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Tragedy

Fiery Crash Of Gasoline Tanker Truck Has Claimed Seven Lives In Beattyville

By CHARLES WOLF
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BEATTYVILLE, Ky. (AP) — "I sure never thought when I got up this morning that I'd be doing this tonight," said a weary member of the Lee County Rescue Squad, who joined in the search for seven persons killed here in the fiery crash of a gasoline tanker truck.

The truck's brakes apparently failed on a steep, 700-foot grade leading into the business district of his southeastern Kentucky town of 1,230 persons.

The hill on Ky. 11 ended in a curve to the left of Vincent's Trading Post, a small furniture store.

The tanker crashed into the building and plowed on through Hollan's Cut & Curl Beauty Salon, a storage area, television repair shop and, finally, Gladys' Dinetto on the corner. The cab separated from the

tanker, which ruptured and spewed 3,200 gallons of flaming gasoline into the shops and toward a row of stores on the other side of the restaurant.

The driver, William Wilson of Louisville, survived the crash by leaping from the cab.

Fire heavily damaged a barber shop, flower shop, clothing store and automotive parts store, but everyone inside the buildings escaped through rear exits.

Five of the dead—Judy Hollan Gabbert, owner of the beauty shop; Christina Bradley Hughes; Reba Davis; Vickie Moore and Tressie Fuller, all of Beattyville—were found in the beauty shop.

Their bodies were burned beyond recognition and rescue workers removed them in pieces from the rubble Saturday night.

Mrs. Fuller was having her

hair styled for her daughter's wedding Saturday afternoon. Her name was added to the list of missing after she failed to appear the ceremony.

The first body recovered was that of Woodrow Wilson, a 6-foot-6 bear of a man with an artificial leg who lived alone in a small apartment above Gladys'.

He was a regular customer there and it was generally believed he was in the restaurant at the time of the explosion, but Deputy State Fire Marshal Edgar Kelly said that was impossible to determine.

As the search continued beneath a string of emergency lights Saturday night, workers became increasingly skeptical that the body of Gladys Fike, the restaurant owner, would be found.

Load after load of rubble was sifted and thrown aside as the search steadily neared the rear of the building.

"You have to do it piece by piece, brick by brick," said Doug Brandenburg of the Lee County Rescue Squad. "You'll see them turn up a shovel and shake it, because a ring might fall out or a finger, or anything."

Several persons among the hundreds of onlookers said they thought Mrs. Fike sought refuge in a small bathroom in the left rear corner of the restaurant. When workers finally reached the spot, they found her body slumped on the toilet seat. The flames had not reached her, and the cause of death was not immediately determined. Lee County Coroner Emmett Daugherty released the body to her family Sunday afternoon.

Mayor Charles Beach III, a volunteer fireman who was one of the first to reach the scene, said it would be some time before the accident's impact on the town would be known.

For the present, he said, the major consideration was "the

tragic loss of lives here."

Within seconds of the explosion, employees of Boog Jones' Ford-Mercury dealership were hurrying to move new cars away from the area.

Jones' showroom was across the street and a half block from the diner. Cars parked across the street exploded like a string of firecrackers as flaming gasoline flowed in the gutter of Main Street, a narrow road that winds for five blocks along the Kentucky River.

Parking meters melted on the sidewalk. Store fronts showed the scars of each car explosion. A storm sewer stopped the fire a few yards from the Beattyville Lumber Co.

Jones removed three cars from his glass-walled showroom, which he turned over to state police for use as a command post. A temporary morgue was set up in the repair shop at the rear of the building because the town's only funeral

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time was too small for the task.

Throughout Saturday, all during the night and again Sunday, rescue workers from as far away as Louisville streamed through the showroom with police, fire marshals and reporters.

Chief Deputy State Fire Marshal Clud Upton apologized to Jones Sunday for the black mud tracked across the tile floor.

"I'm just glad I've still got a place to get dirty," Jones said.

Invariably, news of the accident brought a flood of cars into town from surrounding counties. Many bore Ohio and West Virginia plates.

Traffic was bumper to bumper Saturday night along Main Street as motorists craned for a look at the ruins before being directed down an alternate route by police.

While prayers for the dead were being offered Sunday morning in the Presbyterian church across the street, Upton rested in the showroom and began preparing for the inevitable series of state reports to be filed on the accident.

An elderly, shabbily dressed man with a severe limp entered the building, approached Upton and whispered a request.

"No sir. No sir. No way," Upton said, emphatically shaking his head.

The man turned without protest and left the building.

"He wanted to go back and see the bodies," Upton said. "I don't know why anyone would want to see them. I wish I didn't have to. Twenty-seven years in this business and I'm still not used to it."