

The Hurricane Creek Mine Disaster

We had planned to spend at least ten days in California, but on December 30th we heard on the national news that there had been a terrible coal mine explosion near Hyden, Kentucky, in Leslie County, only 20 miles east of Manchester. Thirty-eight miners had been killed.

This event came to be known as the Finley Coal Company Mine Disaster, or sometimes the Hurricane Creek Mine Disaster, since that mine was next to Hurricane Creek. Later we learned that the U.S. Bureau of Mines had cited the Finley mine as an “imminent hazard” only a month earlier due to excessive coal dust accumulation and electrical spark hazards. (After the explosion, bits of primer cord – an illegal fuse – also were found in the wreckage.) The Bureau of Mines had the authority to shut the mine down until safety concerns were addressed but did not do so, and a follow-up inspection scheduled for December 22 never happened. Despite the passage of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act the year before, the Bureau was critically understaffed, and the new regulations simply were not being upheld.

Many Clay County men worked in the Leslie County coal mines; my own father had for many years. The black lung disease that had caused his retirement only a few years before was, I suppose, a blessing in disguise for our family; otherwise he might well have been killed that day. Thinking about this made me identify strongly with the suffering of the lost miners' children, wives, and in some cases parents. Even today, it is hard for me to imagine 38 hardworking men who were only doing their jobs suddenly being eliminated from existence.

Right away, I called my parents, then Bob Burchell and several staff members of the Jackson-Clay Community Action Agency. From them I learned that most of the miners killed had been Clay County residents, many of them close relatives, even fathers and husbands, of some agency employees. Both Tena and I were shocked and saddened. We had met some of these men at community events and meetings and couldn't believe they were all gone from their families forever.

The explosion was national news. Many thousands of Americans expressed sympathy for the lost miners and their families, and Tena and I knew that friends, family and strangers in all the surrounding communities would already be reaching out to comfort and assist each family in every possible way. The Jackson-Clay Community Action Agency needed to be part of that effort. With Tena's blessing, I caught the first flight I could, arriving home on New Year's Day 1971, and began to visit the families to see what might be done.

What deep hurt and sorrow I saw during those visits. In an instant, 97 children had been deprived of their fathers forever. Most of the mothers of those children were now without a loving companion and the future financial support that they and their children would desperately need. It was hard to hold back the tears when talking with those families, hearing their sorrow and their fears for the future.

Shortly after I had become executive director of the Jackson-Clay Community Action Agency, we had started an agency-supported newspaper called the Jackson-Clay County Roadrunner. Never intended as a commercial newspaper, its mission, printed in each issue, was to inform Jackson-Clay residents of “the things that are, and the things that could be,” and to show readers from outside the region some of the region’s problems.



A miner's widow and child talk with visitors in their home, a few days after the explosion.

We specifically used the Roadrunner to report on the progress of the agency and the efforts of communities toward self-help and as a vehicle where anyone could write a letter or an article about community concerns. But the January 1971 issue of the Roadrunner was entirely dedicated to the men who had lost their lives in the Hyden disaster. We wanted to commemorate those hardworking men, making that Roadrunner something special that their families might value far into the future.

Tena did a lot of the work in putting together that special issue. Though by then she had left paid work to raise our young children, the idealism and courage that had brought her across the country to an unknown place to serve as a VISTA volunteer remained. Not only did she encourage me in my anti-poverty work, never asking me to leave a job when things got tough or even dangerous, she worked alongside me, unpaid but no less dedicated than I was, every step of the way.

Tena visited almost every grieving family during those weeks. Most of those families gave her photographs of their lost husbands, sons, brothers, fathers. Many of them also wrote about their sorrow, and we included as many of these statements as we could fit into that special issue of the Roadrunner. This was one of the longer statements, written by a woman named Edith, of Garrard, Kentucky:

“I would like to tell you little bit about my life as a coal miner's wife. I want to say I am proud of my life as a coal miner's wife. I was married to Lester for 15 years. We have 3 sons, ages 13, 10, and 7, of which I am very proud of.

There were hard times and good times, but we had enough love and faith in each other to see us through the hard times we had.

I took pride in his work, and he wanted to give his family all that he could. He was a brave man and very dependable. He never asked for anything. He always tried to help others.

I have always had a fear of him going in the mines, and I begged him to quit. He said, “Honey, I do not want to leave Clay County because we have lived here all our lives, and it just would not be home any place else.” He said, “I have to work in the mines because that's all there is to work at here.” He did say to me, which I appreciated very much, "If I can do anything about it my boys will never go to work in the coal mines." He did take them to the mines a few times to show them where he worked, and they were frightened of that dark place.

My one fear now is, if there is not more industry brought into this area, what will my boys be able to work at when they grow up if we stay around here? This also applies to all the other young children of this area.

That terrible night at Hyden still seems like a dream to me, but I know it was real. I alone now know that I have to be the brave one because I do not have him to depend on any more.”

Another young widow, Juannita Sizemore, wrote:

"A little time has passed since we lost Arnold and the pain don't seem any lighter. I miss my husband very much.

My children missed him and we had a set of twins 3 years old and they look for him every day, but the 2 older ones realized he won't be back.

We wish to thank everyone who has helped in any way and especially the singers. Arnold loved old music and singing music next to fishing was his favorite sport. We went fishing and camped out last summer. So I shall miss him over the summer.

All these things we did together, I will now have to do alone. He is missed so very much by all his family and friends.

I thank God for our healthy children. He really took pride in his children and wanted to raise them right. He worked to raise them, and he wanted to put them through school so they would not have to go to the mines like he did. So with the help of God, I will do my best to carry out our plans and make his dream for them come true."

Another remembrance was titled "Memorial to Walter By His Family," the author listed as "his wife and children":

"We are the family of Walter who was born on May 3, 1929, and killed by a mine explosion with 37 more hard working men. He was 41 years old. He is survived by his wife, Mae, age 40, and 5 children. The children are ages 17, 14, 11, 9, and 7.

He was a Christian man that loved his family. He was the kind of person that never let a person in need go away if he could help them.

He surely is missed by his wife, children, and relatives, and host of many friends."

And finally, "Memorial to Theo by His Family":

"Born April 12, 1942, he was the son of Asher and Lottie. Theo was raised and attended school on Paces Creek in Clay County. He had 4 sisters and 2 brothers.

He was married to Martha in November 1961. They have one daughter, Sandra, age 6.

In the fall of the year Theo loved to hunt and was a member of the Fort Knox Sportsman's Club. During the summer he went boat riding, and he loved to water ski.

He lived and worked in Louisville for 9 years. But he always talked and planned on moving back home. We moved back August 29, 1970. He started working for Finley's Coal Company September 7 and on December 30, 1970 Theo was gone. Dearly loved and missed by his wife and daughter."

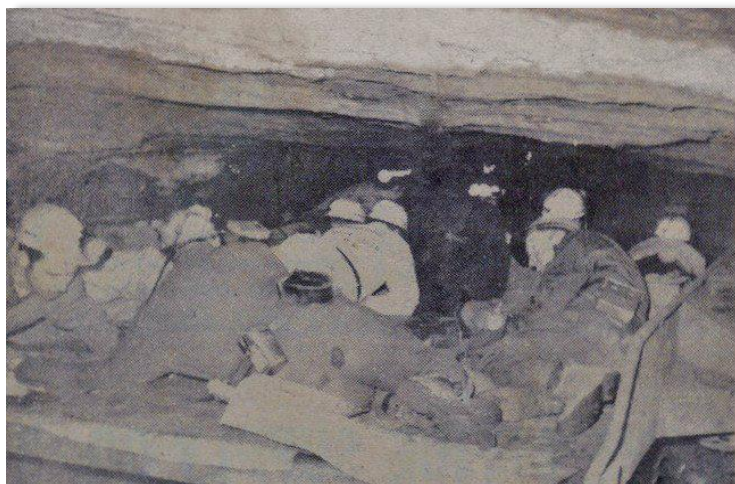
Theo Griffin was only 38 years old when he was killed. The lost miners' ages had ranged from 60 down to only 18, with an average age of 33.

Being a Clay County native and serving as executive director of the local anti-poverty agency, I felt I should publicly express my sympathy and concern for those 38 families. This is what I wrote, with Tena as my editor:

"The news of the tragic accident in the Finley mine which occurred near Hyden, Kentucky on December 30, 1970, spread quickly across the nation. This grim happening quickly drew words of sympathy from public officials from the president on down. Private individuals, clubs and civic organizations, locally and in many states across the country, responded with contributions to the families of the 38 men who died in the mine explosion.

We have since learned that those men are listed among approximately 250 coal miners who died in mining accidents during 1970. Unlike the 38 miners, those who have died in single accidents have gone relatively unnoticed. The difference between the response of the death of 38 and the single accidents of over 200 men who have died in single accidents is illustrative of the lack of response the rest of the country has traditionally shown toward Appalachian people. The men who died in the Hyden explosion were strong hardworking mountain men who had no other choice for livelihood in their home region.

During the history of coal mining in Appalachia, families have lost thousands of breadwinners and suffered untold grief from disability caused by accidents and black-lung disease. The only honorable occupation open to a majority of able-bodied men in the area is coal mining. Yet, the region has few benefits to show



Recovery teams look for survivors the day after the explosion. None were found, but these brave teams recovered all the lost miners' bodies for burial.

for the human suffering or the removal of its natural resources. The most tragic of all tragedies will be to let the memory of those miners die and let things return to the status quo.

If any permanent improvement is to happen and if the sons of the miners who died on December 30, 1970, are to have better opportunities,

renewed work for changes and economic development must be made now. New job opportunities, new educational programs, public facilities and the recognition

of the unique character of Appalachian people and culture must be established now.

It is for these reasons that the Jackson-Clay Community Action Group, Inc., is publishing this special issue of the Roadrunner as a memorial to the miners who died at Hyden. Let us hope that other memorial issues of this or any other paper will never again be necessary.”