

'Town of Living Dead' receiving long overdue recognition

EDITOR'S NOTE — It was one of the worst industrial disasters of the 20th century, "a tragedy worthy of the pen of Victor Hugo." More than 1,500 men died of silicosis after helping dig a tunnel through a West Virginia mountain. Now, half a century later, state officials have finally agreed to erect a plaque in memory of the victims.

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GAULEY BRIDGE, W. Va. (AP) — 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 Reynolds-

burg, whose father died in 1934 after working as an engineer in the tunnel.

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 6 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.

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.

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

Metheny said a local physician, H.R. Harless, alarmed and puzzled by the increasing number of fatalities attributed to pneumonia and tuberculosis, began to suspect that

the men were dying of silicosis.

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 "tunnelitis" and prescribed "little black devils," pills that workers said they were given no matter what their health complaints were.

Arthur Stull, 74, of Mount Lookout, 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," recalls Stull, who underwent surgery to remove part of his lungs after he left the tunnel. "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.

Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster NEWS4

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