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Huntly mine explosion 'never forgotten'

Denise Irvine • 05:00, Sep 13 2014



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PETER DRURY/FAIRFAX NZ

Stan Alder with the canary that is part of the exhibition on the Ralph and Glen Afton mining disasters at Waikato Coalfields Museum in Huntly. Photo: Peter Drury

They're all sad stories, the ones that are inextricably linked to Huntly's Ralph Mine disaster. There is the Jackson family that lost father Henry and sons John and Samuel; they're buried together in Huntly's Kimihia Cemetery. Their joint epitaph says: "One link death cannot sever, sweet remembrance lasts forever."

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left orphaned. Charles Maloney, 21, was another victim. He died not knowing his wife, Ada, had just become pregnant with their son, who was born eight and a half months after the mine explosion.

Huntly historian Jean Beverland knows all these stories, and more. She has spent over a year researching and writing them, compiling storyboards for each of the 43 men who died in the Ralph Mine disaster, and many of the survivors. By this morning, these histories will be displayed in the town's shop windows for everyone to read. The names of the dead are also inscribed in black on lamp-post banners resembling old-style mourning cards. It is a sobering sight.



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It is 100 years since the Ralph Mine explosion. It is New Zealand's second worst mining disaster, only exceeded by the Brunner Mine on the West Coast, where 65 men perished in 1896. The Ralph losses are still keenly felt in Huntly, and the lost miners will be well honoured today at ceremonies and events. Many family members expected to gather from throughout New Zealand and overseas.

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in the mine on September 24, 1939. It was a smaller loss of life, but a similar harsh impact on a tight-knit community. A newspaper report at the time said: "Everything has been suspended in Glen Afton and there is a pall of gloom hanging over the small township."

Beverland says Huntly's population at the time of the Ralph deaths was around 1000 people.

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"Many families were related. It was a tragic time. Most families have never forgotten."

Beverland says she's been moved time and again by the stories that have unfolded during her research. "I've done a fair bit of weeping, off and on."

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One of the most poignant she found is that of John and Alice Jones. John was a mine roadsman; his job was to lay and maintain the rail tracks that skips were pushed out on. He was down the mine on the morning of September 12, 1914, and died instantly in the explosion. It was some time before his decomposing body was found.

His widow was unable to come to terms with her loss. She and John had married in Wales in 1904, both aged 39. They came to New Zealand in 1908, they had no children. Alice became depressed and drowned herself in the Waikato River in November 1916.

Beverland says some of her research was easy, because several families still live locally and have plenty of details about their ancestors. Others have been harder to track down, sometimes because the widowed women remarried. Many of the bereaved left town after they buried their husbands. Some had to find jobs, some left their children with relatives while they worked, some went to live with family in other towns.

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research and printing for the storyboards, and from researcher Heather Maloney, of Pukekohe, who is related by marriage to lost miner Charles Maloney. Heather Maloney and a network of friends have tracked some of the harder-to-find families. "We've got them all," Beverland says, "we've got something about all of them."

Many of the men were killed instantly at 7.20am on that Saturday, when the roar of the explosion shook all of Huntly. The blast was believed to be caused by a miner's naked-flame cap lamp coming into contact with accumulated firedamp (mainly methane gas). Smoke billowed from the mine's main shaft in the centre of town, followed by flames that shot high above the pithead. Within a few minutes, Huntly residents jammed the area around the pithead.

A party of 62 had gone down the mine 20 minutes earlier, a smaller shift than the usual detail of 160. They were to retrieve some rails that lay in a disused area known as Little Dip.

Ralph Mine was considered safe where gas didn't seep from the coal; in these conditions, Huntly miners would wear a naked flame carbide lamp attached to their cloth caps. On that Saturday, it is believed that one miner went ahead of the rest into the old workings. The miner in charge, who had the only safety lamp and should have led the way, testing for gas, was at the rear. It is understood the lead miner walked into a thick pocket of firedamp, his light went out, and when he relit it, the firedamp ignited. It raised a cloud of coal dust (slack) which exploded in a fireball through the confined space. There was chaos and overpowering fumes below, and the first rescuers retreated to the surface.

Some miners escaped in a cage used to transport workers up and down the shaft. Other miners made their way through the labyrinth of underground tunnels to the neighbouring Taupiri West mine and got out through a shaft, opened as an airway for Ralph Mine. Many survivors owed their lives to this shaft. Rescuers finally reached the seat of the explosion in the late afternoon and brought out seven bodies. Retrieval continued in grim, dangerous conditions and the last body was recovered two weeks after the disaster.

A coroner's jury at the inquest found that the victims - some so charred and burned they were unidentifiable even to those who knew them - died due to "ignition of a quantity of gas in No 5 section causing an explosion of coal dust".

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A later Royal Commission found many failures in a system designed to protect the miners underground. Safety lamps, previously used only by mine officials, subsequently became mandatory for all miners, and the report made other recommendations about ventilation, lamps and duties of inspectors. There was a ministerial edict that naked lights not be permitted again.

The cemetery lies a little to the north of the town, on State Highway 1. In another example of how much Huntly cares about its Ralph Mine history, the miners' graves were painstakingly refurbished a few years back by Huntly Lions Club.

Project leader Maurice Gerrand says the idea came to him after he visited 'relatives' graves at the cemetery and he noted the mine victims, and the sad state of some of the memorials. Some graves were even unmarked; these were identified, and each of these now has a plaque funded by the Lions.

Other graves were scrubbed, waterblasted, fallen headstones were straightened, names were re-lettered and landscaping done. A rededication ceremony was held in 2009, when the work was complete.

The Ralph Mine men have remained a Lions' priority, and the club has subsequently raised more than \$100,000 to build a model poppet-head near the site of the Ralph Mine's main shaft in town. The poppet-head is the frame over the mineshaft that was used for raising and lowering men and materials, and the Lions' memorial now sits boldly in the centre of Huntly. It will be officially unveiled today at 10.30am.

On Monday this week, the poppet-head was newly in place, awaiting the weekend ceremonies. Lions' member Bryce Mounsey was digging the footings for the memorial plaque, and Gerrand was there, too, talking about the generosity of all those who have worked on the project. The Lions, he says, have been involved in Ralph Mine work for seven years.

The Ralph Mine men are remembered, too, at Huntly's Waikato Coalfield's Museum, where they are the focus of an informative new exhibit, along with those killed at Glen Afton in 1939.

Museum board deputy chair Jan White has overseen the exhibition; she takes the tour on this Monday morning. It is a well-chosen mix of storyboards and memorabilia: the history unfolds, the shock, loss, anger and despair is encapsulated in literature, objects and photographs.

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death and injury.

Stan points Charlie out in a photograph of the rescue team; Charlie, a migrant from England, was 29 at the time of the Ralph Mine explosion. He was a farmer and a miner, and his grandson remembers him well. He says Charlie never talked about his experience in retrieving the burnt and battered bodies of his fellow miners. Rescue crew members in the photo with Charlie are holding canary cages, and the exhibition has a tiny stuffed bird in a vintage case, a reminder of how canaries were used to detect the presence of deadly carbon monoxide, reacting to it much more quickly than humans. When the birds became distressed the miners were alerted, and evacuated the area immediately.

Stan Alder became a miner himself, and he was later general manager of New Zealand Mines Rescue Service, retiring 10 months before the Pike River disaster in 2010. He was 26 years in the mines in Huntly, 26 years with Mines Rescue.

He says that in coal country such as Huntly and its surroundings, there have been many other mining deaths than those recorded at Ralph and Glen Afton. He shows a list he's compiled of 67 men killed in the Waikato coalfields since 1879; these are individual deaths, not counting the collective losses of Ralph and Glen Afton. These men, Alder says, should not be forgotten, either.

One of them is his uncle Jack Alder, son of his grandfather Charlie, of the Ralph Mine rescue crew. Jack Alder was killed in a fall of coal in 1951 at the Pukemiro mine. Jack had just bought a farm, had handed in his notice at the mine, and was working his last Saturday shift. He left a wife and two children.

The hazards of mining are fully understood in this region, Stan Alder says; he likens it to a soldier going to war. "You know the risks."

The Ralph Mine men, and the all others, he says, will always be remembered. "It's our past, they are part of our town."

Stan Alder will give talks tomorrow at Waikato Coalfields Museum, at 1pm and 2pm, 26 Harlock Pl, Huntly, phone: (07) 828 8128.

Source of historical information on the Ralph and Glen Afton disasters: Waikato Coalfields Museum

Commemoration events in Huntly today include a procession in town at 10am, the unveiling of the poppet head at 10.30am, the release of 43 balloons on the Waikato

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now sits over Taupiri West Shaft, where most of the bodies and survivors were brought out from.

TOWNSHIP REMEMBERS

The Glen Afton mine disaster, 25 years later, had different origins, a smaller loss of life, and a similar tragic impact on the tight-knit community. Eleven men died on a Sunday afternoon, September 24, 1939, and 24 children were left fatherless.

The men's deaths had their genesis in a small fire at the mine on the Friday beforehand; although it was believed to have been extinguished, it continued to smoulder, causing the release of carbon monoxide. The ventilation fans had been turned off for the weekend and the gas built up in the mine. Later, a fault was noted at the Waikato Electric Power Board's Huntly substation and traced to the line supplying the electrical current to Glen Afton mine. Men searched for the source of the problem on Saturday afternoon, were unable to find it, and four men returned the following morning.

Mine manager Christopher Blackburn went to check the situation, discovered that men were trapped in the mine, and he led a rescue party, followed by several others. Eventually those on the surface realised something was wrong. While some were lucky and managed to get out, 11 were asphyxiated. It is believed those in the first rescue party expected to die in the attempt to save their mates.

A newspaper report on Tuesday, September 26, said, "Everything has been suspended in Glen Afton and there is a pall of gloom hanging over the small township."

The newspaper reported that A Johnston and E Hazell, two of those who took part, said simply, "We do not talk about it. That's the miner's code." They were among the first rescue parties and described the air as being "pretty thick", and when they came out into the fresh air, their heads ached and their legs gave way.

It was also reported that birdcages holding finches, canaries and budgerigars were taken into the shafts as the rescue parties entered. When the birds became distressed the miners were alerted, and evacuated the area immediately.

The report said: "Many of the men who went below owed their lives to them, for searchers were confronted with increasing waves of carbon monoxide detected only by the collapse of the birds they had brought with them."

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