

P2 GREATER PITTSBURGH PROGRESS SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 1916

Around the towns

Twin Shaft Disaster memorial planned

By Jack Smiles

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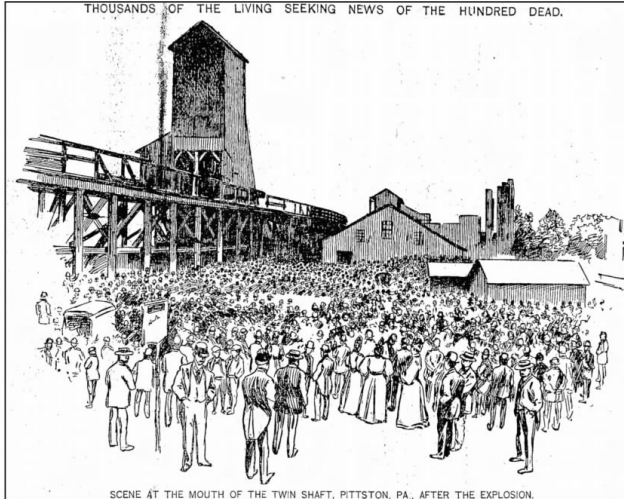
At 3 a.m. Sunday, June 28, 1896, three thundering, ground shaking "whoops" shook hundreds of Pittstonians out of bed. Though the sounds were described as earthquakes or explosions, they were really caused by a tremendous "squeeze" at the Newton Mining Company's Twin Shaft Colliery in the Junction.

"Squeeze" was a mining term used to describe what happens when the roof of a mine chamber collapses. But "squeeze" seems like a weak word for the Twin Shaft Disaster, where 200 acres of 250-foot thick rock strata, the floor of the chamber above, fell in three gigantic sections, crushing and entombing 58 men and boys more than 500 feet below the ground and creating, in an instant, 30 widows and 85 fatherless children.

At 2:30 p.m. Saturday, June 25, the Greater Pittston Historical Society and Our Lady of the Eucharist Parish will co-host a memorial to commemorate the 120th anniversary of the Twin Shaft Disaster with a wreath-laying at the Pittston Coal Miner Monument site on North Main Street at the entry to the Fort Jenkins Bridge. Owing to the small plot and traffic concerns, only a small group can be accommodated, so the wreath-laying is by invitation only.

All are welcome at a special public Mass, short program and reception beginning at 3:30 p.m. at Our Lady of the Eucharist Parish, Saint Mary Help of Christians Church at 535 N. Main St., Pittston.

Richard Fitzsimmons — who, along with Mary T. Policare, is a co-chair of the Twin Shaft anniversary committee — has a special interest in the Twin Shaft. His great-grandfather, John Kehoe, was one of the miners killed in the shaft. Also killed were Kehoe's son, Frank, and nephew, Thomas Barrett. Fitzsimmons is one of several descendants of the entombed miners who will speak at the program.



SCENE AT THE MOUTH OF THE TWIN SHAFT, PITTSBURGH, PA., AFTER THE EXPLOSION.

PROVIDED BY GREATER PITTSBURGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thousands gather at the site of the Twin Shaft Disaster in Pittston in this drawing from a photo taken at the time of the accident. The Greater Pittston Historical Society and Our Lady of the Eucharist Parish are co-hosting a memorial Saturday, June 25, to commemorate the 120th anniversary of the cave-in that killed 58 miners.

"We wanted to have the wreath-laying ceremony at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker alongside North Main Street at Union Street, but were denied access by the railroad," he said.

The site is Reading and Northern Railroad property. The actual site of the disaster is estimated to be from 300 to 900 feet from the marker.

Two days before the disaster, in June 1896, Newton Fire Boss McCormack noticed signs that a squeeze might be in progress, but not eminent. Saturday evening, mine superintendent Michael J. Langan and inside foreman Michael Lynott went into the No. 3 shaft with a force of men to reinforce the roof by building timber roof supports using ties laid crosswise in "Xs" from floor to roof. They hoped to secure the chamber for the Monday morning shift. Langan, who was acting as mayor of Pittston while Mayor Thomas Maloney was traveling in Ireland, and Lynott were among the 58 men killed by the squeeze. Langan left 10 children and Lynott, 7.

As men with mule cars brought timbers from outside, others were setting timbers by hand, working through the night under the direction of Langan. While Langan and most of the men did not believe a squeeze was eminent, four men — Edward Hughes, Michael Langan, Martin Healey and John Williams — left, plainly stating they believed the chamber was too dangerous.

Four others escaped after the fall. James Gill, a noted musician, was at the air bridge. He was blown into a sump by the air forced out by the squeeze. He ran out and picked up Frank Sheridan, a teenager, along the way. Jacob Adams and John Riker were in a car hauling props to the foot of the shaft when the force of air blew them out of the car. They crawled out in dust and debris, met Sheridan and Gill and called for the cage.

The sound of the air forced out was so powerful it led to the belief that there had been three explosions. Riker would later testify at the official hearing that he didn't hear any pillars crushing, any

unusual sounds coming from the roof at the foot of No. 3 shaft. He felt the mine was so safe he would have slept at the foot of the shaft.

A fire alarm was called at 3:15 a.m. As it turned out, firemen weren't needed, but the alarm woke even more people, who were drawn to the colliery. General Manager John B. Law, though sick, was roused from his bed in West Pittston and took a cab to the site. Isaac Molster of the Lackawanna Valley Coal Company and mine inspector McDonald went into the mine with a force of hand-picked men, but all avenues were cut off by gas or the squeeze. Shifts were organized at 7 a.m., 3 p.m. and 11 p.m. with 50 to 60 on each, including three fire bosses and led by superintendents of nearby mines. But there was no way to begin a rescue without timbering the gangway entrance at the bottom of the shaft to protect rescuers. The mule stables were not crushed, and in cage load after cage load, the mules were sent up and timber props were sent down. Props were brought from neighboring mines and sev-

eral carloads arrived by rail, but they couldn't be delivered fast enough and two shifts of work barely accomplished keeping the gangways at the foot of the shaft open. Nothing was done to clear the squeeze as aftershocks snapped coal pillars and crushed props.

Above ground there was no crowd control for hours. Main Street and the railway tracks leading downtown and to the West Side were lined with people. Traction company cars were described as "living masses of humanity." Several thousand people quickly gathered, including families of the miners. Newspapers sold out. One boy sold 1,000 copies. On Monday, the postmaster sold nearly 1,000 penny stamps as papers were mailed to relatives and friends all over the country. Soon family members arrived from as far as Kansas City.

Initially it was thought there was no disturbance above ground. But long cracks discovered along the Coxton farm leading to the river meant flooding was another risk to the rescuers. The cars which Adams and Riker had been blown from were found crushed in the gangway and it took hours just to pull them out. A borehole was drilled 90 feet from nearby Clearspring colliery into where it was suspected the men might be, only to reveal silence and gas detected by a safety lamp 10 feet from the hole.

From the official Report to the Governor on the disaster: "After a careful consideration of the situation, it was decided that the only feasible way to reach the bodies was to proceed down No. 3 slope, it being apparent to those in charge that all of the men who had been at work in the No. 3 slope had been crushed to death. Accordingly, on July 6, the work of opening the passage through the fallen rock was commenced."

As it was unsafe to use explosives, the fallen rock was broken with hammers and wedges. Even with round the clock work for a month, the opening had been driven

only 500 feet from the slope and there were clear signs of another squeeze. On July 24, a meeting was called of all superintendents of neighboring companies. From their official report: "Deep regret was expressed by all present at the apparent impossibility of ever finding the bodies."

Work was stopped on July 29.

St. Mary's Help of Christians Church is an appropriate venue for Saturday's commemoration. Handwritten parish records note 32 of the 58 men and boys entombed were from its parish, and 72 children from the parish were left without a father.

The Twin Shaft Relief Association raised more than \$100,000 through donations and interest. Sons of the men killed received \$60 a year until age 12, daughters, \$60 until age 13, and widows, \$120 until death or remarriage. The fund was exhausted in 1911, 15 years after the disaster; when \$120 was the equivalent of \$3,500 2016 dollars.

One of the most interesting of the Twin Shaft backstories was what happened to widower Katherine "Kitty" Carabine Joyce. She moved to New York City after her husband, Peter Joyce, was entombed and had "a mercurial career" as a Broadway star before she committed suicide by jumping in front of the 11th Avenue train in 1915.

The Lehigh Valley bought the Twin Shaft colliery from Newton and continued mining after a few years. In 1909, the Lehigh reached its goal of a rich vein under Scovell Island in the river between West Pittston and Pittston. The gangway to the island crossed four Newton gangways from the time of the disaster. They were explored. Six loaded mine cars were found. From the Pittston Gazette of Oct. 29, 1909: "The workings were completely crushed down at the section where Supt. Langan and his men were setting timber. There is no opening whatever in which that point in the mine can be reached."

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Twin Shaft 2016

Clipped By:
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May 7, 2023