

**Bureau of Mines Bulletin 616:  
Historical Documentation of  
Major Coal Mine Disasters in  
The United States  
Not Classified As  
Explosions of Gas or Dust,  
1846-1962**

February 16, 1883; Diamond Mine; Braidwood,  
Ill.; 69 Killed

*(From A Compilation of the Coal Reports of Illinois,  
1882-1930, pp. 68-78*

The most conspicuous event which has occurred during the year or which has ever marked or marred the annals of coal mining in this State to this time, was the calamity which befell the Diamond Mine, and the miners in it, at Braidwood, in February last. At this place, by the sudden precipitation of a seal of surface water into the workings of the mine, in the middle of the day, 69 men were engulfed and miserably perished; 39 women were made widows; 93 children were made fatherless, and the mine itself and its owners were involved in common ruin.

The topography of the county in which the Diamond Mine was located, is known to be in general very level and low. The seam of coal is thin, and near the surface, and one of the chief sources of expense in mining it is the handling of the great quantities of water which continually accumulate in the workings. There is said to be ten square miles of this level and marshy tract upon which the Diamond and other mines are located, and it is all so flat that no natural drainage is locally possible, and ordinarily all accumulations of water lie upon the surface until absorbed or evaporated. Even when thrown out of the mines with pumps it has no alternative but to find its way through the soil back again. Another feature of the situation is that all the coal in this field is worked on the long-wall system, and as fast as the mineral is removed the surface comes down with the roof, and consequently makes a loose, irregular break all along the face of the workings, particularly susceptible to the action of water, and leaves in general an uneven and treacherous surface for water to stand upon.

For several days prior to the 16th of February, 1883, there had been a general thaw in the vicinity of Braidwood, accompanied by warm rains, which reduced the winter's snow to water and swelled to a flood, which overspread the entire surrounding country. That this was an unusual condition of things, is not claimed. Water in similar quantities had accumulated and stood upon the surface there before. On several occasions in former years, surface water had found its way into the mine, and two years previously it had broken through in such quantities as to create general alarm. In this case it is stated only that the volume of water was not greater than usual. Its depth is given as from one to three feet, but whether it was more or less, would seem hardly to affect the gravity of the situation. It was spread like a sea over the entire face of the country, and constituted an open menace to every mine in the vicinity. That it was regarded as an element of danger, is shown by the action of the superintendent of an adjacent mine, who prohibited the men from going into his works, and ordered out those who had gone down before his arrival. Yet the men of the Diamond Mine went below that morning as usual, and with only 54 feet of sand and surfaced drift between them and

an untold weight of water, began their day's work—which they never finished.

At about 11 o'clock in the morning the "cager" at the bottom of the main shaft discovered an unusual amount of water flowing to the bottom, and sent word to that effect to the men at the different working places, by the drivers who came to the shaft with their loaded cars. Being still uneasy about it, he came to the top to ascertain if possible the cause of it. Making no discoveries, he descended the shaft again, and reaching the bottom found the volume of water already so great that he had difficulty in rescuing a boy, who had charge of a door near the shaft, with whom he at once ascended again to the top. By this time those who had taken the alarm were clambering out by the escapement shaft, and the mine was now filling so rapidly that those who failed to receive the alarm, or were at too great a distance from the shaft, were speedily and hopelessly shut off from all escape whatsoever. The point at which the breakthrough took place is on the eastern boundary of the workings, while the principal working place was at the western extremity—the main or hoisting shaft being midway between them. In this, as in other mines, the main shaft was located in the dip, or lowest point of the coal, so that all water which accumulated in the mine could flow to the shaft, and then be raised with pumps to the surface. The depth of the old air-shaft, near the break, was 68 feet, that of the main shaft was 84 feet, and that of the escapement 75 feet. The first rush of water was consequently at the bottom of the main shaft, that being the lowest point, and all escape at the point would be shut off some time before the outer galleries of the mine would be filled. It is probable, therefore, that no water would reach the working places on the west boundary until it was really too late to make any escape except by the escapement shaft. The bottom of this shaft being nine feet higher than that of the main shaft, it would afford an opportunity for egress after it was no longer possible to reach the bottom of the main shaft. To this point those who did escape made their way, and at this point the last desperate struggle of those who barely escaped was made, and, groping for this outlet in despair, having almost reached it, twenty-two men awaited and accepted their doom.

Unhappily there was a fatal defect in the construction of the road-way leading to this escapement shaft, which proved full of fatal consequences. At a short distance from the bottom of this shaft there was a dip or declivity in the roadway, followed by a corresponding rise, and creating a hollow about fifteen yards in length. Of course this hollow would be filled with water to the roof, while the road on either side of it was still out of water, and thus the advantage of the higher ground at either end would be neutralized and lost. It will be seen by statements made by those who escaped last by this route, that they had to dive or plunge through this fifteen yards of water in order to reach the bottom of the escapement shaft. Had such an emergency as this been foreseen or anticipated, it would have been a simple matter to have taken down the top and filled up this road to a uniform level, thus affording safe egress, possibly, to the entire

working force, before finally being overtaken by the water. Another complication arises in all such cases as this, from the doors set across the roadways for the purpose of directing and controlling the currents of air. One of these doors being closed with the weight of a body of water against it equal to its own dimensions, would constitute a barrier as impassable as a wall of rock—and so, doubtless, many desperate men found it. Those who did escape had their most dreadful struggle with the doors leading to the escapement gallery, and the location at which the bodies of twenty-two others were found indicates that they may have had a similar struggle in vain.

It will thus be seen that when this sea of surface water began its headlong rush into the cavities of the Diamond Mine, it first closed the exit by the main shaft, then by the escapement shaft, and then hermetically sealed the doors, and took possession of the more remote recesses of the mine at its own deadly leisure.

As soon as the nature and extent of the catastrophe could be realized on the surface, active measures were proposed and taken for the rescue of those who were yet within the mine. These were, however, as brief as they were futile. It was as difficult to get into the mine as it was to get out. The pit boss descended the main shaft, but found only water, and the black damp so heavy as to put out his light. Two men, however, succeeded in making an entry by the escapement shaft, but they never returned. Their bodies were found afterwards among the twenty-two victims near the bottom of the shaft; and their widows and children and friends can only lament their fruitless heroism. This closed the chapter and completed the death roll.

Succeeding the fruitless impulse to save, came the resolution to at least recover the bodies of the dead. Nothing more remained which could be done, and even that proved a most arduous undertaking.

First the exact spot where the crevasse had taken place had to be located and inspected. With the aid of a boat the vortex was reached, and found to be about 50 x 90 feet in area. Nothing could, of course, be done towards removing the water from the mine until the construction of a coffer-dam around this place so as to shut off the further flow of water into the workings. To accomplish this required the building of a dam 5,000 feet in length, in water three feet in depth—an undertaking in itself requiring much time, skill, and labor. Fortunately there was an abundance of assistance at hand.

All the mines in the vicinity at once suspended operations, and both the miners and superintendents directed all their energies and resources to the work of recovery. In the course of a few days the dam was completed, and the company's pumps, augmented by as many others as could be advantageously placed, were at once set in motion for the purpose of hoisting a body of water, the volume of which could only be conjectured.

These powerful pumps were driven to the limit of their capacity night and day until the 26th day of March—38 days after the flooding of the mine.

On the 25th the first descent was made to the mine below, and on the 26th the first bodies were recovered. The mine itself was found to be a total wreck. The water had carried with it, to all parts of the works, vast quantities of mud from the surface, and had loosened and displaced supporting timbers, and had so softened the roof that it fell in large masses as soon as the water was taken out. This not only blockaded the roadways, but also so obstructed the air-courses that it was impossible to re-establish the circulation sufficiently to displace the accumulated black damp. The entrance into the workings was consequently attended with great difficulty and danger—not only from the accumulations of gas and debris, but from the

loosened and impending rocks which were falling and liable to fall at any moment.

After the recovery of the last six bodies (28 in all), and a thorough search of all the accessible recesses of the mine, it became evident that the bodies of the remaining victims must have been buried in the ruins, and could not be reached, except at great risk of life, and further effort at recovery was abandoned. The company offered to continue the pumping and to afford all necessary facilities, if men could be found to go on with the explorations below, but the improbability of any further satisfactory results deterred the men from taking any more risks.

Consequently by general consent, though not without the protest of those deeply afflicted, the long sustained effort was at last suspended. The dead were identified and buried. The fires were drawn from the furnaces, the pumps ceased, the shaft gradually filled again with water, and the late populous mine became simply the silent sepulcher of the unrecovered dead. And such it will ever remain. The property is abandoned, and will be only known in the future as the scene of the great tragedy.

*Weekly Sentinel*  
*Fort Wayne, Ind.*  
*Wednesday, February 28, 1883*

### **Frightful Disaster in a Coal Mine**

JOLIET, ILL. Feb. 17- A mine at Braidwood, a mining town, twenty miles north of here, caved in yesterday and imprisoned seventy-five men. A subsequent dispatch says forth-five miners are dead. Two thousand men are at work endeavoring to rescue the imperiled party but only a few can work at a time. The cave-in is nearly ninety foot square. Braidwood is one of the largest coal mining places in the state.

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*Marble Weekly*  
*Marble Rock, Iowa*  
*March 1, 1883*

The shaft of the old Diamond mine, four miles from Braidwood, Illinois caved in Saturday afternoon from the pressure of water. Seventy men are believed to have been almost instantly drowned, as the water reached a depth of sixteen feet. David Mackey, the superintendent and David Skinner made their escape.

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*Fort Wayne Gazette*  
*Fort Wayne, Ind*  
*Friday, March 16, 1893*

### **At the Diamond Mine**

BRAIDWOOD, ILL., March 15 - Only six and a half feet of water remains to be pumped out of the Diamond mine. The water now coming out must be directly from the place where the bodies lie, as it bears an insufferable stench, and the men at the pumps are obliged to occasionally move away from its influence and get fresh air. From this it is surmised that the bodies are horribly decomposed.

The pumps have been doing good work. They have removed 3,500 gallons the past twenty-four hours, lowering it six inches. The stench from

the shaft increases. The morgue for the reception of bodies when recovered is nearly completed. Fund for relief have almost ceased to come in. About \$28,000 has been received, which it is estimated, will keep those in need for a year.

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*Reno Evening Gazette*  
*Monday, March 19, 1883*

### **The Diamond Mine Disaster**

BRAIDWOOD, ILL., March 18.

A large number of people gathered at the Diamond mine today. Only five feet of water to be pumped out, and bodies are expected to come to the surface at any time. Hinged boxes which fall flat by the removal of a pin, for handling the corpses when recovered, were sent down from Braidwood today.

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*Newark Daily Advocate*  
*Newark, Ohio*  
*Tuesday, March 27, 1883*

## **IN BRAIDWOOD MINE.**

### **A Pile of Bodies Found Beneath Over a Ton of Rock**

BRAIDWOOD, ILL., MARCH 26 - The search in the Diamond Mines was continued all night. Shortly before daylight this morning four more bodies were discovered. They were lying upon a great pile of rocks, and the first was lying upon his face, with his coat thrown over his head. Another was completely buried by rock with only the feet visible. The third was apart from the rest, on the floor of the tunnel, pinned down by a great fragment of stone.

The nine bodies so far recovered were brought up before dark. A large fire had been lit in front of the morgue and surrounding prairie fires for miles combined to make a scene. No bodies so far are recognized. Two are claimed by fellow workmen to be those of Paddy Healey and Jim Hoover, but the relatives repudiate the identification. The inquest takes place at noon, and they interments either this afternoon or tomorrow morning. All business is suspended for miles around and the place is full of strangers.

The second detail of the searching party of fifteen men have just gone down, and the report of those to come up is awaited with painful eagerness by the thousands at the head of the shaft.

#### **Later.**

CHICAGO, March 26 - A report just comes from the Diamond Mine that a large pile of bodies has been found beneath over a ton of rock. The work of extrication will take some time. It is generally believed more bodies have been found than reported, but the searchers are chary of bringing them to the surface, in consequence of fears of the reaction upon the wives, mothers, and other relatives, who cannot be persuaded to abandon their vigil at the head of the shaft and return home.

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*Hopewell Herald*  
*April 4, 1883*

The work of recovering the bodies from the Diamond Mine was continued. Twenty-two corpses were brought up, eighteen of which were identified. The funeral of those not claimed by relatives took place Monday afternoon.

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*Daily Republican*  
*Decatur IL*  
*Monday, April 12, 1883*

## **MINE HORRORS.**

### **Narrow Escape of Searchers In the Diamond Pit**

#### **Six Men Imprisoned by Falling Rock - Six More Bodies Recovered**

BRAIDWOOD, ILL., APRIL 2 - A large crowd had assembled yesterday around the Diamond mine but they were not like the excited crowd that gathered when the first bodies were taken out. They seem to have lost interest in the matter. Even the searchers when they came up were disheartened by the prospect before them. At 8 o'clock yesterday morning, a party of six men went down with the coffins to put the bodies in but before they had succeeded in getting the bodies ready to be brought up they discovered that their means of retreat had been cut off by a large fall of stone in the roadway. Their feelings can be imagined when they realized that they were prisoners in that frightful grave. Sitting there in the presence of the six ghastly corpses painfully reminded them what their fate might be. They had thoughtlessly gone down without tools to dig themselves out, having all they could do to take the coffins down. They had remained prisoners in the awful place for several hours when another party was sent down to hunt them as their long stay had alarmed the officers in charge on top. When the fact became known that the party were imprisoned in the pit, the

**EXCITEMENT BECAME INTENSE**

The party, on reaching the top, were surrounded by a vast crowd of excited miners, who rejoiced at their return. Their wives hung around them frantically. These explorers vowed they would never enter the mine again. This adventure of the exploring party completely changed the minds of the white mining populations in regard to pursuing the work of taking out the bodies not yet buried in the mine. Many of the miners expressed themselves freely on the subject of abandoning the shaft. They think now that to continue the work will be a foolish and reckless piece of work.

Alexander Fillmore, who has a son yet buried in the mine, on being asked if he would be satisfied to let the work be stopped, said:

“If work be stopped now I would be satisfied to let my boy remain, but if nearly all the bodies were taken out, I would insist on having my boy. I have been to the farthest point in the mine yet explored, and would do a great deal to get his body but I will

### **NEVER GO DOWN IN THE MINE**

Again at the further risk of my life; nor can I ask another man to go. I have a family dependent on me for support and do not care to lose my life. Even if I got his body, I could not bring him back to life.”

Many of the interested ones are said to be of the same opinion. Today at 8 o'clock the widows and interested relatives will meet Mr. T. B. Cary, Superintendent of the C. W. and C. V. Co. at the Diamond Coal Company's office to talk over the matter of stopping the work of searching the mine for the remaining bodies.

### **SIX MORE BODIES RECOVERED**

It was found that only six bodies were among the rafters in the southwest entry, instead of seven, as at first thought. They were taken out at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and placed at once in the Morgue. The last three taken up were identified as being Ike Pearson, James Pearson, and John Pearson. They were brothers. The first names was the oldest. He laid on the timber and had the younger boys' heads lying on his breast. There heads were nearly pressed through his body, so heavy was the pressure of the stone on them. The Coroner's inquest will be held on Wednesday at 1 o'clock in the afternoon.