

Coal Mining: Black Gold, Black Death

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Several mining accidents have occurred in Scott County in the past hundred years but the worst accident ever recorded was on the morning of March 23, 1959, at 7:30 A.M. The explosion was at the West mines on Brimstone Creek. Nine men were in the mine while one man stayed up top, Oz West, co-owner of the mine.

The explosion was believed to have been caused by a gas accumulation that had collected over the weekend, and was ignited in an accidental manner. The nine men who lost their lives were very respectable miners: Ed Chitwood, 50; John L. Pike, 46; Arzo Phillips, 17; Burl Phillips, 52; Elmer Phillips, 38; Hubert Phillips, 30; Oscar West, 47; Bernard Yancey, 33; and Willard Yancey, 36. The body of Oscar West, part owner of the mine, was the first to be brought out of the mine. Then shortly after, the rest of the miners' bodies were brought out.

It was evident, even before entry in the mine could be attempted, that all nine had perished, though relatives who gathered at the site of the tragedy held on to a thin thread of hope, perhaps remembering the miracles of the Springhill mine disaster.

Another disaster struck the Brimstone area. This explosion happened in the C. L. Kline mine only six years after the Phillip-West coal mine disaster. It is believed that both were caused by gas that had built up and was ignited in an accidental manner.

Just one hour after the explosion, the mouth of the mine was covered with rescue workers and a crowd grew. The rescue workers consisted of just about anyone who could help. Even some of the West Coal Co. employees lent a hand.

The workers used every tool they could get their hands on and some of the more advanced tools the company had. The workers would work in twenty-minute shifts so when the second shift went in the first shift would then go to the refreshment stand for the well needed rest.

There are pictures in the Scott County Museum showing the workers loading coal carts full of coal. The museum has also reconstructed a life size entrance of a coal mine complete with

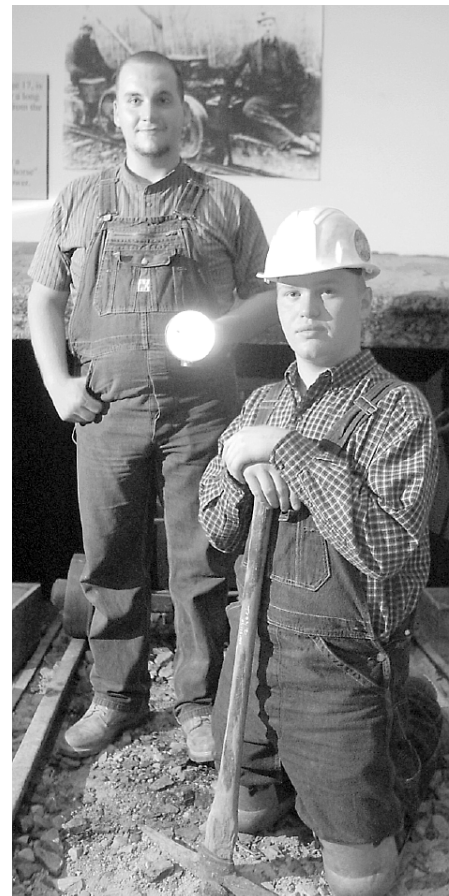


Figure 1 Scott High students bring history alive for visitors to the various exhibits – such as this one on coal mining

mining cart and tracks. Also, a display case shows mining tools and safety devices as well as various types of scrip used in the area. There are two scale model dioramas showing models of deep mine and strip mining operations. While coal mining has been a lucrative business in Scott County there are many headstones that remind us of the dangers associated with this profession.