

**Wicker, Margaret: The Glen Coal Mine Disaster** <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Margaret Wicker: The Coal Glen Mine Disaster**

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 2/13/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Margaret Wicker is probably the last surviving witness to the Coal Glen mine disaster of 1925. Her family owned a farm next to the company town of Coal Glen, in southern [Chatham County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. She was 7 when the mine exploded and killed all 53 men underground. It was the worst mining accident in the state's history. Losing half of its breadwinners, Coal Glen attracted an outpouring of public sympathy that helped spur passage of the state's first workers' compensation laws.

The Coal Glen mine and a larger coal operation, the Egypt (or Cumnock) mine, cut into a 12-mile-long seam of coal that runs along the Deep River. A coal mine may seem out of place in the Piedmont, less than an hour from Raleigh, but the Deep River coal field was worked for 180 years. Plagued by volatile gases, it was racked by several explosions nearly as fatal as the 1925 disaster.

The Deep River coal fields haven't been mined since 1952, and I didn't notice any trace of the coal industry when I first visited. But in Mrs. Wicker's pickup truck, we explored back roads and discovered enduring remnants of the coal fields, the company town and the mine disaster.

She first stopped by a broad field next to her family's homeplace.



Margaret Wicker. Photo by Chris Seward, 2000. ~~Use for permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.~~

"We were chopping cotton out in this field. I was just little, and my mother had some colored women and white women helping her chop cotton. There was a whole bunch of them out there. I was playing in the dirt with a little black girl. All at once, we heard this big noise, like boooooom, and black smoke just boiled and rolled up in the sky. All the women started screaming and hollering. Their husbands worked in the mine. Everybody that lived up and down in those houses k In just a few minutes, there was another explosion. My daddy didn't work in the mine, but he worked with them. He cut timbers and cross ties and things like that for them. He got in somebody's car and came out here to our house to get some That's where I was, somewhere along here in the middle of this field. I was just a young 'un and scared to death. I know there wasn't any more chopping cotton that day."

We drove past the field and turned onto a gravel road through woods and scrub brush.

"When the mine was running, they had houses that went way on down in yonder where the miners lived. Back years and years and years ago, this was Farmville. One time it was called Farmville, one time it was called Coal Glen. You can't e It was a thriving, busy place when the mine was running. They had folks here from everywhere that came to the mine to work. They had a lot of people here from the coal fields of West Virginia, Virginia, Alabama. There was a road that went down through there, way on down in yonder, and houses built on each side of that road real close together. Most of them were built just alike. Now, the store was along here somewhere. They had a company store just for the people that lived here. People could go by and get anything they wanted, get it on credit, run an account. They had a commissary and they could buy their gro Way on down in there, they had a baseball field. Miners could play ball, and they'd play with different communities all around this area. Seem like I heard that they had a dance hall somewhere, too."

We drove onto the grounds of a creosote plant, where the foreman let us walk up to the old mine.

"The mine entrance is right here in these bushes. The mine went down that road to the river. That's the way the slope went, down that road on a gradual downhill under the Deep River. The main shaft branched off and went different ways. It When the mine was running, they had a tippie here. That thing went way out yonder and up high. When the coal came out of the mine, there'd be little cars, just like a car that runs on the railroad now, but smaller. They'd get there and dump it They had an engine room up there, with a great big hoist that had a cable that went down in the mine to pull the cars out. They used little mules on the side tracks to get the coal out to the main track."

We drove along the edge of the forest.

"The cemetery is out here. I'll turn in right here and we'll get out and look at this little marker here. They moved the church after the mine closed down. They have a marker for the people killed in the explosion: May 27, 1925. 53 men died in Farmville Coal Mine explosion, 300 yards southeast of cemetery. Known victims buried in this cemetery are Claude V. Johnson - Charlie Wood - Henry Grady Hall - W.E. Byerley - W. Hollis Richardson. My mother and dad knew them and I knew them. Henry Grady was Pinky's uncle, my brother Joe's wife. The Richardson man lived in the camp. Charlie Wood boarded with us. Mama kept some boarders for men who didn't have a family her Some of them were buried here and yonder and different places. It was probably a week or more before they got all the bodies out. There was a fire down there. They said that they were badly burned. They didn't have enough caskets. They just had to leave the bodies until they could get more from somewhere out of town."

She stops and looks down. I don't think she wants to talk anymore. Then she casts around for a glimmer of light in her memory of that grim day.

"One of the ladies chopping cotton that day with my mama was Mis' Garner. She had two girls and a son. Her husband worked in the mine. Mis' Garner thought he was in the mine when the explosion happened. But he didn't go in that mornin This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for a Change](#) <sup>[4]</sup>" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) <sup>[5]</sup> at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Egypt Coal Mine." Marker H-41. North Carolina Historical Highway Marker Program. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-hig...> <sup>[6]</sup>

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