

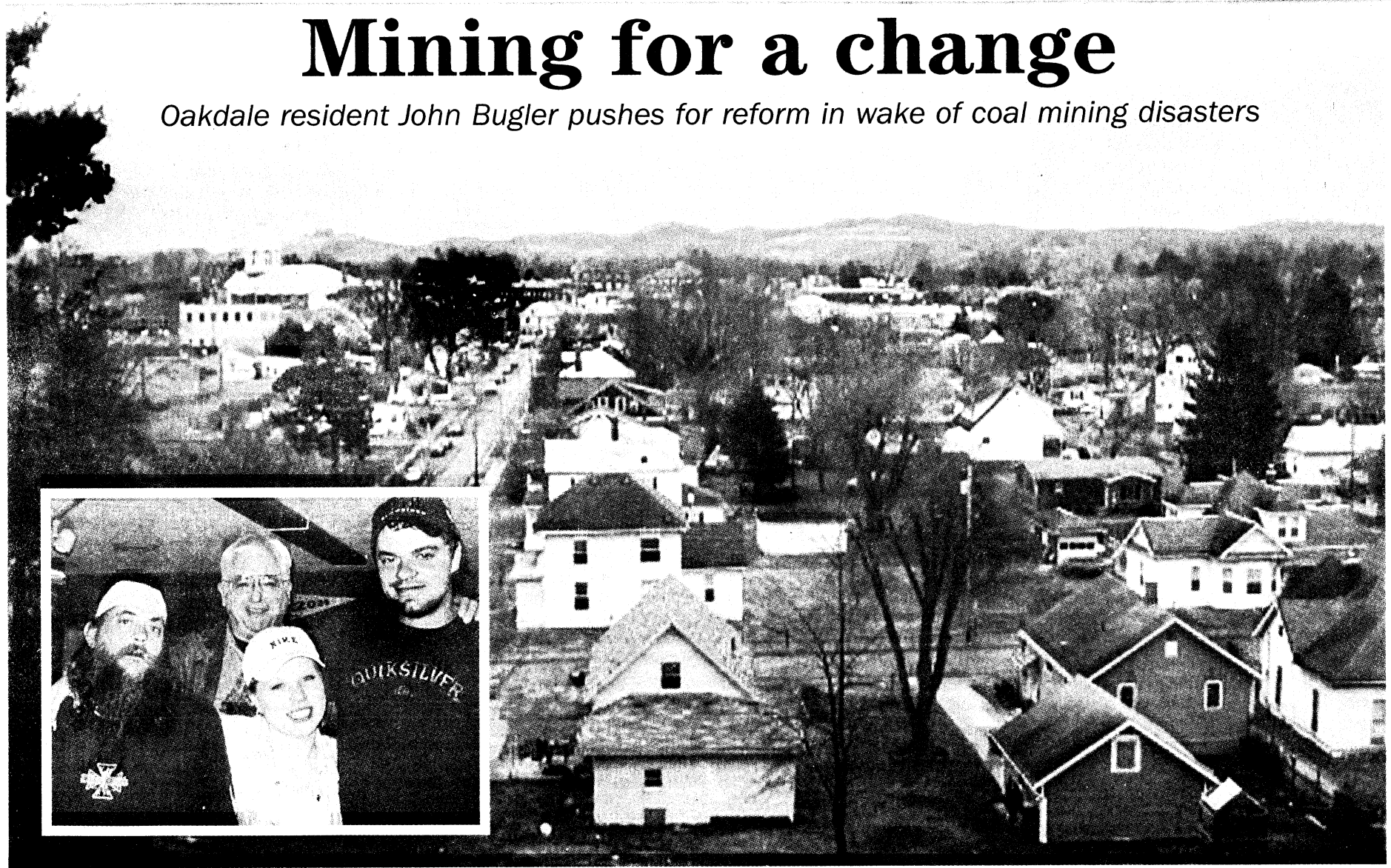
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Mining for a change

Oakdale resident John Bugler pushes for reform in wake of coal mining disasters



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A view of Buckhannon, West Virginia, the neighboring town of Sago, where 12 coal miners died in an accident last month. (Inset) Oakdale resident John Bugler (rear) with three Buckhannon residents. Photos courtesy of John Bugler

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By LINDA LEUZZI

OAKDALE – There are times when an event is so compelling in its human drama, complexity and heartache that you can't turn away. That's the way it was for Oakdale resident John Bugler when he witnessed the Sago Mine disaster in West Virginia. Thirteen men were trapped inside by smoke and toxic gas on the second day of this New Year. Twelve of them perished.

In these sophisticated times, with safety initiatives in place by law, a nation grappled with why it happened. If the miners had wireless radios with them to communicate, for example, or oxygen bottles available throughout the mine to replenish the one-hour tanks they went down with, they could have survived.

"I watched the disaster on television and said I just have to get out there," Bugler said. "I got on a plane, flew to Baltimore, rented a car and drove to Buckhannon, West Virginia. I got there on January 9 and drove up to the coal mine."

Bugler is a retired innovative projects engineer who worked for the New York State Department of Transportation. He has an altruistic bent and is chaplain for the American Legion Post 1006 in Brentwood and the Suffolk County American Legion liaison with the Boy Scouts of America.

He was also the Republican candidate who ran against Assemblywoman Ginny Fields (D-Oakdale) in 2004. Bugler is voluntarily working on a mining proposal that will be submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

Over a five-day period, Bugler spoke to at least a dozen local residents in Buckhannon, the neighboring town that overlooks Sago. Those he talked

to included a local town sheriff, the Sago Baptist Church pastor, families and officials in the mining industry.

"I remember him," said C.J. Martin, owner of Martin Oil Co., of Bugler. Martin has owned his business in Buckhannon for over 20 years. "We talked at the 88 Restaurant at the Main Street Inn in Buckhannon over a couple of nights," he added. "They haven't started back up yet (in the mine), but they will before too long."

To hear Bugler tell it, everyone in Buckhannon says hello and knows each other. "If you fell asleep here and woke up in Buckhannon, you wouldn't find much difference," Bugler said. "They have beautiful old homes, an old courthouse, 11 bars and 88 churches. These people are solid, fabulous people. Everyone I met knew someone who worked in the mine."

Upshur County, where the Sago Mine is located, is known for the natural gas and oil wells, some dating back to the 19th century, that are part of the terrain. "These gas wells are all over the place and many of them are in abandoned shafts," he said. "There was one contiguous to where the miners were working." An early morning storm rumbled the day the miners entered the shaft and traveled two miles down through a central tunnel via an electric vehicle called a mantrip. The vehicle connected to a spur that veered off at a 90-degree angle, the farthest reach of the mine called "2 Left."

"Three bolts of lightning struck the area," Bugler said. "It's believed that a bolt hit the nearby gas well. It blew the seal where the coal miners were working. People felt it 10 miles away." That was a little after 6 a.m. About 1,500 feet of the mine were cloaked in dust and gas.

A crew just behind was spared and

escaped. One of them went to a telephone to call for help. Several mine supervisors rushed in, but couldn't aid those trapped because the smoke was so dense and poisonous. International Coal Group officials, the Sago Mine owners, called in a rescue team at 8:04 a.m., but by 8:30 a.m. the mine was deemed off-limits because the conditions were so dangerous. A rescue team arrived a little more than two hours later, one of 13 in all.

The Sago Mine is a non-union mine.

"I spoke to coal miners, riggers, people who drilled the natural gas wells, and police and they all said there was no emergency plan at the mine," Bugler said. "They didn't know what to do. And these guys were in there." According to news reports, nearly 12 hours after the blast the first rescue crew was allowed to enter, followed by another an hour later.

Bugler contacted the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. "They put me in touch with a website that dealt with a study on seals they tested," he said. "It showed the only case they knew of where there was an explosion happened in June, 1995 in Pineville, West VA. They used four-foot thick, pumpable Portland cement concrete. That held during the explosion and spared the miners (there). That report was out there." What was used to seal the mine at the Sago site were Omega blocks, a cheaper, lighter polyfoam that totally disintegrated."

According to the Feb. 10 issue of the *Charleston Gazette*, in Charleston, West Virginia, a special study of the Omega foam blocks used to seal a closed-off mine area where the explosion that caused the Sago Mine disaster may have occurred, will be performed by scientists at The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

In this area of the country, unfortunately, mining history repeats itself. A Feb. 19 *Charleston Gazette* news story listed a number of mining accidents over a nearly 100-year period. Some of the aids that could have helped, a concise, in-place rescue plan and better communication devices, were repeats of two other West Virginia disasters that occurred within the last 30 years.

So now there is yet another attempt to address the pitfalls leading up to the death of 12 men. Bugler is working on a design advocating the use of the pumpable, high-strength Portland cement concrete for abandoned mine shaft gas seals for the Senate committee mentioned earlier headed by Senator Mike Enzi from Wyoming.

Michael Sapko, principal investigator of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, said he was trying to arrange a visit for Bugler to their test facility in Pittsburgh this week. "He asked to come to our facility," said Sapko when reached. "There are a lot of different people looking at this situation trying to prevent this from happening in the future, John being one of them."

There are gas fields in the Sago area, Sapko said, but there was no indication yet that the gas that was ignited emanated from those wells. "They just happened to be in that area," he said. "All underground coal mines generate gas naturally in the coal scene and it varies from coal scene to coal scene. Preliminary information is that the explosion was ignited about the same time that the lightning strikes occurred in the area. The lightning strikes couple into the metal conductors and it ends up igniting the flammable gas volume and that's the explosion. (But) the seal did get blown up." ■