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The Scofield disaster

Mine blast in 1900 killed 200 — the worst calamity of any kind in Utah; each household in town lost someone

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The world stopped at 10:28 on the morning of May 1, 1900, at Winter Quarters No. 4.

An explosion far inside the mine ignited highly flammable coal dust, which covered mine floors in deep abundance, and sent death and destruction racing through the underground tunnels. And what fire and falling debris did not destroy, the perilous "afterdamp," a combination of poison gases and lack of oxygen, did.

At first those on the outside, who heard only a dull thud, thought the sound had something to do with town festivities planned for later on to celebrate May Day.

But the realization soon hit that there would be no celebrating that day — nor for a long time to come in the mining town perched on the hills just above Scofield in Carbon County.

As the count of what the next day's Deseret News headlined "Death's Awful Harvest at Winter Quarters" mounted, it became clear that the scope of the disaster was almost beyond comprehension, larger than any other mining calamity seen before in the state — or the nation.

"Every house, without exception, is a house of mourning," wrote the paper, "and every household is preparing to receive its dead. The awful scene of yesterday had passed away when the day dawned this morning and the awful calm of despair had taken its place."

In that "awful calm" the numbers reached staggering heights: At least 200 men killed, leaving 107 widows, 270 fatherless children. Families decimated: fathers, brothers, sons gone; uncles, nephews, cousins, in-laws all lost.

More bodies than there were caskets in the state; 75 had to be brought in from Denver.

No mining community anywhere in the country had ever suffered such horror, and shock waves shook the entire country.

(Sadly, since then, other mining disasters have occurred; the Winter Quarters blast now ranks fifth on the all-time national list. But it remains the worst disaster of any kind in Utah.)

President William McKinley wired his condolences: "I desire to express my intense sorrow upon learning of the terrible calamity which has occurred at Scofield, and my deep sympathy with the wives, children and friends of the unfortunate victims of the explosion."

Hard, dirty work

Coal was discovered in the hills above Scofield in the mid-1870s. The town was founded in 1879, making it one of the first coal towns in the state. From 1879 to 1920, it was a booming center of mining, with a population of about 2,500 — and 13 saloons. The mines at nearby Winter Quarters employed about 300 men.

Most of them were recent immigrants; the majority had been in the country less than 10 years. A large contingent had come from Finland, but Scotland, Wales, England, France, Italy, Denmark and Iceland were also represented.

"The mining companies would go to other countries to recruit workers," says Woody Carter, who with his wife, Ann, is planning a memorial for the 100th anniversary of the mine disaster.

And as hard as mining was, and as poorly as they got paid, he said, for many of the miners it was better than what they left behind. Life was not kind to poor people anywhere at the turn of the century.

Mining was hard, dirty work. Mining companies virtually owned the towns: the houses, the stores, the goods — and, some said, even the souls — of the miners. Technology was limited, deplorable conditions were an accepted fact, and knowledge was lacking on even some of the basic health and safety issues.

By 1900, five separate mines operated at Winter Quarters, although some were joined by tunnels. And they were considered among the safest and most progressive in the county.

Large-scale disasters were unheard of in Utah until March of that year, when a blast shook the Castle Gate Mine, on the other side of Carbon County. But that happened after men had left the mine, and although there was damage to equipment and tunnels, no miners were injured. No one thought it could happen here — until that fateful day in May.

Rescue efforts were immediate, but it was already too late.

"The removal of the bodies from the mine was begun at noon yesterday," reported the Deseret News, "hundreds of men having volunteered their services for the purpose. These rescuers came from other mines and towns surrounding and worked incessantly to bring out the burnt and mangled remains of the dead miners. The bodies were taken to the company building as soon as they were brought out of the mine and were there dressed and laid out preparatory to the coroner's inquest and for identification.

"Many of the rescuers came near losing their lives from the fatal afterdamp, but the work was continued in the face of all danger, and most of the brave fellows remained at their posts until they were almost ready to drop."

The owner of Pleasant Valley Coal Co. was in Salt Lake City when the explosion occurred. He organized a train full of rescue workers and medical supplies that arrived in Scofield by 3:30.

"That amazes me," says Woody Carter, "to think that communication was good enough, and with the steam engines they used in those days, that they could get here so quickly."

A second relief train from Salt Lake City arrived the next afternoon. And when it stopped, the townspeople found it full of flowers. When children in Salt Lake City heard about the explosion, they went house to house to gather flowers from gardens and took wagonloads to the train. On the trip down, the flowers were bundled into bouquets — enough for every casket.

A subscription fund for the widows and children was also immediately begun statewide, and the newspaper printed the list of contributors. Led by businessmen A.W. McCune, who sent $2,000, and David Keith, who pledged $1,000, were lines and lines of people who pledged $1, 50 cents, 25 cents — whatever they could. Before they were through, more than $200,000 was raised.

"This was the state's largest disaster," notes Woody Carter. "But it was also the largest relief effort. And you have to look at that side, too."

'The deadly damp'

In a disaster of this magnitude, the stories of life and death are especially poignant.

Very few of the miners survived. One was 15-year-old Thomas Pugh, working in the No. 1 mine, connected to No. 4 by a tunnel, who grabbed his hat in his teeth and ran for the entrance a mile and a half away. He

fainted at the entrance. His father, William, died at the place Thomas Pugh started running.

The explosion carried James Naylor 200 feet, but he was uninjured and able to help with rescue work. Not so, John Wilson. The force of the blast carried him 800 feet across the canyon and left him with a crushed skull. He was one of four men put on a train to the hospital in Salt Lake City that night. No one thought he would survive, but he did and lived to his 70s.

Young Walter Clark had been working outside when the explosion occurred and rushed to the tunnel, fearful for his father and brother, who were inside. The "lurking damp enveloped him as in a winding sheet." He was dead by the time the others reached him. If that wasn't bad enough, his 16-year-old sister, Lizzie, dropped dead at her mother's feet of the shock when she heard about Walter's death.

The Luoma family lost nine members: six sons, one son-in-law, two nephews. The 70-year-old parents had been in this country only three months, brought over to a better life after their sons had found work. In their grief, they returned to Finland. Some 61 to 63 of the men who died were Finns.

The Hunter family lost 11 members, including sons, sons-in-law and nephews. They're all buried in Ogden.

John James and his son were trying to escape when "the deadly damp overtook them, and a moment later they were dead. When found by the rescuers, their arms were tightly clasped about each other in an embrace that death could not loosen."

Most of the miners in No. 1 were killed by a combination of lack of oxygen and deadly gases. "One man had filled his pipe and sat down to light it. The damp struck him and he died then and there with the filled pipe in his outstretched hand," the Deseret News reported.

"On a box where a dead Finlander was they picked up his watch. It had stopped when the explosion had occurred and the hands marked 10:28 o'clock."

In No. 4, many of the bodies were burned or mutilated beyond recognition, making identification in those pre-DNA days difficult. In at least one case, the wrong body was buried in a grave and had to be dug up and re-identified.

But mixed among the stories of heart-wrenching grief are a few on the other side.

John Donaldson and his dad worked together in the mine, but that morning his mother, who said later she had a premonition, did not wake them in time. When they got to the mine, the superintendent refused to let them enter, thinking he would deprive them of a day's pay. Instead, he saved their lives.

One of the Evans brothers complained so much about the conditions of the mine, his supervisor gave him a choice: shut up or leave. He left. Two days later, he was playing in a band for May Day festivities in Price when word came that his two brothers had been killed.

One man always took his dog to work with him, but that day the dog wouldn't go, so the man didn't either.

Within two weeks, all the bodies had been recovered, or so they thought. But a 10-year-old boy came to the house of T.J. Parmley and told him that the boy's father had not been brought out yet. He comes to me every night in a dream, said the boy; he wants his body removed, so he can rest in peace. He's in parish No. 12.

It was August before crews got into that area of the mine. They found the man's body right where the boy said it would be.

Chain reactions

What caused the terrible explosion? No one was ever exactly sure.

There was practically no gas in the mine, so the chances of hitting a pocket and igniting it were nil.

But the mine had recently received a new contract to supply 2,000 tons of coal per day to the U.S. Navy. Did the miners take too much powder into the mine to speed up work to meet that quota? That was one theory.

Another was that some miners were going to "shoot down some coal," but the wall between where they were working and the next chamber was thinner than they thought and it blew down, igniting coal dust in the next chamber.

Regardless of what caused the initial spark, there was for sure too much coal dust in the mine. And once some was ignited, it set off a series of chain reactions that spread through the mine in hopeless microseconds.

Had the mine been sprinkled down weekly, investigators said later, the explosion could have been avoided. But the lack of natural gases in the mine had lulled them into a false sense of security.

"The explosion has taught Utah a lesson," said the Deseret News, "but the cost of it has been terrible. There must, in the opinion of the coal miners, be a closer inspection of the mines."

That would be the long-lasting legacy of Scofield.

But first came the immediate aftermath.

The company bought caskets and funeral suits for each of the victims. Funeral services in Scofield, where 125 of the men were buried, were conducted by a Finnish Lutheran minister brought from Rock Springs and by four general authorities — George Teasdale, Reed Smoot, Heber J. Grant and Seymour B. Young — sent by the LDS Church.

Two funeral trains made their sad way both north and south, taking bodies for burial: seven in Springville; four in Provo; three in American Fork; 11

in Ogden; eight in Salt Lake City; five in Spanish Fork; one each in Eureka, Joseph, Wales, Mt. Pleasant and other towns up and down the state.

In addition to relief funds gathered, Pleasant Valley Coal Co. eventually gave each widow $500; and $8,000 in debt at the company store was written off.

Twenty-eight days later, Winter Quarters re-opened. There was, after all, that big Navy contract to fulfill.

"When the accident occurred all of those who escaped practically declared they would never work in the mine again," noted the newspaper, "but most of them have now changed their minds and are ready to resume operations.

" 'That is a peculiarity of coal miners the world over,' said a Salt Lake man, now visiting here who formerly worked in Wyoming. 'I was in the big explosion at Almy, and every man who survived vowed he would never go into that mine again. I was one of the loudest, and yet, after the shock had worn off I was about the first to accept work and return to the mine. They always do that.' "

Many had no other choice. Life went on.