

Historical Documentation of Major
Coal Mine Disasters in the United States
Not Classified as Explosions of Gas or Dust:
1846-1962

January 12, 1846; No. 1 Mine, Carbondale, Pa.;
14 Killed

(From book "The Story of Anthracite" prepared and published by The Hudson Coal Company, 1932, pp. 172-174)

About eight o'clock in the forenoon, a roof fall, involving an area of almost fifty acres, imprisoned many men. Although most of the men were rescued, fourteen lives were lost; eight of the bodies were never recovered.

(From "The Mining Herald and Colliery Engineer," June 6, 1885, p. 246)

The fall of the roof of the coal mine at Raven Run and imprisonment of the ten miners underground, recall to a survivor of the first great mine disaster in this country the most marvelous escape of some of the miners who were imprisoned behind a wall of fallen coal a mile thick at the time of the disaster. The mine was one at Carbondale. For several days in the Winter of 1844¹ it had been giving warning to the miners by what is known among them as "working"—ominous cracklings of the roof here and there through the mine—that they were laboring in constant danger, but with the proverbial recklessness of their class they continued to work. Suddenly, while nearly one hundred miners were below, and most of them working in the distant galleries, and immense area of the mine roof fell.

The superintendent of the mine was a Scotchman named Alexander Bryden, and he had a son among the laborers below. Bryden was at the top when the fall occurred, and he rushed at once into the mine to see if it were possible to rescue any of the workmen. Before he reached the fallen mass of coal he met several miners who had in some way escaped being crushed by the roof. They told Bryden that it was not possible that any of the other miners could be alive. He insisted on making an effort to work a passage through the wall in the hope some of the men might be alive behind it and could be rescued, and the miners he had met on their way out of the pit, where top coal was still falling on every side, refusing to aid him, the superintendent went on alone. His lamp threw but a dim light on the scene, but he found a small opening made by the tops of two large slabs of coal having stuck together, with their bases on the bottom of the mine three feet apart. Into this crevice Bryden crawled, and found the opening continued in a devious course into the depths. It grew so narrow and low that he was compelled to lie flat and drag himself along. In that way he worked himself at the end of the choked chamber, where he emerged from the passage into a small open space. He was greeted by

a shout that told him some of the imprisoned miners were still alive. The fall had extinguished every light, and they had failed to find an opening in the wall that lay between them and the mouth of the mine. Among the miners was Bryden's son. The superintendent quickly told the men what they must do in order to escape. One of their number had been crushed by the fall, and lay moaning with both arms and legs broken. Bryden took this man on his back, and, creeping with him through the opening, told the others to follow. Twelve of the men were able to keep strength enough to reach the opening on the other side of the mine without aid, but eight of them was necessary for the others to drag along the jagged floor and sharp edges of the passage. The ominous cracking could be heard at short intervals coming from different parts of the mine, and every one of the miners toiling through the narrow and crooked crevice in the wall expected every moment to be crushed by the settling of the mass of coal. They were all saved, however, and the writer's informant, now an aged resident of the county, is the last survivor of the party, the brave Bryden having only recently died. The old miner referred to had two sons in another part of the mines (sic) who were among the victims of the disaster.

Among those who were in the mine at the time of the fall of the roof was Assistant Superintendent Hosie. Two days and nights after he crawled from the mouth of the pit. He was haggard and bleeding and his fingers were worn to the bone. He dropped unconscious at the mouth, and it was hours before he could give any account of his experiences in the mine. He had been surrounded by falling coal, and when the mass had settled he found himself without light or implement of any kind. After groping about in the space in which he was imprisoned, he found a small aperture in the wall and he crawled into it. From that time he dragged himself through places which were barely large enough to admit his body, sometimes being forced to dig away obstructions with his hands, never once thinking of sleeping, choked by thirst, and not even cheered by a knowledge of the direction he was going, until, after 48 hours of constant and disheartening toil, he emerged from the prison well and knew that he was in the tunnel leading out of the mine.

In removing the fallen mass of coal the discovery was made that but few of the miners who were victims of the disaster had been killed outright. Groups of workmen were found surrounded by unmistakable evidence that they had worked desperately with their picks in the hope that they might cut a way to liberty, but, without water or light, and with foul air following the tumbling roof, had at last succumbed to their fate. One poor fellow was found alone, held fast to his waist in a mass of coal. He had worked with his pick-axe until he died with the tool clutched in his hands. Mine rats had eaten the flesh almost entirely from his body. Years afterward skeletons of other victims were occasionally found beneath the coal.

¹The year 1844 does not agree with other records, but this is obviously due to the lapse of time after the disaster.

Star and Republican Banner
Friday, January 23, 1846

ACCIDENT AND GREAT LOSS OF LIFE.—The N. York Journal of Commerce contains the following letter, dated Carbondale Pa., Jan., 12, 4 P. M. :

"Our village is the scene of great excitement in consequence of a serious accident, which has happened this morning in the mine. About 10 o'clock, the roofs of the mines Nos. 1 and 2, to the extent of a number of acres, suddenly fell in. The sudden pressure of the air extinguished the lights even in the other mines connected therewith, to the distance of about half a mile. A great loss of life was feared, but after all came out who were able, and who were much injured, it is found that there are about 15 still missing, among whom I am sorry to say is Mr. Hosea, an assistant overseer in the mines. He was last seen near where the bulk of ruin lies. As it is very dangerous to attempt to get at them in consequence of the danger of more falling, and the uncertainty of their situation, I fear there is little hope of the extrication of any with life."

Milwaukee Daily Standard

Thursday, February 5, 1846

CARBONDALE, Jan. 14, 1846.

THE ACCIDENT AT CARBONDALE.—We have some farther details relative to the accident in the coal mines at Carbondale, of which we gave a short account on Wednesday. The *Wayne Co. Herald*, published in the immediate vicinity, says:

On Monday an immense mass of slate, about seven acres in extent, fell from the roof of one of the mines of the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company, at Carbondale, upon the workmen below. The spot where the slate fell, was a mile from the mouth of the mine. Three persons were taken out seriously injured, one of whom, a boy, died soon after the accident. Of the others, hopes are entertained of their recovery.

The boy who died was riding a horse at the time of the accident, and is supposed to have been killed by the force of the air rushing toward the mouth of the mine—the horse was also killed. The other persons who were taken out were also injured by the rushing of the air. About one hundred and fifty men who were at work mining, some distance from the place of the accident, escaped—but horrible to relate, fifteen persons, who were at work propping up the miners, were either crushed instantly or are walled in without any hope of becoming rescued, as it will take weeks to remove the immense mass of slate which has fallen in; and yet, if alive, will be compelled to die of the most horrible of all deaths—that of starvation! We have been furnished with the names of the missing persons—four of whom have families; they are as follows:

Anthony Welsh, Mark Brennan, William Clones, Patrick Mitchell, Patrick Leonard, Henry More, James McGath, Michael Falin, Henry Derney, John Farrell, Patrick Walker, Peter Crawley, John Hosey, Benjamin Williams, and a son of Widow Brennan.

We are informed upon good authority, that this accident will not retard the operations of the Company.

One of the fifteen above mentioned, however, has been fortunate enough to escape uninjured, after an incarceration of forty eight hours. Mr. Hosey, the one alluded to, was formerly a resident of New York, and has been for some time an overseer in the mines. The following letter, copied from the *Courier & Enquirer*, details the method by which he escaped:

Mr. John Hosey came out of the mines this morning, not having received serious injury, except that he has cut and lacerated his hands by working his way through the rocks and slate during forty-eight hours.

There appears to be from 12 to 15 acres of the roof to have settled down by crushing the pillars and props. It is but one mile from the mouth or entrance and cross Nos. 1 and 2 roads. Some rock have fallen into No 3, but to no great extent.

Mr. Hosey says he was in No. 2, and the crash came instantly. The roof came down upon him, and closed up within three feet, resting upon the crushed pillars. He remained quiet and pent up in the dark until the roof had done settling. He then worked his way by moving the loose coals, until he got to the heading of chamber No. 2. He then found a spring that had been let in by the breaking of the roof, where he got water to drink.

He then worked his way through the chamber to the head of No. 1 road, and found it closed, and also the air shaft at that place. He then crept back to the place where he was first caught, so as to be found on the main road, if he could not get out. After considering the locality of the other roads, he made the attempt to work his way through the column to No. 3, and persevered until he got thro' into that road, and then got out without difficulty.

Mr. H. has not seen or heard of any of the fourteen men that are now missing. He was alone. He says those men were near the place No. 1, and are shut in, either dead or alive, at the head of that place. Energetic efforts are being made to reach them, but it is no probable they can be got out alive. They were laborers, engaged in heaping, and not acquainted with the means of getting out like the miners, even if they could move at all. Mr. H. owes his escape solely to his cool and deliberate judgment, and to his knowledge of the interior of the mines.

The rush of air was so great out of No. 1, that the wagons were broken to fragments—the wheels and axles even were crushed by being dashed against the pillars, &c. along the road.

About one third of the daily supply of coal came from these two roads. We cannot tell whether the accident will effect the quantity of coal contemplated for this year. We hope to resume work by the 1st of March.

Hagers-town Torch Light and Public Advertiser

Thursday, February 5, 1846

From the N. Y. Commercial Advertiser.

Living Burial and Escape.

For the subjoined graphic account of the remarkable disaster at Carbondale, and the almost miraculous escape of a man who was buried in the crushed mines, we are indebted to the Rev. Mr. Rowland, pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Honesdale but formerly of the Pearl Street Church in this city. The narrative is equally interesting and extraordinary.

Correspondence of the Com. Advertiser.

HONESDALE, Jan. 15, 1846.

On Monday morning last, about nine o'clock, an accident occurred in the coal mines of the Delaware and Hudson canal company, at Carbondale, which has produced considerable excitement in the community. A large portion of the hill or mountain into which the mines extend, following a law of gravity, suddenly descended on the honey-comb cavities within its bosom, burying all the unfortunate individuals within its reach. Very many aires descended in a mass; and so great was the pressure of the atmosphere, occasioned by this descent, as to shoot out from the mouth of one of the mines, as from a cannon, a train of cars with a horse and a boy, throwing them to a considerable distance. Think of a bellows moved by mountain power, and you will form a very correct idea of the blast. Painful to relate, fifteen individuals were beneath the descended mass, only one of whom has had the good fortune to escape; and his adventures exceed every thing on record. The remaining fourteen are buried alive, if not crushed, and may be now hopelessly wandering in those gloomy caverns, beyond the reach of human aid, and shut out forever, in all probability, from the light of day.

To present a distinct idea of this occurrence, I must first give a brief description of the mines, and the manner of working them. There are several openings to the coal, which are numbered as, 1, 2, 3, 4 &c; two of them are above the bed of the Lackawanna, and the others are below it. These openings are holes in the side of the hill, about six feet by eight, and are the main entrances to the mines.

From these mouths are roads, leading into the interior of the mountain, following the dip of the coal, sometimes ascending and sometimes descending. The extent of the mining operations will be perceived from the fact that there are thirty-five miles of railroad laid under ground, in the bosom of the mountain including the main roads with all their ramifications.

The coal lies in a horizontal stratum of from four to six feet in thickness, between strata of slate. The method of mining is, to cut out and remove the coal, leaving only piers of it to support the hill above, aided by wooden props made of sections of trees, cut of a suitable length. As fast as the coal is removed, the latter branches of the road are abandoned, and the main avenues pushed on to the coal beyond. In this way the coal has been removed for a mile and a half under the mountain, and the roads extend that distance. About a mile from the mouth of mine No. 1 an air-hole was cut to the surface, up an inclined plane, by which access could be had to the surface of the earth, and down which props were taken. The excavation for coal extends half a mile or more beyond this opening. It was in this vicinity that the accident occurred, and by closing the mouth of this passage, cut off all hope of escape to those within, in this direction.

As fast as the coal is removed, no particular care is taken to support the mass above, in the chambers which are abandoned; the props are left to decay, and the rock and earth may gradually settle down and fill up those cavities, as it has done in former instances; but care is taken to guard the main avenues to the coal from being thus obstructed.

The coal lies beneath a mass of slate; above the slate is the sand stone rock, and above this are the gravel and soil. I have often noticed, in passing through the mines, that many of the ends of the props, which support the slate above, were shivered like a broom, the vast pressure on them; and I never saw this indication without thinking what might happen, should the mass from above

take a notion suddenly to descend, and always breathed easier when I had passed through the mines and emerged to the light of day.

Symptoms of the working of the mass above had been for some time observed; and these symptoms had greatly increased for a few days previous to the catastrophe. Every thing was done which could be done in these circumstances to avert danger. No one supposed it possible that the rock above would prove so firm, or that it would settle suddenly or in a mass.

Only a few of the workmen, of whom there are nearly four hundred employed in the mines, had gone in on Monday morning, when Mr. Clarkson, the superintendent, discovered the ominous appearances, and immediately set some hands to work in propping up the slate. On coming out of the mines, about 8 1-2 o'clock, he met Mr. John Hosie, (who is well known on the Croton water works as one of the ablest masons, and who has been in the Hudson and Delaware Canal Company's employment for about a year, preparing himself to take charge of the new mines to be opened below Carbondale,) and told him that he had better wait till he could go with him, and they would examine the mines together.

Mr. Hosie went on, however, into No. 2, intending to join Mr. Clarkson presently, and had proceeded about a mile when instantly the mountain over his head descended with an awful crush of every thing which opposed its progress, and shot down over him, falling up the road with crushed coal and bending him double, leaving not a foot of space between the solid mass above and the crushed coal below. The distance descended was the height of the mine, or from six to eight feet. So great was the pressure of the air that it produced a painful sensation as if some sharp instrument had been thrust into his ears. -- All was total darkness, every light in the mine being extinguished. Ever and anon the thunder of the falling masses roared through the caverns. After waiting a suitable length of time for the rocks to cease falling, Mr. Hosie began to remove the loose material around him and to creep. He tried one way and it was closed. He then proceeded in the other direction; and after nine hours incessant toil, creeping, removing loose coal and slate, and squeezing himself past obstacles, he made his way into the open mine. Here he tried to strike a light, but his matches had become damp and would not ignite. He then felt around him and discovered by the direction of the railroad that, instead of making his way out, he had gone farther into the mine, and was cut off from a return by the mass which had settled down upon the road. He then bethought him of the air hole, and attempted to reach it; but that passage had been crushed in and closed. Being in the vicinity of the mining operations he found some powder and sprinkling it on the floor, endeavored with a pick to ignite it, but could not. He found also a can of oil, which he reserved in case of necessity to use for food.

Continued next page

Living Burial and Escape - continued

All was total darkness, and the part of mountain over him was also settling, throwing off huge pieces of slate and exposing him to imminent danger at every step; for but a part of the mass above had come down at once, and the other seemed likely to follow. Sensible of his danger, Mr. Hosie protected himself as well as he could; he wound up his watch, and felt the time by the hands.— He also, with a piece of chalk, wrote in different places his name and the hour when he was at certain points. Being in total darkness, however, he missed his way, but was enabled through his acquaintance with the mines to set himself right. He first tried to reach No. 1, but after toiling to that road, found that it was also crushed in. His only chance seemed then to proceed at right angles with the main arteries of the mines and pass over to No. 3, & this he labored to do in accordance with his best judgment.

At one time he passed through a narrow entrance into a chamber, and in endeavoring to creep out on the other side he was caught in a narrow place by the hill above settling down upon him, and remained in this position an hour, expecting to die there. But another settling of the mass crushed out some of the materials around him, and he was enabled to free himself and draw back into the chamber of the mine. In returning, however, to the hole by which he had effected his entrance, he found to his dismay that it was closed; and he was compelled to hunt a new passage and finally to dig his way out with his hands.

Thus, after working for more than thirty-six hours, he at length reached No. 3, where he rested, and then when the hill had partially ceased its working, proceeded towards the mouth of the mines. On his way he met Mr. Bryden, one of the superintendents, who, with his men, was exploring the cavern with lights, in search of him; and at about five o'clock in the morning he emerged to the light of day, having been given up as dead, and been incarcerated in utter darkness beneath a settling mountain for forty-eight hours. Mr. Hosie told me many of these particulars, and the others I gleaned from the principal officers of the company, to whom they were

narrated.
At one time Mr. Hosie saw lights at a distance, but they soon vanished. They were the light of men in No. 3 seeking for him.— These light however assured him that he was pursuing the right course. Mr. Hosie's hands were scratched and cut up by working, so as to be completely covered with sores. He never for one moment lost his self-possession, and to this fact, added to his tact and perseverance, is to be ascribed his deliverance.

There were about forty men in the mines when the catastrophe occurred, and the twenty six who escaped owed their preservation, in a great measure, to Mr. Bryden, one of the superintendents, who conducted them out with great coolness and self-possession, while portions of the hill, other than those which first fell, were settling down around them. Learning that one poor Irish laborer, who had been struck down by slate, was left, with his leg broken, he went back alone and brought him out. Sometimes he was compelled to creep, and draw the man after him, through crevices which were soon after closed by the settling of the hill. In two hours more the whole had shut down, so that if he had been left his death would have been inevitable. Thanks to Mr. Bryden for his coolness, intrepidity and humanity.

The greatest possible efforts are now made by working night and day to reach the place where the fourteen were at work; but faint hopes, however, are cherished respecting them. The places cannot probably be reached before the middle of next week, if then.— The probability is that they have been struck to death. Most of them were men with families. One boy only is known with certainty to be dead.

Except the loss of life, this unforeseen occurrence is not much to be regretted, nor will it greatly impede the company's operations since it has occurred at about the time when it is usual to suspend labor for a couple of months, to repair for the Spring, and every thing will be rectified before then. The immense strength of the rock above prevented the hill from settling in the usual way; but now it is down, it is to be rejoiced at, as it frees us from future danger, & the roads when reopened will be perfectly secure. It was an innovation for it to come down suddenly and in a mass, instead of the quiet decent way it has adopted in former instances, and no human foresight could have predicted the manner of its descent, nor could human prudence, in the present state of knowledge, have provided against it.

The quantity of the mountain fallen is variously estimated. Mr. Bryden said that it was about three quarters of a mile long, by half a mile in width. Mr. Clarkson said that it was about a mile long and an eighth wide. In the former case it would be about 240 acres, and in the latter 40 acres. Mr. Archibald, the chief superintendent of the mines and rail road, whose science and practical skill are not exceeded, estimates the amount fallen at far less than either of his assistants. Since the first avalanche, it must be borne in mind, however, many other portions have gone down. What the extent of the whole is no one can conjecture with any approximation to certainty; and it is exceedingly difficult at present to get any accurate information respecting it.

I do not know that the company have any interest either to magnify or conceal the matter, inasmuch as it is more likely to prove a benefit than a damage to their future operations. The only expense attending it will be to repair the roads and remove the obstructions; but there will then be the safer, and the knowledge acquired by this experience may prove of the greatest utility hereafter.

The occurrence seemed to me so unlike anything I ever heard of, that I commenced writing the account of it to my friends; but it has proved so long, that to save the multiplication of letters, I concluded to send it to your paper, which most of them are accustomed to read; and they may, if they choose consider it as personally addressed to each of them.—There may be others of your readers also to whom it may not be uninteresting.

With sentiments of respect, I am yours
H. A. ROLAND.