

If I Had Gone To Work

by William Danie Walton, age 82
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At the time of the disaster, I was a boy of eighteen living at home with my mother and seven brothers and sisters. Our home, which was located in a coal mining town in the mountains of Utah, was known as the Walton House, a short-order house with a few boarders and Mother as general manager. It was May Day, May 1, 1900; the miners began work at 7:00 a.m., as usual, but being May Day they anticipated the celebration which was to take place in the afternoon. A celebration to most miners meant to spend time in the sunshine and fresh air, or to gather at their favorite saloon. That day, instead of taking my usual place on the fifth level of the Number Four Mine, I went into the thick underbrush of ravines and quaking aspen trees to look for our milk cow and her new calf. To our family this meant a fresh supply of milk, and I was to find the cow and the calf and bring them back home. Mother had packed a lunch for me, as I was not expected to be home until late in the evening. I was happy to be on my way, climbing the trails, enjoying the sunshine and fresh air, and observing the welcome signs of spring, and at the same time listening for the tinkle of the bell which we had tied on the cow's neck.

As I passed over the area which I later learned was almost directly above the fifth level of the mine, I felt the earth tremble. I recall wondering to myself what it could be, and I remember looking at my Ingersol watch which read ten o'clock. Not being able to figure out what caused the earth to tremble, I continued on without giving it any further thought. I searched most of the afternoon before I finally heard the welcome tinkle of the cowbell. Because of the new calf's inability to walk I carried it most of the way home, so I did not arrive there until after dark.

As the town came into view I was struck by the unusual activity. The entire town was lighted, and nine special railway cars had been left on the main line near our home. As I came nearer, I could see that coffee, milk, and sandwiches, along with flowers, were being distributed to the dozens of heart-stricken people I met everywhere. I later found out that the earth tremor which I felt earlier that morning was one of the worst coal mining disasters ever recorded. Two hundred and eight men and boys lost their lives in the dust explosion at the Number Four Mine in Scofield, Carbon County, Utah.

Our home was a hive of activity; food was being served, and help was being given wherever possible. Instead of the reception, I had expected, I was very unceremoniously shoved into the kitchen, given a dish towel and told to get busy. My sister Libbie, managed to give me the bare facts. Our older brother Andrew, was in bed unconscious and not expected to live. I was greatly saddened when I was told that Louis Leyshon, a good friend of mine who had taken my place at the mine that day, was still missing. Miraculously my brother Andrew, regained consciousness, recovered, and gave his account of the explosion. He was a driver on the first level--a driver being one who handles the horse which pulls the empty cars to the miners, who in turn blast the coal loose and load some 2,200 to 2,500 pounds of coal in each car. These loaded cars were then taken to the main entrance where they were literally dropped down the half-mile track to the exit by the electric hoist. He had just taken empty cars to all of his men and was waiting at the switch about a quarter of a mile from the main entrance. Superintendent Thomas Parmley and General Foreman Andrew Hood, happened to come along just at that time, making an inspection tour. Seconds later they felt the blast and were almost knocked off their feet. They all knew it was a serious explosion, and the superintendent instructed my brother to get word to as many

men as possible on his level to hurry out this exit and not the usual way which would be in the direct path of the explosion. My brother ran two miles through the mine to tell all of the men on his level what had happened and where to make a safe exit. They were successful in saving the lives of all the men on the first and a few of the men on the second level, but were finally overcome themselves by the after-damp, and all the men on the third, fourth, and fifth levels perished. "Afterdamp" is the term used when the oxygen has been burned out of the air. Dozens of men lost their lives not knowing where the explosion had taken place or where to get out, for there was absolutely no way to communicate with them.

The persistent and heroic efforts of the superintendent, general foreman and Andrew, to save the lives of the miners almost cost them their own lives. Andrew, was finally carried home unconscious and that was the way I found him on my arrival home.

I went to see Louis Leyshon's mother the next day, and I shall never forget the anguish and sorrow in her eyes as she said, 'Oh if you had only gone to work my boy would be alive!' I could only weep with her as that was a fact. Her boy had taken my place. I promised her I would assist in getting his body out as soon as the air pumps had been replaced. Unfortunately the mines were very dry and dusty, and very little watering was done to keep down the coal dust which clung to everything about an inch thick. This was especially true on the fifth level where the explosion was believed to have taken place. We do not know what caused the explosion, but I believe it was started by an open twenty-five pound keg of black powder and this was intensified by the accumulation of fine coal dust. After the disaster, many necessary precautions were taken to prevent such a tragedy from recurring, but this was little solace to the widows and orphans of the 208 men who had perished. It was three months or more before all of the bodies had been removed, for many were buried under great rock cave-ins caused by the fact that the timbers had completely blown out. I obtained permission to go to the fifth level where my friend's body was, and with the help of others, finally located the badly burned body of the finest friend a boy could ever have, Louis Leyshon, who had taken my place that day.

The following pictures were obtained from the Utah State Historical Society. They are of the Schofield Mine Disaster.

