

**Bureau of Mines Bulletin 586:  
Historical Summary of Mine  
Disasters in the United States  
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1810-1958**

**February 20, 1884; West Leisenring Mine, West  
Leisenring, Pa.; 19 Killed**

*(From Adventures in the Mines, by T. T. O'Malley,  
1891, p. 180)*

Gas had accumulated in one of the entries during the night \* \* \* men started to work in the morning without the mine having been examined \* \* \* one went into an old room to look for rails \* \* \* and lit the gas with his naked light, which exploded, burning and killing some of them, and the others were suffocated by the after damp. Several men \* \* \* escaped by going around to another entry.

**Daily Gazette**  
**Colorado Springs, CO**  
**Thursday, February 21, 1884**

**A Mine Horror.**

CONNELLSVILLE, Pa., February 20.—At 6 o'clock this morning one of the most terrible explosions ever known in this vicinity occurred at the West Leisnering shaft, a few miles from here, resulting in frightful loss of life. The particulars are so meagre that nothing definite is known of what caused the disaster. The latest report received here, at noon, was to the effect that some 75 persons were at work in the mine at the time of the explosion and that out of the number 29 persons are known to have met their death, that many dead bodies have already been taken out. Twelve were rescued, several of whom are so badly injured that they will die. Every effort is being made to get at those who are yet in the mine and to learn the full extent of the frightful accident. It is thought at least fifty persons out of the seventy-five in the mine are killed or so badly injured that they will die.

UNIONTOWN, Pa., February 20.—The little mining village of West Leisnering, four miles north of here, was this morning the scene of the most terrible explosion ever known to the coke region. The Connelisville Coal & Iron company have two hundred coke ovens, which have been in operation about a year, employing one hundred men. The coal is obtained by means of a shaft which reaches the mines at a distance of four hundred feet from the surface. This morning part of the force, who had worked all night, left the mine a little after 3 o'clock and seventy others took their places, making the usual morning shift. At about half-past six o'clock, while the men were digging, suddenly there occurred without warning an explosion that convulsed the mine in every apartment and threw the men into the utmost consternation. The scene of the explosion was in one of the apartments 800 feet from the bottom of the shaft and 1,200 feet from the surface opening. The awful scene that ensued among the terror-stricken miners cannot be described. All their lamps were blown out and they were left in darkness and confusion. They had not time to recover from the shock until they found themselves unable to breathe.

Of all the men who were in the heading where the explosion occurred Dick Balsley alone escaped to tell the awful story. When the explosion came and all the lights were blown out Balsley was just changing his clothes. He at once wound part of the clothes tightly around his face and mouth to keep the foul air from choking him and gave the rest of the garments to his companion with instructions to take the same precautions. He then started for the main entrance, bidding his companion to follow. They ran over bodies of men. They could see nothing but could hear groans of dying men. Presently Balsley & companion protested that they were not going in the right direction and turned back. He perished. Balsley pushed on until finally he saw a light and was taken out. His escape is regarded by experienced miners as one of the most marvelous on record.

Families of the men quickly gathered about the shaft and were crazy with suspense. Balsley's story gave them little ground for hope that any could be got out alive. So dangerous was the after damp that it was fully two hours before any volunteers could enter the mines. Many were on hand ready to search but were unable to do so, until hope of rescuing the unfortunates alive had quite fled. It was about 8 o'clock when the first body was brought out. It was that of Michael Ripko, a Hungarian, whose wife and two children were waiting and weeping at the shaft. He had evidently died from suffocation. The work of rescuing the men now went rapidly on and at noon 10 bodies had been carried out. Then the roll was called and it was announced that all the men were accounted for.

The dead list is as follows: Michael Heffern, leaves a wife and six children; John Buckley, unmarried; James Tracey, single; Jos. Baker, wife and two children; David Lloyd, single; Wm. Davis, single; Thomas McGarey, wife and three children; John Hart, single; Michael Ripko, wife and two children; George Collis; Daniel Buckner, colored, wife and two children; John Murray, wife and one child; Peter Waters, single; Wm. Sparing, wife and four children; Joe Barker, wife; Andy Warmus, single; Albert Heckeney, wife and one child; Garry E. Mayo.

Most of the above bore no visible marks of violence, but died of suffocation. Their faces were generally very black: smoke and dust having been blown into the skin. Many of those who were in other parts of the mine suffered severely. After identifying the bodies Coroner Eaton adjourned the inquest until Saturday morning. The company bear all expenses of the funeral, which take place to-morrow and next day. The accumulation of so much gas in this mine as to cause such an explosion is a matter of much surprise. No accident ever before occurred here, and it was considered a very safe mine. The mine boss with his lamp made the usual examination last night and pronounced everything all right.

*Wisconsin State Journal*  
*Madison, Wis.*  
*Thursday Afternoon, February 21, 1884*

**Terrible Explosion in a Coal Mine**

A WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA MINE  
SWALLOWS NINETEEN VICTIMS.

UNIONTOWN, Pa., Feb. 21.—At West Leisening shaft, or Leisening No. 2, as it is frequently called, about four miles north of this place, in Dunbar township, occurred yesterday morning one of the most disastrous explosions of fire damp in mining annals. The shaft is 400 feet deep, and the explosion occurred about 300 yards from the bottom of the shaft, between 6 and 7 o'clock, at which time there were more than eighty miners in the pit. In or near the main entrance the force of the explosion was terrific, blowing the top off the derrick over the shaft. As soon as the disaster was known to the employers and laborers, about twenty men volunteered to rescue those who might still be living in the pit. But a short time elapsed until the men were lowered and work begun. Those who were engaged in the work described

THE SCENES BELOW

as awful. The floor of the pit was covered with lifeless and half-lifeless bodies. Many of the miners were stunned and wandering around, not knowing in what direction they were going. It was about 12 o'clock when the last man was taken out. Then an examination showed that nineteen of the miners were dead. A number who were almost suffocated were restored to consciousness after they reached the top. The bodies of the dead and wounded were removed to the houses that dot the hillsides, and the superintendent and engineer of the works, L. K. Taggart, came to Uniontown for Coroner Bolton. About 2 o'clock the coroner and a score of other citizens arrived at the scene of destruction. The coroner impaneled a jury. All the bodies were viewed and identified, when the jury adjourned to meet at the town hall, Uniontown, on Saturday, when

WITNESSES WILL BE EXAMINED

West Leisening is one of the neatest villages in the coke region. The houses are so located that the smoke of the ovens near by does not settle upon them, as in most others, and those in the coke business are wont to point to these works as a model. It is removed from the nearest other works about two miles, and is hemmed in by the hills. It is surrounded by farms as good as the county contains, and the owners of them gathered to-day in large numbers to sympathize with and aid the bereaved of the village. The mine has been pronounced one of the best and safest in the coke region. Two of those killed left mines which they considered dangerous, and were engaged by this company but a few weeks ago. The mine inspector for this district thought the mine a model, and placed a diagram of it in his report. No one can account for the accident, as the fire boss had been in the mine a short time before the accident happened, had tested it, and pronounced it safe. The miners all

EXONERATE THE COMPANY.

Most of the dead will be buried Friday, when the company will deposit their remains wherever their friends may desire. The mine inspector was present this afternoon, examining the mine, and as soon as the derrick and the iron cage which were damaged can be repaired and the mine cleared, work will be resumed.

INVESTIGATING THE CAUSE.

UNIONTOWN, Pa., Feb. 21.—The scene of yesterday's terrible disaster is being visited by large numbers, to-day. Many who come, are simply curious, but many come with the earnest intention of investigation, and, if possible, of ascertaining the cause of the explosion. Heretofore, gas has not caused much trouble in western Pennsylvania mines, but it is evident that a vast quantity had generated in a short time without being discovered. A majority of experts who examined the mine this morning incline to the belief that the explosion resulted from the falling in of a portion of the roof of one of the chambers and exposing a crevice filled with fire damp. None, however, are willing to stake their reputation on this until a more thorough examination has been made.

The coffins for

THE NINETEEN VICTIMS

arrived from Pittsburg this morning, and all will be buried from Uniontown tomorrow. Two-thirds of the victims are Roman Catholics, and it has not yet been decided whether a union service will be held, or each family bury their own dead. The Connellsville Coke & Transcontinental company, owners of the mine, pay all the funeral expenses.

There are none here who censure the company. The opinion is universal that the explosion cannot be charged to their neglect, as the shaft was a model; the most approved appliances were used for safety, and greater precautions were taken than are required by law.

The families of the dead miners are not in immediate destitute circumstances, but the sudden

WITHDRAWAL OF SUPPORT

caused by the taking of husbands, fathers and brothers, will be seriously felt in the near future. Many had their lives insured only last week. An insurance agent circulated among the mines and miners, and a large number availed themselves of the opportunity. Among them were several who were killed.

**Daily Nebraska State Journal**  
**Lincoln, Nebraska**  
**Thursday, February 21, 1884**

**EXPLOSION.**

**DEATH IN A COAL MINE.**

**Another Disastrous Explosion in a  
Pennsylvania Coal Pit.**

**Twenty Miners Enter the Ill-Fated  
Man-Trap,**

**And But One Escapes to Tell the  
Awful Tale.**

**The Grief-Stricken Friends Sur-  
round the Gaping Pit,**

**And Make the Air Resound With  
Heart-Rending Lamentations.**

**MINE EXPLOSION.**

**A Frightfully Fatal Disaster in a Penn-  
sylvania Coal Mine.**

CONNELLSVILLE, PA., Feb. 20.—At 6 this morning one of the most terrible explosions ever known in this vicinity occurred at West Lesoring shaft, a few miles from here, resulting in frightful loss of life. Particulars are so meagre that nothing definite is known as to what caused the disaster. The latest report received here at noon was to the effect that some seventy-five persons were at work in the mine at the time of the explosion, and that out of that number twenty-nine are known to have met their death. Many bodies have already been taken out. Twelve were rescued, several of whom were so badly injured that they will die. Every effort is being made to get at those who are yet in the mine and to learn the full extent of the frightful accident. It is thought that at least fifty are killed or are so badly injured that they will die.

**A FULLER ACCOUNT**

UNIONTOWN, PA., Feb. 20.—The little mining village of West Lesoring, four miles north of here, was this morning the scene of the most terrific explosion ever known in the coke regions. The Connelleville Coal & Iron company have coke ovens here, which give employment to about 100 men. Coal is obtained by means of a shaft which reaches the mines at a distance of 400 feet from the surface. This morning a part of the force who had worked all night left the mines a little after two o'clock, and twenty others took their places, making the usual morning shift. About 6:30 o'clock, while the men were digging, without warning, occurred an explosion that

**CONVULSED THE MINE**

in every apartment. It threw the men into the utmost consternation. The scene of the explosion was one of the apartments fully 800 feet distant from the bottom of the shaft and about 1,200 feet from the surface opening, yet the report was heard on the outside for a considerable distance, and caused such a jar that the top of the derrick, 100 feet high, was knocked off. The men were standing at the bottom of the shaft, 800 feet from the explosion, and the rush of air blew one of them through the wooden cage, shattering it to pieces. An awful scene ensued among the terror-stricken miners. All their lamps were blown out, and they were left in

**DARKNESS AND CONFUSION.**

They had not time to recover from the shock until they found themselves unable to breathe. The explosion of fire damp left the mine without oxygen. The men hovered near the bottom, but even here did not long find relief. Of all the men within hearing of where the explosion occurred, Dick Balsey alone escaped to tell the awful story. When the explosion came and all the lights were blown out, Balsey had just changed his clothes. He at once wound a part of his clothes tightly around his face and mouth to keep the foul air from choking him, and gave the rest of his garments to his companion, with instructions to take

**THE SAME PRECAUTIONS.**

He then started for the entrance, bidding his companion to follow. They ran over the bodies of men and shattered wagons. They could see nothing, but could hear the groans of dying men. Presently Balsey's only companion protested that they were not going in the right direction and turned back. Like Lots' wife, he perished. Balsey pushed on until he saw a light and was taken out. His escape is regarded as most marvelous. He says some of the men kept their heads under water as long as they could, and would change from water to fire damp, until finally they gave up.

**THE UNEQUAL STRUGGLE.**

When the news of the explosion was flashed around the families of the men gathered about the shaft, crav' with suspense. Balsey's story gave them little ground for hope that any could be got out alive. It was fully two hours before any volunteers could enter the mine. Many were ready to make the search, but unable to do so until the hope of rescuing the unfortunate alive had quite fled. It was about eight o'clock when the first body was brought out. It was that of Michael Rilks, whose wife and two little ones were waiting at the shaft. There were no marks of violence. He had evidently died of suffocation. The work of rescuing now went on rapidly. At noon

**NINETY-N BODIES**

had been carried out. The company's books were then examined and the roll called, and it was announced that all the men were accounted for. The bodies were taken to homes near by and laid out. Co. over Batten, of this place, with many others, went from here, and the inquest began this afternoon. No testimony was taken except that which identified the dead, a list of whom is as follows:

**THE DEAD LIST.**

Michael Hefston, leaves a wife and six children.  
John Buckley, unmarried.  
Patrick Kennedy, unmarried, the only child of a widow.  
James Tracy, single.  
James Baker, wife and two children.  
David Lloyd, single.  
Wm. Davis, single.  
Thomas McGarry, wife and three children.  
John Harty, single.  
Michael Rilks, wife and two children.  
George Callis, wife.  
David Buckner, wife and two children.  
John Murray, wife and child.  
Peter Waters, single.  
William Searing, wife and four children.  
Joe Barks, wife.  
H. Warmos, single.  
Albion N. Hackney, wife and one child.  
Garrle Mace, unknown relations.  
Most of the above had died of suffocation. Their faces generally were very black. The last man taken out alive was Henry Wilson, who managed to subsist on the air at the very bottom until rescued. He was almost gone. Many of those who were in other parts of the mine suffered severely.



**The Keystone Courier**  
**Connellsville, PA**  
**Friday Morning, October 31, 1884**

**THE MOLOCH OF THE MINE**

**FOURTEEN VICTIMS OF FIRE-DAMP.**

**The West Leisenring Horror Related at the Youngstown Works—The Killed and Injured—Cause of the Explosion.**

Again has the Moloch of the Mine drenched his altar in human blood. Fourteen lives have been sacrificed to the Fire-Dump Fiend, and the insatiate monster crouches low in the gloom of the pit awaiting another opportunity to spill blood, rend flesh and suck the breath of life from additional victims. This time the scene of the disaster is the Youngstown mine and the results are almost as horrible as those of West Leisenring, last March. There are two sable-bordered pages in the history of the Connellsville coke region now. The death roster of one contains nineteen names, and that of the other, fourteen. Men ask themselves whether there is to be any end to such frightful slaughter, but ignorance of the terrible properties of the insidious gas and carelessness of familiar dangers refuse an affirmative answer. A rigid system of mine inspection and a forced use of the safety lamp has not prevented a recurrence of the horrible fatality. The ingenuity of man has not yet been able to cope with this mysterious hidden force of nature, and until it does, the miner takes his life in his hand when he descends day after day to toil in the bowels of the earth for the plain food which he eats and the scanty clothing which he wears. Truly, the life of the poor miner is not a pathway of roses.

**THE EXPLOSION.**

Shortly after four o'clock, Monday afternoon, just after the night turn of miners, twenty-six in all, had entered the mine, a dull rumbling, as of distant thunder, vibrated on the damp air, growing louder and louder and culminating in a roar like that of a passing cyclone. The earth trembled about the mine. A second report followed. The hearts of the frightened listeners above ground stood still in terror. A moment later, and a dense column of smoke, flame and coal dust burst from the mouth of the slope and air shaft. The fierce flames blocked up all avenues of approach. J. M. H. Reis, the superintendent, and James Cole, pit boss, had just left the mine and were consulting together in the office of the former. They hurried to the scene. Mine inspector Stinner, who happened to be in Uniontown, soon after joined them and took charge of the mine, but fully an hour elapsed before the flames subsided sufficiently to permit descent into the mine by way of the air shaft. All the other avenues of entrance were blocked up by fire and deadly gases. The news of the explosion had spread like wild-fire and many people had gathered upon the scene. There was no lack of volunteers, and as soon as the condition of the mine permitted, a rescuing party descended, amid the breathless suspense of the spectators,

**INTO THE DEATH TRAP.**

It was found that the explosion occurred in the right slope, on the sixth flat, one-half mile from the mouth of the mine. The first body brought out was that of Jasper Zoble. His aged father had been standing at the mouth of the mine anxiously awaiting the result of the search. In tremulous tones, he inquired of the rescuing party whose body it was. When gently told it was that of his own son, the old man was overcome with grief and had to be led away. All night long the rescuing party worked with heroic and untiring devotion under the leadership of Superintendent Reis. The flames that filled the mine after the explosion gradually consumed the inflammable gas and died away, offering no further hindrance to the searching party, and before morning the last of the charred and blackened and mangled bodies had been removed, and the living had been rescued. The dead were placed in the wareroom of the company store, where they were laid out, washed and newly clad, and when the rescuing party had concluded its labors fourteen corpses were stretched out in a ghastly row and the village of Youngstown was one vast house of mourning.

**THE DEATH ROLL.**

Following is a correct list of the killed:

**JASPER ZOBLEY**, punper; aged 18; crushed and horribly mangled about the head.

**JACK LAPE**, rope rider; aged 30; leaves a wife and two children.

**WILLIAM MINEYD**, hauler, aged 26; smothered; leaves a wife and four children.

**JAMES PRICE**, Scotchman, aged 45; smothered and slightly burned; leaves a wife and several children.

**JAMES PRICE, JR.**, son of above, aged 15; badly burned.

**THOMAS COLE**, aged 45; terribly burned and mangled; leaves a sick wife and nine small children. Mrs. Cole is dangerously ill and will hardly recover.

**JESSE MILLER**, German, aged 53; smothered; leaves a wife and family. He had only been working in this mine two weeks.

**GEORGE MILLER**, son of Jesse, aged 15; smothered.

**ALBERT TAYLOR**, aged 27; smothered; leaves a wife who will in a few days become a mother.

**ABRAHAM WILSON**, aged 35; roadman, horribly burned; leaves a wife and four children.

**FRANK NICKLOW**, aged 46; smothered; leaves a wife and three children.

**WILLIAM NICKLOW**, son of Frank, aged 17; smothered.

**GEORGE CUNNINGHAM**, aged 30; burned; leaves a wife and one child.

**MOLOMON VANMICKLE**, aged 25; badly burned; leaves a wife and one child.

**THE INJURED.**

The following is a list of the injured:

**JACOB COLE**, father of the pit boss; probably fatally burned and bruised.

**DAVID COLE**, son of Jacob; burned and bruised, probably beyond recovery.

**CHAUNCEY MILLER**, a boy of 15; burned and shoulder dislocated.

**FRANK MILLER**, almost suffocated and barely resuscitated.

**JAMES DABBY**, aged 25; slightly burned and injured internally; a husband of a few months.

**CLARENCE WILSON**, arm broken and head badly burned; saved himself by covering his head with his coat.

**JERRY RINGER**, when found, was in the last stages of asphyxiation; was saved only by the greatest efforts.

**WASHINGTON KLEPKEL**, not much hurt, as he had the presence of mind to lie down in a pool of water and avoid inhaling the gas. He resembled a drowned rat when brought out.

*The Keystone Courier*  
*Connellsville, PA*  
*Friday Morning, October 31, 1884 - Page 2*

**MONEY AT THE PIT MOUTH.**

The scenes at the mouth of the pit when the dead bodies were being brought up was beyond the power of the most pathetic pen to describe. Most of the killed leave wives and children. At this works, as at most others in the region, the single men were discharged and the married ones retained, in making the recent reductions of force. All, or nearly all, of the unfortunates, were natives and lived in the neighborhood. As they were brought out of the mine they were so disfigured and blackened that the work of recognition was slow, and anxious wives and children scanned the faces only to scream as they recognized the familiar features. The most pitiful sight was that of the wife of Jesse Miller, a German, who had been at the mines only for a short time. Her screams for her husband, mingled with expressions of the tenderest affections, were touching in the extreme. Cunningham and Minerd had joined their fortunes and died clasped in each other's embrace.

**THE FORCE OF THE EXPLOSION**

was terrific. Men were killed that were working 1,200 feet from where the explosion took place, and the bratticing all through the mine was blown to pieces. Cars were completely demolished, mules killed, the track torn up and the mine badly shattered. Even the tin buckets that contained the men's supplies were torn into atoms. There was not so much fall of roof as was at first anticipated, and no deaths resulted from any falls. Some of the men were found several hundred feet away from their places of working, and from their mangled condition they evidently were blown thither by the explosion. There was considerable gas in the mine for several days, but it was gradually expelled and the labor of replacing the brattice work and doors is being done this week. As soon as it is completed the air current will be turned on and the mine cleaned up and prepared for operations again. It is not expected, however, that anything will be done at the works before next week. F. W. Kennedy, general manager of the company, appeared on the ground on Tuesday, and assumed charge.

**INVESTIGATING THE CAUSE.**

Mine Inspector Stinner, accompanied by several expert mine and fire bosses, made a careful inspection of the mine, Tuesday morning, with a view of ascertaining, if possible, just where the explosion happened and how the gas was ignited. It is supposed that the explosion occurred on the sixth flat, on the right of the slope, where Frank Nicklow and his son were driving a room through to the air course, through solid coal, as gas has been frequently found on that flat. But as Nicklow and his son each were working with safety lamps, that supposition would not hold. The theory of the experts is that the hauler, Minerd, failed to keep the door closed that shut off the sixth flat, where the gas was known to exist, and that it got on the seventh flat, and was there ignited by his naked light. When the full turn is in a boy is employed to open and close the door as the trips pass up and down. As the sixth flat was well known by all the miners, none would go near it without a safety lamp. Nicklow was cautious and it is thought that the disaster did not result from negligence of his, the scene of the explosion being many feet from his room.

**GAS KNOWN TO EXIST.**

The presence of gas in the Youngstown mine was first discovered over a year ago, when a miner went into an unoccupied entry with a naked light, exploding the gas. He was killed. Just before the West Leisnering explosion, and soon after he had commenced his duties, Mine Inspector Stinner examined the Youngstown mine, discovered gas in dangerous quantities, and peremptorily ordered the use of the safety lamp. The company appealed to court and Judge Willson appointed Elijah Parker, Patrick Locke, and Crawford Stillwagon, three mine experts, who examined the mine and made report confirming the action of the mine inspector. The company then secured safety lamps and ordered their use by the miners in the pit. The mine is supposed to be well ventilated by air shafts. On the morning of the fatal day, the fire boss made his usual inspection and chalked the danger signal on the door leading to number six. Beside the daily inspections of the fire boss, Engineer Boyd last Wednesday made a survey of the mine, and pronounced the air excellent. The same opinion was given by John Henderson, a Dunbar expert, on Thursday.

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**Connellsville, PA**  
**Friday Morning, October 31, 1884 - Page 3**

**THE CORONER'S INQUEST.**

Dr. John Patton, the county coroner, impaneled a jury, Tuesday morning, consisting of A. H. Wycoff, editor and lawyer; Aaron Howman, dry goods merchant; J. W. Darby, gentleman; H. S. McLean, contractor; Isaac Hurst, contractor and O. P. Markle, grocer. They repaired to the scene of the disaster, viewed the remains and adjourned till Thursday morning at ten o'clock. The coroner and his jury assembled at the house yesterday morning at ten o'clock, pursuant to the adjournment. The court room was crowded with miners and others interested in the proceedings. The evidence developed nothing new and the jury adjourned to meet this (Friday) evening, to render a verdict.

The Youngstown works comprise 240 coke ovens, located along the line of the Southwest road four miles north of Uniontown. The works are owned jointly by the Mahoning Coal Company, and the Blair Hill Iron and Coal Company, of Youngtown, Ohio, and the product goes to their furnaces, not entering the market. For some time past they have been running but 70 ovens.

**NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS.**

It is said that Jacob and David Cole cannot recover.

Superintendent Roh was the first to brave the dangers of the gas-laden mine, and the last to leave it.

The sounds of the two explosions were heard as far south as Lomont, and north as far as Mt. Braddock.

Charles Cornors, pit boss on the Redstone branch, and a mining expert of some experience, rendered valuable assistance with his patent safety lamp.

Crawford Stillwagon and Thomas London, mining experts, of Connellsville, accompanied Inspector Stinner on his investigating tour through the pit to discover the causes of the explosion.

It is said that the regular fire-boss was discharged a month ago, to cut down expenses, and that the present acting fire-boss was only required to make the rounds of the pit once a day, instead of twice as heretofore.