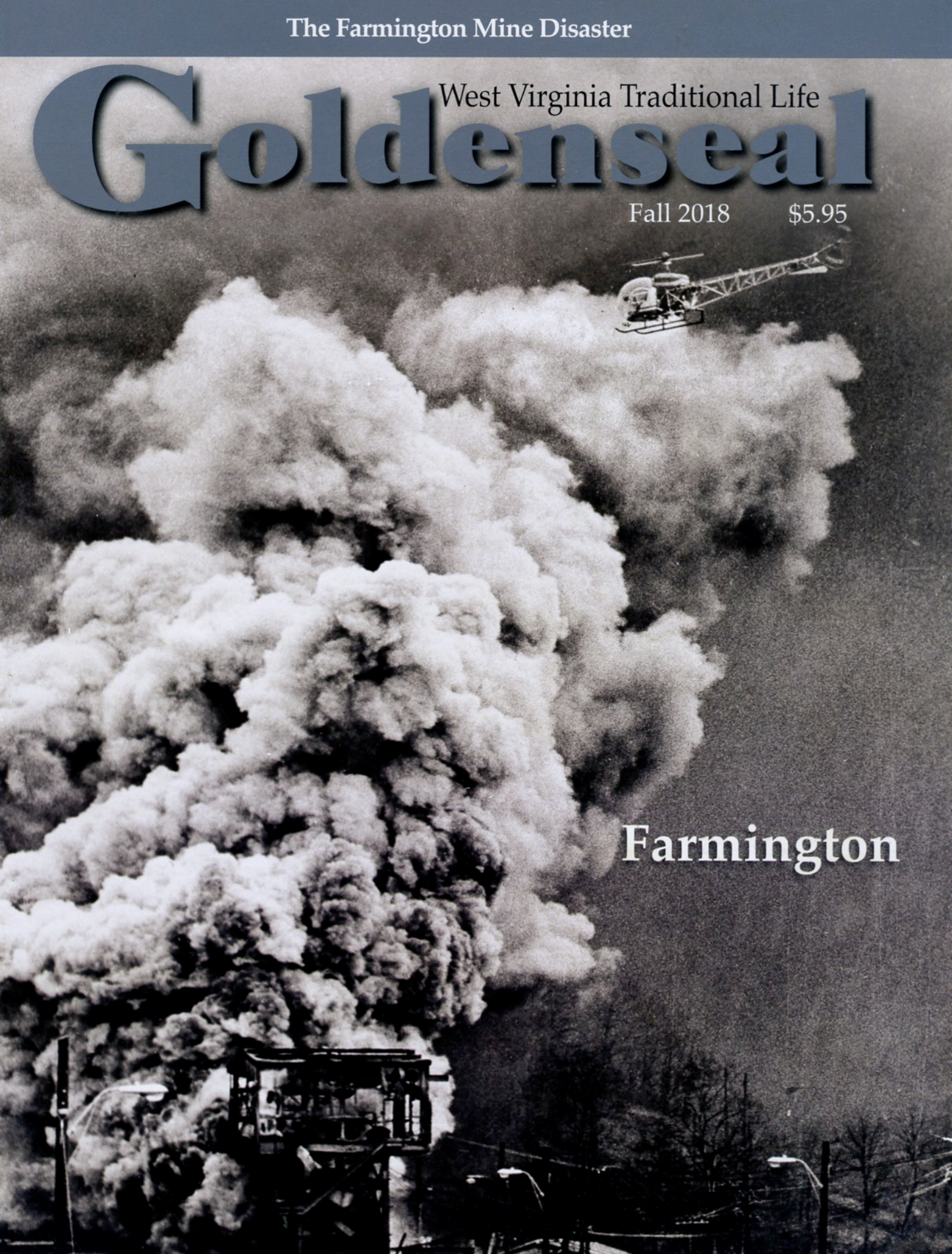
The Farmington Mine Disaster

Goldenseal

West Virginia Traditional Life

Fall 2018 $5.95



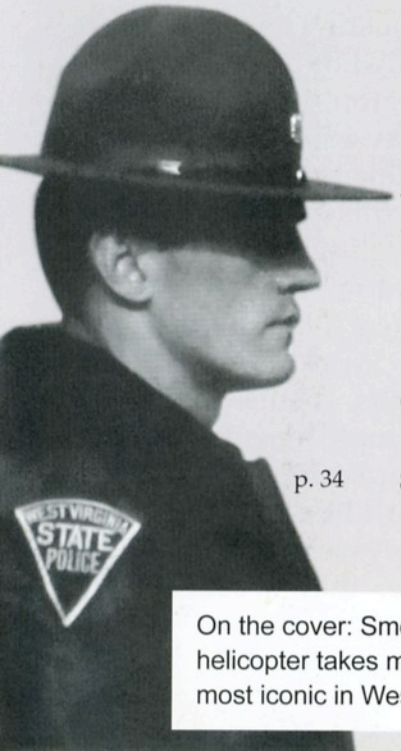
Farmington

Joe Reynolds, field representative for the United Mine Workers of America's District 31, holds a safety lamp found on a continuous mining machine in No. 9 during the recovery process. The lamp is a sacred object to miners, symbolizing the deaths of 78 hard-working men and the mine safety changes that No. 9 brought about. Photo by M. Raymond Alvarez.

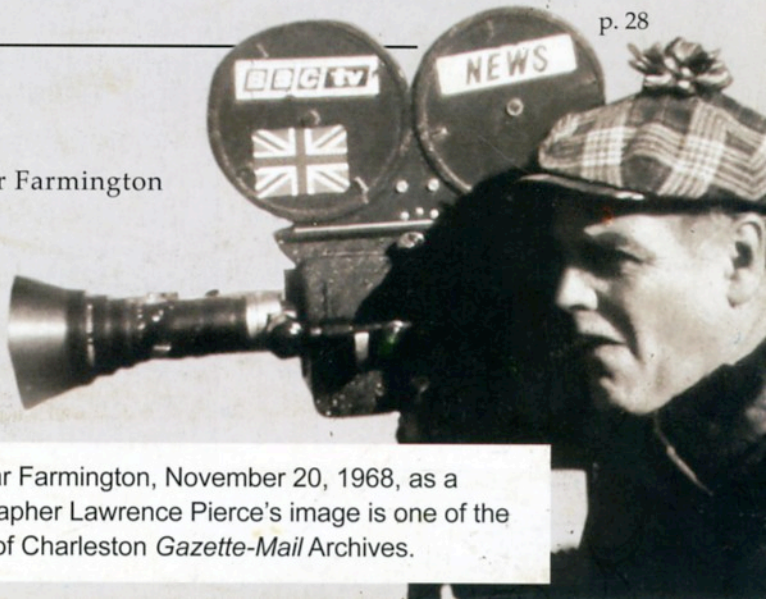
Volume 44, Number 3 **Goldenseal** Fall 2018

p. 19

p. 77



p. 34



p. 28

On the cover: Smoke pours from the No. 9 mine near Farmington, November 20, 1968, as a helicopter takes methane detections. Sadly, photographer Lawrence Pierce's image is one of the most iconic in West Virginia history. Photo courtesy of Charleston *Gazette-Mail* Archives.

Published by the
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GOLDENSEAL (ISSN 0099-0159, USPS 013336) is published four times a year, in the spring, summer, fall, and winter. The magazine is distributed for $20 yearly. GOLDENSEAL welcomes the submissions of manuscripts, photographs, and letters. Please see Contributor Guidelines at www.wvculture.org/goldenseal.

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Periodical postage paid at Charleston, West Virginia.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to GOLDENSEAL, The Culture Center, 1900 Kanawha Blvd. East, Charleston, WV 25305-0300.

The Division of Culture and History is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer.

Printed by Watkins Printing

From the Editor

In the Winter 2017 issue, I mentioned that GOLDENSEAL would be commemorating the anniversaries of several West Virginia tragedies that occurred between 1967 and 1978. Since then, we've looked back at the Silver Bridge Disaster, the Miracle of Hominy Falls, and the Willow Island Disaster.

This entire issue is dedicated to the Farmington No. 9 Mine Disaster, which occurred 50 years ago, on November 20, 1968. Like most tragedies, Farmington devastated entire communities but also underscored a common theme: West Virginians pulling together. We saw it at Point Pleasant with the Silver Bridge and at Willow Island. Likewise, with the No. 9 disaster, it took entire communities—families, friends, fellow miners, ministers, nurses, etc.—to help one another endure. That's because West Virginia towns *are* families.

Joe Manchin III, former governor and current U.S. senator, grew up in Farmington, working in his grandfather's grocery store and father's furniture store (which burned down nine days before the mine disaster). Senator Manchin, only 21 at the time, reminds us how the No. 9 tragedy touched everyone, "My Uncle John [Gouzd], my neighbor John Sopuch, and my dear high school friend and classmate Paul Frank Henderson were three of the 78 who perished in the mine explosion. For days, my mom, my Aunt Jenny, and I sat around the company store with everyone I had ever known waiting for updates about the fate of our loved ones. The look on my mother's face when she found out her younger brother lost his life in that mine will stay with me forever."

No. 9 was horrific for anyone who lost friends and loved ones, but it proved to be a much bigger catalytic event than anyone realized at the moment. Prompted in large part by the disaster, miners stood up to their state government in Charleston, demanding paid benefits for black lung. Widows of the Farmington victims stood up to their federal government in Washington, compelling Congress and a reluctant president to sign the most comprehensive mine health and safety bill in history. Then, rank-and-file miners stood up to their own union, ousting its corrupt leadership. All of this occurred in Farmington's shadow, fueled by the frustration that miners were being treated like pawns.

While this issue of GOLDENSEAL highlights the deadliest U.S. coal mine disaster of the last 67 years, it also reveals the best of West Virginia—West Virginians, themselves. All of the accomplishments in the previous paragraph were achieved by what I like to call *everyday folks*. They weren't high-ranking officials; they worked hard,

cared about their neighbors and loved ones, and decided that enough was enough. Sounds a lot like the patriotic farmers who helped found this country, and Farmington was very much a revolution in coal mining.

This issue honors the 78 men who died in No. 9 and set that revolution in motion. Without their ultimate sacrifice, the death toll from coal mining would have been much higher over the last 50 years.

It's taken a lot of effort to produce this issue. GOLDENSEAL's two-person staff certainly couldn't have done it alone. We can't begin to mention everyone who helped out but would like to point out a few by name.

First, we're extremely grateful to the individuals who met with me in Fairmont last December: the Revs. O. Richard Bowyer and D. D. Meighen, Mike Arcure, Cheryl Sanders Maxwell, Zella Martin Keener, John Veasey, Peggy Edwards, Francene Kirk, Jason Young, and Leisha Elliott. We'd especially like to thank Bob Campione, who gave us permission to use some of his remarkable photos from the disaster; Jason Wright of the West Augusta Historical Society, who found photos of the 1954 disaster we never knew existed; Fairmont *Times West Virginian* Editor Tiffany Towner, who patiently let us dig through her paper's archives; Nancy Vandergrift, who opened up her photo archives at Fairmont Clinic; Dede Tonkovich Feltz, who helped identify the students in the Farmington Class of 1968 photo [see page 16]; Peter "Big Pete," P. J., and Susie Alasky, who shared stories about their Farmington business and that tragic day in 1968; Mike Caputo and Joe Reynolds of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), District 31; and the staffs of the West Virginia State Archives, the Marshall University Special Collections, the West Virginia and Regional History Center, East Tennessee State University's Archives of Appalachia, and Georgia State University. I am especially appreciative of Larry Shockley, for pointing me in the right direction at the National Archives; my dear friend Le-Anne Olson, for helping me sift through Ken Hechler's materials at Marshall; and Steve Brightwell and Richard Fauss of the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture, and History, who helped us capture still images from 50-year-old news footage and publish them in print for the first time ever.

A couple of MVPs deserve special mention. Paul Nyden was a longtime journalist for the Charleston *Gazette*; before that, he wrote the definitive history of the Miners for Democracy (MFD) Movement. He was going to write an MFD column for this issue. We outlined the article and various anecdotes while talking at my office and at our unofficial meeting place, known locally as the Red Carpet. I last spoke with him in Decem-

ber, and he was ready to start writing. Two weeks later, he suffered a fatal heart attack. Paul's death was devastating to me personally, but I didn't want to let go of everything we'd talked about. One day, I quickly jotted down notes of my many talks with Paul and sent them to another dear friend and colleague, Christine M. Kreiser, who wrote the excellent article about the MFD on short notice [see page 58]. So, at least part of this issue is a tribute to Paul. Wherever he is right now, I hope he is pleased with our effort and is raking abundant amounts of muck.

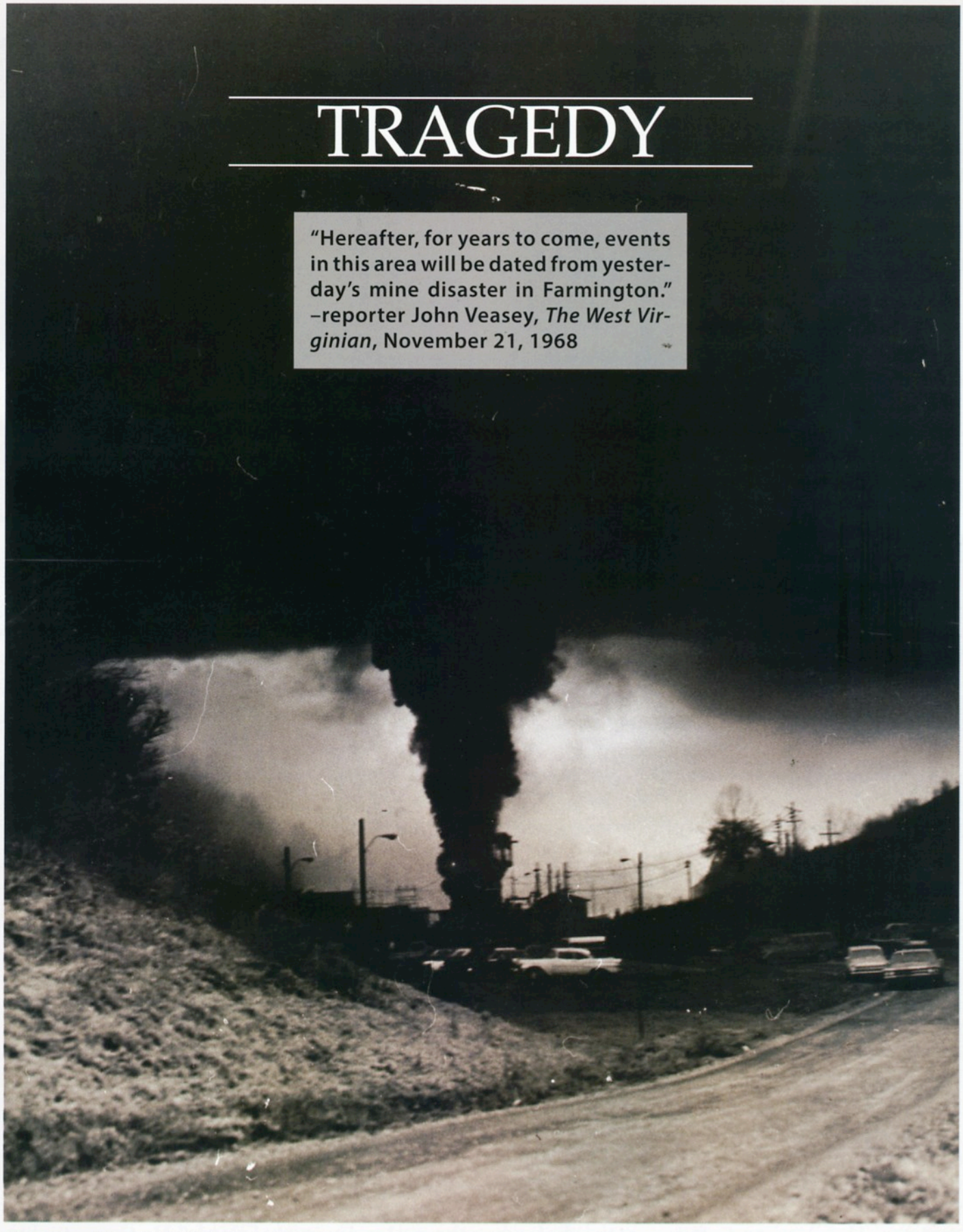
Above all, though, one person deserves the lion's share of credit. More than a year ago, I mentioned the idea of a "Farmington issue" to one of our regular contributors from the Fairmont area. M. Raymond Alvarez was a schoolmate of children who lost loved ones in No. 9, so this issue was very personal to him. He led us to parts of the story that had rarely, if ever, been told—in particular, those about Zella Martin (Keener), the Revs. Bowyer and Meighen, the nurses, and the Fairmont State University No. 9 play. On his own, he arranged for some of these people to attend our meeting last December, found images to support their stories, tracked down answers to my incessant questions, drove me around to key sites related to the disaster, and treated me to lunch at Colasessano's (forever changing my opinion of what a great pepperoni roll is). It's a gross understatement to say this issue wouldn't exist without Raymond. He was essentially a co-editor, except he likely put more work into it than I have. And, I doubt he would like this shared, but he's refused to take a dime for any of his writing work. He just wants the stories shared to honor the 78 men who died and those who were left behind to rebuild their lives and communities. Raymond is truly among the "best of West Virginia." Thank you, Raymond!

M. Raymond Alvarez at the No. 9 Memorial, June 2018. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

Stan Bumgardner

TRAGEDY

"Hereafter, for years to come, events in this area will be dated from yesterday's mine disaster in Farmington." –reporter John Veasey, *The West Virginian*, November 21, 1968



Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, Department of Mines Collection.

The Farmington Mine Disaster

By Stan Bumgardner

"That was the night I dreamed again about the mine and an accident. The next morning, I got up about seven o'clock and decided to finish an afghan I was working on. So I turned on *The Today Show*, and that's when I heard it. That's how I found out about the explosion—on the TV news!

"I remember every word they said: 'We have just received word that at 5:23 this morning, an explosion occurred at the Llewellyn portal of the Farmington No. 9 mine above Mannington, West Virginia."

Sara Kaznoski related her stirring memories of that tragic morning to author Barbara Smith two decades after the disaster. Her husband, Pete, was—and remains—one of 19 bodies permanently buried in No. 9. [See "Miner's Widow," by Barbara Smith, Summer 1988.]

Pete Kaznoski's story is similar to those of many men who've worked in West Virginia's coal mines. He'd first gone underground at age 14 and toiled at it until his death 45 years later. Pete and 98 other men were working the tail end of what was known as the cateye shift: midnight to 8 a.m.

Like most disasters in West Virginia history, such as the Silver Bridge collapse 11 months earlier [see Winter 2017], people can tell you exactly where they were at the time.

Isaac Ray Kuhn had an eyewitness view, "I was looking right at the shaft when the explosion come out. And all I could see, I couldn't tell whether it was dust or smoke because the instant it come out, all the power went out."

John Brock was heading to work for the day shift. In nearby Mannington, he passed a fellow miner who stopped and said simply, "No need to go up, Johnny. It blowed up." Brock was on the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) safety team and rushed to help.

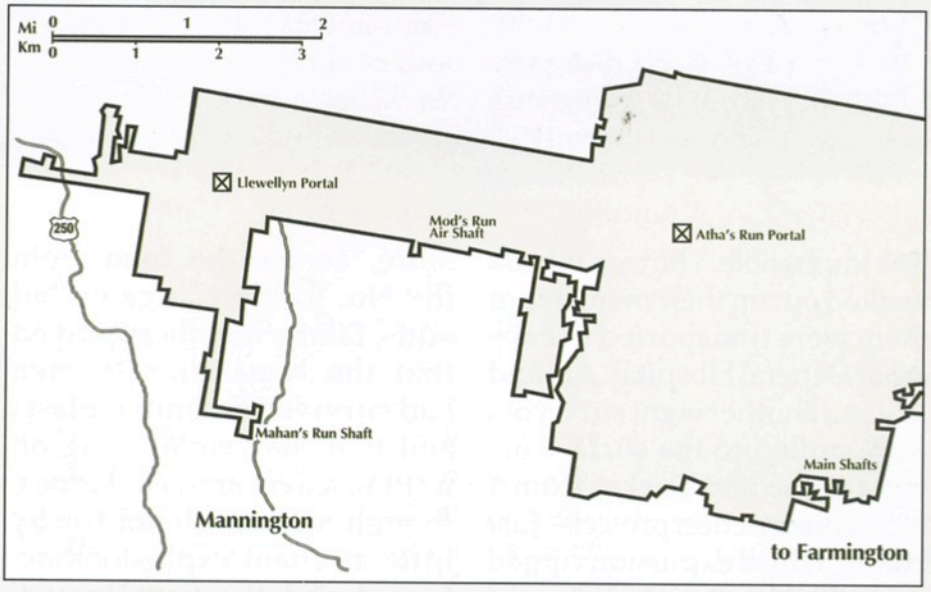
In an incredibly detailed book, *No. 9: The 1968 Farmington Mine Disaster*, author Bonnie E. Stewart tells the story of 14-year-old James Matish, who was at school and overheard some "old boys talking about trouble at a coal mine." He then saw his

Smoke billows from the Llewellyn shaft of No. 9, November 20, 1968. Underground fires would continue to burn for another nine days, when the mine was sealed. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives (WVSA), News Film Collection.

principal talking to his mother, Mary, in the hallway. She was in tears. Mary then explained to James what had happened and asked if he wanted to go home. James stayed because his dad, Frank, had always encouraged him to put school first. A common superstition in mining families was to repeat the same version of "good-bye" just before a loved one left for work. James' last words to his father had been the same thing he'd told him every night, "So long, Dad, don't work too hard and be careful."

There are so many stories like this from No. 9.

Rescue efforts to save the 99 men in the mine began almost immediately, but the fire and high methane levels made the



No. 9 was about 22 square miles in size. The first explosions are believed to have occurred in the western section near the Llewellyn portal, and the fires spread eastward. Drawing by Leslie Lynch based on a map from the Fairmont *Times West Virginian*.

No. 9

The No. 9 mine was 22 square miles, "as big in area as Manhattan Island," Paul Nyden would later write. No. 9 stretched from north of Farmington on the east (the main shafts and the Atha's Run portal) to north of Mannington on the west (the Llewellyn portal). It was so big that 30 minutes after the initial blast, men were still mining coal on the eastern side, unaware of what had happened miles away in the same mine.

In fact, the mine was so big in area that it's led to confusion over the years about where the disaster occurred. Most often, the tragedy is named for Farmington or Mannington—the two closest towns. But, in coal mining culture, there are towns between towns, named for the local mine. The community of No. 9 was opened by the Jamison Coal Company around 1910 on the eastern end of what would become an immense mine.

The community of No. 9 dates to the opening of the Jamison No. 9 mine about 1910. The James Fork United Methodist Church, which played a major role during the 1968 disaster, can be seen at the bottom. Courtesy of the WVSA, News Film Collection.

No. 9 is located in Marion County between Farmington and Fairview on county route 218 and Little Dunkard Mill Run.

task impossible. Thirteen miners walked out on their own; five of them were transported to Fairmont General Hospital. Around 10 a.m., another eight survivors were pulled to the surface using a crane and bucket from a local construction project—just before a third explosion ripped through the mine. As it turned out, these would be the only 21 survivors of the Farmington Mine Disaster.

As the wind chill plummeted and snow flurries blew sideways, anxious family members gathered inside the Champion Store, across the road from the No. 9 tipple. Against all odds, family members prayed that the remaining 78 men had survived the initial blasts and that they could hang on until rescuers arrived. Hopes, though, were dashed little by little as chain explosions occurred and the fires spread. The treasurer for Mountaineer Coal, the Consolidation Coal (Consol) subsidiary that ran No. 9, called the rescue efforts "tedious and slow."

Company officials had few answers for family members, who, out of desperation, begged reporters for information. John Veasey, news and sports editor for the *The West Virginian* newspaper, was continually asked some variation of the question, "Do they have any names yet?" One woman with tears streaming down her face asked John, "My husband is in there. Do you know anything at all?"

The reporters didn't know any more than anyone else did, but their instincts told them the outcome was dire—and that feeling became more obvious with each passing minute,

One of the explosions blew this 26-ton cap from the Mod's Run air shaft of No. 9. Courtesy of the WVSA, Department of Mines Collection.

An unidentified miner shows where the 78 trapped men were most likely located. Courtesy of the WVSA, News Film Collection.

hour, and day. The disaster became a national story, as reporters poured in from across the country. New phone lines were installed to accommodate the growing media presence, and, on the 21st, a makeshift press room was set up in the back of the store. That same day, a national newspaper ran a grim headline: Hope All But Gone For 78 Miners: They Died In Explosion Or May Perish From Suffocation.

The lack of news led to angry outbursts directed toward Consol, government officials, and increasingly the press, particularly the national TV media, which seemed to be seeking emotional shots of victims' loved ones rather than answers to their desperate pleas.

In a letter preserved in the West Virginia and Regional History Center, Bill Evans, editor of *The Fairmont Times*, remembered that "anytime a woman broke down and cried, she was instantly cornered by a dozen or more TV people, six or eight of them sticking mikes under their nose. They asked such things as: 'I suppose

The 21 Who Survived

Charles Beafore
Robert Bland
Henry Conaway
Charlie Crim
Alva Davis
James Herron
Waitman "Bud" Hillberry
Byron Jones
Nick Kose
Lewis Lake
Gary Martin
Matt Menas Jr.
Robert Mullins
Raymond Parker
Paul Sabo
Walter Slovekosky
Ralph Starkey
Nathaniel Stephens
Nezer Vandergrift
George Wilson
Roy Wilson

To avoid the frigid weather, anxious family members wait for news at the Champion Store, located across from the main No. 9 shafts. The store was stocked for Christmas, creating an unusual backdrop for such a grim scene. Courtesy of the WVSA, News Film Collection.

you've bought your husband's Christmas present; what are you going to do with it now?' 'This won't be a very happy Thanksgiving for you, will it?' And to a kid of about 4 or 5: 'Are you going to miss your Daddy?'" [For more about media coverage, see page 27.]

With tensions escalating, immediate family members were relocated just down the road to the James Fork United Methodist Church, and a barricade was established at the top of the hill to keep out curiosity seekers and the media. Evans suggested the move probably saved the lives of several "TV people," who were about to be thrown "through the plate glass front window" of the store. [For more about assistance at the church, see pages 34, 40, and 46.]

The church became an important refuge for family members, even as the flames kept blazing underground, eliminating virtually any hope for the trapped men. On November 29, the day after Thanksgiving, Consol, in consultation with government

Members of a rescue team listen into a bore hole for sounds of life. Courtesy of the WVSA, Department of Mines Collection.

One of Fairmont's two newspapers, *The West Virginian* (before its merger with *The Fairmont Times*), offers a foreboding outlook for the trapped miners. Courtesy of the WVSA, News Film Collection.

and UMWA officials, announced it would seal up the mine, extinguishing the flames but leaving the 78 bodies trapped inside.

In September 1969, the mine seal at the Atha's Run portal was removed, and ventilation fans were started up. When methane levels finally had been lowered sufficiently, the recovery effort began. The first two bodies, Lester Willard and Charles Hardman, were found on October 23 and 24. Over the next nine years, Consol would recover a total of 59 bodies, mining coal along the way, reportedly as part of the recovery effort.

On April 19, 1978, with 19 bodies still inside, Consol announced it would again seal up the mine. While the company cited ongoing safety concerns, others felt it was purely a money-saving decision; still others have alleged that Consol intentionally left the 19 behind because their final resting places might have provided further evidence of the company's complicity in the disaster. James Herron, who'd survived the disaster in 1968, worked for years to help recover the bodies of his fellow miners. He told author Bonnie E. Stewart that he and his team members were within days, perhaps less, of locating the body of Emilio Megna when Consol called off the effort. Today, the No. 9 mine remains sealed, with the 19 bodies still inside.

Even before the mine was sealed the first time, the finger pointing had already begun. Consol was an obvious target. John Roberts, a company-hired public relations official, upset the crowd at the Champion Store by comparing "safety deficiencies" in coal mines to failed automobile inspections and adding that mine disasters are "something we have to live with." Paul Nyden, in his 1,000-page dissertation *Miners for Democracy: Struggle in the Coal Fields*, observed that "Roberts, of course, didn't have to live with it. He lived far away from the widows and orphans of the little West Virginia mining town."

Nyden documented much of Consol's negligence. In the five years before the disaster, the U.S. Bureau of Mines had inspected No. 9 on 24 occasions regarding rock-dusting procedures, a standard practice that reduces airborne coal particles, which can fuel underground fires. The mine failed all 24 inspections. In the

Mine Disasters

By Stan Bumgardner

Since West Virginia started keeping statistics in 1883 (including very rough numbers for the first 50 years or so), more than 21,000 men have lost their lives in our state's mines. While most have died due to roof falls, electrocutions, and other individual accidents, the public has often viewed these deaths as the business of doing coal, a human price we pay to power our appliances, factories, and even navy battleships.

George Edgar Craigo, my great-grandfather, had his leg crushed by a slate fall in a Putnam County mine on June 30, 1905. A company doctor took Craigo to his company-owned house in Plymouth, laid him on the couch, gave him a shot of whiskey and a proverbial bullet to bite on, and then sawed off his crushed limb. Workers' compensation and pensions were a thing of the future. Craigo spent the last 44 years of his life cobbling shoes and doing odd jobs while providing for six children.

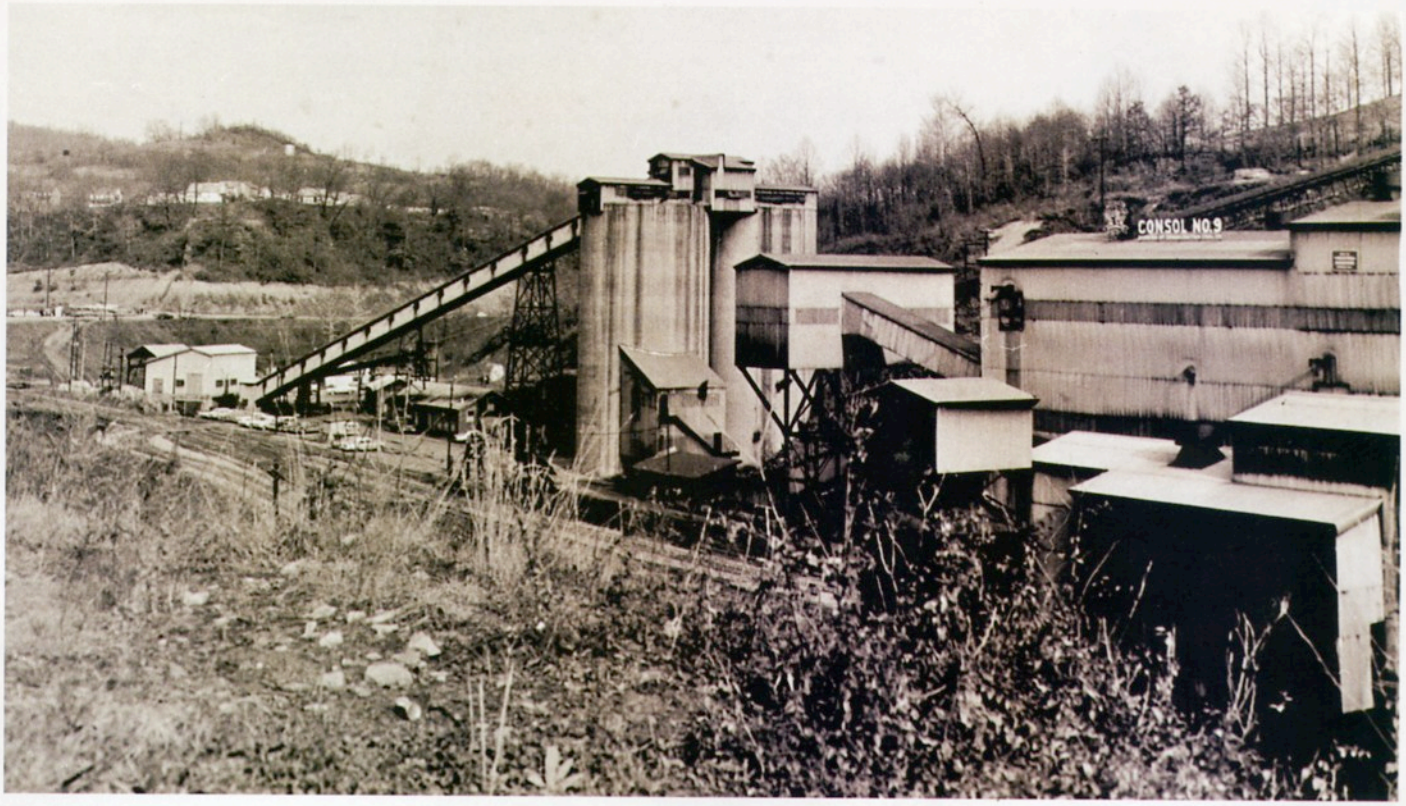
Disasters—normally defined as at least three miners killed in the same incident—caused fewer overall deaths but had a much greater impact. For one, they affected entire communities. As Joe Reynolds, international field representative for UMWA District 31, observes about Farmington, "Everyone knew someone affected."

Families wait for news at Monongah, our nation's deadliest mine disaster, in December 1907. Courtesy of the WVSA, Jack Sandy Anderson Collection.

Some disasters were so catastrophic that companies changed the towns' names. After disasters in Fayette County, the New River Company changed Stuart to Lochgelly and Parral to Summerlee. Another Fayette County town, Red Ash, disappeared entirely from the map after disasters in 1900 and 1905.

The deadliest disasters have been caused by methane explosions. Methane gas (CH_4) was created over hundreds of millions of years as plant material transformed into coal. In today's coal mines, methane is emitted naturally from seams but is accelerated due to mining activities, particularly when the weather turns cold. It's highly combustible above two percent and extremely dangerous when those levels reach five percent or greater. All it takes is the slightest spark, such as an electrical arc or the open flames miners used to wear on their hats.

When ignited, methane can expand to 27 times its initial volume. Mines in the Farmington area were known to be *gassy*, with higher-than-normal methane levels. The worst mining disaster in U.S. history occurred on December 6, 1907, when at least (and likely many more than) 362 men lost their lives in a methane explosion at Monongah, only about 10 miles from No. 9.



The Consol No. 9 tipple, located near the Champion Store, north of Farmington. Courtesy of the WVSA, Department of Mines Collection.

two years before the disaster, No. 9 had been cited for 25 other major safety violations. Asked later why the bureau never shut down the mine, a federal inspector emphasized the company's political and economic power, "Close a Consol mine? You must be kidding. Any inspector who closed a Consol mine would be looking for another job the next day."

Ora Haught, a 27-year mining veteran, called the conditions in No. 9 "lousy." His brother-in-law Robert Kerns died in the disaster.

Even construction of the 577-foot Llewellyn portal in 1965 had turned deadly, killing four men in a methane explosion: Robert Digman, Chester Heldreth, Donald Mickel, and Glenn Curfman.

In the days and hours before the 1968 disaster, various warning signs had gone ignored. On November 17, a miner voiced his fears at a meeting of the Farmington UMWA Local No. 4042. Nothing was said about it outside the union hall, even by the UMWA.

Hours before the explosion, work was stopped for several hours to ventilate dangerous levels of methane. Longtime miners use all their senses to anticipate problems. Sam Stout had been a miner for 30 years and lived in a hollow just above a fan on the western end, where the first blast occurred. He later testified that around 4 a.m., he heard the fan fail: "The motor must have burned out, and the blades must have been thrown off."

The list of accusations against Consol went on and on. Pete Schewchuk, a No. 9 section foreman who wasn't on the cateye shift, alleged that company officials had urged him not to testify before state officials. That inquiry revealed that two fire bosses—who, by law, must inspect mines for potential explosive hazards—had inspected the entire mine the Sunday before the disaster. It supposedly had taken them just more than four hours to cover 22 square miles. Records later revealed that they hadn't inspected certain portions. In fact, some bleeder airways, which ventilate methane from coal waste, could not have been inspected due to previous roof falls and other blockages.

Government officials were another subject of the families'

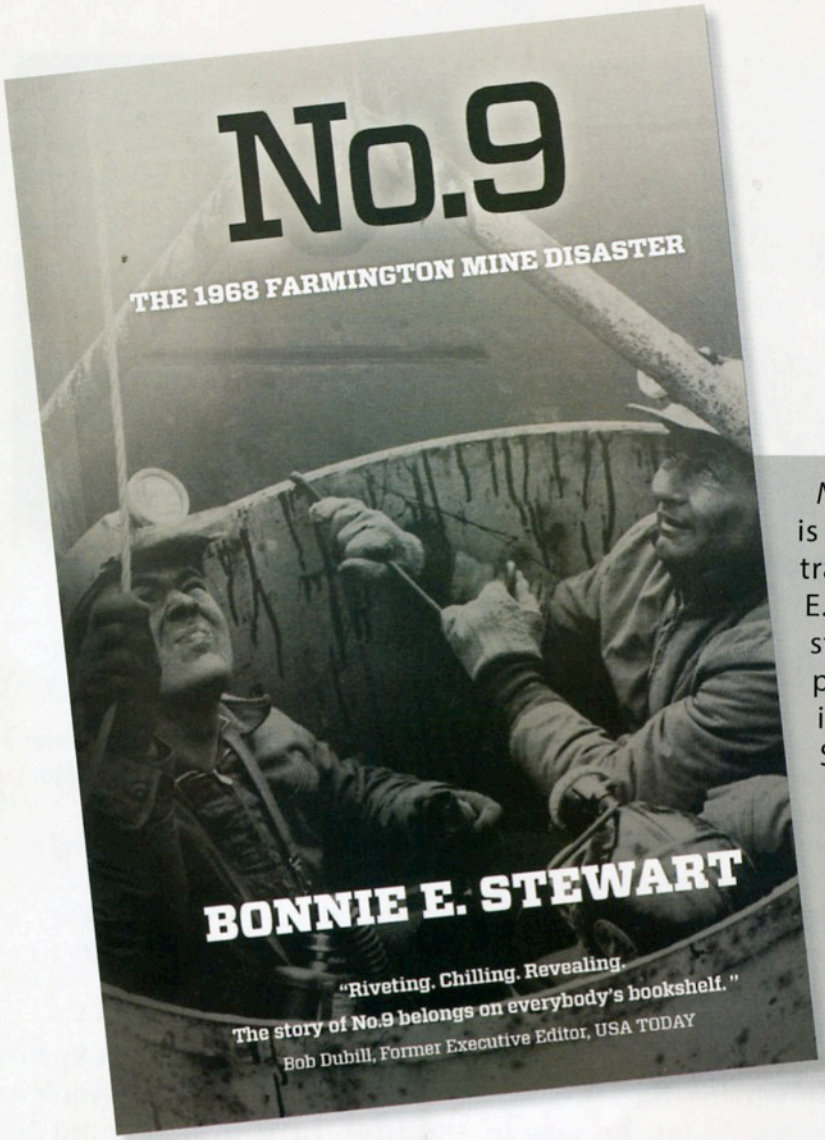
Reporters interview Governor Hulett Smith as he arrives at No. 9. Smith, who was term-limited, had less than two months left in office. Courtesy of the WVSA, Hulett Smith Collection.

ire. Governor Hulett Smith had tried to console the crowd at the store, but his words almost echoed those of Roberts, "We must recognize that this is a hazardous business, and what has occurred here is one of the hazards of being a miner." Smith seemed to ignore Consol's well-documented safety violations, so his words rang hollow.

To his credit, though, the governor personally comforted many grieving family members, but his generic public relations-sounding statement is what most remember.

The federal government had a legal responsibility to help protect miners, which made Assistant Secretary of the Interior J. Cordell Moore's comments at the store even more perplexing. Without addressing Consol's repeated violations or even considering the possible causes of the disaster, Moore told the crowd, "The company here has done all in its power to make this a safe mine. Unfortunately, we don't understand why these things happen, but they do happen."

The families' resentment toward the government hasn't abated over the years. If anything, later revelations have fueled their frustrations, namely a controversy over the mine's automatic safety system. The system was designed to shut off all electricity whenever a fan stopped working. It'd been rumored that under Consol orders, electricians had wired the fan switches to bypass the cutoff to avoid work stoppages,



No.9: The 1968 Farmington Mine Disaster is likely the most detailed account of the tragedy ever published. Author Bonnie E. Stewart was a West Virginia University student when she began her research. By poring through investigation records and interviewing No. 9 survivors and widows, Stewart provides nearly a minute-by-minute account of the tragedy. It also looks at the history of the No. 9 mine and the efforts of the Farmington Widows and others to make coal mining safer. The book, published by West Virginia University Press in 2012, is available from the press office or online sellers.

but at the risk of a major explosion. As part of the state inquiry, Robert Cook, who'd worked in No. 9 for three years, testified that he'd seen fans go down without the power ever being affected. Under oath, the mine general superintendent, Lawrence Riggs, admitted that the system had failed on occasion, but nobody on the panel asked him specifically whether the system was working on November 20, 1968.

Thanks to Bonnie E. Stewart's research, we know that two years after the disaster, federal mine inspector Larry Layne confirmed in a memo to his superiors that Consol had bypassed the automatic shutoff, based on information he'd learned from a mine electrician. He later told Stewart that the shutoff had been intentionally bypassed so Consol could "continue mining coal when the fan was down. . . It was all about greed." If his memo had come to light at the time, it likely would have led to criminal charges against Consol. In a 2016 interview with *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter Len Boselovic, 83-year-old Farmington widow Ella Sopuch lamented, "We didn't even know that had been done until [Stewart] wrote the book. Every time I pick up the book to read it, I get mad."

Most damning, neither state nor federal officials ever issued a violation or fine against Consol or its employees related to the disaster. The state's "informational report," released in 1969, reached no conclusions on responsibility. The U.S. Bureau of Mines likewise assigned no guilt but suspiciously stalled until 1990 to publish its report—and only then after receiving repeated

Some of the students from Farmington High School's Class of 1968 traveled to Washington to meet with U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph in June 1968. Many of them would lose neighbors and friends in No. 9 less than five months later. (Seated, left-right): Linda Jackson, Libby Ford, Mary Lou Bissett, Carol Arcure, Cheri Weaver, Senator Randolph, Michelle Sokolosky, Carolyn McClain, Linda Bennett, Nancy Walley, Kathy Sherry, and Janet McLaughlin; (standing, left-right): Trudy Criado, Susan Morgan, Carolyn Collins, Wayne Bland, Bobby Menas, Sam Aloi Jr., Frances Aloi (chaperone), Donald Dodrill (assistant principal), Bradley Jones, George Levitsky (chaperone), John Knoble, Robin Locke, John Manchin II, Lynn Sanders, Randy Hennis, and Sammy Goodnight. Courtesy of the WVSA, Jennings Randolph Collection.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests from J. Davitt McAteer, the Fairmont-born head of the Occupational Safety and Health Law Center.

Maybe the most surprising targets of the families' fury were UMWA officials. John L. Lewis had ruled his union with an iron fist for four decades. He'd successfully squelched rebellion in his ranks while agreeing to mechanize union mines on a massive scale (leading to dramatic cuts in mining jobs) in exchange for improvements in health, safety conditions, and pensions. Anytime there was a major disaster, he stood arm in arm with the victims' families.

But Lewis had retired in 1960 and was succeeded by his top lieutenant, Tom Kennedy. While Kennedy held the title of UMWA national president, he was in failing health. W. A. "Tony" Boyle, Lewis' preferred successor, was essentially the de facto president. Boyle was elevated to the actual presidency following Kennedy's death in 1963.

An air of corruption seemed to surround Boyle, and a rank-and-file movement among miners was already building against him, particularly over a growing black lung crisis. But when Boyle took to the microphones at the Champion Store, that minor rebellion began transforming into a movement. His comments started out sympathetically enough, "I share the grief. I've lost relatives in a mine explosion." His words then took a sudden turn that seemed to echo the sentiments of Consol and government officials, "But as long as we mine coal, there is always this inherent danger of explosion." While true in a greater sense, this was not what mining families wanted or needed to hear from their union leader at a time like this. Then, he went on to defend Consol, which, as Nyden noted, had the "worst safety record of any major company in the nation." Boyle said, "This happens to be . . one of the better companies, as far as cooperation with our union and safety is concerned."

John Corcoran, president of Consolidation (Consol) Coal, makes an announcement in the press row set up in the back room of the Champion Store. James McCartney, public relations director for Consol, adjusts the mic. McCartney was appointed by Governor Arch Moore as West Virginia's secretary of state in 1975 but was defeated the following year by A. James Manchin. Photo by Bob Campione.

Tony Boyle, national president of the UMWA, angered miners across the country with his comments that seemed to credit Consol for its mine safety record. Courtesy of the WVSA, News Film Collection.

The 78 Victims of No. 9

Arthur A. Anderson Jr.
Jack O. Armstrong*
Thomas D. Ashcraft
Jimmy Barr
Orval D. Beam*
John Joseph Bingamon*
Thomas Boggess
Louis S. Boros*
Harold W. Butt
Lee E. Carpenter
David V. Cartwright
William E. Currence*
Dale E. Davis
Albert R. DeBerry
George O. Decker
Howard A. Deel*
James E. Efaw
Joe Ferris
Virgil "Pete" Forte*
H. Wade Foster*
Aulda G. Freeman Jr.*
Robert L. Glover
Forrest B. Goff
John F. Gouzd
Charles F. Hardman
Ebert E. Hartzell
Simon P. Hayes
Paul F. Henderson*
Roy F. Henderson Sr.
Steve Horvath
Junior M. Jenkins*
James Jones
Pete J. Kaznoski Sr.*
Robert D. Kerns
Charles E. King
James Ray Kniceley
George R. Kovar
Dennis N. McDonald
David Mainella Sr.
Walter R. Martin
Frank Matish*
Hartsel L. Mayle
Emilio D. Megna*
Jack D. Michael*
Wayne R. Minor
Charles E. Moody
Paul O. Moran
Adron W. Morris
Joseph Muto
Randall R. Parsons
Raymond R. Parsons
Nicholas Petro
Fred Burt Rogers
William D. Sheme
Robert J. Sigley
Henry J. Skarzinski
Russell D. Snyder
John Sopuch*
Jerry L. Stoneking
Harry L. Strait
Albert Takacs
William L. Takacs*
Dewey Tarley
Frank Tate Jr.
Goy A. Taylor
Hoy B. Taylor
Edwin A. Tennant*
Homer E. Tichenor
Dennis L. Toler
John W. Toothman
Gorman H. Trimble
Roscoe M. Triplett
William T. Walker
James H. Walter
Lester B. Willard
Edward A. Williams*
Lloyd William Wilson
Jerry R. Yanero

**Body is still entombed in No. 9.*

At the moment, most family members were in too much shock and grief for the meaning of Boyle's words to sink in, but miners across the country took note. As Nyden writes, "Coal miners and their families never forgave Boyle for what he said at Farmington that day. They had learned long ago that no company or government official would ever take their side. But when their own union president praised the company which had just killed 78 of their brothers, the coal miners had heard enough."

Boyle's words gave renewed energy to the Black Lung Movement [see "Let's Show Them What a Fight We Can Give Them," by Catherine Moore, Summer 2006]. Within months of the No. 9 disaster, miners were marching on the state capitol in Charleston, Farmington Widows were testifying before Congress, and insurgent union members were launching the first substantial challenge to a UMWA president since 1926. [For more about the long-term effects of No. 9, see pages 52 and 58.]

Farmington came to represent many things to different people, but most significantly, it was the worst coal mining disaster in West Virginia since the Bartley explosion in McDowell County claimed the lives of 91 men in 1940, and it remains the deadliest U.S. mine disaster of the last 67 years.

STAN BUMGARDNER is the editor of GOLDENSEAL.

The photos on the next two pages show the extensive surface damage caused by the blast at No. 9 on November 13, 1954. Courtesy of the West Augusta Historical Society.

The 1954 Disaster

By M. Raymond Alvarez and Stan Bumgardner

The 1968 disaster was not the first at No. 9. In 1954, Pittsburgh Consolidation (Pitt-Consol) Coal bought No. 9 from the Jamison Coal Company. On November 13, 1954—exactly 14 years and one week before the 1968 disaster—an explosion rocked No. 9.

At the time, the mine had two massive fans that could clear out about three-million cubic feet of methane every 24 hours. Even the temporary loss of one fan could have catastrophic consequences. About 1:45 p.m. on November 13, an alarm went off at the mine, signaling a problem with one of the fans. Within seconds, an explosion tore through the mine. A seismograph in Morgantown, 17 miles away, detected the tremor.

As would occur 14 years later, the No. 9 mine was filled with too much methane to recover the bodies, so it was sealed for four months. The mine was reopened the following March, and the bodies were recovered. Even though Cheryl Sanders (Maxwell) was only three at the time, she recalls going to the funeral home in March 1955 to attend the service for

Courtesy of the West Augusta Historical Society.

her father, Robert "Beasley" Sanders.

"When the service was over," Cheryl recalls, "my brother wanted to go home. My mother knew at that time she had to get on with her life and take care of her family." To earn money, Rose Sanders, who had little formal education or work experience, became a waitress and later a custodian.

Mike Arcure, now 80 years old, was friends with many of the 1954 victims. He notes, "Two of those men picked up that particular maintenance shift because the next weekend, Farmington High School was playing in the state Division B football playoffs."

After the disaster, Farmington coach Ray Kelly asked his players' parents whether they should play or forfeit the game. The families agreed that the 16 men who'd lost their lives would want the boys to play. Mike remembers it like it was yesterday. He says the players came out of the locker room with an intensity he's never seen before or since. Farmington scored three early touchdowns on its way to a 39-13 rout over Rupert, clinching the school's one and only state football championship. One of Farmington's star players was Matt Menas Jr., whose father had just died in No. 9. Matt went on to play football at West Virginia University and, 14 years later, would be one of only 21 survivors of the 1968 disaster.

Another victim in 1954, Lonnie Hartzell, was the uncle of football great Sam Huff, who was born and raised in the area. Mike notes that if

Two sisters of Charles Fluharty grieve as the No. 9 mine is sealed on November 14, 1954. The body of their brother was one of 15 sealed underground until the mine was reopened the following March. Another man was killed on the surface. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives.

The 16 Victims of the 1954 No. 9 Disaster

George Alberts
Louis Beafore
Harry Dunmire
Harry Floyd Sr.
Charles "Barney" Fluharty
Joe Gregor
Lonnie Hartzell
Carroll Ice
Howard Jenkins
Clyde Keener
Charles Korsh Jr.
Nick Kovarbasich
Matt Menas Sr.
Russell Morris
Joe Opyoke
Robert Sanders

it weren't for Huff's football prowess, which took him to WVU and eventually the Pro Football Hall of Fame, he probably would have become a miner like the other men in No. 9 and might very well have been on that deadly shift on November 13, 1954. Another of Lonnie's nephews, Ebert Hartzell, would die in the 1968 explosion.

A federal investigation of the 1954 disaster found that under company orders, miners at No. 9 had been regularly violating safety regulations for fear of losing their jobs or being assigned to more dangerous tasks. One miner, Paris Joseph Bryant, later testified, "Anytime you brought up anything, you would always get in trouble. I figured I needed a job, and it was best to keep my mouth shut."

Due to the gassy nature of the mine and repeated safety violations, mining engineers recommended shutting down No. 9 permanently. But, as Paul Nyden noted, No. 9 was one of Consol's biggest-producing mines, with 35 to 40 years of remaining reserves. The mine reopened in July 1955, four months after it'd been unsealed, setting the stage for the nation's worst mine disaster of the last 67 years.

Marion County native M. RAYMOND ALVAREZ holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from West Virginia University and a doctorate in health care from Central Michigan University. He's a visiting assistant professor for WVU's Public Administration program and a health care consultant. This is his 13th article for GOLDENSEAL. His most recent contribution was in our Summer 2017 issue.

Laura and Walter Martin about the time of the 1968 Farmington Mine Disaster. All photos courtesy of Zella Martin Keener, unless noted otherwise.

"Is your dad home from the mines?"

By M. Raymond Alvarez

Early on the morning of November 20, 1968, the phone rang at the Martin home in Bellview, just north of Fairmont. Zella Martin, a 20-year-old college student, picked it up. "Hello," she said hesitantly. Her mother, Laura, was asleep in another room.

A family friend, Mary Howvalt from Rivesville, was on the line. Mary quickly asked, "Zella, is your dad home from the mines?"

"I think he's in the kitchen," Zella replied as she thought she'd heard something. She put the phone down to check. Returning, Zella said, "No, he isn't in the kitchen."

Mary said, "Go wake up your mom." Zella left the phone off the hook and went to awaken her mom.

When Zella returned, she listened in as Mary told her mom there'd been an explosion.

Zella Martin (front) with her sister Bonnie in 1953.

Zella says she'll never forget that moment or Mary's words, "Laura, I just heard No. 9 blew up!" Zella froze. She knew her father should've been home from work by then. She silently hung up the phone, unsure of what to do next.

Zella's father, Walter Rex Martin, was 65 years old. The son of George and Maud Martin, he'd lived his early life in nearby Monongah. He was four years old at the time of the 1907 disaster there—still the deadliest in U.S. history. At age 15, he'd left home to become a coal miner in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. He met a pretty young girl named Laura who served meals and helped the owners of a boarding house where single miners, including Walter, lived. When they married in 1930, Walter was 26, and Laura was 15. By the late 1950s, Walter and Laura had moved to Rivesville, where, Zella remembers, "It was feast or famine. You were on strike or laid off." But compared to the early days of mining, when Walter first started, "a union job in the mines was like heaven. You could pay off the debt to the company store and earn enough to keep your family going."

Fred Martin, the youngest of Laura and Walter Martin's sons, and his wife, Elisa, visit his parents' graves in East Millsboro, Pennsylvania.

Walter had recently retired after mining coal for nearly 50 years, but retirement didn't suit him. After Zella, the youngest of six children, graduated from Rivesville High School and began attending Fairmont State College (now University), Walter went back to work at Consol's No. 9 mine to help pay for her education. Fifty years later, a tear comes to Zella's eye as she struggles to say, "I've always felt guilty about that."

On November 20, Walter was one of 99 men working the cat-eye shift, which began at midnight and was supposed to end at 8 a.m. Later that morning, Zella's dad still hadn't come home, and she was getting more nervous by the moment. "Those days were absolutely horrible," Zella remembers. Like so many others, all she could do was wait.

"We still had hope somehow my dad would be there," Zella says. "He'd worked in the mines all his life. He was experienced and knew what to do in situations like that, so we thought he could still be alive."

Information was incomplete that first day. "You didn't have social networks then. No officials from the mine called us to say what was going on."

Around noon, they heard that a miner named Martin was one of 21 men who'd made it out safely; however, their hopes were soon dashed when they learned the survivor was named Gary Martin, not Walter.

It wasn't until late that evening that company officials released the names of the 78 miners still trapped inside the mine.

Laura's other children lived out of town. She hesitated to contact them at first because of the lack of information, but, one by one, she made the impossibly difficult calls. Family members started arriving that evening. "One brother came from California and another from Chicago," Zella says. "They dropped everything and left immediately for West Virginia."

The siblings gave them support and a few more days of hope, despite growing evidence to the contrary. In a particularly melancholy moment, they glimpsed a newspaper photo

showing Walter's parked car near one of the smoking portals.

"There were many days where no one slept," Zella says. She went with her brothers to No. 9 but notes, "We couldn't get anywhere near the mine. The state trooper turned us around. We never went back. We just wanted to see about my father."

After that one attempt, the family stayed at their Bellview home. "You give up hope, and then you don't give up hope," she reflects. "I always said, 'Love you, Dad; see you later!' as my way of knowing he'd return home each day. I was the baby and still at home. My dad and I were really close."

When the decision was made to seal the mine, it didn't end the uncertainty for the Martins. It would be several more years before his body was recovered.

"My mom worked about 20 hours a week for the board of education as a janitress," Zella says. "She didn't have much income. For the next year or so, it was tough on my mom. We didn't have a lot of money. My mother was about 55, so she couldn't collect Social Security. Right before the explosion, my father had been diagnosed with black lung. So, my mother eventually got his black lung benefits and workers' comp."

Laura Martin became active with the Widows Mine Disaster Committee, known as the Farmington Widows. These women were a strong political voice in the months that followed [see page 52]. There was some debate among the widows about how best to distribute $200,000 in relief funds that had been raised through various donations. Some needed the money immediately, while others wanted to put it into trust funds for the 121 children who were left fatherless by No. 9. Laura Martin and most of the other widows chose to receive some of the funding at the time.

Zella Martin Keener reflects on how the disaster and her father's death affected her family. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

Zella put her college studies on hold and went to work full time in the business office of Fairmont Clinic.

The widows soon turned their attention to improving mine safety regulations. A formidable group, the Farmington Widows were able to sway national politicians through their personal sto-

Zella Martin Keener (standing near the center with sunglasses) and her extended family today.

ries, inspirational speeches, and proud solidarity. Laura was among those who traveled to Washington D.C., at the behest of Representative Ken Hechler. It was the first time many of them, including Laura, had been on a plane. Their tenacity convinced Congress and a very hesitant President Richard Nixon to enact the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.

Consol eventually reached an out-of-court settlement with most of the widows, including Laura Martin, for a lump sum of $10,000 apiece. Neither the monetary settlement nor national mine safety changes brought any closure for the Martins. That didn't occur until Walter's body—along with those of eight others—was finally recovered on September 12, 1972. Recovery team members informed the family that Walter was found sitting upright on a rail track. His bowed head was resting in his hands, with his arms supported on his knees, like "he had just gone to sleep," according to Zella. As the fresh oxygen supply was depleted, he most likely died from inhaling methane gas and suffered relatively little pain or trauma.

Walter was experienced enough to know how explosions affected different sections of the mine and probably realized quickly that he wouldn't be rescued. So, he sat and waited.

"I would have liked to have had his lunch bucket back, but we got his pocket watch," Zella says in a bittersweet moment. The family held a service at DeGarmo Funeral Home in Rivesville. He was interred in the family plot in East Millsboro, Pennsylvania. Laura Martin died in 1993 and was buried beside her husband.

Zella eventually completed her college degree, married, and raised two children. She retired several years ago from the FBI Criminal Justice Information Services and currently serves on the town council of White Hall, near Fairmont.

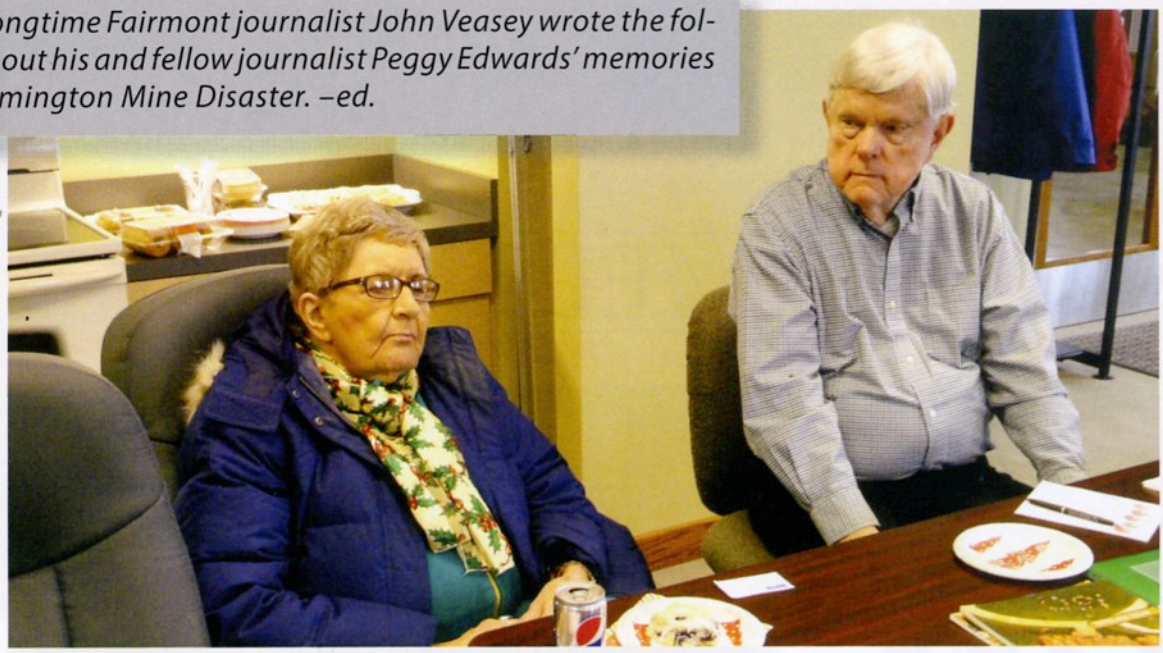
Looking back, she remembers the hazards and hardships of growing up in a coal mining family. Coping with life-changing injuries and, potentially, death was something every family faced on a daily basis. "I do talk about it to my children," she says. "We go to the cemetery and cry. My mom always said to come once a year and visit her grave. So, I do."

MEDIA

Reporters from around the world cram into the back storage room of the Champion Store to cover the mine disaster. Photo by Bob Campione.

While other coal mine disasters had made national news, there had never been anything televised on Farmington's scale. Millions across the nation followed the daily developments. Most families associated with the No. 9 tragedy have negative memories of the national media but generally feel more positively about the local press. Here are some recollections of that time from local journalists and a photographer. –ed.

In 2017, longtime Fairmont journalist John Veasey wrote the following about his and fellow journalist Peggy Edwards' memories of the Farmington Mine Disaster. –ed.



In December 2017, veteran Fairmont reporters Peggy Edwards and John Veasey met with M. Raymond Alvarez and GOLDENSEAL's editor to discuss their memories of the Farmington Mine Disaster. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

Two Reporters Recall That Infamous Morning

By John Veasey

I will never forget that particular morning—one of the more dramatic of my newspaper career. I was just about to leave for my job at *The West Virginian* when I received a rare early morning phone call about 6:45. It was from the late Bill Wilcox telephoning me that there had been an explosion at the Farmington No. 9 mine. He knew I arrived for work about 7:00 where most of the other staff members didn't come in until 9:00. Bill was the advertising director for the two Fairmont newspapers that were housed in the same building.

At that time, I served as both sports editor and news editor for Fairmont's afternoon newspaper. I threw the sports pages together. Although I wasn't really a photographer, I grabbed a camera and rushed off to Farmington, never having visited the mine before. I got there quickly, arriving near the company store area, where many people had gathered, about 8 a.m. This was at the south end of the mine. Bob Campione, the excellent young photographer at *The Fairmont Times*, arrived at the north end and was fortunate enough to take that great photograph of the three miners being rescued, but who now have all passed away.

I snapped several pictures while talking to mining officials as newsmen were arriving there from all over the country—many before noon. A large group of the miners' wives waited at the company store for word of their loved ones as did numerous other relatives. Sadly enough, the men were all believed to be dead within several days after the explosion. Very fortunately, a few who were near the exits of the mine did get out alive. They were the lucky ones.

Even the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) dispatched a reporter to cover the disaster. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, News Film Collection.

The day was mostly an overcast one, especially in the morning. I still have very clear thoughts about talking to one of the UMWA officials, at least that's how I remember it. But while in a discussion with him, I glanced up through a window on a building to my right and witnessed several UMWA people in a more deep discussion. I turned and snapped a photograph—one that would appear the next morning on the front of major newspapers of several metropolitan morning editions.

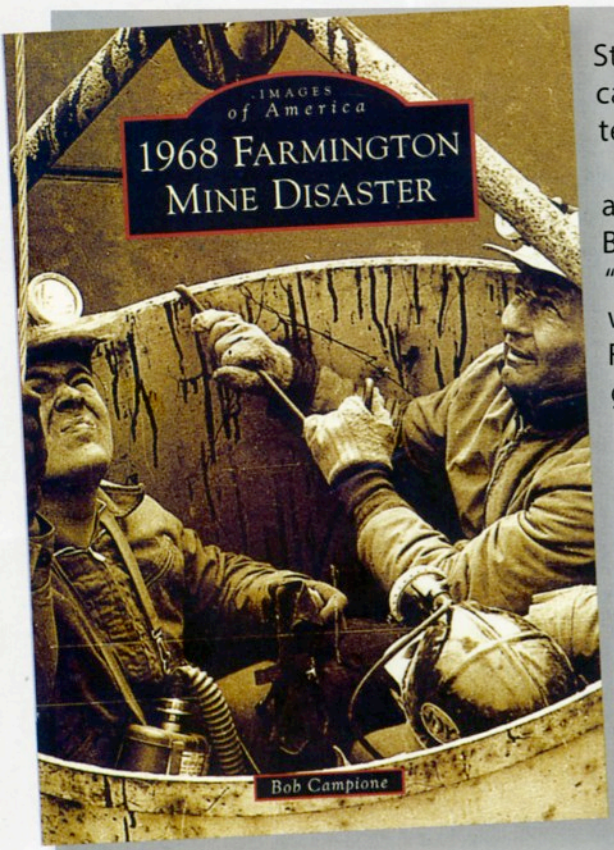
I had to go back to the office to literally get the newspaper out by its 1 p.m. press time. It sounds strange to say, but once I got back to the office, it was more or less business as usual. When you're in the newspaper business, you see a lot of gruesome things, but then you have to get yourself together, write about it, and put out a paper. It's a way of life.

"The television people were incredible. The camera crews were . . . dirty, smelly, unshaven, and unshorn. And the newsmen were not a hell of a lot better."

–Bill Evans, editor, *The Fairmont Times*

Later, I returned to the No. 9 mine and remained there until early evening to get several feature stories and pictures for the next day's afternoon edition. But even "business as usual" has its limits. In this case, what changed so dramatically from other disasters I'd covered was the arrival of the national press, which was clamoring for any information.

At first, it was just Fairmont reporters on the scene. Reporters from Clarksburg and Morgantown and the Clarksburg television crews were the next to arrive. The one location they could go was to the company store at No. 9 camp situated slightly north of Farmington. However, by early afternoon, the national media began to descend on Marion County. Confusion began to mount



In 2016, Bob Campione published *1968 Farmington Mine Disaster,* with photos he took November 20-29, 1968. Most had never before been published or shared.

In 1968, Bob was a 20-year-old student at Fairmont State College (now University), but he'd shot photos for *The Fairmont Times* since he was a student at East Fairmont High. When he first started, he wasn't quite 16 yet, so his mother had to drive him to assignments.

On April 30, 1965, he'd photographed the aftermath of another deadly explosion at No. 9, during construction of the Llewellyn portal. "That was my first major event in terms of typical assignments," he recalls. His father was a coal miner, so Bob was familiar with the risks. By fall 1968, Bob was about to enter a semester of student teaching at Fairmont State. The Department of Education wouldn't allow student teachers to hold outside jobs.

On November 20, 1968, around 6 a.m., *Times* editor Bill Evans called Bob and said, "BJ (his nickname for Bob), we've got a mine incident at Farmington—I need you to go with me to see what's going on." Bob initially declined because he had class.

Evans replied, "You don't understand. This is big, and it's really bad." Evans hired Bob as a temporary one-day photo stringer, not an employee, thus avoiding Fairmont State's rules about outside employment but leading to another confrontation down the road.

A little before 10 a.m., Bob got a tip to go to another portal, where he snapped shots of the last surviving men being rescued in a bucket. His photo of Gary Martin, Bud Hillberry, and Charlie Crim is featured on the cover of his book.

"I knew to go to the Champion Store as that was where everyone was gathering," Bob recalls. At one point while Bob was taking photos, a man approached him and angrily asked him to leave, saying, "I was told you are bothering these people." Bob answered, "I'm doing a job like the men in the mine. It's my job to be here. I don't want to be disrespectful."

The man then calmed down and told Bob how he could get some other photos. Bob remembers, "He had a jeep and offered to take me. He was a family member of one of the miners. He became my go to person when I needed to get directions from time to time. That's how I got photos no one else got because they couldn't get there. I tried to find the man's name to give him credit when I did the book, but I could not identify him."

As John Veasey notes, photographers from across the country had taken over the newspaper's darkroom. "I got into some verbal confrontations with at least one of the Associated Press (AP) photographers," Bob recalls. "He and I tangled. He had found my printed photo of the men in the bucket and sent it out over the wire to affiliated newspapers across the company. Bill Evans and I were furious."

The other photographer claimed it was AP property because the *Times* was an AP publication. Evans pointed out, however, that since Bob was a temporary stringer and not a newspaper employee, the AP had no rights to his photos.

Looking back at his iconic images from 50 years ago, Bob says he didn't realize the importance of his work at the time, "I was just a young kid doing the job I was asked to do."

After getting a teaching degree, Bob never went back into newspaper photography. He had "worked six nights a week at the paper with no social life."

Bob held on to his original negatives from Farmington and published the book as "a labor of love. It was a way to preserve these photos."

The book is available at area bookstores or online through Arcadia Publishing or other sellers.
–M. Raymond Alvarez

Bill Evans was a legend in West Virginia journalism, known for his "no-holds-barred reporting," in Bob Campione's words. *The Fairmont Times* editor personally chose Campione to take photos at Farmington. Evans also was a key John F. Kennedy supporter during the 1960 Democratic primary in West Virginia. Photo by Bob Campione.

with the influx of rescue teams from seven area mines, company officials, union officials from District 31, reporters, and families. Television images of billowing smoke from the mine were broadcast on the nightly news programs on CBS, ABC, and NBC.

Channel 11 out of Pittsburgh was the first to send helicopters. Media reps were everywhere by 2 p.m. I never tried to get close to the mine site. I couldn't get over the way some of the "big city media" would pick out the grieving relatives, mostly women, that they believed might break into tears during interviews and "go after them." The modus operandi of the out-of-state reporters seemed to be "you've got to get at least five women crying and two little boys in every story." We approached reporting differently. I tried to talk to people who looked like they would talk to me. It was sickening. That's the way I thought about it then, and it's still the way I remember it today—50 years later.

"I remember Walter Cronkite leading off the national news with the Farmington Mine Disaster. I was just 12 at the time, and I'd never seen an outline of West Virginia on the nightly news. It was surreal."

–Joe Reynolds, international field representative, UMWA District 31

Peggy Edwards, then a young Fairmont reporter, remembers it similarly, "The outside media reps were not very nice. They wanted to show people crying and would ask questions like, 'How do you feel about your husband / father being trapped in the mine?' It wasn't pleasant to see this," she comments. Peggy was there for the next nine days.

She adds, "I covered it daily while it happened. Then it died out the Friday after Thanksgiving. From a reporting standpoint, I was an observer. I didn't want to intrude on the lives of the families. One of the out-of-state reporters did a story about whether the company store was gouging people on prices. It probably

Fairmont reporter Peggy Edwards as she appeared about the time of the disaster. Courtesy of Peggy Edwards.

was true but wasn't appropriate," she recalled. "We didn't sensationalize this."

Richard Parrish, *The West Virginian* editor, assigned Peggy to cover an evening church service for the families. She got into the church, but a sheriff's deputy escorted her out. "I hadn't done anything, but I wasn't allowed to stay. I could understand that. We had to stay at the Champion Store," she recalls. "That's where the information was. When some of it took much longer or extended past deadlines, reporters relied on what they heard from people in the store. Misinformation was rampant.

"I was able to assist one of the major network news reporters . . . around the area and still remember the nice note of appreciation she sent me later. I think she agreed with me that a few members of her big-city press corps were unduly rude in their attempts to interview some of the relatives of the doomed miners."

"The dark gray skies and bitter cold November wind this morning reflected the tragic mood of the moment as the Marion County community of Farmington found itself in the midst of another mine disaster . . . but the residents, those with relatives and friends trapped inside the underground caverns, never can really be prepared for such a moment."

–John Veasey, November 21, 1968

Our photography darkroom at the newspaper was taken over by the national press, and it was difficult for our own cameramen to even use it. We literally had to stand in line to be able to use our own darkrooms. (This, of course, was before the era of modern digital cameras.) UMWA Chief Tony Boyle showed up. . . . I knew Boyle had perhaps the most evil appearance I had ever seen but never thought then that he could help plan a murder.

This explosion was one of the real dark chapters in the life of Marion County—one I will never forget.

John Veasey is a retired editor of *The Times West Virginian* in Fairmont. The West Virginia University journalism graduate began as sports editor and worked his way up to editor. He's led numerous community projects, including a fund-raising campaign for a new soccer complex in Marion County and a huge Welcome Home celebration for area troops who fought in Desert Storm in the early 1990s. This is John's first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.

COMFORT

Linda Roberts (Hickman) (seated at far left), a nurse from Fairmont Clinic, consoles family members at the Champion Store. Linda worked at the clinic for several more years and was an assistant administrator for clinical services. When her husband's job transferred him from the area, she relocated to Beckley. Today, she serves as senior manager for product safety and management at Mylan Pharmaceuticals. Photo by Bob Campione.

As we wrote in our Fall 2016 issue about that year's deadly floods, "West Virginians pull together" in times of crisis. Neighbors help neighbors, doctors and nurses aid those who are ailing, and ministers lift spirits. –ed.

Healing Spirits

By Rev. O. Richard Bowyer

At the time of the Farmington Mine Disaster, I was in charge of Fairmont State's Wesley Foundation and a member of the Monongahela Valley Association of Health Centers (MVA) board of directors. In my office on Locust Avenue, I'd heard ambulances going to the hospital that first day. I was asked to join Beatrice "Bea" Rhudy, a medical social worker at MVA. Vaughn Michaels, chaplaincy director of Union Protestant Hospital in Clarksburg, also was there. They would be handling the families' emotional needs during the 10-day waiting period. The clergy's role became more important as the non-local media clamored for human-interest stories and badgered grieving families. The outside press was ruthless at times in approaching grieving families. That prompted me and other team members into action.

The Rev. O. Richard Bowyer and his team provided comfort to family members during the disaster. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

On November 21, a decision was made to sequester the families and get them out of the very-public spotlight at the Champion Store. The outside media was abusive, eliciting anguish. Our local media was sensitive and compassionate and did responsible journalism. Others did not. It was plain nasty.

Rev. John Mobley had also joined us. He'd previously been the minister at James Fork United Methodist Church and had worked in the mines. After seeing how the families were being hassled at the Champion Store, he and I arranged the furniture into a rectangle to deter the media from approaching them. It wasn't enough. No one person was really in charge of shielding the families, other than the health care professionals providing medical care. Rev. Mobley said, "The church is setting down there. Let's go down there." Thus, this small Methodist church, not far from the company store, became the family gathering point and haven.

Eventually, I was designated as spokesperson for the crisis team and soon controlled access to the families at the church. I was surprised I could wield such influence with the company officials, the union, and public safety personnel. Looking back, I guess I was accepted by the company and union due to my connections to both the college and MVA. There were too many people on site, so I decided we should give credentials only to the people who should be there and who were clearly

The James Fork Methodist Church was organized in 1815. This building, dedicated in 1918, became a refuge for family members while waiting for news about their loved ones. In 1969, it was honored as the West Virginia United Methodist Church of the Year for its work during the disaster. Photo by Bob Campione.

there to help. If there was any question about getting through the barricades to the church, the security guards had to call us.

Most longtime mining families didn't come out to the church because, sadly, waiting for word after disasters had become somewhat routine, for lack of a better word. Families with little mining heritage, though, didn't know where else to go.

I particularly remember two families that needed the most help. One victim from Wetzel County had just been hired a few weeks before the explosion. He was new to mining, and his family was totally unprepared for the situation. Families would stand around and get only hearsay information. We determined that everyone needed to hear accurate information at the same time. So, the church became a news outlet for the families.

We convinced the company officials to talk to victims' families with a consistent message before making general statements to the press or others at the Champion Store. Prior to that, the families were angry that they'd been getting news secondhand. They now had the information first, before the press or anyone else. A phone was installed at the church to aid communication. I remained on site for eight days and nights, spending only one night at home, when my son was ill. One of the MVA nurses, Eloise Lepera, went with me that night to attend to him; then, I was back the next day.

Salvation Army volunteers worked around the clock to provide meals at the small community center adjacent to the church. The Red Cross provided cots for those who wanted to stay there. During the week, we received telegrams, condolences, and even items sent for the families to touch. Some visitors were now coming out of curiosity. Space grew constrained at the church, so the company donated a trailer.

What we did changed the culture of dealing with mass grief and disasters. It hopefully gave some inspiration to the subsequent organizing efforts of the Farmington Widows. Protecting grieving families was groundbreaking at the time; today, it's handled routinely. The clinic was geared up to do this, serving predominantly miners and their families.

Part of what enabled us to do what we did was that the clinic board members had had a full tour of the No. 9 mine just three months before. It personalized the locations for me. The clinic

often did mine tours so the doctors would better understand the working conditions of the men they served. I'd ridden on the same hoist that was destroyed in one of the explosions.

Throughout the days, many dignitaries, including Governor-Elect Arch Moore, Consol corporate officers, and UMWA President Tony Boyle came to Farmington. After meeting with the families, the company officials would make official announcements from the store. After the trailer was set up, I had students from the Wesley Foundation volunteer as babysitters. MVA nurses provided daily monitoring to the women, especially to a young pregnant widow who was near her delivery date.

A young seminarian who was on Thanksgiving break with his family in Fairmont joined the chaplaincy team. D. D. Meighen was 23 years old and attended Methodist Theological School in Delaware, Ohio, following his graduation from Fairmont State. His father was a supply clerk at the Osage No. 15 mine, so he understood mining families. He called me and showed up at No. 9 the next day.

I'd been trained to minister to families in need and had a lot of experience at it. But this was something entirely different. After seven days of meeting with the victims' families very closely, and with virtually no sleep, it was like I could read their minds. I could anticipate their feelings.

The Rev. O. Richard Bowyer (left) and M. H. Ross pose in the 1970s. Ross established the Mon Valley Association (MVA) of Health Centers in Fairmont in 1958. He was the administrator there until 1978, when he joined the Rural Practice Project at the University of North Carolina. Courtesy of Fairmont Clinic.

A lot of people reading this may be reminded of the families waiting for information at Sago in 2006 or Upper Big Branch in 2010. Officials there followed many of the same protocols we set up for disseminating information, but false rumors unfortunately spread after those disasters. The main difference was that in 1968, there weren't any cell phones. You didn't have constant communication with the outside world or 24-hour news cycles. In 1968, you knew only what was in the newspapers or what people saw on their grainy televisions. So, it was a lot easier to control information and make sure families got only the facts.

It was a constant challenge keeping out folks who didn't need to be at the church. In particular, there were a lot of what I call *soothsayers*, who had theoretically come to comfort the families. One night, we were standing outside the church by a barrel and had a fire going. A group of people from a church in Ohio drove up and demanded to have prayer with the families because they claimed that the men were indeed alive in the

This image, taken from film footage, shows the church and trailer, installed to accommodate overflow crowds and to provide additional privacy for families. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives (WVSA), News Film Collection.

mine. I said that we already had ministers here and that no additional help was needed.

Then I was asked, "Who are you?" One of my associates stepped up and said, "We are chaplain coordinators!" I'm pretty sure he just made that phrase up on the spot. I informed the Ohioans that we appreciated their concerns and prayers. I told them that the Salvation Army was providing food nearby and that they were welcome to eat. I then said, "We'll pray that you have a safe trip back home to Ohio."

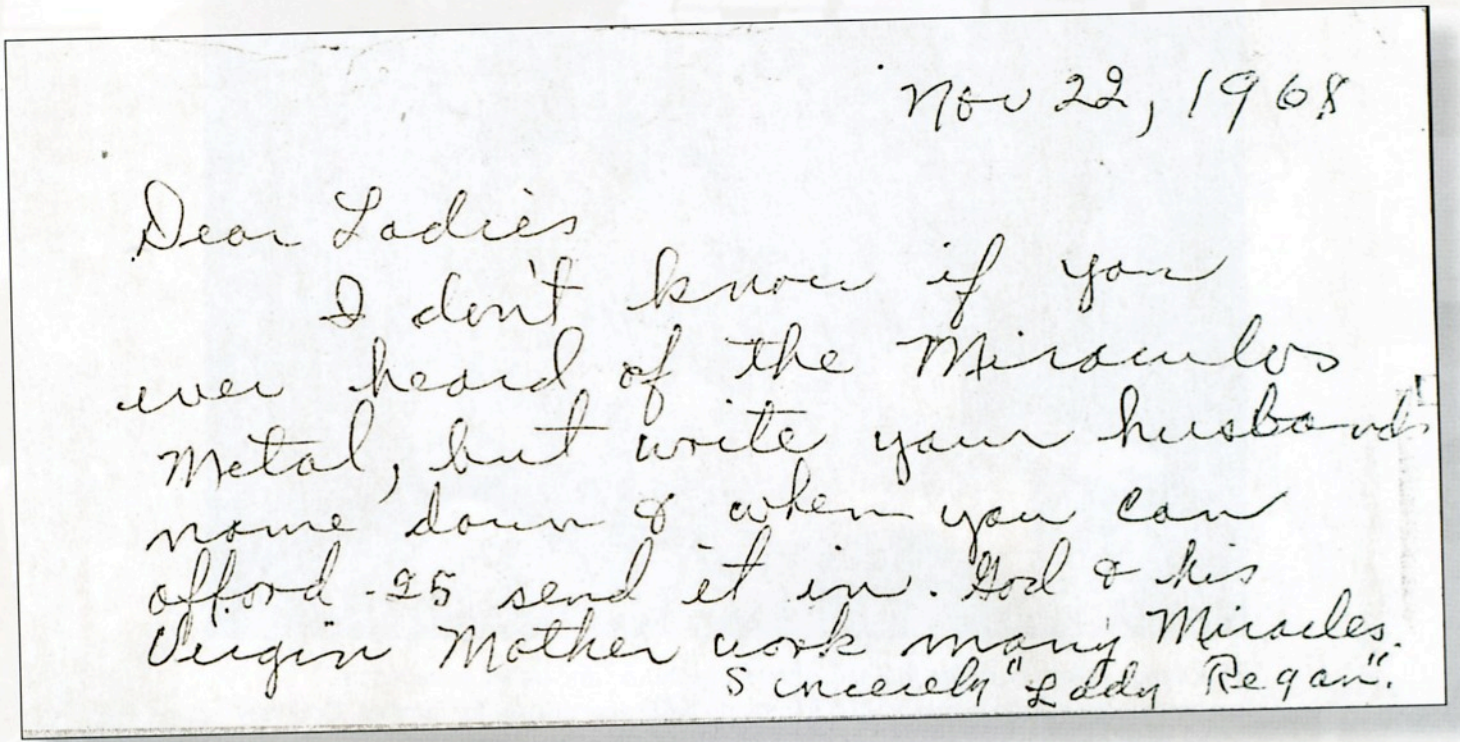
After that, we made a rule that only pastors, rabbis, or priests of the families in the church were allowed to come down. Our goal was to keep the soothsayers and inquisitors away as well as to protect the families from false news. After that encounter, the state police agreed that nobody would be allowed past the barricade without my personal approval. This type of intervention and disaster crisis management is common today, but we were making it up on the fly. In fact, some people have told me that a lot of typical disaster management practices now are modeled on what we came up with at Farmington.

Today, when I watch archival film of Farmington, it's obvious how much the cameras loved to zoom in on mothers and young children. That was another major reason we moved the families—for privacy.

Today, you have to be trained to participate in emergency response, homeland security plans, etc. Communities have disaster plans, and response teams must be vetted to ensure they are well prepared for grief counseling. We're much more aware of the need for an organized response. That wasn't the case then.

Once the families were moved to the church, a lot of our work was just common sense. The church was still a place of worship and a place for grieving, but it also had to be functional. For instance, we converted the communion table into a medical table. Cots were set up. It was no longer just a church. I could stand in one spot and see what was going on anywhere.

Initially, the nursing staff would rush over to a family if someone started to cry, but when you have six or seven families and one falls apart, it can start a chain reaction. The nurses' sense of compassion was right, but it could push some over the edge. So, I asked the nursing personnel



Nov 22, 1968

Dear Ladies
I don't know if you ever heard of the Miracles Metal, but write your husbands name down & when you can afford .25 send it in. God & his Virgin Mother work many Miracles.
Sincerely "Lady Regan".

This letter represents one of many offers sent by what the Rev. Bowyer calls "soothsayers." This note instructed the wives of miners to write down their husbands' names and mail them back with 25 cents enclosed, with the assurance that "God & his Virgin Mother work many Miracles." Courtesy of Georgia State University, M. H. Ross Collection.

to curtail their instincts and let families have a moment to themselves. Often, it was better for families to let out their emotions without nurses treating it as a medical emergency and attracting more attention to them.

Throughout the week, the company posted readings and reports on the church walls. You never want to lose hope, but anyone who knew anything about carbon dioxide or methane, particularly those from long lines of miners, anticipated the final outcome. A week after the initial explosion, company officials met in the trailer beside the church. It was Wednesday, November 27. All efforts at recovery had failed; company officials had decided to close up the mine the day after Thanksgiving. They told me to prepare my team but not to mention it to families. Again, the goal was for every person to hear the same information at once. That was when I first grasped that I was playing a bigger role than I'd recognized. I told a few people on our staff, and we prepared a response. It was guarded, but we had an intervention plan for the announcement.

No doubt, most families knew why they were invited to the church on the afternoon of Friday, November 29. Rev. John Barnes, the church's pastor, was asked to give the opening prayer. It was the most moving prayer I'd ever heard in my life. It was so sensitive and timely. It kept things calm. But when the announcement was made, the air was just sucked out of the room.

Bishop Joseph Hodges from the Catholic Diocese was also there. After the announcement, he offered the Lord's Prayer. It seemed innocent enough, but one distraught family thought he was inferring that the disaster was God's will. As soon as the bishop finished and started to leave, the family was ready to attack him. We blocked the family members from getting out of their pews until we could get him out.

To keep the media and others away from the families, the state police set up a barricade at the top of the hill between the Champion Store and the church. Courtesy of the WVSA, News Film Collection.

Company officials were also in a hurry to leave because there'd been a standing threat against them if they decided to close the mine.

After the announcement, there was some grief; other families lingered in a daze, confused about what to do next. However, for some, the announcement provided some closure after nine days of vigil. The church emptied out in a half hour, and I was one of the last to leave.

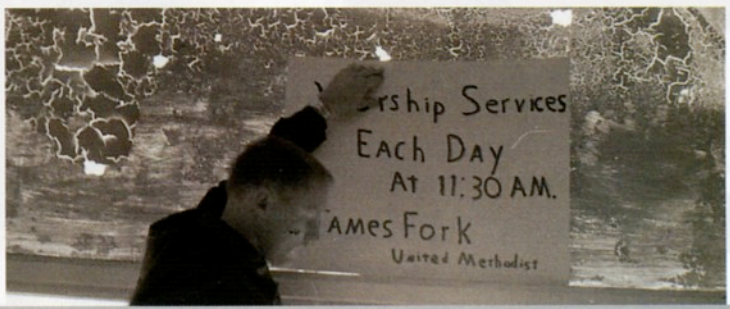
People were angry about the decision, but I thought the company, the union, and the federal oversight agency handled it as sensitively as possible, especially by preparing me and my team for the announcement. You have to remember that we didn't know what a crisis team was supposed to do. Under the circumstances, I thought the medical personnel, social workers, and "chaplain coordinators" did a remarkable job of helping to preserve the families' dignity while respectfully presenting them with the facts, as heartbreaking as they were.

When I finished that day, I had to deal with my own family's needs. My nephew in Dayton had a serious illness. I drove directly there after eight days of being with the families. During the drive, I made a tape recording that became the basis of an article for the United Methodist Church called "Lessons Learned from Farmington." It seems irrelevant today because courses are taught on crisis management and people spend their entire careers doing it. Hopefully, we had a bit of an impact on that field—certainly much more than I realized at the time.

Rev. O. RICHARD BOWYER graduated from Marshall College (now University) in philosophy and obtained masters' of divinity and theology from Duke University. He was pastor of churches in Wayne, Ohio, and Marion counties and the campus minister for the Wesley Foundation at Fairmont State College (now University) from 1962 until his retirement in 2005. Active in various district and national positions for the United Methodist church, Rev. Bowyer has served on several health care-related boards and is the only non-physician ever to hold office on the West Virginia Board of Medicine. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.

The James Fork Church Journal

By Rev. D. D. Meighen



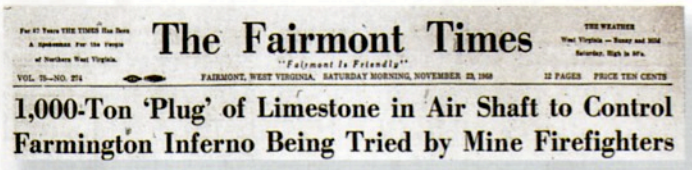
D. D. Meighen, a 23-year-old student at Methodist Theological School, was on Thanksgiving break when he was asked to volunteer for the chaplaincy team at No. 9. He kept daily notes, newspaper clippings, and other mementos of his time assisting victims' families at the James Fork United Methodist Church. When he returned to his seminary, he wrote about his experiences for his graduate thesis, "Pastoral Care: The Role of the Clergy at the Farmington Mine Disaster, November 20-29, 1968—An Evaluation of Effectiveness and Weakness." The following was excerpted from his diary by M. Raymond Alvarez and has never before been published. Photo by Bob Campione.–ed.

On November 20, 1968, a devastating explosion rocked the countryside of northern West Virginia. The aftermath was an anxious-, grief-, and dread-filled 10 days while relatives and families awaited word of [the] 78 trapped men. In all the [press] articles concerning this disaster, little mention was made of the church's role, which maintained a vigil during the ordeal. This could have been the first time where a group of ministers maintained their presence, being constantly on duty to talk, comfort, and assist the families, relatives, and friends of the men trapped. It may have been the first time that a church was used as the source of the comfort. It may have been the first time that ministers were able to witness to company officials who had to make profound moral decisions as the nights grew longer and hope was abandoned.

The company store was not only experiencing frantic outbreaks of emotions, but the mood was generally one of disgust. In the back room, the media was located, and coal officials gathered there and gave their reports. The families did not hear the news first, and the crowded congestion left many people, already struck with grief, [feeling] that the company didn't care for them. Rev. O. Richard Bowyer in conjunction with Rev. John Barnes, whose small church was at the bottom of the slope adjoining the company store, decided with the [Methodist] district superintendent of the Fairmont District, that it would be a wise idea to isolate the disaster-stricken families away from all the confusion. Dick Bowyer convinced Barnes this would be the best way for the church to serve families... The pews were twisted and turned to provide for an atmosphere of intimacy.

The altar was covered with a white cloth to cover up any church symbolism. A large coffee pot, cookies, and refreshments were placed on the table where candles were once. A public-address system was installed so families could hear the important events being presented 150 yards away in the company store. Ashtrays were also installed.

Many [family members], having lost their husbands or other immediate family members in the November 1954 explosion [see page 19], were more composed. Although their reactions were of complete disbelief, they knew the worst was upon them. Other miners who had worked in the mine . . . knowing the disastrous content of carbon monoxide and methane gas, plus [knowing] the areas of the explosions, broke the news quietly to the families. In this way, the ministers and coal company officials were assisted by those close to the miners. In many instances, the officials would break the news to the [most] stable member of the family.


The Fairmont Times

"Fairmont Is Friendly"

FAIRMONT, WEST VIRGINIA, SATURDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 23, 1968

12 PAGES PRICE TEN CENTS

1,000-Ton 'Plug' of Limestone in Air Shaft to Control Farmington Inferno Being Tried by Mine Firefighters

Saturday, November 23

Before arriving, I had read the papers, which cited little hope. [After] talking to the miners themselves, they told me it had been an easy death for [the victims]. After getting to the scene, I spent some time with Vaughn Michaels, chaplaincy director of Union Protestant Hospital in Clarksburg. Having obtained his degree in clinical work, Vaughn advised [me] not to get panicky: "If the person cries or . . . [loses] composure, don't get scared. Be free with your emotions." He said I would feel a lot and in order to do an effective job, I would have to be free with my feelings. He added, "But don't let that stop you from asking the person to go get a cup of coffee or to take him to a temporary resting or counseling site."

He further suggested that I talk about [the trapped miners] but not to give false hopes. He said, "If they ask or inquire something which you don't know, find out their answer. Don't barge in on them as they are sitting in the pews. Don't be scared to listen and learn as much about the prevailing situation in the mines so you might be able to assist if someone from the company is not there. Be aware of signs of grief and depression. Try to prevent women, for example, from [looking at] pictures of their husband or son . . . [having] outbursts of emotions over an extended period of time, or utter silence. Sometimes, it may be advantageous to say something but try to refrain from intruding. If you can only hold the hand of a person, don't hesitate." Then he said these were not strict rules: "The fact that they are in the church suggests that they look upon the church as a symbol of hope; yet, don't build up their hope."

Saturday evening, I spent four hours with people, quietly passing the time with small conversation. One young man had lost not only his father in the mine but had lost his wife and child in a local fire in Farmington at a department store [recently]. [He was] only 26; there was no way to be of assistance except to listen and allow him to work through the meaning of these events. Around 9:00, many people who had journeyed long distances felt they would prefer staying at the church instead of going to their relatives' since that might impose a burden on them. . . Salvation Army . . workers and volunteers brought 20 cots to be used as beds. During the night, as people slept with a dim light hanging from the church, Dick Bowyer consulted and witnessed to the coal officials, and I sat around the kerosene lamp outside the door . . and talked to those unable to sleep.

Much of Saturday [and Sunday and even much of Monday and the rest of the week] was devoted to those disgusted by the use of the church. There was a large-scale map of the mine posted on the back wall . . . where officials occasionally reported to the families the progress of the boring process—an attempt to drill into . a particular section to establish any communication with anyone possibly alive. Many times, I stood around listening to people explaining the mechanical aspects of air intake [and] air-content analysis, while noting their expressions for signs of assistance. Much of the concern came over the ashtrays. These people were told the church was The Only Place where the families could come together, be with others in the same situation, be away from the world, and receive any type of assistance.


The Times-West Virginian

Fairmont, W. Va., Sunday Morning, November 24, 1968

40 PAGES

Efforts Are Being Intensified to Slow Down Fire; 9 Bore Holes Planned to Test Mine Atmosphere

Sunday, November 24

The [Monongahela Valley Association of Health Centers (MVA)] health clinic decided to expand [its] help. Two nurses were assigned. A doctor was frequently around, a family [therapist], and social worker. . . . Since the [Farmington branch of the] clinic

dealt with miners and their families, many people were comforted by [the nurses'] sight. I learned that a few of the ministers had been censoring mail arriving on the miners' wives' behalf. Often, these letters were obscene in their language, suggesting that for a quarter, [the wives] could be told [whether] their husbands were alive. Others wrote of money that would provide a super-natural realm of getting in touch with their loved ones. The wives and families were not told of this censoring, although the company knew of it.

By Sunday evening, it became apparent to me that grieving was not an individual experience; nearly all those gathered were accompanied by other family members and relatives. One minister who served nearby was so concerned with working at the church that he completely neglected his duties to the families of six miners he had in his congregation who had preferred to remain at home.

Sunday was a big day. It began with a brief ray of sun breaking through the dreary, grey, overcast clouds. The papers indicated this might be the day when rescue teams would be sent into the mine. The president of Consolidation Coal arrived to express his deep concerns, telling the gathered that he would remain until a final decision would have to be made. The people accepted quietly the company was doing everything humanly possible. The company agreed that [the] priority of any information belonged to the families first and that no announcements would be made to the press until it was said first at the church. During the morning, an ease [of] attitude prevailed. Much was due to the visit, much was due to the awaiting, which seemed now to be producing results. We were instructed not to be optimistic. Consolidation Coal had become very personal with us, assuring us any decision would be told to us to prepare for any psychological repercussions that might appear.

In the meantime, names had been posted where each miner was to have been. . . . And during the intervals of giving reports on boring operations, these [four] officials . . . began to spend time in the church with the families. This began to establish a strong relationship between the two. In the meantime, the company also posted all the 11 drilling sites, and at each report of an operation, the reports were published on the wall beside the names of the miners.

The president of the company announced a decision to send a rescue team into the mine while stressing the possible hopelessness of the situation. One lady suggested that [they] all get on their knees and ask God for guidance. What was significant was that much of the stress on the prayer was for the rescue team and [its] safety. While the operation continued, hope increased to its greatest heights; although, much of it was superficial.

We had to prepare ourselves for the ordeal as well as prepare those who would wait with the time element. We began to encourage more vigorously people staying home if they felt better comforted by relatives and family, or at least going home early in the evening when no great developments appeared on the horizon. The company had assured them [it would call] if any important development arose. The night before, the company had installed two phones for use by the families and ministers. With these numbers, we assured the families we would call them and give a daily report. We also used the phones to assist and establish donations for soft drinks, plus giving a lending hand in the kitchen.

So, Sunday evening, Dick Bowyer and I went home. We stayed away 'til Monday evening. We understood from later sources that people reacted generally calmly when told of the rescue squad's inability to get into any area where the miners were. But they understood the lives [of the rescue team must not] be endangered. Anyone who watched the national news that night felt all hope was exhausted. We had, of course, advised all those gathered at the church during the two previous days to stay away from the news media.

The Fairmont Times

"Fairmont Is Friendly"

FAIRMONT, WEST VIRGINIA, MONDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 25, 1968

Rescue Teams Make First Exploration Trip in No. 9, Find No Trace of 78 Miners Missing After Explosion

Monday, November 25

[The] morning and afternoon passed without any great disturbance. Much excitement was generated at the company store by news media people who felt the world was losing [interest in] this human-interest story. Those present were asked if they had anyone in the mine; charges against the coal company were elaborated and magnified. Fortunately, none of this filtered to those gathered in the church. By Monday evening, [John] Corcoran, president of Consolidation Coal, announced that little hope was [left]. Two bore holes had struck coal instead of openings they had hoped for. Fast-speed drills had to be established, but even at that rate, to drill as far as 700 feet into the ground would take [35] hours. Monday evening was the beginning of a dread week, 'til Friday when the decision would be made.

One man who had worked in the mine for 27 years remained at the church every day. His son was inside. He knew the results; yet, he kept giving reassurances based on his knowledge of passageways, air current, and barricade possibilities. Yet, in dialogue with him, he felt there was not hope. After a while, he began to tell people, "The situation doesn't look good at all." I told him the best thing possible would be to relieve their fears . that knowing their men being buried underground was a terrible thought to entertain.

On Monday evening, I was asked the first question which began to be asked throughout the week: "What kind of death did they die?" By this time, people were accepting the fact of death and wondering when they would be able to recover the bodies. We were told the tremendous explosion made the death fast and easy, but the recovery operations could be two years away.

The Fairmont Times

"Fairmont Is Friendly"

FAIRMONT, WEST VIRGINIA, TUESDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 26, 1968

Deadly Air and Explosion Hazards Halt Rescue Effort At Farmington No. 9; Hopes 'Slim,' Says Consol Head

Tuesday, November 26

By Tuesday, things were still calm. The company store remained the seat of oratorical exaggeration, and I assigned myself the task of making journeys there to check on possible news media people attempting to enter the church. . . The officials were dreary, spending most of the day in active discussion. With little sleep, they were quite nervous. In a news conference, the executive vice president of the company broke and began crying. When news of this ciphered down to the [church], the worst became apparent. They told us the boring of holes was only an appeasement to the world, something that had to be done to tell the world all would be done, that hope would not be abandoned until every possible section had been checked for life. John Corcoran laid it on the line when talking to the people: that .001 percent of carbon monoxide would kill a person in 10 minutes, and unfortunately, the readings from the sections [were] as high as 2 percent.

The Fairmont Times

"Fairmont Is Friendly"

FAIRMONT, WEST VIRGINIA, WEDNESDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 27, 1968

14th Explosion Further Cuts Rescue Chances at No. 9

Wednesday, November 27

The [MVA] held a special session [for us] on death and grieving . . . and possible ways of dealing with it. Particularly stressed was the thought that the final realization of death would come with the announcement of sealing. . . [It] was a tiring ordeal. The discussion usually started with [people] making a comment about the section their [family] member

was in [and] that hope didn't look good. They sought reassurance in us through questions, "Is there any hope left?" "Will they have to seal the mine?"

All these questions indicated the people were preparing themselves. We gave them typical, I suppose, answers like, "Your husband wouldn't want you to give up on life." "Death appears in mean ways; yet, it does offer new beginnings, new life." What was particularly difficult was many miners were near retirement or quitting. It was also difficult for those who had lost their husbands in '54, now to find their sons dead. Since coal mining communities build up close ties and family kinship groups are tightly drawn, no one suffered alone.

By this time, the people were in an anxious state . that had surpassed real depression. They were obviously aware of the inevitable conclusions and forced to live with that awareness. They might, though, not have had time to think about all this. So, the overall reaction was one of anxious calm.

During the evenings, there was not much feedback between us ministers. . . . We mapped out the church and the way it was being used. We began to keep a record of workers in the kitchen, those that remained in the church for the longest periods of time—the type of person they appear to be. . . . We did not have enough space to operate in; the church was too small, no way in and out except the main door. This would be a problem when the decision to seal the mine [was made] and 180 would be gathered in the small building. We surmised that ministers lacked communication in planning strategies to deal with certain situations. We did not check with the Red Cross about the services [it] could render. We did not employ shifts of ministers nor did we establish any real timetable. We did not ponder what would be our duty after news [broke] of sealing the mine.


THANKSGIVING

The Fairmont Times

"Fairmont Is Friendly"

FAIRMONT, WEST VIRGINIA, THURSDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 28, 1968 — 42 PAGES — PRICE TEN CENTS

Hour of Dread Decision Nearing at Farmington No. 9

Thursday, November 28 (Thanksgiving)

There was almost a sullen quiet over the church. John Corcoran came and spent the afternoon with the people. Governor [Hulett Smith] also appeared, giving comfort wherever he could notice it. . . . We knew it would only be a [matter] of time 'til sealing operations began. In the evening, most of the families felt very relieved by their concern after talking to the leaders in the state. Most accepted the fact that everything humanly possible was being done. Most of the crying was done in a low sob. Papers, TV, and radio indicated there would be sealing operations starting very soon. However, they were ready to accept this.


The Weather

The West Virginian

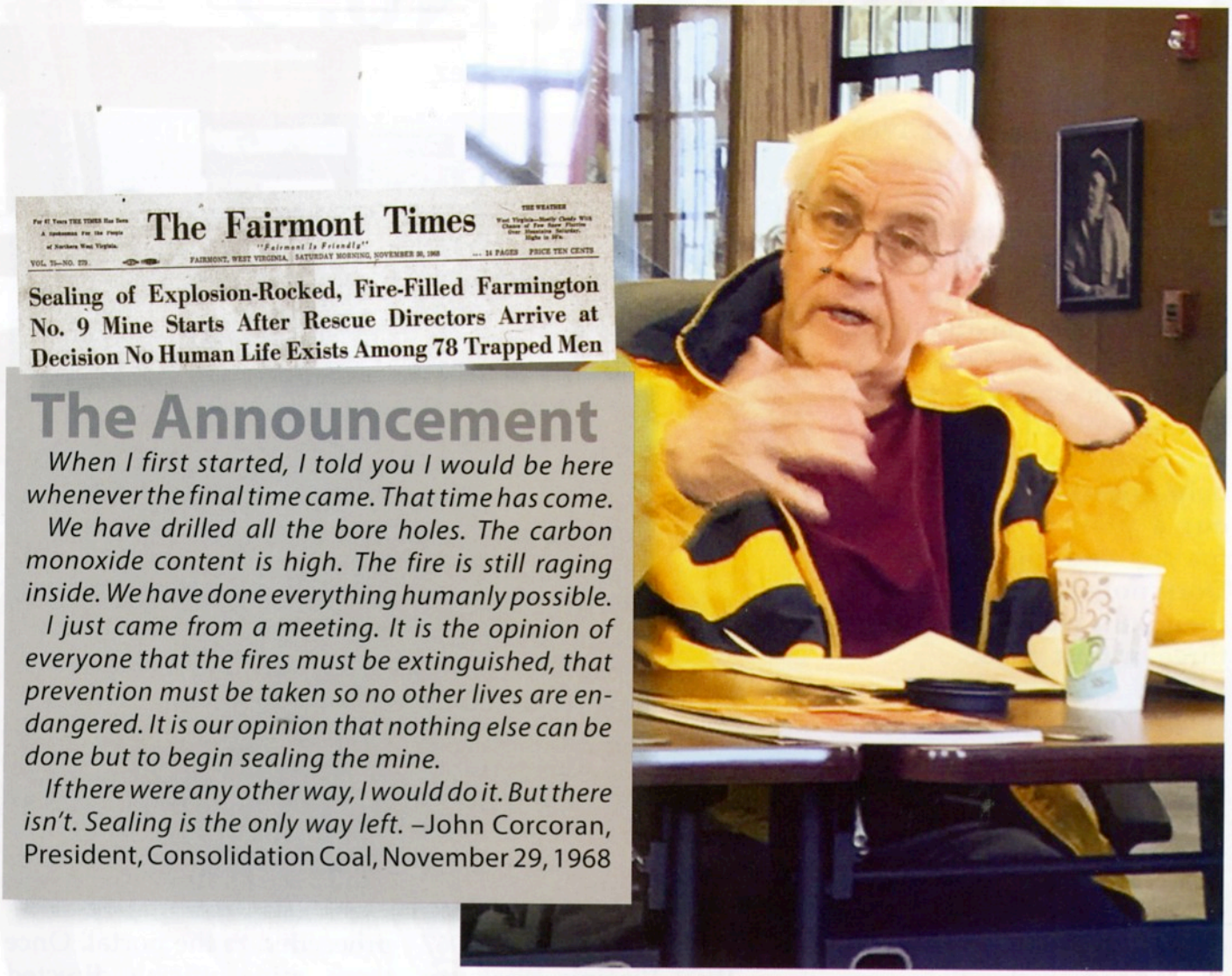
Fairmont, W. Va., Friday Evening, November 29, 1968. 16 Pages. Ten Cents

'Comprehensive Evaluation' Being Made at No. 9

Friday, November 29

Early Friday, the church was cleaned. Phone calls were placed to every family telling them of an important decision that would be given in the afternoon at 4 p.m. The health clinic provided two or three doctors; nearly a half-dozen nurses came, and a few extra ministers were assigned. Before the decision came, the ministers met in the trailer to discuss policy. Buck Bolyard suggested we cover the church in various areas, be prepared to act when hysteria broke out, [and] get the person out of the church as fast as possible. Students from Fairmont State found seats beside people they had become close to. When Corcoran made the statement [about sealing the mine], people were in disbelief.

Then, as the decision began to form in their minds, hysteria broke out. Not a wild hysteria, but here and there, people screamed and yelled. Immediately, they were tended to. Most were



The Fairmont Times

"Fairmont Is Friendly"

VOL. 75—NO. 279. FAIRMONT, WEST VIRGINIA, SATURDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 30, 1968 ... 24 PAGES PRICE TEN CENTS

Sealing of Explosion-Rocked, Fire-Filled Farmington No. 9 Mine Starts After Rescue Directors Arrive at Decision No Human Life Exists Among 78 Trapped Men

The Announcement

When I first started, I told you I would be here whenever the final time came. That time has come.

We have drilled all the bore holes. The carbon monoxide content is high. The fire is still raging inside. We have done everything humanly possible.

I just came from a meeting. It is the opinion of everyone that the fires must be extinguished, that prevention must be taken so no other lives are endangered. It is our opinion that nothing else can be done but to begin sealing the mine.

If there were any other way, I would do it. But there isn't. Sealing is the only way left. –John Corcoran, President, Consolidation Coal, November 29, 1968

D. D. Meighen. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

led from the place as soon as it was announced. Those who couldn't were attended to by all those available. No one went into shock, no one fainted; most went home, some went to the mess hall, where prayers were also offered.

In the midst of the confusion, many thanked us for our efforts. Many just cried on our shoulders; many just wanted to be alone with their families. Thinking about this afterwards, I can only say this was the first situation of this type I had been in. I was warmed by the fact that the people reacted very warmly toward us, willing to share their thoughts and use us as a comforting element, that we were able to bar effectively the press from the church, that the church could serve such an instrumental role in these people's lives, and that the company officials allowed us to share in their moral decisions.

After graduating from seminary, Rev. D. D. MEIGHEN volunteered to assist high-poverty families in Minden, Fayette County. For 50 years, he served as a United Methodist minister for churches throughout northern West Virginia. From 1979 to 1985, he was campus minister at West Virginia University. In retirement, he hosts a cable access program that covers Marion County history and current events. It's available in the Fairmont area on Spectrum Cable's TV-19. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.

Nurses at No. 9

By M. Raymond Alvarez

On November 20, 1968, Doris Lee Jordan arrived for work at Fairmont Clinic. An aide had earlier notified Carol Cutlip, the clinic's director of nursing, about a mine disaster in western Marion County. By 8 a.m., an emergency team had assembled at the clinic, and Carol had enlisted Doris' help. Together, they sketched out a plan to send nurses for day-and-night coverage. Doris noted, "At the time, we thought it would be only for three or four days."

Doris described the atmosphere at the clinic as "apprehensive." As the team evaluated survivors, at least five men were sent to Fairmont General Hospital (FGH). Shortly after noon, Antialee Garletts, nursing director at FGH, called Carol and requested that a physician from the clinic come immediately to assist. James Deadwyler and Reverdy Jones, respectively, a clinic surgeon and internist, went to FGH. Dr. Terry Tallman remained at the clinic to see patients who had regular appointments, although most ended up canceling. West Virginia University Hospitals agreed to take any overflow patients.

To help him at the disaster site, Dr. Murray B. Hunter, the clinic's medical director, called Linda Roberts, a young home-health nurse around 6 a.m. Linda had graduated in 1967 from West Virginia Wesleyan College with a B.S. in nursing. Interestingly, Carol Cutlip had been one of her instructors before joining the clinic.

Linda remembers, "I was living at my parents' home in Mannington. Back then, you just had the house phone. My mom woke me up and said, 'Dr. Hunter is on the phone for you.' He said that there was an explosion at the Llewellyn portal. I knew where that was because it was close to Mannington."

Murray and Linda met at the Esso station in Mannington and proceeded to the portal. Once there, mine officials directed them to go to Rachel, south of town. A new airshaft was opened at Mahan's Run, and officials hoped the crew there could get out.

Linda recalls, "Dr. Hunter and I went there. We had to be ready for anything. We expected bleeding, broken bones . . . but that wasn't the case." Murray wanted ambulances, which, at the time, were provided by funeral homes. They examined what would turn out to be the only 21 survivors of No. 9.

Doris Lee Colbert earned her nursing degree from Presbyterian University in Pittsburgh in 1946 when she was 21. After marrying Rex Jordan, she worked as an employee health nurse in the Fairmont area.

Doris, working for Fairmont Clinic, was part of the medical team that helped families after Farmington and compiled more than 10 pages of notes at the request of clinic administrator M. H. Ross. That document is now in Georgia State University Library's Special Collections and Archives as part of Ross' papers.

Doris continued providing health care to miners until her retirement from Fairmont Clinic in 1991. She died in January 2015. Her obituary noted that she had studied to be a concert pianist but chose nursing instead. She trained more than 280 men and women to be certified home-health aides while finding time to play piano for the LIFE United Methodist Church in Fairmont.

After the first day of the crisis, nurses primarily provided emotional comfort rather than medical assistance. However, Barbara Toler, who would lose her husband, Dennis, in the disaster, was nearly nine-months' pregnant and needed medical attention, too. She would give birth three weeks later. The friend beside her is Pat Miller. Photo by Bob Campione.

"I remember Lazear and Kent funeral homes were the first ones there. What we did was check the men, or triage them," Linda says. Five were sent to the hospital. "I will never forget how scared to death they were. Several were in tears when they came out of the mine. I learned part of their tears were because others were still in the mine. The men were grateful to be in the daylight. They cried, and I cried. I was secretly glad none were hurt physically."

This was her first experience in such a situation. "Dr. Hunter had his medical bag," she explains. "I just had my home-health nursing bag. After the 21 miners had been medically cleared or transported, Dr. Hunter and I went to the company store, where we could use the phone. Dr. Hunter reported to the clinic."

Linda stayed at the company store until Carol arrived. Linda comments, "Since I was single, I decided to stay there and help out in the evenings after work." She preferred working nights because the media was less intrusive at that time of the day and she could really talk to the families.

"I remember listening to a Shinnston woman whose husband was a boss in the mine," Linda says. The woman was distraught about the fate of all the miners and also because her son was in Vietnam. "I tried to discuss this with the local Red Cross, but they were busy setting up disaster operations." She went to a payphone and called her dad, the Mannington postmaster, who then called current Congressman and Governor-Elect Arch Moore to help.

Linda notes, "My dad was friends with Arch Moore . . . who took care of it. The young man was home [from Vietnam] before they sealed the mine." Grateful for Linda's quick actions, the Shinnston woman sent Linda many notes of thanks over the years.

"It seemed like we were at the company store for a long time," Linda says. Seeing a woman in an advanced state of pregnancy, Linda called the

Dr. Murray Hunter, shown here at the Mahan's Run shaft of No. 9, headed up Fairmont Clinic's on-site medical team. Photo by Bob Campione.

clinic and asked for an obstetrician pack just in case. The pregnant woman remained there through the duration.

Doris Jordan arrived and was directed to a table with a bucket of water and a box of medical supplies sent by the clinic. Miners' families came to the store and waited. They had to stand since there were few places to rest. Doris noted that at first, the store's management was more concerned for its merchandise than for the families' needs. Eventually, the store's employees arranged some chairs as a waiting area.

Linda and the nurses gave wives of the trapped miners some medication and monitored their blood pressure, per physician orders. She notes that by that first night, "the place was mobbed with all sorts of newsmen and reporters and cameramen. . . You no sooner got a patient [medicated] and a newsman would come up and talk with them, and the patients would be upset again." To no avail, she continually asked the media to leave families alone.

The cramped, chaotic setting was far from ideal for medical care. The nurses had difficulty talking with, or listening to, people about their feelings. Throughout the crisis, Martha Bradley, another nurse, headed up clinical services at Fairmont Clinic's Farmington branch. Martha kept in touch with patients and visited them at home, if needed.

Doris recalled how hope faded quickly. More explosions had occurred, and the crowds were growing. M. H. Ross, the clinic administrator, consulted with Doris and realized that no additional nursing volunteers would be arriving.

Soon, volunteer ministers, headed up by the Rev. O. Richard Bowyer, with support of company officials, moved the families to the James Fork United Methodist Church so they would have more privacy. Doris thought this would be ideal for the medical team; however, after arriving at the

church, she found clinic nurse Sue Hess sobbing. Sue told her that the people were just sitting in pews, staring at a picture of Jesus, and becoming even more overcome with grief. The ministers decided to make the setting feel less like a funeral. They rolled up the carpet, moved the pews into small group areas, and put out coffee and cookies.

According to Doris, several local pastors, including Rev. John Barnes, the current minister at the church, originally resisted using the site for disaster relief so they could again offer services. By that time, Consol had placed a trailer nearby to provide people with individual attention. Meals were available in the small community building next to the church.

The goal, Doris observed, was to provide individual comfort, "It became apparent to the ministers that while praying helped some people, when it was done before a group, it could cause mass hysteria.... People needed to have [opportunities to pray], but this needed to be a very private affair."

She added, "We met in the little trailer, and I began to feel like an atheist when I... suggested that the prayers and the small morning worship services be held either in the trailer or in the community building. Finally, after a great deal of discussion and many snide remarks, this was arranged."

Rev. Barnes eventually relented, and the staff continued providing nondenominational support and allowing for rest, care, and comfort at the church. Anne Ross, M. H.'s wife, arranged for volunteers to provide babysitting services at people's homes and in a trailer.

Sue Hess (far right) of Fairmont Clinic was on regular duty at the church during the crisis. The other two women are unidentified. Courtesy of Fairmont Clinic.

As the days stretched on, the nurses began feeling increasingly neglectful of the clinic's regular patients and of their own families at home. At the church, their jobs became less about handing out medication and more about offering moral support and counseling, which was not as commonly emphasized in nursing training as it is now. When Doris would leave for home each night, the other nurses would nervously ask how long she'd be away. She remembered, "They were afraid that they were going to be left alone, and they wouldn't know what to do."

With any mass tragedy like this, one of the greatest challenges is for the caretakers to take care of themselves. Doris reflected, "You found yourself going through many feelings when you are involved in something like this. You were angry at times because so much demand was being made on your time. You were tired, you felt for the people, and you wanted to cry. There were other times you found yourself becoming giddy and laughing. I felt if Carol Cutlip and I had any more people leaning on our strength, we would lose ours."

By Monday, November 25, the number of people at the church had dwindled and was fluctuating from virtually none to about

Carol Cutlip (Miller), a native of Williamson, Mingo County, was one of the main nurses on duty at the James Fork United Methodist Church. She later became executive director of West Virginia's first HMO. She retired after a distinguished career and passed away in Proctorville, Ohio, in February 2018, at age 82. Photo courtesy of Fairmont Clinic.

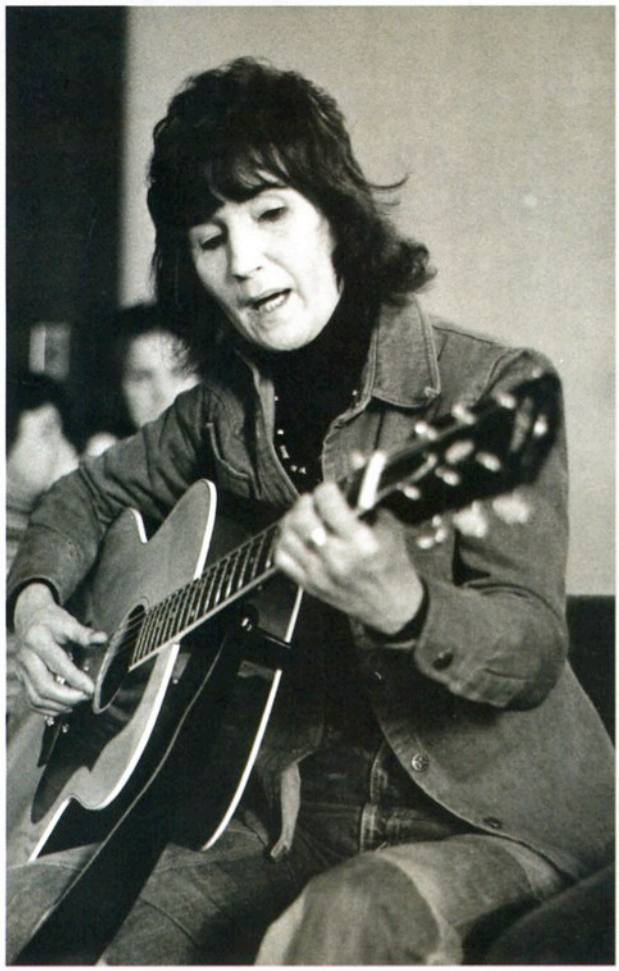
35. Doris started wondering if she and her team would still be needed. It was Thanksgiving week. She wondered how long the overworked nurses could keep up their frantic pace and added that they had adapted from being nurses to leaders of a vigil. That week, many of the nurses began working shorter shifts and spending evenings with their families; although, some who had no responsibilities at home remained around the clock.

By the day after Thanksgiving, a sense of hopelessness had set in. Preparing for the inevitable was a challenge. Doris recalls, "I had no idea of what to do or how to go about doing it. Consol officials became anxious when they felt the clinic might decrease nursing staff."

When the decision to close the mine was announced, the medical team was ready; physicians and even an ambulance were on site. In the end, the announcement was made, bringing more grief to some and closure to others. For the nurses, it brought an end to their duties with the disaster.

In reflection, Doris Jordan observed, "I think the whole disaster showed that the team approach and effort [are needed for] something like this. It made the whole time very difficult and very trying, yet the most rewarding thing that a nurse could ever have participated in."

CHANGE



Hazel Dickens. Photo by Tom Screven.

Grief over No. 9 led to anger among miners and their families, which led to a political movement to make mines safer and to clean house in their union. An invigorated group of activists ensured that, in the words of Hazel Dickens' song, everyone would "remember the disaster at the Mannington mine." –ed.

Mannington Mine Disaster (1970)

By Hazel Dickens

We read in the paper and the radio tells
Us to raise our children to be miners as well.
Oh tell them how safe the mines are today
And to be like your daddy, bring home a big pay.

Now don't you believe them, my boy,
That story's a lie.
Remember the disaster at the Mannington mine
Where 78 miners were buried alive
Because of unsafe conditions your daddy died.

They lure us with money, it sure is a sight.
When you may never live to see the daylight
With your name among the big headlines
Like that awful disaster at the Mannington mine.

So don't you believe them, my boy,
That story's a lie.
Remember the disaster at the Mannington mine
Where 78 miners were buried alive
Because of unsafe conditions your daddy died.

There's a man in a big house way up on the hill
Far, far from the shacks where the poor miners live.
He's got plenty of money, Lord, everything's fine
And he has forgotten the Mannington mine.
Yes, he has forgotten the Mannington mine.

There is a grave way down in the Mannington mine.
There is a grave way down in the Mannington mine.
Oh, what were their last thoughts, what were their cries
As the flames overtook them in the Mannington mine?

So don't you believe them, my boy,
That story's a lie.
Remember the disaster at the Mannington mine
Where 78 good men so uselessly died
Oh, don't follow your daddy to the Mannington mine.

How can God forgive you? You do know what you've done.
You've killed my husband, now you want my son.

Ken Hechler and the Farmington Widows

By Stan Bumgardner

"Make coal mining safer!" Cries for improved mine safety always spike after major disasters. Typically, though, the regulatory changes are minor (often without funding to enforce them), momentum quickly dissipates, and nothing of substance is done. Farmington is perhaps the most significant exception to this in U.S. history. The deaths of 78 men in No. 9, a grassroots effort driven by their widows, and the actions of a crusading congressman from Huntington would spur on the most sweeping federal coal mine safety legislation in U.S. history.

Farmington Widows (left-right) Sara Kaznoski, Nora Snyder, and Mary Rogers march with miners and other activists (including some 60 WVU students on spring break) at the state capitol on March 7, 1969, demanding black lung benefits. With them is Wayne Lee of the West Virginia Black Lung Association. Note that the sign uses a misspelling of the mine's historical name. Courtesy of Charleston *Gazette-Mail* Archives.

Due to poor working conditions, deaths and injuries were common in the early years of mining. As a result, West Virginia created a Department of Mines in 1905 but failed to fund inspections properly. The first federal agency to oversee mining conditions was the U.S. Bureau of Mines, created in 1910, in the wake of the 1907 disaster at Monongah in Marion County—still our nation's deadliest. But again, few changes occurred until 1941, when federal inspectors were given the right to enter mines. The battle to make coal mining safer would be a long haul.

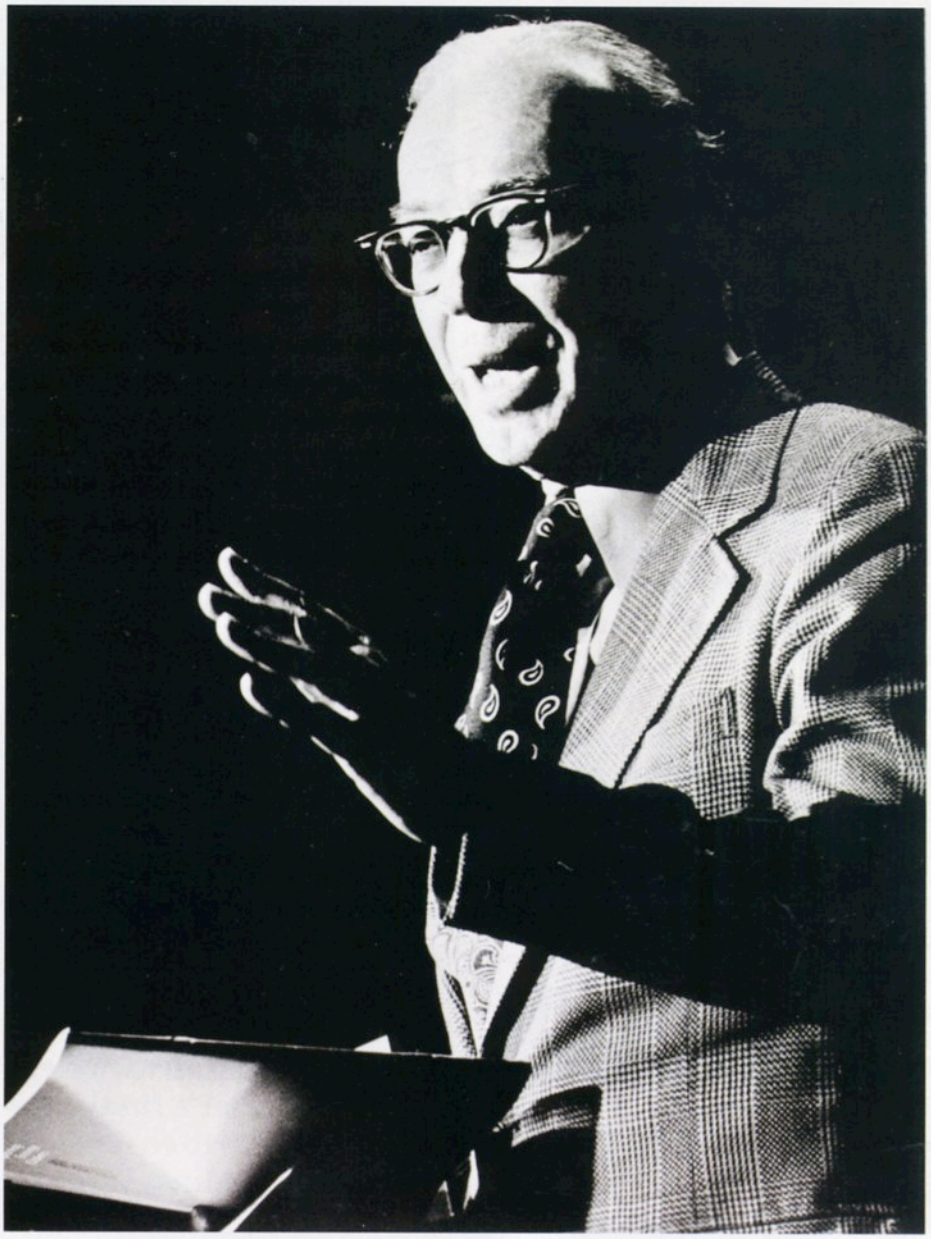
Perhaps the first substantial national safety law occurred after a disaster in Illinois killed 111 miners in 1951. The following year, President Harry Truman signed the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act, which allowed inspectors to shut down non-compliant mines, determined maximum methane levels, and mandated rock dusting. Even in signing the bill, Truman complained that the law left too many safety loopholes, particularly in terms of electrical equipment and ventilation systems. One of Truman's assistants at the time was a 37-year-old Ken Hechler.

Five years later, Hechler moved to West Virginia to teach at Marshall College (now University) and ran successfully for Congress in 1958. For the

first decade of his congressional career, Hechler, a Democrat, worked on a variety of issues. In general, he was strong on national defense and the space program but more liberal on social issues. In 1965, for example, he was the only member of Congress to march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists at Selma, Alabama. Four years later, he was the first of West Virginia's congressional delegation to call for our country to withdraw from Vietnam. Prior to Farmington, though, he'd never expended much political capital on mining issues.

Not to diminish the contributions of other senators and representatives, but after the No. 9 disaster, Hechler became the miners' chief advocate in Washington. In the wake of the initial explosions at No. 9, he drove to the Champion Store—even though it was out of his congressional district—to comfort the victims' families; instead, he got an earful about the government's neglect of miners' health and safety. The rapid-fire questions essentially boiled down to one sentiment: "You're a congressman. Why don't you do something about the safety conditions in the mines?"

As Hechler would later reflect, "I assumed when I met with the Farmington Widows that I was there primarily to comfort them on the loss of their husbands. Instead, I was confronted by a determined group of women who bluntly accused me."



Ken Hechler (1914-2016), the miners' "champion," had a diverse career. During World War II, he earned the bronze star and five battle stars. After the war, he interviewed Hermann Göring and other high-ranking Nazis prior to the Nuremberg trials and then wrote *Bridge at Remagen*, one of the best-selling books about the war. He represented West Virginia in Congress (1959-1977) and served as the state's secretary of state (1985-2001). In Congress and in his later years, he often crossed paths with both the coal industry and UMWA because of his public opposition to strip mining and mountaintop removal. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, Blue Book Collection.

Feeling a bit embarrassed he hadn't done more previously, Hechler was spurred into action. He'd later refer to the experience as life changing, writing, "Nothing in my life ever moved me as deeply as my experience at Farmington."

Like others at the Champion Store, Hechler was angered that Consol, government, and union officials seemed to be looking out more for the coal industry

than they were miners. On November 22, just two days after the first explosions, he issued a public statement condemning current mining conditions, noting that of the approximate 5,500 miners who'd died on the job since Truman signed the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act of 1952, 1,854 (⅓) were West Virginians.

Three days later, he held a news conference in the House of Representatives gallery, saying, "Coal miners don't have to die. In a civilized society, it is nothing short of criminal to allow the present conditions to continue in the mines." He specifically called out the "big three"—the coal industry, government, and UMWA—and pointed out the worst-kept secret in mining: foremen were commonly tipped off in advance about inspections.

Hechler faced an uphill battle. Just months before, Congress had defeated a proposed mine safety bill without holding as much as a hearing on the matter. He wanted to sway Congress to pass a bill more stringent than the 1968 proposal that never made it to the House floor. He urged two organizations to pressure Washington: the Association of Disabled Miners and Widows in Madison and a group that would become known as the Farmington Widows, comprising various wives and mothers of No. 9's victims.

The Farmington Widows played important roles in the 1969 Black Lung strike in West Virginia [see page 58] and with the proposed federal mine safety legislation. As Hechler would later note, "Very few congressmen could refuse the request of a widow from Farmington."

Many Farmington Widows rallied for Jock Yablonski in his campaign against UMWA President Tony Boyle. Pictured are (left-right) Elizabeth Skarzinski, Nora Snyder, Mary Rogers, and Judy Henderson attending a Yablonski event. Courtesy of East Tennessee State University, Archives of Appalachia, Jeanne Rasmussen Collection.

Before moving on to the legislation, Hechler's first order of business was to ensure that U.S. Bureau of Mines Director John O'Leary remained on the job. O'Leary, a Democrat, was a holdover from the Lyndon Johnson Administration. Rumors were swirling that President Richard Nixon, a Republican, was about to replace O'Leary, who'd publicly declared that his bureau's job was to "represent the public interest rather than the industry alone." In February 1969, Hechler got the Farmington Widows to appeal to Nixon in writing not to fire O'Leary. He even flew seven Marion County women to Washington to meet personally with O'Leary's new boss, Secretary of the Interior Walter Hickel. They were Nora Snyder, Mary Rogers, Frances Ferris, Sara Kaznoski, Laura Martin [see page 22], and Eugenia Kaznoski, the mother of Pete Kaznoski. Another woman in the group, Josephine Zogal, had lost her son Pete Jr. in a mine fire at Rachel (midway between Farmington and Mannington) in January 1967. O'Leary was able to hold on to his job for another year, until Nixon fired him in February 1970.

On March 20, 1969, Hechler flew four miners and three of the Farmington Widows—Sara Kaznoski, Rogers, and Snyder—to Washington to testify before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Labor.

Days later, he thanked Kaznoski in a letter, "All three of you ladies made a tremendous

impression on the subcommittee" and added that the "TV stations here gave the most emphasis on the hearing coverage to what you ladies said." Adding emphasis to their testimony, the widows' appeal for improved mine safety occurred on the four-month anniversary of the disaster.

In addition, Hechler challenged other coal Goliaths, calling out the UMWA for mistreating retired miners and miners' widows. He demanded that Congress investigate the potential misuse of money from the union's Welfare and Retirement Fund. He spelled out some of these problems in a letter to Lester Cecil of Boone County, who'd been denied his UMWA pension, "Many miners after working for years in the mines and helping to organize the union, have suddenly found they were not eligible for pensions when they retired. The Fund has set up so many rules and regulations that many miners have been knocked out of their pensions." Hechler soon became a staunch supporter of UMWA rebel Joseph "Jock" Yablonski in his campaign for presidency of the union against W. A. "Tony" Boyle, who would compare Hechler to former Senator Joseph McCarthy and call him a "fink." Afterward, Hechler's staff proudly hung up a sign in the office: "WE WORK FOR A FINK!"

Hechler, never afraid of a fight, went after another *third rail* of West Virginia coal mining. In an April 9 speech at the West Virginia Festival of Ideas in Morgantown, he said, "I regret to report that there has been little change in the [WVU] School of Mines in the last 40 years. What is being turned out are mining engineers who are primarily production experts rather than graduates who passionately believe that the first and foremost principle in coal mining is how you protect the health and safety of the men who mine the coal." He essentially accused the School of Mines of being "compliant," according to Hechler biographer Carter Seaton, in Farmington and other disasters.

In October, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed an aggressive mine safety bill, and the House of Representatives passed its own version 389-4—over strong objections from coal companies, which felt the bill would all but end the industry in the United States.

A conference committee reconciled the two versions into the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, which, among other things, strictly limited coal dust; made black lung a compensable occupational hazard; increased mine inspections; protected the jobs of *whistleblowers;* increased fines for safety violations; required the use of non-sparking electrical equipment; and improved mine ventilation, roof supports, and methane detection. Many of these provisions were in direct response to No. 9, which was cited in the final bill as the "tomb for 78 miners."

Sara Kaznoski (seated at right) became the leading spokesperson for the Farmington Widows. To her right is her husband, Pete Kaznoski Sr., who is one of the 19 miners still buried in No. 9. In the back row are (left-right) Pete Jr., their niece Patty, and son John. Courtesy of Sara Kaznoski.

Ken Hechler's progressive stances made him a common target of the coal industry and the UMWA (shown in this cartoon by Jim Dent of the Charleston *Gazette*) and President Richard Nixon (depicted as Ebenezer Scrooge in this cartoon by Hugh Haynie of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*). Both cartoonists sent signed copies of their originals to Hechler. Courtesy of the Marshall University Special Collections, Ken Hechler Collection.

Hechler publicly recognized the Farmington Widows' role as a "symbol of courage." He wrote, "Despite their grief and the greatest of all losses . . . the widows of Farmington . . . resolved that from a disaster must come the determination of this nation that coal miners and their families deserve to live and work in dignity."

In spite of the overwhelming congressional support for the bill, its future was still in limbo. Rumors abounded that Nixon would *pocket veto* the bill during the upcoming congressional recess. Using his own funds, Hechler flew seven of the widows to Washington for the bill signing: Kaznoski, Rogers, Mary Hayes, Juanita Mayle, Lucille Strait, Bonnie Taylor, and Cora Wilson. The widows, at Hechler's urging, publicly encouraged a wildcat strike—against the wishes of the UMWA—in the event of a veto. The threat was likely a political bluff since Hechler and the widows had little influence over rank-and-file miners. Hechler admitted as much to Seaton, "I didn't know what the hell I was talking about [at that point]." But he and the Farmington Widows successfully bluffed the president of the United States with the political equivalent of a pair of threes.

Nixon was scheduled to sign the bill on December 30. The seven women arrived at the Northwest Gate of the White House at 12:15 p.m. to attend the signing. Seven ceremonial pens were laid out. Nixon, however, refused to see the widows and continued grousing about the black lung elements in the bill. The women were directed to meet with Richard Burress, deputy assistant to the president for domestic affairs, who explained Nixon's staunch opposition to the black lung provisions. At just that moment, the phone rang. Nixon had decided to sign the act and issue a signing statement, which announced his partial support for the legislation; Hechler estimated that 80 percent of the statement was dedicated to Nixon's objections, particularly the sections making black lung benefits a national, rather than state, issue.

Burress rushed to the President's Office to see Nixon sign the bill; meanwhile, the widows were given what Hechler would term a "VIP tour" of the White House. Nixon soon boarded a

helicopter to begin his winter holiday without ever meeting with the Farmington Widows. Each did, however, receive a ceremonial pen of the signing. Hechler later wrote sarcastically that Nixon's change of thought just happened to "coincide" with the arrival of the Farmington Widows and the threat of a wildcat strike.

Despite Nixon's opposition to the act, coal mining deaths have decreased significantly since the bill went into effect even though, according to Hechler, the president weakened its effectiveness "through his appointees." But, overall, it was a signal victory for coal miners and their families. Hechler later hailed the legislation as a "great triumph of participatory democracy" because it was strengthened, rather than watered down, by the efforts of "grass roots forces" like the Farmington Widows. He wrote, "Soon those who tried to weaken the bill figured they had better lay off or else the bill would get even stronger."

Elation over the bill's enactment quickly turned to grief and anger. The evening after Nixon signed the act into law, Jock Yablonski, his wife, and their daughter were murdered in their home, under orders from Boyle [see page 58].

Yablonski's son Chip became an attorney and represented the Farmington Widows against Consol. In a 2011 interview with the Charleston *Gazette-Mail*, he stressed Hechler's role in improving mine safety, "In this era of justified criticism that our Congress is bought and paid for by corporate money, it is refreshing to recall a time when one congressman took on the most powerful interest in his state, pushed aside any worry about his personal safety, and willingly jeopardized his political career by standing up for the coal miners."

Mary Matish was another prominent member of the Farmington Widows. Her husband, Frank, is also still entombed in No. 9. After traveling to Washington to meet with UMWA President Tony Boyle, Matish said, "We're not only trying to help ourselves. We're trying to help all widows." Courtesy of East Tennessee State University, Archives of Appalachia, Jeanne Rasmussen Collection.

But the last word on this should belong to one of the Farmington Widows. Hartsel Mayle's death in No. 9 left his widow, Juanita, with 16 children to raise. After the bill's signing, she told the press, "While this bill is too late to do my husband any good, I'm glad, and I know he would have been, to see it passed so that his 'buddies' who are still working in the mines will receive its benefits."


MINERS YOU HAVE A CHOICE
THE COURIER
Southeastern Washington County's Only Newspaper
Yablonski Wins Big At Ellsworth
Rolls Up 9-1 Margin Over Boyle; Other Insurgents Also Win
Fired By Rival Boyle
Court Orders UMW Reinstate Yablonski
Yablonski On Ballot
'There Is No Doubt,' Candidate Says In Interview
'I Am Going To Win,' - Yablonski
Joseph 'Jock' Yablonski Seeks Debate With Boyle
Boyle Opponent
Yablonsky Promises Fierce Fight
The Charleston Gazette
Boyle Family's Dealings Raise Eyebrows in Montana
Suit Cites UMW 'Plunder' Of Miners' Welfare Funds
UMW Sued for $75 Million By 4,000 Disabled Miners
More than 120,000 miners have died violently
The Scandal Of Death And Injury In the Mines
Terrorism Charged To Tony Boyle
Large Def
Expected In
UMW Fund
$28 Million Down After Pension Hike, Union Says
PAGE FOUR

Yablonski-Boyle headlines. Courtesy of the Marshall University Special Collections, Ken Hechler Collection.

A Rumbling Down Below
Miners for Democracy

By Christine M. Kreiser

In the 1930s, pictures of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John L. Lewis, and Jesus hung side by side above thousands of West Virginia mantels. FDR's New Deal policies recognized the rights of workers to organize, and Lewis' United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) secured its hold on West Virginia's coalfields. Miners saw the coming of the union as a hard-won miracle following decades of violent struggles.

Fast-forward 30 years, and the picture had become decidedly less rosy. Lewis ran the UMWA like a benevolent dictator. On one hand, he negotiated a landmark pact that guaranteed health and retirement benefits to miners through an employer-financed Welfare and Retirement Fund (the Promise of 1946). On the other, he quashed any hint of dissension by handpicking district officials and suspending the rights of miners to elect their own local leadership. Paul Nyden, who documented the history of the UMWA in his 1974 dissertation, speculated that Lewis was never legitimately "elected to any union office."

Lewis also made what many came to see as a devil's bargain in 1951 when he agreed to allow greater mechanization in union mines. Economists were arguing that the coal industry, facing stiff postwar

UMWA Presidents John L. Lewis (left) and Tony Boyle. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives.

competition from oil and gas, could not survive without mass mechanization. But the industry's gain came at the miners' expense: Profits rose as employment fell. In West Virginia, mining jobs decreased from 125,000 in 1948 to about 49,000 by the time of the No. 9 disaster in 1968.

After 40 years at the helm, Lewis stepped down in 1960. He was replaced by Thomas Kennedy, whose failing health cleared the way in 1963 for Lewis' preferred successor, W. A. "Tony" Boyle. Lewis, in the words of journalist Laurence Leamer, "never could stand subordinates who were not cut to a size that fit comfortably into his shadow." Boyle fit his boss' predilections to a T, but when it came to carrying on Lewis' legacy, he lacked John L.'s sheer force of personality.

UMWA locals were becoming fractious. Not only did rank-and-file miners want more local control, they were demanding more attention to another insidious side effect of mechanization. Newer machines, such as high-powered continuous miners, generated more coal dust than the existing fans could ventilate. The dust allowed underground fires to spread more rapidly and, over time, settled in miners' lungs, slowly and painfully cutting off their air.

Debates about the health effects of breathing coal dust intensified in the 1950s and 1960s, but few agreed on whether the dust caused a legitimate occupational disease. Coal operators and company-employed doctors dismissed workers' respiratory complaints as miners' asthma, or more sarcastically, as *compensationitis*.

Some doctors, particularly Donald Rasmussen and Hawey Wells of Beckley and I. E. Buff of Charleston, advanced the study of black lung (pneumoconiosis), but the UMWA, which had a long history of pushing for safety reforms, was in an untenable position. Its Welfare and Retirement Fund provided some relief for ailing miners but was dependent on company royalties, based on each ton of coal mined. It was in the union's interest to keep production up, which increased a miner's exposure to the deadly dust. As a result, Tony Boyle did little more than pay lip service to the problem.

Miners were especially concerned about close ties among government, industry, and labor leaders. This October 1969 meeting at the West Virginia Governor's Office included (left-right) Joseph Moody, president of the Bituminous Coal Association; Herbert Jones Jr., president of Amherst Coal; R. Heath Larry, vice chairman of U.S. Steel; John Corcoran, president of Consol; Tony Boyle, president of the UMWA; George Titler, UMWA vice president; and Governor Arch Moore. Photo by Ferrell Friend courtesy of Charleston *Gazette-Mail* Archives.

To southern West Virginia miners, the UMWA's inaction on black lung was a betrayal. Suspicion spread that Boyle was more interested in cutting sweetheart deals with companies than in protecting the health and safety of miners. With dissent already mounting, the Farmington Mine Disaster became a tipping point. Standing before a bank of microphones and cameras at No. 9 just after the tragedy, Boyle gave an incredibly tone-deaf response: "[Consol] happens to be, in my judgment as president of the United Mine Workers of America, one of the better companies to work with as far as cooperation and safety is concerned." Joseph "Jock" Yablonski, Boyle's soon-to-be opponent in the 1969 UMWA presidential election, later referred to these comments as "profane mouthfuls of fatalism."

Boyle's insensitive remarks at the Champion Store infuriated victims' families, galvanized dissidents throughout the coalfields, and awakened Americans to something that was well understood in West Virginia: coal mining was the most dangerous occupation in the nation.

Two months after Farmington, the nation's first Black Lung Association (BLA) met in Charleston. Without the support of Congress, the BLA could do very little for miners across the country, but it could definitely change things for miners in the Mountain State. Some 3,000 miners, their

Miners and their supporters march on the West Virginia State Capitol in February 1969, demanding the legislature to name black lung as a compensable occupational disease. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, News Film Collection.

families, and supporters from the medical and political communities demanded that West Virginia make black lung a compensable disease. The UMWA responded to this show of independence by threatening to expel BLA supporters from the union. The miners pressed on. [For a detailed account of the BLA Movement, see Catherine Moore's excellent "'Let's Show Them What a Fight We Can Give Them,'" Summer 2006.]

On February 18, 1969, with debate over black lung stalled in the legislature, several hundred Raleigh County miners walked off the job in protest. The wildcat strike (not sanctioned by the UMWA) spread like wildfire. By March 5, 40,000 West Virginia miners were on strike, virtually shutting down our state's coal production. Three days later, as the clock ticked down on the 1969 legislative session, the house and senate passed a compromise black lung bill. But the miners vowed to stay out until Governor Arch Moore signed it. He obliged them on March 11. The BLA had won a battle but not the war. As BLA president Charles Brooks noted, "This act represents a faltering, but not insignificant, step in the right direction that must be followed by more decisive action."

The three-week walkout had significant repercussions for the UMWA and its upcoming December elections. Not only had the miners won on an issue that had been largely ignored by their union, the dissidents now posed a serious threat to the UMWA's leadership itself. Several men vied for Boyle's

Jock Yablonski campaigns in Man, Logan County, in his effort to defeat Tony Boyle for the UMWA presidency. Courtesy of the Marshall University Special Collections, Ken Hechler Collection.

job, but the frontrunner soon became Yablonski, a Pittsburgh-born miner whose UMWA ties ran as deep as an Appalachian coal seam.

In some ways, Yablonski was an unlikely choice. He'd been a top lieutenant for Lewis and later Boyle. He was known for squelching rebellion in the UMWA ranks, sometimes through threats of violence. In fact, he was once called a "thug for the Lewis machine."

But on May 29, Yablonski announced he would run against Boyle, citing "the insufferable gap between the union leadership and the working miners that has bred neglect of miners' needs and aspirations and generated a climate of fear and inhibition."

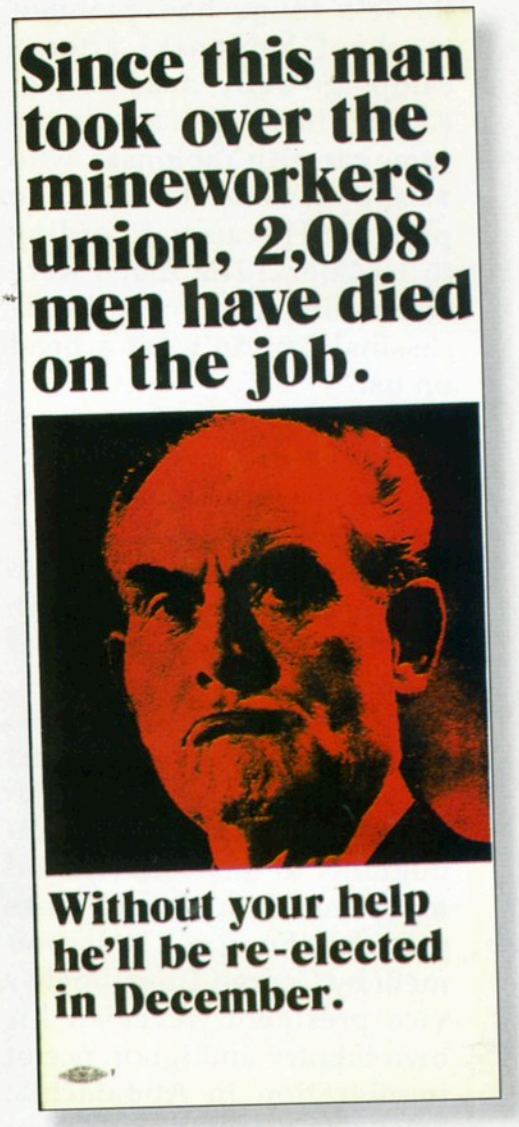
Yablonski even took a share of responsibility for his past role in supporting Boyle but pointed directly to Farmington as a wake-up call. "The abject follow-the-leader posture of the leadership toward the coal industry," said Yablonski, "became apparent to the nation. I have been a part of this leadership. I participated in and tolerated the deteriorating performance of this leadership, but with an increasingly troubled conscience. I will no longer be beholden to the past. I can no longer tolerate the low state to which our union has fallen."

It wasn't the first time Yablonski had defied Boyle. The longtime president of UMWA's District 5 in western Pennsylvania had been removed from office in 1966, in part for supporting that state's black lung legislation. As one of the few district presidents who was popularly elected, not appointed, Yablonski commanded the loyalty of thousands of miners.

This was the first major challenge to the UMWA's national leadership in 40 years. Yablonski took political advantage of the rising groundswell against Boyle. He'd start his campaign speeches by pledging loyalty to Lewis (who would die on June 11 at age 89). In announcing his candidacy, Yablonski paid tribute to the miners' longtime advocate by quoting a classic Lewis line, "When ye be an anvil, lay ye very still. But when ye be a hammer, strike with all thy will. . Today is the day I cease being an anvil."

Yablonski, a populist in the truest sense of the word, enjoyed riling up his supporters, even on non-mining matters. He told one crowd that we need to "get the hell out of Vietnam" and spouted ideas of revolution. "Nothing was ever achieved in the world without getting militant," he claimed. "Young people in America today, if they are to cope with the wealth that is milking our country, better get militant or they are going to pay a terrible price in the future."

Boyle wasn't about to go down without a fight, and he didn't fight fair. A vicious campaign played out over the next six months, including death threats against Yablonski and his supporters. At one point,



This Yablonski campaign brochure pointed out the high death toll from coal mining under Boyle's leadership. Courtesy of the Marshall University Special Collections, Ken Hechler Collection.

Boyle's thugs had planned to shoot Yablonski after a campaign rally near Logan. Ken Hechler was riding in the same car with Yablonski, who he supported in the race. The plot failed because, according to Hechler, "The roads were so winding [the would-be assassins] couldn't get a bead on us."

The threat of violence constantly hung over Yablonski and his supporters. "I saw these characters at every rally," Hechler would write. "I'd try to go over and shake their hands, and they'd snarl at me and throw beer cans at me."

The Boyle campaign also tapped into a deep-rooted suspicion of foreigners. Yablonski's parents had been immigrants to this country, and many miners had family ties to Eastern Europe. A later comment by George Titler, Boyle's vice president, revealed his own bigotry and ignorance of immigration in Appalachia: "You don't know that foreign element of coal miners from Russia and Yugoslavia and the like up there in Pennsylvania. I don't mean there's anything wrong with being foreign, but they stick together and stick behind their man. It's not like down in the Kentucky fields or someplace where everybody's Anglo-Saxon."

In December, to no one's surprise, Boyle was reelected by a nearly 2-1 margin. Accusations of a rigged election emerged before the votes were even counted. Yablonski refused to concede and, on December 11, asked the U.S. Department of Labor to investigate Boyle's campaign. Three weeks later, about 1 a.m. on New Year's Eve, three hitmen entered the Yablonskis' home in Clarksville, Pennsylvania, and murdered Yablonski, his wife, Margaret, and their daughter, Charlotte.

The West Virginia State Museum's exhibit about the Miners for Democracy Movement includes Jock Yablonski's miner's hat. The exhibit also features a shotgun (donated by Lois McLean) given by Dr. Donald Rasmussen to Arnold Miller for self-protection. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

The gangland-style murder was part of Boyle's revenge on Yablonski, but it was also intended to send a message to others who knew about the union's illicit activities, particularly its misuse of the Welfare and Retirement Fund. Monsignor Charles Owen Rice said as much at Jock Yablonski's funeral, accusing the UMWA of being a "financial institution masquerading as a labor union."

An associate of Yablonski and Boyle analyzed it this way: "As the votes were counted by Boyle's stooges, Boyle won as everyone knew he would, except Jock. [Jock] cried out to the high heavens claiming foul play as he knew, having been a paid stooge for J. Lewis and Tony Boyle for years. He knew all the dirty works that were going on in the UMWA National Office in Washington, D.C. Now after defeat, he threatened to expose all crooked wheelings and dealings of the Boyle Machine. This cost him his life, including his wife's and daughter's."

Certain that Boyle and his cronies were behind the murders, rank-and-file miners redoubled their efforts to reform the UMWA from within. The BLA capitalized on its success

The Morris Brothers Campaign for Yablonski

The Morris Brothers, an old-time duo from Clay County, campaigned for Jock Yablonski in 1969 and later for Arnold Miller. In a 2012 interview with former GOLDENSEAL editor John Lilly, David and John Morris recalled how a threat of violence hung over the campaign. –ed.

David Morris (DM): I was hitchhiking to Charleston. . It was just dusky dark when a car stopped and picked me up. The driver . . . told me all about the Black Lung Association and about all the stuff that was going on with the coal miners. . . .

Months later on, I ran into the same guy, and he started playing "I bet you don't know where we met" with me. I was trying to think, and I couldn't remember who he was for the life of me. It was Arnold Miller, and he had picked me up hitchhiking. . . . My idea, and I suppose John's as well, was that if the coal miners could take some control of their life and politics that it might bleed over into the government of West Virginia and the way things were done and that there might be good come out of that. So I went down in October 1969 to the UMWA headquarters. . . .

I went in there and told them that we wanted to be [Yablonski's] musicians. And I heard one man go in and tell Mr. Yablonski that I was out there and wanted to join the campaign. . . . Whoever it was told me that I'd better take this seriously. He said that Yablonski wasn't just some turnip that just rolled off the truck out here.

So I was taken in to meet Mr. Yablonski. He had a gruff, gravelly voice, and he asked, "So, you want to sing for me?" And I said "Yes, sir." And he said, "All right, you sing the truth, and I'll tell the truth."

He said, "We need a campaign song." I said, "Nothing rhymes with Yablonski." So, I . . . took Billy Edd Wheeler's song "Coal Tattoo" and rewrote it for the campaign and for the times: "Yablonski's here, and the time is near. It's coming a better day." And later on, I rewrote it again to say, "Miller's here, and the time is dear. There's coming a reckoning day." And then John hooked up with me, and the next thing we knew, we were in Beckley and down through the coalfields. We went all over the place.

John Morris (JM): We was down in Sophia one day. . . . We sort of helped look out for Yablonski whenever we were with him, kind of watched the crowds and stuff. And some of the Yablonski people told us to keep our eye on a certain white Ford car because the occupants might be dangerous. It turned out that this same white Ford car was the same vehicle that showed up at Yablonski's house. It was the people who killed him, his wife, and daughter.

DM: Mr. Yablonski didn't believe in firearms. He had a shotgun in his house, but it wasn't loaded.

JM: Ken Hechler told me that they chased him from Sophia all the way to Huntington through Wayne County and down through there, trying to get a shot at him.

David (right) and John Morris perform at a rally for Arnold Miller in 1972. Three years earlier, they had campaigned for Jock Yablonski. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer.

DM: We were at [a mine] at midnight for a shift change during that period of time. . . . Our [instrument] cases were up by the door. We were standing there talking to some people, and this guy came in the other end of the building just ranting, raving, and cussing Yablonski. . .

He spied me and said, "Who in the hell are you?"

I said, "We're here with Mr. Yablonski. We're his singers."

And he whipped out a knife, a folding hunter with about a five-inch blade. Just flipped that thing open and came at me with it. He stopped at the rail. . . . And he slashed once at me. And I just stepped back. He would have either had to go under that rail to get to me, or go over top of it. Either way, I'd have killed him before he got to me. About that time, a dozen guys mobbed him and drug him out of there. Mr. Yablonski mentioned that the next day in his speech at Gary.

in West Virginia, and chapters cropped up across Appalachia. Another dissident group, the Association of Disabled Miners and Widows, kept up its demands for better health benefits and safety, leading to a three-day wildcat strike that idled mines in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. In western Pennsylvania, miners attending the Yablonski funeral organized Miners for Democracy and set their sights on the next union election.

Their chance came in 1972, when federal courts overturned the 1969 results and ordered the U.S. Department of Labor to supervise a new election. By that time, Boyle was fending off other legal problems. On Good Friday of 1972, he'd been indicted for making illegal political campaign contributions with UMWA funds. Along with a $130,000 fine, Boyle faced a possible three-year prison term.

Police tracked down the Yablonski killers, who'd left their fingerprints all over the murder scene. Paul Gilly, Aubran Martin, and Claude Vealey were convicted of the murders. One of the middlemen between Boyle and the hitmen was UMWA executive council member Albert Pass, who'd obtained funding for the hit using a common "kickback scheme" through the Welfare and Retirement Fund. Pass was convicted of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. William Prater, a field representative under Pass, was also convicted for helping plan the murders and arranging for "hush money." Gilly had been personally recruited by his father-in-law, Silous Huddleston, president of a UMWA local in Tennessee. Gilly's wife (and Huddleston's daughter), Annette "Lucy" Gilly, was the first to give a full confession. For their cooperation with the prosecution, Huddleston and Annette Gilly were granted probation and entered the Witness Protection Program.

Anti-Boyle candidates meet with U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph: (left-right) Mike Trbovich, Randolph, Arnold Miller, and Harry Patrick. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, Jennings Randolph Collection.

The dissidents, uniting as the Miners for Democracy, coalesced around the remnants of Yablonski's campaign. On May 27, 1970, nearly 400 miners from 16 of the UMWA's most influential districts met at Wheeling College (now Wheeling Jesuit University) to hammer out the details. The convention adopted a slate of candidates that represented what labor historian George Hopkins described as the "moralistic/abstract goals" of union democracy and the "practical benefits" of black lung compensation.

There was no shortage of candidates, but, in the end, it came down to two: Mike Trbovich, Yablonski's former campaign manager from District 4, and Arnold Miller, a BLA founder from District 17 in southern West Virginia. Both men had firm supporters—and detractors—but Miller represented a much larger district. In the best tradition of successful reformers, they worked out

Orville Robinette (right), leader of UMWA District 17, swears in Arnold Miller as national president of the union, December 22, 1972, while new union Secretary-Treasurer Harry Patrick looks on. Courtesy of Charleston *Gazette-Mail* Archives.

a compromise: Miller would head the ticket, and Trbovich would run for vice president. Harry Patrick from District 6 joined on as the secretary-treasurer candidate. Their platform included a complete overhaul of the UMWA administration, the return of democratic elections to every district, and increased health and pension benefits.

For the first time in UMWA history, a slate of rank-and-file candidates took on the incumbent administration—and won. The final tally was 70,373 for Miller and 56,334 for Boyle. The victory was monumental in labor history, as rank-and-file miners "toppled one of the most entrenched and pro-company leaderships in history," in the words of Paul Nyden.

"I've been in the mines," said Miller during the campaign. "I came up the hard way. If I fell dead on this spot, I'd figure that I'd done something these last four years. . . . We all realize that the only hope is for the miners themselves to clean up the union." Among Miller's first reforms were restoring the rights of the rank and file to elect district officers and allowing members to vote on contract ratifications.

Tony Boyle's fall was fast and hard. In 1974, while serving his sentence for misuse of union funds, he was convicted in connection with the Yablonski murders and sentenced to three life terms at the State Correctional Institute in Dallas, Pennsylvania. He died in 1985.

The rank-and-file victory turned in mixed results. Miners for Democracy dissolved in the wake of Miller's election, but the UMWA, and labor, in general, was in for more tough times. Wildcat strikes, bitter contract negotiations, and an uncertain economic climate once again fueled dissension in the coalfields and in the UMWA's national office. After narrowly winning a second term in 1977, Miller stepped down in 1979. He died in 1985—ironically, only six weeks after Boyle's death.

History would repeat itself, as it often does, when reformers Rich Trumka and running mate Cecil Roberts upset incumbents Sam Church and Frank Clements in the UMWA's 1982 elections. Trumka is now head of the AFL-CIO. Roberts, who, like Miller, grew up along Cabin Creek in Kanawha County, has been UMWA president since 1995. Both Trumka and Roberts credit their rises within the labor movement to the Miners for Democracy and the reforms that gave everyday miners a real voice in the union. No doubt, their successors will someday do the same.

After graduating from WVU's Public History Program in 1990, CHRISTINE M. KREISER worked as a historian and editor for more than 15 years in the Mountain State. She now writes from Winchester, Virginia. This is her third contribution to GOLDENSEAL. Her previous two articles appeared in our Fall 2017 issue.

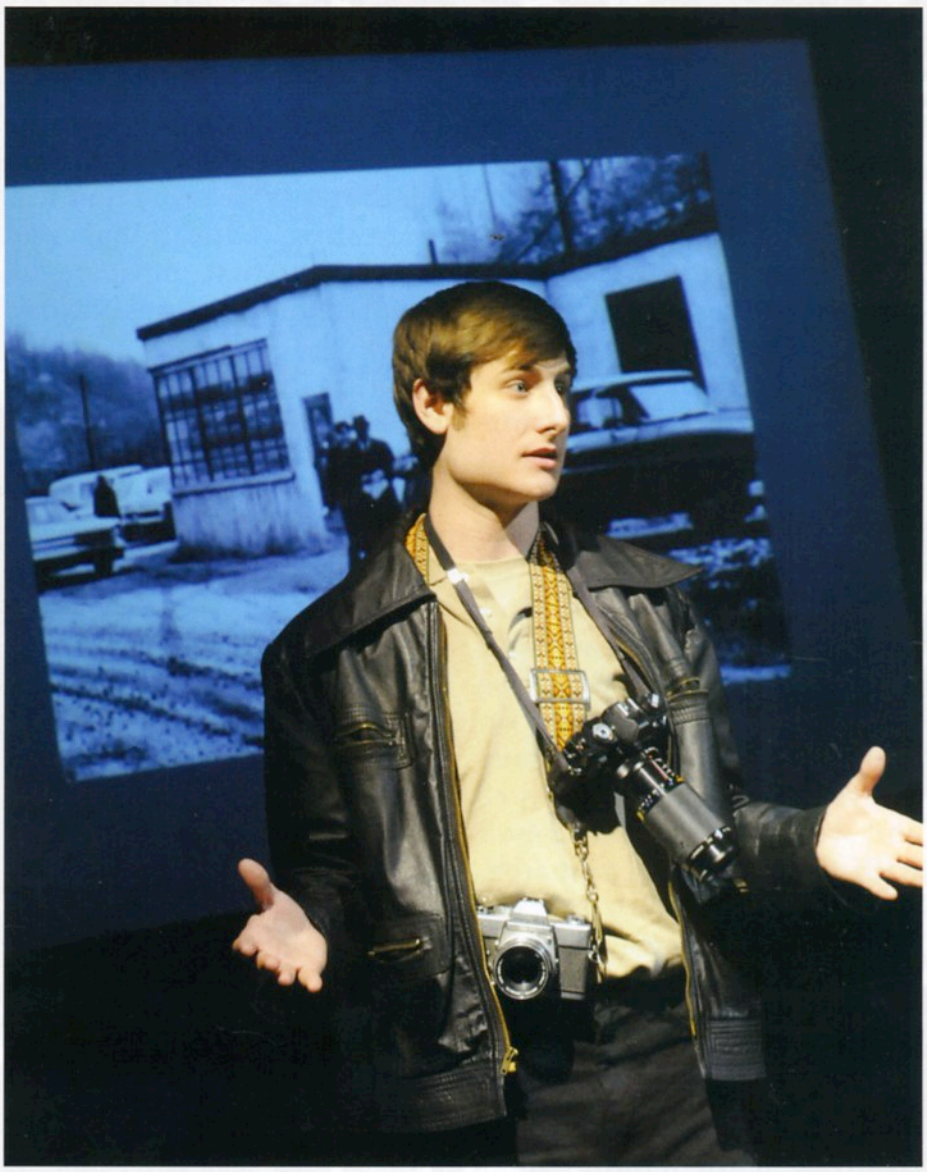
REMEMBRANCE

Sharon Clelland was five years old when her father, David Cartwright, was killed in No. 9. In 2017, at the annual memorial service for the miners, she places a wreath in her father's memory. Photo by Eddie Trizzino courtesy of the *Times West Virginian*.

"It was the explosion heard 'round the world, and we'll never forget it. And we'll never forget my dad, David Mainella." –Aida Mainella Everhart

Remembering No. 9

By Francene Kirk



In *Remembering No. 9*, actor Jeremiah Ridle portrays a character based on photographer Bob Campione. All photos courtesy of Francene Kirk and Fairmont State University.

In 2009, I worked with my students in Fairmont State University's (FSU) Department of Communication and Theatre Arts to develop a play about the Farmington Mine Disaster. My inspiration for *Remembering No. 9* occurred during the 2006 Sago Mine Disaster, as I sat staring at my TV for days as that dramatic story unfolded. I couldn't imagine what the friends and family members of the trapped miners must be feeling or how they endured the waiting in that little country church in Upshur County. But mostly, I wondered how they endured the heartache of losing the ones they loved.

When I returned to campus after the winter break, I talked about these things with a few of my students: Samantha Huffman, Celi Oliveto, and Jason Young. As theatre artists, we value, perhaps crave, the story behind the facts, which prompted us to explore a similar event from our own backyard: the tragic Farmington Mine Disaster.

With funding from the FSU Undergraduate Research Program, Samantha, Celi, Jason, and I sought help from professional historians Michael and Carrie Nobel Kline. The Klines provided us with training and insight into collecting oral histories. For the next several months, the students interviewed wonderful people who generously shared memories about their husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, and friends as well as the events of that horrific time in November 1968. Some showed us newspaper clippings and photographs. Others simply talked, but it was clear that everyone wanted to tell their stories.

In August 2008, Celi and Samantha presented a workshop about their research at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education Conference in Atlanta, where we met Greg Hardison, a museum theatre

specialist from the Kentucky Historical Society. We contracted Greg and playwright Donna Ison to help us (again, through the generosity of the Undergraduate Research Program). They provided us with examples of museum theatre and helped us develop a treatment, with goals for our production and a scenario of the action.

Just eight weeks before the May 2009 workshop performance, a cast of actors and writers was selected. The cast talked with photographer Bob Campione and the Rev. O. Richard Bowyer (whose stories anchor the show) and quickly began to improvise scenes for the play based on their accounts, our previous interviews, and newspaper and web information. Armed with the treatment, research, and improvised dialogue, the cast, working in small groups, began to write.

During rehearsals, scenes were read aloud, discussed, and revised. As opening day grew closer, writing responsibilities were handed over to the student researchers and Steve McElroy, an FSU theatre graduate. As we began staging Act 1, we were still writing Act 2. While staging the play, we continued to revise our work based on new discoveries about the people who inspired our characters. During our workshop performance, we held talk-back sessions with the audience and used this feedback to further develop the script.

We took some dramatic liberties. The characters are somewhat fictionalized based on the research—for instance, many of the names were changed. Likewise, we didn't try to re-create a 1968 setting. Our goal was to tell the story in a way that was interesting, educational, and artistic but that, most of all, honored the memories of No. 9.

Here is the final scene of Act II, *Remembering No. 9: Stories from the Farmington Mine Disaster*, depicting the moment when family members learned the mine would be sealed—*ed.*

Scene 7—The Announcement

By Francene Kirk, Samantha Huffman, Celi Oliveto, Jason Young, and Steve McElroy

ACTOR: November 29, 1968

The scene opens in the church sanctuary, restored to its original state. The feeling all around is somber, waiting for the inevitable. The REV *and the* PRIEST *stand and greet distressed family members, who enter and are seated.* POUNDSTONE *stands off to the side, not wanting to interfere in the personal moments of these people, or perhaps just not knowing what to say.* MARIE *and* PAULINE *are sitting in a pew already.* MAGGIE *is there, also, sitting alone, waiting. Some of the surviving miners are sitting together, too. We hear some quiet murmuring, but there is also a lot of reflection.* RONNIE *enters and sees* CHARLOTTE.

RONNIE: Charlotte, I'm glad you're here. How's your dad?

CHARLOTTE: I tried to get him to come, but he just can't face it. He says he already knows what they're gonna say, and it's not good. I'm so sorry, Ronnie.

RONNIE: Me, too. It's okay, Charlotte. It's not your fault. I don't blame him for not coming today. These men are his friends, his family.

(CHUCK *and* ROSE *enter.)*

CHUCK: Mom, why did we even come here? I mean, we know—

ROSE:,I know. I know. But, Chuck, honey, we all need to be here for each other right now. It doesn't matter who knows what or who's going to say what. We just need to be together.

CHUCK: I've been thinking.

ROSE: Yeah?

CHUCK: I'm thinking about getting a job, quitting school.

ROSE (*pulling him aside so others will not hear):* When pigs fly, Chuck.

CHUCK: No, Mom; I mean it. I'm the man of the house now.

ROSE: Chuck, honey, I know you mean well, and I appreciate what you're saying, but quitting school? School is your future.

CHUCK: But I can work.

ROSE: At what? In the mines? Do you think your daddy would want that?

CHUCK: I think my daddy would want me to be a man.

ROSE: Yes, an educated man. A man who can make a difference around here. Not a man who has to claw and scrape every minute of his natural-born days. Your daddy worked day and night so you could have better.

CHUCK: But mom . . .

ROSE: We're not going to settle this now. Let's just take some time to think on it awhile.

CHUCK: I can do that.

(ROSE *sees* MAGGIE)

ROSE *(placing her hand on* MAGGIE*'s shoulder)*: Maggie?

MAGGIE: Rose . . .

ROSE: Mind if we sit here?

MAGGIE: No, not at all.

(It's getting to be about that time. POUNDSTONE *walks to the front of the church, steps up to the pulpit. He clears his throat. As* POUNDSTONE *talks, the lights dim on the congregation, and a single light focuses on* POUNDSTONE.*)*

POUNDSTONE: Good evening. My name is William Poundstone. I'm the vice president of Consolidation Coal. Thank you all for coming out this evening. I know this has been a long and trying process for all of us. Earlier, I stated that the mine would not be sealed until every avenue of reaching men in the mine had been explored. Every avenue possible to reach the men has now been exhausted. The tragic circumstances surrounding this incident, which include many devastating explosions, extensive underground fires, negative reports by the rescue teams who risked their own lives to save the men trapped inside, and many lethal air samples have all been analyzed by men who are the most knowledgeable in the world about underground mining and rescue efforts associated with mine fires and explosions. The cumulative evidence shows without question that human life is not possible west of Mod's Run, where the men are believed to be located. Equally important is the unalterable fact that further delay endangers the lives of others. Risk of serious injury or death to mine-sealing crews, residents of areas around portals and shafts, the recovery teams who must someday return to the working areas to ascertain the true causes of the disaster, and other hazardous consequences, which could flow from a failure to act, all make it necessary to seal the mine promptly.

(A collective gasp is heard followed by the low murmuring of confusion and consolation. REV *meets* POUNDSTONE *at the back of the center aisle to shake his hand as the* PRIEST *steps to the pulpit.)*

PRIEST *(making the sign of the cross):* In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

ALL: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

(Light comes up on the audience. All are frozen except .)

PAULINE: Thy will be done?! Is it God's will to kill my son?!

MARIE: Pauline, please. There's nothing we can do. The decision has been made.

PAULINE: What have I done?

(PAULINE *begins to sob quietly into her handkerchief. Lights change.)*

ALL: Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses . . .

(Lights change.)

MARIE *(to* ROSE*):* You knew, didn't you? That's why you left before, isn't it?

ROSE: When you've been around mining all your life . . .

MARIE: Why didn't you tell us? We were all just sitting here, waiting . . . and for nothing.

ROSE *(shaken):* Not for nothing. Who was I to take away your hope? Who was I . . .

CHUCK *(intervening, touching his mom on the shoulder):* Mom, let's go home.

(Lights change.)

ALL: As we forgive those who trespass against us.

(Lights change.)

RONNIE: How could they do this? What am I going to do? I'm all alone.

CHARLOTTE: No. You're not. You've got me.

(RONNIE *and* CHARLOTTE *embrace. Lights change.)*

(Left-right) Actors Sasha Bohon, Dana Sayre, and Celi Oliveto wait for news about sealing up the mine. Jason Young can be seen in the background.

ALL: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

(Lights change.)

MARIE: Come on, Pauline, the kids are waitin' for us, and we've got a lot to prepare for.

(Lights change.)

PRIEST: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

(After the prayer, those remaining in the church exit, speaking to the REV *and the* PRIEST *as they go. The* REV *then approaches the front of the now-empty church, sits down contemplating what to do next, as* MAGGIE, *who didn't get the chance to speak to the* REV *as she left, returns.)*

MAGGIE: I . . . I wanted to thank you, for everything you did . . and for sending me home. You were right. My kids need a mother. Now more than ever.

REV: Maggie, I'm so sorry. I wish there was something I could say or do. I can't imagine what you're going through, but I do know that you'll never have to face it alone.

MAGGIE: I know. I'm going to miss . . . Will you do me one last favor?

REV: Sure.

MAGGIE: Will you keep me . . . will you keep all of us . . . in your prayers?

*(*REV *nods.)*

MAGGIE: Thank you. It was nice meeting you. Goodbye.

*(*MAGGIE *exits. The* REV *watches her go. The sound from the nightly news begins to play. We do not see the image. The actors move to their places and begin saying the names of the miners who died in the disaster. It contains the information about No. 9. When the naming is complete, the slide changes to show Mine Safety and Health Administration information. "Let It Be" plays over the slide, and the stage goes dark. There is no curtain call. The actors quietly put the chairs, tables, and props in their places and exit.)*

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West Virginia Back Roads

Alasky's

Another Name for Farmington

Text and Photos by Carl E. Feather

An appliance, furniture, car-parts, and hardware store the size of a football field seems out of place in the hamlet of Farmington, population 374. Given the size of Alasky's inventory, that probably works out to a TV, a sofa, three chairs, a bed, and several tables for every resident.

A simple True Value sign with the family's name identifies the store's location along the Husky Highway, based on the mascot of nearby North Marion High School. Loyal customers come from as far away as Morgantown and even Wheeling, a long haul on the endlessly curvy Route 250 (the Husky Highway's primary name).

"Big Pete" (left) and his son, P. J. Alasky, stand outside their Farmington store along Route 250, April 2018.

Peter "Big Pete" Alasky started the store in 1966 as a Western Auto franchise. When you walk into the sprawling store, the section to the left with hardware items is the original 22′ x 30′ building. Lawn-and-garden equipment is on your right. A Bumper to Bumper auto-parts store and warehouse are housed in an addition, and the furniture and appliance galleries are straight ahead, stretching for 300 feet across the back.

Big Pete, age 90, says all of this came about by "treating people like you want to be treated," hiring good people, and staying lockstep with God.

"It was me and God," he says. "If it wasn't for Him, it would be hard as hell. He was there all the time. It seemed to be that all my decisions worked; I guess He could see farther than I could."

Susie Alasky, Big Pete's daughter-in-law, says the Alasky name also has a lot to do with the business' success.

After a two-year stint in the navy, Big Pete came back to Farmington and worked as a coal miner, like most other local men. While the work and environment didn't bother him, the employment was too sporadic.

Alasky's Western Auto store, 1960s.

"It was great. I loved the mines," he says. "I wanted to work, but they kept forcing strikes on us."

After a nine-month strike, Pete decided to go into the service-station business with his brother Harry (1926-2013), first as a Gulf Oil then as an Esso dealership. Big Pete went from too little work to almost too much.

"I could work from 6 a.m. to midnight," Pete says. The owners pumped gas, changed tires and oil, and did whatever else was necessary to serve motorists seven days a week.

In 1962, Big Pete's service station became a Western Auto agency; Western Auto, a specialty retail chain, was founded in 1909 and was merged out of existence by 2003. Customers would come in, browse catalogs, and order items to be delivered to the store. That prompted Pete to open a Western Auto dealership four years later.

"Western Auto at that time was auto parts and bicycles," says Big Pete. [The representative] came into town looking for me, and he wanted me to get a location. That's how it happened. He finally talked me into it, and that's when it all started."

Pete secured a building formerly used by a natural gas company and started purchasing inventory. He was surprised by the public's response when the new store opened in July

1966. "They came from all around," he says.

At that time, five mines were being worked in the area, and "things were good." Farmington had four service stations; four grocery stores, a shoe cobbler, schools, two bars, and a hardware store. An employee took over his old service station, which stayed open for only seven months.

Big Pete enjoyed the change of pace and shorter hours. He decided to close the store on Sundays.

"I say [to customers], 'If you are not going to church, it's not going to be because of me,'" Big Pete states. "I tell them I don't have a thing in here that you need on Sunday. Now the gasoline business, that was different. I had a product they needed on Sunday."

Faced with seven-day-a-week competition these days, Big Pete is still committed to closing on Sundays. Further, he's never been one to pay attention to the competition.

"I've always focused on what I was doing and what my Helper was showing me to do," Big Pete says.

He's also paid close attention to what his customers want. At one point, Big Pete noticed a lot of special catalog orders for certain pieces of furniture and appliances, so he began stocking those items. That's how an auto-parts store grew into a furniture-and-appliance behemoth.

His first expansion, 40' x 60', was completed in 1969, followed by a 350-foot-long addition two years later. By 1970, he was one of the largest purchasers in the company's Butler Retail Division.

A trade magazine article attributed Big Pete's success to an aggressive credit-selling program, marketing through sales circulars, radio and TV advertising, and effective training and use of sales personnel.

The business continues to evolve but remains rooted in the Alasky family's determination to give customers good value, quality, and selection from a trusted name.

Big Pete's son, P. J., went to work in the store at age 15, doing whatever needed to be done. His wife gives him a lot of credit for the business' continued growth.

"He has a great personality. He's very business savvy," Susie says. "He's very well respected, both in the store and with the buying group . . . which has several warehouses and represents hundreds of independent stores."

P. J. and his father meet each morning to discuss the day's business and challenges. "[Big Pete] has a gift for the mechanics of running a business," Susie says.

P. J. and Susie have two children. Pete IV is a doctor, and Angela Burnside is an MRI technician. They have four grandchildren, including Pete V, who ultimately could determine if Alasky's will remain in the family. For now, however, Alasky's remains very much a family-operated business, with P. J.'s sisters, Beth Anne Alasky and Diane Aloi, hard at work daily.

"She's been one great asset," Big Pete says of Diane. "She's the backbone of the business. She's run the office with three others, does all the correspondence with manufacturers and suppliers, takes the complaints, and takes care of all the insurances."

For many years, Big Pete's wife, Violet, worked as the cashier and buyer. Big Pete says they had an understanding: he was the boss at the store, and she was the boss at home.

"And as long as I was happy, she was happy," Pete says of Violet. "I was chief cook and bottle washer at the store. I would make a decision, and she would agree." Violet, who, like her husband, is now 90, has essentially retired from the business. She and Big Pete will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary on October 31.

Big Pete's eyes tear up when he considers just how much the little business has grown in the past 52 years.

"I just can't believe it at times. Amen," he says.

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Susie Alasky and No. 9

Just two years and four months after Alasky's Western Auto store opened, No. 9 exploded, killing 78 men. One of them was John Gouzd, Susie Alasky's father.

Gouzd had worked odd jobs before getting steady work in No. 9. "My uncle [Joe Craig] got him the job," Susie says.

Gouzd, 42, was a rock duster—spraying down coal dust to reduce the risk of explosion. He'd worked the cateye shift at the mine on November 20, 1968. He was just hours from coming home when a supervisor asked him to go back down. Minutes later, the explosion rocked the mine.

"It spread horribly quickly," Big Pete says. "It was so horrendous... It was just all over the place, people up there waiting for them to bring somebody out."

Susie says her mother, Genevieve, didn't go to the mine and wait. "My mother went up to her room and stayed in the dark for three days," Susie says. "She cried, and cried, and cried. She would not come out of that bedroom. She knew [he was dead], but I still had hope."

Susie's hope lingered for months, even after the mine was sealed on November 29, which happened to be her mother's birthday.

"I kept looking for him to come home," Susie says. "Everywhere I looked, there were memories of Dad. I looked for him a long time." John Gouzd's body was finally recovered in February 1974.

Susie Alasky holds a photo of her late father, John F. Gouzd, who was killed in the Farmington Mine Disaster.

Gouzd's death had a huge impact on Joe Craig, the uncle who got him the job. "It made him literally sick," Susie says. "He mourned the loss. He always thought it was his fault."

After the disaster, a family friend in Florida opened her home to Genevieve and her children. They stayed there about a year but eventually returned to Farmington because they were so homesick.

Susie's family remains involved in mining. Her cousin Mark Gouzd is a mine safety instructor who's trained miners in the United States, Canada, and Australia. He regularly references the No. 9 disaster in his training.

As the 50th anniversary approaches, Susie dreads the attention it will receive from the media. She knows it's all part of the public's effort to honor the miners who died and to recognize the mine safety changes their deaths brought about. Still, though, she says that "some of us resent the media, every year, bringing it up, because it is like living a horrible event over and over again."

Although Susie and P. J. weren't married at the time, Big Pete knew the Gouzd family. "My parents had bought furniture from Alasky's," Susie says. "The [entire] house was Alasky's."

"I just couldn't believe it," says Big Pete, recalling the disaster. "Half of those people or more, I knew—and their families."

The No. 9 Memorial

By John Veasey

The first anniversary of the No. 9 disaster, November 20, 1969, was a somber event held at Farmington's St. Peter's Catholic Church. The first two bodies had been recovered from the mine only a month before. The Rev. William Nolte Jr. reminded the crowd and the nation that "Farmington did not forget. Farmington will not forget."

The second anniversary, in 1970, carried much more of a political tone. It occurred less than a year after the murder of Jock Yablonski; there was turmoil within the UMWA, and miners were angry. That year, a procession began at the UMWA Local Union 4042 hall and ended at the Llewellyn portal. The speakers included the three doctors who'd been campaigning for black lung benefits: I. E. Buff, Hawey Wells, and Donald Rasmussen. Buff publicly railed against Consol's financial offer to the widows, which he considered little more than a bribe to shut down "any government investigation" into the cause of the disaster. He noted that "if negligence was found, it would cost the company 40 times what they are offering to pay the widows now." Buff added, though, that the "78 men did not die in vain because without Farmington," the stringent Federal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 would not have become law.

Joe Megna (left, who lost his father, Emilio, in the disaster) and Jim Matish (who lost his father, Frank) place the first wreath at the 2017 annual memorial service. Photo by Eddie Trizzino courtesy of the *Times West Virginian*.

Perhaps the most striking words on that second anniversary again came from Rev. Nolte. Presiding over another service at St. Peter's in Farmington, Nolte observed that since most of the bodies still hadn't been recovered, the entire region was "living unnaturally under the pall of death but with fantasies that the dead are not really dead because they have not been buried." He said that as a result, Farmington was "spiritually depressed."

As the years went by and more bodies were recovered, the memorial took on a more reverential feeling, like that of a funeral. Sara Kaznoski, one of the widows who'd played such an important role in making the mine health and safety legislation a reality, spoke for many family members in saying, "This [event] is not political. We don't like to be exploited. This is something very sacred and near and dear to our hearts."

As time moved on, the annual commemoration began to dwindle in size; there were a few years when our local papers didn't even cover it. So, it was eventually moved to the Sunday before November 20 to encourage more people to attend.

Joe Reynolds, field representative for UMWA District 31, says, "From what I understand, they tried to place the monument as closely as possible over the site where the final 19 bodies are located."

As such, the memorial and grounds feel more like a cemetery than a park. Rev. O. Richard Bowyer, who comforted the victims' families for nine

Some of the Farmington Widows, other family members, and a minister gather for the 1974 memorial service. Courtesy of East Tennessee State University, Archives of Appalachia, Jeanne Rasmussen Collection.

days following the disaster, has rarely missed any of the annual memorial events.

"I've given the invocations at nearly all the memorials," Richard says. "There are many who come year after year. It is remembered. The Catholic church in Mannington always rings its bell 78 times on the Sunday nearest November 20th.

"I recall that Jay Rockefeller was here once—that might have been 1977—and Joe Manchin was here several times. The services have always been attended by elected officials from Marion, Harrison, and Monongalia counties.

"But the greatest dignitaries in my mind have been the families," Richard notes. "They are the ones who have made the greatest sacrifices. I don't believe Judge Jim Matish from Harrison County has ever missed. His father, Frank, was killed in the explosion."

Has the weather ever been a detriment to the ceremony? "Every year, it seems like it's always really cold and often snowy," says Joe. "Regardless, the turnout is good. Nothing really deters the people from coming. It was cold and miserable last year—our most recent one—but the people still came."

Joe estimates that perhaps four or five widows are still living, but Louise Hillberry, whose late husband Bud Hillberry, was one of the last miners rescued [see the cover of Bob Campione's book on page 30], believes that the total may be only two or three now.

Joe has been the field representative for UMWA District 31 for about 11 years now. He'd been a miner at Federal No. 2. He and District 31 President Mike Caputo always point out the ultimate sacrifice paid by the 78 miners but also like to recognize the widows' important role with the mine safety legislation.

Joe describes his entire experience with the No. 9 memorials as being very moving. "The biggest part of my family were mining people," he says. "My dad worked in the mines pre-No. 9 I've worked post-No. 9."

"Over the years, some of the faces there may have changed, but we haven't missed a year."

–Joe Reynolds, field representative, District 31

He adds, "It's hard to convey what a positive impact the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act has had on mine safety. I was always concerned that the potential for safety standards [would be] lessened. But you can truly see how the miners' death toll has decreased over the years. It also was reflected in later wage agreements between the union and the industry.

"The 1969 act states that a miner can ask for alternate work if he considers the situation is in imminent danger. For example, if there is an excessive amount of methane in the face area, that has to be dealt with before the miners resume work. Actually, it says that if the methane level gets to two percent or higher, they *have* to evacuate the miners.

"Planning for the 50th anniversary ceremony began back in February. There's a possibility the ceremony may be moved inside this year, perhaps at least part of it, if they determine the crowd may be much larger than usual," Joe says.

"Seeing the sacrifice of these men [makes me] reflect on how fortunate I was in my many years in the mines. Their sacrifice gave me a chance to help enforce the new safety laws. But their families gave a sacrifice that they have felt every single

day since the tragedy occurred," Joe says.

"I've been involved since the early '90s," notes Mike Caputo. "I became district international vice president in 2010. So, I have emceed the event the last eight years. And in the years before that, I helped organize them. I was an activist before that. So, I have been active in the memorial service for quite a while."

He adds that "our first priority must be a tribute to the fallen miners while paying respect to the family members. There is one family with more than 15 kids who always attend the service. They are here every year." Mike thinks it's important to remind everyone that the bodies of 19 of the 78 miners have never been recovered. "They are still entombed there," he says.

One of those 19 is Emilio Megna. Recovery crews felt they were within hours of finding Megna's body in 1978. After disputes between Consol and the union about getting more coal from the mine, No. 9 was sealed, and Megna's body remains inside.

Each year, a number of No. 9's 21 survivors have attended the memorial. In November 2017, the 49th anniversary of the disaster, Ralph Starkey, the last remaining survivor, was unable to attend due to poor health. But, to keep a family tradition alive and to honor those who perished, Ralph's wife went and placed a black wreath at the foot of the memorial.

Mike Caputo was only 13 in 1968, but he "remembers the explosion. And I can recall loading the car and delivering food to the family members." Mike feels strongly about continuing the services in perpetuity, even after all the survivors and the victims' relatives have passed on, because No. 9 was a defining moment in the history of the community and coal mining in the United States.

The memorial is an everlasting tribute to 78 men who should not have died on November 20, 1968, and to all other miners who risk their lives daily for our benefit.

This year, the 50th anniversary of No. 9, the annual memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. on Sunday, November 18, 2018. The memorial is located on Llewellyn Run Road (13/1) off Flat Run Road (Route 13). The public is encouraged to attend.

Comfortably Numb

By Stan Bumgardner

Sign above the door of the Champion Store at No. 9. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, News Film Collection.

This may seem like an odd conclusion, but recently, I was listening to Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* for the first time in years. When I was young, I assumed that the Floyd song "Comfortably Numb" was just about partying in one form or another. As I got older, I came to understand that it was about our conditioned indifference to war and its casualties; just to be clear, there are many interpretations of the song, even by its own writers.

But poetry and lyrics have universal meanings. I happened to be listening to *The Wall* again while thinking about Farmington. For the first time, I had a very West Virginia *take* on "Comfortably Numb." It struck me that many of us are comfortably numb to the real costs of coal mining.

Today, approximately 40 percent of the world's and 30 percent of the United States' electricity is generated from coal. While those numbers are down considerably from the past due to other sources—natural gas, petroleum, nuclear, and renewables—coal is still responsible for much of our electricity. How many times do we watch TV, surf the web, piddle around on Facebook, or leave the lights on and think about where that electricity comes from?

More importantly, do we ever think about how all of this is made possible by the brave men and women who work in one of history's most dangerous jobs? Or have we just become comfortably numb to it all?

My guess is many of us are routinely oblivious to the real costs, particularly the lives and health of miners and the environmental toll of mining. We seem much more attuned to the economic costs. Like everyone else, I cringe when I get my monthly electric bill. But how much higher would these bills have been over the years if we had consistently paid miners a fair wage based on their skills, work ethic, and health risks?

Granted, miners are paid better today than they were in the past, especially those days when their wages were based on how much coal they loaded. Even as their pay has increased, however, mining families continually face the on-again off-again ordeal of whether the mines are working. As Zella Martin Keener notes about growing up in a mining family, "It was always feast or famine."

Notwithstanding improvements in pay, benefits, and safety, do we still ignore the true costs of electricity? How much more should we have paid over the last century-plus to make coal mines as safe as other job sites? But, to quote another song from *The Wall*, "the show must go on."

Since record keeping began in 1883, more than 21,000 miners have died in West Virginia mines. That's more than 2½ times the number of Americans who died at Pearl Harbor, on D-Day, and on 9/11—combined. Let that sink in for a moment. Every year, we rightfully honor those who gave their lives on those horrific days, but how often do we pay tribute to our fallen miners?

And while we owe a much-overdue debt of gratitude to miners, let us not forget the spouses, parents, brothers, sisters, and children of miners who have agonized over the reality that their kin might not come home one day. For 50 years, those who lost loved ones in No. 9 have wondered, as Hazel Dickens reminds us, "What were their last thoughts? What were their cries?" The family members and friends of miners will never become comfortably numb to the true costs of mining, and neither should we.

"The West Virginia Coal Miner" statue, located on the State Capitol Complex in Charleston, designed and sculpted by Burl Jones. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

Goldenseal
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PERIODICALS

The No. 9 Memorial lists the 78 men who died in the mine, with asterisks indicating those still buried underground. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

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