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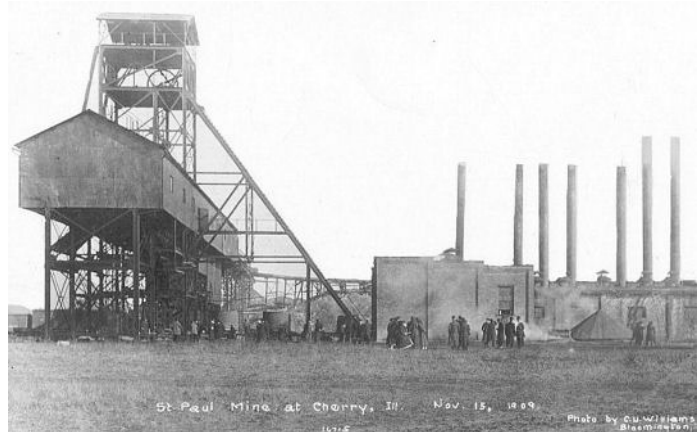
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Cherry, Illinois Mine Disaster of 1909

(The shorter version w/photos)

In November 1909 the St. Paul Coal Company, which owned the mine, employed a total of 481 men and boys. So many of them were from the Streator area that Cherry was known as a Streator "colony." The mine at Cherry was a large one, considered clean, safe, and well run.

There were three veins, with most of the work at this time in the second, about 360 feet down. On November 13, a Saturday, work proceeded as usual, with the sounds of picks, men chatting, and rumbling mule-driven cars echoing through the tunnels. Because a power line had broken a month earlier, the mine was lit by open kerosene lamps, which cast a flickering light through the



underground passages. About 1:15 in the afternoon a coal car loaded with six bales of hay (fodder for the mules) was shoved out of the elevator at the second level and hitched to a train. Some feet farther along the hay was dropped off to await the trip down to the mule stable on the third level.

Somehow the hay caught fire—either because of oil dripping from one of the lamps or from a fallen lamp itself. At first no one thought much of the fire, and attempts to put it out were somewhat disorganized. In minutes, however, the beams overhead had caught fire and flames licked outward at an ever-growing rate. The burning hay was then dumped down the shaft, but it became jammed there and did not fall to the third level. There was no underground alarm system in the mine, and although miners nearby soon realized that the blaze had gotten out of hand and that the only course left was to flee, men in distant tunnels worked on unaware of what was happening. Soon the corridors were filled with smoke, flames, crashing timbers, and men running frantically to the one escape shaft that remained open.



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Above ground, puffs of smoke rising from the shaft were the first sign of trouble. The alarm was sounded, and a crowd of anxious relatives and other townspeople soon collected. Mine superintendent John Bundy, of Streator, was one of the first on the scene. (In later years, one of his sons recalled that he had wanted to go too, but had been admonished by his mother, "Don't you go over there—your father's got his hands full." The boy never saw his father alive again.) Dr. L. D. Howe, also of Streator, physician for the mining company, went below to help but was soon raised to the top and forced to remain there in order to minister to the injured.



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Bundy headed a group of twelve volunteers who made six trips back and forth on the cage to search out and bring up men trapped below. After the seventh descent, the signals to the operator on top were weak and confused and for agonizing minutes he refused to pull up the cage despite frantic pleas from bystanders. When he finally yielded, the hushed onlookers saw to their horror only twelve blackened, twisted bodies—men who had given their lives for their friends. Along with Bundy there were Alexander Norberg, the assistant mine manager; John Sczabrinski, a eager; Joseph Robeza, a driver; and Robert Clark, Andrew McLuckie, James Spiers, Harry Stewart, and Mike Suhe, all miners. The three others, who did not even work at the mine but had rushed over to help, were Dominic Dormento, a grocer; John Flood, a clothier; and Isaac Lewis, a liveryman.

After this, the cage was lowered and raised many times, but it always returned empty and so was soon halted. Tons of water were poured in, but fell to the third level and had little effect on the roaring inferno in the second vein. Late Sunday heavy planks were thrown over the shaft opening in an attempt to smother the raging flames; wet sand was dumped on the planks and the airshaft sealed. The town reached the brink of riot when



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those with relatives below realized that some men might manage to climb to the surface only to find their escape cut off.



On Wednesday, when rumors circulated that sounds of thudding had been heard below, two companies of state militia were brought in to quiet the townspeople. Below, meanwhile, some men had remained alive for a while, unable to reach the shaft because of the heat and deadly gases. They clustered together in trapped and hopeless little groups. Beside the body of a young miner named Sam Howard, a recovery team found this note: "There are a good many dead mules and men. I tried to save some but came near losing myself." Other entries followed, and finally, a weak scrawl dated 12:44 p.m. on Monday: "Our lives are giving out. I think this is our last. We are getting weak."



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The shaft was uncovered on Thursday, November 18, and firefighting resumed, but those who went below returned to the surface only with the dead as mute evidence of the tragedy below. As the bodies were placed in tents to be identified by sobbing wives and children, the death toll mounted above 200. (It would finally total 259.)



One event brought relief to some and hope too many more. On November 20, rescue workers exploring a remote tunnel came upon a few enfeebled miners who led them to a small group of men that had managed to live through a week of deprivation and despair. The group, totaling twenty-one men, was led by George Eddy of Streator, who later described how he had been on the surface when the fire started and had gone below as soon as he saw smoke. After he and several others had notified as many men as they could, they approached the mouth of the entry, but found that they could not get out.

We were blocked in on account of the black damp and smoke; we went back up the entry and tried to go out another road and we found the black damp was stronger there than it was where we were, so we went back into the main entry again. Then we tried two or three times to get out on Saturday and Sunday, but we couldn't get out; every time we would try it we were further away from the bottom, so we saw that we were not going to get to the cage because the black damp was pressing us in from both sections and we knew it was going to fill up the face and that we would smother in there. . . . We went in and built a wall across the second west entry and we built across the first west entry of dirt and we were inside there seven days. Of the twenty-one who were rescued, one of whom later died, John Lorimer and George Stimac (or Stimez) were from



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Streator, and Thomas White from Kangley. Another survivor, named Antoniese (or Antenore), recalled: It was strange to see how the different races acted. The English sang, the French talked, the Italians prayed and the Austrians and Lithuanians swept. Often the English and the Italians would join in singing hymns. At last John Lorimer, a Scotchman, was the leader. » . . 'Abide With Me" was his favorite song. We all learned it.



Many of the others wrote notes to their families, and on the back of one was found this testament, signed by all twenty-one men: "We the undersigned do not blame anyone for the accident that happened to pen us in here and we believe that everybody has done all in their power to relieve us."





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Although the rescue attempts continued until November 25, no more survivors were found. Since the fire could not be extinguished with water, the mine was sealed with cement. This cover was removed on February 1, 1910, and body recovery resumed; the last body was brought up on July 7. The mine then resumed work, and continued in operation for some ten years.



From the beginning, Streator had been vitally concerned with the Cherry disaster. On the first evening, November 13, a special CI&S train left the town at 11:30, carrying 200 persons nearly everyone with a friend or relative in the mine. Of the 259 dead, many had considered themselves Streator people, and their bodies were moved back to the town for burial. The Free Press in November listed some forty-six as "Streator's dead," though this number included men from Heenanville and Kangley, and the list grew longer as more bodies were recovered. Because of the mobility of the mining population and the confused records (some Slavic or Lithuanian names may have as many as five



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variations), it can probably never be ascertained exactly how many of the Cherry dead were from Streator.

What mattered was that there were 630 survivors— 160 widows and 470 fatherless children—who somehow had to be provided for. Private contributions started pouring in immediately from all over the nation, with Streator alone contributing almost \$5000 by the end of November. These, together with donations from the United Mine Workers, Red Cross, and other organizations, eventually totaled over \$444,000.



Meanwhile, official bodies had gone into action. These included the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, which, for all practical purposes, owned the St. Paul Coal Company; the United Mine Workers; and the consuls and other representatives of foreign governments whose nationals were involved. Official records gave the following national breakdown of the men who lost their lives in the Cherry mine disaster: Italian, 73; "Slavish," 36; Austrian, 28; Lithuanian, 21; Scotch, 21; German, 15; French, 12; American, 11; Swedish, 9; Polish, 8; English, 8; Belgian, 7; Irish, 3; Russian, 3; Greek, 2; Welsh, 2.



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The Milwaukee road, a \$400,000,000 corporation, was under no legal liability for the disaster beyond the resources of the coal company, which totaled about \$350,000. If the coal company were sold, it would go into bankruptcy and would probably yield less than its true worth.



Into this tangle of legal complications and aroused public opinion stepped John E. Williams of Streator, who had been serving as vice-chairman of the Cherry Relief Commission. He volunteered his services as a disinterested mediator, spent many hours analyzing the situation, and conducted negotiations. President Albert J. Earling of the Milwaukee road announced: "We acknowledge a moral obligation," and eventually the company added \$400,000 to the amount privately subscribed. The final sums allotted to surviving dependents were worked out on the basis of the English Workmen's Compensation Act of 1906, which Williams had studied carefully. The official report of the disaster noted that "the credit for the settlement belongs almost exclusively to Mr. Williams."

Out of the tragedy came new mine safety laws, more thorough inspections, and improved mining equipment. The men who died, especially those who gave their lives



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for others, would never be forgotten. And Streator had special cause for pride because of its own John E. Williams. His skill, humanity, and hard work played a major role in preventing the Cherry mine disaster from creating bitterness and hatred among the thousands of persons whose lives it affected.





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