

Disaster At The Rolling Mill Mine

Johnstown, Pennsylvania

Part One

by *Stephen R. Lindberg*

The furnaces of the Cambria Iron Company in the valley of Johnstown Pennsylvania trace their origin to the year 1842, with the first steel rolling mills put into operation in 1855. In that same year the Rolling Mill Mine was opened to supply the vast quantities of coal required by the steel mills.

The Rolling Mill Mine entered the hills to the west of Johnstown through a single portal, and in the early part of this century held the record for being worked over the greatest area of any single opening mine in the country. In 1922 it covered an area of over 10 square miles, with a distance to the farthest working face of 5 miles.

Records show that coal production from this mine was indeed great. In it's first 67 years of operation the mine supplied 20,000,000 net tons of coal from just one seam, the Upper Kittanning. The record for a single day production was made on May 31, 1921, with a total of 3,872 net tons delivered to the mills (Richardson, 1922).

Besides coal production, the Rolling Mill Mine holds the distinction of having one of the most catastrophic disasters in United States mining history. On Thursday July 10, 1902 a gas explosion claimed the lives of 112 miners. The explosion occurred at a distant working face known to the miners as the "Klondike"

The account of James E. Roderick, chief of the Bureau Of Pennsylvania Mines at the time of the disaster helps to set the scene.

"I reached Johnstown a little after 4 P.M. of the 11th, and at once saw by the excited crowd

that some terrible calamity had occurred. The streets were filled with anxious and excited people, while in the street opposite the Rolling Mill Mine and at the entrance where the dead bodies were laid out they were nearly impassable. I mingled unknown with the sorrowful crowd that was viewing the dead bodies which were laid out in rows waiting to be identified by relatives and friends" (Ray, 1903).

James Roderick was present at the mine when J.T. Evans, district mine inspector, exited after his initial survey of the disaster. Together they agreed that the scope of the explosion warranted the assistance of additional mine inspectors. On the morning of Sunday July 13, Evans assured the assembled inspection team that all bodies had been accounted for and removed from the mine.

Roderick, Evans, and three other inspectors entered the mine under the guidance of several fire bosses and a mine foreman. They spent the entire day within the mine, centering their investigation at the distant Klondike section. On July 23, 1902 the team of inspectors submitted their report to the Pennsylvania Bureau Of Mines.

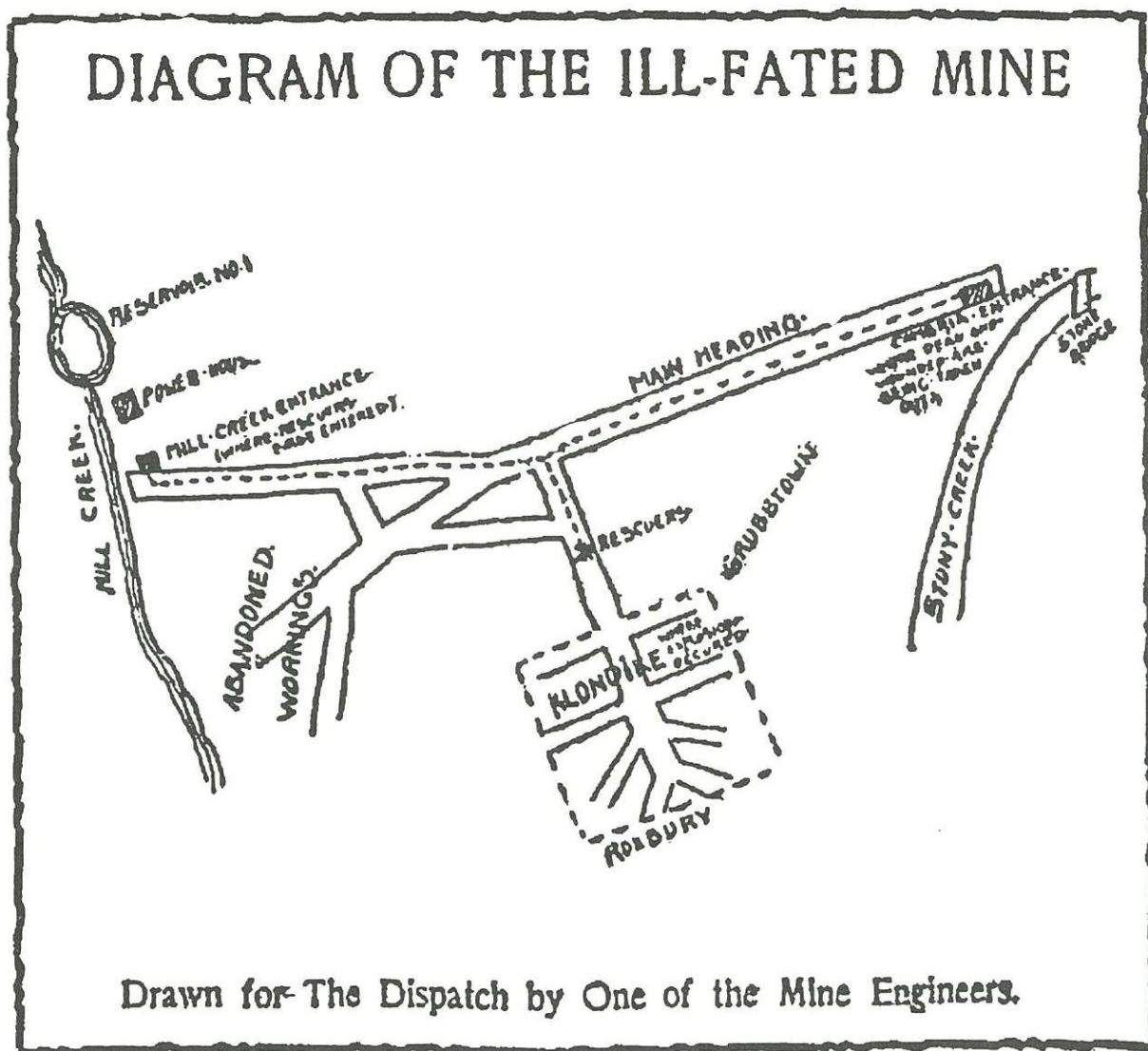
"We made a rigid and thorough examination of the Klondike section of the Rolling Mill Mine, owned and operated by the Cambria Steel Company, Johnstown, Pa., where the terrible explosion occurred on the 10th day of July, 1902, at 11:30 A.M.....We were conveyed from the main entrance in the haulage trip to the safety lamp station, near the entrance to the Klondike section. Here the party were all equipped with locked safety lamps and all persons who had in their possession matches,

smoker's articles, etc., were required to deposit them with the person in charge of the safety lamp section. We were taken by an air motor..... to entry no. five..... dinner pails were scattered here and there along the entry..... their respective owners overcome by the after-damp as they endeavored to escape" (Ray, 1903).

The inspection team continued through the Klondike section, consulting their mine maps as they worked through one room into another. On reaching room number two they found that it had been cut through into "...rib fall on no.

5 entry, right, where gas was known to exist" (Ray, 1903). Inspection of the number two room revealed coats, tools, a can of blasting powder, and an open safety lamp.

"The finding of the miner's open safety lamp filled with oil and cotton, ready for use, so near this fall, which, from inquiry, we learned contained fire damp since the first break or rib falls were made, seemed to indicate that this might be the point where the gas ignited" (Ray, 1903). Further searching uncovered a second open safety lamp, found within twenty feet of the rib fall at number 5 entry.



Sketch of the Rolling Mill Mine made at the time of the disaster. The mine entrance was located along the western hillside above the city of Johnstown. Sketch taken from the July 12, 1902 Pittsburg Dispatch.

"This was the second lamp found in this room, and from their location when found we believe that both were lighted and in use at the time the explosion occurred. If the lamps had not been in use, they would have been back along the rib or on the outside of the danger board, the latter place being the proper place as required by law" (Ray, 1903).

The team of mine inspectors conclude their report on the mine explosion with this final paragraph.

"And now, July 23, 1902, after having made the said examination,.....the explosion occurred on rib fall no. 5 entry, right,..... known as the Klondike section of the Rolling Mill Mine. And further, we are of the opinion that the gas which caused said explosion, was ignited at the face of no. 2 room.....by coming in contact with one or both of the miner's open lamps,..... And we further find that under the facts and law that none but locked safety lamps should have been used in that part of the mine where the explosion occurred" (Ray, 1903).

The inquest detailing the disaster and cause of death for the 112 miners killed within the mine was held over the remains of just one miner, Gust Leavendroskey. The explanation rendered in his case applied to the other 111 miners.

"Gust Leavendroskey, a miner, came to his death as the result of an explosion of gas occurring in Rolling Mill Mine, of the Cambria Steel Company, of Johnstown, Cambria county, Pa., on the 10th day of July, 1902. That said explosion was caused by a person or persons, to the jury unknown, taking into room no. 2, right heading, where gas was known to exist, an open lamp and using same in direct violation of the mining rules and regulations of the Cambria Steel Company" (Ray, 1903).

The single entrance to the Rolling Mill Mine, now sealed with concrete and steel, is still a

visible artifact on the western hillside above Johnstown. It is located very near the inclined plane, which along with our series of well known floods, is Johnstown's other claim to fame. The entire mine and Klondike section lie beneath my property and the rest of our "West Hills" communities. Not too far from my home, along a park trail through a small valley there can be found a large concrete access and air shaft, known as the Elk Run Shaft. Secured with a steel grate on top, it drops 350 feet to the mine below. A powerful flashlight reveals the first hundred feet or so of the shaft, long ago filled with mine equipment to further block any entry. I've climbed to the top several times, wondering what it would be like to descend into the mine labyrinth below.

Cool breezes often vent from deep within the shaft, they seem to carry the distant echoes of long forgotten miners. There is no monument or tribute to those killed in the Rolling Mill Mine explosion, and the loss of the company miners seemed to be more of an inconvenience and delay in the daily mine and mill production than a tragic episode with human consequences.

Next issue: The miners tell their own story of the explosion.

References

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