

Not a single lesson learned: The 1937 Jonesville Mine disaster

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It was Oct. 26, 1937, at the Evan Jones Coal Company's Jonesville Mine northeast of Palmer. Just after 2 in the afternoon, a miner in the main gangway lit a match for a cigarette. Management had been lax in testing the atmosphere and severely deficient in allowing an employee to enter the mine with matches. The flame ignited a pocket of flammable air, exploding through and out of the mine, caving in the entrance.

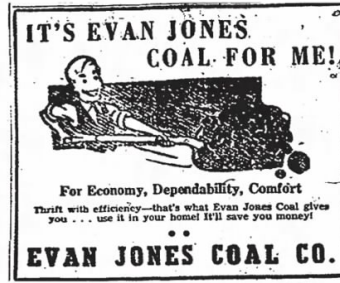
The resulting blast was nothing like the somehow alluring balls of fire seen in movies. This was ugly, more akin to a hurricane of smoke threaded with flame. The wind sucked breaths from lungs, crumpled steel sheets, and blew the adjacent train backward; a few cars toppled off the rails. A timber was driven into the small engine that pulled loaded cars from the mine to the main track, rendering it inoperable. Yet, thankfully, a nearby stash of detonators was unharmed.

At that time, Jake Angeli was off working a chute about 350 feet from the main gangway. He told the Anchorage Daily Times, "I had just looked at my watch and found it to read 2:10 o'clock, when all at once a big shot came and seemed to pass through my head like a wave. I stood there for a few seconds and then I said to Carl Edman, who was with me, 'Gas has exploded! I think we'd better find the trouble.' We started out and met a big black cloud of stinking, choking smoke that nearly blinded us."

Angeli and Edman bent over as low as they could while running out for the gangway. Near the cave-in, they found foreman Victor Raide laying on his face covered in burns and dust, with a broken leg and crushed ribs, but still alive. They dragged Raide away from the worst of the fallen timbers, then crawled through a hole in the debris deeper into the mine. They discovered one and then another now-deceased fellow miners before reversing their way back out.

Elsewhere in the mine, Hjalmer Houser and Otto Nakkola were standing together at the time of the explosion. From a shared primal urge, they ran towards a ventilation shaft, stopping as they became aware of the magnitude of the situation. They turned back, thinking they could save another miner before the fumes and smoke dissuaded them. The only people they could save were themselves, so they returned to the ventilation shaft.

The ventilation shaft was 285 feet from the gangway, at a 45-degree angle, a long distance when in shock and breathing through clouds of dust and



An Evan Jones Coal advertisement from the Anchorage Daily Times Dec. 23, 1941 edition.

coal. "We climbed up and up," said Houser. "I don't know how long it took. We were both gasping for breath. My eyes were smarting and watering. I couldn't see. It seemed as though I couldn't breathe any longer. I thought I was done for when I felt fresh air. I couldn't go another inch so I just hung there where I was with my nose in the fresh air. I was there a long time. I don't know how long."

Once thinking became an option, his first thought was for Nakkola, who had not emerged from the shaft. Houser looked back and saw him crumpled over, 6 feet from the surface. Said Houser, "I wrapped my shirt around my eyes and nose and went back into the shaft. I put my arms around (Nakkola's) back and said, 'Come on, let's try it once more.' As hard as he tried, Houser could not budge the far heavier Nakkola. When more people arrived to help, Nakkola was dead. He was likely already gone even before Houser tried to pull him out of the shaft."

The mine's namesake was Evan William Jones (1880-1950). Born in Wales, Jones moved to Anchorage in 1917, where he became the superintendent of the Alaska Railroad-owned coal mines at Eska and Chickaloon. The latter was soon abandoned, but the Eska Coal Mine operated through 1946, supplying the railroad with coal until it switched to diesel-powered engines. In 1920, Jones and five other Anchorage investors established the Evan Jones Coal Company, built around the Jonesville Mine.

Back in 1937, Oscar Anderson, then president of the Evan Jones Coal Company, organized a relief party from Anchorage, including four nurses and two doctors. In the rush to reach the scene, one of the doctors, Howard Romig, crashed on his way to the Anchorage depot. He abandoned the car and continued on foot to the railroad yards, where he joined the group traveling north in a Brill car.

More immediate assistance arrived from Eska, fellow miners who jumped on a railroad speeder to the scene. Though in rough shape, Raide insisted on helping. "Never mind me.

Take care of my boys," he told the new arrivals. Even as nurses wrapped his many wounds — his face and arms were high covered completely — he talked rescuers through the geography of the mine and the last known location of each miner. Still, only one more survivor, Jacob Jylha, was recovered.

The mine employed 32 men, 19 of whom were there on Oct. 26. Of the 19 men working the mine that day, 14 died: Abel Edward Asikainen, Joseph Cernick, Pete Ferrenti, Axel Huittila, Leslie Lamson, Joseph Lucas, John Mattson, Frank Joseph Melznik, Robert Nakki, Otto Nakkola, Peter Olson, Jack Saarela, Paul Williams and Augustine Yerbich. At least 10 of the deceased were immigrants, and different sources spell some of their names differently. The 1937 Jonesville explosion is the second deadliest mining disaster in Alaska history, after the 1910 Mexican Mine explosion on Douglas Island that killed 39 workers.

On Oct. 28, the last of the dead miners were delivered to Anchorage. Funeral services for 12 of the victims were held on Nov. 7. Anchorage Mayor Joseph Romig, the Romig Middle School namesake and Howard Romig's father, asked for all stores to close and residents to pause their activities during the service. Eleven of the 14 casualties were buried in the downtown cemetery.

After the death of 14 men, it would be a more pleasant history if the Evan Jones Coal Company was thereafter better engaged with workplace safety. It would have been nice if lessons had been learned, if the existence of a single tragedy had at least prevented future tragedies. This is the only appeal of disasters, the opportunity to learn from them, but history is rarely so kind.

The day after the Jonesville explosion, an insurance salesman began running ads in the Daily Times. "14 Killed in Mine Disaster!!! Tragical news indeed. We who remain can only hope that those who mourn their loss will not also be called upon to bear the added burden of A Financial Tragedy." The salesman's questionable taste and timing aside,

maybe some Alaskan was thus prompted to plan for their future. If so, the ads seemingly had more impact than the disaster itself.

The surviving miners already knew about the inherent dangers of mining, the additional hazards created by inattentive management, and the risks created by careless co-workers. Angeli, for example, had worked in mines since he was 16 and narrowly survived two other mining disasters before moving to Alaska. The unidentified miner who lit the match that ignited the explosion died in the mine, gone too quickly to repent.

The Alaskan public mourned the deaths, celebrated the survivors, and moved on. They had forgotten the 1910 disaster on Douglas Island and would soon enough forget this tragedy. When the Jonesville explosion was reported, newspapers called it the worst mining disaster in Alaska history. As the Daily Times reported, "Oldtimers were unable to recall a mining tragedy that took such a large number of lives." Twenty-seven years separated the Mexican Mine and Jonesville Mine catastrophes, the same distance between now and 1997, when Notorious B.I.G. and Princess Diana died, and "Titanic" and "Men in Black" were released in theaters.

In the immediate aftermath of the Jonesville explosion, Evan Jones Coal Company management thought the mine might reopen in a week or two. However, B. D. Stewart, the territorial commissioner of mines, withdrew their license to operate until the company provided written guarantees on new safety standards and installed a new crew of overseers at the site. The mine did not reopen until March 23, 1938. That June, Stewart revisited the mine and shut it down again after discovering more pockets of flammable gas.

Twenty years later, another explosion at the Jonesville Mine killed five workers. As the commissioner of mines wrote, "The miners were killed by flame and forces of an underground explosion set off by an under-burdened shot in the presence of an explosive mixture of methane and air and/or coal dust," another ignited pocket of previously unidentified flammable gas. May we all be better students at life's many lessons.

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