

One-hundred years ago this month, 259 miners lost their lives in what remains the nation's third largest mine disaster.

Cherry Mine Disaster



Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos Courtesy Ray Tutaj, Jr.

The morning of Saturday, November 13, 1909 started like any other in the Bureau County community of Cherry, with 481 men and boys descending deep underground to work for Cherry Coal Mine Company.

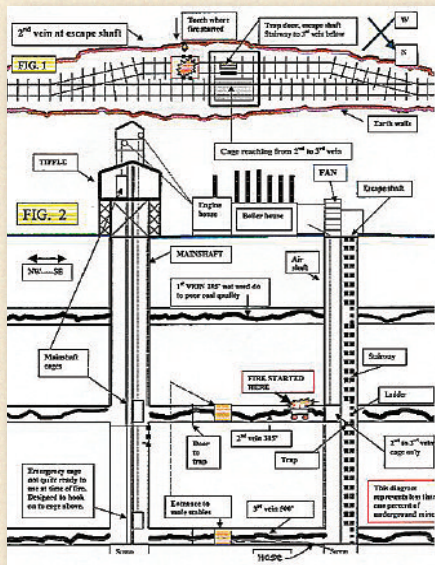


The day after the Cherry Mine fire began, crowds gathered at the surface waiting on news. A team of state mine inspectors (left) assessed the situation.

Workers at the 4-year-old mine, owned by St. Paul Coal Company, mined 1,500 tons daily with pick and shovel.

Because the electrical system was down at the time, the mine was lit with kerosene lamps. A car load of hay, lowered daily to feed the 70 mules stabled underground, was parked under a lighted oil torch, and shortly after 1 p.m., the hay caught fire.

Thinking it would be extinguished in the lowest level of the mine, men pushed the burning car to the escapement hatch



A model of the Cherry Mine will be on display during the Nov. 14-15 remembrance.

Miners pushed a burning hay cart on the second level of the mine to the escapement hatch thinking the fire would be extinguished on the third level.

and returned to their jobs. No warnings were sounded. Not until 3 p.m., the end of the shift, did many of the miners learn that the mine was on fire.

That day, 230 miners rode to the surface and 259 died in the coal mine. Twenty-one men began a remarkable eight days in the mine, which was sealed

at the surface to extinguish the fire, before they were rescued. The mine was resealed on Thanksgiving Day, and remained sealed until February 1 when recovery of the bodies began.

What came out of such a tragedy? In 1910, the Illinois legislature strengthened existing mine fire and safety regulations, three mine rescue stations were set up in Illinois (a fourth was added the following year) and the U.S. Bureau of Mines was created. And a year later, a liability act, which eventually evolved into the Illinois Worker's Compensation Act, was created, allowing victims to recover for injuries.



Thomas White, one of the 21 survivors, recounted his experience in a story published in "The Wide World Magazine."

"The horror and hopelessness of our situation temporarily affected my mind, and the adventure takes a place in my memory like some awful nightmare, of which only the salient details are clear."

Prayer services "never failed to cheer us and strengthen our nerve to meet the death which we felt sure was in store for us."

Sunday night it was suggested they block off a passage: "...build a wall to keep out the back-damp. There will be enough air in this entry to keep us alive for several days. Gladly we welcomed the suggestion, for, although it seemed a forlorn hope, it would keep us employed for a time and save us from absolute despair."

"The space which we had thus walled in, literally burying ourselves alive as it seemed to us, was about 300 feet long and 12 feet wide. The atmosphere was cold and damp, and one could not rest long on the ground without being chilled through and through."

Flames on the lamps started flickering on Tuesday night, an indication of impure air. "Such inky darkness as now enveloped us I have never before seen or hope to know again...gloom and despair reigned supreme."

Saturday: "Hopeless and too weak to get about except by crawling most of us lay waiting and longing for death as a deliverer. Resolving that it would be better to die in the outer passage, where our bodies would soon be found, we decided to let four...men venture forth...in search of water. I lay on the floor of our prison, too weak to lift a hand, with my lips and tongue swollen and caked from thirst, waiting either for the return of the men...or for death to end my misery—I scarcely cared which."

"I emerged from a kind of half-stupor, into which I had fallen from exhaustion and suffering, to find lights and many people...my fellow-sufferers getting to their feet with looks of joy and relief...imbued with new strength by the realization that rescue was at last at hand."

"...one by one, completely swathed in blankets, we were hoisted to the surface and conveyed to a hospital car...I could hear the mad cheering of a tremendous crowd...the noise they made showed me that their number was large."

"In a few months I was quite recovered from the immediate effects of my week underground, but a pasty, whitish colour of the skin, sore eyes, a prematurely-aged appearance and sharp pain in my lungs at times while I am at work underground, with a lack of my previous energy and vitality..."

**—U.S. Dept. of Labor, Mine Safety and Health Organization
msha.gov/century/mag/mag1**

Century tribute

Atribute to the 100th anniversary of the Cherry Coal Mine disaster will take place in Cherry on Nov. 14-15 2009.

Saturday activities include unveiling of a new memorial and trolley rides to the mine site and cemetery (includes a monument erected by the United Mine Workers to memorialize the victims). Artifacts and a model of the mine will be on display at the city library. Many relatives of the miners will share their stories.

Activities taking place Sunday include a pancake and sausage breakfast at the church hall.

Cherry is located northwest of LaSalle-Peru, approximately 4 miles north of I-80 on Route 89.

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum will feature a major exhibit on the Cherry Mine disaster Nov. 2, 2009- March 31, 2010. Visit alplm.org for details.