

INVESTIGATION OF THE GAS IGNITION OF BURNING SPRINGS  
COLLIERIES MINE, WHICH HAPPENED THURSDAY, JANUARY 18,  
1951, ABOUT NOON

STATEMENT BY MR. ARCH ALEXANDER, MINE CHIEF FOR THE STATE OF  
WEST VIRGINIA, WHO CONDUCTED THE HEARING AT THE MINGO COUNTY COURT HOUSE,  
ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 1951, AT 2:00 O'CLOCK P. M.

Mr. Alexander: It is hoped sufficient evidence will come out of  
this meeting which will avoid any such happening in the future. It was a  
very unfortunate incident. Eleven men lost their lives. It was strictly a  
gas ignition and there was very little evidence of any dust exploding. We  
have quite a few witnesses, who will now testify concerning the incident.

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T. V. LAMBERT, witness:

Questions by Mr. Alexander:

Q. Please tell the reporter your name, occupation, and where  
you reside.

A. Thomas Lambert, Mine Foreman at Burning Springs Collieries.

Q. You say you are the mine foreman there?

A. Yes.

Q. How long have you held that position?

A. Since 1947.

Q. You are certified by the West Virginia Department of Mines?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your certificate number?

A. 1435.

Q. You, of course, are familiar with this territory. Have you ever detected gas along that line at Burning Springs Collieries?

A. No, sir.

Q. Will you look at this book and see if you recognize it? (Exhibit Fire Boss' Book).

A. Yes, sir, I recognize it.

Q. Will you look at the last page. That was the run of yesterday morning, prior to the explosion?

A. Yes.

Q. In your own words, Mr. Lambert, start with yesterday morning when you went to work and tell the story of what happened in your own way.

A. When I came to work yesterday morning I cautioned the foreman in that section on this timbering system in-by these places there, to be sure and check before and after each shot, which he does when they are cutting and shooting - he examines the places. I had some other work that the fire boss had left me a note on and I went on the other section. As I was leaving and heading toward this section my motorman came up and said they had an explosion of some sort. I rushed on out and met the motorman from that section and the superintendent and we went on up to see about it. When we arrived there we found the motorman about 30 feet from the motor. We got him out of the way and I took the other motorman and we went up and put a few curtains up and got the boom men out, and they were taken to the hospital.

Q. Was there any evidence of fire when you first went in?

A. No, sir.

Q. This No. 1 room that cut into the old works. When did they

out into the old works?

A. Sometime around 8:00 or 8:30 o'clock yesterday morning, the best I can figure it.

Q. The loading machine partially cleaned that up, did it not?

A. Yes.

Q. Was that the first place that the loading machine worked?

A. I don't know for sure whether it was the first place. All I know is what was left in the places - the condition of them - --.

Q. Has there ever been any gas reported to you along this fault?

A. No.

Q. Have there been any examinations made of that place after it was cut through, or do you know?

A. The Assistant Foreman examines before it is cut and during the process of shooting - before and after each shot.

Q. Had that loading machine been in the shop recently?

A. No.

Q. How old is that loading machine, to the best of your knowledge?

A. A little over two years old.

Q. It hadn't been in the shop lately?

A. No.

Q. Was it new when you got it?

A. Yes.

Q. Did the machine man have a safety lamp?

A. No.

Q. The only lamp on the section was the one the section foreman had?

had?

A. Yes.

That is all.

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CHARLIE FERRY, witness:

Q. State your name and occupation, please.

A. Charlie Ferry, District Mine Inspector for the State of West Virginia Department.

Q. This is your inspection district?

A. Yes.

Q. When was the last time you examined the Burning Springs mines?

A. Monday, about 10:30.

Q. How many times in 1950 did you make this inspection?

A. Three or four times.

Q. Have you ever found any gas in this mine?

A. Not with a lamp. I have with a methane detector.

Q. How much gas does it show?

A. Five-tenths of 1%.

Q. In what condition was this mine when you inspected it?

A. Average good condition.

Q. What is the attitude of the local management toward safety and safety factors?

A. I find them very cooperative.

Q. How about the men?

A. They are cooperative also. These places were driven up against the fault.

Q. Did you use your methane detector?

A. Yes.

Q. Were the heads finished?

A. No. 3 was finished at that time, and I think No. 2 was.

Q. Had they butted off at No. 1 and No. 2?

A. They were turned across there.

Q. Were they working this No. 1 room?

A. Yes, they were just to that room.

Q. Who was with you?

A. Herschel White, State Mine Inspector.

Q. How many violations did you give this mine on this explosion?

A. Seven.

That is all.

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HERSCHEL WHITE, witness:

Q. Give your name and occupation to the reporter.

A. Herschel White, State Mine Inspector.

Q. When did you inspect this mine?

A. On Monday, January 15th, 1951.

Q. Who was with you?

A. Charlie Perry, District Mine Inspector.

Q. Did you separate or inspect together?

A. We separated.

Q. Did you find any gas?

A. No.

Q. Any bore holes?

A. No.

Q. What was the general condition of the mine?

A. It was well rock dusted. It was in very good shape.

Q. Do you recall the minimum amount of air which you recorded?

A. Approximately 7000 feet. I don't remember exactly - but it was a little over 7000 feet.

Q. You heard Mr. Perry's testimony. Have you got anything to add to it?

A. No, I believe not.

Q. You were not on the section where the gas explosion was?

A. No, these go down hill very fast.

Q. Did you make any of these?

A. Down through the airways on my return.

Q. Did you examine the old faults for gas?

A. No, I wasn't in this area (indicating on the map).

That is all.

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JOE HEYMAN, witness:

Q. State your name and occupation to the reporter.

A. Joe Heyman, Night Foreman.

Q. You are familiar, of course, with the area where we had the difficulty yesterday?

A. Yes.

Q. Have you ever found gas in that section?

A. I never have.

Q. Do you make the Fire Boas run?

A. About two times a week - Monday and Friday.

Q. Have you ever found any gas on that fault line?

A. One time, about six years ago, I would say. I just barely could detect it that time.

Q. As Night Foreman you are on that section a good deal, aren't you?

A. Yes.

That is all.

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T. L. LAMBERT, witness:

Q. Please state your name and occupation.

A. T. L. Lambert, Superintendent, Burning Springs.

Q. You are familiar with this area where the ignition occurred?

A. Yes.

Q. Have you ever found any gas along that fault line?

A. No, not there.

Q. Where did you find gas?

A. Further down the faults.

Q. Was it existing gas or feeders?

A. It was feeders.

Q. Have you ever tested for gas in this particular area?

A. Yes.

Q. Have you ever found any gas?

A. No.

Q. Suppose, in your own words, you tell us about this ignition yesterday, where you were, and so on.

A. I was at the house having lunch and one of the men from the office came after me and said they had had some trouble. He thought it might have been some kind of explosion or something. I immediately came on down to the mines and lit the safety light and went inside. I got up on the section - I guess within 200 feet of the boom - and seen some dead men lying across the track. I went on up further and saw the motorman sitting there. I questioned him and he seemed to be addled or something. He didn't know what he was saying. He claimed to be tired and that he had worked too hard. I worked my way on up then to the boom. The boom man was lying there and I thought it was the electrician. It was rather hot in that immediate section. I went up as far as I could, then came back and told them to restore ventilation and get the men out and make arrangements for ambulances to get them to hospitals. After we sent them out I took the methane detector and ventilator with me, as I was under the impression there might be some men alive and we could recover them. But upon investigation we found everybody dead.

Q. You say you detected gas back this way (indicating on the map).

A. It is my knowledge there hasn't been any gas collected up there.



Q. When you came in the mine on your first trip, how did you find those doors?

A. They were both closed.

Q. Did you know that No. 1 place in this entry had cut off the old works?

A. No.

That is all.

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BALBOA BOLLEN, witness:

Q. State your name and address and occupation, please.

as a Motorman

A. Balboa Bollen, employed at Burning Springs Collieries Company.

Q. You were working on the day of the ignition?

A. Yes.

Q. Will you tell us what you can about it.

A. There isn't much I can say. When I came in with a trip of empties I seen there was something wrong. I called the boys and nobody answered. I got my motor and ran to where I was blocked, then I walked some distance and it got too hot for me and I came out and called Mr. Lambert and also the mine foreman, Thomas Lambert.

Q. Are you the first man who got to the scene of the ignition?

A. Yes. We called Thomas Lambert to meet at the mouth of No. 9. I got Mr. Lambert and went back. We ran into one of the boys who was knocked out a lot, but still he could travel. Mr. Lambert went on toward the face and Thomas and I secured some curtains which had blown down. After that, Mr. Lambert came back and told us to secure the air as far

as we could. We did so. Mr. Lambert and I got this boy who was knocked out, the motorman who was working with me, and took him on out. We worked our way on up towards the boom and found the boom boy. He had come to end we tried to take him to safety. That was about as far as we went.

Q. How did you know something happened?

A. Well, by the dust which is always clear. It has a good quantity of air on it at all times. There was too much smoke and dust on it when I went in.

Q. How close were you to this scene when you noticed it?

A. About 2000 feet.

Q. Do you remember what time that was, approximately?

A. About 12:00 o'clock.

Q. Were you the first one to go under that section after this occurred?

A. I was the first one who found what had occurred and I telephoned.

Q. Were any of the doors open?

A. One at the mouth of No. 9 had blown open. I closed it and then closed the other one, which was about half open.

That is all.

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OSCAR YOUNG, witness:

Q. State your name, address and occupation.

A. Oscar Young, Ines, Kentucky, and I am buggy operator at Burning Springs Collieries.

Q. In your own words tell us what you know about this ignition.

A. Not much of anything. I was driving a buggy about 12:00 o'clock and for two or three seconds I thought I had lost my hearing. In a few minutes we had loaded out all cars and lacked one. I was helping the boom boy load and we called the mine foreman. The boom boy told the mine foreman we lacked one car and we worked about 45 minutes, I guess, before they called us.

Q. You were working on a different section to the one where the ignition occurred?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you go on the affected section?

A. Yes.

Q. What was the appearance of the place?

A. Well, it was still smoky up in there. We tried to get the air up through there.

That is all.

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DAMON FUGATT, witness:

Q. State your name, address and occupation, please.

A. Damon Fugatt, Machine Operator, Inez, Kentucky.

Q. Do you work on the section above the one affected?

A. Yes.

Q. Will you tell us your version of what happened?

A. I don't know much. I didn't hear anything. I was cutting coal at the time. I finished cutting a place, and after I got it out I started loading up on the machine. They told me there had been an explosion. I went down on the section and there were a lot of booms and dust. I went to see about the men.

Q. Do you carry a safety lamp?

A. No. The section boss checks the place before we cut

it.

Q. Do you ever check before cutting?

A. No, the section boss does that.

That is all.

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WILBURN PORTER, witness:

Q. Please state to the reporter your name, occupation and address.

A. Wilburn Porter, Ines, Kentucky.

Q. You work on the section above the affected section?

A. Yes, I help on the Joy.

Q. Tell me in your own words just what you heard, saw, etc.

A. I didn't know anything about it until they called and told us. They called for us to come outside. We helped to recover some of the bodies.

Q. Were the bodies pretty badly burned?

A. No, sir.

Q. How are the cables on your machine?

A. In pretty good shape.

Q. Who makes the splices?

A. The electrician most of the time.

Q. Has your machine been in the shop recently?

A. No.

That is all.

At this time the map is introduced as an exhibit by Mr. Alexander.

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Mr. Alexander:

We have some people here who, I think, are experienced along this line and who have had a lot of experience in this recovery work. I would like to have Mr. Westfield, who was in the mine last night, to come to the witness stand.

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JAMES WESTFIELD, witness:

Q. Please state your name and occupation to the reporter.

A. My name is James Westfield. I am Chief of the Health and Accident Prevention Division, Region 8, U. S. Bureau of Mines, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Q. Mr. Westfield, in your own words tell us about what you saw in there after the ignition.

A. After learning of the explosion, we were in the United Mine Workers Office at Beckley. We immediately went to Mt. Hope to get the details and then we drove with Mr. Quenon to the mine. We arrived there somewhere between 6:00 and 7:00 o'clock in the evening. We contacted Mr. Alexander and told him what we were there for. At the time we were unable to contact the mine officials. They were still underground assisting with recovery operations. After the bodies were recovered - I would say approximately 7:30 - we then met the superintendent of the mine and the mine foreman and Mr. Alexander had suggested that someone represent the company on the investigation, so Mr. Lambert, the mine foreman, was appointed. We went underground, and by we I mean the Bureau

of Mines Inspectors and State Inspectors, representative of the Safety Committee and the Mine Foreman. We traveled the entire explosion area. We picked out the obvious evidence, including the evidence which was pointed out by the men who assisted with the recovery work, as to the location of bodies and what machines were in operation. Such evidence as we have indicates that the falls were in the three entrances in the affected area. The mine machine in what I term the stub of No. 1 entry, was not in operation, or apparently not in operation, in that the bodies of the machine helper and the operator were lying away from the machine, as though they were eating lunch. The place in which the machine is located had been under-cut and shot. The machine was back from the face a short distance. The loading machine was possibly operating, in that the operator's body was found near the controls. The machine had loaded out the right side of the place and the machine had been backed out of the place with the loading head raised, indicating that the machine was backing out or preparing to make another out or swath, as they term it. There were no shuttle cars near the loading machine. The two shuttle cars were near the loading point. During our first investigation we found no methane by a permissible flame safety lamp, and a thorough search was made in all areas affected by the explosion. The loading machine is the permissible type. The condition of the machine is not determined at the moment, but the Bureau of Mines has one of its electrical engineers in charge of testing this equipment in the mine looking this machine over at the present. To state at the moment as to where the gas came from we think it came from a feeder at the fault, or at the abandoned area - we are at the moment unable to say. We have taken some air samples and are continuing the inspection and when that is completed we will be able to state whether we were able to find any methane or gas. We have not been able to determine that with yesterday's or today's investigation.

Q. Was the controller on that loading machine open?

A. I am going to have to let Mr. Quenon answer that inasmuch as I did not check that.

Q. Would you like to state anything more?

A. I think not until we have completed our report.

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JOHN H. HANFORD, witness

Q. Give your name and occupation, please.

A. John H. Hanford, Director of Mine Rescue Work, Department of Mines of West Virginia.

Q. Will you in your own way tell the story of your investigation made in this affected area last night?

A. I arrived at the mine shortly before dark with Mr. Alexander, the Chief, and waited some time outside the mine in order to allow the recovery crew to bring the first bodies outside. When this trip went back inside Mr. Young Lawson of the West Virginia Department of Mines and myself went in together. We got out at the telephone and waited there some time while the three remaining bodies were brought down to the trip to be taken outside. After the trip left I found that we didn't have a map of the area, which I thought had been brought on to the section prior to our entry. We called for the map to be sent in and in the meantime made some preliminary observations in the No. 2 entry out by the boom. We decided not to go any farther insofar as we heard, or I heard, four roof falls. Later I found they were not four separate falls, but just possibly pieces of roof falling in the same area. But we elected not to go on to the section until the roof quieted. While we were waiting, other members of the Depart-

ment of Mines - Mr. Alexander and some of the other inspectors, Mr. Quenon and Mr. Westfield - came in and we all started to cover the entire section, which was done. As to the direction of forces, location of machinery, etc., my findings are the same as have been outlined by Mr. Westfield. As to the possible point of ignition, it appears that the ignition originated in the immediate vicinity of the loading machine. As to the immediate cause of the ignition I am unable to state.

Q. Was the control on the machine open?

A. I am not personally familiar with that type of machine, but the controls were pointed out to me by Mr. Quenon and another inspector familiar with the machine, and from their description I assume the controls were open.

Q. Was there any rock or any cinders present? Did you observe any?

A. Very little.

Q. In your opinion it was an out and out gas ignition?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you have an opinion on the source of that gas?

A. There are two possible sources in my estimation. Feeders along the fault, or the possibility of an accumulation of gas in the old works having moved through the opening between No. 3 room and out into the old works possibly a few hours prior to the ignition.

Q. I would like definitely to establish the time of this ignition. Do you know from the watches taken off of these men the exact time it happened?

A. I heard that one watch stopped at about nine minutes of twelve o'clock. I think it was 9 minutes of 12:00.

That is all.



O. W. HARRIS, witness:

Q. Give the reporter your name, occupation, etc., please, sir.

A. O. W. Harris, Coal Mine Inspector, U. S. Bureau of Mines,  
Logan, West Virginia.

Q. Mr. Harris, you were on the investigating party and I think that has been pretty well covered. Have you anything to add so far as the investigation was concerned that has not been brought out?

A. No, I think not.

Q. When you got to the loading machine was the control open on that machine?

A. Yes.

Q. Would the control being open indicate as to what the operator was doing? Was he going forward or backing up?

A. He was backing up. The way it was sitting he had raised the head of the loading machine and it looked to me as though it was being backed up, with the head raised and the controls backward.

That is all.

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MARION MARCUM, witness.

Q. Please state your name and occupation.

A. Marion Marcum. I am a miner and live at Lovely, Kentucky.

Q. As a member of the Safety Committee, were you on the investigation of this disaster last night?

A. Yes.

Q. You have heard the testimony that has been given today.

Have you anything to add to that which would throw any light on this matter and that should go into this record?

A. No, I think not.

Q. How long have you worked for this company at this mine?

A. Almost eight years.

Q. And you have nothing to add to what has been said?

A. No.

Q. I want to thank you for going with us last night and for coming here today.

That is all.

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MR. T. L. LAMBERT, Mine Foreman, recalled:

Q. Were there any test holes or bore holes along this fault?

A. Not in the place they are working now, but in other sections of the mines we would use 12 ft. alters. But not in this particular section.

Q. Did you ever find gas in those bore holes?

A. No, sir.

Q. Mr. Lambert, were there sufficient correct prints to indicate to you that you were approaching faults or old works?

A. Yes, I knew they were there. They were marked on the map to the present time.

Q. Were those adjacent works, those above there, accessible?

A. Not at the present time, due to a few falls across the mouth, and we had been back just long enough then to drive up that distance.

Q. Will you show me on the map just how far up you could get in there?

A. Yes. (Mr. Lambert indicated to Mr. Alexander on the map).

Q. Was the recovery completed as shown on the map?

A. Yes, approximately.

That is all.

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Mr. Alexander:

There being no further questions, the inquiry is declared closed.

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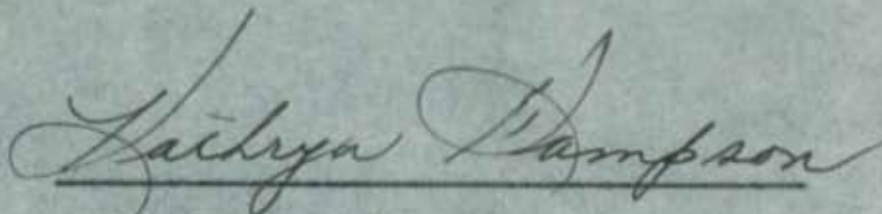
STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA

COUNTY OF MINGO, TO-WIT:

I, KATHRYN SAMPSON, a Notary Public within and for the County and State aforesaid, do hereby certify that the foregoing evidence of T. W. Lambert and others, at a hearing conducted by Mr. Arch J. Alexander, Mine Chief for the State of West Virginia, concerning the gas ignition of Burning Springs Collieries mine, on Friday, January 19, 1951, at the Mingo County Court House, was taken by me in shorthand and later transcribed on the typewriter to the best of my skill and ability.

I further certify that my commission as Notary Public will expire on the 14th day of November, 1956.

GIVEN under my hand this 24th day of January, 1951.



NOTARY PUBLIC within and for Mingo County,  
West Virginia