

Twin Shaft mine disaster left 101 children fatherless overnight

■ *Mine roof collapse in 1896 killed 58 men and helped boost fortunes of powerful labor leader.*

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PITTSBURGH — As they went to sleep on that Saturday evening in 1896, hundreds of children around Pittsburgh Junction could rest easy, comforted at least by the earthen smell of approaching June rain, the luxury of a coming day of rest and the certainty of family.

Instead, many of them would start the next day fatherless.

At 3 in the morning, their world was rocked — literally — by three distinct tremors that shook the earth. Hundreds of feet underground, rock had shifted. Soon after, the shrill

breaker whistle started June 28 with the news that a massive cave-in at the Twin Shaft coal mine had trapped the miners below.

Fifty-eight miners and laborers died in the disaster. One hundred and one children were left without their fathers. The loss hit some families exceptionally hard; Michael F. Lynott, the mine foreman, was the father of seven. The fire boss, Alexander McCormick, had nine children. M.J. Langan, the superintendent, was the father of 10.

Those Irish names were typical of the death list — Gilroy, Burke, O'Boyle, Kehoe — although other ethnic groups shared in the tragedy (the dead at Twin Shaft included the names Shevskie, Teleskie, Zavatskie). Twin Shaft would be a disaster for the Irish community, just as victims at the Avon-



dale mine in Plymouth Township in 1869 had predominantly been Welsh and victims at the Baltimore Tunnel in 1919 would be Poles, Slavs and Lithuanians.

And although the Twin Shaft disaster is not widely remembered, the nature of the mining tragedy — a squeeze, or roof fall — is more typical of the way miners died, rather than the shaft fire of Avondale or the breach of the river at Knox Mine in 1959.

The Twin Shaft mine was located north of the center of Pittsburgh, near the confluence of the Lackawanna and Susque-

hanna rivers. The mine had a relatively fair reputation for safety; only nine fatalities were recorded between 1889 and 1895, a period in which almost 2 million tons of coal were extracted from the workings.

That suddenly and tragically changed, either from natural disaster or human error. No one knows for sure.

In his book, "The Breaker Whistle Blows," the late Ellis Roberts devoted a chapter to the Twin Shaft; "Several days earlier," wrote Roberts, "mine officials had noted movement or 'working' of the strata between the fifth and sixth veins of the mine. Such movement generally precedes roof falls or squeezes. Roof falls were dangerous for the miners and laborers. But also because they disrupted



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The Newton Coal Company's Twin Shaft Colliery, located at Pittsburgh Junction, in the north part of Pittsburgh, as it appeared in 1948. The colliery was later dismantled.

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