

COMPANY BLAMELESS

Coroner's Jury So Finds in No. 14 Colliery Inquest

Long Session Was Held at Pittston Yesterday and the Evidence Offered Indicated That One of the Workmen Ignited Gas With Naked Light.

The coroner's inquest into the explosion at No. 14 shaft on March 2, 1909, by which six men lost their lives, was held in Pittston town hall yesterday afternoon. Coroner Dodson, assisted by mine inspector McDonald, conducted the inquest. Mine inspector Price of the lower district was in attendance and at times questioned the witnesses. An array of talent was present, as were also the following officials of the Pennsylvania Coal Co.: Capt. May, general manager; superintendent W. W. Ingalls; Alex Bryden, consulting engineer; John Reed, general foreman of the colliery; Thomas Muir, mine foreman; Thomas Madden, mine foreman; ex-Judge Knapp and attorney W. L. Pace, represented the company; attorney G. P. O'Brien the family of Thomas Fleming, and attorney Lopatto the family of Jacob Scurkas. The jurors were L. Smith, R. E. Bennett, Patrick Lyons, Enoch Evans, Thomas Cook, W. R. Bradley.

Coroner Dodson stated in opening the investigation that the inquest would be held on the death of Jacob Scurkas. John Muir, inside foreman, was the first witness sworn. A map of the workings of the mine and the scene of the accident were traced. On the fatal morning he was at the foot of the shaft. He said that a motor brakeman had told him that assistant mine foreman Hughes had reported six inches of gas in chamber 278 and twelve inches in chamber 299. He then told of getting the men together after the accident and assisting in relieving the injured and getting them out.

I should judge it was about 2,000 feet from the scene of the accident where we found Fleming. He went to the bottom of the slope and found Coyle, and found Richardson about 350 feet away from Fleming. In making an examination he found the doors down and the air cut off and things were in bad shape. There are about sixty men engaged in the slope where the accident took place. Gases were seldom found in that part of the mine and there was no gas in chamber 299 until that morning. He contended the gas could not have been ignited unless by a naked lamp.

Mr. Hughes, the fire boss, was then closely examined. He had been engaged three days as assistant foreman or fire boss prior to the accident. He testified that after making his rounds in the mines he found twelve inches of gas in chamber 299 and six inches in chamber 278. He put up danger signals and continued the examination.

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He met Ruscavage and Coyle and told them to go in to 299 and guard the chamber until his return, when they would put up brattice and drive the gas out. Mr. Hughes then explained having gone to the hospital and questioned Mr. Coyle how the explosion occurred and was told that Ruscavage set the gas off with his naked lamp.

Hughes contended that if safety lamps had been used the gas would not have been ignited. He did not think a foot of gas was dangerous. Both Ruscavage and Coyle had the Davy and Clanny safety lamps in their possession when they went into chamber 299.

One of the safety lamps was presented in evidence and both the foreman and his assistant identified it. The mining caps of both men were presented. The peak of one of the caps showed to be badly scorched where the cap had fallen to the ground and been scorched.

John Martin, assistant foreman, when sworn, said he did not consider a foot of gas dangerous. He said Hughes was a careful, competent man and complied with the law in placing danger signals up. He further contended there would be no explosion if the gas had not been set off with naked lamps. John Martin, another assistant, was sworn. He is engaged in the checker vein but previously worked in the fatal slope. He had only found local gases there. He did not think a foot of gas dangerous.

J. W. McHale, a miner, related his experience in the explosion. He was working in his chamber when he heard a call from Curley, a fellow workman. Then all lights were quenched. He managed to get along in the dark to where Curley made his exit through a door, when in a moment the second explosion came and the door was blown down and he (McHale) was fast under it. He saw the fire and groping along met Richardson. He said he was roasted. Heard the third explosion but would say that the second was the worst. We were then about at the foot of the slope and made our way out as best we could until we came to another door and lit our naked lamps.

Adjournment was then taken until 7 o'clock when Mr. Muir was recalled. He stated the air was not as good as before the accident but is getting good as repairs are being made. William Hughes, a runner, was sworn. He said he noticed explosions, the first not

amounting to much, but the second and third were severe. He pointed out on the map where he found two foreigners asphyxiated. The witness said that Fleming was not burned until the second explosion. He said that his driver pulled a car into chamber 299 but left the car when he saw danger signal standing there. He did not pass danger signal. He returned to the air course and could not tell where Fleming went. The men were burned near foot of slope.

James McHale was sworn and said he was in his chamber drilling a hole when the first explosion occurred and that his light was extinguished by the second one. In the airway I met Tom Daley, a company hand, who was hurt and I helped him up the slope. The witness would not consider a foot of gas safe providing he was working in an adjoining chamber.

John Martin, assistant foreman, was recalled again he said he heard Hughes tell Ruscavage to get stuff to put up the brattice in chamber 299 and not to go up in face until Hughes would get there. The jury was anxious to know where fire boss was but it was explained that he was in station notifying other miners of the condition of these chambers.

Adam Popolisky said he heard two explosions. He was at his box preparing a charge of powder when the second one went off; was in darkness, made my way out. He had left his laborer, Victor Stukas, behind and he was found asphyxiated in the chamber.

Alex Bryden, consulting engineer, was sworn and said that from the evidence given a second explosion, no doubt occurred. The second might have occurred after the first by an accumulation of gas caused by the doors being left open. A naked light still burning could have caused it. In his opinion it would not be advisable to keep sixty men from work because of a foot of gas in a chamber. He figured out the percentage of gas in the place as less than one per cent.

The jury then retired and after deliberating but a short time returned the following verdict:

We, the jury, find that Jacob Scurak and five others came to their death on March 2, 1909, at No. 14 shaft of the Pennsylvania Coal Co. from burns received from an explosion of gas. The evidence shows that gas existed in chamber 299 when fireboss Hughes made his rounds. He sent two men, John Ruscavage, a bratticeman and Bernard Coyle, helper, to guard the chamber until such time as the gas would be driven out and that Hughes told the men to use nothing but safety lamps he provided them with. The evidence shows said John Ruscavage went to face of chamber 299 with naked lamp and ignited the gas. The jury finds the company in no way to blame for the accident.

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