

Documentary shares stories of Monongah's many widows

- *By Vicki Smith*
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When explosions ripped through Fairmont Coal Co.'s No. 6 and No. 8 mines 100 years ago Thursday, it was the men of Monongah who were lost — at least 362 of them, some just boys.

But it was the 250 widows, 100 of them pregnant, who suffered and struggled long after the nation's deadliest mining disaster, quietly finding creative ways to feed their 1,000 children and keep their community alive.

As West Virginia marks the centennial of one of its greatest tragedies, a new documentary shares some of their stories:

The woman who gave birth as her husband's corpse was carried into the house. The woman who got only \$40 as compensation for her loss. And the woman who filled sacks of coal on her daily pilgrimages to search for her husband's body; the pile eventually grew taller than the eaves of her home, an estimated 350-500 tons.

West Virginia University journalism professor Gina Martino Dahlia spent four years compiling research for the 30-minute film, "The Monongah Heroine," set to air at 10:30 p.m. Thursday on West Virginia Public Television.

"I can't believe this story has never been told before," she says, marveling at women who became seamstresses and turned their homes into boarding houses for the workers who replaced their husbands.

"They were the true heroes of the disaster," says Dahlia, whose film is named for the marble statue that now stands outside Monongah Town Hall.

Gov. Joe Manchin and other dignitaries will gather there at 10 a.m. Thursday and observe a statewide moment of silence at 10:30 a.m., the approximate time of the explosion.

Monongah Middle School students will read the names of each known victim, and Catholic Bishop Michael Bransfield will consecrate a 970-pound bronze bell donated by officials in Molise, Italy, the home region of many of the fallen miners.

Other activities include a noon Mass at Holy Spirit Catholic Church and a 1:30 p.m. procession to Mount Calvary Cemetery for the dedication of a black granite monument, also provided by the Italian people.

Mine safety advocate J. Davitt McAteer is also marking the anniversary by releasing a book he says was nearly 30 years in the making.

“Monongah: The Tragic Story of the 1907 Monongah Mine Disaster, the Worst Industrial Accident in U.S. History,” argues that as many as 550 men and boys may have died in the mine. Like some local historians, McAteer contends many worked off the books, so their presence was never recorded.

Coal mines had lured many immigrants to West Virginia, and historian Thomas J. Koon, whose mother lost her first husband in the blast, says the official count showed 171 Italian victims. There were also 74 Americans, 52 Hungarians, 31 Russians, 25 Austrians and five Turks.

Mine Safety and Health Administration records show four men managed to escape, but Koon says they later died of their injuries. Three rescuers also died trying to reach the victims.

Peter Urban, the last man found alive, was discovered underground holding the broken body of his brother Stanislaus. He lived 19 years after the explosion, Koon says, but died in another accident at the same mine.

Many families were further devastated by how quickly and unceremoniously their husbands and sons were buried after lying in hastily built wooden coffins that lined the streets.

“Today we mourn, and it’s this big, elaborate thing,” Dahlia says. “And here are these women, and the only connection they had was, ‘You have an hour. Here’s a

body part. Now bury your husband.”

But Monongah was only one disaster in what has turned out to be the single deadliest month for the U.S. coal industry. Two western Pennsylvania communities also suffered when explosions at the Darr Mine in Westmoreland County and the Naomi Mine in Fayette County killed a total of 273 men in December 1907.

“The Darkest Month,” an exhibit featuring photographs, artifacts and a separate documentary on Monongah, opened Saturday at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh. The show runs through June 8.

Combined, the three disasters encouraged Congress to act on President Theodore Roosevelt’s call for creation of the U.S. Bureau of Mines.

Dahlia, who grew up in Marion County, was inspired partly by proximity to Monongah and partly by her mother, an Italian immigrant from Calabria who spoke no English and struggled to communicate.

Dahlia’s grandfather, Sam Martino, was a coal miner for 25 years who narrowly avoided being caught in another catastrophe in the same county, the November 1968 explosion at the Consol No. 9 Mine in Farmington.

That explosion killed 78 men, prompting Congress to pass the Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.

“I just hope that people see a different side of this tragedy, a more personal side,” Dahlia says of her film. “Instead of just the history — the who, what, when and how many people died — I want them to have a human connection and see the human tragedy.”