

# Heroes enshrined in Alabama coal mine

*Come listen all you fellas,  
so young and so fine,  
And seek not your fortune  
in the dark, dreary mine,  
It'll form as a habit and  
seep in your soul,  
Till the stream of your  
blood runs as black as the  
coal.*

— Merle Travis

By CHARLES SEABROOK  
cseabrook@ajc.com

**Brookwood, Ala.** — Deep in north Alabama's coal mines, the work is grimy and grueling. A moment's carelessness — or just plain bad luck — can get you maimed or killed.

On Sunday, it was an act of heroism that left a dozen miners dead in Blue Creek Mine No. 5 more than 2,000 feet deep in the earth. They were trying to rescue a co-worker who was trapped by a cave-in and an explosion. He died along with his would-be rescuers when a second explosion ripped through the mine, North America's deepest vertical mine shaft.

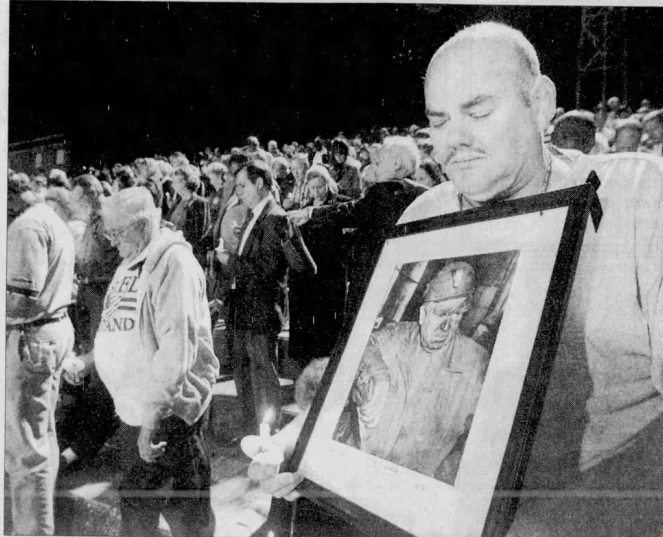
Twelve bodies still lie in the mine, where a raging fire is preventing their retrieval.

"For this community, this accident is every bit as horrible as what happened in New York on Sept. 11," said Lisa Christiansen, a miner who works at No. 5.

The Alabama tragedy is also a stark reminder of how dangerous it can be for the men and women who produce the coal Alabama uses to run factories and generate electricity.

"The only other job more dangerous than coal mining is firefighting," says Eddie Blake, financial secretary of United Mine Workers of America Local 2368, which represents the No. 5 mine workers in Brookwood.

Mining has grown safer than it was in the early 1900s, when more than 3,000 miners perished every year — including a record 367 men and boys killed in a West Virginia coal mine explosion in 1907. In



Disabled mine worker J.R. Hammond holds a photo of union founder John L. Lewis as he joins in a candlelight service Thursday night in Brookwood, Ala., for the victims of Sunday's coal mine blasts. Most of the dead miners were killed by a second explosion and fire while helping to rescue workers trapped in the first one.

recent decades, the death toll has been reduced by government-enforced safety regulations and automation that has cut the work force.

Still, 38 coal miners lost their lives on the job last year, and 48 others died from accidents in other types of mining.

So far this year, 32 coal miners have been killed in work-related accidents, including the 13 last week in Alabama. Their deaths marked the nation's worst mining accident since 1984, when fire killed 27 coal miners near Orangeville, Utah.

The miners say they know their jobs are fraught with danger, but the work is their livelihood and identity. "It gets in your blood," says Sidney Atchison, 56, who has worked in the mines for 19 years.

Jobs digging coal deep underground are among the

most coveted in this area of Alabama. Miners often earn \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year with overtime, says Dennis Hall, spokesman for Jim Walter Resources, which operates No. 5 and two other mines.

Jim Walter Resources employs nearly 1,500 workers from a 16-county area around Brookwood. Because of last weekend's accident, more than 300 of them — those assigned to the No. 5 mine — are out of work indefinitely.

"We're spending most of our time right now helping these workers fill out forms for unemployment benefits," said Blake. The union does not have a fund for members who have been laid off.

Company officials said they don't know when the mine can be reopened to recover the bodies of the 12 miners and return to production. The

company is still pouring millions of gallons of water into No. 5 to extinguish the fire.

The mine is one of Alabama's most fertile, producing more than 2 million tons of low-sulfur coal a year, about 10 percent of the state's mining capacity. Low-sulfur bituminous coal is coveted by power plants, and it exists in abundance beneath the forested ridges near this town of 1,500 about 40 miles southwest of Birmingham.

Thirty-two miners were doing routine maintenance 2,124 feet deep in the mine late Sunday afternoon when a portion of the roof in Section 4 suddenly collapsed. The cave-in apparently released methane gas. Falling rocks hit a battery charger, causing sparks that ignited the methane.

The explosion injured three men and trapped another,

Gaston "Junior" Adams, 56, of Bessemer. Fleeing miners helped the three injured men to safety. When they realized Adams was still trapped, 12 of them rushed back to free him.

Then, a second explosion of unknown origin ripped through the mine, trapping the would-be rescuers. When trained rescue workers entered the mine about an hour later, they came across a severely injured miner, Ray Ashworth, 53, who apparently had separated from the rest of the group of 12 in an effort to restart the flow of water into the mine. He died Monday in a Birmingham hospital.

The trained rescue personnel were forced to leave the mine — and the bodies of the 12 other miners — because of high levels of methane and carbon monoxide.

The miners who rushed back to save the trapped are being hailed as heroes.

"It takes a special hero to give up his life to save another," said Alabama Gov. Don Siegelman. "We've seen over the past few weeks that our country is full of those heroes, and Alabama is no exception."

On Thursday, Siegelman, U.S. Labor Secretary Elaine Chao and about 3,000 other people gathered in Brookwood High School's football stadium to mourn their dead.

Thirteen pale yellow bows held 13 red roses along a fence separating the field from the stadium. At midfield, 13 candles rested on a table flanked by two gold-colored mining picks and two shovels.

"Your country shares your grief," Chao told family and friends of the victims.

The head of the nation's Mine Safety and Health Administration, David Lauriski, said a nine-member team would try to determine what caused the fatal blast. The panel will review records, conduct interviews and eventually inspect the mine.

Two issues that could get special attention are past

## 13 MINERS DIE

Coal mining in the United States can be a lethal occupation. A chronology of last week's tragedy:

▷ 5:15 p.m.

**Sunday**

At 2,140 feet deep in the earth, a portion of the roof collapses in Section 4 of the mine, apparently releasing large volumes of methane where 32 miners are working. Debris falling onto a battery charger produces sparks, which cause the methane to ignite and explode. Three workers are injured and another is trapped under the rubble.

▷ 5:15 to 6:30 p.m.

The three injured men are carried away by their fleeing co-workers, but when they realize another man is still trapped, several of them rush back to rescue him.

▷ 6:30 to 6:45 p.m.

A second explosion, this one of unknown origin and in Section 6, traps 12 of the volunteer rescuers.

▷ 7:30 p.m.

Trained rescue personnel enter the mine to search for survivors. They find a badly injured miner, but are unable to get to the 12 other miners. The injured man dies the next day at a Birmingham hospital.

▷ 6:30 a.m. Monday

The trained rescuers are withdrawn because of dangerously high levels of methane gas and carbon monoxide. They are forced to leave behind the bodies of the 12 miners.

Staff

problems with the mine roof and claims that Jim Walter Resources ignored miner complaints about high levels of methane in the No. 5 mine.

Records show that the mine has been cited for serious safety violations 10 times since Aug. 1, and half of those involved problems with the roof. Sections of roof fell twice last year. No one was hurt.

Kyle Parks, a Jim Walter Resources official, would not comment on the miners' allegations.

2001 Jim Walter Resources No 5 NEWS2

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Apr 23, 2025