“7 Die, 11 Hurt in Mine Blast At Pottsville”
“Spark Fires Gas After Mystery Chasm Opens 300 Ft. Down.

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By David G. Wittels, Record Staff Correspondent

POTTSVILLE, April 27—Roaring death struck suddenly in the depths of the St. Clair Coal Company mine—“the safest mine in Schuylkill county”—today, killing seven men, injuring 11.

A yawning chasm appeared suddenly and mysteriously in Buck Vein, 300 feet below the surface. The hole belched gas—and a spark, perhaps from one rock striking another, set off a blast that shook the countryside.

Nineteen men were down there when it happened, just a half hour after they went to work. A fire boss, whose duty it is to go ahead and see that everything is safe, had just reported all was well.

Use of Open Flames Denied

There was no suspicion that there was dangerous gas in the mine. In all its years of operation, this mine had no major accident. That gave rise to rumors late today that, grown careless through years of working in safety, the men went in with open flame lamps instead of electric lamps. The company denied that.

It is a long trek to the mine mouth from the town of St. Clair, a trek over ancient culm banks, up steep inclines, scrambling down on paths that would make a goat balk. Mine owners do not coddle miners by laying down paths for them. But the men were cheerful this morning and kidding because Prohop Blednick, 227 S. Morris St., the “sleepy head” of the shift in Buck Vein, NO. 9, apparently overslept again.

The men rode down the shaft to the 300-foot level, still kidding about that sleepy Prohop. At that moment. Prohop was awakening at home, cursing himself for losing a day’s work.

No Hint of Tragedy

Andy Potts, 36, the fire boss, went ahead. It was a routine gesture, for whoever heard of dangerous gas in the St. Clair mine. He probably checked carefully, because safety measures are ingrained in miners, but there was no hint of what was coming.

The men went to their appointed places and set to work. Peter Homa and Joseph Stepanosky dropped off first to take up their posts nearly a mile closer to the mine mouth than the rest.

When the blast came, it knocked them off their feet, despite their great distance from the scene. They picked themselves up and ran up the mammoth vein slope nearby to spread the alarm. Fireboss Potts was critically burned.
“Big Hole—and Boom”

Even the 11 injured, who were close to the blast, couldn’t give a coherent account of exactly what happened.

“All of a sudden,” gasped Adam Hernotak at the Pottsville, Hospital, “a big hole opened in the ground. Gas came up and boom! a big explosion, a big sheet of flame, then another, big sheet of flame curling back.”

The second sheet of flame was the “back lash,” worse than the first. It was the gas, forced into the recesses of the vein by the first blast, sweeping back, flaming.

One man was sucked into the chasm. He was Michael Tarris, 28, Schoentown, who was married only Sunday. He dropped 150 feet to a lower level. Men had to clamber down a rope to get to him. His brother, John Tarris, also was killed—burned to death with the others.

Ready to Quit

Death caught them just before they were to leave the mine for good. After saving for years, they recently bought the Schuylkill Haven Brick Yard, and they gave notice that on Monday they would quit.

Twenty minutes after the blast, a half-dozen ambulances arrived from Pottsville with doctors and nurses. In 30 minutes, rescuers were bringing out the victims while hundreds of relatives of the miners stood around the main shaft, silent in their grief.

Others who died were Wassel Holoviak, 49, Deiner’s Hille, whose 13th child was christened Sunday. Frank Montgomery, 32; Paul Silkra, 43; Richard Barnes, 45, and Luke Chukron, 40, all of St. Clair.

Today’s accident was the worst mine disaster in Schuylkill county since the Gilberton mine tragedy on January 21, 1933, when 19 men were killed.