

REPORT OF MINE EXPLOSION

SMITH MINE, MONTANA COAL & IRON COMPANY

WASHOE, CARBON COUNTY, MONTANA

FEBRUARY 27, 1943

Prepared by

W. A. Boyle  
President

Joe Yanchisin  
Board Member, Subdistrict #3

Joe Masini  
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Representing District #27

UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA

Billings, Montana

Mr. John L. Lewis, President  
United Mine Workers of America

My dear Mr. Lewis:

The worst coal mine disaster in the history of Montana occurred about 9:30 a.m. February 27, 1943 in the Smith Mine of the Montana Coal and Iron Company at Washoe, Montana. We, the undersigned representatives of the United Mine Workers of America, as members of the investigation committee of the explosion, in which 72 members of our organization and 2 mine officials lost their lives, herewith submit to you our report and findings.

Smoke pouring from the mine entrance about 10 o'clock that morning, was the first indication of trouble. Alec Hawthorne, hoisting engineer, called the surface and said, "There's something wrong down here. I'm getting out." He was rescued alive with two others. Two bodies and the three injured men were carried from No. 2 vein which had been used only as the haulageway. The 72 other trapped men were in #3 vein.

Ed Davies, State Coal Mine Inspector, arrived at the mine shortly after the accident and immediately entered the mine to direct the working of the rescue crews.

Smith mine employees worked throughout the day repairing stoppings which were damaged, while a rescue squad was flown to Billings from Butte, equipped with masks. Experienced coal miners from Musselshell and Cascade counties, and chrome miners from Benbow and Mouat mines, aided the rescue squads made up of local men.

The rescue crews worked in six hour shifts, under the supervision of the United States Bureau of Mines officials. We recognize that the Federal Inspectors with their years of experience in the coal mining industry, the technical knowledge they have acquired through years of study, along with the efficient manner in which they directed the rescue operations, was of great value during the time of the disaster. We wish to acknowledge and highly commend the assistance and services of Mr. D. F. McElhatton of the Mines Safety Appliance Company, his knowledge in the use of mine safety appliances and suggestions offered by him during the rescue operations was also valuable.

The crews penetrated deeper into the mine workings as stoppings were repaired and fresh air circulated. The installation of the exhaust fan in the old Foster mine openings aided in withdrawing of the poisonous gasses. As the rescue squads worked their way into the mine openings they began discovering the bodies, which they wrapped in canvas and carried them to the

First West rope parting to await removal to the outside.

The first bodies to be removed from the First West parting were 32 in number, taken to the outside the night of March 4th. On the nights of March 5, 6, and 7, there were 15, 23, and 2 bodies respectively removed to the outside. The signers of this report were present at the removal of all the bodies.

Death notes written in chalk on rough boards by five of the victims, not found until the seventh day, told their own story of how the men calmly awaited the poisonous gas they knew would come. The messages were found near the inby end of 5 Southeast panel.

Front and Back of one Board

Front

"It is five minutes past 11 o'clock  
Dear Agnes and children, I am sorry  
we had to go this way. God bless you  
all. Emil, with lots of kisses."

Back

"Frank Pinich  
John Sudar  
and Joki  
We tried our best but could not get  
out."

Second Board

"Walter & Johnny Good-bye  
Wives and daughters. We died an  
easy death. Love from us both.  
Be good."

These men made a futile attempt to barricade themselves from the noxious gasses.

Words cannot express the gratitude of the United Mine Workers to the Local Women and the Red Cross for the service they rendered throughout the sorrowing community, and at the mine during the recovery operations. The Red Cross set up an emergency hospital which was used principally to revive rescue squads who were overcome by the noxious fumes in the mine. The Local Women and the Red Cross in caring for the rescue workers and the bereaved families, served hot food continuously at the mine. Wives, children and relatives stood at the mine entrance for days refusing to give up hope; standing mutely by, or praying audibly that their loved ones would be brought to the surface alive.

The Anaconda Copper Mining Company of Butte, and the same company operating the Defense Chrome Account Mines at Benbow and Mouat, along with the other companies throughout the state, are to be commended for making it possible that the employees and rescue equipment could be available at the time most needed.

The Montana Highway Patrol should be praised for the services they performed in the transporting of the rescue workers to and from the mines during the terrible winter weather that we had at the time of the disaster.

Governor Sam C. Ford visited the scene of the disaster and offered any State assistance in the emergency. In his special message to the Legislature, which was still in session, he asked that an investigation fund be allowed for an inquiry by the State into this disaster. The Montana legislature passed a bill appropriating \$5,000.00 for a thorough examination into the cause of the Smith Mine Disaster. Governor Ford's investigating Committee is now at work investigating the explosion. On behalf of District 27, United Mine Workers of America, we extend our sincere thanks to his Excellency.

To Mr. R. V. Bottomley, Attorney General, we offer our thanks and appreciation in the lending of his able assistant, Mr. George S. Smith, to the County of Carbon to assist in the investigation held over the bodies of those men killed in the explosion.

District 27, United Mine Workers of America, takes this opportunity to express our gratitude to Mr. J. Burke Clements, Chairman of the Industrial Accident Board for his assistance, and prompt work in preparing the claims of the sorrowing dependents.

We wish to make mention of the fine work done by Mr. Barclay Craighead, Chairman of the Unemployment Compensation Commission in his handling the matter of unemployment claims of those who survived the disaster at the Smith Mine. To Mr. Craighead we also offer our thanks.

The Smith Coal Mine comes under the jurisdiction of Local Union #858, United Mine Workers of America, and the writers of this report attended the first meeting held after the explosion and disaster that rocked this community. It was a sad meeting for anyone to attend. President Lewis's message of condolence was read at this meeting, along with an explanation that the International Union had arranged for a cash contribution of \$7,400.00 to be placed at the disposal of District President Boyle, to be distributed among the dependents of the 72 members of the United Mine Workers and those dependents of the 2 bosses who were also the victims.

The investigation of the explosion, in an attempt to determine its cause, began on Monday, March 22nd, and continued throughout the week; conducted by Federal Bureau of Mines inspectors, Messers Arnold and Bailey, and State Mine Inspectors Davies and Henry, the Smith Mine Company officials, Messers Romek, Newman and Freeman.

We wish to make it clear that we do not pretend to possess the technical mining knowledge of the Federal and State inspectors. We have studied their reports and the report of the Company officials and we find that they disagree as to the point of origin of the explosion, and the direction that the explosive forces traveled. All agree that the explosion was caused by the ignition of an explosive mixture and that dust propagated it from the point of origin throughout the rest of the mine.

Our study of the reports and examination of the mine has led us to the conclusion that we cannot accept the findings of the Federal Inspectors and those of the Company officials as to the point of origin of the explosion.

The Company officials selected the 2nd East off the 4th Southeast, as the starting point of a sequence of events that led up to the explosion. They declare that concrete stoppings were erected in the main and back entries, one in each entry, at the insistence of the Federal Inspectors who inspected the mine during the latter part of November, 1942. The stoppings sealed off old workings that generated small quantities of gas, and the area sealed off is estimated as sufficient to contain 200,000 cubic feet of gas.

The Company assumes that a cave occurred directly over the concrete stopping in the back entry. The cave released the explosive gas which entered the return air current and traveled to the upcast shaft that connects the #3 and the #2 veins in the mine. The gas was set off by the blowing of a fuse in the high power line at the bottom of the shaft. From that point, the explosive force traveled back to the concrete stoppings and blew them towards the faces of the entries. They declare that only the exposed part of the stopping in the back entry, where the cave occurred, was disturbed by the force of the explosion. The rest of the stopping was protected by the cave, and judging by a sketch of the same on a map prepared by the company in support of their contention, remained intact.

The difficulty in accepting the Company's conclusions is that two miracles were necessary in order to bring about the sequence of events which they believe led to the explosion. The cave over the stopping in the back entry which they declare took place could not have happened. A roof that is supported in any manner, by props, cross bars, or even concrete stoppings, cannot fall unless the supporting medium gives way on account of the pressure exerted upon it. There is but one departure

from this rule, and it occurs when the prop, or cross bar or other support, remains intact and the nature of the roof is such that it gradually crumbles. Examples of this particular kind of roof can be found in almost every mine. They can be found in the Smith mine in an entry adjoining the 2nd East.

If we accept the Company's conclusion in regard to the cave, then we must believe that a concrete wall one foot wide and about eight feet in height and twelve feet in length could not support two feet of over-burden, a part of which was coal; and that the roof fell but the concrete stopping was undamaged, and remained intact until the force of the explosion that traveled from the upcast shaft blew the exposed portion towards the face of the entry. We must disregard the fact that the door in the slant off the 2nd East entry was blown inby, and this could not have happened if the original explosive force had traveled from the shaft inby to the 2nd East entries.

The other miracle was the blowing of the fuse at the shaft at practically the same time that the cave over the concrete stopping occurred. If this were not a miracle, it could be described as a most remarkable coincidence.

We do not know which of the Company's investigators formulated this theory as to the point of origin of the explosion, but it was not mentioned by any of them while the investigation was in progress. We were assured by the management at the time of our investigation was being conducted that the mine officials had been instructed to keep nothing that they knew, or that they had discovered, from the Federal and State investigators. Now, we find the statement in the Company's report to the effect that their officials had been instructed not to make known to anyone their findings in regard to the cave that released the gas in the 2nd East entry, and the blowing of the fuse at the air shaft.

We are of the opinion that if such an extraordinary cave had occurred, the Company officials would have brought it immediately to the attention of the other investigators, and the necessity of straining their imaginations would have been avoided. As the result of their failure to cooperate with the other investigators they cannot now produce their number one exhibit in support of their theories. The evidence has been covered by bigger caves at the point where the concrete stopping stood in the entry, as the result of the destruction of the stopping.

We have found from our experience that investigators usually emphasize, stress, and point out every factor that in any degree supports their theories. We are now informed that such was not the case with the Company's investigators. Yet, strange to say, we are now asked to accept their findings without any corroborative evidence from any of the other investigators.

All the investigators, while investigating, were in agreement in regard to the impossibility of explaining the conflicting evidence as to the paths that the explosive forces traveled throughout the mine.

This problem presented no difficulties to the Company's officials when they made their map. A glance at their map of the mine with red arrows indicating the initial direction of the explosive forces justifies this statement. A note on the map states "that in order to avoid confusion, initial inby force and direction of liberated gases is all that is shown on the map." We know that the direction of the initial force of the explosion as indicated on their map, cannot be followed as easily as the red arrows make it appear.

To the layman, the Company may appear to have made out a strong case in support of their contention as to the point of origin of the explosion and the events that led up to it. However, any mining man of experience will readily agree that the case they have made out is based upon an impossibility, namely, that a concrete wall of the dimensions stated could not support an over-burden of two feet, and that when the cave occurred the concrete stopping was intact and undamaged.

We submit that it is far more reasonable to assume that the cave occurred after the concrete stopping was destroyed by the explosive forces, than to assume that a cave occurred directly over the stopping while the stopping remained undamaged and intact.

The State Mine Inspectors' report covers the entire mine and is based on the evidence which they discovered, and they reached the conclusion that the point of origin of the explosion was near the face of the 8th West Main entry.

The Federal Mine Inspectors Report has this to say of the report made by the State Inspector:

"All of the above facts are substantiated by evidence in the panel. The reasoning is good, but the only difficulty in selecting the solution is that of reconciling this solution with the definite path of propagation as described in the discussion of the 9 S. E. panel."

The above quoted statement of the Federal Mine Inspectors report leads to the conclusion that the point of origin of the explosion was in the 8th West main entry as assumed by the State Inspectors. Our reason for so concluding, is that the definite path of the initial force of the explosion in the 9 S. E. panel entries traveled from the mouth of the main entry towards the face.

In helping us to arrive at our conclusions as to the point of origin as stated, we have carefully studied the Federal Inspectors report, the Company Officials report, and the report of the State Inspectors. The report of the State Inspectors appears to us to be a plain statement of the conditions that they found; and we are in agreement with the statement contained in the Federal Mine Inspectors report that all of the facts that they mentioned in regard to the 8th West "are substantiated by evidence in the panel."

The Executive Officers of District 27, United Mine Workers of America, requested a joint meeting with the Montana Coal Operators Association. The meeting convened on December 22, 1942 for the purpose of discussing proposed legislation, and those recommendations already made by the Federal Mine Inspectors in their preliminary report of the Smith Coal Mine. The Officers of the District organization requested that the Coal Operators lend a cooperative hand at the coming session of the Legislature, convening the first week in January 1943, to the end that at least the major recommendations made by the Federal Mine Inspectors would become part of the Montana statutes. All of the efforts on the part of the Coal Miners at this meeting met with failure, and the meeting adjourned without the miners receiving the necessary cooperation in order that the recommendations be embodied in the Montana Laws. Therefore, we, the signers of this report, feel that had those major recommendations made by the Federal Inspectors been incorporated in the Montana Coal Mining Laws at the last session of the Legislature, January 1943, and had they been enforced, that in all probability we never would have experienced an explosion of this magnitude in the coal mines of this state.

We are of the opinion that the only sure prevention against another such disaster in our mines, is the amending or rewriting of the Montana State Coal Mining Code, and embodying therein those recommendations made by the Federal Mine Inspectors, those that may be recommended by the Governors Commission, and also those of the Coroner's jury verdict that we are submitting herewith:

VERDICT OF JURY

STATE OF MONTANA)  
: ss  
COUNTY OF CARBON)

An inquisition taken at Red Lodge in the County of Carbon, on the 12th, 13th, and 14th of April, A. D. 1943, before Edward Olcott, Jr., Coroner of the said County of Carbon, upon view of the bodies named on the attached list, lying there dead, by the oaths of the Jurors whose names are hereto subscribed, who, being sworn to inquire, on behalf of the State of Montana when, how, and by what means, the said persons came to their deaths, upon their oaths do say:

That on February 27th, 1943, at the coal mine of the Montana Coal & Iron Company located at Washoe, Montana, met their deaths due to concussion and to gas poisoning caused by gas and dust explosion.

As a part of this verdict, we, the jury, impanelled on the coroner's jury recommend that our present mining laws be amended and new laws be enacted as follows:

1. That the State and Federal Coal Mine inspectors be given power to close any coal mine or part thereof where said inspector finds any hazard that he considers dangerous to the health and safety of employees.
2. That blasting of coal be not permitted when men are working in the mine, unless permissible powder is used.
3. That every underground employee be furnished with self-rescue equipment.
4. That helmets and gas masks in workable condition, in sufficient quantities, be kept at the mine to supply rescue crews in case of emergency.
5. That rescue crews be trained for rescue work and be supplied with all necessary equipment.
6. That all coal mines be rock-dusted.
7. That ventilation systems be improved immediately when requested by mine inspectors, and that booster fans be discontinued.
8. That a competent employee, selected by employees, must also accompany the state mine inspector on his official mine inspection.
9. That the intake air system should be on the man-way or haulage-way when the mines have regular man trips.
10. That each local union of the mine involved be furnished a copy of each mine inspector's report.

In testimony whereof, the said Coroner and Jurors of this inquest have hereunto set their hands, the day and year, to-wit, this 14th day of April, A. D. 1943.

<u>Signed</u> 7	C. S. Chamberlain	John Mikesell
	Edward Bloom	John Mance
	Eli Pekich	Anton Columbus
	J. J. Gerondale	William C. Godina
	Celeste Roat	

ATTEST

Edward Olcott, Jr.  
Coroner of Carbon County, Montana.

LIST OF MEN KILLED IN MINE EXPLOSION  
AT SMITH MINE OF MONTANA COAL & IRON COMPANY  
FEBRUARY 27, 1943.

<u>NAME</u>	<u>AGE</u>	<u>MARRIED OR SINGLE</u>	<u>NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS IN ADDITION TO WIFE</u>
James Allison	51	M	2
Emil Anderson	40	M	1
Sam Alexander	57	M	0
Wm. Appleton, Sr.	50	M	0
Sam Barovich	56	Widower	2
Wm. F. Barry	26	M	1 Prospective
William Beeney	53	M	0
Jules Besinque	51	M	1
John Bone	59	S	0
Leland Cline	28	M	1
David J. Davis	42	S	0
William DeBourg	55	MM	0
August Deruelle	62	MM	0
Patrick Doran	38	MM	0
Marcel Fages	40	SS	0
Joe Ferro	51	SS	0
John Germanetti	60	M	1
Pete Giovetti	39	MM	3
Matt Hallila	57	SS	0
Art Halpin	42	MM	2
A. D. Hardy	42	MM	0
James Hawthorne	30	MM	1
John Hodnik	31	MM	1
Walter Joki	30	M	1
Wayne Jones	31	MM	0
Andrew Jordan	21	S	0
Mike Kerinko	33	MM	4
John Krop, Sr.	59	MM	0
Louis Kuhar	56	MM	1
Edward Kumpula	35	M	0
Edward Laird	55	M	1
Edw. J. Laird	49	M	1
Clem Lodge	51	M	0
Abe McDonald	59	M	0
Joe McDonald	32	MM	2
Robert McDonald	42	MM	3
James McNeish	65	M	0
John Maden	53	M	0
Ignac Marinchek	57	S	0
Frank Mourich	42	M	1
Jack Mourich	36	M	2
*Richard Mallin	68	M	0
John Meiklejohn	51	M	0
Herman Mejean	19	S	1
Joe Meyer	39	M	1
Wilbur Muller	22	M	0
David Murray	56	M	0

<u>NAME</u>	<u>AGE</u>	<u>MARRIED OR SINGLE</u>	<u>Number of DEPENDENTS IN ADDITION TO WIFE</u>
Earl Mus	51	M	3
Wm. A. Nelson	51	M	0
William Noble	68	M	0
Frank Pajnich	53	M	0
William Pelo	46	M	2
Elmer Price	53	M	0
William Pryde	32	M	2
Eino Rahkola	27	S	0
Fred Rasborschek	61	S	0
Martin Ratkovich	46	S	0
David B. Reid	33	M	3
Lawrence Reid	41	M	2
Geo. J. Saarela	33	S	0
William Shepard	69	M	1
William Slaby	38	M	0
David Sommerville	60	M	2
John Sommerville	34	M	2
Frank Starkovich	64	M	1
John Sudar	28	M	1
Frank Sumisek	65	S	0
Geo. Thomson, Sr.	63	M	0
Adam Wakenshaw	72	M	1
Robert Wakenshaw	39	M	0
Robert Whitehead	47	M	1
Clarence Williams	42	M	1
Lloyd Williams	45	M	2
Vid Zaputil	50	M	0

\*Richard Mallin was the uncle of President W. A. Boyle.

Respectfully submitted,

District #27  
UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA

W. A. Boyle  
W. A. Boyle, President

Joe Yanchisin  
Joe Yanchisin, Sub-District Board Member

Joe Masini  
Joe Masini, International Board Member  
G.C.