

West Pittston Colliery Disaster Caused By Miners Worst Enemy

By Ed Phillips
Dispatch Staff

As the anthracite industry exploded during the 1850's and 1860's, collieries grew and mine managers, eager to wrench every possible cent out of a ton showed a general disregard for safety measures. Accidents were common and could usually be traced to a few possible causes.

Poor ventilation was the miners worst enemy. Most shafts only had one air opening and huge fans were installed at the bottom or top to help ventilate them. The buildup of gasses and the igniting of gob piles posed a serious daily problem. Gob was a mixture of slate, bony coal, coal dust and lumps which the miner's laborer missed. Similar to the fires which started in calm banks, the gob internally combusted.

The West Pittston colliery fire of May 27, 1871 was a typical mine disaster in the anthracite coal fields before mine safety legislation and stronger unions formed in the 1870's. Before the day was over, twenty miners were dead, 30 children orphaned, 14 widowers and the breaker burned to the ground.

At the time, it was common practice to build the breaker directly over the shaft or adjacent to the opening of a slope. The fire began after one o'clock in the fan house. First to witness the fire was a mine superintendent who immediately alerted stationary engineer James McDermott, who used the speaking pipe to give the alarm at the bottom of the shaft. McDermott had been in fan house at 1:05 and reported that everything was fine and was led to believe that a hot journal might have ignited the freshly oiled equipment.

The mine only had one shaft and the breaker was directly over it. Work for the improvement of ventilation had been done recently but was not completed. Miners frequently complained that the works had poor ventilation. David Harris testified before the coroner's inquest, which was held at Pittston city hall, that "after blasting the smoke remained all day," and that no work had been done in three weeks because of bad gas. A mine inspector had visited the works recently and noticed that the fan ran very fast but produced low air flow.

What the inspector didn't know was that the fan, which could give ventilation for twenty men, was being used for at least forty men. The breakdown of workers that fatal day was: fourteen chambers being worked by two men each, and two with four men each, four drivers, four footmen, two runners, two young boys tending doors, one trackman, one fan tender. The others were unaccounted for.

One of the operators and managers greatest faults was the belief they built that mine accidents were caused by careless miner's and that their safety measures were adequate. As the Civil War passed, most of the English and Welsh that began the mines had assumed higher positions. The average colliery worker was Irish. Unlike their neighbors, most of the Irish came from rural origins and were not used to the regimentation caused by the industrial revolution. Also, there were few mines in Ireland and the Irish arrived with little or no experience. It was easy for the colliery operators to place all the blame elsewhere.

As the fire consumed the breaker and moved down the shaft, the last two cars of miners exited the ground and made



their way to safety. The recent mine inspection had also noted that the speaking pipe was too long. There was much confusion during the fire as many men fled the works. McDermott testified to pulling seven or eight cars up the slope loaded with men. Some even testified that they never heard anyone sound the alarm. Another unfortunate part of 19th mining techniques were the untreated timbers that lined the shafts and passageways. They became choked with coal dust and could prove highly flammable.

At the coroner's inquest, Superintendent Kendrick testified that the mine inspector gave no indication of bad air in the mine or the necessity for additional alarms. The inspector stood up and vehemently denied these accusations and made insinuating remarks towards Kendrick, the judge and jury. He was escorted from the room.

Eventually the fire in the fan house caught the rope pulleys on fire. As the pulleys worked their way to the top of the breaker, the fire continued to spread catching oily rags and anything else on fire. Burning timbers fell to the bottom of the shaft and those remaining underground sought shelter in the inner workings. With no fresh air coming into the mine, the air was being poisoned. By five o'clock the breaker was a smoldering ruin.

Other miners testified to the close relationship between the inspector and the management. "The inspector never told him to break the law but had told him to keep within the law," Kendrick said of his superior Mr. Brown. Brown also told Kendrick to study the new safety laws and do all he could to keep the men out of danger. There still was a basic understanding between the men that the mine had poor air but the inspector had noted a definite improvement. This was not the first time that the West Pittston shaft had been overworked either.

Oddly enough, Democrat Senator Samuel G. Turner of Luzerne county told the Senate that the mines in his district were essentially safe. The 1869 mine safety law was the first in the anthracite

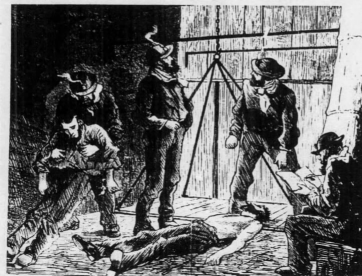
fields. It was originally proposed for Schuylkill county but an attempt was made to include all of the hard coal counties. Turner also noted that he never read the bill. It was signed into law only for Schuylkill county. He also showed a general level of ignorance so he could protect "important interests." It was only a few months later that the Avondale mine fire claimed 110 men and boys and Turner faced a major political crisis which he used to his advantage during the following election. Republicans quickly called the democrats, traditional friends of the miners, murderers.

The verdict of the inquest was that the fire had been caused from friction of one of the fan journals. The death of twenty miners was attributed to the effects of impure air caused by improper ventilation and from the effects of carbonic acid produced by the burning breaker.

Employee negligence was also cited for not keeping the journal properly oiled. The inspector was also cited for ignoring obvious safety violations and not protesting against them.

The miners killed in the West Pittston disaster were:

- John Burroughs,
- Patrick Carden
- Hiram Curtis
- David Conner
- Martin Cooney (19),
- Martin Crahan (11 but given as 14 in state mine report)
- George Cull
- Peter Davis
- Evan R. Davis
- David Edwards
- Patrick Farley
- William James
- Benjamin Jones
- Owen Maken
- Charles Mc Ginnis
- Thomas Prosser
- Thomas Ruane
- Aaron Smallcombe
- Timothy Walsh.



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