

Twin Shaft disaster still haunts mining

BY JOE SYLVESTER
STAFF WRITER

PITSTON — It began like most other days. Coal miners in Pittston descended into the dark caverns of the earth, just as they had every other work day.

But on this day — June 28, 1896 — 58 miners would never return to the surface. An explosion caused a massive cave-in of rock and coal that permanently sealed them in the Newton Coal Co.'s Twin Shaft mine.

The disaster, which led to stronger unionization of coal miners in the region, remains the fourth-worst fatal mine accident of the 108 that occurred in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania between January 1846 and January 1959.

The worst was the Sept. 6, 1869, fire at the Avondale Colliery in Plymouth Township, which killed 108 workers and two would-be rescuers, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Another 109 miners died in an explosion in the Mammoth Mine in Mount Pleasant on Jan. 27, 1891, and 92 died in an explosion in the

Baltimore Tunnel No. 2 in Wilkes-Barre on June 5, 1919.

But it is the Twin Shaft disaster that will be remembered later this month.

"The biggest thing about it to me is they're still buried there," said John Dziak, of the Greater Pittston Historical Society, which will hold a display June 24 to mark the disaster's 110th anniversary. "They never found the bodies."

The disaster is marked by a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission plaque at North Main and Union streets. The society wants to do more to note the tragedy because it is the 110th anniversary, so it will put on the display at St. Mary Help of Christians Church on North Main Street, beginning at 3 p.m.

"We're going to have maps, we're going to have a list of the dead," Mr. Dziak said. "I just got a 165-page transcript of the (state) report of the disaster." He said the display would be up until about 7 p.m.

The church, which lost 32 members in the disaster, also will celebrate Mass on June 28 at 8 a.m. in the victims' memory.



MICHAEL J. MULLEN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

John Dziak, of the Greater Pittston Historical Society, standing by coal cars at the Lackawanna Coal Mine, has been investigating the 1896 Twin Shaft mine disaster.

Mr. Dziak said the society is looking for interested people and descendants of the victims of the Twin Shaft disaster to help plan the commemoration. Those interested can reach him at 654-6209.

"It would be interesting if we have descendants," he said.

The state commission plaque, dedicated in 1992, states: "On June 28, 1896, fifty-eight men were killed in a massive cave-in of rock and coal here, in the Newton Coal Company's Twin Shaft Colliery. An investigative commission, appointed by the Governor, reported on Sept. 25. Although its safety recommendations would often be ignored,

the disaster was a factor that led to a stronger unionization of this region under John Mitchell after 1900."

According to the April-June 2003 edition of *The Miner's Lamp*, the newsletter of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum and Iron Furnaces Associates in Scranton, the Newton Coal Co. was owned by Philadelphia bankers. The explosion in what was one of the oldest mine shafts in the region occurred in the sixth, or lowest, vein, under Coxton Farm, just beyond the Lackawanna River, the newsletter reported.

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Car-truck collision kills woman

BY MEGAN STAFF

A Carbondale woman drove miles in her car on Interstate 80 early Saturday morning when it collided with a truck near the Dickson interchange.

Tammy Layman, 55, was pronounced dead at 5:07 a.m. by Lackawanna County Deputy Coroner David Land. Chief Investigator Joseph Swoboda said the driver of the car was of multiple trauma. No autopsy or toxicology test results have been formed on her.

State Police believe Ms. Layman was driving north in the southbound lane for at least three miles when the 4:16 p.m. collision occurred, wearing a seat belt.

According to the state police, the car collided with a truck driven by a woman of Highland Township, 1 mile marker west of the interchange. The woman was uninjured and was reduced to a critical condition about three hours after the crash.

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