



The 1943 Mulcahy Mine Disaster

By Cory Ritterbusch

1943 was a tough year for Shullsburg. Many of the city's young men had left or were leaving for World War II and its principal industry, mining, was in high demand. Everyone was chipping in however they could on the home front, including many busy women, as the mines were working 24-hour schedules to keep up with the lead demands made by the War.

On Tuesday February 9, things would get a lot worse as tragedy struck at the Mulcahy Mine one mile west of Shullsburg. Eight miners were killed and three injured in two tunnel cave-ins 60 feet below the surface. In its wake, five wives were widowed and eighteen children were left fatherless. Two of the rescuers were children of the deceased. It was the worst mining accident in Wisconsin history.

The tragedy began when two miners were working a "clay crevice" when ceiling beams in the tunnel gave way, trapping them under two tons of rock. Immediately, employees from the nearby No. 2 James Mine were called and a futile rescue attempt began by removing rocks and digging for the pair. As they worked more ceiling gave way, killing six more. The Lafayette County sheriff said, "rescue crews had nearly reached their objectives when another section of the tunnel gave way." Two other men were seriously injured but managed to dig their way out.

Now, employees from all nearby mines were deployed and rescuers reached the six bodies by mid-afternoon and the bodies from the original collapse "a few hours

later." Mortuaries in Shullsburg, Galena, Platteville, and Cuba City were utilized for identification. Future State Senator Gordon Roselip served as coroner for the process.

The next morning at 9:00, the city would need to control its emotions for the wedding of one of its most popular citizens: 25-year-old former professional baseball player and current war hero/fighter pilot, Johnny Gerlach. He would wed Mary Hebenstreit at a likely somber ceremony at St. Matthews Church. Funerals at area churches would soon follow.

Although, the disaster was ruled an "unavoidable accident," it would lead to stricter safety standards in lead and zinc mines in the mining district. Other fatalities in the mines around Shullsburg would occur in 1949, 1953, 1957, 1964, and fires in 1963 and 1969, which left many injured.

The following month Shullsburg would receive news that John Hebenstreit became a Prisoner of War in the fight. Seven men from Shullsburg would eventually die in World War II.

Today, the Miners Memorial Park on Water Street in Shullsburg is dedicated to the eight men who lost their lives that day. There we can reflect on the danger in the mines men would put their lives into to provide for their families and the struggles Shullsburg and the country would face during this difficult period in American history.

-continued from page 1-

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