

Belle Isle Tragedy

1968 salt mine disaster claimed 21 miners, devastated surrounding communities

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No telephones rang in the darkness. No sirens pierced the night. For families of night shift workers at the Cargill salt mine on Belle Isle, the only sign that something was amiss in the early morning hours of Wednesday, March 6, 1968, was absence.

“I heard my father talking to my mother early in the morning,” said Joseph A. Olivier, then a high school freshman in the Grand Marais community near Jeanerette. “My mother, I remember her saying, ‘You know, Arthur Jr. is not back, yet.’ &hellip This was about 5 in the morning.”

Olivier’s father wasn’t alarmed. He also worked in salt mines and knew the problems that might delay a crew’s return to the surface. There hadn’t been a fatal accident in Cargill’s five-plus years of operating the Belle Isle facility, and salt mines were generally considered safe.

That, however, was an illusion, as family members were soon to discover.

Between 11:15 and 11:30 p.m. on March 5, a fire had ignited in the shaft that connected 21 miners to the surface 1,200 feet above them. A frantic, multi-day rescue effort that transfixated Louisiana ended in the worst disaster in the history of American salt mining. All of the trapped miners died. Two of them, John Christensen and Michael Boudreaux, had worked there a week or less.

In small pockets of Acadiana, it struck a devastating blow. Among the dead were twin brothers, Harris and Harry Touchet. Harris Touchet, Paul Granger and Leroy Trahan were married to three sisters.

Then, there were the Oliviers of Grand Marais.

In addition to Joseph’s brother, his cousins, Alcide Olivier Jr., and Dallas Olivier, were lost, as were two others related by marriage, Luke Boutte and Louis Frilot.

“It was a big shock for everybody, this whole area of Grand Marais,” said Alcide Olivier’s sister, Bessie Decuir. “I remember when I got there &hellip I can remember daddy saying that like it was yesterday: ‘I lost my two arms &hellip My two arms are gone.’ &hellip He loved Dallas like a son.”

“You hear about it other places,” said Albertha Olivier, widow of Dallas and sister of Boutte. “You don’t ever imagine it could happen to you.”

Or that it could happen again.

Rare geography

Belle Isle is one of five geologic anomalies along the Louisiana coast, salt domes — vertical columns of salt that extend thousands of feet down and create islands that rise above the coastal marsh. All of them have been mined, and Cargill began test drilling at Belle Isle in 1960, began sinking a shaft into the salt dome the next year and started commercial production in 1963.

Such mines were considered safe; the salt was solid enough that cave-ins were not feared, and the risk of dangerous gases also was thought to be low. U.S. Bureau of Mines records showed that there hadn't been a fatal salt mine fire since 1920. Because of that perception, the bureau didn't supervise mine operations but had inspected the Belle Isle mine at Cargill's request in 1967.

That inspection resulted in at least two significant recommendations. A second shaft should be sunk to give miners a second route in and out, and that fire retardants be applied to the timber that lined the shaft (metal wasn't used because the salt would corrode it).

According to *Cargill: Going Global*, a book by Wayne G. Broehl, Cargill planned to eventually dig another shaft, but work hadn't started when the disaster occurred.

“At that time, nobody knew anything about safety or what was involved in being safe,” said Daniel Olivier, who was on the day shift. He is Dallas Olivier's second cousin. “Nobody was trained in any kind of safety.”

Certainly, nobody was prepared for what happened.

Near the end of the workers' shift, hoist operator Clemere La Boeuf picked up a telephone to the mine level and heard miner Roy Byron yell, “The shaft's on fire! … Send the north skip (elevator) down!” Moments later, Byron said, “The skip's on fire! Pull it up!” Then, the line went dead, and smoke poured out of the shaft.

Calls went out to the Coast Guard and a nearby Sun Oil refinery, which moved a pumping unit to Belle Isle by barge. The fire severed cables holding the skips and the electrical wires before water sent down the shaft extinguished the blaze. Work crews were called from their homes and brought out to the mine, which is 14 miles by water from Calumet.

Family members of the miners, however, were in the dark. Albertha Olivier, noticing that her husband wasn't back, went to see if he was tending some pigs they raised on their property. He wasn't. When she got back to the house, she heard a radio report about the fire.

Alfred Raggette, a family friend who worked at the Morton Salt Mine at Weeks Island, took her, Decuir and Catherine Boutte, Luke's wife, in his car to Calumet. A policeman pulled him over for speeding.

“I was supposed to get a ticket, but they didn't cite me,” Raggette said. “He said, ‘Do you know you were speeding?’ I said, ‘I understand I'm speeding. I'm just trying to take them.’ He said, ‘Follow me, but don't drive fast. Follow me.’ He was driving 20 miles (per hour) over what I was going.”

Cargill's building at Calumet quickly filled with family members and friends seeking news. Only mine workers, safety officials and media were taken out to Belle Isle.

“Nobody knew how bad it was until we got there,” Daniel Olivier said. “When we got there, they started preparing cages and doing things. They were putting cables down the shaft. It was like all day and all night. It was difficult getting back to the landing, and all the family members were there asking questions, ‘Do you think they're all right?’ I didn't know how to answer them.”

No one at Belle Isle was trained in mine rescue. Coal mine rescue teams from Sturgis, Ky., and Madisonville, Ky., volunteered and were flown to Patterson, then sent to Belle Isle, where workers were turning a fan housing into a

bucket to send down rescuers.

It was 5 a.m. Thursday, March 7, before Kentuckians Edward Holeman and Dilford Holmes took the first descent, wearing breathing masks, standing back-to-back and holding out their hands to keep from smashing into the shaft walls as the bucket swung back and forth. They carried two hours worth of air.

“Our first trip was mainly just to see what the condition was, so we went to the bottom of the shaft and observed there was still a small fire in the fan chamber where the fan was,” Holeman said from his home in Sturgis, Ky. “We spent a very few minutes just observing and seeing if we could see any signs of people that could possibly be alive. We could hear a machine that was still running, and that was a puzzle to us because we thought that there shouldn’t be any machines still operating with the carbon monoxide like it was.

“The fire generated a lot of heat. It was pretty hot. It was a good 100 degrees, at least, maybe a little more.”

They couldn’t see much in the still-toxic darkness. They banged on the bucket — breathing masks prevented them from yelling — but heard no sounds in reply, then were hoisted to the surface. Along the way, falling salt struck Holeman, bruising his arm.

The work was slow. Workers created different bucket designs, trying to create one that wouldn’t sway perilously and would protect occupants from falling debris. Back at Calumet, families waited anxiously.

“They were telling us maybe they were in the back of the mine,” Catherine Boutte said. “They were giving us hope.”

“They were giving us a lot of hope,” said Decuir, who was living in California and getting updates from her parents. “That’s why I didn’t come at the time, because my mother kept telling me not to come now, they’re going to be all right, they’re going to be all right.”

Complicating rescue efforts were limitations imposed by having to bring enough air for the entire journey. The next two drops dealt more with ferrying down oxygen and an air pipe than active searching. It wasn’t until the fifth drop that extensive searching could take place in a mine that formed a complicated series of hallways and excavated rooms. Unlike coal mines, salt mines excavated rooms as large as 80 feet tall, 80 feet wide and 100 feet long, and the searchers only had lights they carried with them.

The rescue crews resisted the temptation to despair.

“Unless the men had been trained to protect themselves in certain ways, we knew there was hardly any chance at all of being alive, but you don’t think that way,” Holeman said. “You can’t and still go down. You have to have in your mind the possibility that they are still living. If not, you’re just endangering yourself and everybody that’s working with you.”

On Friday, March 8, the sixth rescue group finally located some of the miners in the back of the mine. It fell to Cargill official Evan Williams to break the news at Calumet, which he did with brevity: “I cannot repeat this but once. It is tragic news. Sixteen bodies have been found on the floor of the mine.”

Family members wept and screamed. Two women fainted. Nurses administered sedatives to some mourners.

Later in the day, the other five were found. It was the Grand Marais men, said Joseph Olivier, who can’t recall who told him that.

One miner died of head injuries, mostly likely from debris that struck him while fighting the shaft fire. The rest succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. The coroner’s report set the time of death at 6 a.m. on March 6, nearly a day before the first rescue bucket was lowered.

“When they were all gathering together, I understand our five guys were in one group and I know all of them didn’t go at one time,” Joseph Olivier said. “I like to think my brother watched his cousins go to sleep. That gives me a little piece of mind.”

After a half-day’s rest, the recovery work began and it proceeded cautiously. The bodies were bagged, their locations marked for the inevitable accident investigation, and then moved to the shaft. Workers had unsuccessfully tried to build a large lift to bring the bodies to the surface. Instead, three bodies were placed in the bucket that was in service, with one recovery team member joining them on the ride to the top.

“It was pretty gruesome,” Holeman said.

All 21 miners finally made it to the surface almost exactly a week after the fire had broken out. Together in death, the Grand Marais men were buried side by side in the St. Nicholas Cemetery near Jeanerette.

A Bureau of Mines investigated never determined what started the tragic fire.

Motivated to help

Joseph Olivier followed his family tradition of salt mining in 1970. Although Cargill added a second shaft at Belle Isle, much hadn’t changed. Two miners had died there in 1969.

“I went underground and trained with the guys to run a piece of equipment for a couple of hours, and then I was going at it,” he said.

But Olivier had different plans. He trained to be part of the mine’s rescue team, then left Cargill in 1978 to become an inspector for the Mine Safety and Health Administration, which replaced the Bureau of Mines. He was captain of the national mine rescue team for several years.

“That disaster is what motivated me to go in the direction I’m at today,” he said.

Belle Isle would continue to give him motivation.

Accidents killed a miner in 1974 and 1975. Then, in 1979, a methane gas explosion in the mine killed five more, including another cousin, Amedee Olivier, and Richard Collins, who had been the best friend of Joseph’s brother, Arthur, who died in 1968.

By this time, motivated by the 1968 Belle Isle event and a 1972 silver mine accident in Idaho that claimed 91 lives, Congress had enacted tougher rules and oversight of non-coal mines. Miners had to have 40 hours of training before going underground and 24 hours of training for surface operations.

“It took a disaster of that type to set precedents nationwide that all mines have at least two ways in and out,” he said. “You look at all our laws we have today, we hate to say it, but we say that the laws we have today are written in blood.”

The blood flowed once more at Belle Isle, when an accident claimed a miner in 1981, and Cargill was fined \$45,000 for safety violations. By 1984, structural problems at the salt dome convinced Cargill to end its operations there. In 1985, the company dug a channel to the mouth of one of the shafts, then set off an explosion that flooded the mine with water from the marsh.

Belle Isle’s days of tragedy were over.

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