

11 Die In Herrin Mine Blast

By SAMUEL O. HANCOCK
United Press International
HERRIN, Ill. (UPI) — Rescuers probing the smoke and fume-filled tunnels of Blue Blaze Coal Mine No. 2 today found the shattered bodies of 11 men trapped when an explosion tore through the shaft. There were no survivors.

The bodies could not be removed until ventilator fans blew the mine free of carbon monoxide left by the apparent methane gas explosion.

Recovery of the bodies was to be attempted later today.

Relatives of the victims were informed of the outcome of the tragedy by William Orlandi, Illinois director of mines and minerals, in a terse announcement.

Wives of two of the dead broke into sobs. The crowd of friends and relatives gradually dispersed into the 4 below cold.

Orlandi declined to discuss possible causes of the blast. Mine owner Claude Gentry who was attending his own 45th birthday party when news of the blast came Wednesday night, said he had "no idea" as to the cause.

But the state mine inspector, Ray McCluskey, theorized the workmen at the coal face may have cut into a trapped pocket of Methane.

The gas could have been touched off by a miner lighting a cigarette, a spark from a machine or an electric short.

The body of the cage operator was found a few feet from the shaft. That of the motorman lay about 40 feet away. Bodies of the remaining nine were strewn about the coal face, some 750 feet to the east of the shaft.

Gentry said the rescue teams told him the blast tumbled coal cars and timbers askew. Damage to the mine was said to be extensive.

The men of the second shift apparently never had a chance when the mighty blast, which could be heard and felt two miles away, rumbled through the tunnel.

There was no indication that any of the men had survived the force of the blast, only to succumb later to fumes or burns.

The explosion site was 2½ miles northwest of Herrin and a mile from the smaller community of Carterville. Herrin is 90 miles southeast of St. Louis.

The Blue Blaze mine had been called a blessing when it opened in the economically depressed Illinois region called "Little Egypt" six months ago. But shortly after 6 p.m., CST, Wednesday, a choking ball of hot, black smoke welled from the mine shaft.

Pieces of shredded timber and mangled steel fell from the smoke. The window of an auto 30 yards from the pithead was shattered.

Death underground was no stranger to the people who waited above.

At West Frankfort, Ill., scarcely 20 miles away from the Blue Blaze mine, 119 men died when the New Orient Coal Mine blew up on Dec. 22, 1951. At nearby Centralia, Ill., 111 miners died in another coal mine explosion.

One of the first teams to venture into the blasted Blue Blaze shaft reported shortly after midnight it had come upon a body in the smoke-shrouded debris.

As the search continued, a 25-ton crane lowered the rescue workers, two at a time, into the pit. The men descended in a yard-wide "bucket," carrying with them oxygen tanks as protection against the carbon monoxide fumes eddying below.

The initial search group consisted of five members of the Benton mine rescue team, plus a state mine inspector who knew the twists and turnings of the new Blue Blaze mine.

Almost blinded by smoke and gas, they passed the first body, ventured 300 feet further, and then made a wrong turn. Two of the team members had to return to the surface to replenish their oxygen supply.

The temperature above was 4 degrees below zero. Bonfires and salamanders glittered in the icy darkness, their light flickering across the set faces of those who watched behind a rope barrier 200 feet from the mine tangle.

There were only two women in the crowd of 100. Other wives and mothers were stopped by company police at the highway entrance to the mine. They waited through the night for word of their men.

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