

# West Virginia remembers '30s tunnel tragedy

By AVIVA L. BRANDT  
Associated Press

GAULEY BRIDGE, W.Va. — Arthur Stull's every labored breath reminds him of the silica dust he inhaled 60 years ago while working on the Hawks Nest Tunnel.

Historians say up to 700 men, most of them black, died of silicosis and other lung problems after working on the aqueduct, bored through a deposit of nearly pure silica in Gauley Mountain.

Other men, like Stull, survived but still are suffering decades later from the effects of silica dust.

"There was no protection from it," said the 78-year-old Stull, who lives in nearby Mount Lookout. "Work was scarce then. You couldn't find work anywhere, hardly. You had to take what you could get."

Work on the 3.8-mile aqueduct, about 40 miles east of Charleston, began 60 years ago this week. Born in the bleak days of the Great Depression, the project proved to be one of the darkest moments of U.S. industrial history.

The tunnel was built by Union Carbide Corp. through a contractor, Rinehart and Dennis Construction Co. of Charlottesville, Va. The purpose: divert the New River to a power station used at a Union Carbide smelting plant in nearby Alloy.

Martin Cherniack, a Yale University assistant professor of occupational medicine, studied the case and wrote "The Hawks Nest Incident" in 1986.

Crews blasted a 31-foot-wide tunnel through almost pure silica, a glassy substance found in sand and quartz. Then, the tunnel's width

was nearly doubled to cash in on the silica, so pure it could be used without refining at the alloy plant, according to Cherniack. The whole project took about two years.

Soon after work began, many workers began complaining of hacking coughs and searing chest pains. The average worker stayed on the job just 15 to 16 weeks, Cherniack said.

A company doctor at the time called the condition "tunnelitis," and gave the men tablets nicknamed "little black devils."

Many didn't quit in time. An undertaker was paid \$55 each to remove and bury bodies in a mass grave near Summersville. Congressional records say 169 men eventually were buried there.

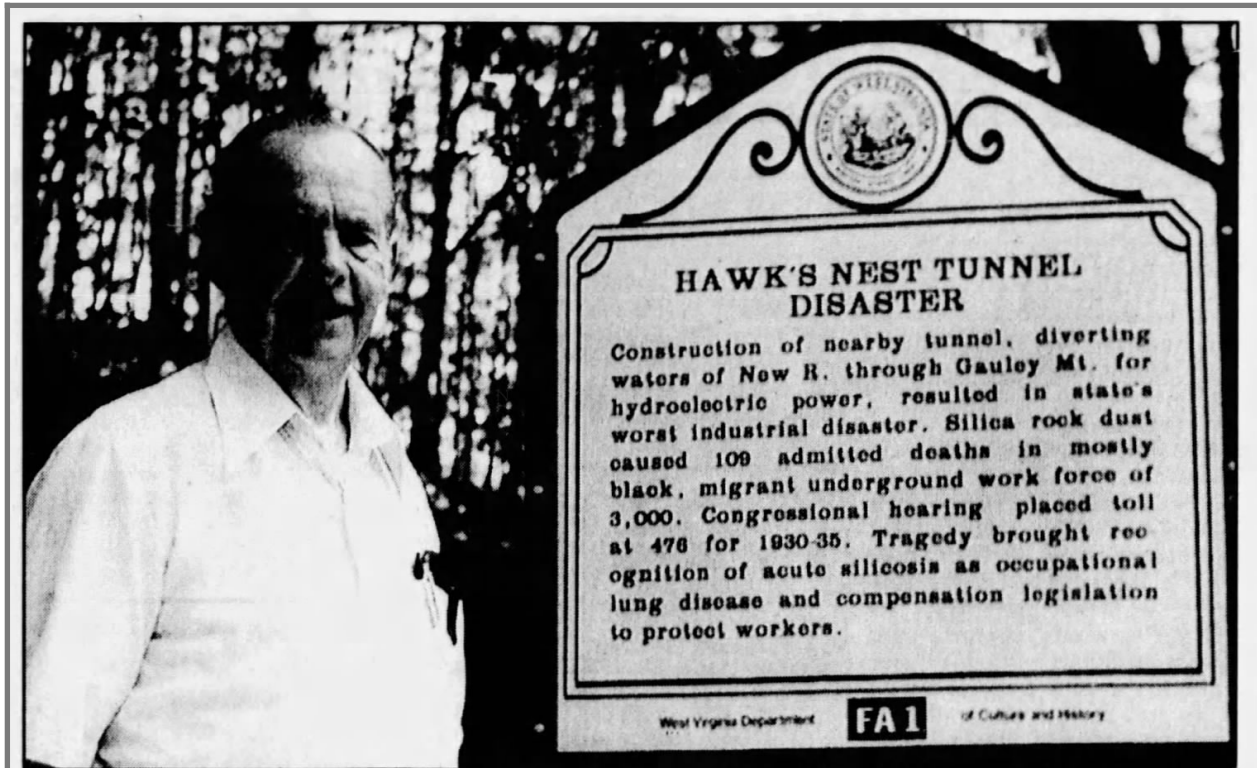
But with jobs hard to find, reports that workers were dying failed to deter others. Men who died or fell sick and refused to go back to work in the tunnel were easily replaced.

The number who died while working on the tunnel or died later of lung diseases is only a guess because many of the more than 4,000 workers were migrants and left the area. Estimates range up to 700.

Lengthy exposure to silica causes hard nodules to form in lungs until scar tissue replaces healthy tissue, leaving little room to breathe. Tuberculosis and pneumonia often develop.

The hazards of silica dust were known to civil and mining engineers in the 1930s, although company officials later claimed they did not know of the dangers.

Cherniack concluded that racism was a factor in the deaths. More than 75 percent of the workers were



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Arthur Stull still has trouble breathing after working on the Hawk's Nest tunnel.

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black migrants who came from across the South.

He wrote of "a widespread attitude of condescension, if not contempt, toward the blacks." Many whites believed that the workers were dying not because of silica dust but because of poor nutrition or a propensity to violence.

"In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, some people still say that knifings, shootings, and beatings took the greatest toll," Cherniack wrote. "Gambling out of doors before open fires in the cold is another supposed cause of death."

About 300 survivors and relatives filed lawsuits against Rinehart and

Dennis. They eventually received \$130,000, half of which went to lawyers. Rinehart and Dennis, now defunct, admitted no wrongdoing.

A 1936 House Labor Committee investigation into the deaths brought unwelcome notoriety to Gauley Bridge. It became known as "The Town of the Living Dead" because of the many disabled workers who remained there until they died.

Townpeople resented outside interest in the tragedy. Researchers had difficulty finding cooperative sources and sometimes were threatened, Cherniack said.

And in an unrelated dispute, federal authorities contended in a law-

suit that Union Carbide should have sought federal permission before diverting a navigable waterway. The U.S. Supreme Court eventually decided in favor of the government in that dispute.

The tunnel is now owned by Elkem Metals Co. of Pittsburgh, which bought it, along with the power plant and alloy factory, from Union Carbide in 1980.

Stull said he was lucky because he apparently was assigned to a part of the tunnel with the least amount of silica.

Nevertheless, he said, the dust led to pneumonia and surgery to remove part of his lung shortly after he stopped working on the tunnel. Doctors blame the silica dust for his current lung problems.

Besides the dust, tunnel workers coped with gas from vehicles that carried the rock and steel from the tunnel, he recalled.

"Some days the light would get awful red looking," Stull said. "You could tell there was gas. ... We just went ahead and worked. You just got used to it and didn't pay much attention."

## Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster NEWS

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