**1922 Gold Mine Disaster Was State's Deadliest**

*Nearly a mile below ground, 47 workers ran out of time and air in a case with similarities to the recent tragedy in West Virginia.*

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Cecilia Rasmussen, Times Staff Writer

The words "cave-in" and "mine disaster" inevitably call to mind the coal-mining region of Appalachia.

But 84 years ago, the Gold Country was the scene of the deadliest recorded mine disaster in California, with similarities to the recent Sago mine explosion in West Virginia that killed 12.

On a hot summer night in 1922, fire and toxic gas ripped through a mine shaft nearly a mile beneath the surface, trapping 47 miners. The incident at the Argonaut Gold Mine in Jackson, about 30 miles from Sutter's Mill in Coloma, turned into a 22-day rescue effort.

The harrowing story is told in Times news reports and a recent book.

The Argonaut mine had been discovered in the 1850s by two freed slaves, William Tudor and James Hager. It was destined to become one of California's richest, producing more than $25 million before the federal government closed the nation's gold mines at the beginning of World War II. (Gold was considered nonessential to the war effort.)

Tudor and Hager worked the mine until the 1860s. By the 20th century, it belonged to a large group of investors.

The Argonaut was the heartbeat of Jackson, along with the nearby Kennedy Mine, where ore-crushing hammers shook the earth around the clock.

By the early 1920s, the Argonaut's main shaft extended 4,900 feet into a maze of interconnected caverns and honeycombed tunnels. Most miners, primarily immigrants from Italy, Spain and Serbia, earned $4 a day.

Shortly before midnight on Aug. 27, 1922, when most of Jackson was asleep (or occupied in speak-easies and brothels), a fire broke out below 3,000 feet. Most of the men on the night shift were trapped.

A few miners who were stationed closer to the surface clambered out, alerted others and began pouring water down the shaft. By dawn, the townspeople, firefighters and every miner in Amador County had rushed to help. They could hear water hissing as it hit the flames, raging out of control in the impassable shaft.

It took 2 1/2 days, until Aug. 30, to extinguish the blaze. Two rescue teams began to reopen two passageways that connected the Argonaut with its rival and neighbor, the Kennedy Mine. The tunnels had been closed after a 1919 fire.

In dim light, slowed by heavy oxygen tanks and plagued by small cave-ins, rescuers laboriously cleared rock, timber and debris.

Word of the disaster had spread beyond the county. As the miners' families waited anxiously for news, dozens of reporters and newsreel crews with hand-cranked cameras swarmed into Jackson.

One of them was already there: a producer-actor named Hobart Bosworth, who in 1909 had starred in a dramatic epic filmed in Los Angeles' first studio, "In the Power of the Sultan."

Bosworth was staying in Jackson and using the mine as a backdrop for a silent movie, "The Beloved Unknown." He had hired and filmed many of the trapped miners as extras. Bosworth took his camera crew back to the mine to shoot real-life fire scenes and try to rescue miners. His still photos of the miners, taken before the fire, ran in all the newspapers.

After laboring for a week, rescuers had yet to reach the miners. But they, and newspapers, remained optimistic -- if inconsistent. A front-page Times story almost two weeks after the fire had begun screamed: "Rescue Crews Hope to Reach Miners in Week." Yet three days earlier, the paper had quoted engineers and mining officials as saying they believed that there was no hope and that 47 coffins had been ordered.

Amador County's mining companies offered a $5,000 reward for the first rescue team to reach the miners.

In the depths of Prohibition, the American Red Cross dispensed a couple of shots of whiskey to each rescuer before he entered the tunnel, and a few more when he climbed out.

The liquor was supplied by the federal government as a special "dispensation" and to help bolster morale.

On the evening of Sept. 18, rescuers wearing masks and carrying oxygen tanks inserted a caged canary behind a bulkhead. Several minutes later, the small bird lay lifeless; rescuers lost all hope of finding survivors.

Moving on, the crew watched as rats scurried away from where the remains of two men would be found huddled together. They would be identified as Charles and Arthur O'Berg, father and son. All but one of the other bodies were found nearby.

Devastated townsfolk buried the victims four days later in three cemeteries -- Protestant, Catholic and Greek Orthodox. Forty-seven coffins were placed in the ground, even though the body of the last man would not be found for a year.

It turned out that all of the doomed miners had fled farther into the mine to escape the fire. Trapped nearly a mile from the main entrance, they built two bulkheads and barricaded themselves, trying to stave off deadly carbon monoxide.

But the miners' training and precautions proved futile when critical hours passed without rescue -- the same fate that befell the Sago miners.

As the oxygen supply dwindled, Argonaut miner Edward William Fessel used the carbon from his miner's lamp to scrawl a message on a rock wall: "3 o'clock, gas getting strong."

Another miner, using a rock, scratched: "3:15, half knocked out."

Fessel made the final entry: "4 o'clock" -- nothing more. That was 4 a.m. -- their oxygen had run out in four hours.

It was Fessel's body that was not found for a year, perhaps because the water used to extinguish the blaze had washed his remains farther down the shaft. During the intervening year, newspapers speculated that he had escaped and fled to start a new life -- much to his family's anguish.

An investigative committee appointed by Gov. William Stephens concluded that the mine had violated safety regulations. But the owners of the Argonaut Mine Co. were not fined or punished; at the time, the U.S. Bureau of Mines had little control over enforcing safety regulations.

The committee's report is recounted in O. Henry Mace's 2004 book, "47 Down: The 1922 Argonaut Gold Mine Disaster."

Investigators eventually made 17 "logical" safety recommendations, Mace wrote, including the installation of an emergency alarm system, fire doors and reversible ventilation fans. But the committee could not determine what had caused the fire. It cited several possibilities but concluded with "incendiarism" -- meaning arson -- or defective electric wiring.

"Despite the death of 47 men in the Argonaut Mine, the government of California had determined that the value of the state's gold mines far exceeded the risk to human life," Mace wrote, noting that the Legislature had failed to regulate mine safety.

Sympathetic Americans banded together to raise money for the miners' families. At a ball sponsored by Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles, several of the rescuers -- friends of the dead miners -- made special appearances in their denim mining garb and described the ordeal. (One of them insisted that Los Angeles traffic was more dangerous than mining.)

Members of Pacific Coast League baseball teams lined up against Hollywood celebrities at a charity game at Washington Park, which was at 8th and Hill streets in downtown L.A.

In all, more than $45,000 was raised nationwide -- about $1,000 per miners' family.

After World War II, several attempts to reopen the Argonaut and the Kennedy failed. Both mines -- registered together as California Historical Landmark No. 786 -- now strike it rich as a tourist attraction.