

Deseret News archives: Mine disaster in Scofield devastated a community

Winter Quarters coal mine explosion in 1900 was worst in U.S. history at the time

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A look back at local, national and world events through Deseret News archives.

May Day was in its heyday in the U.S. at the beginning of the 1900s, as Americans, many of them recent immigrants from Europe, continued to celebrate the traditions of their ancestors.

But May 1, 1900, was a difficult day in Utah history.

“Shock waves of horror and grief fanned out from the Winter Quarters coal mine in Carbon County as the full impact of a May 1, 1900, underground explosion hit the small community. It was the most lethal mine accident ever in Utah and, at that time, in the United States,” per a retrospective [story written by Twila Van Leer](#) in 1996 in the Deseret News.

“Death’s winding sheet seems to envelop Scofield this morning. Every house, without exception, is a house of mourning, and every household is preparing to receive its dead,” read the May 2, 1900,

newspaper report at the top of the page, [per recaps of the events of the day](#).

“At least 200 men lost their lives in an explosion that rocked the Winter Quarters Number Four Mine at 10:28 a.m. on a day planned to honor the victory of Admiral Dewey over the Spanish navy at Manila in the Philippines two years earlier. In fact, some thought the roar of the deadly explosion was a blast set off by someone beginning a midmorning celebration of Dewey Day.

“The men and boys died either directly from the explosion or were suffocated when the afterdamp or carbon monoxide following the blast robbed them of life-sustaining oxygen.

“About 20 of the victims were young boys who worked at various tasks inside the mine — helping their fathers load coal, coupling coal cars together, or opening and closing ventilation doors. The official number of dead was placed at 200; however, miners counting the bodies at the mouth of the tunnel claimed 246 had died. A week after the explosion, Finnish miners maintained that 15 of their countrymen had not been recovered.

“The disaster left 107 women as widows and 286 children as fatherless.”

In the years that followed, [stories of heroism, survival and tragedy](#) have been kept alive.

Here’s one story, shared in a 1991 article by Deseret News writer A. Kent Powell:

”Roderick Davis managed to escape from the mine after the explosion and joined one of the rescue parties, but while back inside the mine, he was overcome by the gas and fell unconscious.“

“Taken for dead, Davis was thrown into one of the cars being filled with bodies. Once out of the mine, he was placed in a row of corpses to be washed. When the men began to wash him, he regained consciousness and walked out of the room.”

According to reports, the dead miners were washed and dressed in white shirts, ties and black suits purchased by the Pleasant Valley Coal Co. and were placed in coffins shipped to Scofield from Salt Lake City and Denver. They were then taken to their homes to await burial on May 5.