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Mine victims part of Eastern Kentucky life, death cycle

By Ben A. Franklin
New York Times News Service

CRAYNOR, Ky. — A refrain from a doleful coalfield folk song by Hazel Dickens — "the mines was his first love, but never his friend" — is being acted out here this weekend for the 100,000th-odd time this century.

Since 1900, more than 102,000 men and women have died in coal mining, the most hazardous of all industrial vocations.

Death has come so frequently this year to the mines in Eastern Kentucky that Willard Stanley, state com-

missioner of mines and minerals, said Friday, "There is some kind of failure. Something is going wrong."

Families bid farewell yesterday to the latest victims, nine men drawn by circumstance, tradition and choice to the risky business of clawing coal out of the earth in tunnels too narrow to stand in.

Seven men, all of them related, died Wednesday in an underground explosion at a family-owned mine here. Yesterday four of their bodies lay at the home of Purvis Hamilton, 10 miles up Mud Creek from U.S. 23-

460 on a rain-soaked dirt road. The road was lined with 20-ton coal trucks, idled because of the shut down mine.

Purvis Hamilton, 47, the surviving brother and mining company partner of Donald, 39, Jack, 36, and Burnis Hamilton, 31, and the father of Wade Hamilton, 22, Friday night began observing the Appalachian custom that calls for two nights of "viewing" by relatives and friends.

Hamilton lined up his brothers' and son's bronze-colored coffins in his living room. Scores of floral arrangements on wire tripods, several of

them with Bibles as motifs, overflowed onto a makeshift front porch, built since the deaths, of fresh lumber and bedsheet-sized rolls of opaque sheet plastic.

Lillie Hamilton, grandmother and mother to the four dead Hamilton men and the widow of another miner, was in her linoleum-floored house Wednesday morning when she heard the shattering blast at the low-budget "punch mine" of the RFH Coal Co. The mine was originally named for Purvis Hamilton's sister, Rita Faye, and was recently renamed the Joyce

Ann mine for the woman who is now the widow of Jack Hamilton.

"I never did want them to go into the mines," Mrs. Hamilton said. Palmer McKinney, Thurman Reynolds and Ronnie Hall, all 25, distant cousins of the Hamilton men, were also killed in the explosion. They and two miners who died when a 15-by-30-foot slab of overhead rock fell on them Friday at another family-owned mine at nearby Phelps, Ky., are to be buried near here today.

The deaths of Vernon W. Smith, 37, and Curtis Adams, 61, raised to 22 —

the number of deaths in seven mining accidents in Kentucky in seven weeks.

Adams, an experienced miner who had recently returned to the mines to enhance his United Mine Workers union pension, was a preacher at Berean Bible Church in Phyllis, Ky.

It will be months before federal and state mine safety officials publicly issue their judgment on what caused the disaster that overtook the Hamiltons inside the Joyce Ann mine.

The Hamiltons had taken a federally sponsored training course in explosives handling last fall.

1982 RFH Coal Company explosion
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