

# FOUR LOST IN SHAFT; TWO BRAVELY RESCUED

## Deadly Fumes Blown to Diggers Under the East River.

### THEN THE WATER SURGED UP

#### Two Living and Two Dead Brought Up by Superintendent and Lock- tender of Belmont Tunnel.

Six negro laborers were trapped early yesterday morning while working twenty feet below the level of the East River in a shaft being sunk for the Belmont tunnel, under the Steinway franchise, and four were lost. The two who were saved owed their lives to the heroic work of H. R. Shaller, the night Superintendent and son of Chief Engineer Robert A. Shaller, and Kaerle Verbecke, a Dutchman, who works at the shaft as air lock tender.

The accident is one of the oddest that has fallen to the underground and underwater burrowers in the city. Fire started, apparently spontaneously from oil and dust, in the air receiver from which the workers received their supply, and gusts of dense and hot fumes caused by burning rubber were forced down instead of pure air. To effect a rescue the lock had to be opened, and with the usual pressure removed, water gushed in in a small flood. Whether the four who died were suffocated by the fumes or were drowned the Coroner does not know.

The dead men were William Ray and Isaac Ross, both of 353 West Thirty-seventh Street, and Arthur Jordan and Kuthner Waters, whose addresses are unknown. The men rescued are Earle Jones of 784 Boulevard, Astoria, and Nathaniel White of 130 West Thirty-fourth Street.

The shaft in which the men were imprisoned is 11 feet in diameter and 26 feet deep, measuring from the rock bottom to the air lock above. As the six men were drilling into the rock under electric lights, the air, which was being kept at a pressure of eight pounds within the steel tube, suddenly became a terrific blast of penetrating, cutting effect to throat, nostrils, and lungs. The stench was poisonous and agonizing, as the fumes from the receiver were being forced through heavy rubber pipes, the pipes burning and crumbling under the heat, the melting and smoking material creating dense clouds of irrefragable odor and stinging pungency.

In a few seconds the caisson was an inferno to the six negroes, as they groped, gasping and choking, on the rock bottom. One of them struck wildly with a hammer upon the steel sides. The minute that would be required for the iron bucket to sink through the folding doors of the air lock above meant an eternity to them. The lights had gone out. The negroes scrambled, holding their breath, to a small ladder which runs from the bottom of the tube but stops at a wooden platform at the level of the river, twelve feet from the open air, which is cut off hermetically by the double doors of the lock.

Verbecke, in charge of the lock, knew by the sounds of the hammer against the steel sides that something had gone wrong and that the men below wanted the bucket. He sent it through the lock. It came back empty. With the reopening of the lock for its exit came a cloud of evil-smelling smoke. He knew that there was fire below, and that the laborers were in an oven. Hoisting the bucket clear of the lock, he threw wide both doors of the lock, and a great puff of heat and smoke arose. There were no sounds from within.

To clear the tube of the smoke and heat the lock had to remain open. Without the air pressure to hold back the water from the crevices between the caisson and the seamy rock at the bottom, the new peril of death by drowning was the added lot of the unfortunate men. The sound of the inrushing waters greeted Verbecke's ears. He cried for assistance and Supt. Shaller responded.

There was but one thing to be done if a single man of the six was to be saved. They were the humblest of laborers and black at that, but Shaller jumped into the bucket without hesitating. Verbecke, stolid Dutchman that he is, said nothing, but squeezed into the bucket with his superior.

This bucket is about three feet deep and of circumference sufficient to allow of two men entering it, one on each side of the big handle, to which is attached a steel cable. It sinks through the air lock and then through a passage to the caisson.

When the two rescuers gave the signal the engineer lowered them. The waters were then close to the platform. The two rescuers groped over the boards and found only one body. So stifling and stinging were the fumes that neither Shaller nor Verbecke could have remained below during a trip of the bucket upward with the other and the body found on the platform. Under the bucket there is an iron "eye." This solved the problem. The Superintendent, working quickly, soon had a rope under the arms of the unconscious man and then tied him fast to the bottom of the bucket. The signal was given and the rescuers were whizzed to the cool morning air and high above the mouth of the shaft, the limp body of Nathaniel White dangling below them in the glare of the arc lights.

With fresh air in their lungs, Verbecke and his boss unleashed their charge and once more descended through the tight throat of the caisson. By this time the water had crowded up to the platform and was splashing at its thin edges. Both men groped in the dark, reaching out over the planks and twirling through the water with their hands. It was desperate work, with little chance of getting another man saved. But Shaller's strong fingers became entangled in a garment and up came the body of Earle Jones.

The same method of getting him out was used. His rescue required more time than the first, and both rescuers were sick and weak from the stench of burning rubber and their lungs were being torn with each inhalation. They went back twice, however, and brought up a body each time. Then they had to give it up. Two living and two dead men were in the shanty near the caisson. When hope of pulling out the other two was abandoned all hands labored to restore the sparks of life in two of the four that had been rescued and in the vain hope of bringing back to life the other two. A tug was sent across to the foot of Forty-second Street, and a physician obtained. Coroner Acritelli was notified by telephone.

The first thought of the Coroner was to place Mr. Shaller under arrest pending an investigation as to the blame for the catastrophe. But when he heard how heroic he had been and saw how ill he was, he decided not to do this, and only requested that he report to him in the afternoon, when a preliminary investigation was held.

The water in the caisson was forced out as soon as Jones and White had been revived and had been taken to Bellevue Hospital in ambulances. The bodies of the other two victims were found at the bottom and hauled up.

Chief Engineer Shaller yesterday took a TIMES reporter to the reef, which is about 1,200 feet out from the Forty-second Street Ferry. The receiver into which the air is pumped before it is piped to the caisson was black and blistered from the heat from within. The compressing engines, in a shanty near this air storage receptacle, it is believed, had driven into the receiver enough oil and lime and dust to coat the lining. With moisture and the constant air pressure spontaneous combustion resulted. The first spark meant a sheet of flame lining the receiver, and this, with the air, was pumped into the death trap and into the lungs of the men.

The heat within the receiver must have been terrific, for it blackened and warped its exterior. From this receiver stretches a large metal pipe for a distance, and then comes a heavy rubber pipe. The fragments of this rubber tubing were crumbled and charred, some of it being burned completely away to the outer cloth cover.

The tunnel for which the shaft is being driven will connect Long Island City with the Grand Central Station. The shaft will go down 120 feet through the reef. The caisson now sunk into the rock has not been sealed because the drilling so far has been through scaly and split rock. As soon as the solid bed is reached the caisson will be sealed to the rock, and compressed air no longer will be necessary.

To start this shaft a crib was built around a tiny "spit," a few yards of rock showing above the water. The men work on an artificial island of considerable size now.

At the foot of West Forty-second Street another shaft is being drilled through the rock. This is already at a depth of 100 feet. From both shafts tunneling will be done, and then the same plan will be used from the Long Island side of the river.