

The Fourmile Mine Disaster by Jadon Gibson

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Part One

Part Two

Part Three

Part Four

Part Five

Part Six

Conclusion

Part One

The mountains of eastern Kentucky are centuries old but the history of the white man in the region dates back less than 300 years.

Dr. Thomas Walker and his band of five men documented the discovery of Cumberland Gap in 1750 before venturing deeper into the area that is now Kentucky.

Daniel Boone and other long hunters came in the years that followed, and thousands of pioneers settled Kentucky and ventured beyond in the years thereafter.

Isaac Shelby was an early settler and large landowner in southeastern Kentucky. He became Kentucky's first governor when statehood was granted in 1792. Much of his large farm was located in the area now known as Fourmile, in Bell County.

Abraham Lincoln's parents migrated through Cumberland Gap a few years later. In the mid-1800's, while Lincoln was president, the armies of blue and gray marched along essentially the same roads during the War Between the States.

Bell County was little more than a wilderness until entrepreneurs began mining coal in the 1880's. This presented a need for railroads and workers were needed to build them. They were also needed to work the mines and timber, to build houses, stores and shops.

In the mid-1890's coal-mining operations began near Pineville. Most of the workers were recruited from other states during the influx of workers into the region. A town sprang up four miles from Pineville and it took the name Fourmile.

The mine operators had houses built for the workers. The houses were rented to the miners with the rent deducted from their pay. The homes were heated by coal, and they were charged for the amount of the fuel. The families shopped for food, clothing and household needs at the company store. These charges, too, were deducted from their pay.

The miners received little pay after the deductions but not much was needed that they could not charge at the company store against future wages. The miners and their families felt secure and were satisfied because they had more than they were accustomed to having. Their homes were comfortable, and they ate well. They were satisfied with their standard of living.

Over the next several decades, Fourmile became rundown and by 1945 most of the houses had deteriorated. William E. Lewis, the owner of the mine and coal camp had little difficulty in finding workers. Residents in Bell County and throughout the mountain area have a long history of industriousness.

“They came up at the end of the day exhausted, cramped, blackened,” Dr. McClurkan, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Pineville, told a reporter of the Chicago Sun in 1946. “They get their pay envelopes every Saturday night and many of them gather with their fellow miners.

“I have a lot of empathy for them. It is dark and cold underground. Men walk stooped and at times fear gnaws at them. Loneliness grows in their veins. Saturday brings freedom for them from the grind, the danger, the discomfort, the stoop in the back, the coal dust in the pores of their skin, the coal dust in their throat. It brings freedom from loneliness, the dark and the cold.”

Christmas of 1945 was a happy time in Fourmile. World War II had ended, and the economy was showing signs of prosperity. Miners were starting to buy cars, radios, phonographs, boats and motors and other consumer goods.

Santa Claus arrived with presents bringing cheer to families. The miner’s money was spent for the most part when they reported for work the following day, but they were secure because they could charge most anything they needed.

Tragedy struck, however, early on the morning of December 26, 1945 when an explosion rocked the mine at Fourmile leaving 31 miners trapped. The attention of the entire nation focused on the small town of Fourmile in the mountains of southeast Kentucky for several days thereafter.

Part Two

Disaster struck the Kentucky Straight Creek Mining Company at Fourmile, KY, on the day after Christmas in 1945. Some nearby residents felt a vibration and thought right away that something might be wrong at the mine.

There had been an explosion and smoke was seen coming from the mine at 8 a.m. It was unknown initially whether the explosion was caused by dust or gas.

Officials of Kentucky Straight Creek Coal Company of which W.E. Lewis was owner, did not know how many men reported for work at 7 a.m. that morning but it was estimated to be between 35 and fifty. Some had taken the day off, it being the day after Christmas. At least one was late in arriving and missed the man-trip that carried the men into the recesses of the mine where they worked. Mine foreman Nath Centers was among those trapped inside.

A boy was checking on his family's goats on a nearby hill and noticed thick smoke coming from the mine entrance. Not long thereafter a train engineer saw smoke and began ringing the bell of his locomotive.

Within minutes word of the explosion and mine fire spread through the company houses in Fourmile Hollow. Women ran from house to house telling their neighbors, one or two with children following behind. Soon several women and children were hastening down the railroad tracks toward the mine as the train bell continued to ring.

After an hour or so as many as two hundred people had gathered near the mine to learn of news of the calamity. Soon they learned that up to forty or fifty miners were trapped inside.

"My man's down there," a woman said, noticeably worried as she daubed her apron at her teary eyes.

"Mine too," another woman followed as she held a little baby girl. "His father is in there too."

Many of the miners employed in the Fourmile mine lived near each other in houses owned by the company near the mine, a section called Rim.

Miner Champ Patterson, age 46, entered the mine earlier that morning.

"He dropped a grocery list off at the commissary before he went in," a store worker said. "He said I probably could not read it but to send the groceries out right away as the family needed them. When I told him I could read the list just fine he started laughing. He said his five-year old daughter had written it."

The intense fire in the mine lessened during the night of December 27 and rescue efforts began the next morning. Many loved ones of the trapped miners were clustered on the hillside near the mouth of mine, hoping to get some positive news. In that era it was considered bad luck for women to enter the mines however it was customary for wives, mothers and even children to go to the mine area to learn news first-hand of their loved ones in times of disaster. That is certainly understandable. Rare exceptions were when the wife or mother was incapacitated due to illness.

A baby cried prompting her mother to say, "Hush, hush, now! Daddy'll be coming up soon and we'll go home. Don't cry now. Mommy's not crying. See."

Some gathered around a large barrel with a fire for warmth while others tried to stay warm around several bonfires on the barren slope, moving closer to the portal to see the rescuers when they surfaced. They were concerned for the welfare of their loved ones. Their concern overshadowed any inconvenience from the cold.

McKinley Leath, a 20 year-old youth, talked about his father.

"Dad often takes the day off after holidays," he said. "He decided last night that he would go ahead and work today. I wish he had stayed home with us. Then this wouldn't have happened... at least to my Dad anyway."

Bob Whitney, a 50 year old black miner, said he was lucky he wasn't trapped inside with the others.

"I was late for the mantrip which takes us into the mine," he explained. They started off before I got here. If they hadn't I'd be in there too."

Ordinarily forty miners work the shift, but some had not returned from out-of-town Christmas visits. A few others missed due to sickness.

Five rescue crews arrived from Kettle Island, Black Star, Three Point and the Straight Creek Mines and entered the mine, reaching a point 1200 feet underground. The explosion site was some two miles inside.

Officials of the company would not guess as to how long it would take before reaching the trapped miners but R. R. Sayers, director of the U. S. Bureau of Mines, estimated it would take two or three days.

Rescuers dug for 30 hours with only four hours of rest. They found that conditions worsened somewhat, and the mine was still ablaze. The rescuers had extinguished sixteen fires and said that "smoke, fumes, and carbon monoxide gas fills the air." They were totally exhausted, and an appeal was sent throughout the coal region of Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee and West Virginia, for other trained rescue teams to assist. Mine officials had little hope of finding any of the miners alive.

Volunteer truckers, timbermen, hardrock men and common laborers arrived in the days that followed, toiling day and night with shovels, picks and firefighting equipment. Periodically they exited the mine, coughing repeatedly even though they wore gas masks and helmets while inside the mine. Their eyes were also noticeably reddened,

looking ill and discouraged but soon reentered the innards of the dark mountain with its bad air, smoke and carbon monoxide.

“There’s a lot of fires burning in the coal down there,” one of the men uttered. “The crosscuts are full of smoke, black and damp. Gas is everywhere. Nobody can get through.”

Leonard Mills, age 22, was a member of the rescue crew. His father, Frank Mills, was one of the trapped miners. “I’ll keep right on working until we get them out of there,” he said.

As the hour grew late it began to rain heavily. Women who were there with their youngsters took them home. Some of them returned after leaving their children with neighbors or their older children to watch. They waited for news of their loved ones. It was a devastating situation, even for those who had no family members trapped two miles underground nearby.

Many of the major newspapers and leading news agencies in the country sent representatives to Bell County in southeastern Kentucky to file updates and pictures as they became available. These first-hand interviews and pictures filed at the time the events transpired offer an unbiased glimpse of the Fourmile mine disaster and area residents at the time of the tragedy.

Part Three

Underground explosions left 31 miners trapped in a Fourmile, KY coalmine, two miles underground, on December 26, 1945. Fourmile is in the extreme southeastern section of Kentucky, a beautiful, mountainous and historical area.

The conditions were hazardous but mine rescue teams from the local area and from nearby states worked feverishly in special attire and masks to protect them from the harsh gases and smoke. When one team of rescuers ended their 5-hour shift another fresh group entered, making their way to the innards of the mine. This continued repeatedly for 24 hours daily for three days before some information came from below that several miners had been found.

It was presumed that all the men were dead, but a crowd gathered at the mine despite the early morning hour. They wanted to learn the identity of the deceased. It was a woeful time in the Fourmile area. Word came that afternoon however that was as welcome as sunshine in Alaska after a long, dark winter.

Nine miners had been found alive. The mood changed to hope and anticipation for the families of the trapped miners. Could their loved one be a survivor?

Were nine miners virtually coming back from the dead? If so, which nine? Who was dead and who had survived? Family, friends and curious onlookers were near the mouth of the Fourmile mine and others gathered not far away where they would learn of any news. Then rescuers appeared with a blanketed body, obviously deceased.

“Who is it?” several onlookers asked almost in unison.

“Al Bennett,” someone answered. “He’s dead. He just died. But the other eight I think are alright.”

At age 64, Bennett was the oldest of the men trapped in the mine.

“Is my man coming up,” a woman asked one of the rescuers who shook his head sorrowfully sending the woman into a woeful cry. Several of her friends tried to comfort her.

None of the other women asked about their husbands. They waited and prayed.

An ambulance soon entered Fourmile Hollow beneath the railroad underpass with its siren screaming, giving everyone a feeling of urgency.

“There’s gonna be live men coming out now baby,” a woman told her little one. “They don’t hurry with the siren on like that just to carry away dead people. It’s for live folks. We’re watching for your daddy. Oh God, let your daddy be one of them.”

Then three more ambulances appeared, each with sirens blaring. The bell of a train rang but it was somehow different than before. On the morning of the disaster it signaled a forewarning whereas now it had a ring of hope.

Soon a hysterical joy passed through the crowd as Charles Lingar was brought to the surface even though he was quite subdued. He was quickly whisked off by ambulance to the Pineville Hospital. He and any forthcoming miners had been through a harrowing, near-death experience and were badly in need of medical attention.

It wasn’t long before McKinley Leath, William Branstutt and Ivan Philpot were brought out. There were shouts of joy from their families and onlookers. The rescued miners were quickly taken on to the hospital for evaluation and medical attention. Others tearfully waited and prayed that their loved one would be forthcoming.

Bud Townes, Joe Hatfield, Tom McQueen and Huey Miller, were brought out after a short while, eliciting tears and shouts of joy from their families. They were also taken away immediately in waiting ambulances to improve their chances of survival.

Most of those in the waiting crowd daubed tears from their eyes as no word had come about their loved ones who were still in the belly of the mountain. Yet they hoped that maybe, just maybe, the remaining 21 lost miners would still be found.

Meanwhile Tom McQueen, one of the last three to be rescued, hung onto life by a thread. He died a few hours later at the Pineville, KY, Hospital.

Huey Miller, 31 years old and the father of six children, lived near the mine. He had waved goodbye to his children before entering the mine tunnel. While trapped inside he prayed aloud for himself and the other men. Later he was carried from the mine unconscious. The children applauded when he was brought out. Later he was able to recount details of the explosion and entrapment.

“I prayed for compassion... for us and our families that we would survive and be rejoined with our loved ones,” Miller said. “And now blessed Father, I’m safe. Glory be his name! My wife and six kids need me.”

“When the explosion came it almost tore our ears off,” Joe Hatfield, another surviving miner said. “It started several fires, but the fires didn’t touch the group I was with. We tried to work our way out but the heat was too awful, and the gas and smoke drove us back. Only a miracle could have saved us. We found a room with fairly good air. At times there was a lot of heat, but fresh air kept coming in from some place. Thank God, it was a miracle that some of us survived and got out alive.”

Bud Townes, a black miner, also survived. Ironically, he had been trapped in a mine at nearby Kettle Island in 1929 and that experience helped save his fellow workers at Fourmile.

At first the men crawled around checking on the other miners while looking for a safe place to stay. It was cold and dark except for their lamps. The passageways were narrow and low and there was a smell of smoke wherever they went. They scratched arrows on the slate.

“We did that to show any rescuers where we were,” Townes offered. “We finally got a place where the air wasn’t so bad, and we barricaded ourselves inside what amounted to a side room. We had to shovel to close our area in order to keep the smoke and gasses out.”

Before sealing the room one of the men scrawled, “Nine miners in here, 11 a.m. Thursday” on a pile of slate. The remaining hole was then closed. The men stretched out on their backs to conserve their supply of oxygen.

“We burned only one light at a time so they would last,” Joe Hatfield said. “We had used up all the lights except mine and it was barely flickering when they found us.”

As if the mine disaster wasn't enough to contend with, torrential rains came and caused Cumberland River to rise to historic levels. Pineville, Wallsend and the mouth of Fourmile Hollow were flooded. As rescue efforts continued at the mine, trucks from Fort Knox arrived with cots, blankets, and supplies for the many families who had to evacuate their homes due to the flooding.

Part Four

Eight miners survived the Fourmile mine disaster after explosions rocked the Bell County, KY, mine on December 26, 1945. One died hours later in the Pineville Hospital.

Rescuers bravely traversed the deadly conditions of the mine, the walls blistering hot from the fires. They contended with a series of explosions, flames and carbon monoxide gas. They found four charred bodies two of which evidenced the violent explosion and fires, bringing heartache to any observers. Conditions prevented the rescue crews from continuing.

Harry Thomas, head of the Kentucky Department of Mines and Minerals, made the decision to seal the mine to prevent additional loss of life. Rescue workers were ordered out, their heroic efforts at an end. It also ended hope of any other miners, twenty unaccounted for, being found alive.

It was an agonizing time for the families and friends of the trapped miners. Authorities thought the men had died in the final days of 1945, that is if they survived the explosions. Many thought some of the miners may still be alive – waiting, praying, hoping to be rescued.

Pictured is a look at the housing of Fourmile a few years prior to the disaster.

Joe Hatfield was one of the seven miners who survived. Hatfield had broken ribs and a badly hurt shoulder. Both Hatfield and Bud Townes were praised for being instrumental in saving the lives of the miners that were brought to safety. Townes said Joe Hatfield played an important part in their survival.

“We lay in there a long time not doing anything but sleeping and thinking,” Hatfield explained. “There wasn't much to talk about but there was a lot to think about. We knew there was fire in the coal all around us and there was smoke and gas all over the mine.

“It looked like we wouldn't get out of there. I said a little prayer or two before I passed out. I never was what you'd call a religious man. I never went to church very much but that don't keep a man from praying. Especially when he's two miles down in the earth, can't get out and ain't hardly got a chance to live.”

Hatfield explained that he eventually passed out and didn't know anything until they were rescued from the mine.

"When I finally got well enough to go home the Cumberland River had risen and nearly covered up homes in Wallsend," Hatfield added. "My wife told me that everything in my house was wet except for a couple of Bibles that had been moved to the top shelf."

Although Hatfield developed emphysema he lived to be 85 years of age before passing away in October 1990. He was the last survivor of the Fourmile disaster.

Numerous newswire services and newspapers sent agents to Bell County to cover the story as they did at many other disasters. The stories and pictures they filed were published in many newspapers and offer an important insight into the mine disaster.

Bessie Fisher, the widow of Jim Tom Fisher and the mother of eight children was interviewed in their humble dwelling that survived the flood. It had no icebox, running water, curtains, carpet or linoleum. It was heated by coal like most of the other nearby houses.

"Jim Tom's grave is over there deep in the mountain," Bessie Fisher told the Chicago Sun-Times reporter. "Eight of the men were raised from the grave on the third day... saved from the hot, smoky mine. The stone rolled back, and they came out like an Easter miracle, but my man is still buried deep under that mountain. He was a good Christian man, but he hasn't been resurrected, not yet anyway."

"The hand of God has been on this region. It's a loving hand but there is justice in it. God smites the just and the unjust. Merciful men are snatched away too, some saved from evil to come."

Mrs. Fisher then bemoaned the difficulty of getting to her home and how hard it is to fetch the family's water each day.

"It's an awful climb to our home up here on the side of the mountain," she explained. "And it's an awful climb from here to the top of the mountain where we fetch our water. We get it two pails at a time from the cold spring."

"Jim Tom and I agreed though what was most important was that we get to the holy mountain, that is that we get to Heaven. I've missed so much here on earth. I can't take a chance on missing Heaven too. The way I feel is that Tom's just gone ahead of us to get things ready for when our time comes."

The residents of Fourmile and Pineville received national press coverage during the mining disaster and the flood that followed. The reporters lauded area residents saying they were friendly, helpful, courteous, and courageous.

“They can take an explosion that kills 24 men and not whine about it,” some printed. “And they can take a devastating flood and find something about it to laugh about.”

The Cumberland River waters were compared to the record flood of 1929, but the new water crest was 29 inches higher than the previous record.

“Nearly every church in Pineville was baptized by water,” Nell Putnam said. “I was in one church when the water started coming in. I managed to get the carpet up with some help from friends but before we could get it out the door floodwater was on the organ and the hymn books began swirling around.”

Miss Putnam converted her hilltop summer home into a commissary with the assistance of Mrs. Clyde Guthrie and Sgt. Dewey Gamble. They fed 500 people the first day alone. Later when it became too cold those needing meals were fed in the Continental Hotel ballroom.

Meanwhile Col. Matt Colson, John Broughton and Barry Howard were exchanging tales in the office of Sheriff John Howard.

“Don’t pity me just because I can’t see,” blind Sam Duff said, “There are lots of people worse off than me. Think about those miners lying dead in the mine up there at Fourmile.”

Part Five

Teams of rescuers worked around the clock in five hour shifts to save trapped miners after explosions at a Fourmile, Kentucky mine on the day after Christmas in 1945. The initial explosion was heard to those in the area outside the mine as a great THUMP and was followed by a large smoke ring rising into the sky.

The bodies of Hobert Sulfridge, age 44, and mine foreman Nathan Centers, age 62, were found and removed from the mine along with two other unidentified corpses, tremendously mangled. One of the rescuers, a veteran of World War II who saw heavy fighting in Europe, was asked by a reporter to describe the scene. He broke into tears and could simply say that “the bodies were in a terrible condition.”

Seventy-one year old “Uncle Jim” Wilson said sadly, “Nate Centers was my half-brother. I raised that boy, and I mourn him as my own son.”

Everyone was heartened when it was announced nine miners had been found. They were unconscious but “alive and still breathing.” One of them, Al Bennett, died while being brought out and Tom McQueen died in the Pineville Hospital soon thereafter.

The rescuers contended with fires and gas and had to make their way through tons of rock and other debris. At times they were forced to wade through water that was released from subterranean springs following the explosions. Fires burned in the walls of the mine and blistered hands at the slightest touch. Rescuers were eventually forced to leave the mine because of the harsh conditions. They attempted to reenter but again were forced to retreat.

Harry Thomas, head of the Kentucky Department of Mines and Minerals, made the decision to seal the mine. It ended any hope of others being found alive.

Charges and counter charges followed. State and federal inspection reports stated that the presence of gas and coal dust, two deadly hazards, had combined to make the mine a virtual powder keg. Frayed machine cable was reported to be the igniting agent.

A state mine inspector with the Kentucky Mining Department had inspected the mine not long before the explosion and found serious problems.

“Little was being done toward safety at the mine and mine law is being absolutely neglected in every respect,” the report stated.

United Mine Workers officials were incensed.

“They should have had the guts to shut the mine down,” Taylor Maddox, UMW District 19 safety director, said. “I’ve never seen anything like it. If the management had done their duty and examined the mine before the shift, kept the fan running and cut breakthroughs every 60 feet, cleaned out the airways and had sufficient air, that mine would not have blown up.”

Several of the miners who were employed at the mine at the time of the disaster said the main fan had been shut off for five days until just an hour and a half before the men entered the mine. It is felt that methane gas built up during this time and along with coal dust the mine was “a virtual powder keg.”

It was contended that the explosion occurred due to a miner lighting a cigarette in the mine. It is hard to imagine that smoking was allowed in some mines in that era. It was a common practice for employees to carry and use matches and smoker’s items underground. Although it wasn’t illegal at that time, it was irresponsible and likely was the ignition agent that set off the explosion.

A.D. Sisk of the Department of Mines announced that he had “eliminated all theories regarding the explosion except for smoking being the cause.” Others said it may have been the source of ignition, but poor mine conditions was a major cause.

Time passed and the debate continued. Procrastination over unsealing the mine and removing the bodies continued through the winter, spring and summer of 1946. The UMWA repeatedly protested the undue delay. Chief Thomas of the Department of Mines and Minerals, countered by saying efforts could not be made due to “a lack of funds.”

Bell Countians were concerned that their neighbors and friends, the dead miners and their families, could not rest in peace.

Part Six

The mine at Fourmile was sealed and rescue attempts stopped because of deadly fire and gases in the Bell County, KY, mine after explosions on December 26, 1945. Responding to United Mine Workers Association pressure, public indignation and protests, authorities decided to unseal the Fourmile mine in August of 1948.

When the shaft was reopened a ventilation fan was installed to rid the mine of deadly gas. Recovery crews cleared debris and made paths. Passageways were timbered and stoppings were built.

On September 11, 1948, the bodies of seven victims were found more than two miles inside the mine but it was over a month before they could be removed. Rock falls and dangerous gas prevented them from bringing the bodies out earlier.

Seven other dead miners were found about 40 feet from the mantrip that took them into the mine on the day after Christmas in 1945.

After the recovery of 15 bodies heavy gases were again encountered and forced a temporary halt to the search. The last five bodies were removed when recovery efforts were continued. They were found scattered within a 1,000 foot radius near the deepest part of the mine.

Findings indicated that several of the men lived for several hours following the explosions.

“God bless us all is my prayer,” was written in a message by Jim Fain, age 50, who was found near his final written words.

Another man had simply written, “Dear God, 3:30 o’clock, O.K.” in his late hour he evidently found peace with his maker.

The bodies of the following 20 miners were removed after being sealed in the depths of the mountain at Fourmile: John Brock, Jim Tom Fisher, George Mathews, Frank Mills, Hugh Westerfield, Jim Bain, Bill Carroll, Jim Tom Gambrell, Harmon Lovell, Delbert Lockard, Bill Brock, John H. Branstetter, Dave Sharp, H. Reed Lawson, Jim Emery, Bud Partin, Floyd Gambrell, Jim Collins, Champ Patterson, and Henry Honeycutt.

The arrangements for proper burials were made by the individual families and United Mine Workers District 19 assumed all funeral expenses “in order to relieve the families who were left destitute by the holocaust.”

“Fifteen were taken from the mine on October 18 after months of procrastination and delay by public authorities,” reported the United Mine Workers Journal.

Taylor Maddox, safety director of District 19, added “Recovery was made by federal and state mine officials and volunteer crews in air that would not turn an anemometer, in a mine that a rat would not feel safe in.”

Maddox replied to the comment by A. D. Sisk that the explosion may have been caused by one of the miners lighting a cigarette.

“I was present during the inspection following the removal of the bodies and I emphatically disagree with the report of Mr. Sisk because no cigarette was found after a thorough search was made for smoking material.

“A match allegedly found near the body of Henry Honeycutt could not have been there during the explosion. The evidence of intense heat was clearly shown as the ribs from top to bottom for more than 360 feet along the entry were charred to a depth of one-eighth of an inch. The heavy timbers along the entry were also badly charred.

“Certainly the intense heat which charred the coal to a depth of one-eighth inch and the heavy timbers which were damp from mine moisture would have completely demolished a match had it been there at the time of the explosion.”

The Fourmile Disaster, the worst in Bell County history, left 125 children and 23 widows without a breadwinner. The mine was not covered under the State Workmen’s Compensation Act, but the disaster did focus national attention on the coal-mining industry leading to improved safety laws.

It also led to improved benefits for the men, and the families of the men who work deep in the belly of the earth.

Conclusion

When I interviewed Jewell Lewis Ross and Earl Lewis in 1991 it brought back vivid memories to them of the Fourmile Mine disaster that occurred the day after Christmas in 1945. They were the children of W. E. Lewis, the owner of the mine at Fourmile. The senior Lewis was also the son of a miner, Joe Carl Lewis of Campbell County, Tennessee, who was killed in a gunpowder explosion in 1911 at an earlier mine in Fourmile Hollow.

A youthful W. E. Lewis, suddenly the head of his family following his father's death in 1911 toiled hard and saved his money before going to Louisville to get an education. He returned to Bell County with a degree in business.

"Daddy didn't mind hard work," Jewell told me in 1991. "After returning from college he invested all the money he had to buy property. He and W. E. Campbell would rise at 3 a.m. and walk to the head of Four Mile Hollow and worked there all day. He kept buying increments of property and was realizing his dream prior to the explosion in 1945.

"The mines were working good, and the men were making a good living. Daddy was pleased with his workers, and they like him, in fact many of them called him Uncle Bill.

"It was a tragedy for many families, and it was for Daddy and our family too. He lost his health because of the heartache and pain from going through it. He also lost his best mine and his best workers that morning.

Earl Lewis, superintendent of the mine at the time, pointed out that much of the machinery was lost in the explosion and fires and or by being sealed up in the mountain.

"We had 51 miners and those 31 that were working that morning were probably our best," Earl said. "I would have been in there with them, but I was on the phone with Ben Brown in Middlesboro ordering some switches.

"That explosion and aftermath nearly killed my Daddy," Earl continued. "Things were just going so smooth, and the bottom just fell out. Daddy was good to those men. He knew every one of them well. If they needed something they knew where they could get it. Often when one of them married Daddy would set them up with some furniture."

The mining tragedy at Fourmile also affected local native Paul Ross who married Jewell Lewis, daughter of W. E. Lewis. Ross was an Air Force pilot in World War II before returning to Fourmile with plans to enroll in medical school at the University of Kentucky.

"When the tragedy happened I stayed in Fourmile to help instead of enrolling in school," Ross said. "My most vivid memory of the accident is carrying those heavy oxygen tanks up the hill on my back. Later I was recalled into the reserves and flew in the Korean War and Vietnam War."

The jet Ross was flying was shot down over north Korea, but he was rescued from the Yellow Sea. He served later as a member of the USAF Thunderbird precision flying team before retiring.

“Mr. Lewis went through much stress and strain following the explosion,” Ross continued. “He loved those men. The explosion and aftermath were difficult for him to contend with. It led to his death just a few years later.”

Jewell explained that it took several years for her father to work through all the legal claims.

“He had to borrow money, but he settled all claims regarding the miners and their families,” Jewell related. “Daddy personally visited the widows and families of the men. Many advised him to take bankruptcy, but he absolutely would not. He wanted to stand by his miners and did every way he could.”

Jewell explained that when her father died on January 19, 1952, Ken Sulfridge, an electrician at the time of the explosion, led the miners on a 2-mile march from Fourmile Hollow to Riverside Baptist Church for his funeral.

Ken Sulfridge had been the first to notice smoke coming from the mine fire on the morning of the explosion,” Jewell explained. “He ran down the hill and told me and Louise Elliot. Earl (Lewis) was on the phone but immediately began calling the necessary officials and then he and another man ran back up to the mine.”

Louise Elliott was the bookkeeper for Kentucky Straight Creek Coal Company and Jewell Lewis Ross assisted with the bookkeeping and issued scrip to the miners.

Joe Hatfield was the final survivor of the Fourmile mine disaster. He was among eight miners who were rescued before perilous conditions forced officials to seal the mine. It remained sealed for nearly three years before being reopened and the other miners removed and buried.

“Mr. Lewis and my husband talked about the explosion and events that followed,” Eliza Hatfield, widow of Joe Hatfield, said in 1991 at the Wallsend home where she and her husband lived at the time of the accident. “Joe liked Mr. Lewis. Neither of them were pleased with the way the media covered the tragedy.”

Thanks for the assistance of Jewell Lewis Ross, Paul Ross, Earl Lewis and Eliza Hatfield in completing the series on the Fourmile Mine Disaster.

The mine where the tragedy occurred is quiet today except for the sounds of vehicles passing nearby and youngsters that can be heard swimming in a distant stream during hot summer days.

But for a time in late 1945 and early 1946, Fourmile Hollow gripped the attention of the entire nation.

Links to each part at BereaOnline:

Part 1 - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/04/the-fourmile-mine-disaster/>

Part 2 - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/05/the-fourmile-mine-disaster-part-2/>

Part 3 - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/05/the-fourmile-mine-disaster-part-3/>

Part 4 - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/05/the-fourmile-mine-disaster-part-4/>

Part 5 - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/05/disaster-at-fourmile-part-5/>

Part 6 - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/06/the-fourmile-mine-disaster-part-6/>

Conclusion - <https://www.bereaonline.com/2019/06/tragedy-at-fourmile-conclusion/>