

'Town of the Living Dead'

By GIRARD C. STEICHEN
Associated Press

GAULEY BRIDGE, W.Va. — At age 81, B.H. Metheny still vividly recalls the thick swirls of choking, white dust that condemned more than 1,500 men to lingering, agonizing deaths and branded this community the "Town of the Living Dead."

Metheny, who lives in Deep Water, is one of the last survivors of the construction of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel in the early 1930s. Hailed as an engineering marvel when it was built, the project ultimately was described by a congressional committee as "a tragedy worthy of the pen of Victor Hugo."

"The dust was as thick as fog behind the drills," Metheny says. "You came out of there after working a shift and you were white all over. You could squeeze your nose and it was like toothpaste coming out."

The men died from silicosis, which petrifies the lungs and leads to a slow, suffocating death. Many of the construction workers stayed to die in Gauley Bridge, earning the town its grim epithet.

Image-conscious West Virginia officials tried to ignore the tragedy and even attempted to censor early accounts. But half a century later, the state is finally planning a memorial to the victims of one of the worst industrial disasters of the 20th Century.

An appeal by an Ohioan for some recognition for the father he never knew prompted the state to act.

"It's a very token thing, but I'm grateful they're doing that much," says Marcus Phillips, of Reynoldsburg, whose father died in 1934 after working as an engineer in the tunnel.

"This is a milestone given the feelings involved in West Virginia about what happened."

Phillips says his pleas for recognition for the men who worked and died in the tunnel were ignored by West Virginia's congressional delegation and by state officials for several years. Finally his request was approved this year by the Department of Culture and History, which is in charge of erecting and maintaining historical markers.

Metheny and Phillips' father were among more than 2,000 men who signed on to blast the 3.75-mile tunnel through Gauley Mountain. Broke, with families to support in the throes of the Great Depression, the men flocked to the area from neighboring coal towns and surrounding states.

The men worked 10 to 12-hour shifts, six days a week. Those who fell ill were quickly replaced by other job-seekers who had hopped freight trains, hitchhiked or walked to Fayette County in search of steady jobs.

"The whole driving of the tunnel was begun, continued and completed with grave and inhuman disregard of all consideration for the health, lives and future of the employees," the House Labor Committee concluded after extensive testimony in 1936.

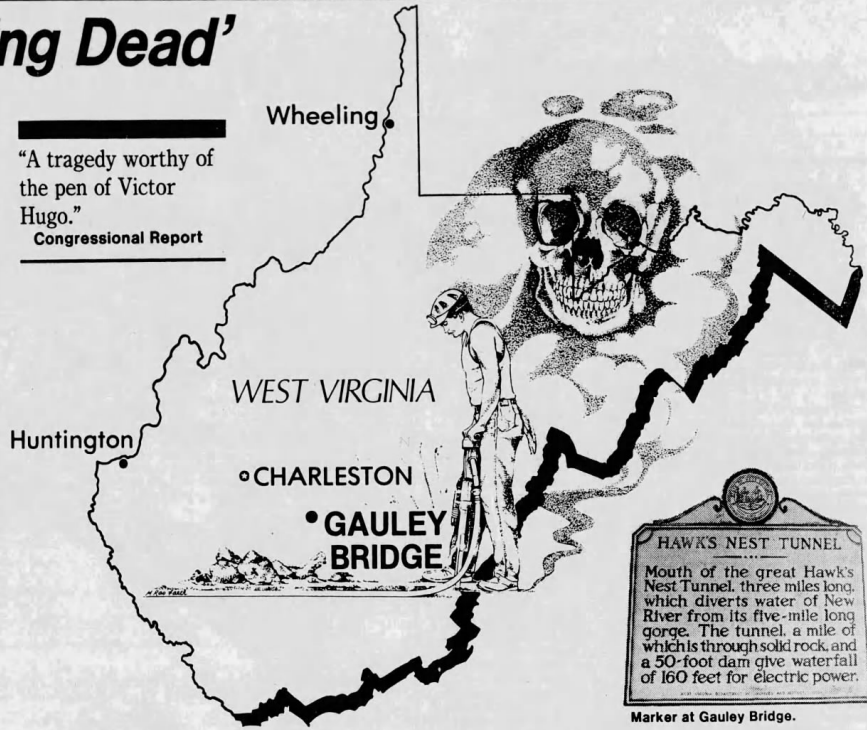
Phillips, who was six years old when his father, David Phillips, died in a West Virginia sanitarium, says the state's decision to erect a monument to the workers needs to be more than conciliatory gesture.

"I want people to know what really happened there," Phillips says. A state historical marker near the tunnel extols the technological accomplishment, but says nothing of the men who died.

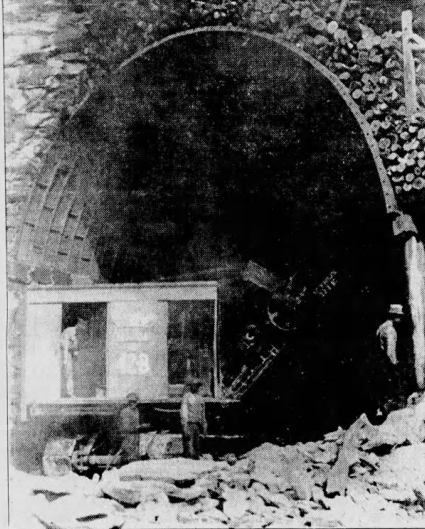
Fred Armstrong, of the state Culture and History Department, says the old marker will remain, but a new sign will recognize the accompanying human sacrifice.

He has a 3-foot-square space and 11 lines to tell the workers' story.

"A tragedy worthy of the pen of Victor Hugo."
Congressional Report



Marker at Gauley Bridge.



Dust pours from tunnel during construction in 1930.

"This one will be hard to write," he says.

The tunnel was commissioned by Union Carbide, which hired Rinehart and Dennis Construction Co. of Charlottesville, Va., to do the work. The project diverted the New River from Hawk's Nest to a power station in Gauley Bridge, with the power going to a Carbide subsidiary's smelting plant.

For more than two years, work crews hacked and blasted a 56-foot wide corridor through the mountain. Along the way, they drilled through almost pure silica — a glassy substance found in sand and quartz.

Metheny, who ran a 120-pound drill for about seven months in 1930, says no protection was provided from the dust and other pollution in the tunnel. The air was so foul, he says, that workers were carted out by the dozens and lined up in rows in the open air to recover.

When they revived, the men were ordered back into the tunnel by company guards, Metheny says.

"If you didn't go back in, you didn't have a job," he says. "They could keep getting men to do it, and to do it cheap. Nothing was done about taking care of the men."

Within months, workers began to fall sick with hacking coughs and searing chest pains. The warning signs were ignored.

The tunnel's width was even expanded to cash in on the rich silica deposits, which were so pure that they could be used without refining at a nearby alloy plant.

Metheny said a local physician, H.R. Hacless, alarmed and puzzled by the increasing number of fatal-

ties attributed to pneumonia and tuberculosis, began to suspect that the men were dying of silicosis.

"Doc Harless had a man's lungs there after an autopsy. They was so solid, you couldn't stick a penknife in 'em," Metheny recalls.

Extensive exposure to silica causes hard nodules to form until scar tissue replaces healthy lung tissue. Hundreds of workers had breathed huge amounts into their lungs.

A company doctor called the condition "tunnellitis" and prescribed "little black devils," pills that workers said they were given no matter what their health complaints were.

Arthur Stull, 74, of Mount Look-out, worked in the tunnel as an engine operator in 1931. He knew co-workers were dying but not how many.

"We didn't know why," Stull recalls. "They kept it pretty quiet."

Stull and Metheny say a local undertaker was hired to cart the bodies away and bury them in shallow trenches in a field near Summersville. The congressional report said 169 men were buried there "with cornstalks as their only gravestones."

"They buried them like they were burying hogs, putting two or three of them in a hole," one witness testified before the congressional committee. "The men were buried in what they got killed or died in."

Stull, who underwent surgery to remove part of his lungs after he left the tunnel, says the contractor generally hired white men to run machines. Black workers were rou-

tinely assigned to carry steel to the drillers and haul the rock and debris from the tunnel.

"They had shacks for the colored folks up there where the Hawk's Nest golf course is now," Stull recalls.

Reports on the working conditions gradually reached Washington and prompted the congressional investigation in 1936. The committee's report said the project could have been run safely if the contractor had used water in the drilling process.

But the "wet drilling" method took more time and the contractor was on a construction deadline, Metheny says.

"The only time we used wet drilling was when the state inspectors showed up," he says. "They always knew when they were coming."

Many of the bosses suffered the same fate as the workers.

"When I left there, the superintendent couldn't walk up steps without losing his breath," Metheny says. "I think he died shortly after the tunnel was finished."

Later, about 300 survivors and relatives of those who died would file lawsuits against the drilling company. It eventually was settled and they received \$130,000, half of which went to lawyers in the case.

"The widow of a Negro man received \$85," the congressional committee reported. "Her share was determined by the lawyers."

The drilling company did not admit wrongdoing, but its owners did quietly dissolve the firm a few years later.

Union Carbide laid the blame on Rinehart and Dennis.

But a witness at the congressional hearings said Carbide's contract with Rinehart and Dennis included a clause that allowed engineers for New Kanawha Power Co., a Carbide subsidiary, to force changes in the contractor's procedures if injuries were being caused by "negligence on the part of the contractor."

Thad Epps, Carbide's regional director of public affairs, says those issues are now almost impossible to resolve.

"It happened so long ago, the knowledge and information is lost and long since forgotten," Epps says.

The congressional investigation brought an unwelcome notoriety to the area. Gauley Bridge became known as the "town of the living dead" because of the many disabled workers who remained there until they died.

Outraged city and county leaders claimed the incidents were exaggerated and were exploited by "troublemakers."

In 1939, Gov. Homer "Rocky" Holt refused to sanction a Federal Writer's Project guide to West Virginia until a lengthy and graphic discussion of the Hawk's Nest project was toned down.

The West Virginia Legislature did pass a workman's compensation law for silicosis victims in 1935. But the law only provided compensation for workers who could prove that they had worked for at least two years on such a project.

Most who attempted to work that long at Hawk's Nest died on the job.

Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster NEWS3

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