

# Methane Gas Deaths Sealing Wilberg Mine

By JANICE PERRY  
ORANGEVILLE, Emery County (UPI) — Explosive methane gas delayed efforts to seal the Wilberg Mine and snuff out a coal fire that killed 27 people in the nation's worst mine disaster in a dozen years.

The bodies of the 26 men and one woman remained deep inside the burning mountain 115 miles south-east of Salt Lake City today despite the brave efforts of volunteer miners to "get them out for their loved ones."

Mine officials ordered the Wilberg sealed Sunday to cut off oxygen to the fire, which broke out Dec. 19. But high levels of explosive methane gas seeping from the mine portal sent crews fleeing for their lives down the mountain and away from the opening.

A search party discovered 12 bodies more than a mile inside the mine late Saturday night and Emery Mining Corp. abandoned hope of finding other two missing miners alive.

Thirteen bodies were found Friday. "We hoped to the very end that someone was alive," said Joe Vendetti, one of the men who probed the depths of the burning mine. "After we found nobody was alive, we did our best to get them out for the sake of their loved ones."

But the smoldering fire flared up and forced the search party to leave the bodies behind.

Vendetti, who came in from Hanna Mine in Wyoming to assist the search, said some of the victims died "before they even knew what happened to them" when they were overcome by carbon monoxide fumes.

"It smells just like car exhaust," said Lynn Hunter, another rescuer. "They have so much air going through there that by the time you realize that carbon monoxide is

filling the air, you are dead." The mine was ordered closed for at least 72 hours — disappointing grieving relatives.

"I just want to bury (my husband) and put him to rest," said Kathy Riddle, a mother of four small children.

"It's just more of the nightmare to drag on," added her sister, Ann Mitchell.

The two women went to the mining office Sunday to pick up

## Wilberg Disaster

ORANGEVILLE, Utah (UPI) — Following is a chronology of the fire that took 27 lives at the Wilberg Mine.

Dec. 19 — Fire erupted in conveyor belt at 8:30 p.m. nearly a mile from mine's entrance, trapping 26 men and one woman.

Another miner, Kenneth Blake, escaped by leaving way out of tunnel. About 20 others in different sections of mine also got out safely.

Dec. 20 — Firefighters battle fire all day and start drilling two air shafts to safety chamber where aftermath victims had fled.

Officials say missing included six Emery Mining Corp. executives and supervisors in mine to witness attempt to break 24-hour work production record.

Five would-be rescuers driven from mine must be made and carbon dioxide when fire surges back out of control after being contained.

Dec. 21 — Rescuers discover nine bodies about 3:30 a.m. in first third of 3,000-foot side tunnel beyond fire. Among dead were the six company officials.

Search parties, thwarted for most of day by fire, re-enter tunnel and at 7 p.m. find four more bodies further back in horizontal shaft.

Dec. 22 — Rescue teams battle surging fire all day, controlling it to point that rescuers can reach back of dead-end tunnel. They find 12 more victims — 11 men and women — between 6:30 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Emery Mining officials, about 8:30 p.m., say they believe two missing men also dead.

Dec. 23 — Officials decide at 4 a.m. to seal mine in effort to kill slushers fire by shutting off oxygen. The bodies of the miners were sealed inside the mine.

Gov. Scott Matheson visited the Mine Sunday and said federal, state and local officials will begin their investigations of the cause of the disaster this week.

The Wilberg was cited for 264 safety violations in the past two years and it had an accident rate three times the national average in 1982. But federal mine safety officials said Emery mining had reduced the accident rate significantly in the past year and a recent inspection gave the mine a clean bill of health.

Six Emery executives and supervisors were among the dead. They were watching a crew of over 100 miners attempt to break a world-record for long-wall mining production when the fire broke out.

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# Matheson Tours Site of Disaster

By PAUL ROLLY  
HUNTINGTON, Utah (UPI) — Gov. Scott Matheson ordered state agencies to rush to the aid of families of 27 mine fire victims in what he called "the greatest loss-of-life" disaster in his eight years as Utah's chief executive.

Matheson flew to Huntington Sunday after Emery Mining Corp. officials decided to seal the Wilberg Mine without recovering the bodies due to another coal fire that erupted and threatened the lives of rescuers.

He met for more than an hour with company and local safety officials before heading 10 miles south to the Orangeville mine site to talk with rescue crews.

"After viewing that scene up there, I must say the rescue effort by these men and women has been nothing less than heroic. These people risked their own lives and deserve a tremendous amount of praise," he said.

The governor said he has di-

rected state public safety and social services officials to commit all resources available, including counseling programs and health clinics, to aid relatives of the dead miners.

This disaster impacts all Utahns and is not limited to this area," Matheson said. "This is the greatest loss of life in the eight years I've been governor."

We must now shift from the rescue and firefighting efforts to the human side of the equation and address the tremendous pressure the family and loved ones have to deal with," he added.

Matheson said he also would earmark money from his emergency fund to pay for unusual needs that may arise.

The governor, who earlier declared a state of emergency at the Wilberg mine, said federal, state and local officials will begin their investigations of the disaster this week.



Smoke continues to belch from the Wilberg Mine where the bodies of 27 miners are entombed until the fire subsides.

# Nielson Will Open Mine Hearings

By DICK HARMON  
City Editor

## Utahns Can Help in Mine Disaster

Utahns are turning their time and pocketbooks to help families of 27 miners killed in Emery County last week.

Monetary contributions are being accepted and can be sent to:  
United Mine Workers Carbon and Emery Disaster Fund  
C/O Angelo Bera  
105 Royal Way  
Helper, Utah 84526  
1-627-2827

- Volunteers are needed to provide transportation and lodging for out-of-state relatives and friends of the victims.
- Food and lodging are needed for rescue workers.
- Money and goods are being accepted to aid the families of the victims.
- Any other types of contributions can be arranged with Bera.

"We are born-again Christians and while we don't understand why this tragedy had to happen, we cannot blame God. Our hearts go out to those people. We are thankful our son is not among them."

Boyd, the oldest of five Wilkins sons, tried to get work at U.S. Steel Geneva Works where his father has worked for 20 years. "But the economy the way it is, he took a job as a miner."

The son did not complain about dangers at the mine, and has not pointed any fingers in blame, said the father.

Meanwhile Rep. Nielson vowed to use his influence on a

major Congressional subcommittee to see a similar tragedy doesn't happen again.

"It is difficult for me to find the words to express my emotions today," said Nielson. "At a time of the year when our thoughts so naturally turn to our loved ones, how painful it must be to have suffered such a tragic loss. This kind of accident would have been extremely difficult to bear under any circumstances, but the Christmas season makes it all the more poignant."

Nielson sits on the powerful Health and Environment Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which oversees the functioning of the Mine Safety and Health Administration.

While expressing sympathy to mine officials and families of the victims, Nielson says he will use whatever influence he has to see that standards of safety are adopted that will protect mine workers.