

# Mining Disasters in Southwest Wisconsin

## By Dennis A Wilson, April 10, 2012

The midnight, the morning, or the middle of day,  
Is the same to the miner who labors away.  
Where the demons of death often come by surprise,  
One fall of the slate and you're buried alive

### CHORUS:

It's dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew,  
Where danger is double and pleasures are few,  
Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines  
It's dark as a dungeon way down in the mine.  
---Merle Travis

Mining was the first honey that drew settlers to Grant County. Lead was like gold, a way to get rich, and an opportunity for the everyman pushing across the forests and prairies into the Northwest Territory. Those who came here first were a tough lot, and mining was a tough business. Aside from the physical exertion and the risk of ruining your body, mining offered many opportunities for a fast death: Falls down mine shafts, crushing cave-ins, lung disease and the risk of being blown to bits by explosives. We don't hear much about mining accidents, but they happened and the results were disastrous. The archives are filled with death records for individual miners, and sometimes whole communities were struck by even more horrible events.

We do not need to look hard for the newspaper clippings. They tell the tragic stories, sometimes as routine items and sometimes in screaming headlines. God help the family that lost their man to the mines. One mine poet, Tommy Armstrong put it to verse in 1883:

"February left behind it what will never be forgot;  
Weeping widows, helpless children,  
May be found in many a cot,  
Homes that once were blest with comfort  
Guarded by a father's care,  
Now are solemn, sad and gloomy,  
Since the father is not there"

Those who lost the support of the breadwinner could face grim prospects; farming out or adoption of the children by strangers, many of whom were looking for child laborers; placement in the county asylum (if there was one), or cruel want- perhaps to the point of starvation.

William Warner, who rose to become mayor of Kansas City, and Senator from Missouri, was born in Shullsburg, Wisconsin on June 11, 1840. At the age of six he was left an orphan, with seven brothers and sisters who could not support themselves or him. In desperation, he began picking ore from the refuse piles at the mine and selling them to the smelters to eke out a living. Abandoned children were not uncommon in those days. His self improvement; learning to read and then studying the law was a testament to his hard work and intelligence. Most children did not fare as well.



Senator William Warner of Missouri

The death of an individual in the mines was little cause for note. The death records show the name with the cause "mine accident". The Dubuque Telegraph Herald of October 2, 1907 carried the following in the Potosi News section: "Jos. Gerhardt, while working in the Wisconsin Mine in British Hollow last week, was caved upon in a drift. He was taken out at once by his fellow workmen to the main shaft, but while ascending he fainted and fell back in the cage. He was caught by the timbers in the shaft, and upon examination it was found that several ribs were broken, and his head bruised and cut." This appeared along with news of visits and engagements-everyday things.

And then there were the bigger disasters, the ones which haunt the darkest dreams of mining towns. Shortly after Christmas in 1909 the Benton area lived the nightmare. "Blast Victims Torn to Shreds at Benton" the Dubuque Telegraph Herald headline of December 29, 1907 screamed. Another newspaper headed the story with "Blown to Pieces by Dynamite Charge." The Telegraph Herald reporter wrote; "*Southwestern Wisconsin, hardened to mine disasters which have brought sorrow to scores of homes in former years, shudders today with the awfulness of the catastrophe which yesterday exacted a toll of four lives at the Ollie Bell mine, a miles south of this place.*" Just after work, four men were seen walking toward an eight by ten foot mine shack on a hillside where 75 lbs. of dynamite were thawing out for use. In a millisecond they were gone and pieces of flesh and bone, splinters and rock were raining down on those gathered at a distance. The dead were:

Edward Sullivan, age 36, married with two children  
Thomas Clegg, age 35, married with two children  
John Oldberg, age 40, married with two children  
Charles Morton, age 23, unmarried

Only the body of Sullivan was recognizable, hurled a hundred feet with his body intact. Only pieces were left of Clegg and Oldberg. Nothing but a few flesh stripped bones was found of Morton.

In 1917 the grim reaper of miners returned, this time to Montfort and the Hump Development Company's lead and zinc mine. This time only one, Peter G. Peterson was taken. Eight were maimed. It happened just before work, while the men were in the "change" room dressing for

their shift. In that room was a case of a thousand dynamite caps, each with a “lifting power” of 800 pounds. The mine superintendant, Theodore A. Watch said he couldn’t explain the cause of the explosion, or why explosive caps were stored in that room. This time there was action taken. The Wisconsin Industrial Commission ordered compensation to the widow, Verna Peterson, and two of the disabled who had filed claims. These were paid by the employer’s insurance company. The owners were ordered to pay an additional penalty of \$1500.00 to the victims from their own pockets.

In 1943 the mines were open and running at high capacity 24 hours a day to meet the war needs of the country. Employment had returned to the mines of Southwest Wisconsin. The Mulcahy mine in Shullsburg was no exception. At about noon on February 9, 1943 two men, William Rooney and John Stevens were repairing shoring in the first drift, 30 feet wide, eight feet high, and 200 feet long about 108 feet below the surface when the ceiling beams gave way and the mine caved in, killing them. Miners from the Mulcahy and nearby Gill mines rushed to the scene and a crew descended into the mine to try to save the two men. They worked feverishly trying to dig the men out and shore up the run. At 1:30 p.m. a second collapse occurred, killing six more men.

There were at least 15 children left fatherless. Other miners came and they dug out the eight bodies. The Associated Press reported that Sheriff Curry said “identification was difficult.” The dead were taken to funeral homes in Shullsburg, Platteville, Galena and Cuba City. Church bells rang and funerals followed. The dead were:

William “Buck” Rooney, age 47, Shullsburg  
John Stephens, age 55, Benton  
Maynard Howell, age 37, Platteville  
Russell Farrey, age 40, Shullsburg  
Walter Mauthe, age 52, Elk Grove  
Nelson Jones, age 20, Mineral Point  
John Griffin, age 70, Jenkynsville  
Romano Luciani, age 32, Darlington

Lafayette County Coroner Gordon Roselip convened a coroner’s jury at the sight, took testimony from six witnesses and concluded that “it was an unavoidable accident caused by cave-ins.” The Wisconsin State Industrial Commission did not accept the coroner’s word as final but ordered an investigation to be conducted by the state mining engineer.

As the years passed most of the mines in our part of the state closed and our economy found other staples for employment of the populace. Mine accidents still happen in the state, despite all efforts to mitigate the danger. On October 19, 1949 an accident occurred at a mine at Shullsburg which had been touted as “*one of the newest, largest and most modernly equipped lead and zinc mines in Southwestern Wisconsin.*” This mine was operated by the Calumet and Hecia Consolidated Copper Company. It was another cave-in 330 feet underground. John Hebenstreit, age 25 of Shullsburg died and another miner was seriously injured. The latest fatality I could find for Wisconsin Mines was in the year 2000 when a miner’s clothing was trapped in a machine auger.

There is little doubt that lack of regulation contributed to these disasters. Before the twentieth century there was little government regulation of mines. In 1915, the state Industrial Commission (IC) promulgated orders setting forth safety standards for zinc mines. By 1922, the agency was issuing orders for to all mines regarding explosives, hoists, shaft ventilation, and other dangerous aspects of mine operation. In 1957 the Legislature gave the Industrial Commission authority to actually conduct safety inspections every two months.

And so a salute to our miners, mostly gone yet they remain emblazoned on our state flag. They helped to build our state and they will forever be a part of the history of our area, for they took a frontier and turned it into a state. John Wallace Crawford wrote the following in Virginia City Nevada, another mining frontier:

Only a miner killed -- oh! is that all?  
One of the timbers caved, great was the fall,  
Crushing another one shaped like his God.  
Only a miner lad -- under the sod.  
Only a miner killed, just one more dead.  
Who will provide for them -- who earn their bread?  
--Wife and little ones: pity them, God,  
Their earthly father is under the sod.  
Only a miner killed, dead on the spot,  
Poor hearts are breaking in yonder lone cot.  
He died at his post, a hero as brave  
As any who sleeps in a marble top grave.  
Only a miner killed! God, if thou wilt,  
Just introduce him to Vanderbilt,  
Who, with his millions, if he is there,  
Can't buy one interest -- even one share.  
Only a miner, bury him quick;  
Just write his name on a piece of a stick.  
Though humble and plain be the poor miner's grave  
Beyond, all are equal, the master and slave.



## WE DON'T NEED IT IN PAINT

In 1991, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services called lead the *"number one environmental threat to the health of children in the United States."* Old lead-based paint is the most significant source of lead exposure in the U.S. today. The effects of lead exposure on fetuses and young children can be severe. They include delays in physical and mental development, lower IQ levels, shortened attention spans, and increased behavioral problems. Now we are trying to remove all old paint. If they only knew in 1939!



*-and here*  
is the original advertisement for the new White Lead company that is "digging out" a powerful new source of good paint and good painting.



It takes experience to be a good paint job. For the paint on a house to last 15-20 years or more, it needs to be properly applied to give real protection. That's what this is one of the things a good painter knows - how to lay out all kinds of objects like doors, windows, sashboards, etc.

**Y**OU don't need three guesses to tell what I'm talking about, because my job is mining lead.

And lead is the starting point for making a durable paint.

You see, they make the purest lead into white lead.

And white lead is used in making paint.

When you look at such ancestry, it's not surprising that pure white lead paint is able to stand up under the attack of time and nature.

In case you think I'm grinding my own ax, just ask any painter who knows his stuff. Ask him what he'd paint his

own house with. I can tell you what his answer will be—"white lead."

So take it from an old lead miner, you can't beat a paint that's made from lead. And this is one case where the best is really the cheapest.

LEAD INDUSTRIES ASSOCIATION  
628 Lexington Avenue  
New York, N. Y.

