

In the Aftermath of Tragedy:
Herschel Wence and
The 1925 City Mine Disaster,
Sullivan County, Indiana

Edited by
Eric C. Nystrom

The City Mine, a bituminous coal mine in Sullivan County, Indiana, exploded on 20 February 1925. Of 122 men in the mine that day, 51 died in the accident, making it the most deadly mine accident in the history of the state of Indiana.¹ The explosion in the City Mine was part of an epidemic of disasters that plagued the American coal mining industry in the first decades of the twentieth century. The U.S. Bureau of Mines had been formed, in large measure, to conduct research to reduce the frequency and severity of coal mine explosions.²

Such major mine accidents have received attention from mining historians, and rightfully so, but one aspect of these accidents has frequently been overlooked: the recovery of those killed. An underground mine after an explosion is a dangerous place indeed, and the rescuers' hazardous, gruelling work is rarely leavened by the inspirational hope of finding survivors. Yet the victims' bodies must be recovered to provide them with a proper burial and their families with closure. Left unspoken, but no less important, the victims must be removed in order for the mine to resume operating.

This first-person account describes this difficult and hazardous recovery work after the City Mine explosion. It was written by Herschel Elmer Wence, a fire boss at a nearby mine, who led one of the recovery teams immediately after the City Mine explosion. Herschel Wence was born in October 1887 in Indiana.³ He married Sadie Mabel Crow in 1907 and they had at least five children, one of whom died in childhood.⁴ Both Herschel and Sadie lived until 1975, well into their 80s, and are buried together in Shelburn, Indiana, where they lived for much of their working lives.⁵

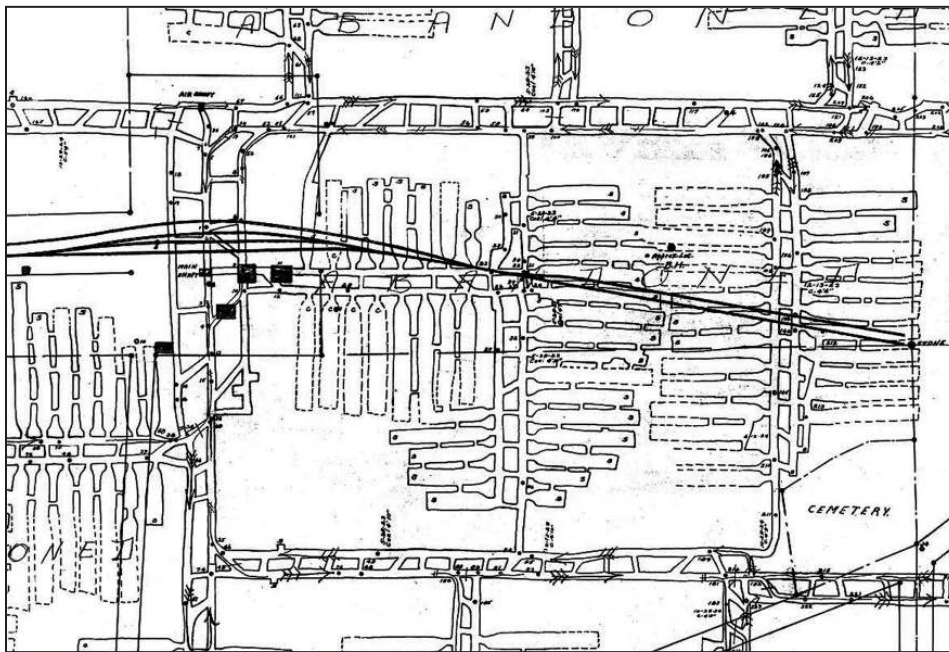
According to his account, Wence began working in the mines in 1902, at age 15, and continued until forced into retirement at age 67. As a result of his long career, both underground and surface, Wence, who stood five feet eleven inches, was intimately familiar with mining southwestern Indiana's coal seams, many of which were too short for him to ever stand up fully.⁶ According to Wence, the City Mine's seams in the area of the recovery varied in thickness from a little more than three feet to a maximum of less than four feet.

Wence's remarkable account was saved by a fortunate connection with the Smithsonian Institution. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Smithsonian received approval to found a new museum, the Museum of History and Technology, which opened in 1964.⁷ New curators were hired and directed to collect historical and technological artifacts. One planned exhibit would tell the history and technology of coal mining. Curators worked most closely with retired coal company executives to collect the items they needed, but they also placed an advertisement in the *Journal* of the United Mine Workers of America for tech-

nological artifacts related to mining.

Sparked by the advertisement, Wence wrote to Smithsonian curator Charles O. Houston, Jr., in May 1960. He owned an unusual form of safety lamp—a “Baby Wolf” that burned naphtha, which had subsequently been banned by the Bureau of Mines as unsafe—and Wence wondered if the museum would like this technological artifact.⁸ Such safety lamps had been an important part of coal mining since the early nineteenth century. The protective shield on the lamp prevented the flame from escaping and igniting methane gas in the mine. The lamp also provided a rough measure of methane levels; the flame inside the lamp would lengthen as methane concentrations grew higher.

The Wolf style of lamp included a clear window, allowing the lamp to shed far more light than the older enclosed-mesh style. Wence's Wolf lamp was one of the small models, making it more portable and lightweight, if its smaller fuel capacity could be tolerated.⁹ Wence added one additional detail—this was the lamp he had used while leading a rescue crew to recover victims of the City



Portion of a mine map of City Mine, Sullivan, Indiana.
(From: <http://gis.indiana.edu/cmis/mineimages/3419/341961.jpg>)

Mine explosion. Wence asked if the museum would be interested in the lamp.¹⁰

Curator Houston replied with enthusiasm, noting the potential value of the lamp to the museum's comprehensive collection of mine lamps. Houston, who had been trained as an anthropologist, seized on another part of Wence's letter:

The information in your letter about your participation in the City Mine disaster was equally interesting and valuable. I would be very eager to hear from you your account of that disaster and your work in connection with rescue operations. It is through eye-witness and participant accounts such as you can supply that an authentic historical record of American mining can be developed. I have learned not to trust too far accounts published in newspapers by reporters, and it has always been difficult to get actual accounts from the men whose lives have been devoted to this very challenging industry of our civilization.¹¹

With such encouragement from Houston, Herschel Wence set about writing a comprehensive account of his role in the City Mine disaster recovery efforts of thirty-five years before, to preserve this history for all time. He asked two of the men who participated with him that day to review and sign his story, attesting to its accuracy. Wence even was willing to have the document notarized to further reinforce the truthfulness of his account, though curator Houston assured him that such a step was unnecessary.¹² In early June, 1960, Wence finished his handwritten account and mailed it, along with his Baby Wolf lamp carefully packed in a metal tube, to the Smithsonian.¹³

Over the next several years Wence continued to work with Houston's successor to help the Smithsonian locate mining items, but it was clear that the Baby Wolf lamp was Wence's sentimental favorite. He even got to visit it in 1964 on a

trip to Washington.¹⁴ Perhaps anticipating a curator's curiosity about why he would donate the lamp that meant so much to him, Wence wrote: "None of my three boys ever worked in the mines. I think my safety lamp [is] worth more at [the] Smithsonian than left for my children. Thanks for the privilege of placing it there."¹⁵

*Herschel Wence's Baby Wolf lamp.
(Division of Work and Industry,
National Museum of American History,
Smithsonian Institution.)*



Rescue and Recovery at the City Mine

By Herschel E. Wence¹⁶

812 South 17th St.

Terre Haute, Ind.

June 10, 1960

[To] Mr. Chas. O. Houston, Jr.

Dear Sir:

[I] Will supply you as well as I can do so, with a report of the explosion in "City Mine" at [the] east edge of Sullivan, Ind. and the recovery of the 51 bodies, particularly as to my part in the work. I shall give you the facts as I know them, and reports and statistics that were accepted as facts.

This explosion occurred on Feb. 20, 1925 at approximately 10:30am. At this time I was employed as Fire Boss at the "Peerless" mine of the Templeton Coal Co. located about 4 miles north east by east of the "City Mine." I had completed my duties at Peerless and gone home, in Shelburn. (About 6 miles north of Sullivan[.]) I had cleaned and filled my "Baby Wolf" safety lamp, as I always did, so it would be ready for [an] emergency. I judge it was about 11am when my wife came to the bed and awoke me to say she had just got word the City Mine had "blew up." (I don't recall if she got word by radio or telephone.) Of course I jumped out of bed, quickly dressed, kissed my wife good bye[,] picked up my safety lamp[,] got in [my] auto and headed for Sullivan. The roads were all blocked for some distance and open only to emergency vehicles. I parked [the] car at [the] end of [the] line and walked to the mine where I learned that several men were believed to have been killed.

A careful check showed the number to be 51 dead[,] 1 badly hurt, and a few others slightly injured. I reported to those in charge and was soon lined up as a stretcher bearer. I helped bring 2 bodies out that day, these were identified as those of Silas Wagner and Oliver Keagy. With the low roof, (seam of coal only 37 to 42 inches thick) be-

sides broken timbers, falls, heat and rotten air, I figured I had enough for the day and went home and to bed. The explosion had occurred in the 4 North off of Main East Entry and practically all the brattices from there to [the] north end of [the] empty track on shaft bottom were wrecked. This fact would not let us get but a little off of main bottom, so recovery of bodies had to wait till these brattices could be repaired and circulation restored.

After I had made my rounds at Peerless the next morning, our Mine Boss Harry Keenan said he had been asked to supply a bunch of experienced men to be ready to go in[,] locate and bring out bodies, to report for duty at 4pm as they figured [the] brattice would be done and air circulation restored by that time. A squeeze was on in the 5 & 6 north entries which had been worked out and abandoned[; this] was the reason they wanted experienced men rather than just those who were willing but inexperienced. Several of us were on hand by 3pm and about 3:20 they called for the "Peerless" bunch. Our Room Boss Delbert Cummins said "But Harry is not here who will lead you?" The reply came at once. "We will follow Herschel if he will take us." What could I say but o.k.?

On my first trip this day I had 6 men under me and orders to find the bodies and bring them to a designated place and turn them over to the stretcher bearers. I told my men on the way in, "Boys, its a little hard to say this, but those boys are just as dead as they will ever be, so don't be in such a hurry to get them, that you overdo and get down, as then you will not only have failed to do them any good, but will have harmed us, as then we will have to take time to carry you out. If you get tired and want to rest, say so and we will all rest with you." I am proud to say not a single man failed me.

Of course we went in on the intake side of air. That is[,] with the good air rather than the foul air from explosion area. As we neared the place where we expected to find some bodies, some

men on [the] brattice bunch [crew] said "Don't go in there it has not been examined yet." The substance of my answer was "We are sent in here to find bodies, the examination is part of my job." My men said "you go in Herschel and examine then let us know," so that is what I did. So far as I know I was the first man, after the explosion to go through a curtained hole in [the] brattice from 3 north to 4 north entry. I was very cautious as not only my life but several others depended on me. The air was not good but it was free of methane (gas) so I called my men to come on.

Almost immediately, on the entry, we found a battery locomotive and three or four bodies around it. The motorman appeared to have been blown from his seat. The trip rider and one or two others [were] near the other end of [the] locomotive. We put these bodies through the brattice to the stretcher bearers who had arrived by that time[,] then we started down in a room or 2 and found more bodies. One of them as I recall was the Pit Boss and he had 2 standard size safety lamps with him, but had not yet got to where we calculate the gas was coming from. A squeeze frequently liberates gas, so we tried to piece together some events and arrived at this conclusion. The men in 4 north were nearing the rooms worked out in the 5 north. It was reported the cutting machine had cut through into one of these rooms. The men were uneasy and at least part of them moved out towards [the] entry and sent for Pit Boss Harry Anderson. The one badly injured man Elmer Davidson told me, Anderson had passed him coming from the other side of the mine just a short time before the explosion and was carrying these two safety lamps, one with flame up for illumination (to see to travel) and the other flame low as we use for testing.

We had recovered perhaps 8 or more bodies, when we were ordered on top for a bit of fresh air. Of course we went but we also took one body with us. When we got on top we were asked to hang around a while as they might need us a little later. I happened to overhear some of my bunch

talking and one said "Lets [sic] hang together boys if we do have to go back I want the same bunch," and another said "Yes, and we want Herschel to lead us again." I hope I really merited their confidence. We were called back two or three hours later but by that time one or two of this bunch had got away from the rest. However I did have part of the original bunch this time.

This detail was stretcher-bearers and I had 10 men[,] 4 for each stretcher and 2 extras for emergency. This was hard work, only a little over 3 feet from floor to roof and some falls to slide stretchers over as well as fallen timbers etc. This was my last trip in the ill fated mine. Another bunch of experienced men were being held to go to [the] head of Main East. There were only a few [bodies] as I recall up there. This was delayed as the air first had to travel up 3 north, down 4 north then on east, so all the foul air out of 3 & 4 also had to travel M.E. [Main East] before good air could get there.

I wish I could recall the names of all the boys who worked with me in that "hell hole," and I want to praise and thank them along with those I do recall. Among these men were Frank Barnhart who later became President of District #11 United Mine Workers of America and then worked out of [the] International office in Washington DC. Jas. McGarvey who later became Auditor of Sullivan County Ind.[:]; he is deceased. Thos. Miller who is retired and lives in Farmersburg, Ind. Thos. Dunn killed in another mine a few years ago. Otto "Dutch" McCoskey [McCaskey?], deceased, and Oliver Steck and I have lost track of him. Frank Barnhart has retired and now lives at 2200 South 7th St. Terre Haute, Ind. Harry Keenan[,] mentioned earlier, arrive[d] by the time he was supposed to and as I recall, he and his bunch relieved me, when we were called out for fresh air. Some of the men working with him were Delbert Cummins, Jack De Priest, "Dutch" Donner and Leonard Bledsoe.

One thing stands out clear in my memory of the recovery of bodies. Except for the few re-

covered the first day, these bodies had lain there since about 10:30am on Feb. 20 to perhaps 4pm on Feb. 21 and it was hot down there. In picking up a body [we had to] catch hold of [a] pants leg, sleeve, or jacket as the skin would slip from the flesh-----

There were 122 men in [the] mine at [the] time of [the] explosion[,] 52 on [the] north side of [the] hoisting shaft and 70 on the south[.] Of those on [the] north only one man survived, this was Elmer Davidson and he was coupling empties on [the] north of bottom. He was found by 3 men just a few minutes after [the] explosion. He was down under some slate and had been protected somewhat by a fallen cross bar which had one end resting on a car and over him holding some slate off of him. His hand was sticking out from under the slate and they dug him out and carried him up the stairs in the manway. Of course they were all exhausted but they had saved a buddy's life.

Elmer Davidson himself verified this report just a few days ago. The heroes who saved him were Clarence Ford, Harry Lewis and Nick Fongerouse. Elmer Davidson now and has for several years operated a small grocery store in Sullivan, Ind. Nick Fongerouse is still living in Sullivan. I don't know about the other two men. The hoisting shaft was out of operation only a short time. It was operating all the times I was there. The Red Cross moved in and served sandwiches and coffee for the workers.

As for the explosion itself, I firmly believe there was just enough methane (gas) to set it off and that coal dust carried it to the awful end. I believe if that mine had been properly rock dusted that the explosion would have been a minor one.

One man Wm Dickerson still living in Sullivan had been transferred from 3 north east to [the] south side on Feb. 19[.] There may have been some dampness on [the] main shaft bottom to help arrest the force of [the] explosion and kept it out of the south, but I think there were other contributory factors. All the coal was caged from south bottom and empties going to north bottom.

Beyond the empty track a short way[,] the Main East entry took off at a right angle[,] also on north a little farther was the air shaft combined with the escape shaft. Then there was a "run around" from north to south on [the] east side of [the] hoisting shaft for putting north coal on south bottom, and also empties from north side for the south side. So you can readily see with the chance for [the] force of [the] explosion to expand and also outlet at [the] main shaft & air shaft it should do much to relieve pressure.

I want to say right here that my bunch was but a small fraction of those engaged in this work, and also that all of us, who did the work, was [sic] but a fraction of all who volunteered. There was no shortage of volunteers.

Following is list of the dead. Cland [sic?] Saunders, Geo. Neal, Jno. A. Ward, Gilbert Taylor, Robt. Freeman, Russell Dowdy, John Brown, John Rowe, R.L. Jackson, Lex Robertson, Pearl Hawhee, Frank Hawhee, Frank Cottingham, Albert C. Robertson, Everett Keller, John Thomas, Ross Boothe, Chas. Sheedy, Wayne Walters, Dan Purcell, Clinton Higginbotham, Florenz Lecocq, Emil Lecocq, Jas. Burriss, Jas. Miller, Harry Anderson, Earl Robertson, Earl Laughlin, Chas. McCammon, Frank Smith, Everett Metcalf, Silas Wagner, Pat Dunning, Geo Baird, Cland [sp?] Treader, Perry Maxwell, Cecil Carty, Philip Walters, Mike Cussack, John Solomon, Frank Mason, Ellis Eaton, Oliver Keagy, Harry Gorly [could be Gorby], John Collins, Jas. Eller, Blaine Gibson, Dave Smith, Dwight McClanahan, W.H. Moberly and Jas Boyles.

As for myself I worked in and around the coal mines of Indiana from 1902 till in 1954 when I was forced into retirement by the mine I was at as Hoisting Engineer being worked out and abandoned, and being as old as I was they would not transfer me to another mine. During those years I had worked in almost every capacity in and around mines. In 1905 the State of Indiana granted me a Certificate of Competency to serve as Hoisting Engineer and in 1919 I got one to serve as Fire

Boss and one to serve as Mine Boss. I have used all of them at various times, and [worked] several years as a Mine Electrician.

I agree with you about some newspaper reporting. I recall one about this recovery work published in a near by newspaper. In substance it said "The rescuers stumbling around over falls, broken bars and fallen timbers, their eyes blinded by tears, in search of their fallen comrades." I feel sure he (or she) was never in the mine. God knows there were plenty of tears on top, but I never saw a single tear down there nor have I talked with anybody who was down there that said they saw any. That was neither the time nor the place for tears. We needed clear heads and keen eyes for the task. To avoid any possibility of such a thing happening I was told they would not allow anybody down who had a relative on the list of dead. It sounded very sensible to me to have such a ruling.

Of course none of the other mines near by worked till after all the funerals were over, even then it was a few days before all were back at work. It seems to me that we had one man that did not

come back at all, but after 35 years I would not like to swear such was the case. Some of the theaters and movies in near by towns gave benefit performances for the victims['] families. The Indiana Legislature then in session voted without a single dissenting vote \$10,000.00 [for relief] to be spent under supervision of the governor.

All my mining has been in or around shaft mines and all in Indiana. During those years I have worked in 4 different seams, namely 4-5-6-7. I wanted to cover this as well as I could and suspect you will want to cut it down some. Please feel free to do so. I am mailing you at this time (as per your request) my "Baby Wolf" safety lamp I used in leading my crews.

Resp[ectfully],
Herschel E. Wence

We worked with Herschel Wence in this recovery of bodies, and believe all his statements are true.

Frank Barnhart
Thomas Miller 🏠

Notes:

1. United States Mine Rescue Association, "Coal Mine Disasters in the United States: By State: Indiana," http://www.usmra.com/Mine_Disasters/search_Coal_state.asp?ACC_STATE_NAME=Indiana&x=17&y=16 (accessed 16 June 2013).
2. Mark Aldrich, "Preventing 'the Needless Peril of the Coal Mine': The Bureau of Mines and the Campaign against Coal Mine Explosions," *Technology & Culture* 36 (1995): 483-518. Mine disasters, where multiple miners were killed, received the bulk of the attention from the Bureau of Mines, despite the more numerous injuries caused by less attention-grabbing accidents, such as rock falls and machinery accidents.
3. "United States Social Security Death Index," index, *FamilySearch*, Herschel Wence, October 1975 (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/J2P8-P65>; accessed 12 June 2013).
4. For marriage, see "Indiana, Marriages, 1811-1959," index and images, *FamilySearch*, Herschel Elmer Wence and Sadie Mabel Crow, 1907 (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/XXFK-DQH>, accessed 12 June 2013). Information on children from 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 manuscript census forms. The children in order of birth, with approximate birth year, were: Harold R. Wence (1908, died 1915); Arthur E. Wence (1911); Mary M. Wence (1914); George W. Wence (1917; likely to be the same as "Wendell Wence" found in the 1930 census); and H. Blaine Wence (1930).
5. Their tombstone shows that they are buried along with Harold, their first child who died young. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Wence&GSiman=1&GSst=17&GRid=53496002>
6. Wence was listed on his 1942 draft registration card as 5' 11", 160 pounds, with gray eyes, brown hair, and a light complexion. "United States, World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942," index and images, *FamilySearch*, Herschel Elmer Wence, 1942 (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/X5NQ-G3J>, accessed 12 June 2013).
7. The Museum of History and Technology was renamed the National Museum of American History in the early 1980s.
8. Herschel Wence, letter to Charles O. Houston, Jr., 11 May 1960, folder "Wence, Herchel [*sic*]," Cabinet "#001," Drawer 4, "Correspondence, John Hoffman, Curator," Divisional Records, Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter "Wence Correspondence").
9. Henry A. Pohs, *Early Underground Mine Lamps: Mine Lighting from Antiquity to Arizona* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1974), 36-41; see also: Paul J. Barros, "A Light in the Darkness: U.S. Mine Lamps, the Early Years—Candlesticks, Oil Lamps, and Safety Lamps," *Mining History Journal* 16 (2009): 45-63.
10. Wence to Houston, 11 May 1960, Wence Correspondence.
11. Charles Houston, letter to Herschel Wence, 17 May 1960, Wence Correspondence.
12. Herschel Wence to Charles Houston, 27 May 1960; Charles Houston to Herschel Wence, 3 June 1960; Wence Correspondence.
13. The lamp is catalogue number MHI-MN-7754, Acc. 235034, collected 6-13-1960, entered 6-20-1960. Charles Houston to Wence, 13 June 1960, Wence Correspondence.
14. Herschel Wence, letter to John N. Hoffman, 10 Sep. 1964; see also Wence/Hoffman correspondence from 1964 and 1965; all in Wence Correspondence.
15. Herschel Wence to John Houston, n.d. [photostat], Wence Correspondence.
16. Herschel Wence, letter to Charles O. Houston, Jr., 10 June 1960, Wence Correspondence. Editor's additions are in square brackets and paragraph breaks have been added. This account has not been previously published.