# Sago just latest in a sad history of mine disasters

**For as long as people have been going into the mines to dig for coal, they've been dying down there.**

By Associated Press
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Before Sago, there was Centralia, and Cherry and Monongah before that - places long since scarred, even defined, by underground tragedies made of coal dust and fire and sorrow.

And while the nation has seen nothing quite like the televised spectacle of raised and shattered hopes in West Virginia this past week, the loss of 12 men there was just the latest in a long, sad history of mine disasters.

It is an arc etched with heartbreaking themes - families huddled in nearby churches, keeping vigil for hours or days, and poignant final notes scrawled to loved ones by miners who knew their fates were sealed.

In Sago, from 51-year-old miner Martin Toler Jr.: "Tell all I'll see them on the other side. It wasn't bad. I just went to sleep. I love you."

In Centralia, Ill., more than a half-century earlier, from one of 111 coal miners killed in an explosion: "Dear wife: Goodbye. Forgive me. Take care of all the children. Love."

Sago was the worst mine disaster in the United States since 13 miners were killed in Brookwood, Ala., in 2001 - an accident far less publicized, just two weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Thirteen years before that, 26 men and a woman where killed six days before Christmas when a fire at a mine near Orangeville, Utah, cut off escape routes and filled its tunnels with toxic gas.

Still, these are far safer days for the men and women who descend into miles of tunnels to retrieve the vital energy resource.

In 1909 alone, there were 20 documented coal mine disasters, each of them claiming at least five lives, according to records kept by the United States Mine Rescue Association, which advocates better mine rescue training.

The worst of the 1909 accidents came in the town of Cherry, Ill., at a relatively new mine that many experts believed to be among the safest in the world.

On a November day, with nearly 500 men and boys in the mine, a bale of hay used to feed the mules who carried coal carts to the elevator shaft caught fire, reportedly ignited by one of the torches used to light the mine.

"They didn't believe that it was happening, that the mine was actually on fire, because they believed it

couldn't catch fire. Or that it couldn't burn," said William Furry, executive director of the Illinois State Historical Society.

Search teams worked for days, and more than 200 people made it out alive. But 259 died, including 12 rescue workers.

Furry said the town of Cherry has never fully recovered.

"The mine was the thing that was its lifeblood for so long," he said.

In coal country, these mining accidents have become an all-too-familiar way of life, and particularly in West Virginia - five lost at Fairview in 1986, five at Uneeda in 1980, nine in Blacksville in 1972.

But they have also left a touching legacy.

The worst mining disaster in U.S. history, an explosion in Monongah, W.Va., that killed 362 people in 1907, also was the inspiration for what some say was the first observance of Fathers Day.

It happened when Grace Clayton suggested her church set aside a Sunday to honor the hundreds of fathers lost in the mine - many of whom had taken their children into the depths with them.

She chose July 5, 1908, the closest Sunday to her father's birthday.

Clayton, speaking of the instant widows and orphans the disaster created, later offered sentiments that hold just as true after Sago: "Oh, how sad and frightening to have no father, no husband, to turn to at such an awful time."

While a Washington state woman is generally credited with starting Fathers Day as we know it - on the third Sunday in June - Clayton's town, Fairmont, W.Va., claims the first observance.

Clayton's church, Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church South, later became known as Central United Methodist Church.

Its minister today is the Rev. D.D. Meighen, one of the counselors who responded to an explosion at Consol Mine No. 9 in Farmington, W.Va., that killed 78 people just before Thanksgiving in 1968.

It was the first time, Meighen said, that authorities isolated families of the missing miners in a nearby church - "at the foot of a hill, near the portal to the mine" - much the same way as the families kept vigil at Sago Baptist Church for two days.

In the 1968 blast, one of the people gathered at the Farmington church was a young Joe Manchin, now the governor of West Virginia, who lost his uncle and several friends in the disaster.

This past week, he vowed an investigation into the Sago accident: "My goal is to make sure that we don't have one more fatality in our mining industry."

An achievable goal? Perhaps not.

As long as men have gone into the earth to dig coal, men have died there, and their deaths have been the stuff of horrific legend.

In 1947, in Centralia, an explosive charge meant to loosen coal ignited coal dust; Woody Guthrie wrote a song about it, *The Dying Miner*, and it ends this way:

"Dear brothers and sisters, goodbye. Dear mother and father, goodbye. My fingers are weak, and I cannot write. Goodbye, Centralia, goodbye."