

Fire breaks out down below 100 years after the Cherry disaster – the Forest remembers



•Edward Mills, killed in the Cherry Mine disaster

It's 100 years since the 1909 Cherry mining disaster, which claimed the lives of Foresters who went out west to forge a better life. Among the foresters, Edward and Arthur Mills who joined the exodus and ended up in the doomed mine. Great nephew, Roy Mills, who still lives in Cinderford, has spent years researching their story.



•Roy Mills

IT began like any other day. Early in the morning of November 13, 1909, nearly 500 men and boys were dropped into the Cherry Mine, Illinois.

Their job, to hack out the coal to help power the Chicago, Milwaukee and St Paul railroad company which owned the pit. Some were American, but many were migrants from Europe, from Italy, Poland and from England, intent on escaping crippling poverty and on making a new life in a new country.

On this day, only one thing was different - the mine's crude electrical system had broken down, so kerosene lamps lit the miner's way.

By lunchtime, bales of hay were dropped down the hoist to feed the mules, who spent their lives underground.

One unnamed miner and 15-year-old Matt Francesco pushed a coal car piled with hay towards the stables. They shoved it the last few yards where it came to rest under an open torch. Kerosene dripped onto the hay and it quickly burst into flames. The fire spread fast and was soon out of control. Fans were opened in a misconceived plan to pull the fire out. But this made matters far worse and the flames and smoke spread through the lower two galleries. Behind the flames and with oxygen gone, the poisonous and suffocating gas called Black Damp made



•*Women make their way to the stricken mine.*

its deadly way into the 500ft depths of the pit.

Trapped underground, four foresters: brothers Arthur and Edward Mills from Cinderford and Lewis Gibbs and Frank Waite from The Plump.

Edward Mills, the eldest brother, had already been out to America, panning for gold in the Klondike, sheep herding and working in bars. He came back to the Forest and married Isabella Pratt from The Pludds at Ruardean Woodside. Deciding to return to the New World, he persuaded his younger brother, Arthur and Arthur's wife, Alice, to return with them. They left in 1905.

In the stricken mine, once the fire took hold it proved impossible to control and burned for weeks. It was a slow death for many of the miners trapped underground - either by poisonous gas or suffocation.

A team of 12 rescuers, recruited from the town of Cherry, made the haz-

ardous drop into the smouldering mine shaft time and time again. Each time they brought up survivors, until the seventh drop. A confused message from below led to delays bringing the cage up. Whether by accident or mistake, when it was finally brought up, the rescuers had all burned to death. None survived.

Nor did most of the Foresters down below. Only Frank Waite, of Hazel Hill near Plump was brought out alive as part of a small group of miners who managed to barricade themselves behind a wall of mud, rock and timber for eight long days.

The bodies of Edward and Arthur Mills weren't found until April 2010, five months after the fire had been quenched. They were among 259 miners who died, leaving behind widows and more than 500 children. The Mills' wives did re-marry and their children's children still live in America. Rel-

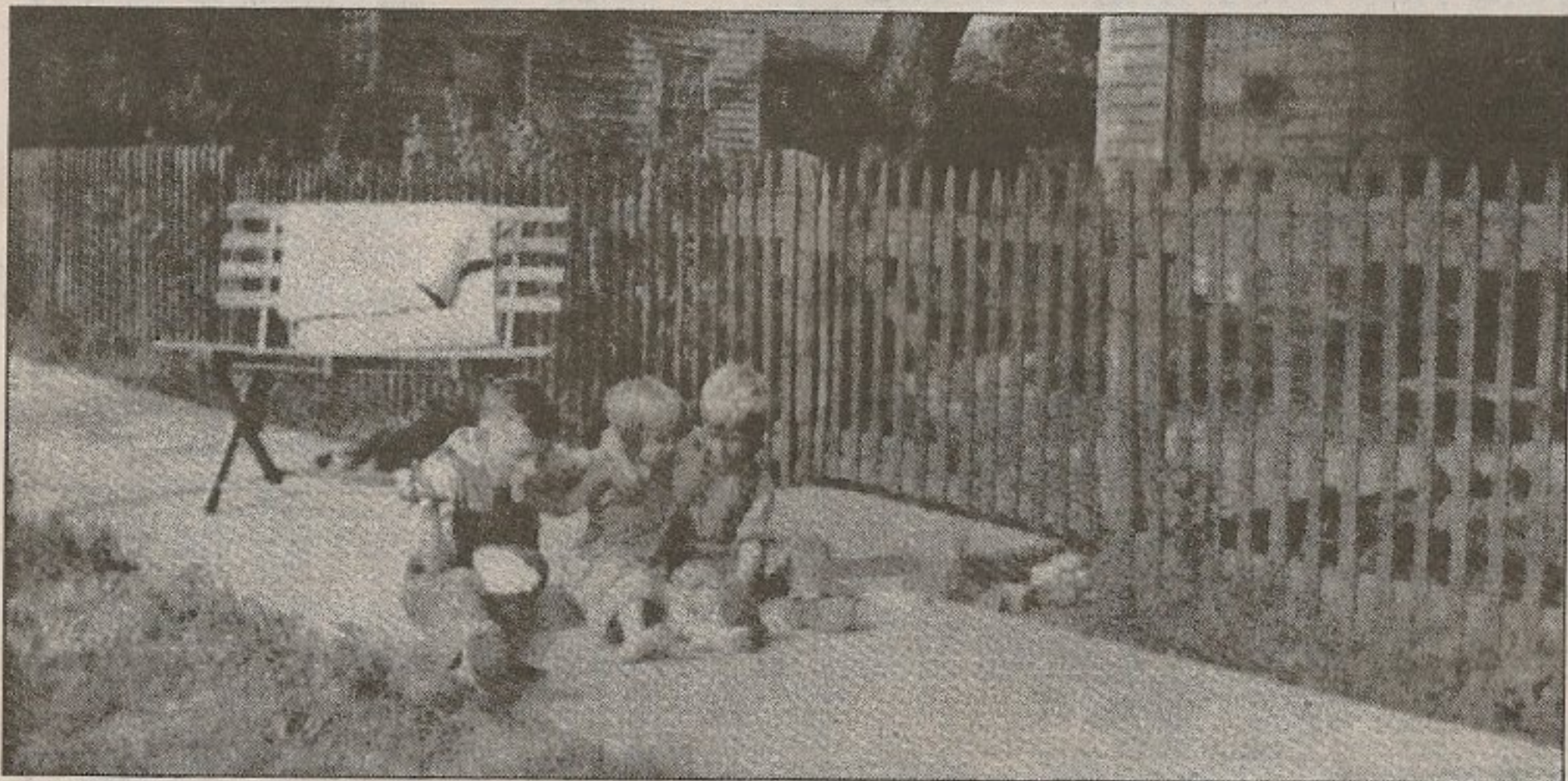
atives of the Cherry miners remain in the Forest, including the nephew of Grantley Lewis Gibbs, who became headteacher at Steam Mills Primary School, and Roy Mills from Cinderford, the great nephew of Edward and Arthur who's been researching the family history.

"My father always used to talk to me about my two uncles killed in a mine," said Roy. "I started researching the history about 20 years ago, inspired by a family history event down at the Dean Heritage Centre."

"It's amazing how much material there is. Edward's son, Edward, was killed in a lorry crash but his two daughters lived on - but they changed name when they married, which made it difficult to find them. But now I keep coming across second cousins, there must be hundreds of them, mostly still living in America."



•*Edward's wife, Isabella Pratt Mills from the Pludds.*



•Children who lost their father. Edward Mill's children – Edward, Phyllis and Alma playing outside their house in Cherry.