

# Disaster At The Rolling Mill Mine Johnstown Pennsylvania

*by Stephen R. Lindberg*

## **Part 2, continued from January, 1997**

The morning of Friday July 11, 1902 revealed to the residents of Johnstown the magnitude and grim reality of the Rolling Mill Mine explosion that had occurred the previous day. Gathered outside the mine entrance, wives and children searched for husbands and fathers. Parents awaited word as to whether their sons were among the living or dead.

“ Johnstown, July 11..... Patient sentinels stood at the entrance to the mine at 4 o'clock this morning. They were there when the (mine) cars slowly pulled out of the mine. They saw the determined, sad - faced men lift limp forms from the cars to the wagons, and observed one vehicle after another carry off the dead. Forty five bodies were first recovered from the chambers within the mine, yet the women still hoped that their missing husbands were not among the first arrivals. At that time they had no way of finding out. The face of every victim, if it escaped complete destruction, was mutilated or blackened beyond description..... where the features of a face were discernible the death mask was one of fright or horror” (Egan, 1902).

A temporary morgue had been set up on main street at the armory of Company 8, Fifth Regiment, and as bodies were recovered from the mine they were transported there in wagons and carts. The process of transporting and caring for the bodies was supervised by Mayor John Pendry, who was also an undertaker. Assisted by two dozen other undertakers, the victims were stretched out on large slanting boards extending from the seats of chairs to the floor.

“ The victims, as they were found in the mine, clothes torn and burned, flesh hanging from their hands, and in every unsightly condition imaginable, were stretched on the boards, stripped, washed and then covered with a white sheet..... One body is headless and the faces of three other victims were destroyed beyond recognition” (Egan, 1902).

By 9:00 that morning a large crowd numbering in the hundreds had gathered outside the armory, and it was necessary for the police to block their entrance into the building. Pendry had arranged the dead into several long rows with passable aisles between them, and at 10:00 the doors were opened to the crowd. Women and children of the miners swarmed into the room, searching through the bodies from one row to another.

“ Then followed a scene which has occurred only once before (referring to the great Johnstown flood of 1889) in the history of Johnstown. A plaintive cry broke from the agonizing stillness. The first woman to discover her husband's remains threw her arms about the corpse. In the Polish language she wailed in awful grief..... Her son she afterward found in another corner of the room..... he was 17 years old..... working in close proximity to his father” (Egan, 1902).

Blame for the cause of the mine explosion was to follow, and those representing both the company and miners sides were quick to voice their opinions. Cambria County Coroner E.L. Miller assisted in removing bodies from the mine to the armory. He announced that very morning that an inquest will proceed within a week, but would not hold such an inquest until the state mine inspectors have concluded their investigations. Officially, he made no immediate effort to ascertain the cause of the explosion, but stated that it resulted from "The carelessness of an ignorant Slavish miner who entered a gas - filled chamber with a safety lamp not in repair" (Egan, 1902). Patrick Dolan, president of the Pittsburg district of the United Mine Workers, was quick to counter such comments, (although his statements don't appear to help mend the rash of ethnic slurs directed towards the miners).

JOHNSTOWN PA., FRIDAY MORNING, JULY 11, 1902. PRICE ONE CENT—\$5.00 PER YEAR

# DISASTER IN CAMBRIA COMPANY'S MINES

## LOSS OF LIFE IS APPALLING

Many Physicians Down in the Mines Administering Oxogen to the Imprisoned and Prostrate Men.

## DEAD BODIES SEEN ALL ABOUT.

First Four Men Rescued from the Klondike Section a Little Before Midnight and Taken from Mill Creek to the Memorial Hospital  
 —Foreman Harry Rodgers Thought to Be Among the Victims  
 —Miraculous Escapes of Assistant Foreman Thomas Foster and Fire Boss Griffith Powell—Details of Johnstown's Second Great Catastrophe.

## MEN IN THE MINES RELATE STORIES OF STRUGGLES

Terrible Experience of Richard Bennet and John Meyers.

## SCORES PENNED IN BIG DIP

Strench in the Mines Described as Something Frightful.  
 John Murphy Tells of the Help That Was Rendered Drivers.

"As long as they import foreigners by the hundred, dump them into the mines without any instruction or training, and run along on the theory that the mine boss, who gets his certificate from the state, is wholly responsible for the lives of hundreds underground, we will be greeted every few months by the news of these appalling disasters. Don't they understand that when they put a dozen untrained, ignorant foreigners, newly imported, into a mine such as the Cambria, they put the lives of every miner employed there at the mercy of the newcomers ?..... Remember, I am not talking about the foreign born miner we see in the Pittsburg district..... But I am always raising my voice against the kind of foreigners they import by wholesale in Johnstown..... and put to work while they are yet raw" (Pittsburg Dispatch, Saturday, July 12.)

Rescue teams brought the first survivors of the explosion out of the mine at 11:25 on the evening of Thursday, July 10. As the miners began to tell their accounts of the explosion, the horrors of being trapped deep within the mine soon became clear.

William Malcolm was in the upper section of the mine when the explosion came. "The first I knew of the trouble was when men came running from what is known as the dip, or lower section. They came running without hats, coats, and some without clothes and in a terrible state of excitement.....not more than 10 came that way and they escaped, leaving at least 200 in the dip" (Bailey, 1902).

David Williams was within the Klondike section and recalls, "I heard the explosion, but it did not affect me. I got out quick, but I saw many who appeared to be smothered and unable to move.....my father was in there with me.....he told me to hurry home and tell mother he was not hurt" (Bailey, 1902).

John Whitney was working at the heading about a half mile from the Klondike explosion. "Several dozen were overcome by the damp or gas as I had all I could do to escape.....after the explosion we went back to rescue the less fortunate and nearly lost our own lives..... I did not see my father, John C. Whitney, fire boss" (Bailey, 1902). John C. Whitney survived the initial explosion, and entered the Klondike section three times along with other rescuers. On his third trip into the section he perished, sacrificing his life while saving a stricken miner.

John Hewlett was working in room number 16 with six other miners, two miles back in the mine. "After the explosion we could not see our hands before us until we reached the main heading. It appeared to be a smoky, stinky substance, whether gas or damp, I could not tell. It was terrible, whatever it was" (Bailey, 1902).

During the official inquest into the disaster many of the miners who worked within the Rolling Mill Mine gave testimony. George Bogie had worked in the mine for ten years, and in the Klondike section for eight of those years. At the time of the explosion he was in the main heading, "When he felt something like a strong wind and heard a strange sound and feared that something was wrong..... two men came up from the Klondike and said there were men lying in it who could not rise; he then thought there had been an explosion and tried to get a safety lamp, but could not get into the fire boss' shanty, as it was locked" (Ray, 1903).

Valentine Salla testified through the use of an interpreter. "He had worked in the mine for eighteen months, the Klondike for one year..... He felt a rush of warm air, which extinguished his light. He then ..... refilled and relighted his lamp and resumed his work of loading a car, when a fire boss came and asked him where the explosion was, and he replied that he did not know there had been an explosion. The fire boss then left, but in a few minutes the foreman came and told him to go home. He started, but soon came on some bodies of dead men, and some men who were alive lying beside the track..... and remembered nothing more until he was rescued and taken from the mine" (Ray, 1903).

Mine foreman H.L. Rogers was born in Wales and had thirty years of experience in the mines. "On the morning of the explosion, I was in the fire boss' shanty eating lunch. Fire bosses had just finished their day's work when I heard the concussion, and knew that an explosion had occurred, and we went to the Klondike and saw what had happened and found a door was down and we replaced it as best we could. We went through the old workings until we got to second right heading, where we knew the air would be fresher, but found that the after-damp was becoming too strong..... we retraced our steps..... Robinson, Retallick, and Blanch were with me, and we saw Whitney when we got back, and he was still alive" (Ray, 1903).

George F. Robinson testified that he was superintendent of the Rolling Mill Mine and several other mines of the Cambria Steel Company. "The Klondike district has never given us more trouble than any other part of the mine, only that for several weeks previous, it was the only part of the mine in which gas had been found, but not in sufficient quantities to cause any uneasiness.....There were four fire bosses in the Rolling Mill Mine and they were sober and experienced men.....my instructions are that any inexperienced man should be put to work with one who was experienced..... I believe that the company had made every effort to safeguard the miners and mines that was possible" (Ray, 1903).

As I researched and gathered materials for the story of the Rolling Mill Mine disaster, one particular reference to the explosion and its aftermath seems to stand out as a curious peculiarity, the two but very brief references to the headless man. Both of these appear in the newspaper articles detailing the explosion, but not within the transcript of the Bureau Of Mines report from 1903.

In the Saturday, July 12, 1902 issue of The Pittsburg Dispatch, James Roderick, chief of the bureau of Pennsylvania mines (see EUREKA!, January 1997, Disaster At The Rolling Mill Mine.) states; "I doubt very much if it will ever be known exactly how the explosion occurred. We know pretty well where it was. The miner whose head was blown off was, in my opinion, probably the one who lighted the gas. All the men in that entry were killed" (Gable, 1902). The brief reference to this continues by saying "Man who caused it now headless. Company officials also believe they can show the headless body belonged to the man who touched off the catastrophe" (Gable, 1902).

Other than this and the mention of the headless man in the armory morgue, no other reference to this victim is to be found. Who was the headless man, was he ever identified, and is he among those miners in the published list of the dead? Perhaps the nature of the mutilation, and the need to place immediate blame for the disaster made the decapitated corpse the likely scapegoat. There is no indication that this body was ever matched with a recovered head.

The "old-timer" miners I have had the opportunity to meet suggest that this is the place to begin the "Legend Of The Rolling Mill Mine Ghost". To this day, the headless ghost of the unknown miner stills searches the workings of the mine, wandering endlessly through crumbling passages in search of his lost head. Only after he finds it can he leave the mine, and then tell the true story of who was responsible for the Rolling Mill Mine Explosion.

#### References

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Ray, William S., State Printer Of Pennsylvania. "Report Of The Bureau Of Mines Of Internal Affairs Of Pennsylvania, 1902." 1903.