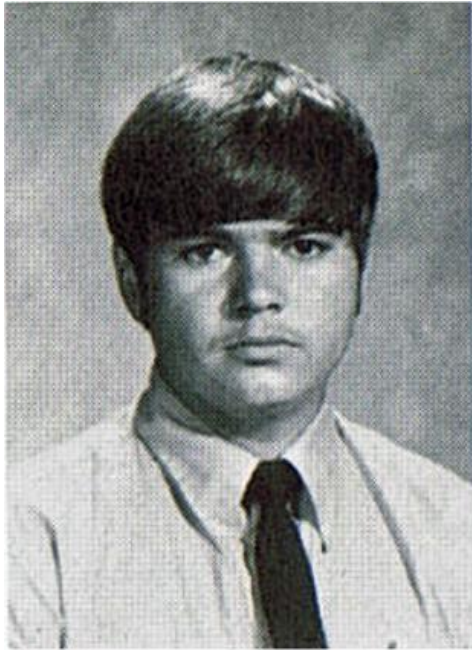


Thomas David Byrd, Class of 1972.



Deep Trench Burying Five Workers In Earthen Death Trap

Five workmen were buried alive about 4:15 p.m. yesterday when a deep sewer trench they were digging in North Frayser caved in.

Three bodies were uncovered by Memphis Fire Department rescuers about 8:45 p.m. after four and a half hours of frantic efforts to reach them.

Authorities feared the other two workmen also were crushed to death by tons of earth and mud.

"I was working and at first I thought I was just imagining something," said Earl Spelling, who escaped from the trench - 25 feet deep and about 3 feet wide - as it caved in.

"Then I saw it (metal supports holding back and steeply vertical earthen banks) quivering. I just started to run and a boulder hit my leg."

Within an hour Mr. Spelling was manning a front-end loader, one of several large pieces of earth-moving equipment rushed to the scene, in an apparently futile attempt to save his co-workers.

The five trapped workers, who were employed by the J & R Contracting Company, Inc., 2623 Frisco, were tentatively identified by police as Reece Davis, 27, of Canisbay Road, a co-owner of the contracting firm; and Tom Byrd, 19, Tim Poston,

23, Enoch Hagler, about 50, and John Jackson, 53, all reportedly lived near Highway 61 at the Mississippi line.

The body of Mr. Byrd was recovered and pulled from the pit at 9:10 p.m. A second body was removed at 11:10 p.m. but not immediately identified, and a third had been sighted but not removed. p Workers were attempting to extract the remaining three bodies at midnight.

Police Lt. H.D. Parks the first officer to arrive on the scene, said the workmen were buried under about 12 feet of dirt.

About 11:30 p.m., nearly seven hours after the banks had crashed down, authorities said they felt they were only a few feet from uncovering the last two victims but said the work could take hours.

Two bodies located earlier were protected from further cave-ins by the scoops of front-end loaders but rescuers were helpless to pull them from the hole until the trench had been further opened.

After collapsing, the narrow trench was quickly enlarged by workmen as they tried to move tons of dirt which had fallen on the five men. By 5:30 p.m. two earthmovers and three front loaders from J&R Contracting and Memphis Light, Gas & Water Division had scooped mounds of dirt from the area.

Several times firemen and other rescuers descended into the pit by ladder or in the scoops of the diggers, only to be quickly forced out by the threat of further cave-ins.

Rescuers again were lowered into the pit and, working first with large shovels and then smaller ones, unearthed three bodies. About 300 people-gathered in the dark, damp chill to witness the rescue effort. Watching were the families of two of the

trapped men and a number of construction workers. The mood changed from one of frantic effort to despair as the rescue effort dragged on.

When the bodies finally were removed, almost all hope had left the faces of the onlookers, who at first were allowed up to the edge of the giant hole to peer down but were later herded back 20 feet behind ropes as the possibility of further crumbling of the trench's walls was realized and as relatives complained.

Newsmen were also criticized and in cases threatened by the distraught relatives and friends of the trapped workers. Police later herded newsmen into one area and left an officer to prevent their approaching the site of the disaster.

A construction foreman who declined to give his name said the workers were preparing the trench for the foundation for a manhole and would probably have completed the work today. He said the men had been laying sewer pipe from the L&N railroad tracks east of the accident area for the past two weeks and had begun work on the trench Tuesday.

Information from The Commercial Appeal, Friday November 17, 1972.