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Mine Tragedies Make Demands

The tragic deaths of seven men in a Floyd county coal mine last week emphasize, of course, the absolute necessity that every precaution be taken against extending the string of mine disasters.

An earlier mine explosion at Topmost, Knott county, a few weeks earlier, and now this one on Mink Branch in this county quite logically bring into question the safety of the shooting method—"shooting from the solid," blasting into the face of the coal—that was practiced in both. UMW President Sam Church immediately suggested that the method of blasting coal loose from the seam be outlawed.

But those who defend the blasting method used in these two small mines point to not one but two explosions which occurred earlier in the Scottia mine in Letcher county which claimed lives, first, of mineworkers and, later, those of rescue team members, and that the shooting method used in that operation was far more sophisticated, and presumably safer, than that of the smaller mines.

One gets the feeling that those who were victims in last week's explosion died, despite their best efforts to practice safety. For these victims included the owners themselves of the mine; their lives were at stake. Neglect of employees' safety cannot, in this case, be ascribed to management.

At best, coal mining can never be a safe occupation. Nature itself can be said to rebel as the removal of coal creates a huge vacuum deep in the interior of a mountain. The imponderables outweigh man's knowledge.

No one knows this better, perhaps, than Kentucky's commissioner of mines and minerals, Willard Stanley, whose dedication to mine safety is unquestioned.

Governor Brown, we think, has acted correctly in naming a commission composed of officials, mining company personnel and miners to study the situation and make an effort to reach a solution to the problem.

If "shooting from the solid" is eliminated, the small coal operation will cease to exist. The cost of cutting machines, continuous miners and such equipment is too great. In that event, only strong, well-financed companies, many of which have out-of-state ownership, would be able to operate.

This contingency, nevertheless, will not justify a shooting practice if it, indeed, is found to invite disaster. But it does justify the closest scrutiny and the best thinking before such a stern measure is put into effect.

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that would divide Prestonburg has long been a matter of record, he said, and there was never any doubt that he would vote against it.

Bailey said he was absent from the senate chamber at the time of the vote on the bill only because Gov. John Y. Brown had asked him to accompany him to Mink Branch, scene of that day's mining tragedy. In any event, outcome of the senate vote on the bill passed by 34 votes 5-5 was by then a foregone conclusion, he said.

Floyd county enjoys a balance of power in this district, Bailey said, pointing out that, even with the new boundary, the district he represents will embrace 42,000 persons in this county and only 17,000 in Knott. Knott was, in fact, the only county he lost in the last election, Bailey noted.

"I'm being accused of things that just aren't true," he said in Frankfort Tuesday, adding that he would himself be prepared to file an amendment to the disputed bill if requested.

The council unanimously voted a resolution opposing the bill and urging Rep. Stumbo to seek to amend it.

Commercial and residential garbage rates will be increased soon, according to a council decision. Councilman Paul Phillips Hughes explained that the city sanitation department incurred a \$27,000 loss last year, despite the fact that fuel and repair costs were not charged to the department and that money had been put aside toward purchase of new equipment. With the additional costs figured in, the deficit amounted to about \$77,000, Hughes said.

City businesses were advised some weeks ago of the proposed new rates. Residential rates will be raised from \$4 to \$6 monthly, with a 25 percent discount for senior citizens, it was said. Hughes said comparable cities in the area charge as much or more—in some cases making only one pickup weekly—for garbage collection.

According to a recently-enacted state law, Prestonburg will need to adopt an ordinance altering the procedure by which council members are elected. City Attorney Paul P. Burdett told the council. Under the law, candidates for city council will be required to file in the primary as well as the general election, he said.

Ceramics Class Sailed

A beginning Ceramics Class will begin at Prestonburg Community College Tuesday, Feb. 9, and running through April 13, from 6 to 8:30 p.m. This class will teach the student the art of handbuilding and throwing on the potter's wheel with craftsmanship, developing an eye for form and texture and an appreciation for the ceramic tradition. Gwen Heffer will be the instructor.

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IT'S THE LAW... The Kentucky law which prohibits a candidate for public office from promising the voters to serve for a reduced salary brought some giggles to the august chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court, the other day.

The case at issue pertains to the Jefferson county election of a man named Brown who as a candidate for county commission had promised he would serve for \$3000 less per year than the prevailing wage. Kentucky law says "no one can do that," and the state Court of Appeals ruled against Brown, although he took fight and extracted his offer four days after it was made.

Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor asked if candidates for office can't promise the voters anything. President Reagan as a candidate promised to raise the budget and cut taxes. Justice Blackmun asked if the promise would be illegal under this law.

Justice Marshall blandly inquired if it won't lead to a lot of trouble to require every candidate to say "nothing but the truth," adding that every candidate promises to reduce taxes and increase services—a bit of hyperbole, he said, "is certainly impossible."

And Justice Stevens wanted to know why, if a candidate promises something he or she can't possibly do, his or her opponent couldn't point out that fact to the voters.

Others who are not as dignified as the robed justices wonder if this law of ours isn't an abridgment of freedom of speech and a threat to wipe out politics in general, which lives on promises.

It is explained that the Kentucky law says, in part, that no candidate shall promise "things of value" in consideration of an individual's vote. But such a promise can be a "election promise" as they prove an "election promise" is of value?

In Memoriam

In loving memory of our beloved husband and father, Bill Dotson, who passed away 18 years ago, Jan. 29, 1927. Born Dec. 1, 1912.

To some you are forgotten
To others, just part of the past
But to us who loved and lost you
Your memory will always last
It's a loneliness house without you,
And sad has been the way
For life and home are not the same
Since you were called away.
Our hearts still ache with sadness,
Secret tears will always flow.
What it meant to have you no one will ever know.

For memories are all we have left now.
Oh, we miss you so.
Sally missed by his
WIFE AND FAMILY

The Floyd County Times

Our Yesterdays

(Items taken from The Floyd County Times, 10, 20, 30 and 40 years ago)

Ten Years Ago

(January 27, 1972)
The city of Prestonburg and its municipal water and gas commission moved jointly Monday toward compliance with a Kentucky Water Pollution Control Commission directive demanding that Prestonburg build and have in operation by December, 1973, a secondary sewage treatment plant. Congressman Carl D. Perkins wired The Times Monday, reporting that President Nixon in his budget submitted to the Congress asked for an additional \$200,000 for construction of the local flood protection project at Martin. Influenza has not reached epidemic proportions in this county but it's here and the worst may be yet to come, it was said this week. Born: to Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Edward Webb, of Prestonburg, a son, December 10, to Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Lyons, of Paintsville, a daughter, Angela Lynn, 2, to Mr. and Mrs. Nannie Hamilton Hughes, 78, of Prestonburg, Friday at Prestonburg General hospital. Mrs. Rebecca Centers, 66, of the Auxier road, last Thursday here. Noah Lee Collins, 71, formerly of Printer, Jan. 6 at the Methodist hospital, Pikeville. Mrs. Dona Wiley, 66, of Betsy Layne, last Friday at Our Lady of the Way hospital, Martin. Andrew Porter, 61, of Allen, last Thursday at General hospital, Louisville. Samuel Howell, 77, of Toler Creek, last Wednesday at his home. Burnice Stone, 64, last Monday at his home at East McDowell. Headlines: (Hans) Hoots, 86, of Drift, Friday at the McDowell Appalachian Regional hospital, Beckham, Stumbo, 71, of Wayland, Sunday at Veterans hospital, Huntington, W. Va. Rebecca H. Scutcheon, 65, of Water Gap, last Thursday at the Methodist hospital, Otis Mullins, 46, formerly of Holdman, last Thursday at his home at Wyandotte, Michigan.

Twenty Years Ago

(January 25, 1952)
Custom Car Carpet Company, Inc. began operation this week in the New York Furniture Company Warehouse at the corner of Main and Clark, of Floyd county, was the only county school superintendent in the United States to appear by invitation on the panel discussion following President Kennedy's address at the National Conference on Milk and Nutrition in Washington, D. C. Tuesday. Reviewing the financial condition of the City of Prestonburg in a talk to the Community Development Council here Wednesday, Mayor George P. Archer said, "There's no news, and it's all bad, but there's nothing so bad that it can't be straightened out." Twenty years ago IGA advertised ground beef at 10¢ a pound, sirloin steak at 1.99, and round steak at 1.49. Born: to Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Johnson, of Prestonburg, a daughter, Lisa Renee, January 21 at McDowell Memorial hospital; to Mr. and Mrs. Fred H. Stumbo, a son, Glen Carter, January 6. There died: Ed Evans, 56, of Grethel, last Wednesday at Pikeville Memorial hospital; Mrs. Mary Grethel, 62, formerly of Drift, last Wednesday at the same hospital; Adkins, 42, formerly of Allen, last Wednesday at his home at Marshall, Mich.; Bernice G. Rice, 70, Friday at his home at Estill, Mrs. Thelma Bready Sney, 34, formerly of Left Beaver, last Thursday at Prior, George Mich.; Andrew J. Goble, 65, formerly of Justell, January 14 at Cincinnati; Mrs. Minny Sparks, 42, of Banner, last Wednesday at Methodist hospital, Pikeville.

Thirty Years Ago

(January 24, 1942)
A 30-year-old Bramhan's Creek man, accused of the torture and rape of an orphaned girl, remained a fugitive this week, hidden in some mountain fastness in the vicinity of his Bramhan's Creek home, or sheltered by relatives elsewhere. To the mounting number of old machines come confiscated over Kentucky within the week by Federal Bureau of Investigation agents were 22 from Floyd county. The day after the Stumbo's March in Floyd county will be launched in two sectors—Prestonburg and Maytown—at 4:30 p.m. next Tuesday in the war on poils as a dramatic climax to the month-long March and Burnie Stumbo, to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Stumbo, of Minnie, a son, Tommy Devan, January 17; to Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Boyd, of Tran, a daughter, January 16. There died: Mrs. Merle S. Hicks, 54, Floyd county native Sunday during funeral services for her sister-in-law at Mount; Mrs. Margaret Hicks Tackett, 72, at her home at Dory; Mrs. Pukie Halbert Barnett, 74, last Thursday at home on Buck's River; Fred Gearheart, 52, Sunday at his home at Prior; George Stanford, 71, Monday at his home at Wheelwright; Thomas A. Spradlin, 75, Friday at home at Bonanza.

Forty Years Ago

(January 25, 1912)
Suspected of blasting a 16-inch pipeline which supplied gas to a plant against a defense work, two Little Point men faced grand federal prosecution after the grand jury of the Floyd circuit failed Wednesday to vote an indictment against them. Ray "Puzz" Lewis, 29-year-old son of a local defense committee, and the wounded Saturday night was a tragic climax to a party at the home of a neighbor. How every individual may assist in the conservation of products that can be re-used, and the method of helping local defense committees and all other organizations formed in the cause of national defense—all this will be explained at a giant defense rally to be held Feb. 1 in the auditorium of the Prestonburg grand jury building. As announced this week, Although returning only three indictments alleging roadhouse regulation violations, the grand jury of the Floyd circuit court stated in its final report on adjournment Wednesday: "We have noted that most of the felonies were at or near roadhouses or places of public entertainment." There died: Anne F. Grethel, 68, last Wednesday at his home; Henry Bailey, 78, 23 at his home at Bonanza; Mrs. Sophia Nesbit Devan, 69, Sunday at her home here; Mrs. Mary Ann Hicks, 47, Sunday at her home on Bruck Creek; Martin B. Wellman, 68, formerly of Garrett, Jan. 18 at South Bend, Ind.; Samuel Robinson, 69, Jan. 17 at his home at East Point.

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In any event, by 11 a.m. Tuesday the town reservoir contained no more than 20,000 gallons. Hoggman said he had told by Beaver-Elkhorn of a figure confirmed by Beaver-Elkhorn superintendent Bob Hackworth.

Hoggman said Middle States was being used as a "scapegoat" in the affair. "Whenever the system fails," he said, "the easiest one to accuse is the coal company."

Hackworth estimated this week that the water remaining in David's storage tank last Tuesday morning should have lasted at least two days. "There is simply no way" the town's residential customers could have exhausted the supply by Tuesday afternoon, he said. Nor is there any evidence of a major leak in the David water system, he added.

Hoggman said he doubted whether water district officials had accurate knowledge of the water volume in the David tank at any given time. At any rate, Middle States was being unfairly blamed for last week's sudden outage, he insisted.

In their petition, David residents call for a state Public Service Commission hearing on the matter, citing a "long series" of instances in which Middle States' coal-washing practices have allegedly deprived the water district, has contributed to community activities, and has consistently sought to cooperate with town officials.

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clinic served as a receiving station for sandwiches, hamburgers, cola and coffee brought throughout the day by store owners, church groups and individuals and distributed as quickly to workers at the mine as to police and sheriff's deputies on crowd and traffic duty.

Deputy Sheriff Gillis Conn was among them. He was stationed early at the mouth of Mink Branch, blocking passage up the hollow to all but authorized traffic, fending off news reporters bent on getting to the disaster scene, and submitting to news interviews himself until, in the small hours of Thursday morning, traffic and questions were finally stilled.

The John M. Stumbo school at Grethel was early established as an information center, a rallying point for official spokesmen and the press. It was there, too, that, early Thursday morning, the dead miners' families received official confirmation of the worst.

He knew it would be small comfort to the grieving families, but for Mike Sheets, the Public Health Service nurse who has assisted in other disaster operations and who saw as much of one as any, it was remarkable for its order and competence.

And, though even the support of a caring community can ease only somewhat the burden of Wednesday's tragedy, Janita Compton thought it nevertheless worth mention.

"It's an awful good community to help like that," she said.



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The rescue effort stretched through the day and into the night, workers proceeding cautiously in the knowledge that the mine still contained lethal concentrations of carbon monoxide and that a second explosion remained a possibility. On hands and knees within the 38-inch-high corridor, they picked their way through twisted mine equipment, and knees within the 38-inch-high corridor, they picked their way through twisted mine equipment, and knees within the 38-inch-high corridor, they picked their way through twisted mine equipment.

Meanwhile, police and sheriff's deputies had set up a road block on KY 979, the Mud Creek road, at its intersection with Mink Branch. Other police units were stationed above the Mink Branch fork and on the road leading to the mine. Even though entry was barred to all but essential workers, traffic sometimes threatened to clog the access to the mine, and a crowd of more than a hundred people gathered near the mine by early afternoon.

Around 4:30, word spread among the knots of bystanders—the bodies of three men had been found, some 600 feet inside the mine.

At darkness gathered, emergency lights illuminated the mine area and the search continued. It would be nearly 2:30 a.m. Thursday before the bodies of the four other victims were recovered and taken to a temporary morgue. At Prior for identification. Autopsies followed later at Pikeville Methodist hospital.

The week's tragedies pressed with new urgency the question of mine safety, especially use of explosives to loosen the coal. "Shooting from the solid," as the technique is called, is a common practice in eastern Kentucky's smaller mines, and was the practice in both the RPT mine and the Adkins mine at Topmost where eight died early last month.

While some United Mine Workers officials called last week for a ban on the practice as being too dangerous, the alternative—use of a cutting machine—is said to be too costly for local small operators to afford.

Willard Stanley, commissioner of the state Department of Mines and Mineral Resources, was scheduled to discuss with Governor John Y. Brown, Jr. this week the question of enforcement of mine safety regulations. State mine safety officials temporarily closed 10 of 75 eastern Kentucky mines they closed at Monday. All the mines down used explosive to dislodge the coal.

Ironically, six of the seven killed in the Mink Branch mine had attended a training session in mine safety the Friday before the tragedy, and the seventh had received similar training in October.

The mine enjoyed an all-but-unblemished safety record. No serious accidents had occurred there before and a weakness noted last November by an inspector—who said stronger roof supports were needed in one section—was remedied during the inspection, it was said.

RELIEF FOR DAVID residents, who found themselves without water, last Tuesday, following a break in a water main of the Beaver-Elkhorn Water System, came in the form of emergency water rations supplied by the Kentucky National Guard, and distributed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In pictures with Tommy Lafferty (second from right), county personnel director, who is demonstrating use of a 30-gallon tank of potable water to a David resident.

(Photo by Ken Peters)

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