



ATTEND CHURCH-SCOUTERS CONFERENCE

Three of the nine Island delegates attending the third annual Maritime Church-Scouters Conference at Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, were, **LEFT TO RIGHT:** Rev. Father MacDonald (Charlottetown), district cubmaster Margaret Dolliver (Charlottetown) and assistant scout master, Parker Jewell (York).

Taxi Driver Recalls Blast In Springhill Mine In '56

By IAN DONALDSON
SPRINGHILL, N.S. (CP) — Sweat trickled through Merle McBurnie's stubble. He pressed his right foot hard on the accelerator of the station wagon and his tired, red-rimmed eyes squinted as he worked to keep the speeding car on the road.

Suddenly, he saw a flashing red light ahead. The Mounties. But they had no speeding ticket ready for McBurnie. Instead, as pre-arranged, they hustled him and his precious cargo—several tiny vials—into the RCMP cruiser for the last 20-mile dash into Halifax.

McBurnie had been on the road, nearly two hours when the Mounties flagged him. When the RCMP car

reached the blood bank, McBurnie paced back and forth—nervous to start the trip back. But a Mountie told him to relax. The blood would be flown to Springhill by helicopter.

"When she blew it was like an atomic explosion," McBurnie recalls. "You couldn't imagine the feelings on those faces there at the pithead. There were thousands of them milling around. Everybody felt helpless."

But there were some who could help. Rescue teams stood by as No. 4 Colliery, a big coal producer for more than 25 years, continued to belch smoke and flame. As soon as firemen put out the fire in the bankhead area, rescue crews started down on the first of countless missions before the danger of a second explosion forced a halt.

SAVED 88 MINERS

The rescue work, carried out by draegermen equipped with gear to protect them against the deadly fumes in the mine and by "bare-faced" miners, was back-breaking and heroic. But it paid off. Eighty-eight miners were brought out alive in four nights and three days.

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the surface, insisting on walking the last few feet from the pithead to waiting ambulances.

One of these was Con Embree, survivor of two earlier mine accidents and son of a man who survived the 1891 No. 1 Colliery disaster here which killed 123. Embree, whose leadership after the explosion was credited with saving many lives, scrambled out of his stretcher and said: "I'm coming out the way I went in—on my feet." A crowd of several hundred set off a deafening cheer.

But 39 men, including the seven on the surface and two rescue workers who were overcome by poisonous gas, 40-year-old Ken Gilbert, now is a correctional officer at the federal penitentiary at nearby Dorchester, N.B. Gilbert reached the surface 50 hours after the explosion, vowing never to return to the mines.

'OUT FOR GOOD'

But like so many of his companions, Gilbert did go back. He worked in neighboring No. 2 Colliery until it was battered by an underground upheaval Oct. 23, 1958. Seventy-five men died in that disaster.

Gilbert even worked for a time in the small mine oper-

ating here now. "But I'm finally out for good," he says.

Springhill today doesn't look much like a coal town. Gone are the big surface installations, the mine whistles and the endless criticism of the bosses. Even the railway—like the mines owned by the Cumberland Railway and Coal Co.—is no more.

The Cumberland company pulled out completely following the 1958 disaster in No. 2 Colliery. The surviving mine employs about 100—a far cry from the 1,585 who worked here when Nos. 2 and 4 were hoisting.

But everyone here remembers the days when every able-bodied man in town had a lamp and a coal company number and could bring home a good pay envelope every week; when the Springhill Fencebusters lived up to their name in baseball parks around the Maritime provinces; when the high-pitched whistle of the steam locomotives screamed across the rolling Cumberland hills as the long coal trains rumbled toward the junction with the

CNR main line three miles to the south.

MINE EMPLOYS 100

The mine in production here now is tiny by Springhill standards. No. 2 Colliery, for instance, had working areas 15,000 feet from the surface. The 100-man operation is one of the town's major employers today. Several small industries have been established and the federal government has placed a minimum security institution not far from the former pithead areas.

And there are jobs—such as the one Ken Gilbert worked hard to qualify for—in neighboring towns.

Coal mining is a tradition here—as are the hazards that go with it. Freak geological structures in the Cumberland provide conditions subject to "bumps"—upheavals of the mine floor and walls caused by build-ups of gas. It was a massive bump that wrecked No. 2 Colliery in 1958.

But the explosion that erupted at 3:07 p.m. Nov. 1, 1956 in No. 4 colliery was something completely differ-

ent, completely unpredictable.

Thirteen months after the disaster, a Nova Scotia provincial investigating commission reported the explosion was caused by a deadly chain reaction.

The commission said a runaway coal trip—or train—touched off the tragedy. Six cars loaded with coal became uncoupled as they were being hoisted up the mine slope. The cars charged down the slope and sliced through an electric cable.

An arc from the broken cable ignited clouds of coal dust stirred up by the run-aways and the explosion that followed probably was made worse by the presence of methane gas.

The investigators said "the explosion resulted from the unfortunate combination of circumstances for which no

blame can be attached to any individual."

Company officials and union leaders got little sleep during the early days of November, 1956. But their worst hours were those of early morning, Nov. 8, nearly five days after the explosion. Twenty-six men were still unaccounted for, but rescue officials agreed there was no chance any of them were alive.

MINE SEALED

The risk of further rescue operations was too great, they decided. The mine was sealed.

The task of announcing the grim decision fell on Harold Gordon, chief of coal operations for Dominion Steel and Coal Corp.—Cumberland's parent company. Gordon, a grey-haired Scot who risked his life many times in leading rescue workers into the shattered mine, had tears in his eyes when he said:

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A. W. MATHESON

QC, BARRISTER

85 Queen St. Charlottetown

Their destination: The Red Cross blood transfusion centre. McBurnie's cargo: blood samples from the first injured removed from the explosion-wrecked workings of No. 4 Colliery in this tragedy-prone hilltop town.

It was early evening, Thursday, Nov. 1, 1956. McBurnie, a taxi driver, was chatting with a friend on his verandah at 8:07 p.m. when Springhill and the surrounding countryside was shaken by an explosion deep in the immense Cumberland coal field.

KILLED ON SURFACE

The ground he was on felt it as he stepped out of his barn. Windows were cracked. Springhill housewives busy preparing the evening meal froze as dishes crashed to the floor around them.

The mouth of No. 4 spewed fire, smoke, splintered timbers and twisted metal. Chunks of shattered mine equipment flew 80 feet into the air.

And down in No. 4, great balls of dust rolled through the workings. Pockets of deadly methane gas poisoned the air. Men were unconscious. Others were bleeding. Some were alive and praying. Still others were dead, falling where they worked.

McBurnie, like everyone else in the town of 7,000, knew instinctively there was trouble in the deep. But it took him a second to react—and then he "ran like hell" for the pithead.

Unlike many mine disasters where the death and destruction is hidden deep underground, No. 4 killed on the surface. It was there to see when McBurnie and others—many of them wives and children of the 118 miners on the night shift—arrived. Seven men were dead on the surface, and others were injured.

BLOOD FLOWN IN

Merle, begging mine officials, firemen and police officials, firemen and police officials,

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