

M/NM FATAL

SUMMARY DRAFT

June 24, 1887: Gould & Curry (Gold-Silver), Virginia City,
Nevada; 11 Killed
(From Nevada State Journal; June-July-August 1887)

Eleven miners lost their lives following a six p.m. fire of unexplained origin, but which was probably due to the dropping of "snuff" from a candlestick in a post, or so near the cap or tie that timbers were set on fire.

The smell of smoke in this well ventilated Comstock mine prompted those working on the various levels to scurry for safety. This fact saved the lives of the men working on the 600 and 800 levels. However, five miners on the 400 groped their way through a dark and narrow tunnel to almost within reach of safety before suffocating.

When the six men working on the 1500 level discovered the fire, they extinguished it only to learn that the drift had caved, thereby cutting off their exit in that direction. Attention was shifted to the bulks in an old drift and to the winze leading down to the 1700 level. Fortified with axes and shovels, they apparently worked in shifts of three men each, and had they been successful, escape would have been possible through what was known as the Sutro Tunnel. On July 11, more than two weeks later, rescue workers found their remains in an old winze 100 feet north of the Curry shaft.

One dedicated employee stood so faithfully at the shaft with his hand on the bell rope to intercept any signal, however weak, that he was overcome by poisonous fumes and was carried away, but upon regaining consciousness returned to his post. Weeks later he was forced to seek comfort in a distant climate from lingering after-effects of his exposure.

While the exact circumstances leading to the outbreak were not known, it was agreed that at least one miner had been careless or negligent with his lighted candle. Some voiced strong support for a rule which would prohibit a burning candle from being secured to a conveniently placed timber. Apprehended violators would be dismissed.

Criticism was also expressed because the relative positions of underground workings as indicated on Comstock maps, proved to be grossly inaccurate and misleading. What appeared to be a scant 20 feet of ground between the six trapped miners and safety, required more than weeks digging by alternating shifts of workers laboring around the clock.

FROM NEVADA STATE JOURNAL: JULY 8, 1887

THE SWELLING GROUND IN THE MINES UPSETS THE SURVEYS--Critism has been made upon the apparent error made by Superintendent Patten in running the rescue drift to the imprisoned miners in the Gould and Curry. Surveyor Wrinkle, who is the great Comstock Surveyor, says

if no error has been made no one is to blame, because the ground swells and moves so much that survey points are constantly getting out of place and becoming misleading. For instance four months ago Supt. Patten ran a drift which was done on a careful survey. Yesterday another survey was made, and it was found that the drift had pushed up nine feet, or more than two feet a month. A tunnel to connect with that drift would have gone clear under it.

FROM NEVADA STATE JOURNAL: JULY 10, 1887

THE MINERS FOUND.--A special dispatch to the Journal received from Virginia at 8 o'clock last evening says:

Early this morning communication was effected with the Gould and the Curry mine from the Con. Virginia rescue drift on the 1500 level. The bodies of the six entombed miners were not found but were ascertaining to be in an old winze one hundred feet north of the Curry shaft, below the 1500 level, communicating with the Sutro Tunnel, but bulkheaded. Preparations are being made with air pipes to enter this winze from above and below. The bodies will doubtless all be recovered tonight.

FROM NEVADA STATE JOURNAL: JULY 12, 1887

THE END.--The dead bodies of the six miners were taken from the Curry drift yesterday, and the funerals will take place today. The boys left no writing of their frightful experience. Peace, Sweet peace, to their ashes.

From: Nevada State Journal - August 2, 1887

Health Injured by the Fire.--The Enterprise has the following in regard to the late fire in the Gould & Curry:

Many heroes were brought out to light by the Gould & Curry fire and have received the praise of the people and the press, but there is one who should be noticed more than he has been. Manual Cafferata received orders that fateful night, soon after the fire was noticed, to stand at the shaft with his hand on the bell rope so that any signal which might be made would be received, although too weak to ring the bell. While men could hardly stay near the door of the works, Cafferata stood at his post and did not leave it until carried out after being overcome by the fumes. He again returned to his post upon recovery. The gas breathed by him that night has injured his health. He has gone to Lake Tahoe to see if the mountain air will benefit him, and intends to go to San Francisco from there, unless he improves.

FROM: NEVADA STATE JOURNAL: JULY 14, 1887

WERE THE MINERS SACRIFICE: The San Francisco Call queries:

Now that the fate of imprisoned miners on the Comstock is known, it is fitting that some thought should be bestowed on the cause of their death and on the circumstances which prevented their rescue. It appears they died of exhaustion, heat and hunger in a drift in which they were imprisoned by the outbreak of a fire, caused by carelessness, which cut off their only exit. There was no development of poisonous gas, such as often causes death in coal mines; no such gas is known on the Comstock. The air was rendered unfit to breathe by the combination of wood. It appears almost certain that the fire was caused by the ignition of a dry timber from the flames of a miner's candle that had been stuck in it. We may here note that a rule prohibiting the sticking of miners' candlesticks into timbers would obviate such an accident hereafter; there are a number of rules on the Comstock of which experience had dictated the propriety, yet which involve more inconvenience than this would.

When the fire broke out, and the men realized their situation, they fought with energy to get out. They extinguished the fire on the side of the station. They removed a lot of primers for fear of their igniting. When they discovered the cave in the drift they saw that egress was cut off in that direction and they attacked the bulkhead in the old drift in order to the winze leading down to the 1700 foot level, which would have enabled them to escape by the Sutro Tunnel. They appear to have divided themselves into two shifts of three men each, and they had provided themselves with axes and shovels. The severe labor exhausted them. How long did they keep up the work? That is a question which no one can answer. All that is certain is that there came a time when overcome by heat, foul air, and possibly want of food (their dinner-plates were empty,) they laid down and died. All six bodies were found within a space of twenty feet. One of the men had a watch, which had stopped at 5:25; it is assumed, on what evidence is not stated, that it was 5:25 in the afternoon of the day following the outbreak of the fire. If so, the unfortunate men perished within 21 hours of their incarceration.

The fire broke out at about 6 p.m. on the 24th of June, and it soon became evident that the men on the 1500 feet level could only be rescued by connecting that level with the south draft of the Con. Virginia. It was supposed that the two levels were about twenty feet apart. Both were supposed to run to the south line of the Con. Virginia, but the Best & Belcher drift was supposed to be twenty-feet below the level of the Con. Virginia drift. By vigorous work it was supposed that this distance could be covered in twelve hours, and high hopes were entertained that the imprisoned miners would be rescued on the 25th.

NEVADA STATE JOURNAL

JUNE 26, 1887

THE GOULD AND CURRY MINE ON FIRE

HEARTRENDING SCENES AT THE BONNER SHAFT

Friday evening the wires conveyed the awful intelligence that the Gould & Curry mine was on fire that 11 miners entombed in the deep underground works. This startling announcement was carried through our town and listened to with breathless interest. The terrible catastrophe that occurred in the Jacket mine 18 years ago rushed once more through the minds of those familiar with the occurrence, and it became a settled conclusion that the 11 unfortunate men had gazed upon the bright light of day for the last time. No human being, however fertile his conception, can portray the awful position of helpless human beings so situated. What thoughts chase each other with lightning rapidly through the terror-stricken brain? God alone can respond to the question. Hundreds of feet below the surface, crying in a dark corner of a dreary tunnel, every means of exit cut off by the demon fire, they utter wild prayers for help that can never come. Brave men are ready to go to their rescue, but are powerless to render aid. Such was the case on Friday night.

The smell of smoke in a well-ventilated mine is soon discovered and no time is lost in finding from whence it comes. This fact saved the lives of the men working on the 600 and 800 levels, who started for the Savage shaft at the first intimation of danger. Owing to a heavy draft the smoke rushed rapidly through the burning mine, and with no light to guide them, it is a miracle that the men on the 600 ever reached a place of safety. The poor fellows on the 400 made a desperate effort for liberty but, being in the dark, guided only by a rush of air and the side of a narrow tunnel, their progress was necessarily slow, and when almost within reach of the friendly door that would have saved them, they were overtaken by the deadly smoke and suffocated.

Joncy Morgan, one of the unfortunate men that was working on the 400, a young man held in high esteem by those who knew him, a little more than a year led the daughter of George Hanning, of Virginia City, to the Alter, and today she will follow the light of her young life to the tomb.

None of the five men on the 400 escaped. All were found dead in the tunnel that led to freedom. Every effort was made by brave miners to descend the smoking shaft, but in every instance they were driven back by air in which nothing could live.

Imprisoned on the 1500, near the station are-----6-----.
The fire originated on the 1500, near the station, and when these

entombed men discovered the fact the flames had, no doubt, made such headway that it would have been sure death to run the gauntlet of fire, and their only rescue was to run back to the face of the drift and trust to Providence. Between this drift which has been run to the consolidated Virginia south line, and a level on the Con. Col. and Va. mine, there is 20 feet of ground, and the rescuers are working ten minutes passes to tear out this ground and reach the imprisoned men. Signals were interchanged up to half past eleven o'clock on Friday night, but the last signal sounded by the rescuing party not answered. The air compressor is kept running at full speed and it is barely possible that if no accident occurs to the air pipe and the intervening ground can be taken out without delay, they may be found alive, but it is not probable. The connection, if the ground is easy to work, will probably be made today. Supt. Patton is doing all that mortal man can do for the relief of the unfortunate men aided in his noble efforts by men who fear no danger when the life of a comrade is at stake.

How the fire originated is still unexplained, but was probably occasioned by a "snuff" dropping from a candlestick, in a post or so near the cap or tie that the flame set the timbers on fire. This is something that frequently occurs, but as a general thing the owner of the candlestick is nearly to prevent the occurrence of anything serious. Miners are always cautioned about leaving their candlesticks, with lights in them, sticking in the timbers, but still it is frequently done. In the Godl Hill properties the most rigid rules are enforced regarding light and any negligence on the part of miners is immediately punished by discharging them. Smoking is positively prohibited and consequently is not indulged in underground. Miners along the lods fear fire more than anything else, knowing full well the horrors that would follow. It is a very fortunate thing that the fire in the Gould and Curry originated where it could not communicate to adjoining properties or a clamity would have followed the details of which would have beggared description.

No time will be lost by the rescuing party and it is to be hoped that the imprisoned men on the 1500 will be found alive. With air and water they can stand the place they are in for several days.

The latest from the Gould and Curry disaster is to the effect that the men remaining in the mine are supposed to be dead. The rescuing party are doing good work, and will probably make the connection this evening. The distance to run is greater than at first represented, but the best miners in the employ of the company are at work, and the increased distance will not delay them many hours.