

October 8, 1894; Luke Fidler Colliery; Shamokin, Pa.; 5 Killed

(From Reports of the Inspectors of Coal Mines of the Anthracite Coal Regions of Pennsylvania, 189), P- 262)

A most disastrous fire occurred at this colliery on the evening of October 8, between the hours of 7 and 8 o'clock. A shaft repair crew of three men was repairing the air brattices in the No. 1 shaft, which extends from the No. 10 to the No. 9 seams.

The shaft is operated by bore holes from the surface; the construction of it is such that the steam pipes are very close to the air compartment, thus making the brattice and timber in one end of the shaft very dry. For this reason lanterns, only, were used in making repairs, and for fear of fire even smoking was prohibited.

Notwithstanding these rules, a carpenter, in direct violation of orders, used a naked light and foolishly placed it against the brattice to look for a leak, thinking to discover it by having the flame draw up through the opening. In doing this he set the brattice on fire, and as everything was as dry as tinder there was no possible chance of extinguishing it. Discovering this, he went up the shaft, shouldered his tool chest, and started out the tunnel to make his escape, but so rapidly did the flames spread that the fumes overtook him, and he paid the penalty for his violation of orders with his life.

At the time the fire broke out there were 60 men at work in various parts of the mine. Another workman, who was in the shaft, not thinking of self, went down, and together with others who went down the new shaft, notified all the men they could reach to go to the new shaft, which was the most accessible place where they could reach the surface with safety.

The colliery, fortunately, is furnished with many avenues of escape, otherwise a greater number of men would have perished. In spite of all efforts, however, four lives were lost. Two of these victims were notified to go to the new shaft but made a mistake and tried to escape by the traveling-way from the foot of the old shaft to the water level, but were overtaken by the fumes from the fire and were lost. Two others in the No. 3 slope could not be reached, despite every effort.

So intense was the fire, and so rapidly did it spread, that by no efforts could the bodies of the men be reached, although every human exertion was made. Owing to the location of the fire, it being at both the top and the bottom of the shaft, thus destroying the return airway, and the mine generating large quantities of explosive gases, any effort to fight the fire would have been extremely hazardous, if not suicidal.

The only recourse left was to seal all the openings and fill the mine with water. This was done by turning in Coal Run creek, and also by pumping all available water into the mine. It required over one billion gallons of water to fill it to water level. As the fire had gotten above water level, dams had to be constructed in the new shaft, also in the main tunnel in order to raise the water above the fire. This was done successfully, and at this writing the water has been run off from above water level and the fire found to be extinguished. It was found to have gotten above water level about 100 feet and did more damage than was expected.

The work of taking out the water below water level has been commenced, but it will take some time before the bodies can be recovered or the mine operated again.