



# No.9

**THE 1968 FARMINGTON MINE DISASTER**

**BONNIE E. STEWART**

*"Riveting. Chilling. Revealing."*

*The story of No.9 belongs on everybody's bookshelf."*

Bob Dubill, Former Executive Editor, USA TODAY

*No.9: The 1968 Farmington Mine Disaster* explains how such a thing could happen—how the coal company and federal and state officials failed to protect the 78 men who died in the mountain. Based on public records and interviews with those who worked in the mine, *No.9* describes the conditions underground before and after the disaster and the legal struggles of the miners' widows to gain justice and promote coal mine safety legislation.

Front jacket photo: Gary Martin (left), Bud Hillberry (right) and an unidentified man are hoisted from the No.9 mine. They were the last men to escape the disaster alive. Photo by Bob Campione.

Back jacket photo: The Consolidation No.9 Mine exploded on November 20, 1968, sending clouds of smoke into the winter air. Photo by Bob Campione.

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**BONNIE E. STEWART**



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Jacket photos by Bob Campione. Book design by Than Saffel.

*For the 78 men who died in the No.9 mine  
and for all their families and loved ones.*

“It is infuriating that in this day and age, and in this country, that such a disaster could still happen. I am sick. I am saddened and I am angry. We have the laws. We have the resources. These tragedies, on this scale, should no longer be happening.”

—*Senator Robert C. Byrd, following the deaths of 29 men  
in Massey Energy’s Upper Big Branch mine in  
Montcoal, West Virginia, on April 5, 2010*

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# Introduction

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**W**hen I came to West Virginia University in 2005, I knew nothing about coal mining. I had never seen a coal mine, and I did not know anyone who labored underground so that I could turn on my lights and run my beloved central air conditioner.

Then one evening, I was in a downtown Morgantown restaurant having appetizers with Associated Press reporter Vicki Smith. We were talking about journalism, going over stories we had written or wished we could write. I told her I was looking for a good story that needed to be told.

She said, had she the time, she would write about the Farmington coal mine disaster. Then she told me what happened on November 20, 1968, in a coal mine less than 30 miles from where we were sitting. That cold November morning, Consolidation Coal Company's No.9 mine blew up, trapping 78 men underground. It continued to explode until the company sealed the mine with the men inside 10 days later. I was horrified. In 1968, I was still in high school, leading an insulated life on a rural Indiana farm. I did not remember hearing about the disaster or even seeing it on the news. I felt as though I had missed an important piece of history.

I asked Vicki if I could steal her idea. She said, "Sure." And that is how this book began.

I do not pretend to be a coal mine expert, but I have learned a lot about mining over the past four years, and I can say with confidence that rarely, if ever, are coal mine disasters accidents. Historically, at least during the

past century, most mine disasters have been the result of poor management, inadequate regulation and enforcement, greed, negligence, carelessness, foolishness, selfishness, complacency, indifference—add your own descriptor. All too often, the drive to produce coal—to make money, to meet contracts, to satisfy stockholders—has trumped safety. When that happens, miners pay a steep price. Usually, they are killed or disabled one by one, and few people outside their own communities notice. However, every few years, a mine explodes or a roof falls and crushes or traps an entire crew, and everyone is surprised. After examining inspection records from the No.9 mine and from mines that more recently have claimed lives, I am amazed that mines do not explode more often.

At this writing, the mine disaster at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch (UBB) has filled newscasts. The April 5, 2010, deaths of 29 men in Montcoal, West Virginia, were predictable. Nonunion miners who worked there have testified that the mine was dangerous. Both state and federal inspectors knew the dangers, too, judging from the hundreds of violations and fines they issued to the UBB before the disaster. Similarly, many of the miners in the Consolidation No.9 coal mine predicted their own demise long before November 20, 1968.

At the Upper Big Branch, federal inspectors were in the mine at least 10 times in March 2010. They cited the company for coal dust, ventilation and roof control violations, any one of which could cause a disaster. They levied fines in the tens of thousands of dollars.<sup>1</sup>

State inspectors, too, spent at least seven days in the mine in March. They found electrical, coal dust and ventilation violations. On the morning the mine exploded, a state inspector was in the mine and cited the company for an unsupported roof and lack of ventilation in one of the working sections. He was unable, however, to complete his inspection. He came out for a break, and the mine blew up before he could go back inside.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately, the media swooped in, as they did after the No.9 exploded. Politicians began promising new laws and tougher enforcement. Government officials launched investigations. The full story of Massey Energy's mismanagement of the Upper Big Branch disaster has yet to unfold, but already flagrant violations have come to light. National Public Radio

reported that UBB managers ordered an electrician to disable methane monitors on mining machines, devices that shut a machine down if gas is building up, which a spark could explode.

Safety devices routinely were disabled at the No.9 mine, too. There was too much gas and not enough air, too much coal dust and not enough rock dust, too much money to be made and not enough safety to be had. This book attempts to piece together what can be learned from the No.9 disaster not only because it ruined many lives but also because it saved so many lives later by forcing Congress to adopt the landmark 1969 Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act.

The law required federal officials to inspect underground mines four times each year, instead of once. For the first time, federal officials could levy fines, and they could even file criminal charges if companies willfully violated the new and stricter rules. The new law also provided health benefits for miners with pneumoconiosis or black lung disease. By their deaths, the 78 coal miners prevented thousands of underground miners from a similar fate. (See appendix A.)

This book is a true accounting of the 78 dead, based on a three-year investigation. What you will read comes from sworn testimonies taken after the disaster; state and federal inspection records and correspondence; confidential Consolidation Coal Company records produced during two lawsuits; analysis of coal mine practices and laws; and media accounts of the tragedy. This account also includes information gathered during personal interviews with coal miners who survived the disaster; men who worked in the mine prior to the disaster; and others who worked on recovery teams, bringing out what was left of the bodies of their co-workers that had lain in the mine for years. Other parts of the book are based on interviews with families of the dead, federal inspectors and mining technology experts.

The record shows that the No.9 mine disaster easily could have been prevented. The company men responsible for the mine's day-to-day operations knew the mine was dangerous, but did not slow or stop production to make it safe. Everyone in the mine was under intense pressure to produce coal. The union had limited influence. State and federal inspectors ignored the mine's glaring and egregious ventilation violations.

This investigation reveals that Consolidation Coal's managers routinely took illegal shortcuts, as did some of the men who worked for them. Before the mine exploded, a coal company employee disabled a ventilation fan's safety alarm that could have saved the men who were working underground when the mine exploded. Court documents and interviews with the relatives of the dead reveal the widows' struggle for justice and Consolidation Coal's efforts to conceal evidence that could have been used to determine the cause of the disaster. This book also explores the failure of federal and state government officials to investigate the disaster properly and their failure to hold anyone responsible for the deaths of more than six dozen men.

Twenty-one No.9 miners escaped the inferno that morning. But the mine would not give up the others.

For 10 long days, television cameras rolled in Farmington, West Virginia, and the nation watched as the horror streamed into their living rooms. All the major networks carried the story. Walter Cronkite of CBS and other news anchors gave nightly updates. They told Americans about the relentless fires and the safety violations federal inspectors had found in the mine just three months before explosions ripped it apart. Commentators lamented the lack of regulations to keep the country's miners safe.

About a year after the mine was sealed with the 78 men inside, the company reopened No.9 and began clearing away the rubble. Federal and state officials monitored the recovery effort for nine years. Teams of coal miners, many who had worked side-by-side with the men who died, found 59 bodies and brought them to the surface for burial. Then the mine was sealed again, becoming the permanent grave for 19 men.

Emilio Megna was one of those 19 men. He went to work on the eve of his retirement, but he never came home. His son Joe, who became a coal miner, has never recovered from the trauma and the lack of resolution. He is haunted by his memories of the day the mine exploded and by the words of Gary Martin, one of his father's buddies who escaped the inferno. Before he died, Martin told Joe the disaster was no accident. In fact, Joe said, Martin called it murder: "Murder One, 78 times."

# 1 Good Night, Dad

.....

**E**milio Megna had one more shift to work in the Consolidation Coal Company No.9 mine before he would retire and open his own service station in Worthington, West Virginia. Just eight more hours, 600 feet underground inside the cold and dark tunnels, then he would no longer have to breathe coal dust or scrub it from his face and clothes each day. No longer would he have to worry about methane gas explosions or roof falls that could bury him alive. Instead, he would wake with the morning sun and work in the midday light, pumping gas and fixing his neighbors' cars and trucks. Best of all, he could pass the business on to his son. Emilio would become the last person in his family who had to mine coal. He was still young, only 48, with a lot of life left to live.<sup>1</sup>

As a young boy, Emilio had followed his father into the coal mines of West Virginia, picking up chunks of coal and doing odd jobs. He had come to America from Italy in 1923, when he was a three-year-old, wearing a skirt and an earring. His family was one of thousands who crossed the Atlantic Ocean hoping to earn a good living in the coalfields. When he turned 16, Emilio took a permanent job underground, earning 50 cents a day. More than 30 years later, he was ready to come out of the mines.

The day before the No.9 exploded, Emilio's 16-year-old son, Joe, tried to convince his father to play hooky and go trout fishing. But Emilio would not do it, said he owed it to the company to work his last shift. That evening, Emilio took Joe to his best friend's house for a sleepover. The two boys

planned to go to school and then spruce up the gas station for the grand opening that Saturday.

Joe tried again to convince his father to stay home.

“No, I love you. You be careful. Don’t get in trouble,” Emilio said. He then drove away in their Dodge Dart station wagon. It was the first time Joe could remember hearing his father say he loved him.

Emilio Megna went home, gathered his lunch box and reported for work with 98 other men who went underground at midnight. Unlike third-shift workers in other industries, No.9 miners did not call it the “graveyard shift.” They dubbed it the “cateye” shift.

On November 20, 1968, as he had done hundreds of times, Emilio entered the mine through the Llewellyn Run portal, located in the hollow for which it was named. He rode a large elevator to the floor of the mine, where he boarded a passenger rail car, called a “jeep.” The electrically-powered vehicle carried him more than a mile to section 9North on the far west side of the mine.

A section foreman, Emilio likely checked his work area for methane gas and any other dangerous conditions. Earlier that week, he had found gas in his section, but his written reports indicate it had not accumulated to hazardous levels. Some of the machinery in the section was not working properly that morning. At some point, the dispatcher sent Emilio and his crew to another part of the mine.

As Emilio worked, his son Joe slept, until the phone call came, the call that no mining family wants to answer. The first words are as devastating as the sight of a black sedan pulling into a military family’s driveway: “The No.9 blew up.”

“Joe, which mine does your father work in?” his friend’s mother called upstairs.

“The No.9,” he answered.

Joe jumped out of bed, put on his pants and shoes and ran bare-chested two miles through the wintery woods to get home. One of his sisters was fixing her hair for work. He told her the news. His mother came in, and they turned on the television. It was true. The TV screen was filled with images of smoke pouring from the mouth of the mine.



Emilio Megna (first row) with his wife, two daughters and son, Joe (back row).  
Courtesy of Joe Megna.

---

They climbed into their car and drove toward the mine. At a roadblock, they were rerouted to the mine's company store, where people already had begun to gather. They waited and waited and waited, participants in a morbid ritual that had come to define coal mining in America.

Emilio had talked about the dangers in the mine in the weeks before it exploded. "It's so hot. It's bad," he told his wife, referring to the methane gas. "Somebody is gonna get killed over there. Somebody is gonna get killed," he said.

Joe sensed something strange in his father's words. "My dad was not scared of anything, but he was scared of No.9 mine," Joe said years later.<sup>2</sup>

Emilio Megna was not the only miner who was worried about the working conditions in the No.9. In the days before the explosion, Pete Kaznoski told his wife, Sara, that the mine was going to blow. It was too gassy. She asked him to quit.<sup>3</sup> He would not.



Frank and Mary Matish with their son, James. Courtesy of James Matish.

---

Frank Matish was not happy with the conditions in the mine, either. He had been injured in the mine a few weeks earlier, just before Election Day. Hot oil from a mining machine had sprayed him in the face, which put him into the hospital. However, his accident did not stop him from voting. His wife, Mary, tried to convince him to stay in the hospital while she drove people to the polls.

“Dad, one vote’s not going to matter,” said his 14-year-old son, James.

“You never know,” his father replied. “Besides, we don’t want Richard Nixon in the White House.” Frank Matish, who was 57, cast his last vote in 1968 and then went back to work.

The weekend before the mine exploded, James overheard his parents talking about the mine. Frank, who had been working in coal mines since he was 11 years old, told Mary that the mine was in the worst shape he had ever seen. Coal dust was knee-deep.

“Maybe I should quit,” he said.

“Well, why don’t you just call, why don’t you just quit and not go?” she asked.

“Well, we’ve got a son that we need to worry about educating,” he said.

“Don’t worry about that. I’m cleaning houses. I’m cleaning the church. We’re making money and we can get by, and we’ll get you a job doing something,” she said.

“Well, we’ll think about it,” he said.

A few days later, Frank Matish kissed his son goodbye as he always did before he went to work at the No.9.

“So long, Dad. Don’t work too hard and be careful,” said James, who already was drifting off to sleep.

A few hours later, the boy had a bad dream. He was in a coal mine, and one miner called out, “Fire in the hole, fire in the hole, fire in the hole.”

“At that time, my whole body shook, and I woke up and looked at the clock and it was 5:20 a.m.,” he said later.<sup>4</sup>

Government documents show that the first of many violent explosions that rocked the No.9 hit sometime between 5:15 a.m. and 5:30 a.m., when Frank Matish, Emilio Megna and Pete Kaznoski were laboring somewhere deep inside the mountain. No one knows exactly how the three men died. Their bodies were never found.

# 2

## Dangerous History

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**N**o one should have died in 1968 in the No.9 mine. When Emilio Megna and his buddies went underground for the last time, the coal industry and its regulators knew well what causes mine disasters and how to prevent them. They had learned the hard lessons over and over again during prior decades.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, injuries and deaths in the mines were common, and most people simply accepted that fact.<sup>1</sup> The coal industry was a mighty political force, which had completely blocked federal regulation and had kept state laws and enforcement at a minimum. West Virginia was one of the first states to regulate the industry, hiring its first mine inspector in 1883 and adopting its first significant coal mining law in 1887, a year after the state's first recorded major disaster in the Mt. Brook Mine in Newburg.<sup>2</sup> The open flames on the cap lights the men wore had ignited a pocket of methane gas, blowing the inside of the mine apart. "When the work of exploration began it was found that the whole force of the mine, 39 men and boys, were stark and cold in death."<sup>3</sup>

The laws, however, did not stop the carnage. Men and boys continued to die in the mines, a dozen here, two or three dozen there. Large numbers of miners were killed by roof falls, as the ceilings of the tunnels gave way and covered them with coal and slate. No woman knew if her man or sons would come home from work from one day to the next. In coal country, miners were expendable, more so than the horses, oxen, mules and goats

that worked underground with them. As many coal miners have noted, coal companies had to buy another mule, but a man, well, they could easily find another one.

What happened in 1907, however, could not be ignored. That year, an estimated 3,232 of the country's 680,000 coal miners died on the job.<sup>4</sup> The worst coal mine disaster in U.S. history occurred on December 6, 1907, in Monongah, West Virginia. Government records show that the Monongah explosion killed at least 358 miners.<sup>5</sup> Some experts, however, believe the number was much higher because mining companies kept poor records of the people working underground. In his book *Monongah*, Davitt McAteer, a former federal coal mine official, estimates that as many as 578 men and boys may have perished that day.<sup>6</sup>

That same December, 239 men died in a horrific explosion in the dusty,



In the 1800s and early 1900s, mining companies often used animals, such as goats, to pull coal cars in and out of the mines. Courtesy of John Brock.

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gaseous Darr Mine in Jacobs Creek, Pennsylvania; 34 miners died in another Pennsylvania mine disaster; 11 died in a New Mexico pit; and 57 miners died in an Alabama mine explosion. The December death toll that year was so high that the month was dubbed “Bloody December.”<sup>7</sup>

At that time, coal mining was one of the most dangerous and disabling industrial occupations in the country. Following Bloody December, federal officials began a serious study of coal mine explosions. They already knew that coal naturally emits methane gas. They knew that a spark or the open flame from a coal miner’s cap could ignite the gas and set off an explosion. They also knew that an ignition source could cause coal dust to explode. They knew that even a small explosion could become a major disaster: It could stir up and ignite loose coal dust, which would explode and stir up more coal dust. As long as there was loose dust or certain concentrations of methane in its path, one explosion could set an entire mine ablaze.

What most people in the coal industry may not have known then, but would soon learn, was that under the right conditions, coal dust thrown into suspension can self-ignite and set off a powerful explosion. In 1910, the newly formed U.S. Bureau of Mines announced that finding.<sup>8</sup> It was clear then, as it is now, that to keep miners safe, coal companies had to control both coal dust and methane gas.

Over the years, the industry also learned that winter months are particularly dangerous. When cold fronts move into the mountains and the temperature and humidity drop, underground tunnels dry out. The drier the mine, the dustier it gets and coal dust is everywhere: on the roof of the tunnels, the rib or walls of the tunnels and the floor. It is produced at the working face, where men and machines dig coal out of the mountain. It builds up around the machinery and in the loading areas and unloading areas. It blows off the coal cars as they move through the mine, and it settles along the haulage tracks. To keep coal dust from exploding, miners have to wet the dust, haul it out of the mine or neutralize it by mixing it with a pulverized inert material, usually limestone, called rock dust.

## **Barometric Pressure**

That so many disasters happened in the winter is no coincidence. When cold fronts move into an area, the barometric pressure drops, which allows more methane to seep out of the coal seam. The pressure change also can weaken seals that close off mined-out tunnels. When the integrity of the structures fails, the methane that builds up behind the structures leaks into the mine. A drop in pressure also can force methane from unsealed mined-out areas, known as gobs, which contain coal and slate. If the gobs are improperly ventilated, as often has been the case, the methane moves into the working sections. The outcome can be disastrous.

Obviously, managing methane and coal dust is a continuous, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute activity. Every time miners carve out a load of coal, cut a new tunnel or advance in any other way, they make more dust and expose more coal that can emit methane. It takes time to spread rock dust or wet down the working sections to mitigate the dust. It takes time to stop mining and check the methane levels. It takes time to make adjustments that will bring more air to the working face in order to sweep away the methane. In the coal mining business, time for these tasks is time taken away from mining coal, and coal is money, big money.

## **A Gassy, Dusty Mine**

The No.9 mine, opened by Jamison Coal and Coke Company in 1910, always was plagued by coal dust and methane gas, as were the Jamison No.7 and No.8, its sister mines.<sup>9</sup> All were located in Marion County, West Virginia, in the heart of the Pittsburgh coal bed, which extends more than 5,000 square miles into parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland and West Virginia. The bituminous coal, which on average is 96 inches thick, lies between 300 to 800 feet below the surface.<sup>10</sup> It is a soft coal that has a high energy value when it is burned, and it produces methane gas during the mining process. Thousands of miners have died digging it from the Appalachian Mountains, hundreds in Marion County, West Virginia alone.

In October 1916, 11 men died in an underground explosion at the Jamison No.7 mine in Barrackville, West Virginia, and a state inspector died trying to rescue them. Officials believed cigarette smoking or an electrical arc set off methane gas and, as often happens in mine disasters, coal dust carried the explosion and fire through the mine.<sup>11</sup>

In January 1926, a gas explosion killed 19 men in the Jamison No.8 mine in Farmington, West Virginia. Forty-seven men were underground that day. One group survived by hunkering down for 18 hours in the underground stable's feed room. To seal out noxious gases, the men had stuffed hay around the doorway.<sup>12</sup>

### **No.9's Record**

State inspection records show that the Jamison No.9 mine, later known as the Consol No.9, did not have a good record. A 1935 report, the earliest No.9 inspection record in the West Virginia State Archives, describes the mine as "very dusty." The inspector recommended rock dusting.<sup>13</sup>

By January 1936, the inspector was losing patience with No.9's owner. "Very little has been done at this mine for the past 1½ years to put it in shape. The main haulage road is the only way of escape from the faces, except through the old workings. Very little rock dusting is done. The sections are dry & dusty. There are three solid sections that liberate gas very free."<sup>14</sup>

A few months later, the inspector found gas again. He wrote, "There is no improvement of conditions at this mine since my last inspection."<sup>15</sup>

The No.9 had a dismal beginning in 1937 as miners worked with too much dust and gas and not enough air. By summer, a new superintendent was trying to improve the conditions, but by October, the state inspector found chaos.

"So many changes has [sic] been made at this mine during the past 3 months I am afraid that no one knows just what they are doing," he wrote. He decided to give the men a few more weeks before he began "working on them."<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, state inspectors found inadequate ventilation, high levels of methane gas and too much coal dust in the No.9. One of the worst years was 1942. A state inspector found 64 violations in February and 64 violations in June. However, the number dropped to 45 violations in September and to 32 in December.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most damning inspections took place in 1943. During World War II, coal was so important that President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order, commanding the U.S. Bureau of Mines to conduct coal mine security inspections “to insure uninterrupted production of essential war minerals.”<sup>18</sup>

Federal inspectors visited the No.9 that April. They found little danger from “pro-Axis sympathies” or sabotage, even though the management did not investigate its “key men” or other employees to make sure they were patriotic.<sup>19</sup>

The worst threats to the No.9’s war production capabilities came from extremely dangerous mining practices. The once confidential report lists numerous major hazards, including:

- dust explosion hazard where coal was unloaded outside the mine
- explosives magazine stored near the ventilating fan in illegal housing
- electric wires not in conduits in numerous areas
- inadequate fire protection above and below ground, including inoperable fire extinguishers and no water hoses underground to fight a fire
- no plan for control of a fire
- kerosene used for cleaning purposes
- no mine rescue equipment
- very little rock dust<sup>20</sup>

The report also noted that many of the company’s miners lived in 124 company-owned houses. “Observed living conditions are poor, and accommodations are not adequate,” the inspector wrote.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the No.9’s condition, the government still considered the mine

an important source of coal for the war effort, noting that in 1942, the 301 men who worked at the mine had produced 619,449 tons of coal.<sup>22</sup> The company, however, reported problems that were hindering production: absenteeism of 8 percent each week and a labor turnover that had hit 40 percent annually.<sup>23</sup>

## **Federal Law**

Even though coal production for the war effort had become a high priority, the federal government did little to keep miners safe. In 1941, the U.S. Congress passed the Federal Coal Mine Inspection and Investigation Act that allowed federal inspectors to inspect mines, but gave them no enforcement powers. The law did require the government to notify the public about its inspections. The press releases became sanitized summaries that lauded the coal companies for fixing hazards in their mines after an inspector had pointed them out.

For instance, in May 1951, a federal inspector found 24 violations in the No.9, including two “serious hazards:”

- The elevator shaft used to carry the men underground had loose and defective boards supporting it. The inspector had noted the problem on four earlier inspections, but the company still had not replaced the boards.
- Men were drilling rocks and coal without wetting the area, which could produce sparks and ignite methane or coal dust. Also they were not using dust collectors on the drills to keep the coal dust from flying into suspension and self-igniting.<sup>24</sup>

After this inspection, a federal press release commended No.9’s owner for making more than a dozen improvements since the mine’s last inspection. It noted the problems, but did not indicate their seriousness or the number of times the mine had been cited for the same hazardous conditions.<sup>25</sup>

The press release praised the company for installing a new ventilating fan that increased the quantity of air in the mine. The release, however, did

not tell the public that the inspector cited the company for failing to equip the new fan with an alarm system that would alert the miners if the fan stopped or stalled.

Eight months later, in January 1952, T. J. Ward, a federal inspector, noted that the fan still had no alarm. He also discovered that there had been an explosion in the No.9 on October 11, 1951.

Ward's frustration with the state is evident in his report: "Information obtained during this inspection indicates that the ignition was investigated by the West Virginia Department of Mines; however, the [U.S.] Bureau of Mines did not make an investigation because the fact that an ignition occurred became known to the Bureau only after an elapse of several months."<sup>26</sup>

The federal report notes that no one died in the explosion and explains what happened. A No.9 miner had set off explosive shots in loose roof material. This practice was dangerous and, in most cases, illegal. Miners were supposed to use "confined shots," which meant drilling holes in the coal, inserting government-approved or "permissible" explosives, and topping off the hole with incombustible material, such as clay.<sup>27</sup>

## **Shooting Stumps**

Even when No.9 miners used confined shots, they did not always detonate them legally, particularly when they were shooting stumps, which were columns of coal left to support the mine's roof in room-and-pillar mining. This mining method required that miners drive several long tunnels, or entries, parallel to each other. Then they connected the tunnels with shorter entries, called crosscuts, creating a checkerboard pattern. Each long tunnel in the No.9 was named for its location in relationship to the mine's main passageway, which was being driven to the west. For instance, 4Left-2North referred to the fourth entry off the second section north of the main passageway.

Once the miners finished taking all the coal they could from the pillars, leaving only stumps, they began to retreat from the section. As they backed out of the area, they blew up the stumps. At that time, No.9 miners were not recovering the coal from the demolished stumps.<sup>28</sup>

To shoot a stump, a miner was supposed to run a long blasting cable from the explosives to an approved battery that was kept a safe distance away. Then a miner was supposed to activate the cable with the battery, setting off the explosives to bring down the stumps, one at a time. After each stump was shot, the miner was supposed to let the smoke and dust clear and check for gas before setting off the next explosion. This method was the legal way to do the job, but it was not always the most expedient way. Furthermore, it was not the way some No.9 miners were shooting stumps in 1954. Records show miners did not always shoot from a battery, an illegal practice that would cost lives.

# How Such Things Happen

On November 13, 1954, shortly after Consolidation Coal Company bought the No.9 mine, section foreman George C. Alberts and his crew were shooting stumps in 4Right-2North. He took a dangerous shortcut in his work. As a result, more than a dozen men died after an explosion ripped through the mine and set it on fire.

Later, men who had worked for Alberts testified under oath that he had routinely broken mining laws when he used explosives. Physical evidence unearthed a few months after the disaster supported their claims.<sup>1</sup>

The disaster could have been even worse: The mine blew up on a Saturday, when few men were working. On a weekday, more than 100 men would have been inside the mine during any one of No.9's three daily shifts. Most would have been trapped in the far reaches of the mine, which in 1954 stretched nearly 16 square miles. The only miners who could have escaped would have been those near the slope, a long tunnel used to enter and exit the mine. The rest would not have been able to reach the "man shaft," a vertical tunnel equipped with an elevator that lowered men into and lifted them out of the mine.

Conditions in the mine could not have been much worse. The night before the first explosion, the barometric pressure had begun to drop as a moderately strong cold front had begun to move rapidly into the area from the west. The change likely pulled more methane off the gobs. The month had been dry, too. No rain had fallen that week, and less than half an inch

had fallen all month, which meant the mine was dry and possibly dusty.<sup>2</sup>

On November 13, 24 men traveled underground to work. Some checked the ventilation system and came out of the mine. By early afternoon, 17 men were still underground.

Some were working on machinery, and Alberts and his crew were blasting in 4Right-2North.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Explosion**

At about 1:45 p.m., section foreman Harry Floyd Jr. was filling out a report in an office building outside the mine when he heard a ventilation alarm sound. He knew the alarm could mean a fan had slowed or stopped, a sure sign of trouble. He also knew his father, Harry Floyd Sr., was in the mine.<sup>4</sup>

The No.9 depended upon two large ventilation fans, the No.1 fan and the Athas Run fan, to exhaust and circulate about 348,000 cubic feet of air through the mine every minute. In 24 hours, the fans swept more than 3 million cubic feet of methane from the mine. When a fan malfunctioned, the entire ventilation system was compromised.<sup>5</sup>

The warning horn had been wailing only a few seconds when Floyd spotted papers blowing under the door of another office. Then he heard a blast, a short, blunt crack—like a firecracker going off in a barrel. Plaster began cracking off the walls, and the light fixtures shook. Floyd ducked under a metal table as a roar from the blast escaped from a nearby airshaft.<sup>6</sup>

When the blast hit, 38-year-old Howard Jenkins was on duty in the lamphouse, where miners kept battery-operated lights for their caps and numbered metal identification tags. The explosion brought down a steel beam that hit Jenkins. He died instantly.<sup>7</sup>

Underground, mechanics Gilbert Kiger and Paul Barthelow had finished their work. They were waiting at the slope bottom for a ride out of the mine. The electric lights began to flicker. The blast wave hit, and clouds of rock dust and flying boards engulfed them.<sup>8</sup> “It was like someone had thrown a sack of flour in my face,” Kriger said.<sup>9</sup>

Someone outside the mine signaled for the two men to board an electric trolley car and ride up the slope. They managed to find the car. However,