

Horror at Lost Creek

A 1902 Coal Mine Disaster



"THE LIST" BY GEORGES SCHREIBER; LABOR'S NON-PARTISAN LEAGUE, TESTIMONY OF JOHN L. LEWIS (BEFORE U.S. CONGRESS, APRIL 1947)

by Merle Davis



Anna Booth was preparing a noon meal for her husband, William, and their nine-year-old son, Harry, on Friday, January 24, 1902, when a wailing mine whistle sounded a warning that something was wrong at Shaft No. 2. Wives and mothers, fathers and children, relations and neighbors began rushing toward the pit head as word spread that a terrible explosion had wrecked the works and trapped scores of men and boys below ground. Anna and William's fifteen-year-old son, William A., was working in the coal mine that day, along with a hundred or so others.

Anna and William knew well the dangers inherent in the mining of coal. They both had come to America from England, where their fathers and grandfathers, as far back as anyone could remember, had worked in the mines. Anna's own father had died in a mine explosion in England. For all she knew, her son William could now be among the dead or injured. Anna and William, along with

Miners' wives agonize over a list of casualties.

young Harry, hurried to Lost Creek Shaft No. 2, a half-mile southeast of their home in the village of Lost Creek, a mining town in Mahaska County about ten miles south of Oskaloosa.

Even as the Booth family and other residents of Lost Creek rushed toward Shaft No. 2, some of the men and boys who had been in the west side of the mine when the explosion occurred began groping their way through the smoke and blackness to the mine's escape shaft and up to the surface. A quick count showed that forty to fifty men and boys had reached the surface, leaving another fifty to sixty trapped below.

Among the gathering crowd, rumors abounded. It was believed that fires raged

below, consuming the oxygen and cremating men and boys pinned beneath shattered timbers and fallen slate. Underground doors, needed to direct the flow of air, were believed to be blown out or otherwise wrecked. The force of the blast was said to have torn up the rails on which pit cars moved and to have jammed cars against one of the hoisting cages.

Men working above ground told of flames and debris shooting two hundred feet into the air. Smoke was yet billowing from the mine shaft. Survivors reported that the explosion had blown out the flames in their lard-oil pit lamps, and that foul air and deadly afterdamp were filling the mine. A quick inspection





Left: Iowa law permitted boys as young as twelve to work in coal mines. Here, mine interior in Lucas, 1913. Above: Top works at Lost Creek, Mahaska County.

showed that the guides on the hoisting cages were knocked out of alignment. Even more important for the survival of the trapped miners was the condition of the ventilation fans, designed to push fresh air down the air shaft and into the mine, where it was circulated through a network of doors and passageways. Now it was discovered that the force of the explosion had gone up the air shaft and had at least partially wrecked the fans.

The heart-rending scene at the pit head was one of fear and anxiety. No one could be certain of what was happening below ground. Smoke and gases still forced back rescuers who tried to enter the mine through the escape shaft. Those gathered around the pit could do little else but stand in the January cold and watch and wait. The strain of the moment became too great for some. Some of the women and children reportedly became "frantic with grief" and others ran about "shrieking, moaning, praying." To lessen the chaos, the women and children were ordered to return to their homes and wait there for news.

MINE SUPERINTENDENT Jasper M. "Jap" Timbrell was at the company store, about three-quarters of a mile away, when the explosion ripped through Shaft No. 2. As soon as word reached him, he hurried to the shaft

and took charge of rescue operations. He immediately set men to work repairing the fans. Unless they were repaired quickly, chances were that anyone who had survived the explosion soon would die from breathing suffocating or noxious gases or "damps."

In Iowa coal mines, the most common of these gases were carbon monoxide (called "whitedamp" by miners), carbon dioxide ("chokedamp" or "blackdamp"), and hydrogen sulphide ("stinkdamp"). Miners recognized yet another dangerous gas, called "afterdamp," which oftentimes filled mines after explosions, leaving death in its wake. It was not a single compound, but a mixture chiefly consisting of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, and water vapor. Miners considered afterdamp highly explosive and fatal.

Although the ventilation fans were soon repaired and running again, the next obstacle was to enter the pit and clear the debris in the underground airways and repair the doors that regulated the air currents. The moment Timbrell believed the air in the pit was safe enough for men to descend the shaft, volunteers stepped forward, William Booth among them. Timbrell personally led the first rescue party down the escape shaft and into the mine. The damage they found was less severe than at first rumored. The mine had not caught fire. The damage to the guides in the hoisting shaft was repaired in about an hour, and the cages were set in motion, carrying fresh rescuers to the bottom.

The work was exhausting and slow. Rescue parties worked in the foul air until men would

fall from exhaustion or be overcome by damp. Fresh men would seize the tools from the fallen, and the frenzied work would continue without interruption. Repeatedly the gases forced the men back. Timbrell was himself overcome by damp and exhaustion and brought to the surface, where he collapsed. Once revived, he entered the pit again.

WHILE THE RESCUE operations were underway, news of the disaster reached nearby communities. Within minutes of the explosion, men had rushed to the company store and the single telephone in Lost Creek. Calls to Eddyville, Oskaloosa, and surrounding towns summoned physicians. Within a few hours, a train carrying ten physicians arrived from Oskaloosa. Undertakers followed. Mahaska County Coroner Charles F. Foehlinger arrived. County Sheriff William Cricket was on hand to maintain order.

As word of the disaster reached neighboring communities, people raced to Lost Creek in buggies and wagons, aboard trains, and on foot. Hundreds made their way to the village. Some joined the crowds of the curious near the shaft. Others, including miners from Oskaloosa, Beacon, Pekay, and elsewhere, offered their muscle and skills in the rescue efforts.

As Jap Timbrell and the rescue parties pressed deeper into the mine, they found the portions to the west largely unaffected by the explosion, which confirmed some survivors' accounts. In several instances, men working on the west side said they had been totally unaware of the explosion until told to get to the surface as rapidly as possible.

Conditions worsened as the rescue parties moved toward the east side. There they encountered fallen debris, wrecked airways, smashed doors — and damp. Near the hoisting cage they discovered a number of injured mine workers who had been waiting to go to the surface for their noon meal when the explosion struck. Many of them were young men and boys — drivers, cagers, and trappers — some badly burnt, but alive.

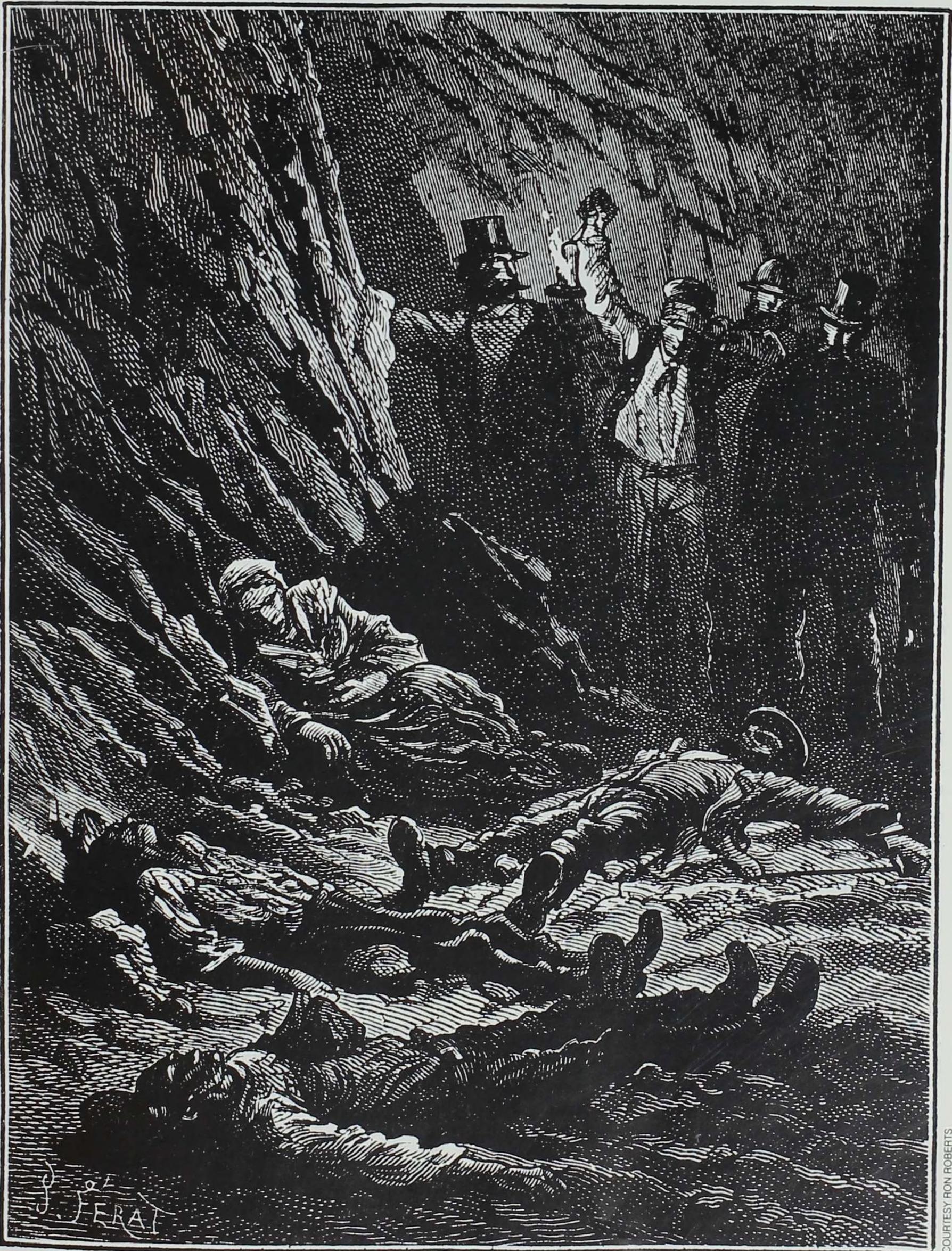
Not until nearly three in the afternoon were Timbrell and his men able to enter the east

section and push through the damp and devastation — and the worst effects of the blast. Near the origin of the explosion, they found bodies strewn about, some horribly mangled, others burnt nearly beyond recognition. One young miner was found with the top of his skull entirely blown off. Victims found in the northeast section suffered terrible burns to their faces and hands. Some of the dead showed no visible signs of injuries at all. They had fallen victim to afterdamp. In fact, rescue parties found more people dead from the effects of afterdamp than from the blast itself.

THE EXPLOSION at Lost Creek killed and injured men and boys, fathers and sons, black men and white men, foreign born and native born. Two brothers, Frank and Joseph Gasperi, were found dead in the same room, while another brother, James, who was working in a different part of the mine, survived. Michael Fox, president of the local union at Lost Creek, was found with his face, chest, and arms horribly burnt. In his agony, he had apparently tried to save his eighteen-year-old son, Michael, Jr., who was working alongside him. He had thrown his coat over his son's head and held his cap over the boy's mouth and nose, clasping him in his arms to save him from the flames. The father and son were both dead.

In all, the disaster claimed twenty lives. Fourteen others, including young William Booth, suffered severe injuries ranging from broken arms and legs, to burns, to lungs affected by afterdamp. Among the injured were a number of boys. William Fothergill, age twelve, was badly burned. As a trapper boy, his job was to open and close ventilation doors. Another trapper, thirteen-year-old Oliver Mabie, suffered a broken arm. His brother, Jonas, age sixteen and a mule driver, had a broken leg. The severity of the injuries affected even men who had witnessed much suffering in life. Bert Thompson, an army veteran recently returned from the brutal guerrilla war in the Philippines, described the carnage in the mine

Right: Rescuers reach victims of an underground disaster (artist's depiction in a turn-of-the-century novel).



COURTESY RON ROBERTS



ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Miners' families often faced the grim task of identifying severely burned bodies. Here, mourners await victims of a gas and dust explosion at Cherry, Illinois, in November 1909 that killed 266 mine workers. Iowa miner and senator John T. Clarkson cited the Cherry disaster in his 1911 push for workers' compensation laws in Iowa, won in 1913.

as worse than anything he had seen overseas.

The excitement on the surface, which had been intense all afternoon, grew alarmingly as the dead and injured were brought up. Sheriff Cricket stood at the mine entrance to maintain order. The injured were sent to the surface as soon as they could safely be moved, and from there they were taken to their homes and given medical care. The first of the dead were hoisted to the surface at about four o'clock. To prevent the dead from being exposed to public gaze, each body had first been carefully wrapped in a blanket. Not until six o'clock was the last body recovered.

Wagons carried the bodies to the company store, which was fitted out as a temporary morgue. There the blankets were removed, and the bodies were laid side-by-side in a long row on a hastily erected platform that stretched almost the entire length of the store. The undertakers and their assistants washed the coal dust and grime from the faces of the dead and prepared the bodies as best they could for identification. Some of the faces were so horri-

bly burnt and disfigured that they could be identified only with great difficulty. Following the identification, the undertakers cut the mine clothing from the victims' bodies, washed the remains, and dressed them in clean underclothing. The bodies were placed in coffins, and one by one the dead were taken to their former homes to be watched over by family and friends.

Funerals for the victims took place on Sunday and Monday following the disaster. As many as a thousand people gathered in Lost Creek on Sunday to follow in procession behind fifteen coffins on their two-mile journey from Lost Creek to Eddyville. Members of the United Mine Workers had traveled to Lost Creek in great numbers to pay their respects to their fallen union brothers. The various fraternal societies to which many of the dead belonged sent delegations of mourners. The weather was cold and disagreeable. Harry Booth would later recall that his breath froze to the window pane as he watched the procession.

Not enough hearses could be found to carry

the dead. Some of the bodies were carried in beer wagons or farmers' spring wagons to Eddyville that day. No church in Eddyville could hold the crowd of mourners. The funeral services were kept brief, as many of the mourners had to stand outside the churches and then accompany the remains to the cemeteries in the sub-zero temperatures.

The services for the five others took place in different towns or on the next day. With the funerals at an end, the time came for the inhabitants of Lost Creek to return to their homes to mourn the dead and wait to see what the future would hold.

IN MOST RESPECTS the village of Lost Creek differed little from scores of other coal camps that dotted the landscape of southern and central Iowa in the early twentieth century. It was a company town, owned and operated by the Lost Creek Fuel Company. In 1902 the company was operating two shafts at Lost Creek. The mining camp had been laid out in about 1894, when Shaft No. 1 was sunk. The company opened Shaft No. 2 in 1900. A big company store, situated on the crest of a hill, was the village's most prominent structure. In 1900 the town consisted of a company store, two large boarding houses, and a hundred or more company-owned miners' houses, each twenty-two by twenty-four feet, with four rooms. These houses were humble affairs of frame construction, roughly built, and scattered over the sides of the hills near the company store. The population consisted of a mixed lot of people, mostly born in the United States or Britain. A few blacks lived in the camp and worked the mines, along with a sprinkling of South Slavs, Hungarians, and Italians. The town was without a church or a burying ground of its own.

A large union hall, which the local union of the United Mine Workers owned outright, was the single large structure in Lost Creek not under the company's control. The union hall was a center of social life. In 1901, for instance, the local union sponsored an oyster supper at

A HORRIBLE FATE

Befalls Sixty Men in the Lost Creek Coal Mines this Afternoon.

A Terrific Dust Explosion

KILLS AND MAIMS MANY. HOISTING CAGE IS WRECKED SO THAT THE WORK OF RESCUE IS DELAYED.

A terrible explosion occurred in the mines at Lost Creek, ten miles south-east of this city, at noon today, and a fearful loss of life resulted. The explosion wrecked the hoisting cages so that it was nearly two o'clock before entrance to the mine could be made. From 50 to 60 men are entombed and it is feared many of them have perished. The catastrophe was caused by what is known as a dust explosion, following the firing of the blasting shots at the noon hour. Medical assistance was asked from this city and a number of Oskaloosa physicians hastened to the scene. Up to the time the cages were put in operation all was confusion at the top of the mine and the families and friends of the unfortunate men gathered in distracted groups. Even after the rescue parties were lowered it was nearly an hour before they could go into the entry, the deadly gas being so stifling.

THE KNOWN DEAD

The known dead thus far recovered are:

Boone Fish.
James Humphrey.
Jack Elder.
Rush Fish.
Chas. Crews.
Dave Walton.

THE INJURED

The injured are:

Frank Secress.
Ed. Swanson.
Jonas Mabie.
Olive Mabie.
John Jerkin.
Wm. Harvey.
Geo. Gogo.
Harry Derrock.

Portion of the front page of the *Oskaloosa Daily Herald*. Further on, the paper reports that the appeals of the families "nerved the living on to a duty . . . beyond the range of human endurance."

the hall that attracted seven hundred visitors to the little town, probably doubling its population that day. Lost Creek was solidly unionized and considered one of the strongest union camps in Iowa. No non-union men were employed in the Lost Creek mines in 1902, when the explosion occurred.

Witnesses on the scene that January day realized from the very first that an explosion of coal dust had caused the catastrophe. The explosive potential of coal dust was already widely recognized. Iowa recorded its first such explosion on November 8, 1892, when a dust explosion at Pekay, only two and a half miles from the future site of Lost Creek, claimed three lives and demolished the mine. The death toll would have been greater had the mine not been closed for election day. A few months later, on February 14, 1893, a dust explosion ripped through a mine near Albia and took eight lives.

Generally dust explosions were attributed to blown-out shots, sometimes called "windy" or "tight" shots. These occurred when the explosive charges that miners placed in holes bored in the coal face blew out their tampings instead of breaking down the coal into lumps. When this occurred, a tongue of flame would

Steps in shot firing: Drilling a hole (often four or five feet deep) in the coal face; tamping the explosive in place; firing the shot (a worker alerted others with a yell of "Fire in the hole!"); and a successful shot in which chunks of coal fall off the face (or solid).

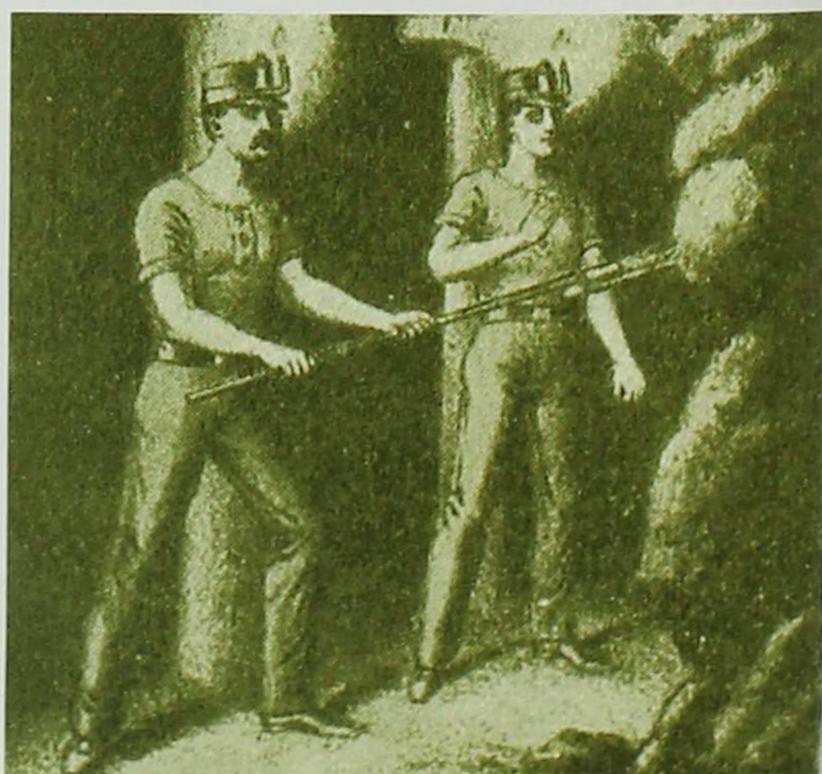


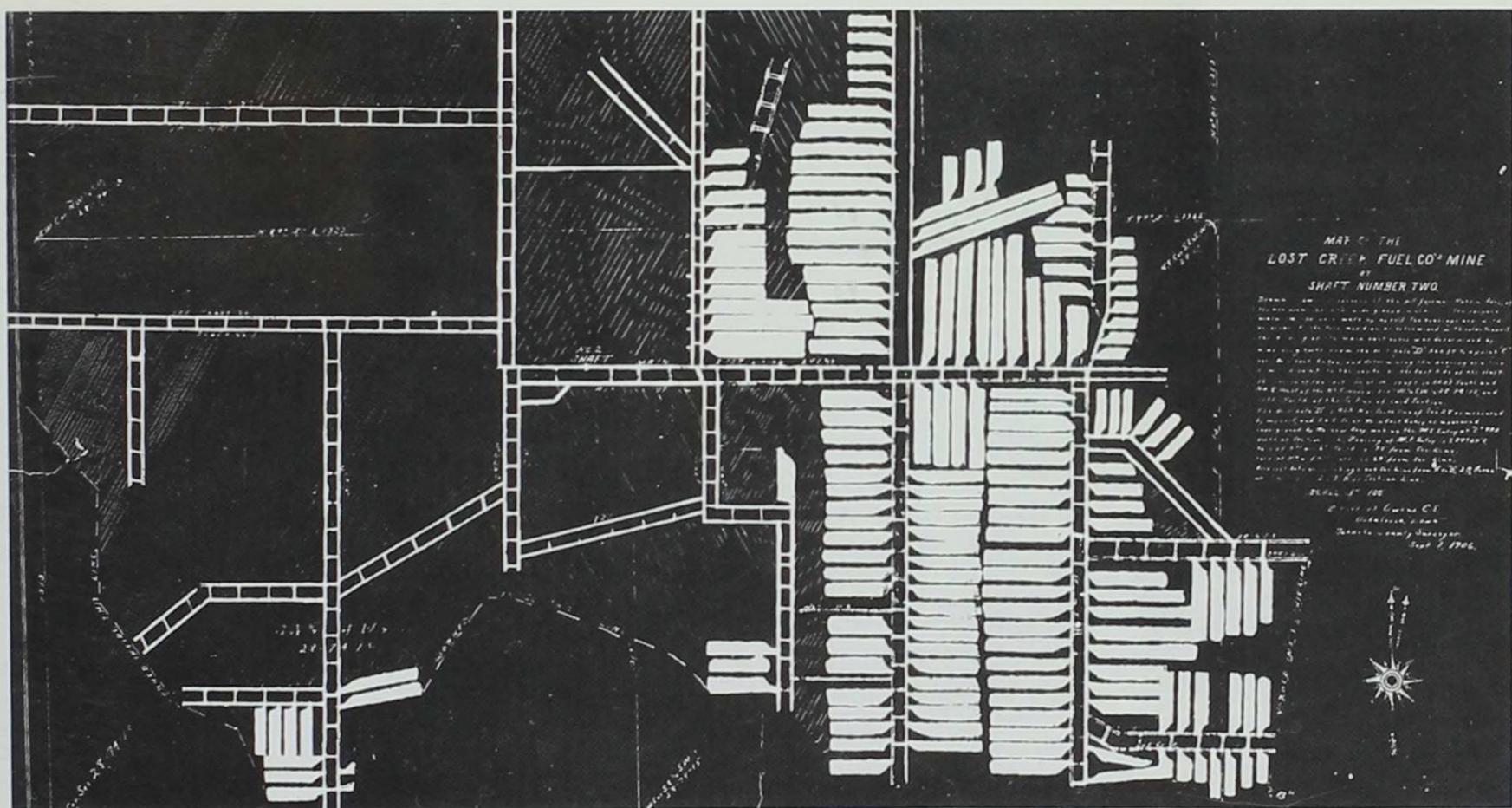
COURTESY RON ROBERTS

belch forth from the bored hole much like the discharge of a firearm. This would produce a commotion in the air and raise a cloud of fine coal dust, which would expand with explosive force. Sometimes the blown-out shot would do no further damage. But under certain circumstances, the action could become cumulative. A blown-out shot could spread throughout a working place, and from there travel down airways and haulageways, potentially leaving death and destruction in its wake.

The miners themselves were generally blamed for causing coal dust explosions. They were often accused of using inferior materials to tamp their holes and too much blasting powder to bring down the coal (five to ten pounds of the coarse black powder was not uncommon). They were told to use fireclay (a hard clay oftentimes found in thick bands below the coal) for tamping, not drilling dust, and to undermine the coal face, rather than blasting the coal from the solid.

Nevertheless, much of the coal mined in Iowa was shot off the solid. This mining technique had become commonplace in Iowa about the same time the first coal dust explosions were noted. Powder mining, as it was sometimes called, wasted powder, which the miners paid for out of their own earnings, and fractured the coal to such an extent that much of it was unmarketable. Yet despite the waste of coal and the risk of explosion, operators tended to encourage powder mining because it was



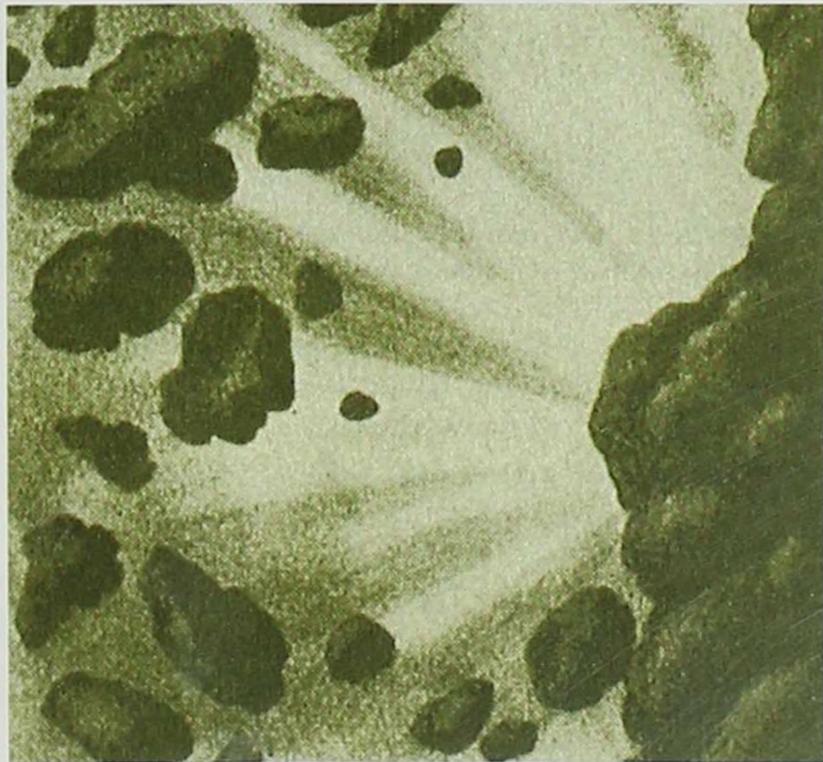
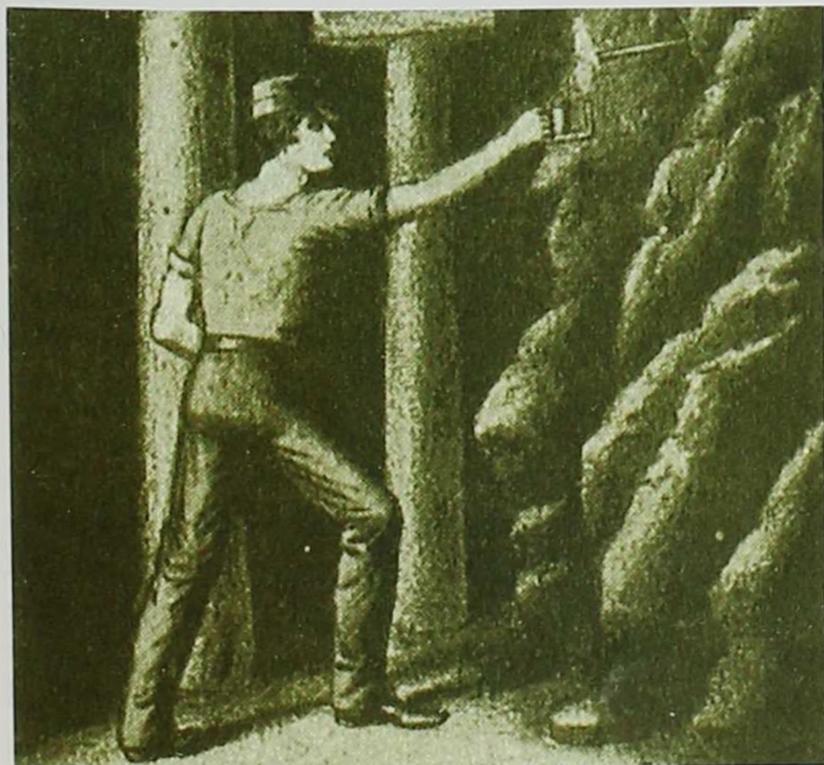


IOWA DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES, GEOLOGICAL SURVEY BUREAU

Blueprint of the Lost Creek Mine No. 2. Each white rectangle represents a "room" 24 to 30 feet wide, 120 to 150 feet long, and 4 to 6 feet high. Together, two "buddies" would mine out the coal in the room.

considered to be cost-effective. Deaths and injuries from shooting off the solid could simply be marked down as an added expense of mining coal. Likewise, custom placed the responsibility for a miner's safety on the miner himself. If a careless, inexperienced, or lazy miner chose to use too much powder or poor tamping materials, or if he placed his shots incorrectly, he had no one but himself to blame.

DESPITE THE DANGERS inherent in coal mining, most miners liked their occupation. Coal mining was a rough sort of craft work. To mine coal successfully, miners needed to master a multitude of tasks. These skills were handed down through generations of coal diggers. Fathers taught sons, older men guided younger, brothers instructed brothers. Miners took pride in





Mine workers commonly ate underground as the dust and smoke of the noon shots settled over them. The miners' union worked to abolish the noon firing. Here, Iowa miners with dinner buckets, Smoky Hollow Coal Mine, 1890s.

their skills. Their earnings, and their very lives, depended on their own skills and the skills of their fellow workers.

In Iowa, the room and pillar system of mining was the most commonly used. Two miners — called buddies — customarily worked together, separated by distance and darkness from the other miners. The two buddies got out the coal in their own manner. Assigned a section of the mine to work, they would begin

blasting and digging out the coal to form their "room." As they removed the coal from the face, this room would eventually become about 24 to 30 feet wide and 120 to 150 feet long. In the Lost Creek area, the height of the coal seam from floor to roof ranged from 4 to 6 feet. In other parts of Iowa, the seams of coal might be as low as 18 inches or as high as 12 feet. Rooms were separated by supporting walls of unmined coal 8 to 10 feet thick called "pillars," with



breakthroughs cut between adjoining rooms for air circulation. Miners' work involved much more than drilling the blasting holes, placing and firing shots, and loading coal into pit cars. They needed to test roofs, place timber props, and undertake a variety of other tasks in order to protect life and limb.

To a large extent, the miner was his own boss. The mine foreman — or "pit boss" — visited the miners' working places infrequently, once a day at the most. The boss might make suggestions about safety or other mat-

ters, but he would have been stepping beyond his customary authority if he ever tried to issue commands to a coal digger. During the era when coal was loaded by hand, a miner set his own pace of work. Coal mining was not like factory work. A miner's work was not regulated by a moving chain or speeding belt. Yet, for all the freedom miners had — and they had a great deal, indeed — their lives and well-being were constantly in peril.

Coal mining was and is a dangerous occupation. During 1901 in the United States, coal mining took the lives of 1,467 men and boys and another 3,643 suffered serious injuries. In Iowa during the same period, 29 mine workers were killed, and another 59 injured. Roof falls, in which loose coal, rock, or slate crushed the men and boys working below, normally accounted for the largest number of deaths and injuries in Iowa coal mines. Injuries and deaths also resulted from a multitude of other causes, from being run over by pit cars to falling down mine shafts. A list compiled by one of Iowa's three state mine inspectors for separate non-fatal mining accidents in his district during the first half of 1901 illustrates the range of injuries sustained: "hand crushed, leg broken, breast bruised, head cut, foot injured, left ankle fractured, three fingers crushed, arm broken, toes crushed, external injuries, arms fractured, two ribs broken." Casualty lists like this were commonplace. Not included in these lists were the long-term consequences of working in foul air and breathing coal dust — then called "miner's asthma" and now known as black lung disease.

Even the disaster at Lost Creek — the worst in Iowa's coal-mining history — paled in comparison with other coal-mining disasters that year. At Coal Creek, Tennessee, on May 19, 1902, a mine explosion claimed 184 lives. A mine explosion at Johnstown, Pennsylvania, on July 10, 1902, killed 112 mine workers.

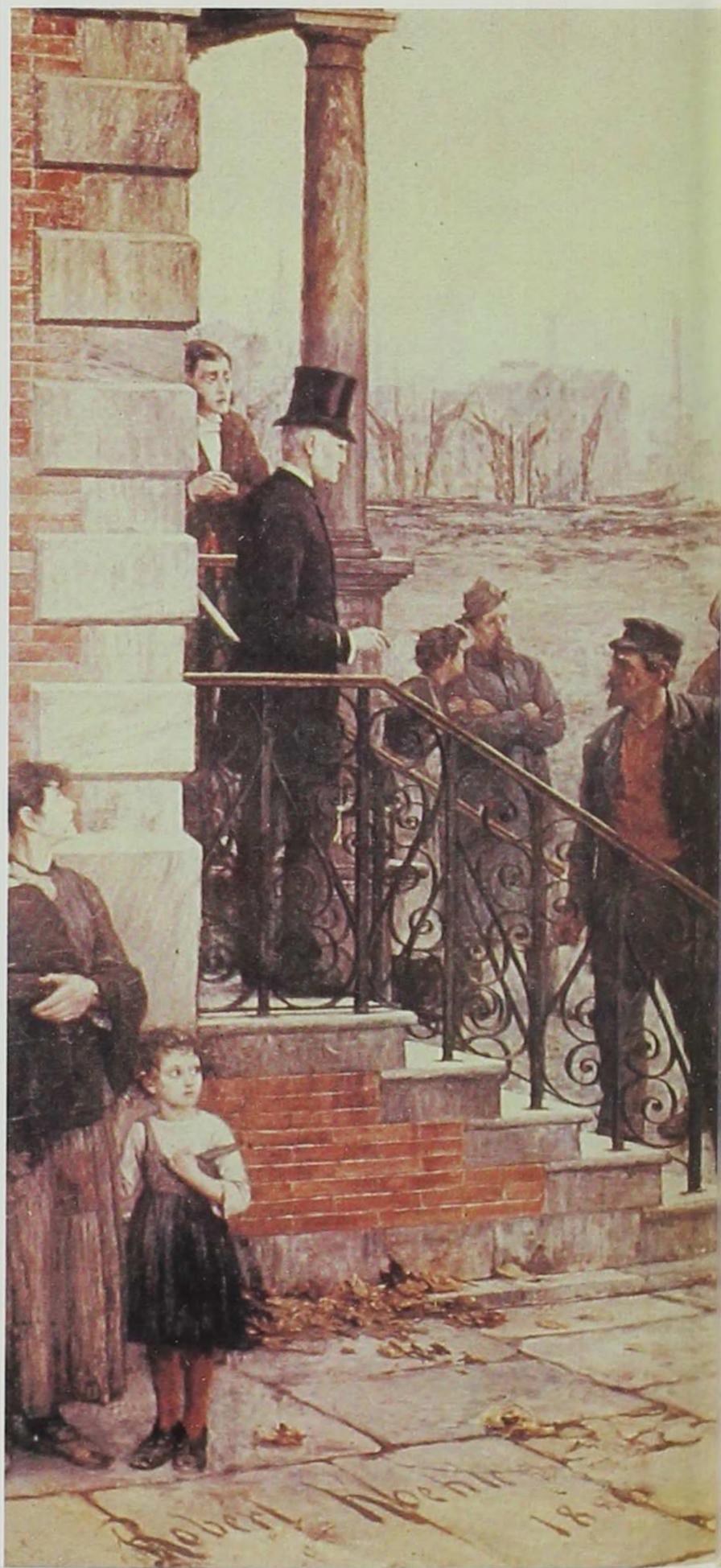
THE DISASTER at Lost Creek created widespread consternation in Iowa coalfields. Within days of the tragedy, John P. White, secretary-treasurer of the state miners' union, let it be known that the union intended to demand changes in the manner in which shots were fired in Iowa coal

In America and Europe, laborers fought unfair or dangerous working conditions. "The Strike" by Robert Koehler depicts angry workers confronting the owner.

mines. Then, one week after the disaster, as many as fifteen hundred mine workers in Mahaska and Monroe counties left the pits in wildcat strikes, demanding that the mine operators allow them to hire special shot-examiners to examine all shots, and shot-firers to fire the shots at the end of the workday, after everyone else had left the mine. This would allow the smoke and coal dust to settle overnight before the workers returned and, in the event of an explosion, would limit the number of workers who would be killed or injured. At this time in most Iowa mines, the miners fired their shots twice a day. The first was at noon just before they would quit work to eat their noon meal, which they commonly ate underground while the smoke and dust settled. The second shot was in the afternoon at closing time.

After striking for a week, the miners gained a partial victory. As a stop-gap measure, they were allowed temporarily to hire shot-examiners and shot-firers, who would be paid by the miners themselves. But the system of shooting twice a day was to remain unchanged. The union and the operators agreed that the issue would be addressed again at the upcoming annual joint meeting of miners and operators in March.

Statewide joint meetings of miners and operators had become an annual event in Iowa only since 1900. At these meetings the state coal operators' association and the state miners' union endeavored to set wage scales and resolve other differences through the process of collective bargaining. By 1902 the state miners' union was the most militant, if not also the largest, trade union in Iowa. The Iowa miners were members of District 13, United Mine Workers of America. The U.M.W. of A. (as it was then designated) claimed a membership of more than 230,000 in 1902 and was widely recognized as the strongest labor organization in the country. District 13, which encompassed within its jurisdiction all the coal miners and mine laborers in Iowa and the northern tier of counties of Missouri, could boast of eighty-three local unions and 12,015 members in good standing. Young men led the



organization. John P. Reese, age twenty-five, was district president, having been elected to that post two years earlier. Reese had grown up in the mines and with the union. He entered the mines at age nine in his native Ohio and joined the U.M.W. of A. in 1890, at the time of its organization. John P. White, thirty-two,

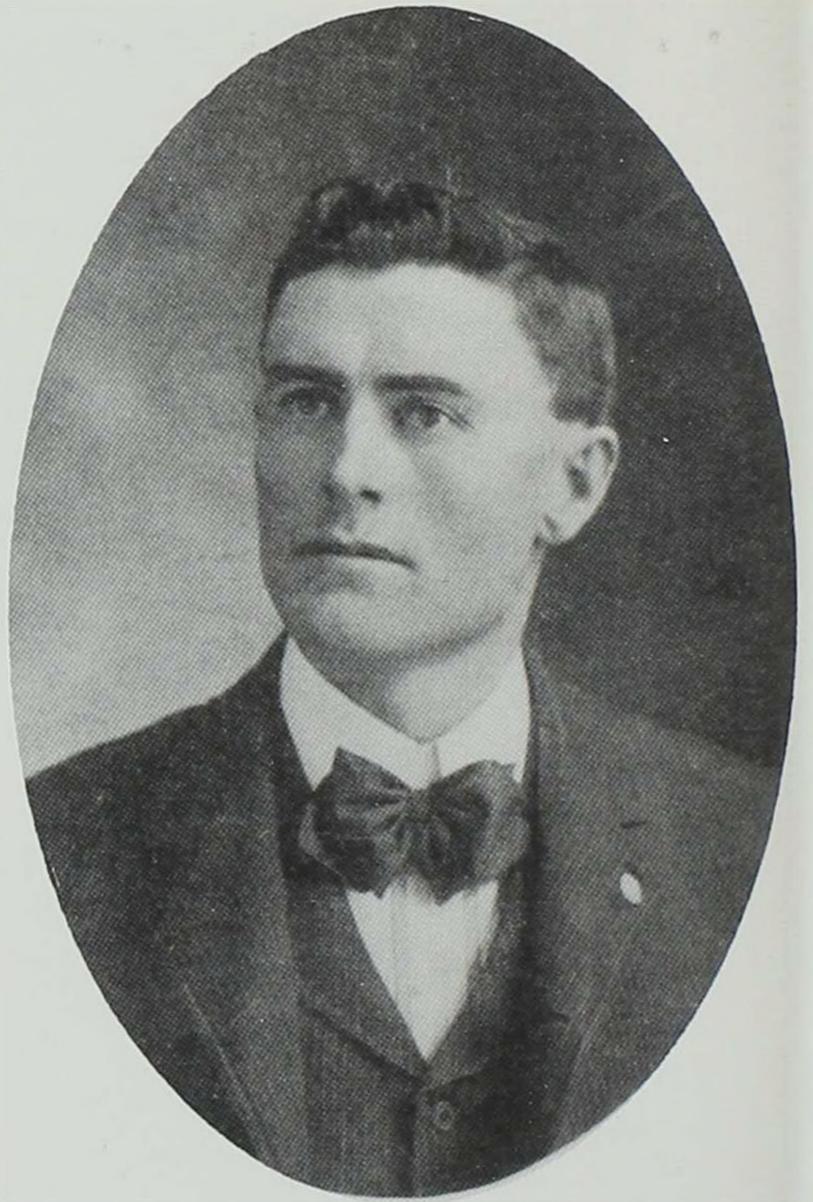
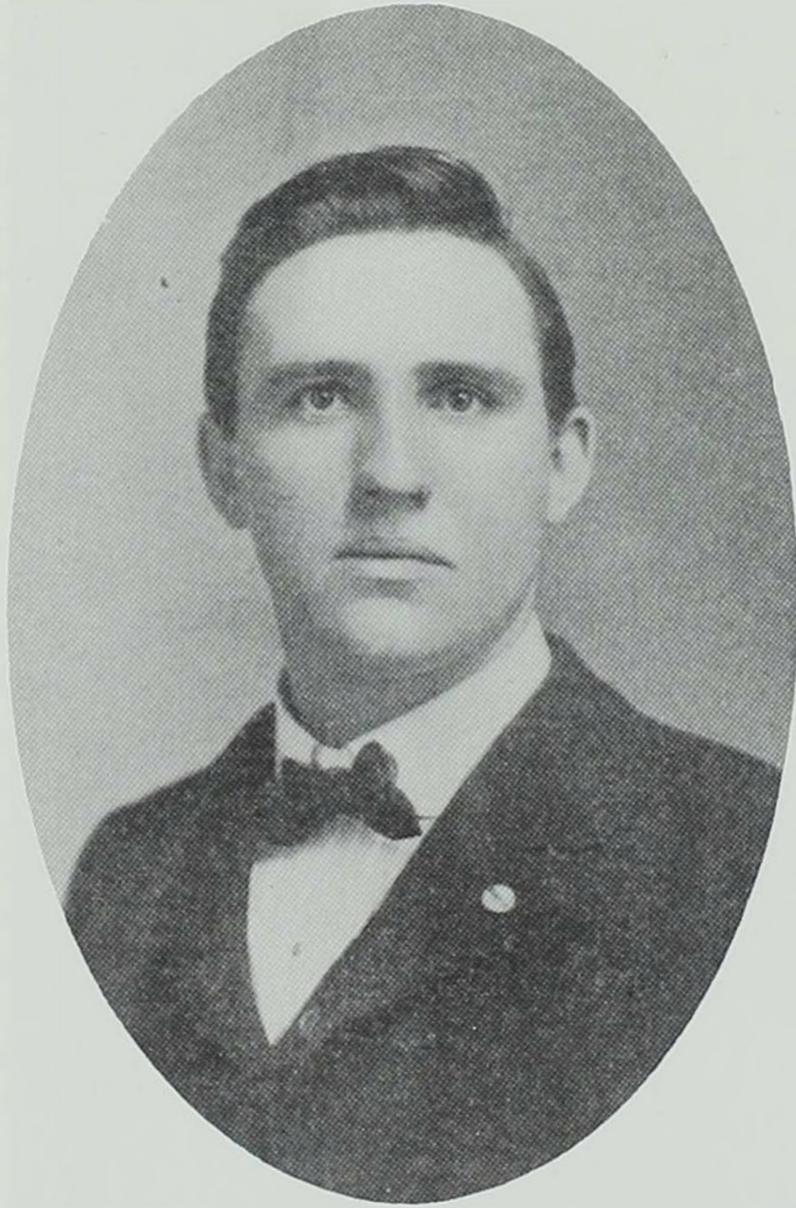


COURTESY RON ROBERTS

was district secretary-treasurer. Born in Coal Valley, Illinois, in 1870, he had worked continuously in the mines since age fifteen. In 1904 he would be elected district president and in 1912 international president of the U.M.W. of A. and serve in that position for the next five years. The Lost Creek mine disaster would

provide both White and Reese an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership abilities.

The Iowa General Assembly was in session in 1902 at the time of the disaster at Lost Creek. Within days of the tragedy, Representative Nate E. Kendall of Monroe County introduced a concurrent resolution calling on



Miners and union officers John P. Reese (left) and John P. White served on the Lost Creek investigative commission. They differed from other commission members in recommending that shot-firers, as well as shot-examiners, be hired.

the governor to create a special commission to investigate the causes of explosions in Iowa coal mines and recommend means for their prevention. In February, Governor Albert B. Cummins appointed such a commission, composed of two miners, the three state mine inspectors, and two coal operators. Reese and White were the two miners appointed.

The commission visited Lost Creek and issued its report within the required eight days. Evidence the commission uncovered at Lost Creek agreed with earlier speculation and pointed to the conclusion that miner Andrew Pash had fired the shot that brought on the explosion and led to the twenty deaths. Pash had been working in his room in the northeast portion of the mine when he fired a heavily charged shot. The shot ignited the coal dust stirred up in his room, which then sent a column of flame sweeping through the east por-

tion and up the hoisting and air shafts. Pash was himself killed by the force of the explosion. He left a young widow and a small daughter to mourn his fate.

The commission recommended changes in the state's mining laws, the principal one being that competent shot-examiners be employed in all coal mines in Iowa where coal was shot off the solid. These examiners would have the power to prohibit the charging and firing of any shot they judged to be unsafe. Reese and White accepted all the proposed changes and signed the report, but they thought it did not go far enough. The two miners filed a supplementary report recommending that all shots be fired by men hired for that purpose, and that shots be fired only when all other workers were out of the mine. The General Assembly considered several pieces of mining legislation during the 1902 session. Finally on April 11 they

adopted an act patterned after the commission's recommendations that compelled the operators to employ shot-examiners. All efforts to require coal operators to hire shot-firers were rejected.

Even before the General Assembly took final action, the miners had sought a remedy through collective bargaining. On March 11, the miners and operators met in Des Moines at their annual joint meeting to hammer out a joint agreement for 1902. As always the wage scale was the principal concern. But on this occasion, the miners made the hiring of examiners and firers one of their major demands. The Lost Creek disaster had so awed many of the miners that some of them — including union president Reese himself, who had previously argued that shot-firers were unnecessary — now insisted that they would never again fire a shot unless it was as a shot-firer and unless all other workers were out of the mine. The question of hiring and paying examiners

and firers became the central issue in the 1902 negotiations.

After more than two weeks of meetings, an agreement was reached on March 26. First, the operators agreed to hire and pay shot-examiners in mines where the coal was shot off the solid. Second, the miners could, if they so desired, hire and pay the shot-firers. When satisfactory arrangements could be made between the operators and miners, the same person could serve in both capacities and the operators and miners would each bear half the cost. With settlement of this issue through collective bargaining, the operators and miners soon resolved other differences with little difficulty. Eventually the practice of miners hiring and paying shot-firers and firing only once a day was established everywhere in Iowa where coal was shot off the solid. John P. White would later write that it had had "such a splendid effect upon the miners that under no circumstances would either operator or miner care to



COURTESY FON ROBERTS

The mules that pulled the pit cars lived in underground stables and seldom saw the light of day.

return to the old system that was marked by death, disease, and slaughter.”

THE DEATHS of the twenty mine workers at Lost Creek left fourteen women widowed and at least thirty-nine children fatherless. Even before the dead were buried, funds began flowing into Lost Creek to aid the victims. John P. White gave the local union \$200 from District 13 funds and asked for authorization later. U.M.W. of A. Local Union No. 325 of Lost Creek quickly assumed responsibility for handling and distributing the monies on the local level. Labor organizations from across Iowa established subscription funds. The Ottumwa Trades and Labor Assembly handled the raising of funds in the Ottumwa area. Another fund was set up in Des Moines. Typographical Union No. 118 of Des Moines gave \$50, far surpassing the \$10 given by the *Iowa State Register*. Local miners' unions were the heaviest contributors. Within days of the disaster, the union at Hilton raised \$800, the one at Youngstown gave \$100, and a small local at Foster sent \$25 and offered to raise more as needed.

Contributions of this sort were not insignificant. In 1902 a mine laborer in Mahaska County received \$2.25 for working eight hours underground in the dark and dust of a coal mine. Owing largely to slack work, a coal miner working in Iowa during this same period aver-

aged only about \$450 per year for his labors. The women and children who depended upon the earnings of the men and boys killed and injured at Lost Creek had little recourse except to rely upon the charity of others. In 1902 workers in the United States were without the protection of workers' compensation laws. (Iowa did not adopt such a law until 1913.) Little more than a month after the disaster Secretary-Treasurer White could report that twelve widows and twenty-nine children were depending on the union for support. During the same period District 13 had received \$2,243 for the children and widows of Lost Creek.

Lost Creek Shaft No. 2 reopened within a few days of the explosion. It would continue in operation for a few more years. By 1907, the Lost Creek mines had been abandoned, the top works torn down, and the machinery shipped elsewhere. The miners and their families moved away. The houses in which they had lived were torn from their foundations and moved to new locations.

Coal still lay buried beneath the surface. Eventually strip miners would come into the area and rip open the surface of the earth in search of the riches buried below. This would obliterate the physical remains of the former town site. All that remained was a dual legacy—the horror of the Lost Creek disaster and the safer mining practices won by the mine workers. As Harry Booth would say many years later, “You got to go ahead and get killed before you get anything done.” □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Material for the article was drawn primarily from newspaper sources. The most helpful newspapers were: *Oskaloosa Daily Herald*, *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, *Iowa State Register*, and *Eddyville Tribune*. The *United Mine Workers Journal* was of special value in tracing the history of District 13, providing biographical information about union leaders, and presenting the views of rank-and-file union members about dust explosions. Two especially useful books dealing extensively with mine explosions were: James T. Beard, *Mine Gasses and Explosions* (New York, 1908), and H. B. Humphrey, *Historical Summary of Coal-Mine Explosions in the United States, 1810-1958* (Washington, 1960). One of the more useful books dealing with coal mining and the miners' unions was: McAlister Coleman, *Men and Coal* (New York, 1943). The State Mine Inspectors' *Biennial Reports* (Des Moines,

1882-1917) were of particular value in providing statistical information about mines and mine accidents in Iowa. Harry Booth's oral history interview provided an eyewitness account of the Lost Creek disaster and of life in Iowa mining towns. I wish to offer my special thanks to Mark Smith, Secretary-Treasurer, Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, for giving me access to the interview and authorizing its use for the purposes of this article. Mary Bennett, Audio-Visual Archivist, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, first suggested this article and provided expert assistance in helping with its completion. John Jacobs of Oskaloosa and Rose Hill, Iowa, shared with me his knowledge of the burial sites of Lost Creek victims and gave me use of some of his extensive research notes dealing with coal mines and coal mining in the Oskaloosa and Eddyville areas.



Iowa mine workers' homes. The company-owned houses were often moved to new camps after a mine was closed.

Among the tragedies of the Lost Creek explosion were the number of adolescent boys who were injured, and the number of wives and children who were widowed and left fatherless.

LIST OF INJURED

Name	Age	Job	Injury
Matt Aday, Jr.	?	trapper	burned
William A. Booth	15	trapper	burned
Harry Darrock	?	driver	burned
George Fothergill, Jr.	49	trapper	burned
William Fothergill	12	trapper	burned
George Gogo	?	miner	lungs affected by afterdamp
William Harvey	29	miner	lungs affected by afterdamp
John Jerkins	?	cager	burned
Chas. Lannan	?	driver	burned
Jonas Mabie, Jr.	16	driver	leg broken, head hurt, burned
Oliver Mabie	13	trapper	arm broken, burned
Frank Secress	?	miner	arm broken
Asa Sullivan	20	dumper	burned
Ed Swanson	36	driver	back injured, bruised, burned

NOTES: Although not listed in the state mine inspectors' report, John Wignall, age 25, was listed in most newspapers as among the injured. William A. Booth was the brother of Harry Booth, who witnessed the event at age 9 and later recalled the incident in an oral history interview. George Fothergill, Jr., had eight children, including two sons who worked in the mines. William Harvey was a black miner, born in Missouri. He and his wife, Millie, had two children. Jonas Mabie, Jr., had been born in Wales, and his brother Oliver was born in Iowa. Ed Swanson had come from Sweden to the United States in 1885.

SOURCES FOR BOTH LISTS: Compiled from *Eleventh Biennial Report of the State Mine Inspectors* (1903), the 1900 federal census, and from accounts in the *Oskaloosa Herald*, *Des Moines Daily News*, *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, and other Iowa newspapers in January 1902. Spelling of names varies in each source.

Key to artifacts on cover (from left):

1. Powder can, galvanized steel. Used to carry and measure blasting powder. Ca. 1920. Loan.

2. Common miner's hat and lamp. Canvas hat with leather bill, and brass Autolite carbide lamp with homemade reflector. Ca. 1920. Museum #8642.

3. Falling wedge (a modified pick head). Used to wedge between the coal seam and the mine roof to encourage the seam to fall. Moingona, Iowa, ca. 1940. Museum #1989.57.2.

4. Miner's pick, hardwood handle and detachable steel pick head. Pick heads varied in length; this is a shorter version. Heads that became dull during the workday were replaced with spare heads and taken to the local blacksmith for sharpening or re-forming. Ca. 1920. Museum #i8468.

5. Candle spike, steel. Handmade candle holder that could be pushed into a timber or hooked on a support. Loan.

6. Oil lamp, steel. Provided open flame light. Normally affixed to a hat or hooked on a support. Ca. 1890. Loan.

7. Safety lamp, brass, glass, and steel. A variation on the Davy safety lamp developed in the early nineteenth century to monitor

LIST OF FATALITIES

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children
John Berto	?	single	4
Sylvester Crayton	28	single	
Charles B. Crews	31	wife Edna, age 20	1 (age 2½)
George Denechok	29	married	
John Elder	35	wife Alice, age 26	2
Dan "Boone" Fish	30	wife Nellie	2 (infant and 2 years)
Russell Fish	27	wife, age 23	2 (infant and 4 years)
Mike Fox, Jr.	18	single	
Mike Fox, Sr.	48	wife Sarah, age 40	7 (ages 7-22)
Frank Gasperi	40	wife Cattarena, age 34	2
Joe Gasperi	32	wife Orsola, age 36	4
Alexander Gray	24	single	
James Humphrey	34	married	
Sam Humphrey	34	wife Amanda, age 40	5 (ages 2½-14)
John Kovall	47	wife Elizabeth	4
John Martin	29	married	3
Jack McNeeley	20	single	
Andrew Pash	33	wife Elizabeth, age 22	3 (1?)
James Stovall	30	married	
David Walters	40	widowed	

NOTES: Andrew Pash, the miner who fired the shot that caused the explosion, had come from Hungary in 1888. Mike Fox, Sr., president of the local United Mine Workers of America union, was found next to his son. According to the newspaper accounts, he had a coat draped over his son's head to try to protect him from the dangerous fumes. The Gasperi brothers were also found in each other's arms. Sylvester Crayton and James Stovall were black miners. Stovall, born in Tennessee, was "living alone" in 1900. A special train carried the body of David Walters, who had been a weigh boss, to What Cheer for his funeral and burial.

—Lists compiled by Mary Bennett, guest curator of SHSI labor exhibit

the amount of blackdamp (or carbon dioxide) and provide a safe light source. Ca. 1900. Loan.

8. Wet and dry bulb psychrometer, brass, glass, and ivory. Made by John Davis and Son, Ltd., of England in the late nineteenth century. Used to calculate the relative humidity within a mine as an indication of the potential for explosive conditions. Museum #i8466.

—William M. Johnson, SHSI museum curator

Museum exhibits

The previous article and the following oral history interview are published here in conjunction with a new museum exhibit at the

State Historical Building in Des Moines. "Badges of Pride: Symbols and Images of American Labor" is a traveling exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution. The exhibit examines Americans' attitudes towards work and workers. Iowa materials have been selected to augment the exhibit, and a series of films and lectures has been scheduled. The exhibit will be open October 2, 1990 through January 6, 1991.

Additional exhibits related to Iowa coal mining and labor are on display at the John L. Lewis Memorial Museum of Mining and Labor, in Lucas, Iowa. Born near Lucas, Lewis was president of the United Mine Workers of America for forty years and helped found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.). The Lewis museum is open June through November.