type of explosive used at the R.F.H. Coal Co. mine was a "water gel," and he said he was baffled that "it would generate that much heat."

Some explosive detonators in the mine were not in proper containers, Stanley said.

It could be several months, however, before the government inquiry into the accident is finished.



Lilly Hamilton at her Craynor home
... mother and grandmother to 4 of victims

Deaths Bring Miners Face to Face With Risk

CRAYNOR, Ky. (AP) — The miners of eastern Kentucky understand the risks, but often have little choice but to work in small mines such as the R.F.H. Mining Co. No. 1 mine, where seven men died Wednesday.

"You just never think about it until it happens," said Shannon McKinney, whose brother was one of the seven victims. "It's just terrible."

"I'm not sure now whether I'll go back or not," said McKinney, who was working in a nearby mine Wednesday. "But it's about the only work around here that pays anything."

Many of those who choose coal mining don't work in anything elaborate. They work in small mines like the R.F.H., one of five truck mines in the same rugged hollow. The initial investment on the R.F.H. was \$500,000.

"It's a challenge to them," said Eva Salisbury whose husband lost a first cousin in the explosion. "It's a tradition, you know."

"It's also a necessity, in part," said Harlan McKinney, who at 15, expects to start coal mining in three years. "I guess I'll have to. That's all there is around here."

But with the current boom in coal, it's enough to keep families and small towns together. The Craynor community is close-knit, consisting of about 75 wood and brick homes and 10 trailers spread out by the winding road.

Four generations living next to each other is not unusual, and some who leave, like Eva Salisbury, come back because they "can't get as close to anyone as we are here."

This part of eastern Kentucky is dotted with

small mines like R.F.H. Most still "shoot from the solid" — drilling a series of holes in the coal seam and filling them with an explosive powder or gel, as was used at R.F.H.

The explosives are set off with detonating caps, and if anything goes wrong, there can be a flash of flame. The flame, in turn, can ignite a methane gas or the highly volatile coal dust which, under safety laws, is to be covered by a layer of rock dust.

United Mine Workers President Sam Church visited Craynor Wednesday. He said he thought the practice of shooting from the solid should be quickly phased out, as it was in most U.S. mines when the industry was mechanized back in the 1940s and 1950s.