

Looking Back: The Coal Mine Disaster of 1925



Editor's note: The Office of State Fire Marshal makes an effort to keep the Fire & Rescue Journal fresh, interesting and full of information that you, North Carolina's fire and rescue personnel, find useful. Most of the stories told in this newsletter reference current events, lessons learned from new techniques and equipment and stories from modern-day North Carolina. As our fathers and grandfathers (or mothers and grandmothers) in the fire service can tell us, however, there is a lot to be learned from history. So OSFM is bringing you a new quarterly feature in the Journal — "Looking Back." Every issue will feature a fire event from the past. Some will be familiar to you, but others may not. What all will have in common, though, is the fact that they are part of the foundation upon which our modern fire and rescue service is built. We think you will find these stories interesting, if not inspiring; we certainly hope so. And if you have a fire or other disaster you would like to suggest we cover, please let us know. Email Claude Shew at cshew@ncdoi.net. Thanks, and enjoy!

Believed to be the worst industrial accident in North Carolina history, the Coal Glen-Farmville Disaster of May 1925 killed more men in one short time than any other event in the state. Despite its ghastly toll — 53 men dead when all was said and done — Coal Glen-Farmville is seldom remembered when discussing North Carolina's industrial disasters. Perhaps that's because more recent events, such as the Hamlet chicken plant fire or the explosion at West Pharmaceuticals in Kinston, overshadow an event that occurred 80 years ago. Or perhaps it's because the town of Farmville, once the scene of a busy coal mining operation in Chatham County, was virtually deserted in the years that followed. Either way, the explosions that left some 38 women widowed and 79 children fatherless were responsible for practically ending the business of coal mining in this state. Here is the story, as told by local newspaper reporters.

From the May 28, 1925, *Raleigh News & Observer* —

Two score men were trapped 800 feet under ground in the Carolina Coal Mine nine miles from here today when three successive explosions of gas



"Hour after hour during the day hundreds of men, women and children surged around the mine, all straining toward the entrance of the mine shaft where those rescued, if any, must emerge. Time after time they were disappointed as the mine bucket came to the surface loaded only with debris."

[filled] the shaft blocking escape and none among the mining experts who are directing the rescue work holds out the faintest hope that any of them will be removed alive.

Twelve hundred feet from the mouth of the slanting shaft into the mine a handful of relief men worked feverishly with a mountain of crumbled slate and timber. Beyond the wall of debris of fire rages, and the thousands who wait silently about the mouth of the shaft wonder what else goes on beneath the quiet earth beneath their feet.

Six of the men are known to be dead and their bodies were brought out at 8 o'clock tonight. Superintendent Howard Butler who rushed into the shaft immediately after the first explosion saw them caught there beneath the tangled mass of slate and timber. A second explosion shook the mine and the young superintendent was scarcely able to fight his way back before a third and final detonation closed the throat of the shaft and hid the men from his sight.

Tonight rescue workers are attacking 20 tons of rock which block the shaft just beyond the point where the first bodies were recovered. While the bodies removed showed some signs of burns, it appears that they were killed by falling rock....

Massed around the roped in enclosure are the silent hundreds who make up the families of the entombed men. As yet no complete list has been made of the men who entered the mine this morning. It was the day shift, each

man wearing a number... Almost all of them are young men, sons of families that have lived in this section for generations.

They await there quietly, numbed by the unthinkable horror that lies beneath their feet. They stare at the yawning hole down which their kin went to work this morning. They whisper together in hopeless monotonies and wait. There is no hope among them anywhere. Aged mothers stare with dry eyes and little children tug at their skirts. Beyond them eddies a vast assemblage of people who come hundreds of miles to see a tragedy....

First Explosion

The first of the explosions order was heard at 9:40 this morning. Young Butler instantly called to men working beyond the 1,800 foot level by the mine telephone. They answered that things at that level were all right and that the explosion was apparently nearer the point where the shaft spreads out like the fingers of a hand. Communication was maintained for a few minutes and no casualties were reported.

Going immediately to the shaft Butler descended to the 1,200 foot level where progress was blocked by fallen stone and crushed timber. Underneath the debris were six men, some of whom were still alive. Ten minutes after the first explosion, the second detonation rocked the mine, partially filling the shaft behind the superintendent, and the third barely allowed him to escape. He was in a state of collapse from poison gases and shock when he climbed out of the mine.

Accompanying him on his explorations was Joe Richardson, who was not too far down the shaft when the second explosion came. He reached the surface in safety. Within half an hour search parties were ready to enter the mine and the first reports reached the surface before 11:00 o'clock. Twelve hours was estimated is the time required to clear out the shift to the point where the first bodies are known to be. Butler did not recognize any of the men entombed. They were blackened with grime. He himself is now in a Sanford hospital.

Experts here differ as to the cause of the explosion. Some gas was observed in the mine at all levels during the past few days and precautions were ordered against it by President McQueen. The test of the air late yesterday was reassuring and the tests this morning were not alarming. The general opinion is that gas formations are responsible for the disaster.

Deadlier Than Gas

Other experts are of the opinion that coal dust caused the explosion. Coal dust, they point out, is 10 times more deadly than gas, and more widespread in its affects. The recurrence of the explosions is held by some of the authorities to indicate dust as the basis of the detonations that wrecked the mine. Differ as they may on the causes, there is little difference among them as to the improbability that any man will come out of it alive.

The shaft enters the earth at an angle of 45 degrees, and extends for 2,300

feet at that angle under the earth. The first coal is encountered at about 1,000 feet. From that point the mine branches out in countless labyrinthine passages into pockets where the men were working. There the seam of coal is from two to five feet thick. The mine is wired for electricity and has a system of naked signal wires. The miners caps are lighted by electricity from storage batteries strapped to their backs.

Circulation of air through the countless chambers of the mine is obtained by a system of bulkheads built so as to direct the current. Doors are thrown up with rock and here and there are placed fabric curtains to divert the currents. Indications to Mr. Butler were that these bulkheads and doors had been blown out by the force of the explosion and that circulation of air is exceedingly problematical.



"Almost all of them are young men, sons of families that have lived in this section for generations." Two miners waited for news about their comrades trapped underground.

Fans at Capacity

The great fans that suck air out of the mine through a direct shaft were whirling at capacity this afternoon and standing in the shaft of the mine there was a strong current of air entering.

Miners had little hopes that it was doing more than flow through the shaft and out to the air drain shaft, without deflection into the pockets where the men were trapped. Some hope was felt that there might not be extensive fire in the mine. Little was escaping, but it is generally believed of the main shaft beyond the 1,200 foot level is burning slowly, which will vastly increase the work of the miners after the openings are cleared. It will be well into the night before it can be definitely determined whether fire has been added to the already agonizing fate of the entombed minors....

Relief work has been handicapped to some extent by the absence of gas masks. The equipment on hand



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is obsolete and of no use. Rescue volunteers have worked on short shifts as the gas filled the shaft, and come up for relief. Expert relief is being rushed here from Washington on a special train and is due to arrive sometime tonight. Another crew is on the way here from the Alabama coal fields.

The men who are now trapped in the mine went down at 7 o'clock this morning, and shortly after they went in, the night shift, which is in charge of cleaning up the mine, and making it safe for operation, came to surface. They reported nothing out of the ordinary, and no intimation was expressed by them that trouble might be experienced in the mine. The night shift goes on at 1 o'clock in the morning.

From the May 28, 1925, *Durham Morning Herald* —

There were no scenes of disorder at the mine. Hundreds stood behind the ropes which held them back from the mouth of the fatal shaft, but they appeared too numbed to make their grief visible.

Adjutant General Van B. Metts, sent by Governor McLean to take charge of the situation and if need be to summon military aid said that the crowd about the mine was orderly and that there appeared to be no need of outside aid. Sheriff G. W. Blair of Chatham County had a force of extra deputies on duty at the mine to aid in holding back the crowds.

Headed by Major Burr of Fort Bragg, a company of army engineers and a hospital detachment came to the scene from Fort Bragg to render aid but it was found that the troops were not needed and they were returned to the fort.

The hospital detachment

however remained on duty at the mine and was aided by a corps of volunteer nurses from Sanford. General Metts said that he would remain on the scene for a day or two in order to respond to any emergency.

Estimates as to the length of time it would take to clear the mine and reach the entombed men varied. Some believed that the work would require at least a week, while others said it would not take more than a day or two. The arrival here tomorrow of a specially equipped mine rescue car, ordered here by the federal bureau of mines was expected to aid materially in the work of rescue.

The rescue crew working throughout the day used gas masks when entering the mine, although the main shaft was said to have been cleared of foul air late today. The men remaining in the mine are known to have been working in the main shaft from the 1,000 foot level down and hope was held out that they might be rescued. The work of rescue was going forward under the direction of J. R. McQueen of Lakeview, N. C., president and general manager of the Carolina Coal company. In this he was being assisted by Vice President Butler and other officials. The rescue crews were led by William Hill of the

which held it back from the mine opening. The order had gone out for the soldiers to bring their stretchers close to the shaft and the nurses stood by to give their aid. Once, twice, the cable which brought the car to the surface stopped and the mass of human beings watching it wind its slow way out of the shaft held its breath. Then seven grimy men came out of the opening with set faces. As if called, a group of miners descended to the cars just a few feet below the surface and tenderly removed the bodies of six of their comrades. Death had struck them down just after the heroic work of Butler and Richardson had given them an opportunity for life. The soldiers brought up the stretchers and the bodies were carried away to waiting ambulances to be transported to Sanford. Another crew of miners entered the shaft and the work of rescue was resumed.

The mine where the men are entombed, it was explained by Vice President Butler tonight, has only three openings--an air shaft, the main shaft and an old abandoned shaft. It is possible only to work down the main shaft to set at the men below and the rescue crew have reported that the main shaft is filled with fallen timbers and other debris. The second



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Cumnock mines, C. Scott and W. A. Jones, the three men being experienced mine workers. A full crew of miners from the Cumnock company was aiding in the work of rescue.

Hour after hour during the day hundreds of men, women and children surged around the mine, all straining toward the entrance of the mine shaft where those rescued, if any, must emerge. Time after time they were disappointed as the mine bucket came to the surface loaded only with debris.

Then shortly before 10 o'clock tonight, a stir ran through the crowd and it pressed more closely against the ropes

right lateral, where the first explosion is believed to have occurred, is about 1,000 feet from the mouth of the shaft, and about 100 feet underground, measured perpendicularly. It was from the mouth of this shaft that the six bodies were then brought. The air in the main shaft beyond is reported as pure, giving rise to the hope that the men might be safe behind the debris in which the main shaft at this point is filled.

The work of rescue was to be continued throughout the night with crew of seven men, the largest number which can enter the mine at the same time, working in shifts of two hours each.

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"The soldiers brought up the stretchers and the bodies were carried away to waiting ambulances to be transported to Sanford." This phrase from the *Durham Morning Herald* in May 1925, describes only a portion of the tragedy that occurred in the small, rural town of Coal Glen-Farmville, once a thriving coal mine town, now not much more than a memorial stone in today's Chatham County. The scene of one of the worst industrial accidents in North Carolina history, the Coal-Glen Farmville of 80 years ago comes alive in the newspaper stories and haunting photographs that described the coal mine explosion and subsequent fire that killed 53 men. Yet this piece of history is seldom remembered by fire and rescue personnel today.

This issue of the *OSFM Fire & Rescue Journal* brings you a new regular feature, "Looking Back," that will retell the stories of historical North Carolina fires. Learn more about the Coal Glen-Farmville fire, and how you can suggest stories from history for us to cover, on page 8 and 9.



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