

Yellow Jacket Mine in a Blaze

Submitted by Dave Johnson

(Excerpted from the book: The Big Bonanza, The History of the Great Comstock Lode, by Dan DeQuille. Dan DeQuille was the pen name of William Wright, a reporter for the Virginia City, Nevada Territorial Enterprise newspaper from the late 1850's to the 1870's. In 1876 DeQuille published a history and recollection of his years on the Comstock Lode. This is just one of many interesting short articles that appear in his book.)

No premature explosion of blasts, crushing of timbers, caving of earth and rock - no accident of any kind is so much feared or is more terrible than a great fire in a large mine. It is a hell, and often a hell that contains living, moving, breathing, and suffering human beings - not the ethereal and intangible souls of men. It is a region of fire and flame from which the modes of egress are few and perilous. A great fire on the surface of the earth is a grand and fearful spectacle, but a great fire hundreds of feet beneath the surface of the earth is terrible - terrible beyond measure of the power of words to express, when we know that far down underneath the ground, which lies so calmly on all sides, giving forth no sound, and scores of human beings pursued by flames and gases, scorched and panting, fleeing into all manner of nooks and corners, there to meet their death.

A large mine in which are employed from five hundred to one thousand men is of itself a considerable village, though it be a village far below the light of day. In it are more timbers, lumber and other combustible matter than is found in all the houses of a town of two thousand inhabitants. It contains millions on millions of square feet of timber, in it whole

forests have found a tomb.

Besides being built up to a height of from one thousand to one thousand five hundred or two thousand feet, with cribs composed of massive timbers, each crib filling a space five by six feet in size, there are floors of heavy planks, six feet apart, one above another, all the distance from bottom to top. In many places, too, the main timbers are doubled again and so filled with blocks and wedges and braces that all is a solid mass of wood. In numberless places there are stairs leading from floor to floor, and then there are scores of chutes, built of timber and lined with planks, with vertical winces, constructed in the same way, all of which, with the chutes, lead up through the floors from level to level; also numerous drifts and crosscuts supported by timbers and walled in with lagging (split pine-stuff, like staves, but longer), all of which serve as flues to conduct and spread the heat and flames throughout the mine.

The mines of the Comstock have not escaped fires. They have not been many, but they have been fearful as experiences and have cost many lives. The first and most terrible of these fires was that which broke out in the

Yellow-Jacket mine, Gold Hill, about seven o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, April, 1869, in which forty-five men lost their lives.

The fire started at the eight-hundred-foot level (that is, eight hundred feet below the surface) at a point two hundred feet south of the main shaft, near the line of the Kentuck mine. It was first discovered at seven o'clock in the morning, though it had no doubt been burning longer, as some of the miners asserted that they detected the smell of smoke as early as three o'clock a.m. The night shift (relay) left at four a.m. and the morning shift began work at seven a.m., and it was supposed that the fire originated from a candle left sticking against a timber by men on the night shift. From four o'clock till seven o'clock the only men in the mine were the carmen, but before the danger had been discovered many of the day shift had been lowered into the mines - Yellow Jacket, Crown Point, and Kentuck.

The first thing done on discovering the fire was to try to get the men up out of the mines. The alarm of fire was sounded, and the fire companies of Gold Hill and Virginia City at once turned out. Pending the arrival

of the firemen with their apparatus, those about the several mines were doing all in their power to rescue the men who were left underground. At first the smoke was so dense that no one dared venture into either of the shafts, but about nine o'clock in the morning it seemed to draw away from the Kentuck shaft, and men descended on the cage and recovered two bodies.

At the Crown Point mine, when the cage was being hoisted for the last time, some of the men on it were so far suffocated as to fall back and were crushed to death between the sides of the cage and the timbers of the shaft.

Toward noon some of the firemen working at the Yellow-Jacket mine ventured down the shaft to the eight-hundred foot level and recovered three or four bodies of asphyxiated miners.

About the same time at the Crown Point mine a cage was sent down with a lighted lantern upon it. It was lowered to the thousand-foot level, and with the lantern was sent the following dispatch, written on a large piece of pasteboard.

"We are fast subduing the fire. It is death to attempt to come up from where you are. We shall get you out soon. The gas in the shaft is terrible, and produces sure and speedy death. Write a word to us and send it up on the cage, and let us know where you are." No answer came back - all below were dead.

As soon as it was known that the mines were on fire and that a large number of miners were imprisoned below by the dense volumes of smoke and suffocating gases that poured up through the several shafts, the most intense excitement prevailed, both in Gold Hill and Virginia City. The wives, children, and relatives of the lost flocked to the several hoisting-works, approached as near to the mouths of the shafts as they were allowed to come, and stood there on all sides, their grief and lamentations causing tears to course down the cheeks of the most stout-hearted. "Lost! Lost! Lost!" was the despairing cry constantly uttered by many of the women whose husbands were below.

The Reverend Father Manogue, a pioneer of the country, and several other Catholic clergymen of Virginia City and Gold Hill, moved about among the people and did all that could be done to comfort and quiet the weeping women and children, but even the reverend fathers could find little to say in mitigation of the woes of such an occasion. Many of the poor women, with weeping children clinging about them, stood round the shafts, convulsively clasping and wringing their hands and rocking their bodies to and fro in excess of misery, yet uttering scarcely a word or a sob; they at first seemed utterly stupefied and overwhelmed by the suddenness and awfulness of the calamity. Turn where they might, there was no comfort for them.

At the Yellow-Jacket mine the smoke and gases drew away to the southward, men descended the shaft, and all but one man known to be below at that point were brought up dead.

As the cage containing the dead bodies rose up at the mouth of the shaft, there was heard a general wail from the women, who could with difficulty be restrained from climbing over the ropes stretched to keep back the crowd. "Oh God! Who is it this time?" some one among them would be heard to say. The dead bodies would then be lifted from the cage and then borne in the arms of stout miners and firemen outside of the circle of ropes.

As the men passed out with the dead, the women would crowd forward in an agony of fear and suspense to see the faces "Oh, Patrick!" one could be heard to shriek, when the bystanders would be obliged to seize her and lead her away.

At the Kentuck and Crown Point shafts there steadily arose thick, stifling columns of smoke and pungent gases, generated by the burning pinewood and heated ores below. No person who stood at the mouth of either of these shafts could entertain the slightest hope that any one of those in the mines could be alive; yet wives and relatives would still hope against everything. In every direction almost superhuman exertions were made to extinguish the fire. By closing up the shafts and pouring down water, it was thought that the fire might have been extinguished,

but to have done so would have been equivalent to saying that all below were dead - and would, indeed, have been death to any that might have been living. Besides, the order to close the shafts would have drawn from all present at all interested in the fate of those below such a wail as no one would have cared to hear.

No one could enter the Crown Point or Kentuck shafts, but that of the Yellow-Jacket being cooler, the firemen began to work their way down it, carrying with them their hose and bravely battling with the fire. A long string of hose was attached to a hydrant and carried down to the eight-hundred-foot level, where the fire began. It was such work as few firemen in the United States have ever undertaken, and such as now but firemen in a mining country could have done. The miners and firemen battled side by side. The firemen would advance as far as possible, extinguishing the burning timbers, and when a cave of earth and rock occurred, or the blackened and weakened timbers seemed about to give way, the miners would go to the front and make all secure.

The walls of the drifts were so heated that it was very frequently found necessary to fall back, even after the burning timbers has been extinguished, and play a stream on the rock in order to cool it down. In places boiling hot water stood to the depth of two or three inches on the floors of the drifts. Steam, fumes and sulphur, and gases from the heated ore and minerals rendered the air so

bad that it became necessary to lead in an air pipe from the main blower above to enable the men to continue work. When caves occurred, flames and poisonous gases were driven forward upon the men, singeing and partially suffocating them. Their position was one of great peril. Their only means of reaching the surface was through the shaft, and at any moment an accident might happen that would cut off from this; or the draught might change and overwhelm them with stifling gases before they could ascent to the surface.

The situation below, when the fire broke out, was fearful. The smoke and gases came upon the men so suddenly that although they ran at once for the shaft, many were suffocated and sank down by the way. At the Crown Point the men so crowded upon the cage at first (a cage holds from twelve to sixteen men) that it was detained nearly five minutes, the station - tender being afraid to give the signal to hoist while so many men were in danger of being torn to pieces. A young man who came up on that cage told me that as they were finally about to start, a man crawled upon the cage and, thrusting his body in between the young man's legs, begged to be allowed to remain there and go up. He was permitted to keep the place, and his life was saved.

As this cage started up, hope left the hearts of those remaining behind. They were heard to throw themselves into the shaft and to fall back on the floors of the mine. Another young man told me that in rushing toward

the shaft, it occurred to him that he might fall into it, all being dark below when he got down on his hands and knees and crawled, feeling his way until he knew that he was at the shaft. While lying there, three or four men came running along from behind and pitched headlong into it, to their instant death. At one lowering of the cage a man who went down from the surface, finding that there were more persons below than could be brought up that trip, generously got off into a drift and put on board a young man who was so far suffocated that he was unable to stand. The man who did this was afterwards brought up unharmed.

Not only did the firemen go into the burning underground cheerfully, but there was strife among them to be allowed to go. To see them in their big hats ascending and descending the shafts as they relieved one another was a novel sight. It was a new way of going to a fire. Although a stream was kept playing at the eight-hundred-foot level of the Yellow-Jacket all day, at nine o'clock at night it was found that the fire was rising, and a second stream was put on at the seven hundred.

At two o'clock the morning of the 8th, thirteen bodies had been recovered. Some of these were found in the sump (place in which to collect water at the bottom of a shaft), at the eleven hundred-foot level, where they had fallen from stations above; others were found at the thousand foot level, lying in all kinds of despairing positions, just as they had sunk down and

died when overtaken by the poisonous gases.

At one o'clock on the afternoon of the 8th, twenty-three bodies had been recovered. When the fire first broke out, an explosion of gases occurred near the Crown Point shaft, which is supposed to have killed several men in that direction. Wherever the stifling gas swept in upon the men, it left them dead. One miner was found clasping a ladder with death grip, his head hanging backwards. It was necessary to lower the body with a rope a distance of fifty feet to the bottom of the level. On the nine-hundred-foot level of the Crown Point mine, about thirty feet from the shaft, nine men were found in one heap. They had unjointed an air-pipe in the hope of being able to get enough fresh air to keep them alive.

On the morning of the 10th it was evident that the fire had increased to such an extent that no more bodies could be recovered - that none in that pit of fire could be alive - and at eleven a.m., the mouths of all the shafts were covered with planks, wet blankets, and earth. At noon steam from the boilers was turned into the Yellow-Jacket shaft through the air-pipe leading from the blower (a fan revolving in a drum, used in forcing air into the mines) down to the eight-hundred foot and nine-hundred foot levels whence it would go wherever it could find egress.

On the 12th a few more bodies were found, and there was so much fire that the mines were again closed and

steam was forced into them. Some of the bodies last taken out of the mines were so decomposed, owing to the great heat below, that in order to handle them it was necessary to roll them up in canvas coated with tar. Several bodies were in such a condition that the wives and the relatives of the deceased were not allowed to see their faces. They were told to remember them as they had last seen them in life. One woman begged hard to see the face of her husband, then to see his hair. Being shown his hair, she laid her hand on it and said "good-bye, my husband." As she turned away, a little girl she was leading said: "Can't I see my papa?" when the mother fainted.

On the 14th, at 3 o'clock p.m., steam was shut off from the shafts and all the work stopped. Five bodies still remained in the mines. Three days later, the shafts were opened and some explorations made. Spots of fires were extinguished where they could be reached. Almost daily they were able to get into some of the mines and direct streams of water upon some parts of the fire. At this work men were frequently asphyxiated, and then it was necessary to hasten with them to the surface. On the 28th another body was recovered, and on the 29th efforts were made to reach the bodies (four) still remaining on the upper levels of the Kentuck; but some of the men fell down insensible from asphyxia, and the attempt was abandoned.

Thus, the miners struggled with the fire until May 2, when it grew worse.

The drifts between the Yellow-Jacket and the Kentuck and the Crown Point mines were then closed, and the shafts of the latter mines were again sealed. The fresh air thrown into the mines by the blowers was supposed to have given the fire new life.

On May 18th, the Kentuck and the Crown Point mines were opened, and miners descended to the lower levels of both. On May 20 another body was recovered in the south compartment of the Crown Point shaft when it was found lying on a scaffold at the thousand-foot level, leaving three bodies not yet found. After this the fire again increased and drove the men away from places where they had been able to work. On May 24, it was discovered that the fire was on the eight hundred-foot levels of the Crown Point and Kentuck mines, and the miners finally succeeded in walling it up and confining it to this space.

As late as June 23, men were occasionally brought to the surface in an insensible condition and the fire continued to burn in that portion of the mine to which it was confined for over a year. Nearly three years from the time of the breaking out of the fire the rocks in the eight-hundred-foot levels of the Crown Point and Kentuck mines were found to be red-hot. Only fragments of the skeletons of the three missing men were ever found. Their bodies were in those parts of the mines that were walled in and given up to the flames.