

Last February, mine inspector Jim Steiner recognized the gushing water and red stains on the walls of a southern Illinois coal mine as signs of imminent danger. "People would have died," Steiner said after preventing a catastrophic accident.

We Are DNR

Story By Joe McFarland

Jim Steiner is no match for modern technology. Eighteen years ago, Steiner was poking through the rubble of an Illinois mine accident, looking for clues about how those miners could have detected the abandoned mine shaft they'd accidentally breached, when he spotted something unusual.

Among the rubble, Steiner found wet, red-stained rocks he said he remembers actually tasting for clues. It was a noxious taste and a smell he never forgot.

Fast forward to February 2, 2010. Steiner, a roof control and ventilation specialist for the Department of Natural Resources Office of Mines and Minerals, was visiting a new coal mine in downstate Perry County when he began looking closely at the walls where miners were preparing to dig a new extension. Company engineers already had decided mining could proceed without trouble. Underground sonar readings performed by the engineers indicated the long-abandoned Whippoorwill Mine, opened in 1912, was still 500 feet away. Safety regulations require a distance of at least 200 feet between an old mine shaft and new mining activity.

But as Steiner examined the walls where miners were preparing to dig deeper, he noticed something he hadn't seen in 18 years. And it made him nervous.

"The ribs were gushing high-pressure water," he recalled recently. "And



Relying on his memory of a mine accident 18 years earlier, DNR mine inspector Jim Steiner prevented a catastrophic mine accident last February.

there was red staining all over the fissures." Although groundwater in coal mines is common, what Steiner saw brought an unsettling flashback. Once again, he lifted a wet rock to his tongue. "You could smell it and taste it," he said.

Despite sonar reading to the contrary, Steiner was absolutely convinced another mine, filled with water and deadly gas, was dangerously close. He quickly notified


his Mines and Minerals office in Benton, then contacted federal Mine Safety and Health Administration officials. The mining company was ordered to cease activity immediately, a costly delay based only on what Steiner believed from his memory. Even as engineers insisted the sonar was more reliable, a special drill was brought in from Colorado to bore a test hole in the direction of the planned mining. Once again, engineers insisted they would not reach another mine for 500 feet.

"At 8 ½ feet they hit another mine," Steiner said. "They were that close."

For those miners who would have been nearby, the suffocating rush of icy water and toxic, oxygen-depleted gas in the old mine would have flooded them instantly.

"People would have died," Steiner said.

In recognition for his life-saving decision to err on the side of caution, Steiner was recently honored in Springfield as DNR's employee of the quarter—in addition to the heartfelt thanks he received from the miners.

"I was just doing my job," the modest Steiner said reflexively, but then paused. "I guess there's a lot to be said for experience." 

Old, abandoned mines dating back 100 years or more exist throughout Illinois. Their precise locations underground aren't always known.

