

Stiritz Mine Explosion - 1927

Stiritz Mine No.1 was located in Williamson County, IL and was owned by the Cosgrove Meehan Coal Company, on Tuesday evening 20 December 1927, miners were starting the night shift when a electric car ignited gas in the mine.

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Seven Men Killed In Mine Blast

Bodies Removed from Franco Mine No.1 After All Night Search

Last of Bodies Recovered Twelve Hours After Explosion in Mine at Stiritz

Only Twenty Men in Pit at Time of Accident Instantly Killing Seven,
Including Four Marion Men.

Seven miners lost their lives in an explosion which occurred in Mine No.1 of the Cosgrove Meehan Coal Company at Stiritz early Tuesday night, the dead are:

William Jones, Marion, 208 East Charles street

Charles Wyatt, Marion, 1007 North Monroe street

Dave Anderson, Johnston City

Almus Lavender, Marion, 2107 West Marion street

Fred Cagle, Scottsboro

George Grubbs, White Ash

G. Garotta, Stiritz

All of the victims leave families except Garotta who so far as is known has no relatives in this country.

The explosion occurred at 8:15 o'clock Tuesday night on entries 5, 6 7 and 8 and while the cause of the blast could not be determined until a complete investigation is made by the state mine inspectors, it was thought that it was probably set off from a motor which was operating in the section of the mine where the explosion occurred.

Employs 400 Men

This mine which employs about 400 men on the day shift was working only twenty men on the night shift Tuesday night. The men had been in the pit less than an hour when the blast caught them. The motorman Almus Lavender had pulled their cars into them and they had just begun their night's work.

Many Survivors

The men in this mine who survived the explosion without injury were Walter Barham, E. King, George Treece, George Runnels, acting night boss, Dennis Jackson, Wallace Laur, F. C. Weaver, Raleigh Leigh, Harper Weaver, H. Laur, William Kent and Harry Thompson.

Notice of the explosion was sent out from near where the bodies of three victims were found.

A miner who was unloading some sand at the mouth of entry 5 for the use of the motorman was blown off a car by the wind that swept thru the workings of the mine following the blast. He said that he could hear the rush of air before he heard the explosion. As soon as he had recovered from the effects of the jar, he called the bottom of the mine on the telephone and informed the men on duty there of the explosion. He then went ahead to inspect the workings in the directions of the blast and discovered that the trap doors and air brattices had been blown away, and that gas was spreading thruout the entries in that part of the mine. He replaced the trap door to block the bad air and then telephoned that help was needed.

Enter by Air Shaft

The condition of the air in the mine was such that it was impossible for the men to enter the mine at the shaft by way of the cage and the rescue workers moved into the pit thru the air shaft by way of stair steps. Once inside the mine they were forced to erect brattices as they advanced in order to cut good air into the workings ahead of them so they could move forward. This was long and arduous task and progress was limited because the narrow passageways permitted only a few men to work at a time.

Wore Gas Masks

Even the rescue teams wearing gas helmets were unable to endure the gas and lack of air for any length of time. About eleven o'clock the mine rescue team from Herrin arrived and went into the mine working side by side with the miners who had escaped injury in the explosion. Later on rescue teams from Benton and Saline County arrived and participated in the work.

State Director Leads

Receiving news of the explosion about eleven o'clock, A.D. Lewis director of the state department of mines, left Springfield at 11:40 o'clock and at 4:30 o'clock Wednesday morning was at the mouth of the shaft at Stiritz. After studying a map of the working below and inspecting the mine examiner's reports he donned overalls and went into the mine along with the Benton mine rescue team.

The painfully slow progress of the rescue workers continued thruout the night and into the morning.

The men encountered all sorts of handicaps and the gas was so bad at times that they were held back. Some of them became so nauseated and had to leave the pit to gain some fresh air at the top.

Bodies Recovered

About three o'clock Tuesday morning the report was brot to the top that three bodies had been recovered. Official confirmations of that report was received by Superintendent Hight from State Mine Examiner Plumlee who wrote a note saying that three bodies had been recovered and that he expected to reach the other four within two hours. At seven o'clock however, no word was received confirming his expectations.

Body Not Marred

The three bodies were those of Jones, Anderson and Wyatt. They were found on entry 5 & 6. Rescuers reported that the bodies were found in a kneeling position as if the men had fallen forward and down in an effort to escape the explosion and were killed instantly. The body of Jones had fallen slightly on one side. The bodies were not marred by the explosion. Rescuers reported that farther into the mine a pit car was found standing on end, pushed against the roof by the force of the blast.

All Bodies Recovered

Between eight and nine o'clock Wednesday morning the other four bodies were found. That of Almus Lavender, motorman was found lying a few feet from his motor. The bodies of Cagle, Garroto and Grubbs were found beyond that of Lavender and were nearer the face of the coal. The bodies were all intact but the skin of all of them had been burned badly.

Spark Touched Off Gas

The fact that the center of the explosion seemed to be in the vicinity of the electric motor gave rise to the theory that a spark from the motor touched off the gas. Results of examinations will probably not be revealed until the coroner's inquest.

According to rescue workers the workings where the last four bodies were found were wrecked by the blast, trapdoors, brattices, pit cars and debris from fallen roof and pillars were all thrown together in a mass of wreckage which hindered the work of the rescuers. It was said that the men had to virtually cut their way thru to recover the bodies of the last four men found.

Ventilation Improved

The part of the mine in which the explosion occurred was noted among the miners as being gaseous and that region had been repeatedly been marked unsafe. Recently, however that part of the workings had been improved by the ventilation system and was not regarded as especially dangerous.

Altho the bodies were badly burned there was no indication that there had been any fire in the mine after the explosion, the searing of the flesh, it was said, must have been caused by the intense heat which followed the explosion immediately.

Mules Were Used

By the time all the bodies had been located the gas in the mine had cleared sufficient to permit the men to ride the cage down into the shaft. The operation of electric motors was still regarded as hazardous and the electric current which was shut off immediately after the accident remained off. Mules were used to pull cars carrying the bodies of the explosion victims to the bottom of the shaft and from there they were hoisted one at a time on the cars.

Families Claim Bodies

The bodies were all removed to Johnston City to the establishments of J.C. Wildridge and of John C. Hathaway where they were viewed by the coroner's jury and then turned over to the families. Coroner George Bell announced that he would hold an inquest into the deaths of the explosion victims on Thursday and after the jury which he empanelled had viewed the bodies the inquest adjourned.

Altho notice of the explosion was received by officials far and wide it was not generally known locally until Wednesday morning. A small crowd remained about the mine during the night but when morning came the crowds began to accumulate. Many miners went to the mine expecting to work Wednesday, not learning of the accident until they reached the shaft.

The families of the victims were not notified until Wednesday morning when a correct list of the dead could be given.

The Stiritz mine is operated by the Cosgrove Meehan Coal Company. General Superintendent Harry Woods, Division Superintendent Harry Copher and Mine Manager T.E. Coulahan were all on hand soon after the explosion and assisted in the rescue work until all the bodies had been recovered.

The explosion occurred about a mile and a half from the bottom of the shaft.

Coroner George Bell went to the mine immediately after hearing of the accident and spent the entire night there in order to be on hand to release the bodies to the relatives as soon as possible after they were taken out of the mine.

Deputy Sheriffs Brady Jenkins and Joe Schafer also spent the night at the mine aiding the mine officials during the night and the following morning in controlling the crowds of curious.

This is the first of a series of news items on the hazards of working in the Southern Illinois coal mines in the early 1900s.

Content with the amenities of today, often we forget the hardships endured by our ancestors.