

DREADFUL MINE DISASTER

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE MEN
KILLED BY AN EXPLOSION.

Not One of Those at Work in or About the
Mine Left to Tell the Tale—The Machinery
at the Mouth of the Shaft Blown 300
Feet Away—The Mine on Fire.

A terrible gas explosion occurred at one o'clock Thursday morning in the Laurel Creek mine, operated by the Southwest Improvement Company in Pocahontas, Va. One hundred and fifty-five men were at work there at the time, and such was the force of the explosion that everyone was killed, and the fanning machine, engine, and cars were blown 300 feet from the entrance. The engineer at work near the mouth of the mine, as well as his assistant and a colored boy, were blown hundreds of feet away, and their mangled bodies were found scattered in every direction. The engineer's head was found in a ravine, and his legs and arms were picked up near the mine. Of those at work in or about the mine not one was left to tell the story.

The little hamlet, whose population numbers about 500, and made up entirely of the houses of the miners, was resting quietly when the explosion occurred, but soon afterward the whole place was roused, and the scene which followed beggars description. The few living beings who saw a puff of smoke shoot from the mine, and the sudden upheaval of the engines and cars, hastened into the town with loud cries for help. Men, women and children were roused, and as soon as they comprehended the dreadful news they made a wild rush for the scene of the disaster. Despite the cold night, women, as well as men, ran off scantily clad. Experienced miners, on reaching the scene, were satisfied that no men in the mines were living. A slight rain and snow was falling, which added to the horrors of the situation, which has been intensified by the discovery that the mine is on fire.

The Laurel Creek mine is the only one in that part of the State, and has been operated for about two years. It consists of a tunnel running three-quarters of a mile in the mountain side, and a railroad runs the entire length of the mine. There are lateral galleries at intervals. The mine is situated above the water level, and for this reason it has until now been free from accident, not a single fatal casualty having occurred since operations were begun. W. A. Lathrop, the superintendent, is an expert mining engineer and has had many years' experience. The mines have been worked by reliefs every six hours.

A train of cars, drawn by a small engine, was near the entrance and moving in the mine at the time of the explosion. Four cars and the engine were blown out, and a car axle was propelled by the force of the explosion into the side of a small frame house occupied by two miners, William Amory and Jake Sexton. Both were asleep, having left the mine at six o'clock. The noise awoke them. Their escape was wonderful, the iron wheels of the car falling by the side of their bunks. They struck a light, and, so far as can be learned, were the first to realize the situation and to give the alarm.

The cause of the explosion is not yet definitely ascertained, as the entries to the mines are all full of bad air, but the presumption is that one of the miners struck a fissure of gas. Several parties ventured into the mines, but could not endure the foul atmosphere. A number of bodies were discovered horribly mangled, some of them with their heads torn from the trunks, and others with the limbs all gone, representing a horrible spectacle. The work of destruction was not confined entirely to the interior of the mines, but houses 200 or 300 feet removed from the mines were overturned, and in several instances entirely demolished.

The large ventilator of the Southwest Improvement Company was blown to atoms, and the mines cannot be entered until another is constructed for the purpose of freeing the atmosphere of the suffocating fumes. This work is now progressing speedily. A large force is engaged on the outside of the mines, constructing coffins and perfecting other arrangements for the interment of the dead. Those who were not killed outright by the terrible force of the explosion most likely perished from the after-damp.

The men employed in the mines were mostly Hungarians without families. A number of negroes from Lynchburg and the surrounding country were also employed.

What effect the disaster will have on the operations of the miners can only be conjectured until the full extent of damage is known. The mines have not been long opened, but the company had gotten well under way, and was supplying a large section of country with coal; and the prospect was most encouraging, a large coaling station for the supply of ocean steamers being in process of construction at Norfolk. While the accident will have the effect of retarding work at the mines, it is not believed that it will cause a permanent discontinuance of operations, as a great deal of money has been expended there by Northern capitalists composing the Southwest Improvement Company.

The latest intelligence concerning the explosion in the Pocahontas mines is to the effect that about 150 men were killed and that the accident was caused by the men's going too far into the mines with their lamps. A relief train, with physicians and a force of workmen on board has gone to the scene of the accident from Petersburg. A dispatch has been received at Petersburg asking that safety lamps be sent to Pocahontas at once to facilitate the work of recovering the bodies.

The mine in which the disaster occurred is known as the Flat Top Mine, and is situated in the northeast portion of Tazewell county, at the base of the Flat Top Mountains, which divide that part of Virginia from West Virginia. The company working the mine is nominally known as the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company, but the mine is really under the control of the Norfolk and Western Railroad Company who have a branch road, known as the New River

division, running from New River to Pocahontas, about sixty miles. John C. Ilsey, of Pennsylvania, is president of the Improvement Company, and William A. Lathrop is superintendent of the mine, which is comparatively new, having been in active operation but little over a year. From 500 to 600 hands were employed, and a large quantity of coal was being taken out.

A correspondent who visited the mine said no one dared venture any considerable distance into any of the openings. Crowds of men, with melancholy, blackened visages, surrounded the shops and buildings, discussing the disaster. Only a few women were seen in the vicinity, and these came more out of curiosity than in search of missing relatives.

The indications of the fiery blast from the mine on the surface show that it shot with tremendous velocity from all the entrances southeast and north. Heavy mine cars, weighing more than a ton, standing 600 yards within the entrance to the mine, were hurled from the mouth and smashed to pieces against the opposite side of the valley, 200 yards away. The hot blast as it swept forth blackened and scorched everything it came in contact with and destroyed numerous buildings in its course. Every impediment in its way, including trees, trucks and buildings, was shattered and cleared away.

The locomotive engine shed was blown down. The trunks and stumps of trees are blackened and charred, and hillsides and ground are covered nearly an inch thick with coal dust. The roads inside the entries were torn up to the depth of two feet.

All the evidences go to show that the blast must have swept the whole mine and have quickly dealt death to the unfortunate miners.

The mine superintendent says—"The explosion was caused, in his opinion, by a blast which probably opened up a large quantity of gas. He says it could not have occurred from a lamp."

Nearly all of the bodies are mangled, some of them beyond recognition. Many of the bodies are decapitated and limbs are separated from the trunks, necessitating the removal of the corpses in pieces. The wives and children of many of the victims are at the scene of the disaster, and their grief as the remains of their loved ones are brought to light is heartrending.

The management, to prevent the possibility of any fresh disaster flooded the mine. It may be therefore several weeks or months before any attempt can be made to reach the bodies of the unfortunate miners. Around the mines are only a few persons not connected with them. One of the most notable features of this awful disaster is the quiet and almost matter-of-fact way in which it is regarded.

This is probably owing to the fact that so few of the victims belong to the locality, the great majority of them being strangers and foreigners. A close investigation has only discovered four families of the lost miners in the vicinity. It is not known nor can it be ascertained how many of the unfortunate miners had families. In consequence of this extensive relief measures are held in abeyance.

Fresh evidence of the frightful force of the explosion continues to present itself. In front of the three west entrances the bark of trees 100 feet away is burned to a cinder three-fourths of an inch thick. This is even the case on the rear sides of the trees, which show that the whole valley around the mine on the night of the disaster must have been one vast sheet of lambent flame. The mine has five distinct and separate entrances, all running on the same level as far inward as one-half a mile or more.

From each of these entrances the explosion belched forth with terrific force, carrying great clouds of blazing coal dust and flaming gas, which scorched and charred everything combustible in its way. The hour being about half-past one on Thursday morning, there were few if any witnesses of this awful spectacle. In the blacksmith shop there were two men, one white and one colored, both of whom were so stunned and injured by the explosion that neither of them realized anything beyond their immediate surroundings and their own personal condition.

Some contend that the five shocks or reports coming from the mine were the vibrations coming from each of the five entrances. Others say there were five different explosions and corresponding reports and shocks, each of which had the volume and velocity and deafening report of a large body of gunpowder or dynamite. The engineer and experts are beginning to agree in the theory that a large body of gas contained in some hidden cavity must have been encountered by the miners, which caused the disaster.

Superintendent Lathrop was asked what was the cause of the explosion:—

"Fire damp," he replied, "from some unknown source."

"How many men were lost?"

"About one hundred and fifty."

"Are there any of them alive?"

"None."

"Is there immediate prospect of getting the bodies out?"

"No, not under two weeks."

"What will you do?"

"We will seal up the mine now, because there is fire in it; then we will flood it to destroy the fire."