

Drowned In Corn

Drowning is tragic—whether it occurs in an ocean, lake, river or swimming pool. Yet, many people have met tragic ends when they drowned in... grain! Indeed, a mass of grain can be every bit as treacherous as a body of water. The following is a true account of three young men who found themselves trapped in gargantuan bins of corn....



Help! I'm going under! I'm drowning!" The hysterical cries cut through the air, sending shivers down the spines of Wyatt Whitebread's two stunned co-workers. How could their friend be drowning? They were nowhere near water. They were inside a four-story granary that was filled with bushels of corn—millions of kernels of corn altogether.

The group of young men working in that granary, which is one of thirteen in the huge complex on Mill Road in Mount Carroll, Illinois, were recent hires. Their job was to make sure the corn flowed unobstructed into the huge tank.

At first, 14-year-old Wyatt Whitebread had been very excited about his first real job. However, after just two weeks, he complained to friends about the tedium of the work, which entailed clambering into vast bins filled with corn. "I wouldn't mind if I never saw a kernel of corn again in my life," he grumbled to his parents one night.

The next morning, on a sweltering July day, Whitebread was working alongside his friends Alex Pacas, 19, and Will Piper, 20, at the Haasbach grain storage complex. Pacas had started working there a day earlier and Piper a week prior. Another 15-year-old, Chris Lawton, also worked in that grain storage facility.

Shouldering shovels and pickaxes, the inexperienced workers climbed up the four-story high ladder to reach the top of the mammoth Bin No. 9, which was filled with innumerable hard, wet kernels of corn.

The boys turned to their respective tasks, wading into the corn and breaking up the clumps—sometimes 10 to 20 feet high—which were obstructing the flow.

Beware of the Corn!

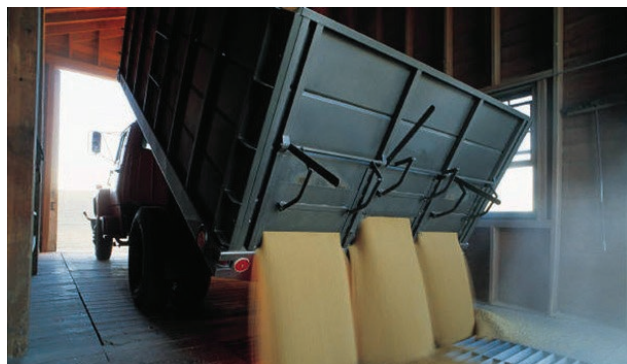
At the Mount Carroll granary, crucial safety measures were repeatedly ignored. None of the boys had received any kind of training or were warned about the perils of their work. Piper's manager, Matt Schaffner, admonished them once, saying, "Make sure to control the corn. Don't let the corn control



How could their friend be drowning? They were nowhere near water. They were in a four-story granary that was filled with corn.



There were 13 such bins in the huge complex on Mill Road in Mount Carroll, Illinois.



A shipment of corn just arrives from the field.

you!" However, the significance of the warning was lost on them.

After two hours, the youths inside Bin No. 9 made considerable progress, chipping away at the hardened kernels stuck to the sides of the huge bin and shoveling the loosened kernels into the hole in the center.

Around 9:45 AM, Schaffner opened two additional holes in the floor of the 500,000 bushel grain bin to accelerate the flow of corn. Underneath the drains a conveyor belt moved the corn along.

Suddenly, Piper saw Whitebread riding a pile of moving corn in a sitting position, something the young workers did occasionally to help the grain flow. By the time he stood up, Whitebread was knee-deep in the corn quicksand.

Whitebread started screaming as the kernels moved past his chest, up his chin and over his head. Alex Pacas and Will Piper rushed to their friend's aid, struggling to stay on the surface. Grabbing Whitebread by both arms, they attempted—unsuccessfully—to haul him out. He disappeared beneath the corn.

Then Pacas and Piper started sinking into the mass. Lawton meanwhile climbed a ladder inside the bin to get help. When Schaffner was alerted to the situation he quickly turned off the conveyor. However, the corn was still unstable and began to swallow up Pacas and Piper.

In desperation, Schaffner himself jumped into the bin and began frantically shoveling the endless kernels in an attempt to reach Whitebread. However, for every shovelful of kernels that he removed, another mountain came tumbling down. After about 30 seconds, Schaffner realized he wasn't getting anywhere, so he set down his shovel, climbed out of the bin and dashed outside to meet the rescuers who had already been summoned.

Meanwhile, the corn just kept on flowing around Piper and Pacas. As the kernels began pressing against Pacas' throat, he wailed, "We're going to die!"

"Hold on," responded Piper. "Help is coming soon."

But before he could say more and in front of Piper's horrified eyes, a final avalanche of corn landed on Pacas, completely covering him.

By now, Piper was himself chin-deep in corn. He was sure that he would share the same fate as his friends.



A manager in a granary inspects the corn in the bin before sending in the workers.



Professional grain workers prepare to work with the corn inside the bin.



Kernels of corn often get stuck to the walls of the bin, obstructing the flow of the corn.

Combating the Kernels

The first of the rescuers to arrive on the scene was firefighter Tom Kravato. He donned a safety harness and waded into the treacherous mass of corn. The first thing he did was jam a bottomless five-gallon plastic