

Authorities arrest five men in connection with copper thefts

By Samantha Perry Bluefield Daily Telegraph

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WELCH — Five McDowell County men have been arrested in connection with copper thefts that left another man dead after he was entrapped in a Keystone mine, West Virginia State Police officials said Wednesday.

Dustin Bolen, 21, Justin Bolen, 22, Brandon Collins, 35, Steve Cordle, 38, and Jimmy Church Jr. , 32, all of Kimball, were arrested Tuesday following an investigation into the copper thefts at the Keystone No. 1 mine, Senior Trooper B. D. Gillespie, with the Welch detachment of the West Virginia State Police, said.

The arrests stemmed from a late August incident in which Clay “C. J.” Epperly, 30, of Kimball, along with Justin Bolen, Collins and Cordle, were trapped in the abandoned mine, Gillespie said.

Justin Bolen, Collins and Cordle were found in the shafts by rescuers and brought out to safety. Epperly, however, was never found. After days of search efforts, the rescue attempt was called off on Sept. 1 and the mine was sealed.

At the time of the incident, Gillespie said the theft of copper from the mine was believed to be a criminal enterprise ongoing for months.

But, he noted, “We haven’t had anything come out in the investigation that would lead me to believe foul play was involved (in Epperly’s death),” Gillespie said. “All the suspects have fully cooperated and we have found no inconsistencies in their statements. ”

Metal thefts at Keystone No. 1 have been a problem for years. In January 2015, another McDowell County man had to be rescued from the same mine after entering it to steal copper, officials said. The injured man and his partner became separated after entering the mine. The partner made his way out, but the injured man did not. He was eventually rescued.

The five men arrested Tuesday face charges of grand larceny, conspiracy and transferring stolen property, all felonies, and the misdemeanor charge of trespassing. Upon conviction, Gillespie said they could face a prison time of one to 25 years.

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Low oxygen levels are one of the serious threats copper thieves face when entering abandoned mine shafts. In a previous report, Gillespie said those arrested for the Keystone No. 1 thefts knew the danger, and how to work around it.

“The individuals would wait until around 11:30 p.m., and then they would go in and work the mine until about 3 a.m. the next day,” he said.

Gillespie explained that mine shafts “suck in” oxygen during early-morning hours, a process known as in-gassing. “They had more oxygen then,” he explained.

During normal daytime hours, out-gassing would occur, which resulted in less oxygen in the mine. During that time, the men steered clear of the shafts.

But there were other hazards within the dark depths. “There were definitely dangerous conditions within the mines other than low oxygen levels,” Gillespie said. “They were also encountering roof falls. ”

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During the 1960s and ‘70s, Keystone No. 1, owned by Eastern Gas and Fuel, a subsidiary of Boston Power and Light, employed hundreds of workers. At that time, the company owned all of the Keystone mines and used the coal to fuel its own needs while also selling its surplus across the globe.

Because the mine was so large — described by a current company official as “the size of Huntington” — trolley cars were used to haul the coal out of the shafts.

These trolley cars are one enticement for criminals of today who risk their lives to venture into Keystone No. 1 to steal metal.

“Someone had to know about this mine portal entry that had trolley cable in there,” Gillespie said in a previous Daily Telegraph report. “That was what they were after. ”

Keystone No. 1 is now owned by Bluestone Coal Corp., a company headed up by coal baron and currently gubernatorial candidate Jim Justice.

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After the late August botched nighttime theft, Gillespie said the three surviving men made a failed attempt at rescuing Epperly.

“Three of them made it back out and stayed out for awhile before realizing C. J. (Epperly) was still inside,” Gillespie said. “They decided to go in and rescue him, so one of the individuals decided to borrow an oxygen tank from a friend to go back into the mine. ”

The rescue attempt failed, and soon the three men were being sought by mine rescue experts.

Gillespie said officials were notified of the situation after a family member of one of the men called 911.

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In early September, Keystone No. 1 was resealed without Epperly’s body being found. As tragic as it appeared to residents of the southern coalfields, it was not a unique situation.

In June of this year, three men broke into the Upper Big Branch Mine near the Raleigh-Boone County border. The mine had been sealed in 2012 after an explosion in 2010 killed 29 workers.

Two men, Everett Adkins and William Bennett, were charged with breaking and entering. But a third man, David Lee Adkins, was never found. After an extensive search the mine was resealed.

The copper theft problem is not unique to coal mines. Trooper Gillespie said individuals have been stealing metal from homes and phone lines for years.

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Gillespie said the suspects in the mine copper theft case were arraigned before McDowell County Magistrate Vandyke and remanded to the McDowell County Holding Facility in lieu of \$50,000 bond.

— Samantha Perry is a writer for The Bluefield Daily Telegraph

Search continues for man missing in abandoned mine

By [MetroNews Staff](#) in [News](#) | August 30, 2016 at 3:37PM

UPDATE 8 p.m. Tuesday Three men found and one man still missing—the man who originally went in the mine. Search scheduled to resume Wednesday morning.

KEYSTONE, W.Va. — State police, mine rescue teams and other first responders were on the scene Tuesday afternoon in McDowell County looking for two people believed inside an abandoned coal mine, troopers said.

The search began earlier Tuesday after troopers learned four people were inside the old Keystone No. 1 mine that was sealed in 1916.

Apparently one man entered the mine at about 2 a.m. and three others went in looking for him. Two of them were found at just before 3 p.m., according to reports.

People have been using shovels to dig through the sealed area to get inside and look for copper trolley cables, state police said.

