

Body of Pike miner recovered following one of two roof falls

By JOHN VOSKUHL
Staff Writer

PHYLIS, Ky. — A 29-hour rescue attempt ended yesterday afternoon with the recovery of the body of Eddie Meade, a 34-year-old miner killed by a massive roof fall at a Pike County mine.

The fall that killed Meade, at Cherokee Mining Co.'s Mine No. 1 near Phyllis, was one of two that occurred Wednesday within six miles and six hours of each other.

The other fall, at Canada Coal Co.'s Mine No. 2 near Kimper, left a Pike County man seriously injured. Roger Dean Blackburn, who was rescued about 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, spent much of yesterday in surgery at the University of Kentucky's Albert B. Chandler Medical Center in Lexington. Information about his condition and the extent of his injuries was not available last night.

Meade's relatives kept a harrowing vigil at the Cherokee mine site. By early yesterday afternoon, most observers had abandoned hope that Meade had survived the fall.

Nellie Mae Meade, the victim's mother, said the waiting had taken a toll on her. "If it wasn't for the Lord, I couldn't hardly make it," she said.

Meade's body was recovered about 2:30 p.m., and Pike County Coroner Charles Morris pronounced him dead at the scene.

"Apparently, he was killed instantly" when the roof fell, said David Phillips, a district supervisor for the state Department of Mines and Minerals.

Rescue workers from the department and from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration worked around the clock at the Cherokee mine, attempting to lift a section of roof estimated to measure 70 feet by 20 feet by 6 feet.

Mike Fulkerson, a spokesman for the mines and minerals department, said the roof section was thought to weigh about 1.5 million pounds.

Two additional state rescue teams were brought to Pike County from the department's Martin District office to help in both rescue efforts, Phillips said.

Phillips, a 14-year veteran of the Pikeville district office, said that Wednesday was the first time he could recall two roof falls occurring in such close sequence.

During an interview yesterday, he recounted details of the two rescue attempts. The Cherokee fall occurred about 8:45 a.m., nearly one mile down in the mine, he said. Workers began lifting the immense rock — which Phillips described as a mixture of sandstone and shale — using airbags and hydraulic jacks capable of lifting up to 300 tons.

"I could see (Meade's) body lying there," he said. "I couldn't tell whether he was alive at that point." However, he added, "It was doubtful that anyone could have survived a fall to the extent of that one."

By early afternoon, the department received the call about the Canada fall. Mine workers reported that they could see and communicate with Blackburn, who was trapped under a pile of large and small pieces of shale about two miles deep in the mine.

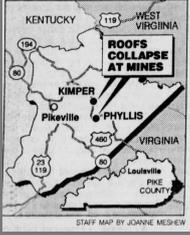
As they worked for nearly six hours to free him, rescue workers conversed frequently with Blackburn, Phillips said.

"He was conscious the whole time — six hours," Phillips said. "Occasionally, he would lapse into a period where we didn't hear anything from him. We would holler extra loud and he would respond."

"He'd say, 'Hurry up and get some of this stuff off me. I can't understand how some-

one could see (Meade's) body lying there," he said. "I couldn't tell whether he was alive at that point." However, he added, "It was doubtful that anyone could have survived a fall to the extent of that one."

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one could live through that."

Some of the shale pieces were so large that Phillips feared they would break if workers used hydraulic jacks to lift them. For that reason, he said, workers had to cut pieces of the rock and manually lift them from Blackburn.

It was unclear yesterday what caused the roof falls. Investigators had already begun examining the Canada mine yesterday. However, an investigation of the Cherokee site probably won't begin until next week, Fulkerson said.

At the Canada mine, a pair of state safety inspectors had just completed an inspection Wednesday when the roof fall occurred, Phillips said. A report from that inspection is expected to be prepared early next week.

Phillips said it would not have

been unusual for inspectors to have judged the mine's roof to be stable. "Roof falls are deceptive," he said. "Everything can look fine just before they happen."

State inspection records showed that the most recent inspection at the Cherokee mine was last May. State law requires the department to inspect mines twice a year.

Inspection records for the past year showed that neither mine has a history of uncorrected violations.

A roof fall had occurred at the Cherokee mine in April, records showed. No one was injured in that incident, and mine workers began using larger bolts to support the mine roof, according to subsequent inspection reports.

Officials of both mines would not comment yesterday. However, Cherokee released a statement through Coal Operators and Associates, a trade group based in Pikeville. In the statement, Cherokee officials expressed regret for the accident and said they were cooperating fully with investigators.

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