

REPORT OF A FIRE AT POCAHONTAS MINES
POCAHONTAS, VIRGINIA
NOVEMBER 14 - 22, 1901 - 17 KILLED

(Excerpt from "Mines and Minerals," January
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The Baby Mine and the West Mine are at Pocahontas, Va. These two mines are part of a group of five mines known as the East Mines No. 1 and No. 2; Silver Ridge Mine, Baby Mine, and West Mine. The workings of this group of mines embrace an area of about 2,00 acres, while the total acreage of the company's property is about 8,500 acres. The East Mines and Silver Ridge Mines are entirely separate, but the Baby Mine and the West Mine in which the disasters occurred on November 14 and 22 are connected through workings.

On November 14, at about 4 o'clock in the morning, a fire was discovered in the Baby Mine exhaust fan. The fan was stopped and after the fire was extinguished, it was discovered that the air from the fan entry, which was still coming out in the direction of the fan, carried with it considerable smoke and heat, and upon examination it was found that there were fires at four different points just off the main entry and the fan entry of the Baby Mine, all fairly well under way, separate and distinct from each other.

The first of these fires, which was discovered, was located about 700 feet from the Baby Mine pit mouth on No. 1 entry on the straight mine track, over which cars had been hauled only a few hours before. Although these four fires were all burning and equally well under way, there had not been, up to this time, any explosion or disturbance of the electric equipment, which is used in this mine for haulage. While a small party at 5 a.m. was making an examination of the fire, in the No. 1 entry at a point aside from the direct intake, and cut off from any draft, a fall of roof coal occurred which caused a disturbance of the gases which had been accumulating in the rear of the fire, resulting in a slight explosion. This did not seriously injure any of the party, who were all within 50 feet of where the fire was burning, and where the fall occurred. It, however, blew out some of the brattices, which permitted the smoke and gases to pass on up through the workings in the old section of the Baby Mine and into the West Mine, where a number of miners had gone to work early in the morning before the regular day shift had entered, and before warning could be sent to these miners, they were overtaken by the smoke and suffocated. In this manner there were nine men suffocated in the West Mine at a distance of a mile from the location of the fire.

In the meantime preparations were being made to fight the fire in the Baby Mine, and while streams of water were being put on the fire, between 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning a second explosion took place at the same point. This occurred in the following manner:

After it was discovered that some miners had gone into the West Mine before orders had been given not to enter this mine, and that the smoke from the Baby Mine was drifting up into the West Mine, directions were given to start the Baby Mine fan for the purpose of drawing the smoke back from the West Mine out over the fire in the Baby Mine, so as to give the men who were in the West Mine fresh air. The result of starting the Baby Mine fan was that the gases which had been previously generated by the fire and drifted with the smoke, were carried back mixed with air over the fire, resulting in a second explosion. This explosion was, however, slight and although a number of men were near the fire there were none of them seriously injured. In fact no fatalities have occurred in the Baby Mine or within 3,000 feet of the point where the fires and explosion occurred.

The bodies of the men who were suffocated on the 14th inst., were all recovered a day or two afterwards, but it was found that the condition of the West Mine was such that it would not allow of it being worked while the Baby Mine fire was in progress, and after putting up some brattices partly cutting off the Baby Mine from the West Mine, a party of eight, went into the mine entry of the West Mine at 12 o'clock on Friday, November 22, for the purpose of making an investigation and ascertaining the condition of the mine. After having put up the temporary brattices the evening before, which were built of wood separating the Baby Mine from the West Mine, the West Mine fan was started at 4:15 a.m., on the morning of the 22nd, and at the time the investigating party entered at 12 o'clock left directions as to what intake doors were to be left open. This gave them good air to a certain point about 1,500 feet in, but they went beyond this point and it developed that the brattices which had been put in between the Baby Mine and the West Mine, did not completely cut off the gas, and the West Mine, being at a higher elevation, the gases from the Baby Mine drifted up into the higher workings of the West Mine, and the party passing beyond the shorter circuit of ventilation entered these higher workings and were suffocated. This gas was composed of white damp or CO, and had a distinct odor which accompanies coal distillation.

The searching parties that went in that same evening, upon the failure of the party of eight to return, discovered the foul condition of the West Mine, and the bodies could not be recovered until after more brattices had been put in. The bodies of this party of eight were recovered on Sunday, November 24, all of the party having died from suffocation at a distance of about two miles in the West Mine, away from the location of the fires and explosions in the Baby Mine.

The fires and explosions in the Baby Mine have done very little damage to the section of the mine which has been recently worked, and has extended only into the old abandoned section of the Baby Mine.

The system of fighting these fires has been to supply them with as much water as possible through pipes which have been extended into the workings and after these pipes were extended curved brick dams were put in at the foot of the old entries and in the fan entry, cutting off entirely this section from the section of the Baby Mine in which coal has been mined during recent years. The water pipes extending through these dams have been used for flooding the district in which the fore is located. In this manner the fire is being gradually extinguished and the ventilation and tracks in the new section of the Baby Mine have been changed so that now the Baby Mine is being worked and the usual quantity of coal is being taken out. The West Mine, through which gas and smoke naturally drift on account of the higher elevation, is also being cut off from the old section of the Baby Mine by brick brattices and dams in place of the temporary wooden brattices. This work is almost completed, and as soon as completed will permit the operation of the West Mine, which will first be thoroughly ventilated. Hereafter, these two mines will be permanently separated by these brick walls. It is expected that coal will be shipped from the West Mine, which produces about 2,00 tons per day, by the 20th of December.

The mines of this company are the largest, and oldest, and most extensively worked in the entire Pocahontas Flat Top field, having been opened in 1882. The coal is of a semi-bituminous character, somewhat softer than Commellsville coal, and somewhat easier to mine, and possibly the easiest seam in the entire country to work and is, under ordinary conditions, entirely free from dangerous gases. The seam at Pocahontas is about 10 feet thick and in some rooms 18 to 19 feet in thickness.

The Baby Mine is equipped with electric haulage, coal-cutting machines, and electric pumps. The haulage of the West Mine, the East Mines, and the Silver Ridge Mine is done by steam locomotives and mules. The condition of the West Mine as to haulage, drainage, and ventilation is very good. Exhaust fans are used in all of these mines. The company has just erected a new stone power house with a capacity of 1,500 horsepower, so as to admit of a more extensive use of electricity throughout the plant. The coke larries and tipple are operated by electricity, and the towns of Pocahontas, Va., Coopers, and Bramwell, W. Va., are lighted from this plant. The company operated 600 coke ovens.

The Salt Lake Tribune.

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH, FRIDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 15, 1901.

PERISH IN MINE FIRE

Several Miners Are Killed and a Number of Others Unaccounted for in Virginia.

Fire in the Pocahontas Shaft Is Followed by a Terrific Explosion Which Causes Death to at Least Five and the Wounding of Twenty-Five Others—Number Are Entombed.

Bluefield, W. Va., Nov. 14.—Five dead bodies have been taken by the Baby Mine at Pocahontas, Va. Several other persons are unaccounted for, and twenty persons have been rescued more or less severely burned. The list of the dead so far recovered is:

THE DEAD.

Louis Woolwine.

John Bernhard.

Will Montgomery.

M. D. Koontz.

A Hungarian named Urid.

Woolwine, Montgomery and Koontz were killed while attempting to reach and bring out a dead body.

EXPLOSION FOLLOWS FIRE.

At 3 o'clock this morning it was discovered that the Baby mine of the Pocahontas company at Pocahontas, Va., was on fire. In a short time after the firemen reached the mine a terrific explosion occurred and many miners and their friends were more or less injured. It is supposed that the mines

caught fire from a defective electric light wire.

FIVE BODIES RECOVERED.

Five bodies had been recovered up to 6 p. m. and it is uncertain how many more are dead, though it is now known that there are several, perhaps eight or ten men, still in the mines, unless they succeeded in making their escape through the Tug river entrance. Twenty-five persons have been rescued, all more or less burned, some seriously and perhaps fatally. The injured were carried to their homes in wagons, and all the physicians in Pocahontas were busy all day attending to the injured.

MINE STILL BURNING.

One or two other explosions followed that of the early morning. The mine is still burning and clouds of smoke are constantly issuing from its mouth. The fan has been stopped and as soon as possible to do so the mine will be re-entered with the hope of extinguishing the fire. In 1884 Pocahontas experienced a like occurrence, in which over 100 lives were lost.

Waterloo Courier

Friday, November 15, 1901

CAUGHT BY MINE GAS

Men Who Were Fighting Fire and Saving Life at a Virginia Coal Plant.

FIVE MEN ARE KNOWN TO BE DEAD

While the Wounded Number Twenty-Five, Some Cases Fatal—Eight or Ten Missing.

Bluefield, W. Va., Nov. 15.—Five dead bodies have been taken from the Baby mine at Pocahontas, Va. Several other persons are unaccounted for, and twenty-five persons have been rescued, more or less severely burned. At 3 a. m. yesterday it was discovered that the Baby mine of the Pocahontas Colliery company, at Pocahontas, Va., was on fire. An alarm was sent in and the fire company responded promptly. In a very short time after the fire fighters had reached the mouth of the mines and were attempting to extinguish the flames some of the firemen and others having rushed inside of the mines to ascertain the extent of the trouble and to assist miners imprisoned therein, a terrific explosion occurred, and many miners and their friends were more or less injured. It is supposed that the mines caught fire from a defective electric light wire.

Dead Roll May Reach Fifteen.

Five bodies have been recovered up to this writing, and it is uncertain how many more are dead, though it is known that there are several, perhaps eight or ten men, still in the mines, unless they succeeded in making their escape through the Tug river entrance. Twenty-five persons have been rescued, all more or less burned, some seriously, and perhaps fatally. The injured were carried to their homes in wagons, and all the physicians in Pocahontas were busy all day attending the injured. One or two other explosions followed that of the early morning and others are hourly expected.

Mine Is Still Burning.

The mine is still burning, and clouds of smoke are constantly issuing from its mouth. The fan has now been stopped and as soon as possible to do so the mine will be re-entered with the hope of extinguishing the fire. In 1884 Pocahontas experienced a like occurrence in which over 100 lives were lost.

List of the Recovered Dead.

The list of dead so far recovered is: Louis Woolwine, John Bernhart, Will Montgomery, M. D. Koontz and a Hungarian named Urico. Woolwine, Montgomery and Koontz were killed while attempting to reach and bring out a dead body. At this time it is impossible to secure the names of those injured. As yet it is impossible to estimate the amount of damage to the mines.

Newark Daily Advocate

November 23, 1901

THEY DIDN'T RETURN

Eight Persons Attempt to Inspect the Baby Mine.

ALL OVERCOME BY BLACK DAMP.

Parties Prominent, Including the State Mine Inspector and Other Officials. Ill-Fated Colliery Burning Furiously and Tremendous Excitement Reigns—Rescuers Balked.

Huntington, W. Va., Nov. 23.—Another disaster has followed on the heels of the Baby mine horror in the Pocahontas coal field. Superintendent Walter O'Malley of the Pocahontas Collieries company, along with State Mine Inspector William Priest, A. S. Hurst, chief coal inspector for the Castnor, Curran and Bullitt company of Philadelphia; Robert St. Clair, chief coal inspector; Morris St. Clair and William Oldham, substitute coal inspectors; Frazier G. Bell, mining engineer, and Joseph Vardwell, manager of the Shamokin Coal and Coke company of Maybury, W. Va., composing a party of eight, entered the west mine of the Southwestern Virginia Improvement company's collieries for the purpose of examining the true situation in regard to the recent explosion and fire in the Baby mine, and have not been heard from. It was supposed that the Baby mine proper had been cut off from the west mine, for the purpose of operating the west mine. The large fan in the west mine had been started and it was thought that all gases originating from fire in the Baby mine had been forced from the main portion, and it was considered safe to enter.

After some time had elapsed a party consisting of experienced miners, led by Assistant Superintendent King, entered the mine to rescue the lost party of eight, but they returned shortly, having encountered such quantities of black damp as to make it impossible to enter any distance into the mine. Assistant Superintendent King was completely overcome by the gas and is now in a critical condition. All efforts are being used to recover the bodies of the inspecting party, but no hopes are entertained that any of them will be recovered alive. The secretary and treasurer of the Southwestern Virginia Improvement company, C. S. Thorne of Philadelphia, is directly in charge of all movements at the mines. The fire that originally started in the Baby mine a week ago last Thursday morning, and which was supposed to have been under control, is now burning furiously. All the members of the lost party are prominent in the coal field, and the excitement now prevailing at Pocahontas is intense, business having practically suspended. All the members of the party are married, some having large families.