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Doomed miners take time to write poignant farewells

As I explained last month, free miners earned the right to work the mines in Anderson County during the Coal Creek “war” of 1891 and 1892. For the rest of the last decade of the 19th century, they mined with little controversy or publicity.

Then something happened at Fraterville (two miles west of Coal Creek) that propelled the mines back into the national spotlight.

It occurred on May 19, 1902, only moments after more than 200 miners routinely entered the mine to start the day’s work. About 7:20 a.m., men at a nearby mine noticed a column of smoke shooting up from an air shaft that led out of the Fraterville mine. The significance of what they had seen did not immediately register with them.

What they had seen was backdraft from an explosion.

It took little time for the news to reach mine supervisor George Camp. He later told the Knoxville Journal

that when he first got to the scene of the disaster, “We found the entry filled with slate and empty cars, all jammed together. The roof had caved in on the train of coal cars. One man was lying dead there in the mouth of the entrance.”

Camp and others organized rescue parties that mainly consisted of men from nearby coal towns. One of those men was Philip Francis, a lifelong miner whose autobiography can be found online, thanks to the efforts of his great-grandson, Bailey Francis.

Some of the bodies that Francis remembered finding had been crushed by falling debris, but many of the miners had survived for hours in side passages, only to eventually suffocate. “The first bodies we came to were four,” he wrote. “Two of them were on their knees in a praying position, the other two being partly on their side, just a few yards away, at the head of the entry. The men were sitting close to each other with their arms on their knees folded and their heads on their arms.

An explosion at the Cross Mountain Mine on Dec. 9, 1911, killed 84 miners. It was the second such tragedy in Anderson County: a backdraft in the Fraterville mine killed more than 200 in 1902.



“In this position, 17 of them had died.”

All 216 miners perished in one of the worst mining disasters in American history. Some had time to write farewell notes to their loved ones, the contents of which were published in newspapers and magazines across the country. Among them:

From Scott Chapman:

“I have found the Lord. Do change your way of living. God be with you. Goodbye.”

From James A. Brooks:

“My Dear Wife and Baby: I want you to go back home and take the baby, so goodbye. I am going to heaven. I want you to meet me there.”

From Jacob Vowell:

“Ellen, darling Goodbye for us both. Elbert said the Lord had saved him. Do the best you can with the children. We are all praying for air to support us but it is getting so bad without any air. Horace, Elbert said for you to wear his shoes and clothing. It is now ½ past 1.

“Powell Harmon’s watch is in Andy Woods hand.

Ellen I want you to live right and come to heaven. Raise the children the best you can. Oh! How I wish to be with you. Good Bye all of you, Good Bye! Bury me and Elbert in the same grave by little Eddy. Good Bye Ellen. Good Bye Lily, Good Bye Jimmy, Good Bye Horace. We are together. Is 25 minutes after Two. There is a few of us alive yet. O God for one more breath. Remember me as long as you live. Good bye Darling.”

From John Hendren:

“Dear Darling Mother, Brothers and Sisters: I have gone to heaven. I want you to meet me in heaven. Tell all of your friends to meet me there and tell the Church I have gone to heaven. Oh, dear friends, don’t grieve over me because I am in sight of heaven. Oh dear, stay at father’s or your father’s and pay all I owe if possible. Bury me at Pleasant Hill if it suits you all. Bury me in black. This is about 1:30. So goodbye dear loving father, mother, brother, and friends. I have not suffered much yet. Your boy, your brother, John Hendren.”

Only three men had not reported for work that day, and they were said to be the only three adult men surviving in the town of Fraterville after the explosion. As a history of Coal Creek points out, “Many women lost every male member of her family: father, husband, brothers and, in some cases, even her sons. One woman, Mrs. Catherine Dezern, lost five sons and two sons-in-law in the disaster.”

It is believed that about 1,000 children were left fatherless by the Fraterville explosion.

No one has ever proven the cause of the explosion, although the likely cause was a buildup of flammable methane gas, which was ignited by the flames of the miners’ lamps. And, as awful as the tragedy seems to us now, it is hard to believe that, after the bodies were buried and



Cross Mountain Miners’ Circle, where 31 men killed in mine explosions in the early 20th century are buried, has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

the mine cleared, the Coal Creek Coal Company found men to go back in and start mining Fraterville again.

Nine years later, the mining communities of Anderson County went through another tragedy. On Dec. 9, 1911, an explosion occurred at the nearby Cross Mountain Mine in Briceville. There were 89 men in the mine, and 84 of them died; five men had managed to survive in a corner of the mine by building a wall to keep out the poisonous gases.

In the 1930s, the citizens of Coal Creek were so anxious for people to forget their area’s legacy of labor strife and mining tragedy that they had the name of their town changed to Lake City. However, I am happy to report that today there are signs that people remember what happened here. In 2000, Knoxville resident Barry Thacker formed an organization called the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation. His organization has sponsored numerous clean-up days and history field trips in Briceville and Lake City. Through its efforts, Miners Circle at Leach Cemetery, where 89 of the Fraterville miners are buried, has been placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

On Dec. 9, there will be a series of events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Cross Mountain Mine disaster. Descendants of miners killed or rescued at Cross Mountain will mount a plaque commemorating the listing of Cross Mountain Miners’ Circle on the National Register of Historic Places (31 of the miners are buried there). Students from Briceville Elementary School will compete in a literary competition at Briceville Church, which was built by Welsh miners in 1888. Attendees will also visit the site of the former Cross Mountain Mine.

There’s more on the Web ←

Go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org to learn more tales of Tennessee history.