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Picturing the past: Exhibit recalls 1940 Sonman Mine disaster

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PORTAGE— Merle Thomas remembers seeing the blood running from the side of his father's mouth as he was laid to rest following the explosion of the Sonman Mine on July 15, 1940.

Thomas' dad ran the motor that moved the railcars at the mine and was only inches away from the spark that set off the explosion, killing the 63 men.

Located in the Sonman area of Portage Township, the mine was one of many that operated around Portage from the early 1900s until the middle of the century.

The disaster of six decades ago impacted the lives of nearly everyone in the Portage area and will be remembered in a photo exhibit, "63 Men Down," set to open this week at the Portage Historical Society Museum on Lee Street.

The exhibit will be a collection assembled in the past 25 years by Robert Sease of Main Street, Portage, a local photo buff who can be seen daily walking the town's streets, camera in hand recording the people and changing scenery.

"I agreed to provide the photos and the historical society will set up the exhibit," said Sease, 84, who has photographed a large number of areas of interest in the region including one of his favorites, the Schwab Estates in Loretto.

"The bank had photographs, and that's how I got interested," Sease said of his 25 years working at Portage National Bank.

Most of the dozens of pictures he has of the Sonman Mine – before and after the explosion – came from the victims' families, who allowed him to make copies.

Sease has photos of 51 of the dead miners and the historical society is hopeful more families will provide access to the 12 photos missing from the collection.

"We want to see what else we can find," said society member Irene Huschak, expressing hope the exhibit will stir public interest and prompt some people to get into the old steamer trunk.

The explosion changed the life of Thomas, then a boy, and the exhibit of black-and-white photographs is one he plans to see despite the painful memories it will evoke.

"I'll never forget the blood running out of his mouth. It was terrible," Thomas said. "I was one of nine brothers and sisters, and after the explosion we lived in poverty."

The exhibit originally was set to run Friday through Sunday, but interest prompted the historical society to extend it until early September, Huschak said.

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