

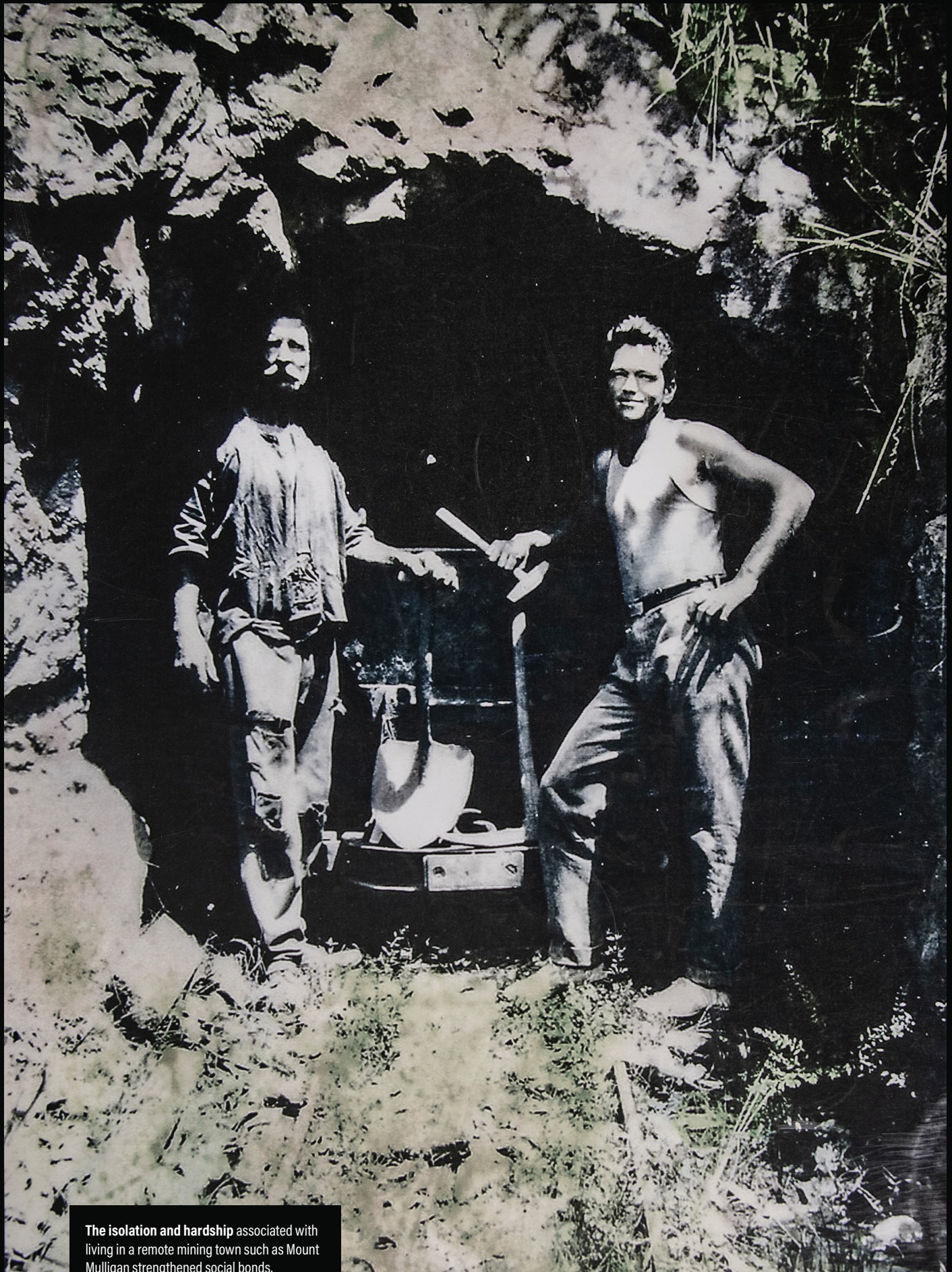
**The clock stopped** permanently for at least 75 miners when the Mount Mulligan mine exploded at 9.25am on 19 September 1921. This fob watch was recovered from the body of victim George Doran James.

# A MINE TRAGEDY REMEMBERED

STORY BY **DENISE CULLEN** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRIAN CASSEY**

At 9.25am precisely on Monday 19 September 1921, a deadly explosion at the Mount Mulligan colliery in Queensland ushered in changes to Australia's mining sector that continue to help save lives in a hazardous industry.

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**The isolation and hardship** associated with living in a remote mining town such as Mount Mulligan strengthened social bonds.



• After the explosion, shattered equipment, including steel cable drums, timber framework and a ventilating fan, was found dozens of metres from the mine's entrance, according to author Peter Bell.

• This photo of Janet Hutton, aged 22, was taken in 1921, the year she lost her husband James O'Boyle in the Mount Mulligan mine explosion. It's a treasured possession of Janet's great-granddaughter, Wendy Longe.



In that exact moment, in the township of Mount Mulligan, 155km by road west of Cairns in far north Queensland, assistant teacher Mary Ellen 'Nellie' Hourston stood on the verandah of the small schoolhouse. She listened as headmaster Neil Smith delivered the morning's address and she gazed towards the mountain known to its Traditional Owners as Ngarrabullgan and the birthplace of the Rainbow Serpent.

"Then she saw the explosion – a massive cloud of dust and smoke, pieces of timber and sheets of roofing metal," says Desley Brkic, Nellie's granddaughter, now based in Tinaroo, two hours drive south-east of Mount Mulligan. Desley learnt about the event on her grandmother's knee, and through scrapbook and photograph collections. She explains that Nellie frantically signalled to the headmaster as the sound of the explosion reached them. Instantly, they knew something catastrophic had happened at the nearby coalmine. "The headmaster immediately ran down the stairs and towards the mine and left her with all the children – for many, their fathers were coalminers," Desley adds.

The headmaster was among dozens who rushed to the mine that day. Peter Bell, who in 2013 published the disaster's definitive account, *Alas It Seems Cruel*, wrote that first responders met billowing black smoke, grass burning 60m from the mine entrance, and a "dazed and coal-blackened" blacksmith. The scale of the damage told mine engineer James Watson, one of the first on the scene, there would be no survivors. He expressed as much to the gathering crowd, who refused to believe it.

One of the women who'd rushed to the mine entrance was Janet O'Boyle (nee Hutton). She'd married James O'Boyle the previous year and sat at the mine entrance until late that night, "hoping against hope", as she cradled their three-month-old baby, Elizabeth. Her great-granddaughter Wendy Longe, now in her 50s and living in Sydney, says Janet's two brothers, Edward and Thomas Hutton, were also missing.

Meanwhile, Frank Grainer had been delivering logs, which were used to hold up the mine's roof and walls, but he hadn't yet climbed up onto the horsedrawn cart, says his granddaughter Pam Millett, who lives in Cairns. "When the explosion occurred, the horses bolted, and he never thought he'd find them. But he did, miles away," she recounts. Frank survived, but his brother-in-law Francis Gielis was down the mine that day.

Desley's grandfather Cliff Franklin, then Mount Mulligan's stationmaster, sent one of the first Morse code messages via the railway telegraph line alerting the outside world. A small group of rescuers ventured into the still-smoking mine, where they found two men badly injured and barely conscious. Both later died. ▶



● **Desley Brkic** says her grandmother's generation "didn't like to talk about the past all that much". Now she wishes she'd asked more questions when her grandmother was alive.

◉ Pam Millett shares a picture of her maternal grandparents, Frank and Florence May Grainer (nee Gielis), on their wedding day on 18 June 1913. "I was thinking how very proud and honoured I am to have been part of their family," she says.



In all, 74 bodies were recovered and buried within a week. But the true figure may never be known.

By the next morning, miners from other areas, along with medical staff and other volunteers, had begun to descend on the isolated township, offering whatever help was needed – from searching for bodies to digging graves. The oppressive heat accelerated decomposition of the bodies, making identification difficult. Volunteers worked until they collapsed. Dave Hutton left Mareeba Hospital, where he was an inpatient, to assist. His sons, Thomas and Edward, and son-in-law, James O’Boyle, had been entombed. “After the bodies of his lost were recovered, he was again hastening to the mine when, owing to his state of exhaustion, he fell off the planks crossing a gully and met with various injuries,” the *Cairns Post* newspaper reported on 23 September 1921.

In the ABC documentary *Too Young to Die*, released in 1971 to coincide with the disaster’s 50th anniversary, Mary Grant (later Wardle) recalled making tea and sandwiches for volunteers as she waited for news of her husband, Francis (Frank) Grant, one of the underground deputies. “I waited four days and nights for my husband’s body to be brought out,” she said. Some found the strain too much: “Some of the women started to laugh and couldn’t stop... It was a dreadful sound. I will never forget it. It was worse than any weeping.”

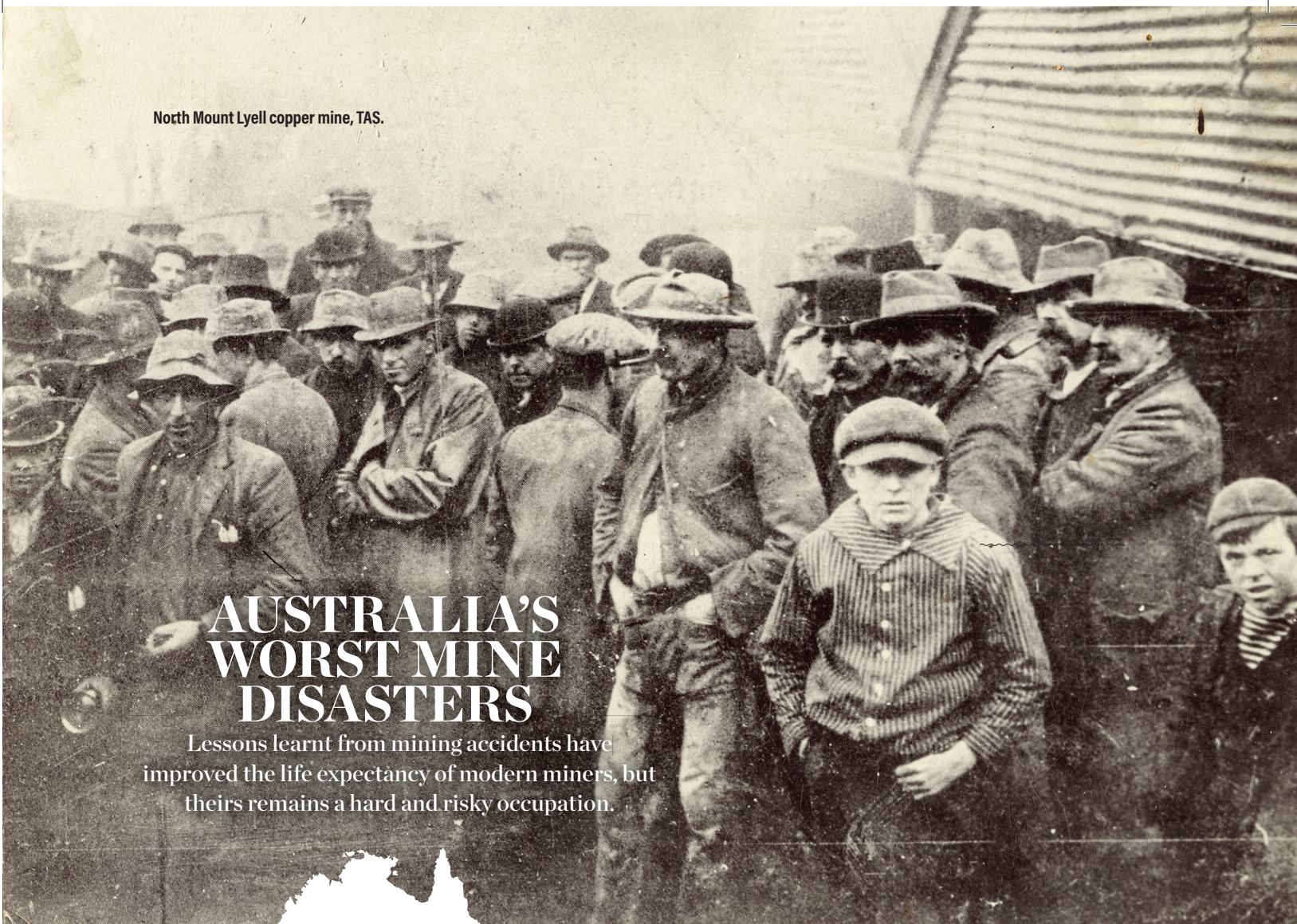
**M**OUNT MULLIGAN REMAINS Queensland’s worst mine disaster. It devastated the community, killing three-quarters of the township’s men, and leaving 40 widows and 83 fatherless children, Peter Bell notes. In all, 74 bodies were recovered and buried within a week. A 75th body was found five months later where no-one had previously thought to search. But slipshod record-keeping meant the true figure may never be known.

James O’Boyle, along with Thomas and Edward Hutton, Frank Grant, and many others, were buried in the local cemetery. Francis Gielis was transported to nearby Thornborough cemetery, where his parents and grandparents were buried, notes Alisa Patterson in her book *In Loving Memory*.

A Royal Commission into the disaster began as the last bodies were buried. No-one disputed that a coal dust explosion had occurred. At issue was its origin. This remains the subject of some debate, despite the Royal Commission concluding that “the cause of ignition was the firing of an explosive, either accidentally or otherwise”.

Because it’s difficult for contemporary readers to visualise what happened, Mark Parcell of the Mine Safety Institute of Australia recently worked with UK-based

North Mount Lyell copper mine, TAS.



# AUSTRALIA'S WORST MINE DISASTERS

Lessons learnt from mining accidents have improved the life expectancy of modern miners, but theirs remains a hard and risky occupation.



**1 New Australasian goldmine, VIC**

Date: 12 December 1882

Fatalities: 22 Cause: Flooding

**2 Bulli Mine, NSW**

Date: 23 March 1887 Fatalities: 81

Cause: Explosion

**3 Mount Kembla Colliery, NSW**

Date: 31 July 1902

Fatalities: 96 Cause: Explosion

**4 North Mount Lyell copper mine, TAS**

Date: 12 October 1912

Fatalities: 42 Cause: Fire

**5 Mount Mulligan Mine, QLD**

Date: 19 September 1921

Fatalities: 75 Cause: Explosion



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◉ **Just four months** after the last body had been recovered, the mine reopened. It had originally opened in 1912 and closed for good in 1957.

artist Alan Andrews of The Art of Mining to create a virtual simulation of events at Mount Mulligan. “My hope is to help people understand what actually happened... and communicate the lessons to current and future mineworkers,” Mark says.

Resources Safety and Health Queensland (RSHQ) is the independent statutory authority responsible for regulating health and safety across the state’s mines, quarries, petroleum and gas sites, and the explosives supply chain. Its CEO, Mark Stone, says the Mount Mulligan tragedy ushered in a raft of changes to improve mine safety via the *Coal Mining Act 1925*. “The legislation included some of the measures that are now standard industry practice, such as the compulsory use of safety lamps, the banning of naked flames underground, rules for the volume of stone dust allowed, and the appointment of mines inspectors,” he says.

After lengthy repairs, Mount Mulligan mine reopened in early 1922. But the disaster had severely diminished the town’s population, created ongoing financial hardship for those left behind, and carved deep scars in the community’s psyche. Silence emerged as a collective coping mechanism. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like that day,” Desley comments. “[My grandmother Nellie] never really liked to talk about it all that much.” Nevertheless, life went on. Nellie and Cliff Franklin wed the following year in nearby Chillagoe. Janet O’Boyle was remarried in 1923, to a man who came to work in the reopened mine. Her former in-laws never spoke to her again.

Ken Best arrived in Mount Mulligan in 1944 as a six-year-old, after his mother married the mine deputy Robert Best. He recalls a childhood spent climbing, fishing, camping and exploring, before, at the age of 17, he began an electrical apprenticeship at the mine. Like others, he doesn’t recall much talk of the tragedy among the townspeople, with one exception. “Some older miners would try to frighten you by talking about Morgan’s ghost,” he says. “Morgan was one of the miners who, it was said, was not found, but he was.”

In 1957 a decision was made to close what was by then a state-owned mine. Ken says this was due to

heating of the coal in the old workings, but there were additional political and economic considerations. While Ken’s family took the news in their stride, others were blindsided. Helen Scott’s family, for instance, had arrived in Mount Mulligan in 1925. Helen, who now lives in Cairns, says her parents met and married in the shadow of the mountain. Her father worked as a winch driver.

She recalls sensing “a lot of tension about the town” before a meeting was held to announce the mine’s closure on 28 October, when she was only nine. “The miners were really very angry; they weren’t expecting it,” she says. Willing miners, their families and houses would be shipped to Collinsville. If unwilling, they had to make their own arrangements. Helen watched as the miners’ tin-and-timber homes were dismantled and bundled onto the railway for the more than 700km journey south. Planning to start afresh in Cairns, her parents had sold their house but were still in it when the buyer started pulling it down. “He said to us, ‘You can’t stay here any longer,’” she recalls.

**M**OUNT MULLIGAN WAS hastily abandoned during what was known as Operation Exodus. Ken was part of a gang charged with sealing up the mine entrances with concrete stoppings. Today he is one of only six men still alive who ever worked in the Mount Mulligan mine. It was a hot, dusty task, right on the cusp of summer.

“That was 15 November 1957,” Ken says. “And on the very next day, the pub shut.” The last round of workers and their families left for Collinsville on 7 December.

Following the 1958 auction of the last items of state property, Mount Mulligan fell into an extended slumber and the mine disaster dropped from public memory. Yet those who’d lived there never forgot. For years, Helen Scott’s family returned to their old house plot, to mow the grass and reminisce, while Ken Best helped to organise reunions for former residents who proudly dub themselves Mulliganites. ▶

◆ **Ken Best's family** was one of 38 families hastily transferred to Collinsville when the Mount Mulligan mine closed in 1957.



◆ **Helen Scott** still mourns the loss of her childhood home. She continues to cherish this model of the house a friend in Cairns created for her.





**Mount Mulligan** is now a ghost town. Most of the town's buildings were removed when the mine closed, but the chimney stack remains.

● **Isabel Clarke and Raymond Plath**, wearing 1920s period attire, travelled from Mareeba to attend the 2021 memorial in Mount Mulligan. Isabel's great-uncle was a miner at nearby Tyrconnell Gold Mine and is buried in the cemetery there.

● **Lost miners' descendants** and former Mount Mulligan residents were among those who laid wreaths at the commemorative service.



“To the families who lost people on that day, we are very sorry, because these people have perished on our land.”

In 2019 Mt. Mulligan Lodge luxury tourist accommodation opened on a nearby 28,000ha cattle station, but otherwise it's now a ghost town. Only one building from that era still stands – the former hospital, which now houses lodge staff. Old stumps and newer plaques are the only hints as to the locations of the pub, billiard hall, police station, post office, residences and other chambers of the town's beating heart.

The cemetery's remaining headstones are either crumbling or listing to the left or right. My throat catches when I spot the grave belonging to Wendy Longe's forebears.

Exploring the old mine precinct, its winding trails thick with coal dust, is an eerie experience. The foundations of the old shower blocks still stand, the kiln can be entered, and towering over it all is the chimney stack, purchased by a defiant miner at auction to ensure the structure could never be knocked down. Towards the base of the escarpment is the old mine entrance and, on either side of the gloomy interior, tidy but decaying rows of the logs Frank Grainer used to cart. The mine is now flooded and choked with fallen boulders and seems to exhale its steamy, foetid breath in waves.

**G**USTS OF WIND gather up fine red dirt, dusting cars and minibuses parked beside the dirt crossroads at Mount Mulligan, where an honour roll to the 75 dead miners stands. Under a marquee's shade on a 30°C day, Judulu Neal, chair of Nguddaboolgan Native Title Aboriginal Corporation, welcomes almost 600 attendees to the RSHQ-organised Miners' Memorial Day event. “To the families who lost people on that day, we are very sorry, because these people have perished on our land,” Judulu says. The Venerable Christopher Wright OAM, Archdeacon of north Queensland, then leads a minute's silence to remember the 1501 miners who have died in the state's mines to date.

Former underground mine manager and another of the event's speakers Ron McKenna is haunted by the experiences of his 68-year career. These include the 1972 underground gas and coal-dust explosion at Box Flat colliery near Ipswich in Queensland, which killed 17 men. Seven were part of the mine rescue team. “I lost a lot of my best friends in Box Flat,” Ron says. He was appalled by what he found. “There were body parts everywhere,” he recalls. “There were two crows fighting over a finger with a wedding ring on it. I said to Bill [Chief Inspector

PHOTO CREDITS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ALAMY; RESOURCES SAFETY AND HEALTH QUEENSLAND (RSHQ); RSHQ

• **The fob watch** of mine disaster victim George Doran James is forever displayed in the CFMEU office of Stephen Smyth. At the Mount Mulligan miners' memorial, Stephen said, "We must never forget the sacrifices made on this ground as we recommit ourselves to fighting for a safer coalmining industry."



of Mines Bill Roach], 'We've got to do something to prevent this from happening.'"

Yet mining is still a dangerous occupation. Professor David Cliff, professorial research fellow at the Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre at the University of Queensland's Sustainable Minerals Institute, says the Moura 2 Mine in 1994, which killed 11 men, was a "watershed" in mining safety. It compelled a shift from a rules-based approach to one of risk-management. Since then, the leading cause of fatal accidents has changed from principal hazards such as fires and explosions to individual fatalities involving 'falls of ground', falling from height, or accidents involving machinery. Although many major hazards have been eliminated, Cliff says, there are new challenges, including mounting pressures of production; deeper, hotter and more complex mines; and new roster patterns including fly-in fly-out working arrangements, which can contribute to mental health issues.

Third-generation coalminer Stephen Smyth, Queensland district president of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), needs no reminding that miners continue to die. Four days before the memorial day event, at 3.15am, he took a disturbing call about a roof collapse in the Sojitz Gregory Crinum open-cut coalmine near Emerald in central Queensland. In the hours that followed, he was "gutted" to learn that one miner, Graham Dawson, had died, and another man had been seriously injured.

Stephen also points to last year's explosion at the Anglo American Grosvenor mine near Moranbah, in

which five men suffered "horrific" burns and many more were traumatised. In a report released a year later, the Queensland Coal Mining Board of Inquiry identified multiple concerns, including the inadequacy of the mine's gas drainage systems to cope with the rate of production. "Grosvenor was so close to the entire mine exploding," Stephen says. "There were up to 180 miners working on that shift and they were put at risk as well. It was through good luck more than good management that we didn't have another Mount Mulligan disaster that day."

Stephen says every major disaster has delivered further improvements, including gas monitoring, self-rescuers (portable air packs) and emergency escape facilities. "But it's a tragic fact that most major improvements in safety in our industry are written in the blood of workers," he says. The prevalence of labour hire and other insecure work arrangements has left miners reluctant to speak up about safety breaches, he adds.

For Stephen, miners' safety is deeply personal. His wife's great-grandfather George Doran James, 40, and great-uncle George Robert James, 17, were killed in the Mount Mulligan tragedy. When the older man's body was recovered, rescuers removed his fob watch, which had stopped at 9.25am. Father and son were interred together in the Mount Mulligan cemetery. Stephen keeps the watch framed and hanging opposite his desk in the CFMEU office and sometimes it accompanies him on his travels around the region. "It serves as a reminder of what happens when it goes wrong," he says. "And it's a reminder of why I do what I do. Our work is never done." 