

**Bureau of Mines Bulletin 616:
Historical Documentation of Major Coal Mine Disasters in
The United States Not Classified As Explosions of Gas or Dust,
1846-1962**

**August 11, 1885
West End Colliery
Mocanaqua, Pa.
10 Killed**

**(From reports of the Inspectors of Coal Mines of the Anthracite Coal Regions of
Pennsylvania, 1885, p. 73—75)**

The West End colliery, near the village of Mocanaqua, across the river from Shickshinny, was the scene of a shocking disaster on the 11th of August, 1885. Ten men lost their lives from breathing the poisonous gases which arose from the fires under the boilers in the mine. The mouth of the drift through which the coal is brought out of this mine is four thousand five hundred feet east of the breaker and the mine cars are hauled from a turnout two thousand feet inside of the drift-mouth to the breaker. All the workings between the mouth and the turnout above water level were finished, the coal having been mined out to the outcrop. At the inner end of the turnout there is a slope sunk diagonally down the pitch on a small grade about six degrees, to a distance of one thousand two hundred feet. There were workings on each side of the slope. The coal above water level is mined above a gravity-plane, between that and the outcrop. The foot of the plane is about five hundred feet inside of the head of the slope. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining water on the surface, the boilers which generate steam to run the slope engine and the fan engine were placed in the mine a short distance below the head of the slope on the left side, where the air current returns to the out-cast. The fan was located about three hundred feet away from the boilers, between them and the out-cast, and from the fan to the mouth of the up-cast there was a distance of over one thousand feet, rising on an average grade of about fifteen degrees. Thus the air-current first passed through the workings of the slope, and then up behind the boilers, taking with it the gases arising from the fires through the fan, and directly out through the up-cast. On the

night of the 10th of August, at about eleven o'clock, the eccentric strap on the fan engine broke, and the fan stopped running. There were a few men working on the night shift, but as they had never seen or heard of dangerous gases being generated in the mine, the stoppage of the fan caused no alarm and they finished their night's work before leaving without suffering any inconvenience from lack of ventilation. By half-past seven next morning, the eccentric strap was repaired ready to take into the mine, and the engineer, machinist, and mine foreman together took it with them, and rode from the breaker on the locomotive train into the mine. There were from forty to fifty workmen riding in on the same train. All knew that the fan had broken and was not running, but it seems that no one apprehended any danger. Upon reaching the turnout at the head of the slope, the mine-boss and the machinist took the strap toward the fan, and the workmen went on to their working places. At this time it was believed that the fan could be fixed to run in about half an hour, but after putting the eccentric strap in place, the engine was started, and it would not run. The boss and others went in to the fan several times to pry it off center, and finally they discovered that the fan-shaft was bent so that it could not run. Messages came to the boss, at this time, that the men were getting sick down the slope by inhaling foul air, and could not walk out. The boss himself was affected in the same manner by inhaling the noxious gases in the fan, and he soon became unconscious.

The air was healthy on the west side of the slope, and the men from that side ran to assist those on the other side ; but the subtle poison was such as to

effect them again in a short time, and it proved a difficult task for even these to escape. Many fell unconscious and had to be carried up the slope and sent out in cars. By mid-day a large number had to be carried out, being unconscious, three of whom were dead and seven more missing, nearly every one who worked in that mine having been helping. The slopemen were, by this time, sick from inhaling the gas. A fresh relay of men came in the afternoon and succeeded in bringing out the bodies of the remaining seven. They were found lying at various points on the gangways of the east side workings.

The cause of the accident was that, during the time the fan was not running, the air-current reversed, and instead of conveying the gases produced from the combustion of coal under the boilers out through the up-cast, the air came in that way, and conveyed the gases down into the workings, and the men who worked in those workings which it entered first were the ones that suffered first from inhaling it. The air current must have changed its course only a short

time before the men entered their places. Upon entering, they were taken sick immediately after reaching the faces of their workings places, but were reluctant to leave so soon, believing that the fan would start and refresh the air every minute. However, they finally started out, and the ten fell and failed to reach a point where the air was pure. Others fell in the same manner, but were rescued by workmen from the other parts of the mine.

The night and morning were very warm and close, and when the temperature of the up-cast air became cooler than the temperature of the air outside, the current naturally reversed. The mine foreman did not expect this to take place, and, believing that there was no danger, permitted the men to go to work. It was here be made a serious mistake. Whether he thought it was safe or not, he should not have permitted them to go to work until the fan was set running and the workings places examined and ascertained to be safe; but, having never seen any danger in the mine, these precautions were overlooked.

Oshkosh Northwestern
August 11, 1885

MINE EXPLOSION

WILKES-BARRE, PA. – Aug. 11 – Information has been received here of a terrible explosion of gas in West End Coal Co.'s miners this morning at Mocanaqua, 15 miles from here. As far as can be learned, ten miners were instantly killed and several others dangerously injured.

WILKES-BARRE, PA. – Aug. 11 – Further intelligence of the disaster shows that the fan of the engine which supplies fresh air to the west end of the mine at Mocanaqua broke, thus depriving the mine of air. Four men were brought to the surface dead and four or five more are yet in the mine and cannot be reached owing to the impure air.

The following additional particulars have been obtained:

Just before the night shift went off duty, the fan broke. The boss and men of the day shift knew of this but took the risk and went into the mine. There were about thirty men in all who were supplied with safety lamps as it was well known that gas would accumulate. About 75 men were in the min when work began. The workmen repairing the fan were the first who succumbed and about an hour later, many more were overcome before the men realized the danger. About twenty were unconscious. Those who could then escape, did so. Supt. Jno. Teasdale and several of his men became unconscious and were with difficulty rescued. Others went down and in the face of immense difficulties got out all but ten men. Three of those brought out were dead and the other six are beyond doubt dead.

Six hours after the accident, Supt. Teasdale, part owner of the mine, was still unconscious.

Daily Democratic Times
Lima, Ohio
August 12, 1885

PERISHED IN THE MINES

Ten Mine Die by Suffocation With Deadly Fire Damp

WILKE-BARRE, Pa. , Aug. 12 - The breaking of the fan which supplied the West End Coal Company's mines at Mocanaqua with fresh air caused the suffocation of ten miners. The boss knew of the break and so did the men, but notwithstanding this they went into the mine. About seventy-five men were in the mine at the time. The men repairing the fan were the first overcome by the gas and before the rest of the men fairly realized their danger, more than twenty were unconscious. Those who could escape then, did so. Superintendent Teasdale, with a corps of men as a relief, went down in the mine to assist the men, but after being in the mine half an hour, Teasdale and several of his men became unconscious and were with difficulty rescued.

Others went down and in the face of immense difficulties, and in spite of being continually overpowered with gas brought out all but ten men. Three of those were dead, and the others are beyond doubt dead. Teasdale, the superintendent, has been unconscious since his being brought up and may die. The accident can be laid only to the foolhardiness of the miners.

Daily Kennebec Journal
Augusta, Maine
Wednesday, August 12, 1885

A TERRIBLE ACCIDENT

A Number of Miners Suffocated by Gas

WILKES-BARRE, Pa., Aug. 11 - The mine of the West End Coal Company, operated by Conynham, Teasdale & Company., at Macanaqua was the scene of a peculiar and terrible accident this forenoon. Just before the night shift went off duty, the fan broke. The boss knew of this and so did the men on the day shift before they entered the mine, but notwithstanding this, they went into the mine taking a great risk. There were about 30 in all, who were supplied with safety lamps, as it was well know that gas would accumulate. About 75 men were in the mine at the time work began.

The workmen repairing the fan were the first to be overcome with gas and about an hour later, the same fate was shared by many of the miners in the mine. Before the men realized their danger, more than 20 were unconscious. Those who could then escape did so.

Superintendent Teasdale with a corps of men as a relief went down into the mine to assist the men in making their escape and after being in the mine half an hour, Teasdale became unconscious as did several of his men who were with difficulty rescued. Others went down and in the face of immense difficulty and in spite of being continually overcome by gas got out all but 10 men. Three of those were brought out dead and those in the mine are beyond doubt dead.

The dead as far as can be learned are, James Whalen, Wm. Vineby, Peter Bornitzki, John Dilday, and Hiram Mead. Eight men were badly hurt and some of those rescued alive are still unconscious and in a precarious condition. The boss at the mine says he notified the men before they entered the mine that the fan has stopped and it was not safe for them to enter as the mine was filling with gas. This is denied by the miners and laborers who, on the contrary, say he told them to go to work that the fan was broken but would be repaired and put in working order in an hour.

The Daily Gazette
Fort Wayne, Indiana
Wednesday, August 12, 1885

A TERRIBLE EXPLOSION OF GAS

Twelve Miners Instantly Killed and Several Others Injured

BY TELEGRAPH TO THE GAZETTE.

WILKES-BARRE, August 11. – A terrible explosion of gas took place in the west end coal company's mines this morning at Mocanqua, fifteen miles from here. Ten miners were instantly killed and several others dangerously injured.

Further intelligence of the disaster says:

The fan engine that supplies the fresh air at the west end of the mine at Mocanqua broke, depriving the miners of air. Four men have been brought to the surface dead and four or five more are yet in the mine, and cannot be reached, owing to the impure air. Six hours after the accident, Superintendent Teasdale, who is also part owner of the mine, is still unconscious.

The boss at the mine says he notified the men before they entered the mine that the fan had stopped and that it was not safe to enter as the mine was filling with gas. This is denied by the miners and laborers who said that he told them to go to work; that the fan was broken but would be repaired and put in working order in an hour. When they entered everything appeared all right until they began to smell the fatal sulphur fumes and before they could get out many were overcome and suffocated.

The disaster is considered singular in its nature and stands alone and unprecedented in the history of mining. It could have been easily foreseen and prevented, but owing to one of those singular oversights the cause of the disaster escaped notice. The death roll is twelve and as now fully ascertained is as follows: James Whelan, aged fifty-four, widower with six small children; Hiram O. Meade, forty, married, two children; William Zienty, twenty-four, single; Peter Bordaski, aged twenty-seven, single; John Bilby, aged forty, married, five children; William Price, aged twenty-two; James Fay, aged thirty-two, married, two children; Nicholas Bertella, aged thirty-six, five children; Anthony Boraski, aged twenty-four, single; John Brofokoski, married, three children; and Labin Nyurskofski, aged twenty-six, single. Those who were overcome with gas and brought senseless from the mine are now doing well and are out of danger.

August 13, 1885
Waukesha Freeman

A MINE DISASTER

WILKES-BARRE, PA. - Aug. 12 - The mine of the West End Coal Company at Macanaqua, about eighteen miles down the valley, was the scene yesterday of the most terrible accident in this region for fifteen years. The fan which furnished fresh air to the mine broke down, the colliery filled with gas, and a great number of men were asphyxiated. Twelve are known to be dead. Nine others were seriously injured. This terrible loss of life was the result of an oversight if not a neglect of duty, on the part of Christopher Coonrad, the mine boss. The fan broke down at eleven o'clock Sunday night, when the night shift was just quitting work and the gas was accumulating all night. Coonrad says he told the men on the day shift that the mine was not safe and that they should not go down. They, on the contrary, say he told them to go to work; that the mine was safe and the fan would be working in an hour.

About sixty men went down about seven o'clock yesterday morning and had hardly got to their working places when they began to feel the influence of the gas. These suffocating fumes are very sudden in their action on the human system, and almost before the men were aware of their danger they became unconscious or crazed. Someone reached the foot of the slope and gave the alarm, which was rapidly conveyed to the surface and help was summoned from all sides. A few of the men in the mines succeeded in reaching open air, but the majority were brought out insensible by relief parties that fought their way through the deadly gas until they stumbled over unconscious forms, or until they themselves dropped to the group overpowered. The first relief party went too far, and all were prostrated. One of the number, Peter Boraski, who had gone in to rescue his brother, was brought out dead.

The work of getting out the men, both dead and alive, lasted until six last evening. At one p.m., operations were abandoned for a time, all the leaders having been overcome by gas, it being certain that those then in the mine were dead. At that time only three dead bodies had been recovered. Among those who were overcome by the gas were Major C. M. Conyngham, of this city, and John Seasdale, of Shickshinny, both stockholders in the West End Coal Company. At 4:30, operations were resumed and six more bodies were recovered. There were still three known to be in the mine and there may be more.

While the work of rescuing was going on, the most terrible excitement prevailed outside the mines. Hundreds of people had gathered among them being wives, mothers, and children of the men below. Many threw themselves on their knees and prayed aloud. Others seemed bereft of their senses, and ran through the crowd shouting the name of some relative and calling for help. As each victim was brought to the surface the body was surrounded by an eager throng, and the shriek of agony that frequently rose from the group testified to the recognition of the purple and distorted face of some relative or friend. Over sixty men were brought out unconscious. Those who revived are little the worse for the experience and in a few days will be all right again.

No one was hurt externally and no damage was done to the colliery, which will resume work as soon as the fan is repaired.

New York Times
New York, New York
August 13, 1885

WEST END COLLIERY DISASTER

WILKES-BARRE, PENN., Aug. 12 – There are no new developments in regard to the accident in the West End Colliery at Mocanaqua. The bodies of the 12 men who were smothered to death were all removed from the mine last night. The stoppage of the fan and the consequent accumulation in the mine of fumes from the boiler fires and foul gas caused the accident. As the responsibility for the accident rests somewhere, the Coroner, in order to determine who is at fault, impaneled a jury today, who after visiting the mines and viewing the remains of the dead miners adjourned, to meet at Shickahinny next Saturday

The World
New York, New York
August 18, 1885

The Mine Boss Responsible

WILKES-BARRE, Pa., Aug. 18 – The Coroner's inquest touching the death of the twelve miners who were suffocated by gas on Tuesday last in the West End Colliery at Mocanaqua, was concluded this afternoon. The verdict of the jury was that Christian Coonrad, the mine boss was guilty of criminal negligence in allowing the men to enter the mine when the fan was not working.