More respect for the living

We listened to CBS news this morning and heard a voice from New York telling us that Letcher County Judge Estill Blair has spent $800 to import into Letcher County a young daredevil who never has seen the inside of a coal mine but who promises to recover the 11 bodies entrapped at Scotia.

And so the tragedy which has struck Southeast Kentucky and which will haunt many mountain families for decades is reduced to grand farce, a kind of super circus.

Soon, we suppose, the ABC, CBS and NBC camera crews will be boarding their private planes and heading back to Letcher County for the greatest show since Evil Knievel sputtered and failed in his attempt to jump Hell's Canyon.

The men of Scotia, both living and dead, and their families deserve more than this. The decision made to close and seal the mine, leaving entombed for a few months the 11 remaining bodies, could not have been made lightly. Fact is, the decision to seal the mine represented the considered judgement of state and federal mine safety officials as well as the judgement of local miners who recognized the futility of further recovery efforts at the present moment. It was a considered verdict that 26 fatalities were enough, that it was time to calm down, assess the situation, and proceed at a deliberate pace with proper regard to safety. Had a similar decision been made after the first explosion, in fact, the second with its 11 fatalities might never have occurred. We don't need a third.

Judge Blair, who grew up in a coal county and who is himself a coal operator, should be ashamed. He must know that the scheme he advances is as wild and crazy as anything that has come down the path. All it can do is to stir up headlines across the country and open wider the wounds that tear at so many families. He should have more respect for the living, if not for the dead.

A four-ring circus. Is that all the Scotia disaster means to our county's chief executive?

ABOUT 100 UMWA MINERS from the U.S. Steel mine at Lynch, Local No. 7425, honored the Scotia disaster victims by attending a memorial service held Monday at the First Baptist Church at Cumberland. The local ceased work for 24 hours in tribute to the 26 victims, an honor usually reserved for UMWA dead. [Photo by P.N. Pride]

'I knew the motor... was in pitiful shape'

(Continued from Page 1)

record, a chronicle of tragedy emerges. It is incomplete at this point; a thousand questions remain unanswered. Some may be cleared up by the continuing investigations. Other questions may never be answered, because the men who knew the answers are dead.

Four Scotia miners who worked the second shift—2 to 10 p.m.—talked with us at length after asking that their names not be used. They were getting ready to go to work when the mine exploded; it was on their shift that a federal inspector visited the mine the day before. They worked in the vicinity of the fatal explosions and may have known conditions there as well as anyone now alive. Some of their comments appear below in bold face type.

Monday

"I'll be damned, we got an inspector coming," the section foreman shouted. "Get to rockdusting and hanging curtains!" That's the way one of the miners remembers it; the foreman is dead now. They followed instructions, spreading rockdust to suppress coal dust on the mine roof, ribs, and floor, and hanging brattices—curtains—to direct the flow of air so that it could meet federal ventilation standards.

The company always knew when the inspectors were coming: that may or may not be true, but Scotia miners believe it and claim that they were warned by their foremen too often for coincidence.

Federal inspector Cecil Davis made his way to the 2 Left section of 2 Southeast Mains, nearly four miles in from the mine mouth (see mine map, pages 12-13) during the afternoon shift on March 8. By the time he got there, the crew had rockdusted, hung curtains, and supported the roof with additional bolts.

According to the federal Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration (MESA), Davis was at Scotia on a spot health inspection, primarily concerned with control of respirable dust. At approximately 5:30 he measured the velocity of the air at the face, where federal regulations require that the minimum quantity of air must be 9,000 cubic feet a minute. Davis calculated that the quantity of air was 8,092 cubic feet a minute and wrote a violation notice ordering Scotia to meet the federal standard within 30 minutes.

"When an inspector was above you, you didn't have no air. When you had good air, you knew he was on your section. The air is divided up evenly until an inspector comes. The mine is goofed up so bad, they can't ventilate."

At 6:00 p.m. Davis found 10,472 cubic feet a minute at the face and wrote a notice that the previous condition had been totally abated.

More than one Scotia miner remembers the facts differently from the written violation notice filed by Davis. "His air reading was 6,000 cubic feet," one said, and others agreed. They said curtains were hung across the inby entries to 2 Southeast Main, robbing air from that section for 2 Left. (In mining terminology, "inby" a point means toward the face; "outby" means toward the mine mouth.)

They thought Davis must know they were robbing air from another section. "I figured Davis would shut us down," one said, "but he didn't."

At 7:00 p.m., Davis wrote a second violation notice. Checking the continuous miner in the section, he found that 11 of its 36 water sprays were inoperative. The sprays pour a fine mist over the coal as it is being cut by the machine, partially holding down the enormous quantities of dust generated by the whirling bits of the miner. In all mines, water sprays must be attended carefully or they clog up. Davis ordered the condition corrected by 4:00 p.m. the next day—March 9.

At 8:20, Davis wrote a third violation notice. This time, he found insufficient air at the entry where the continuous miner was operating, and ordered the line brattice (curtain) controlling the air to be moved closer to the face, in accordance with regulations. His records indicate that this condition was corrected within 10 minutes.

The notices that Davis wrote on March 8 brought to six the total of ventilation violation notices served on the Scotia mine in 1976. In 1975 the mine had been cited 15 times for insufficient ventilation and on four occasions inspectors had closed sections and ordered men withdrawn. During 1974 there were 25 notices, including three withdrawal orders; in 1973, there were 15 notices, including one withdrawal order.

Is that a pattern?

The answer varies depending on who you ask. After the first disaster, Herschel Potter, chief of MESA's Safety Divison, told reporters that "the company stands tall in the industry." An opposite view is held by a federal inspector familiar with the mine over its 14-year life. "The expansion of the mine outdistanced the ability of the single-fan system to pull enough air through, I believe," he said. "Expertly handled, the ventilation system would have been adequate. I can't honestly tell you that the company always had experts handling the air, however."

In a big mine, a single inspector can't readily catch men robbing air from one section to another unless he actually observes curtains being hung or air regulators being opened or closed. If an inspector suspects that the practice is being used by the company, the only sure way to nail it down is to hit the mine unexpectedly with enough inspectors to check each section simultaneously. Sharp drops in the air in one place at the same time that the air is being increased elsewhere are all the evidence the inspectors need.

Such an inspection is called a "blitz"—and some federal inspectors believe it should be the principal weapon in the government's mine safety effort. A review of records available in the Whitesburg MESA office indicates that the Scotia mine had never been blitzed during the three-plus years that the mine has been under Whitesburg's jurisdiction.

"Every man in there knew what was going on. It's common knowledge with men who had been in there any length of time. I don't know why they never sent in four or five inspectors at once."

Tuesday

The Tuesday day shift entered the mine at approximately 6:00 a.m. and proceeded to their work places. In the 2 Left section of 2 Southeast Mains, a foreman and face crew began cutting the coal with a continuous miner, conveying coal from the miner to the mine conveyor belt with two shuttle cars and following the continuous miner with a roof bolting machine.

The mine's records are unclear, but MESA investigators are in general agreement that around 11:00 or 11:19, the section foreman called the mine office from the telephone on the section and asked for more air on 2 Left. Nobody knows exactly what had happened to prompt the call; the foreman is dead along with his crew.

Inby the intersection of 2 Left and 2 Southeast Mains two men had proceeded on a battery-powered locomotive, apparently at around 11:00, traveling in the track entry of 2 Southeast Mains toward the face (see map). They had with them a load of track, to extend the track line closer to the face.

Scotia officials aren't talking, but Scotia miners say that the section had been idle about a month. Earlier, as the section was developed, the coal seam had increased in height, and the continuous miner then in use could not mine the full height of the seam. Miners say that it was withdrawn, to develop 2 Left, and the inby section of 2 Southeast Mains was idled until the company received delivery of a new continuous miner capable of mining the 10-foot-high seam (normal seam height range around 6 feet).

At the time of the explosion, the miner had not been received, but it would be necessary to lay track as close to the face as possible to move the massive miner by rail from the mouth of the mine to the work place.

There are various theories about the ventilation system in use that morning on 2 Southeast Mains and 2 Left. In order to bring air from the main entries on 2 Southeast Mains into 2 Left, the aircourse had to be diverted. This could be accomplished by hanging curtains across the main entries. It's possible that there were curtains in place from the night before. It's possible that the motor crew with their load of rails either knocked out or otherwise removed a curtain across the track entry, and that intake air followed them into the inby section of 2 Southeast Mains, resulting in a sharp drop in the air in 2 Left. There won't be definite answers until the mine is unsealed and explored — if then.

It's equally possible that the explosions will have destroyed any evidence.

"I know the motor that was up there that day. They had it setting outside the mine when I first went to work there. It was in pitiful shape."

In the intersection of 2 Left and 2 Southeast Mains, two miners were constructing two overcasts—which are, in effect, air ducts installed in recesses blasted out of the mine roof. When installed and enclosed, the overcasts carry air at right angles over an existing air course to supply adjacent sections. When completed, they would divert air to 2 Left. They were uncompleted at the time of the explosion.

Company mine maps show that in the entry adjacent to the overcasts, a stopping—a permanent cinder-block wall between two blocks of coal, through which air cannot pass—had been removed, possibly to facilitate moving materials to 2 Left on the track which supplied the section. To keep air moving into 2 Southeast Mains inby the intersection, some sort of movable curtain should have been hung across the 2 Left track entry to replace the permanent stopping.

No such curtain is indicated on any company maps, according to MESA inspectors. Without it, air—following the path of least resistance—would be short-circuited from the long trip up to the face of 2 Southeast Mains and back, and would instead travel the