



## ***The Farmington Mine Disaster, 1968***

***By James A. Haught***

***Staff Writer***

Mannington-Rescue prospects dimmed late Wednesday for the 78 men now known to be trapped deep in a smoke-filled coal mine rocked by explosions earlier in the day.

The miners are believed to have died about dawn Wednesday when an underground explosion shook the earth for 20 miles and erupted into the sky like a volcano.

Twenty-one other miners, working in distant tunnels, managed to escape to the surface before fire spread inside the mine. But 78 still were missing in the flaming catcombs Wednesday night.

"There's not a chance in the world to get those men out," West Virginia Department of Mines inspector Leslie Ryan said in midafternoon as he viewed the mile-high column of smoke rolling from the burning mine.

Just before midnight, a pocket of gas developed behind one of the openings which had been sealed and blew it open. The opening had been shut off in an effort to control air intake into the mine and help subdue the fire.

Earlier, rescue workers had said chances of finding the men alive were "very doubtful. . .very grave."

Scene of the tragedy is the huge No. 9 mine of Mountaineer Division of Consolidation Coal Co. The mine lies beneath Farmington, Mannington, and nearly 24 square miles of

Marion County just west of Fairmont. It is an old mine, opened in the 1940's, but it had been modernized to exploit its rich seam of six-to eight-foot coal. Production was 9,400 tons a day.

Main Entrance of the mine is on W. Va. 15 at a tiny town called "Consol No. 9, unincorporated." But the center of the explosion was about seven miles away, somewhere in the 600-foot-deep labyrinth of tunnels under Llewellyn Run west of Mannington.

"Consol" official Leonard Grose of Morgantown, formerly of Charleston, said about 100 men were at work in the mine on the midnight shift early Wednesday. Most of them were in the newer section near Llewellyn Run.

Between 5:30 and 5:40 a.m., a thunderous blast went off deep in the earth. The elevator of the well-like Llewellyn run shaft was hurled into the sky like a shot from a cannon. Sections of concrete from the shaft entrance were thrown onto nearby cars, smashing one of them. The modern Llewellyn Run portal, built only last year as part of a \$1 million improvement program by Consol subsidiary Mountaineer Coal Co., was destroyed. Flame and smoke began to rise from the shaft. A parked car was set afire. The smoke grew steadily thicker until the scene looked like an erupting volcano.

Shock of the explosion was felt 10 miles away in Fairmont. C & P Telephone Co. official William Withrow said his house shook as he was dressing for work, and he said other Fairmont residents also reported feeling the tremor.

Stragglers began emerging from the mine. Eight men who had been working about two miles from the blast linked hands and groped their way to an air hole. After nearly two hours they made contact with men on the surface and were hoisted to safety by a crane with a scoop bucket attached.

"I helped load them into ambulances," Charles Priester Jr. of Farmington said. "They were sick and vomiting, and two of them were bleeding from the eyes. The concussion from a blast in the mines does that to you."

The eight men were taken to Fairmont General Hospital where they revived quickly. Only three were admitted for observation. One of the eight, George Wilson recounted:

". . .The power went off and we could tell by the swishing of the air and the dust that there had been an explosion. . .All the men were made sick by dust and carbon monoxide fumes. . .We yelled to each other and decided to go to the air shaft where we thought we had a better chance of being rescued. We were down there for a couple of hours and pounded on the pipes and yelled and finally made contact."

Others who emerged from more distant entrances weren't injured. In fact, one of them, Charles Biafore of Fairmont, said he

had been operating a noisy mining machine about six miles from the explosion and didn't even know there had been a blast until others told him to flee the mine. Altogether, 21 men came out safely.

Consol Executive Vice President William Poundstone of Pittsburgh held a press conference Wednesday afternoon for dozens of West Virginia and national newsmen who flocked to the scene. He said it is presumed that natural gas, methane, caused the explosion. He said the mine always had been "moderately gassy, as are many mines in Marion County, an oil and gas region.

Estimates of how many men were missing varied throughout the day, but at a late afternoon press conference a coal company spokesman said the number had been determined to be 78.

If all 78 of the missing men are dead, it will be the worst mine disaster in West Virginia since Jan. 10, 1940, when 91 were killed in a coal mine blast at Bartley, McDowell County

The worst mine disaster in U.S. history happened only about 10 miles from the site of Wednesday's blast. On Dec. 6, 1907, the lives of 361 men and boys were snuffed out by a mine explosion at Monongah, Marion County

The ill-fated Consol No. 9 mine was hit by another gas explosion on Nov. 13, 1954, that killed 16 miners. The mine was set afire by that blast, too, and it had to be filled with foam and sealed for a year until the smoldering stopped. A granite monument to the 1954 victims sits beside a church in Farmington. ...