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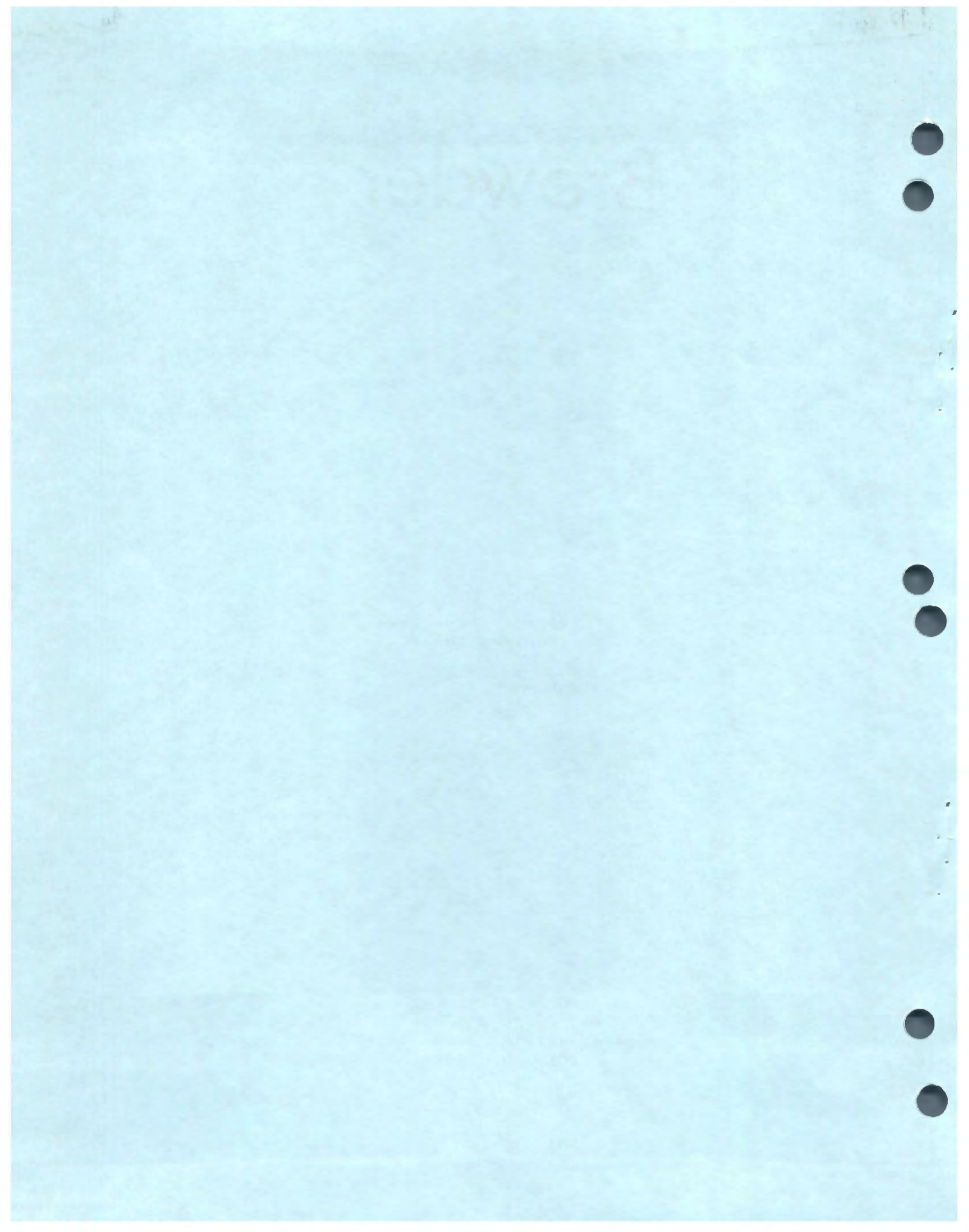
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# Browder

BROWDER, KY. MINE EXPLOSION KILLS 34 ON FEB. 1, 1910

Written Jan. 22, 1990  
(Revised 1991)

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## BROWDER MINE EXPLOSION KILLS 34 ON FEB. 1, 1910

By BOBBY ANDERSON

Thursday, Feb. 1, 1990 marked the eightieth anniversary of the Browder, Ky. coal mine explosion, which killed 34 miners, including their foreman, Pete Kelley. This still stands as the single worst mine disaster in Muhlenberg County.

Shortly before noon on that day, the explosion ripped through the middle portion of the south entry. Bodies were dismembered and portions of those bodies hurled hundreds of feet away. Most of those killed were so mangled identification was extremely difficult.

The tragedy, however, made a prophet of Kelley.

"This will be my last day in the mine, and I'm not sorry", he was quoted by his sister-in-law, Della Mason in 1960. Kelley kissed his wife and said goodbye to five children as he left his Drakesboro home for the mine on that day.

Though his prophecy was fulfilled, it was not the ending he had looked forward to. The Wickliffe Coal Company, which operated the Browder mine, was transferring control of the pit to the Elk Valley Coal Company that day, and Kelley was retiring from his position as mine foreman.

All of this was recalled in February, 1960, in a full page presentation by the Central City, Ky., Times-Argus on the 50th anniversary of the explosion.

This writer, with the help of his mother, the late Hazel Anderson, was able to interview Mrs. Mason at her Drakesboro home. Mrs. Anderson, a child of almost six at Drakesboro at the time, recalled some of the incidents surrounding the explosion and its impact on the community. But Mrs. Mason had both the memory of her brother-in-law's last day, and copies of the 1910 Muhlenberg Argus which carried the details of the explosion.

In addition to this story, and the reprinting of the Argus articles, another heart-rending human interest story, as only the late Agnes S. Harrelson could tell, was carried by the Times-Argus on the same page.

Mrs. Harralson, vividly recalled the day, because it was the day her own father was buried. Robert Simpson, her father, had died in the Render mine a few days earlier, she stated. Following his burial, a telegraph operator approached the group leaving the cemetery in search of members of a family, related to one of the victims at Browder.

Mrs. Harralson also recalled that one of the men killed in the explosion, Mack (perhaps Matt) Loyd, had just been married the day before to Miss Bessie Wright. She stated "he was getting a lot of free advice (on married life) from practically everyone" shortly before the explosion snuffed out his life.

Though perhaps, a complete list of the casualties was never published because of the lengthy period it took to exhume all of the bodies, and poor communications in that day, it is known that two of the men were from Logan County. They had not been married long, were close friends and had brought their brides to Browder to live in company-owned shacks. The bodies of Dudley Empson, 30, and Riley Thompson, 25, were returned to Logan County for burial.

Among the other casualties were:

Charlie Sherfield, a young man from Ennis, who died at his home on Feb. 7 after being injured in the blast;

Arthur Richardson, a 52-year-old blacksmith, who had been hired by the company, and was making his first trip inside the mine to shoe a mule. He was the grandfather of Yvonna Warman of Cleaton;

James Williams, the father of former Central City police chief Charlie Williams;

Nat Allen, the city judge of Drakesboro, who also worked in the mine;

Estill Browning, 23, a black man who lived with his widowed mother, and whose brother had been one of the early bodies removed from the tragedy scene. They were both laid out on the same bed at their mother's home;

Also Max English, M. Edwards, Austin Richardson, a Martin, a Reno and a Bennett.

Among those critically injured in the blast were Jess Jernigan of Drakesboro and James Lemons. Neither was expected to live after sustaining life-threatening injuries in the explosion. Jernigan's skull was fractured, and had opened up allowing the loss of brain matter. Doctors said it was just a matter of time for him. Coffins were ordered for the dead, as well as for Jernigan and Lemons. It is not known what became of Lemons, but Jernigan's is a long and interesting story.

He was a brother to Mrs. Mason, who gave much of the details for the 1960 story. Both she and her husband, Henderson Mason recalled vividly Jernigan's story.

So serious were his injuries that doctors would not allow him to be taken home. He was bedded down in the engine room at the mine, away from the view of his family, but with a nurse beside him at all time. Doctors said the hole in his head was horseshoe shaped and at the back of his head. They refused to attempt to put a steel plate in his head because they said he would soon die. Jernigan told those around him from his "death bed" that he would live and work in the mine again.

He did live, and later saw his own casket. One day, soon after he had recovered, he walked into the company store at Browder and asked to see his casket. It was shown to him -- but it was never used.

A small man, weighing only 112 pounds, he lived 31 years beyond his injury, in a small house built with the compensation he received because of his injuries. Jess Jernigan died in 1941.

One story told by Mrs. Mason regards three black men killed in the explosion. The bodies were to be taken to Ebenezer (at what is now known as the Tim Gregory home) where a relative of the men lived. Bill Carr of Drakesboro was to transport the bodies in his wagon. Upon arrival, he solicited the help of three men and two woman at the scene to unload the bodies. All refused, because of deep-rooted superstitions, to touch the caskets or the bodies. Carr backed his wagon up to a fence, removed the tailgate and gently slid the caskets out of the wagon and leaned them against the fence, where he left them.

Another interesting and tragic sidelight to the explosion at Browder was the death of Pete Kelley's son. Eight years, to the day, on Feb. 1, 1918, 18-year-old Ragan Kelley, Pete Kelley's oldest child, was killed in a mine accident at Black Diamond Mine in Drakesboro. The story told is that he was driving a mule,

pulling a train of loaded coal cars out of the mine. He unhooked his mule while the cars were still in motion and was caught between one of the cars and the mine rib. Bystanders witnessed the incident, saw Kelley free himself and thought he was okay. He walked several steps away and collapsed, dead of internal injuries.

At Browder, a few days after the explosion, a coroner's jury, composed of J. B. Tice, J. R. Buchanan, G. R. McLean, J. L. Lidbetter, Dan Key and J. T. Smith ruled the men died from an explosion, cause unknown.

It was later determined by the state mine inspector that the accident was caused by the explosion of a keg of blasting powder. Fragments of the keg were found. It was not known what touched off the powder.

Though the bodies of the men, dead and alive, were mangled, some beyond recognition, mine cars splintered and warped, and steel rails twisted, the mine itself needed little repair to resume its normal operation. It did function again, for many years, before finally closing about 1950 because of the high costs of transporting mined coal to the surface, and a depleted coal market. Remnants of the mine still stand as a grisly reminder of both the good days at the mine when the economy around it flourished -- and the bad day, Feb. 1, 1910, when the lives of 34 men were snuffed out in the most historic and tragic mine disaster in the history of Muhlenberg County.

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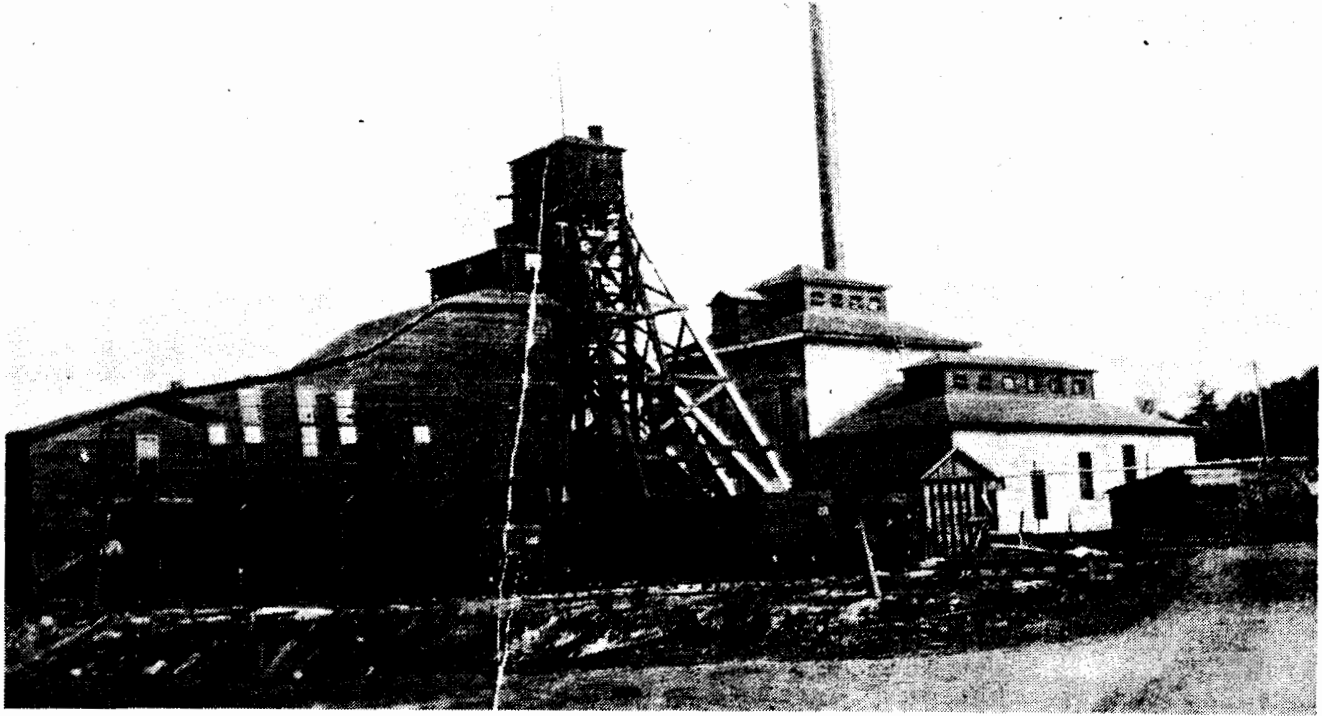
The complete list of dead in the mine tragedy, later obtained through a news article appearing shortly after the explosion, follows. This list was obtained through the effort of Gayle Carver and Sandy Cather. The list is printed with the same identifications made by the newspaper article, denoting white, colored and marital status.

Dead were, white: Matthew Lloyd, married; Mac English, single; Ray Bennett, married; J. A. Richardson, married; Estil Cornett, single; Eugene Cornett, single; Ben Leslie, single; Alex Williams, married; Pete Kelley, married; J. M. Allen, married; Will Whitaker, single; J. R. Thomas (or Thompson?), married; Dudley Epton (Empson), married; James Williams, married.

Colored: Ray Martin, single; Will Reno, married; Hilar Sprall, single; Columbus Sprall, married; Alex Sweat, single; Alex Hughes, single; Ezro Mayfield, married; Obie Jones, single; Raymond Browning, single; Will Jones, married; John Duffy, married; George Duffy, single; Kelley Cash, married; Henry Mason, married, But Smith, married, Will Berry, married, Warner Johnson, single, Estil Browning, Levi Duvall, single.

Seriously injured were: James Lemon, married, Jesse Jernigan and \_\_\_?\_\_\_ Sheffield, all white. (The last named was probably Charlie Sherfield, who died shortly after the explosion at his home in Ennis.) Jesse Jernigan lived until a relatively few years ago at Drakesboro, Ky.





The Browder mine of the Wickliffe Coal Company about 1935.

## Judge's uncle killed at Browder

### TO THE EDITOR:

As stated in Bobby Anderson's interesting history of the 1910 Browder Mine Explosion (Times-Argus 1-31-90), "a complete list of casualties was never published." I can name two of them.

My father, Claude Cornette, had two brothers in the mine. One, Eugene, was killed instantly, but the other brother, Roy, was only slightly injured.

My father, who was sixteen at the time, went to the mine, and I have heard him recall the events

many times. The tragedy did not scare him away from coal mining however. He worked about fifty years as an underground miner, mostly for Duncan Coal Company, and died in 1988 at age ninety-four.

(Sincerely,  
Dan Cornette  
Circuit Judge  
Greenville, Ky.





# 34 Killed in Mine Explosion at Browder Feb. 1, 1910

By **BOBBY ANDERSON**

"This is my last day as mine foreman, and I'm not sorry." Those were the last words of Pete Kelley as he said good-bye to his wife and five children on Feb. 1, 1910 as he left his new home in Drakesboro to go to his job as mine foreman at Browder.

At noon that day, he was to be relieved of his job as mine foreman, and would be replaced by Abercrombie, who would take over the mine at Browder for the Elk Valley Coal and Mining Co. from the Wickliffes.

But at five minutes before noon (various stories give different times) a shattering explosion snuffed out the lives of Kelley and more than 30 other miners in the Browder pit. The total has always been indefinite because of the death of some following injuries in the explosion.

The following was copied from the "Muhlenberg Argus" printed on Feb. 11, 1910, in Central City. The paper belonged to Mrs. Della Mason of Drakesboro, who was a sister-in-law to Pete Kelley, the mine foreman at the time of the explosion. As the story will tell, Mr. Kelley's body was the last removed from the mine.

## The Catastrophe in the Wickliffe Mine at Browder, in This County.

### All Now Found Foreman Kelley's Body Last Found

"At the time the Argus was put to press last week, the body of Foreman Kelley had not been found. We also learned that two or three of the names published last week were incorrect as to the given name. We publish the following from Browder, which gives additional particulars:

Browder, Ky., Feb. 4—Fifty-two hours of almost constant searching resulted late yesterday afternoon in the finding of the body of Pete Kelley, assistant superintendent of the Browder mine, in which 33 men were blown to pieces and suffocated Tuesday shortly before noon. The body of Kelley was mangled and torn almost

beyond recognition by the force of the explosion. Decomposition had set in and the remains were in such a condition that for a time it was considered best to take it at once to the cemetery for interment. This was not done however.

#### Last Bodies Recovered

"The body of Kelley's was the last of the 33 taken from the tomb, now the site of Kentucky's most horrible mine disaster. The remains were brought up in the cage at 4 o'clock by State Mine Inspector Hugh Jones, Thomas Gattis and the other miners who had formed the searching parties for the dead and living since the day of the explosion.

#### Death Toll is 34

"The fatal hole is now clear of all bodies and the known dead is positively fixed at 33. Jesse Jernigan, whose skull was fractured in a terrible manner, is expected to die at any moment. James Lemons, another of the injured, is in a precarious condition, and his recovery is extremely in doubt. None of the others injured are in any immediate danger.

#### Where Body Was Found

"As given out by the men who discovered the remains, Kelley's body, when found, was discovered in the middle fourth of the south entry opposite the break-through. The body was worse mangled than that of any taken from the mine, which seems to indicate to some of the miners that

Kelley was nearer the explosion than any of the others. The body was found in a different place from any of the others and from its position it is thought that he was on his way back to his men after leaving Supt. Reynolds, stepped from the cage to the top of the shaft just as the explosion let go. The body would have been discovered sooner had the searching party been able to get into that part of the mine where he was found.

#### Verdict of Coroner's Jury

"The coroner's jury failed to learn the cause of the explosion after examining 10 witnesses and taking thousands of words of testimony. The verdict was:

"We, the jury, find that these 33 men came to their death by an explosion in the Browder mine at Muhlenberg County, Ky. Cause of the explosion not known."

"The jury was composed of J. B. Ticc, J. R. Buchanan, G. R. McLean, J. L. Lidbetter, Dan Key and J. T. Smith.

#### All Buried But Two

"There were 23 funerals of the dead taken from the mine up and down the district yesterday. All of the dead have now been buried with the exception of Matt Lloyd and Pete Kelley. Eleven white widows, 30 white children and at least 40 colored widows and fatherless children are left to face the world alone as the result of the disastrous explosion. The bodies were buried yesterday from Drakesboro, Browder, Caneyville, Providence, Nortonville, South Carrollton and Crofton.

#### Liability Complicated

"It became known at the inquest that the explosion occurred on the day Mr. Wickliffe, the owner, was to have transferred the property to the Elk Valley Coal and Mining Co. Just who owned the mine at the time of the explosion will have to be determined later. Many attorneys are on the ground collecting evidence with which to bring damage suits. The dubious ownership at the time of the disaster will complicate those suits: and

make difficult the collection of the insurance. All of the witnesses at the inquest were summoned at the behest of the Browder mine officials. All but one testified there was one explosion. One said he believed there were two from the evidence heard, the only verdict possible was the one rendered.

"On Feb. 7, Charles Sheffield, a young single man, who was injured in the explosion in the mine of the Elk Valley Consolidated Coal Mining Co. on Tuesday, Feb. 2, died at noon at his home at Ennis where he had been taken immediately after being recovered from the mine. Both limbs had been broken, one so badly crushed and mangled that it became necessary to amputate it on Sunday.

"This makes 34 who have lost their lives in the mine at Browder, with several others in critical condition. The most remarkable case is that of Jesse Jernigan, whose skull was so badly crushed that the brain was exposed. He still lives and says that he will be at work in a few days.

"On account of the accident, a number of miners have moved to other towns, but just as many are moving in to take their places. A man has been in Central City employing men, meeting with success. The new concern proposed to work every day and this is an inducement to a miner at this time of the year."

Ironically enough, the same paper carried a story in February of 1918, just eight years to the day, telling of the death of Ragan Kelley, the oldest child of Foreman Pete Kelley. The paper, also owned by Mrs. Mason, gave this version:

#### Killed in the Mines

"Ragan Kelley, 18 years old and employed as a driver in the mines of the Black Diamond Coal and Mining Co. at Drakesboro, was killed at his work last Monday afternoon. He had just brought in a train of mine cars and was unhooking his mule, from the train while the cars were still in motion, he was caught between

one of the cars and the mine 'rib.' Several fellow workmen saw the accident but when the young man got up and started away, they thought his injuries were only trivial. However, he walked only a few steps when he fell and expired before aid could be rendered suffering internal injuries. Funeral services were conducted Tuesday, followed by burial in the Drakesboro Cemetery. His death occurred just eight years from the time of his father, Pete Kelley, was brought a corpse from the Browder Mines, a victim of an explosion."

Mrs. Mason, who was contacted by my mother, Mrs. Hazel Anderson, remembered the explosion well, as could her husband, Henderson Mason, where we visited them, although many of the names of the dead slipped their minds.

In addition to her brother-in-law, Pete Kelley, losing his life in the mine, Mrs. Mason's brother, Jesse Jernigan, was one of the most seriously injured miners.

His injury was so serious, the doctors said he could not possibly live, and kept him in the engine room of the mine so that the family could not see him. A nurse and a doctor remained with him, and a mattress was brought in for his bed. The nearest hospital was in Owensboro.

His lone injury consisted of a horseshoe shaped hole about two inches each way in the back of his head, which exposed the brain. Dr. Cundiff later told the family part of his brain was lost. At the time, doctors refused to put a plate in his head, as they said he would not live.

However, he did live to see his own casket, a box ordered by the coal company for all dead miners. So sure were they that Mr. Jernigan would die, they ordered his casket. Upon his recovery, he walked into the Browder Company store and asked to see it.

Mr. Jernigan, who weighed only 112 pounds, lived 31 years after his injury, in his home

in Drakesboor, built with th compensation given him by the company. He died in 1941.

Mr. Mason was able to give some interesting sidelights on the tragedy.

One concerned three of the Negroes killed in the explosion. Bill Carr was hired to take the bodies of the three to Ebenezer, to what is now the home of the late Tim Gregory, but at that time was occupied by a Negro family.

Upon arrival, Mr. Carr asked help of the three Negro men and two women there in unloading the caskets, but all

in a very superstitious manner refused to touch the caskets, whereupon, Mr. Carr backed his wagon up to a fence, undid the tail gate, and slid each of the caskets out, leaving them standing on end against the fence.

Will Bartlett of Drakesboro related he was working at Black Diamond Mine at the time of the explosion, and upon learning of the disaster went to the mine along with several of his fellow employees, against the will of their bosses. He was able to help in

establishing part of the list of the dead in the mine.

Mrs. Yvonna W a r m a n of Cleaton gave us the name of Arthur Richardson as one of the dead in the explosion. Mr. Richardson, her grandfather, was employed as a blacksmith by the company. On this day, he made his first trip into the mine to shoe a mule, and was killed. He was born on Nov. 6, 1857 according to the family register.

## Among the Dead Was Mack Lloyd, Who Had Married the Day Before

(Editor's note—Here's another account of the Browder Mine explosion—this one by Mrs. Agnes Harralson. Anyone having the complete list of dead is asked to telephone

The Messenger and The Times-Argus at 814 or Bobby Anderson at WMTA or Mrs. Harralson. We hope to have the song written about the explosion available for publication next week.)

### By AGNES HARRALSON

The successful rescue of three entombed men at Peabody Coal Company's Mine last week, brought back memories to many West Kentuckians of other mine accidents with less happy endings. The explosions of the St. Charles Mine in Hopkins County, the Duvin Mine in Providence and that of the Wickliffe Coal Company's Browder Mine are a few. These also withstood long hours of waiting while rescue men worked around the clock, with no thought of their own safety as they sought and found the unfortunate victims.

(Feb. 1, 1910 has always been a date remembered by this writer. We were leaving the cemetery after the burial of my father. Robert Simpson, who had died in the Render mine, when a telegraph messenger came looking for someone whose relatives had died in the Browder explosion.)

### Cold Wind

There was a cold winter

wind blowing across the slack road at Browder that February morning as nearly one hundred men left their homes for another day's work. There was laughing and joking as they congregated under the shed at 7 o'clock, awaiting their turn to ride the cages to the bottom of the 170 foot shaft. Mack Loyd, who had just married Miss Bessie Wright the day before was getting a lot of free advice from practically everyone. It started out like a normal day but before it ended the cold wind of death had snuffed out the lives of 34 of the little group.

### Browder

At Browder today you see little that was there 50 years ago The mine has been long abandoned, the large brick store and coal office is gone, as are the neat rows of little company - owned house in which more than a hundred miners and their families. Located about 10 miles south of Central City on the L&N rail-

road, Browder is also on Highway 431 where you turn to go to Rochester.

### East Entry

After leaving the cages at the foot of the shaft, the men climbed into the waiting cars and were taken by the motorman 700 feet into the mine to begin another day's work. About half of them went to their places in the East Entry—among them were Supt. Jim Steele and Underground Foreman Porter M. Kelly. The regular motorman was off duty, and assistant motorman Jess Jernigan and J. Lemons were running the motor.

### The Explosion

All had gone well with machine men cutting the coal, loaders filling the cars, drivers and their little bank-mules pulling it out to the entry to be picked up by the motorman, as he made up his trip on the main lie-way. From there it was hauled to the bottom of the shaft where the big hoisting engine lifted the

loaded cars to the top of the tibble. It was 11:15, almost time for dinner, an enjoyable time in any mine, as men sit and talk and eat from their dinner-buckets. The survivors told how all at once, without warning, the earth rocked with an explosion that was unbelievable in force and searing heat. Men were hurled hundreds of feet, or were burned beyond identification. Supt. Steele, who was quite a distance away, was thrown to the ground, yet he and five men with him crawled to the safety of a low place where some water had collected.

#### **A Sad Sight**

The uninjured from other parts of the mine were soon brought to the surface, but it was nearly six hours before rescue teams could safely go into the East Entry. When they did, it was a sad sight as most of the 34 dead were burned beyond immediate recognition, and in many cases it was members of their own family they were trying to identify. There was hardly a home in Browder without someone dead or seriously injured and several homes had more than one. The last body taken from the mine at midnight of the second night was that of Estill Browning, 23-year-old Negro machine man, who lived with his aged mother. He was carried to her home and laid upon a bed beside his brother, Raymond, who had been removed from the mine earlier in the night.

#### **List Incomplete**

James Williams, father of Central City ex-police chief Charlie Williams, was blown

more than a hundred yards from the explosion. Mack Loyd was thought to have been nearest to the explosion as he was the most badly burned. In the list of dead was Judge Nat Allen, who served as police judge at Drakesboro when not engaged in mining; Arthur Richardson, blacksmith; Porter M. Kelly, inside boss; Austin Richardson, Max English, M. Edwards—Bennett—Reno—Martin, and many others. Because of the delay in identification the papers did not get a complete list of the dead at once. Dudley Empson, 30, and Riley Thompson, 25, had come to Browder from Russellville, and with their young wives were living together in one of the company-owned houses. Rescuers found their bodies together. They were taken back to Logan County to their boyhood home for burial.

#### **Mine Inspector**

State Mine Inspector C. J. Norwood, after a thorough examination, said the accident was due to the explosion of a keg of blasting powder. Fragments of the keg were found. What touched off the blast will never be known. Mine cars were blown to splinters, steel rails were found twisted and fused together in a tangled mass against the side of the entry. No one of the foregoing fatalities could be said to have resulted from any defective condition of the mine. In fact, it was passing strange how little repair to the mine itself was necessary when it was all over. The Browder Mine continued operation for many years after that fateful day in 1910 but the little community never forgot.