

Methane blamed in mine deaths

ST. CHARLES (AP) — An explosion that killed four coal miners Thursday in this southwestern Virginia community resulted from methane gas concentrations above federal limits, authorities said early today.

"If you had an explosion there would had to have been a safety violation," said Frank Mann, supervisor of mining engineering for the Virginia district of the Federal Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration.

Mann made the comment minutes after the four miners were brought out of the P & P Coal Co. pit around 2 a.m.

The victims' widows stood around the mine entrance as their husbands' bodies were brought to the surface.

One, Janie Perkins of Jonesville, whose 31-year-old husband Bill was one of those killed, wept loudly and openly during the ten minutes it took rescuers to cover the bodies and transfer them from mine cars to ambulances.

The other victims were identified as Harold Johnson, 33, and Harold Wells, 40, both of St. Charles, and Danny Tester, 29, of Woodway.

Authorities said the four men died almost immediately from heat shock and carbon monoxide poisoning after the explosion racked the mine shortly after 10 a.m. Thursday.

Fourteen other miners who were working about 1,500 yards away from the explosion escaped unharmed. The four victims had been sent into an abandoned section of the shaft to retrieve equipment.

The miners were initially examined by a coroner at the mine's entrance and then taken to Lee General Hospital at Pennington Gap.

Mann's comments reinforced United Mine Workers

President Arnold Miller's charge that a violation of mine safety laws probably allowed the explosion.

Clyde Poe, a co-owner of the coal company, disputed Miller's claim.

"Mr. Arnold Miller has his ideas where he's at, but he's not on the scene," he said.

Ray Compton, MESA district manager for Virginia, said officials do not know yet whether methane gas readings were taken before the men entered the abandoned mine section.

Mines are equipped with detectors to measure the tasteless, odorless, clear gas, and Compton said such readings are required by law before workers are allowed in an area.

He and Poe said responsibility for taking the reading belonged to the crew foreman, Harold Wells — one of those killed in the blast.

Federal Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration officials said the four were found at the end of an abandoned portion of the mine near a mining car.

The mine had to be ventilated in small areas at a time to safeguard the health of rescue crews waiting to move the bodies from the shaft, MESA officials said.

A UMW official in Washington said the mine was considered moderately gaseous, releasing 70,000 to

75,000 cubic feet of methane a day.

The mine produces 12,000 to 15,000 tons of coal a month and before Thursday had never had a disabling accident in the five years it was operated by P & P Coal, Poe said.

Poe said that in April the company had quit mining the area where the explosion oc-

curred, but that the shaft was still at least partially ventilated.

Mann also said that self-rescuers' devices held over the nose to filter poisonous gases had not been removed from the four victims' belts — an indication they were killed instantly.

Their bodies were badly burned.

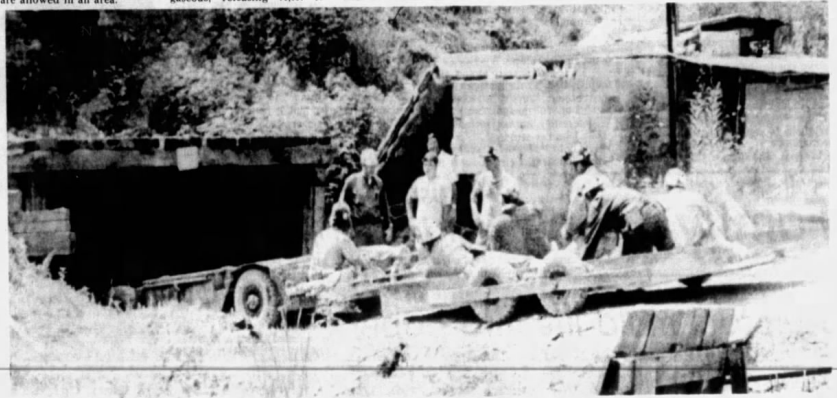
The men's widows went to the mine entrance when it was announced about 8:45 p.m. that the bodies of their husbands, all dead, had been located.

Escorted by sheriff's deputies, they wandered back and forth between the entrance and a mobile home serving as the company's headquarters during the six-hour effort.

THE DAILY ADVANCE

LYNCHBURG, VA., FRIDAY EVENING, JULY 8, 1977

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A mine rescue team enters main shaft of P & P Coal Mine in attempt to locate four miners after explosion

(AP Wirephotos)

Widows of four grieve at mine
Bodies were recovered Thursday night

P and P mine explosion NEWS

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May 1, 2025