

# **About the Hawk's Nest Incident--Background for Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead***

**Ashley Lucas and Ariadne Paxton**

## **Introduction**

The Hawk's Nest Incident is the story of one of this country's worst industrial disasters. The disaster took place in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. The incident revolves around the contraction of silicosis while constructing a new hydroelectric power plant. Silicosis is a disease that infects the lungs and gradually causes the cells to digest themselves. The most common symptom exhibited by infected persons was shortness of breath. Silicosis was contracted through inhaling rock dust that contained silica dust. Blasting away at the rock in order to build a tunnel produced the dust.

## **PREPARATION FOR DISASTER**

In 1927 the proposal to build the hydroelectric plant on the New River was brought up. This hydroelectric project was conceived to help boost West Virginia's economy. Construction began under the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation. Union Carbide then formed the New Kanawha Power Company. This new undertaking included the building of several structures; two power stations, two dams, and two tunnels. The total investment totaled approximately \$9,000,000.00. The Rinehart and Dennis Company of Charlottesville, VA was contracted to begin construction. Rinehart and Dennis worked under the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation engineers, thus giving U.C.C.C. tight control over the project. Workers came from all over the Southeast. The majority of these new employees were African-American. One procedure used to build the tunnel was called "mucking." This was the process by which the broken rock was removed from the tunnel. The removal of the broken rock aided the dispersal of dust that might have been contaminated with silica dust. This dust might have infected several hundred men. The rock was then carried out of the tunnel via "dinkeys"(or small locomotives).

## WORKING IN THE TUNNEL

The work schedule that was set included a six day work week with two ten-hour shifts per day. The workforce was composed unevenly of African-Americans and Caucasians. There were clearly more African-Americans employed by U.C.C.C. that were required to work in the tunnels than white workers. As a result, more African-Americans died as a result of silicosis. The discrimination did not end with the tunnel workers. The company provided its workers with housing. The housing was scarcely better than living in a shack, but the white workers were charged less rent for their accommodations than their African-American counterparts. While the employer thought that they were being considerate providing housing, there were not even close to enough beds for all of the workers and their families. The cost of living in the villages, much like the rent was determined by race. The process of working in the tunnel consisted of two three-hour shifts. Holes were drilled in the rock for several feet and then dynamite was inserted in the holes to blast out the remainder of the rock. After the explosion the debris would have to be cleared out. The clearing out of debris involved a lot of contact with the dust that contained silica. In addition to the dusty conditions, the use of gasoline powered equipment also polluted the already contaminated air. It has been reported that black workers were forced to clean out the tunnel after the blast that was by far the most dangerous part of the job. Length of employment rarely lasted over a year as a result of the dangerous working conditions. The records of medical services rendered to the workmen have never been fully recovered. Without medical records, it is very difficult to determine whether or not patients truly suffered from silicosis. Another obstacle in diagnosing these patients was that physicians of the time were not very familiar with silicosis as a disease. It resembled tuberculosis and was often misdiagnosed as such. It also appears that Union Carbide never took any steps to assess the risk of the workers being exposed to silica dust. The accounts of how unbearable the dust was vary. There are several accounts from workers saying that they emerged daily from the tunnels coated in dust from head to toe. There are also members of the community who likewise said that the workers were often so dust covered that they left footprints as they walked away from the mines back to their houses. The officials of the Union Carbide and Rinehart and Dennis disagree with this account and say that if there was any dust coverage on the workers, it was minimal.

## RECOGNITION OF DISASTER

In 1932 several lawsuits began to be filed on behalf some of the afflicted workers. Many of the local residents testified of behalf of the workers. The residents claimed that the workers were often coated with dust when they left the work site. Rinehart and Dennis used a single witness who happened to be the general manager of the project. He claimed that there was never any negligence on the part of the administration and that there was no known documented case of silicosis reported by one of his workers. He also said that he never heard his employees complain about the conditions while working in the tunnel. By the mid-1930s the courts had ruled in favor of compensating the plaintiffs. The allocation of money was based on race and marital status, just as wages and housing had been earlier. A single black man would receive \$400, while a married white man received \$1000. In addition to these payments, the families of deceased workers received an extra \$600. In 1935 the West Virginia House of Delegates passed a new state worker's compensation law which would compensate workers who were infected with silicosis. Despite this giant step forward in compensating workers for illness contracted on the job, there were many loopholes. These loopholes cleared the employer of responsibility for the disease and made eligibility for this law almost impossible for workers. Some of the clauses that made eligibility so difficult were clauses involving the length of employment someone had to endure before they could claim workman's compensation under this new law. The hearings that existed at this time did not do enough to relieve or compensate the victims and their families, despite the new legislation that was passed. A positive aspect of these hearings was that these hearings opened other people's eyes to the danger of working with silica dust and to the risks involved with working in tunnels and mines.

## A NATIONAL ISSUE

By the late 1930s most of the nation's leading newsmagazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* were running articles about the Hawk's Nest Incident. The national exposure that silicosis was now receiving made other industrial projects aware of the danger that was imposed on their workers. In addition to the national exposure this industrial disaster was receiving in print, there was also a song written about the suffering of the men at Hawk's Nest. The famed blues musician, Pinewood Tom, wrote one particular song. This song was appropriately titled "Silicosis Is Killing Me."

## **HOW MANY DIED?**

An actual number of how many people died as a result of silicosis in Gauley Bridge has never been reached; however, the estimate has been set at around 700 deaths. There have been no authoritarian documents to tell us what exactly happened. The victims remain for the most part anonymous. There were no headstones for the graves that have been found. The numbers of how many died vary in different reports, just as the causes of these deaths were constantly debated. The agreement has always been reached right around 700. The one consistent factor is that proportionally more blacks than whites died in this great disaster. Black deaths were also underreported, thus skewing the number of deaths even further. Investigators tried to obtain more information about deaths at this time through a comparison of county records. This process proved futile since many records were only accessible through a certain date, thus, leaving several incomplete files. It was also difficult to find a "normal" death rate for the time to compare the death rates of these workers with. These records also did not account for the numbers of migrant workers who left the area after completing their work and possibly died from silicosis elsewhere. Cherniack also derived that there have been no statistical means by which the total amount of suffering and despair of these afflicted people could be measured.

## **EPILOGUE**

The prospects for local men to work in the mines after working at Hawk's Nest were slim to none when the operators discovered that these men had been exposed to silica dust, which could be killing them. After the afflicted were compensated, Rinehart and Dennis never again competed for a major project. They seemed to disappear after all of the hearings. Union Carbide thought they had vindicated themselves by claiming no responsibility for silicosis. Up until at least 1940, silicosis remained absent from the list of diseases that could be claimed under the workman's compensation laws. There is no longer any indication of where the camps once stood on the construction site.