

EXPLOSION IN A MINE.

**A GRAPHIC ACCOUNT GIVEN BY THE
"RECORD."**

**The Terrible Disaster at the Conyngham Shaft
in Wilkes-Barre—The Fatal Effects of a Miner's
Imprudence.**

About 7 o'clock yesterday morning a terrible explosion of gas occurred at the Conyngham Colliery of the D. & H. C. Co. in the 2d ward, Wilkes-Barre, an explosion more terrible from the awful amount of death and suffering wrought than from its violence or the damage done to the colliery.

So far as can now be learned about 40 men and boys were more or less injured, and only in one case was there any serious injury except by burning. The nature of their injuries renders it impossible to say with certainty what will be the result in all the cases. There is no kind of injury more treacherous in its nature or uncertain as to the result than a burn by mine gas. At this writing none of the injured men are, so far as is known with certainty, dead, but it is certain that several are in a very precarious condition, and it is highly probable that the injuries received may terminate fatally in some eight or ten cases. Unlike the majority of accidents of this nature the cause of this disaster seems plain and unquestioned. It was due to

UNACCOUNTABLE NEGLIGENCE

and disregard, not merely of the laws and rules regulating the mine, but of all ordinary precaution on the part of Thomas O'Brien. He paid the penalty of his rashness and is now at the point of death, if not already dead. The employees of the company had assembled there to commence the day's work at the usual hour, about 7 o'clock. The colliery at present employs about 160 men and boys inside. Between 60 and 70 of these had descended the shaft when the accident occurred and many more were gathered around the head of the shaft preparing to descend. For the last few days the mine has been making considerable water, and when the water attains a certain height it is impossible for the men to work in a large portion of the mine. The water yesterday morning was very near this point and was rising. On ascertaining this fact the men who had descended the shaft realized that there would probably be no work for them as in any event they would not be able to continue in their chambers more than a couple of hours. Instead, therefore, of going at once to their places, a large number of men stopped near the foot of the shaft and waited round in the expectancy of receiving orders to return home. At the time of the disaster there were probably over 50 men

CONGREGATED IN THE GANGWAY
and in the vicinity of the fire bosses shanty. The two fire bosses, William J. Evans and William Williams, were in their office, together with several other men. About 360 feet from the bottom of the shaft is an opening known as the "old west." It is used occasionally as a mule stable and also for a "return" passage in the ventilation system. But when the water rises in the mine this opening becomes filled with gas, and is then closed and danger signals put up. This is just what had happened on Wednesday and Thursday. The water had risen and the fire bosses discovering gas in the old working, had placed two boards across the opening with the words "gas" and "danger" conspicuously written thereon, together with large crosses which would make plain the meaning of the obstruction to any of the employes who could not read. Yet in spite of these precautions Thomas O'Brien undertook to enter this old working to attend to the calls of nature. He carried his naked light on his hat and it is said was followed by Cornelius Boyle, though some of those who stood near did not see Boyle. Not only did O'Brien pass the danger signals but opened the double doors placed in the opening to direct the air current. He had hardly passed the doors when the gas caught from his lamp and like a flash of lightning

A VIOLENT EXPLOSION FOLLOWED,
and a mass of flaming gas burst from the old opening, sweeping down every obstruction in its path and enveloped in a sheet of flame the men standing around near the foot of the shaft. Though it lasted but a second it penetrated every nook and cranny, entering even the fire bosses shanty and enfolding the men therein in its fiery and fatal embrace. The force of the explosion, though not so great as frequently happens, was sufficient to carry every man in its course off his feet and dash him with violence to the ground. The shock was felt in the most distinct part of the mine, half and three-quarters of a mile distant from the foot of the shaft. The smoke and dust were driven violently up the shaft and though the latter is over 700 feet deep, the heavy clouds that told of the disaster that had happened below rushed in volumes from the mouth. The shock and report were also plainly felt and heard on the surface, and it was at once surmised that a terrible disaster had occurred.

1886 Conyngham Colliery explosion NEWS

Clipped By:
usmra_rob
Oct 12, 2025

The news of the explosion spread with almost incredible speed through the vicinity and the usual scenes of alarm, grief, and suspense followed. Most of the employes of the mine resided in the immediate vicinity and their friends and relatives together with many hundreds of the curious and idle flocked to the colliery to learn the extent of the disaster and the fate of father, husband, brother or son. The women wept and cried in their terror and grief and importuned the officials of the mine as to the fate of their loved ones. At first little could be told, but with a promptitude and method which was in the highest degree creditable to the official in charge, measures for the relief and care of the injured were planned and put in execution. The inside boss, David McDonald, had come to the surface only a few minutes before the disaster occurred, after making his preliminary visit through the mine. He immediately called for volunteers

TO ACT AS A RESCUE PARTY,

and at the head of a gang of men provided with safety lamps was lowered into the shaft. The light of the lamps threw a feeble illumination over a scene of horror that could not well be overdrawn. Lying around the foot of the shaft were the

blackened forms of thirty or forty men. They were totally unrecognizable. The fire, the shock, and the dirt and smoke had so altered and obliterated their features that their dearest friends could not have recognized them. Those whom the flames had spared were rendered black as coal by the flying dirt and heavy smoke, and not a few were bruised and out by the violence with which they had been dashed about. A number who had not suffered so severely had gathered together at the foot of the shaft and their calls for help were plainly audible for those descending, while the groans of the injured men, suffering great agony from the burns and wounds, echoed through the gangways. Rapidly but carefully the rescue party went to work conveying the blackened forms to the carriage and sending them to the surface. The after damp which invariably makes its appearance on the heels of an explosion was at first present in large quantities and the rescuers had to exercise the utmost care in carrying on their work. McDonald, the inside foreman, in his eagerness to reach and aid the sufferers was overcome

BY THE TREACHEROUS GAS

and was brought to the surface unconscious and though he soon revived was unfit to further continue work, and was sent home. The other rescuers, however, did not flag in their efforts and before 8 o'clock every man had been brought to the surface.

Here they were well taken care of under the direction of outside foreman John Bowers. As soon as the disaster occurred and its extent was known the engine room was prepared for the reception of the injured and all available measures taken to afford them relief. The ambulance attached to the colliery was got in readiness another one borrowed from the L. V. Coal Co., one of Stark's busses procured and one or two spring wagons. Then as fast as the burned and suffering men were brought to the surface they were taken to the engine room, their burns covered with oil and oil soaked waste, and their bodies wrapped in blankets. One or two who seemed to have been burned internally cried in heartrending tones for water, but none dared be given them. Instead oil was poured down their blackened throats. As fast as possible they were placed in the ambulances or other conveyances and taken to their homes. It was impossible even for those who had known them well to recognize the blackened faces and the only way to find out who they were or where they lived was to question them. The women and others who flocked around the engine house strove hard to gain an entrance, but this was denied to all but a few, lest the presence of the agitated crowd should interfere with the work of those who were caring for the injured. The removing of the unfortunate men was carried on rapidly and before 8:30 every man had been taken to his home.

1886 Conyngham Colliery explosion NEWS

Clipped By:
usmra_rob
Oct 12, 2025