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FAMILIES OF MINING VICTIMS WAIT FOR RECOVERY OF BODIES  
... Current coal boom keeps families, small towns together

## Risks High, Choices Few

### Small Mine May Be Only Job Around

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 RFH 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."

David Jones of the state medical examiner's office said Thursday that three brothers — Jack Hamilton, 36, Burnis Hamilton, 31, and Wade Hamilton, 23 — died of internal injuries apparently caused by the explosion.

He said Donald Ray Hamilton, 39, Palmer Edmund McKinney, 26, Thurman Reynolds, 25 and Ronnie Hall, 25, apparently died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

MANY OF THOSE who choose coal mining don't work in anything elaborate. They work in small mines like the RFH, one of five truck mines in the same rugged hollow. The initial investment on the RFH 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 RFH. 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 RFH.

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.

Willard Stanley, commissioner of the state Department of Mines and Minerals, said he could not argue that mine inspection procedures were adequate, since 15 miners had died in the past six weeks.

"BUT THERE'S something else that doesn't meet the eye," Stanley said. "We've always done this type of mining in eastern Kentucky — shooting from the solid. My family did it. Last year, we had 11 people die from explosives. Now we are starting off this year with 7."

In 1980, the county had no fatal accidents, period, in such mines. There were 14 non-fatal accidents, of which six occurred in mines with 10 or fewer employees.

In Knott County, where an explosion Dec. 7 at Topmost killed eight coal miners, there were no fatal accidents involving underground truck mines with 10 or fewer employees in 1980.

THERE WERE 19 total accidents in such mines, all non-fatal. Total underground truck-mine production was 635,172 tons, of which the small mines accounted for 115,198 tons.

Figures for 1981 are not yet available.

Whatever the risks, the small miners are likely to persist.

"If I was able, I'd go back to it tomorrow," said William Howell, a 50-year-old miner disabled by black-lung disease. "I've run for my life plenty of times, and if I had to do it again, I would. Seems I ain't got nothing to look forward to now."