

# 7 Found Dead in a Virginia Coal Mine

By SABRA CHARTRAND

Special to The New York Times

NORTON, Va., Dec. 9 — Two and a half days after an explosion rocked South Mountain Mine No. 3 here, hopes that eight miners had survived the blast ended late tonight when grim officials announced they had found the bodies of seven of the men.

United States Assistant Secretary of Labor Bill Tattersall said the miners "apparently died in their work stations" and "did not survive the blast."

He said rescue workers found "seven of the eight bodies," but were unable to locate the last body or remove any of the dead from the mine because of dangerously high levels of methane gas.

Sheriff's deputies at the mine site boarded school buses where frightened family members had huddled for days to deliver the devastating news. Many of the relatives collapsed, hugging one another and rocking and crying in each others' arms.

Among the victims were Claude and Palmer Sturgill, brothers whose family first began working in the mines in the 1930's. For over 50 years Sturgill men blasted and drilled, opening solid rock deep in the Appalachians to haul out coal.

Over the decades, a young father died in a mine blast, a cousin was crippled by an earth scraper, and the countless dangerous jobs deep in the shafts left many of the clan injured.

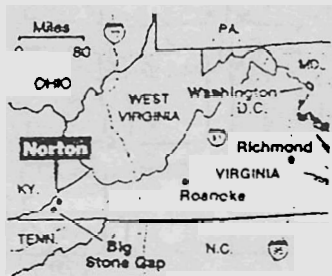
Yet, few knew the dangers of mining coal better than the Sturgills. Like everyone else here, and like people in other hard-scrabble Appalachian towns, the Sturgills also knew that only mining paid a living wage in an area where work itself is scarce and they felt lucky to be earning \$14 an hour doing the backbreaking job.

Between them, Claude Sturgill, 49, and his brother Palmer, 44, had eight children. In the cold, snowy days since the explosion on Monday morning, Claude's youngest son, 13-year-old Lee, camped with the rest of his family in a tent at the base of the hillside mine.

"Dad liked the money but he didn't feel safe in the mine and he wanted to find something else," the boy said earlier today. "But he couldn't. Just about everybody in my family works in the coal mines."

## Losses of Two Kin

And now, eight of the 38 employees of the No. 3 mine are dead. The other workers, home at the time of the blast, are out of a job, perhaps permanently. And while there is little comparison



The New York Times

Seven coal miners were found dead at Norton, Va.

## The dangers of mining hit home once again.

between the two blows, people here know that in a place where few have life insurance, pensions or nest eggs, where new mines rarely open and existing ones are turning increasingly to mechanization and where unemployment is already in the double digits, the loss of 38 jobs is devastating, too.

While rescue workers, government investigators and officials from the South Mountain Coal Company, which owns the mine, have not determined the cause of Monday's explosion, all say that high levels of naturally occurring methane gas usually cause such disasters.

Norma Bowman, a Sturgill cousin, spent two and half days in her family's vigil, but never held out much hope.

"This is part of the work, the hazard of the job," she said earlier today. "Those boys all knew the risk. But they didn't have any choice."

## Pulling Together

Norton and the surrounding towns are the sorts of places where people rally to help one another faster than any Government agency can react. As soon as word of the explosion spread, townspeople rushed to the trapped men's relatives with blankets, clothes, food and spiritual support.

"This is small area," Mrs. Bowman said. "Everybody is kin to everybody else, and everyone pulls together."

Outside the Sturgill clan's tent, volunteers offered pizza and fried chicken to rescue workers and relatives. Others passed out stocking caps and mittens,

while a Salvation Army canteen truck gave away hot coffee and food. In a nearby tent, the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company hooked up telephones for the families.

"An accident like this reminds everybody that there's no such things as an overpaid coal miner," said Jerry Gray, a local lawyer who once was part-owner of a mine but who now earns a living suing mine companies for property owners or miners.

## Few Alternatives Available

"If you drive down Main Street, you'll see it's a dying town," Mr. Gray said of Norton, whose population is under 5,000. "We've got high unemployment. They're mining more coal now than ever with fewer men. It's still a single-employer economy, and there will not be other mines opening up for these miners to work in."

Jackie Barnette, another Sturgill cousin, knows well how hard it is to find work outside the mines. He was disabled in a mine accident in 1988 and has not been able to find a job since.

"My Daddy had 37 years in the mines," Mr. Barnette said. "I was in and out of the mines for five years. The pay is good, even in a non-union. But I don't get any compensation, and now my wife has to support me and our kids."

Though the focus here was clearly on the fate of the trapped men, there was also worry about what would happen to the miners who had lost their jobs.

"As far as the company taking care of the other miners, that's doubtful," said Howard Campbell, a former South Mountain employee. "They're just out of a job and will have to apply for unemployment."

This lack of security and alternatives saddens, and angers, nearly everyone in small mining communities like Norton. "America wants a cheap product, but they don't realize this kind of cost goes into it," said the Rev. Wayne Harrison, pastor of the First Baptist Church. "But the people in the coal fields are very aware of what goes into it."

Even as he waited this afternoon for word of his father and uncle, Lee Sturgill and his older brother Chris both said they would still welcome work in a mine.

"I'd sure think about it if they offered me a good job," said 25-year-old Chris Sturgill, who now works for a heavy-machine company here.

Lee said: "My Dad doesn't want me to work in the mines. He says coal is going to run out in this area pretty soon. But what else is there?"