

Bear Creek Mountain, Montana

Smith Mine Explosion

February 27, 1943 - 74 Killed

February 27, 1943 began on an optimistic note for most families in Bearcreek, Washoe and Red Lodge. The bright sun reflecting off a light covering of new snow gave most people living in the shadows of the Beartooth Mountains a trusting view of the world.

It was Saturday, and the kids were out from underfoot early that morning, not wanting to miss a minute of sunny escape from school. In addition, it was payday for the Smith Mine workers. The men would return home that evening with pay for their toil.

Little did the residents of the three communities suspect that morning that their lives would soon be changed forever. The miners knew the danger of their profession. That knowledge was likely in the back of their minds each time they descended beneath the surface of the earth. Their wives shared that knowledge; the thought of their husbands being injured or even killed likely crossed their minds each day they left for work. But the magnitude of the impending disaster was almost beyond comprehension.

The men began work at 8 a.m. Seventy-seven men entered the mine that morning; some into the earth 8,000 feet, on Seam Number Three. Only three would come out alive.

The explosion inside the mine took place at about 9:37 a.m. Shortly after, the mine's siren was wailing and smoke was billowing from the mine entrance. As if acting on cue, threatening clouds began filling the sky and the temperature began to drop. That glorious Saturday morning had indeed darkened.

Three men near the entrance of the mine managed to get out. According to the book "Red Lodge Saga of a Western Area" by Shirley Zupan and Harry J. Owens, the three, Alex Hawthorne, Willard Reid and Eli Houtonen, felt unusual pressure in their ears with no sound. A terrible wind came at them from inside the mine, blowing debris. Hawthorne reached a phone and sent word that something was wrong, and that he was coming out. He was then overcome by gas. Reid and Houtonen were knocked off their feet by the force of the wind. Reid managed to get up and tried to waken Houtonen. Guided by Reid's lamp, rescue men found the three and took them above ground. The three survived the explosion; 74 others did not.

All mines operating in the area that day were closed as workers rushed to take part in a rescue effort. Those miners not working hurried to the mine to help look for their fellow workers. Meanwhile, wives, brothers, sisters, parents and children of the entombed miners kept a vigil outside the mine.

In the beginning, many held out hope their loved ones might have found a spot in the mine

where they would be shielded from the explosion and gasses. Onlookers admired the calmness of the waiting, praying families, and of the rescue workers. But as time passed and lifeless bodies were carried out a few at a time, it became obvious the likelihood of finding more survivors was slight. It wasn't until eight days later that the last body was brought to the surface.

Later, in April, a coroner's inquest involving witnesses and state and federal mine bureau investigators concluded the men had lost their lives due to concussion and gas poisoning caused by gas and dust explosion.

Fifty-eight women were widowed by the disaster, 125 children left fatherless. One Bearcreek woman lost 11 relatives. Six of eight Bearcreek High School seniors lost their fathers.

It was not only the survivors who were left devastated by the explosion. The disaster eventually forced an end to the local coal mining industry. The faces of the towns of Bearcreek and Washoe changed forever, almost vanishing altogether. Homes were torn down, abandoned, plowed under or moved to nearby Red Lodge and Belfry.

Thousands of tons of coal remain beneath the reclaimed hills around Bearcreek. Today, in 2005, the rusted buildings of the Smith Mine stand by the highway as a monument to those who lost their lives beneath the sage covered hills, to their brave survivors, and to the courageous rescuers.

In Remembrance

Smith Mine Disaster Victims

February 27, 1943

"They took, willingly, the daily risk which accompanies the occupation of mine working in order that they might provide the wherewithals of life to their loved ones." Rev. A.W. Seebart, Memorial Service, March, 1943

Sam Alexander, 57, Bearcreek. Born Stevenston, Scotland on Nov. 24, 1885. Married Agnus Pearson at Red Lodge in 1908. Was survived by his widow, 1 son, 1 daughter, 3 grandchildren. Buried Bearcreek Cemetery.

James Allison, 51, Red Lodge. Born in Red Lodge Jan 27, 1892. Son of James and Agnus Allison. Lived entire life in Carbon County. Married Rose Skupa, Feb. 17, 1919. Survived by his widow, 1 son, 2 daughters, 1 grandchild, 1 brother, 3 sisters. Buried Robinson (Clear Creek) Cemetery.

Emil Anderson, 40, Washoe. Born in Red Lodge Aug. 2, 1902, son of Mr. And Mrs. Leander Anderson. Attended Red Lodge schools, moved to Washoe in 1915. Started work in Bearcreek coal mines in 1916, at age 14. Married Agnes McBride at Red Lodge, Jan. 27, 1922. Survived

by 3 children, 3 brothers, 1 sister. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William C. Appleton, Sr., 50, Washoe. Born Prescott, Lancaster England Aug. 22, 1892. Married Annie McDonald Tweedie at Maidstone, Kent England, April 13, 1915. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 2 daughters, sister. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Sam Barovich, 56, Bearcreek. Born in Yugoslavia. Obituary not found. Bearcreek Cemetery.

William F. Barry, 26, Red Lodge. Born Sandpoint, Idaho, May 26, 1916. Married Virginia Price Sept. 5, 1940 at Red Lodge. Began working at Smith Mine Jan. 2, 1943. Survived by his widow and his mother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Beeney, 55, Bearcreek. Born Newcastle, county of Durham, England Sept. 6, 1888. Came to Bearcreek in 1907, worked in mines since. Married Mary Hamilton Dec. 24, 1914. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 1 daughter, 3 grandchildren, 1 brother in England, 2 sisters (1 in England). Red Lodge Cemetery.

Jules Besinque, 51, Bearcreek. Born Scammon, Kansas, July 11, 1891. Came to Bearcreek in 1918. Was the mayor of Bearcreek for a time, managed meat department in Bearcreek store. Returned to mines in 1923. Moved to Billings in 1930. Survived by his widow Elizabeth Tassin Besinque, 2 sons, 1 daughter. Buried at Billings.

John Bone, 60, Bearcreek. Born in Scotland. Obituary not found. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Leland Cline, 26, Red Lodge. Born Nov. 23, 1917 in Miles City. Graduated Billings schools, helped father on farm 3 miles west of Boyd. Married Verna Warila of Roberts on Aug. 26, 1940. Had only recently gone to work for Montana Coal and Iron. Survived by his widow, parents Mr. And Mrs. Joe Cline, daughter, 3 sisters, 4 brothers, grandmother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Donald J. Davis, 42, Red Lodge. Born Swanse, Wales Dec. 19, 1901. Came to U.S. in 1903. Father Thomas Davis was killed in mine cave-in near Livingston in 1905. Moved to Red Lodge with his mother Margaret Pollock and stepfather in 1907. Began work at Smith Mine in Aug., 1942. Survived by 2 sisters, 1 brother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William DeBourg, 55, Red Lodge. Born Sillingbyn, Langsrud, Varmland Sweden, Feb. 3, 1888. Son of Christine Larson and John Jacob DeBourg. Came to U.S. in 1908. Was blacksmith and mechanic. Married Lena Sconfienza Mar. 27, 1927. Survived by his widow, 1 sister, 1 brother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

August Deruelle, 62, Bearcreek. Born in France. No obituary found. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Pat Doran, 38, Red Lodge. Born in Red Lodge. Wife's name Minnie. No obituary found. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Marcel Fages, 40, Bearcreek. Born Lieven France on Jan. 12, 1903. Lived in Bearcreek 22 years,

was a barber in Bearcreek. Survived by his wife Mary, 1 son, his mother, 1 sister. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Joe Ferro, 51, Red Lodge. Born in Italy. Was single. Believed to have been an orphan. No obituary found. Red Lodge Cemetery.

John Germanetti, 60, Red Lodge. Born Borgo-Franco, Italy on Jan. 1, 1883. Came to U.S. in 1908. Married Josephine Pistano. Lived in Red Lodge, worked in Smith Mine 11 years. Survived by his widow, 1 daughter, a brother and a sister in Italy. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Peter Charles Giovetti, 39, Bearcreek. Born Italy, May 12, 1903. Came to U.S. at 4 months, to Red Lodge in 1914, to Bearcreek in 1939. Married Lottie Spear Nov. 16, 1923 at Red Lodge. Survived by his widow, 2 daughters, 2 sons, his mother Mrs. Dominic Giovetti, 2 sisters, 1 brother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Matt Hallila, 57, Red Lodge. Born Finland, Jan. 1, 1886. Came to America in 1906, and to Red Lodge in 1942. Married Mrs. Ellen Nyback in 1942. Survived by his widow, 1 daughter, 4 stepsons. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Arthur Halpin, 42, Red Lodge. No birthplace or birthdate listed. Resident of Red Lodge for many years. Operated a ranch, worked in mines during busy mining time. Brother-in-law William Pelo also killed in Smith Mine disaster. Survived by his wife Ada Halpin, 2 sons, father M.F. Halpin, 2 brothers, paternal grandmother Matilda J. Halpin. Red Lodge Cemetery.

A.D. Dewey Hardy, 46, Red Lodge. Born in Oklahoma. Wife's name was Delena. No obituary available. Red Lodge Cemetery.

James Hawthorne, 31, Bearcreek. Born Red Lodge Mar. 1, 1912. Moved to Bearcreek as a child, attended Bearcreek schools. Graduated Bearcreek High School 1930. Married Alice Rose Schwenneker May, 1939. Survived by his parents Mr. and Mrs. Alex Hawthorne, 1 son, 2 brothers, 2 sisters. Red Lodge Cemetery.

John Hodnik, 31, Bearcreek. Born Dec. 4, 1911. Graduated Washoe Grade School 1926. Graduated Bearcreek High School 1930. Various occupations, worked for Montana Coal & Iron 7 months. Married Helen Karina, May 21, 1940. Was part owner of Bear Creek Coal Mine. Survivors included his widow, mother, 3 brothers, 1 sister. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Ahti Walter Joki, 30, Red Lodge. Born near Fox on Jan. 28, 1913. Attended school at Fox. Married Louise Henrietta Vanderloos Nov. 23, 1939. Survived by his wife, 1 daughter, his parents, 2 sisters, 4 brothers. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Wayne Jones, 31, Red Lodge. Born in Idaho. Wife's name Elma. No obituary available. Buried in Idaho.

Andrew Jorden, 21, Red Lodge. Born in Red Lodge. Single. No obituary available. Red Lodge

Cemetery.

Mike Korinko, 33, Red Lodge. Born in Bridger. Wife's name Susie. No obituary available. Red Lodge Cemetery.

John Krop, Sr., 59, Red Lodge. Born St. Ozbold, Yugoslavia on Dec. 7, 1883. Lived in U.S. 35 years, 25 in Red Lodge. Married Fannie Prenta in 1910. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 1 brother, 1 sister. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Louis Kuhar, 56, Bearcreek. Born in Austria. Wife's name Josephine. No obituary available. Buried at Billings.

Edward Kumpula, 35, Red Lodge. Born Stockett, Montana, July 4, 1907. Came to Red Lodge as small child. Married Esther Wilson at Columbus on April 24, 1939. Survived by his widow, 1 son, 1 brother. Buried Red Lodge.

Edward Laird, 55, Washoe. Born in Scotland. Wife's name Ruby. No obituary available. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Edward J. Laird, 49, Washoe. Born Armadele, Scotland Mar. 3, 1803. Came to Washoe 1911, worked in mines 22 years. Married to Mary C. Thorburn, Mar. 7, 1921. Survived by his widow, 2 daughters, 1 son, his mother Mrs. James Laird Sr., 3 sisters, 3 brothers. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Clem Lodge, 51, Washoe. Born Dickinson, North Dakota on Aug. 12, 1891. Came to Red Lodge in 1897. Started working at Bridger Mine at age 13. Later moved to Washoe. Married Mary Laird on April 17, 1915 at Red Lodge. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, mother, 4 brothers, 2 sisters. Red Lodge Cemetery.

John Madden, 53, Bearcreek. Born in Yugoslavia. Never married. Survived by 1 brother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Richard Mallon, 68, Red Lodge. Born Oct. 7, 1874 at South Stanrigg, Scotland. Came to Montana in 1893. Married Anne Jane McKee at Bozeman Nov. 22, 1897. Came to Red Lodge in 1908. He worked in the Red Lodge mine until it closed, then worked in the mines in Bearcreek region. Survivors included his wife, 4 daughters, 1 son, 6 sisters, 6 grandchildren. Buried in Bozeman.

Ignac Marinchek, 57, Bearcreek. Born Zazorjc, St. Peter, Yugoslavia, July 1, 1885. Came to Bearcreek in 1909. Worked in grocery store and in mines. Survivors included his widow, 2 daughters, brother, grandson. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Abraham McDonald, 59, Washoe. Born Haywood Scotland on Oct. 19, 1883 to Mr. And Mrs. John McDonald. Came to Washoe from Ohio in 1913. Survived by his widow Mrs. Jemimia Laffea McDonald, 2 daughters, 1 son. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Joseph McDonald, 42, Washoe. Born in Ohio. Wife's name Anna. No obituary found. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Robert Logan McDonald, 42, Red Lodge. Born in Red Lodge on Feb. 16, 1901, son of Wilhema and Sam McDonald. Married Nell Ferry in 1924. Lived in Red Lodge until 1936, then in Red Lodge. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 1 daughter, 2 brothers, 2 sisters. Red Lodge Cemetery.

James McNeish, 60, Washoe. Born Scotland. No obituary available. Red Lodge Cemetery.

John Meiklejohn, 63. Born Oakley, Fefeshire, Scotland Mar. 21, 1889. Married Margaret Strang, Apr. 16, 1916. She died in 1932. Survived by 1 daughter. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Herman Mejean, 19, Red Lodge. Born in Bearcreek. No obituary available. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Joe Meyer, Jr., 39, Bearcreek. Born Pueblo, Colorado Feb. 27, 1904. Came to Montana at age 9. Worked in mines since age 14. A brother, Ludwig, was killed in Brophy Mine in 1941. Married Josephine Ann Faygel at Roundup on June 29, 1929. Survived by his widow, parents Mr. and Mrs. Joe Meyer Sr., 2 brothers, 2 sisters. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Frank Mourich, 42, Bearcreek. Born Dec. 3, 1900 in Austria. Came to America in 1903. Began working for Montana Coal & Iron at age 15. Married Lula Marie Knuttila. Survived by his parents Mr. and Mrs. Jack Mourich, his widow, 1 son, 1 daughter, 1 brother. Brother Jack also died in Smith Mine disaster. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Jack Phillip Mourich, 35, Bearcreek. Born Feb. 28, 1907 in Bearcreek. Married Jean D. Alexander in Red Lodge. Survived by his parents Mr. and Mrs. Jack Mourich, his widow, 2 sons, 1 brother. Brother Frank also died in Smith Mine disaster. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Wilbur John Muller, 22, Red Lodge. Born Sheridan, Wyoming Mar. 10, 1920 to Mr. and Mrs. Leo Muller. Came to Red Lodge when six weeks old. Married Miss Dorothy Sneider at Columbus July 19, 1940. Survived by his widow and parents, 1 daughter, 2 brothers, 1 sister. Red Lodge Cemetery.

David Murray, Sr., 56, Bearcreek. Born Stevenston, Ayrshire, Scotland Dec. 2, 1886. Came to America in 1906. Was a miner for a time in Red Lodge, had been a miner in Bearcreek for 29 years. He held a supervisory position with Montana Coal & Iron. Married in 1907 to Martha Dunlevy. Survivors were his widow, 3 sons, 1 daughter. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Earl Mus, 51, Red Lodge. Born Thurber, Texas, Nov. 9, 1892. Married Mary Hendericson. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 2 daughters, 3 brothers, 2 sisters. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Nelson, 68, Red Lodge. Born Lennep, Montana. Wife's name was Ella. No obituary available. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Noble, 68, Washoe. Born Feb. 2, 1874 in Vitrona, Iowa. Married Loretta Sullivan at Great Falls in 1907. Came to Washoe 1913. Also lived in Bearcreek. Worked at Smith Mine for 22 years. Also operated a pool hall with brother Chester in 1910 in Red Lodge and later in Washoe. Survived by his widow, 3 daughters, 1 son, 9 grandchildren. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Frank Pajnich, 53, Red Lodge. Born in Yugoslavia. Wife's name Mary. No obituary available. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Pelo, 55, Red Lodge. Born in Michigan. Worked on ranch as main occupation, worked in mines in busy mine season. Brother-in-law Arthur Halpin also died in Smith Mine disaster. Survived by father Matt Pelo, his widow Bertha Pelo, 3 sons, 2 brothers, 1 sister. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Elmer Price, 53, Washoe. Born Kirckville, Iowa (some accounts say Missouri) on Nov. 6, 1889. Carbon County resident 37 years, lived in Bearcreek and more recently Red Lodge. Married Margaret Rae July 23, 1910. Was foreman in Smith Mine at time of explosion and was last body to be found. Survived by his widow, 2 daughters, 3 sons, mother Mrs. Richard (Anne) John Price, 7 brothers, 3 grandchildren. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Pryde, 32, Bearcreek. Born Bearcreek, May 21, 1910. Attended Bearcreek schools. Married Vera Jacklavich on Nov. 14, 1936. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, mother, 1 sister. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Zino (Eino Walfred) Rahkola, 27, Roberts. Born in Roberts. No obituary found. Buried Roberts Cemetery.

Frank Ferdinand Rasborschek, 61, Bearcreek. Born in Yugoslavia. Wife died prior. No obituary found. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Martin Ratkovich, 46, Bearcreek. Born Yugoslavia. Was unmarried. No obituary found. Bearcreek Cemetery.

David Reid, 33, Bearcreek. Born Byesville, Ohio. Wife was Irene Berta. No obituary found. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Lawrence W. Reid, 42, Bearcreek. Born Cambridge, Ohio, Feb. 15, 1901. Came to Bearcreek at age 1. Married Mary McDonald Dec. 25, 1929. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 3 brothers, 4 sisters. Bearcreek Cemetery.

George Saarela, 33, Red Lodge. Born Ii Qulien Laani, Finland, June 10, 1909. Came to U.S. at age 4. Survived by his father Andrew Saarela and 1 sister. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Shepard, 69, Washoe. Born Watage, Illinois, Aug. 7, 1873. Worked in mines since age nine. Came to Montana in 1897. Married Mary Jane Freeman at Red Lodge on Dec. 22, 1898. In 1897 homesteaded land near what is now Boyd. From 1912 to 1920 he farmed near Roberts

and Belfry. Worked in supervisory positions in mining during his life. Survivors included his wife, 2 daughters, 1 son, 6 sisters. His only brother was killed in a coal mine accident in Iowa in 1910. Red Lodge Cemetery.

William Slaby, 38, Red Lodge. Born Germany, July 30, 1904. Married Olga Scala in Billings Aug. 26, 1925. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, mother Mrs. Mary Slaby, 3 sisters, 2 brothers. Red Lodge Cemetery.

David Sommerville, 60, Washoe. Born in Scotland. Wife's name was Jean. No obituary found. Red Lodge Cemetery.

John Sommerville, 34, Red Lodge. Born in Ohio. Wife's name was Grace. No obituary found. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Frank Starkovich, 64, Red Lodge. Born in Croatia. Wife's name was Francis. One son known, John. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Frank Sumicek, 65, Bearcreek. Born Austria Sept. 22, 1877. Came to U.S. (Bridger) in 1916, moved to Bearcreek in 1922. One daughter, 1 son, 4 grandchildren.

John Sudar, 28, Red Lodge. Born Rugby, Colorado on May 3, 1914. Came to Bearcreek at age 3. Attended Bearcreek schools. Started at Smith Mine at age 17. Married Ann Korack on Aug. 5, 1935 in Red Lodge. Survived by his mother, 1 daughter, 1 sister, 2 brothers. Red Lodge Cemetery.

George Thompson, Sr., 65, Washoe. Born in Scotland on Sept. 24, 1877. Came to Washoe in 1907. Married Susan Tharthen in Scotland. Survived by his widow, 3 sons, 4 daughters, 1 brother, 1 sister. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Adam Lee Wakenshaw, 72, Bearcreek. Born Swalwell, county Dublin, England Feb. 17, 1871. Was oldest man killed in the explosion. His son, Robert, also died in the tragedy. Adam was survived by his widow Margaret Wakenshaw of Boyd, 2 grandchildren. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Robert Lee Wakenshaw, 39, Bearcreek. Born in Helena on June 16, 1903. Lived in Bearcreek most of his life, attended Bearcreek schools. Survived by his widow Mary Wakenshaw, a daughter, a son, and his mother Margaret. Bearcreek Cemetery.

Robert Whitehead, 47, Red Lodge. Born North Lawrence, Ohio on Aug. 11, 1895. Came to Red Lodge in April, 1907. Worked at Smith mine from 1937. Married Margaret Walsh Dec. 31, 1940. Survived by his widow, parents Mr. and Mrs. Adam Whitehead, 3 sisters, 2 brothers. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Clarence Carlye Williams, 42, Washoe. Born in Belt, Dec. 24, 1900. Came to Red Lodge at age 7. Married Mary Campbell Dec. 25, 1923. Brother Lloyd was also killed in Smith Mine disaster.

Survived by his widow, 1 daughter, 1 sister, 3 brothers. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Lloyd Abraham Williams, 46, Washoe. Born in Belt Sept. 30, 1897. Came to Red Lodge in 1907. Married Florence Bloom Jan. 1, 1922. Brother Clarence also killed in Smith Mine disaster. Survived by his widow, 2 daughters, 1 sister, 3 brothers. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Vid Zaputil, 50, Red Lodge. Born in Yugoslavia June 15, 1892. Moved to Red Lodge July 7, 1916. Married Mary Yakovich Dec. 29, 1918. Survived by his widow, 2 sons, 1 daughter, 1 brother. Red Lodge Cemetery.

Note: most of the above information was taken from obituaries found in the Carbon County News at the time of the disaster, as it was submitted by survivors at that time.