

DISASTER AT THE TWIN SHAFT

Listen to the Warnings

WHEN?
JUNE 28, 1896

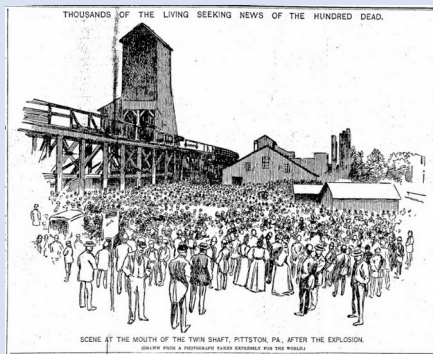
VOCABULARY
gangways robbing
pillars timber props



WHERE? Pittston, PA

EVENT 58 miners
perished when 200 acres
collapsed on the miners 400
feet below ground

The earth had been giving warning signs about coming disaster for months. Miners worried about widening cracks in the roof over their heads as they worked underground. The support timbers “talked”—cracking from the weight of the earth pressing down. Water from the nearby river seeped through the rock and fear of poisonous gas was ever present. One miner, Edward Hughes, refused to stay in the mines the night of June 27 saying the “crackling became worse” (Explore). The superintendent ordered more timbers put in for support but that proved worthless. At 3 A.M. on Sunday morning, June 28, 1896, disaster came.



Three distinct tremors and the sound of a “tumultuous earthquake” woke the sleepy neighborhood (Roberts 35). The whistle blowing from the colliery coupled with the rising wail of fire alarms confirmed what many had feared—trouble. Wives and mothers with their children in tow, men who worked on other shifts, neighbors rushed to the scene within minutes. A cave-in stopped them in their tracks. It covered about 200 acres and appeared to reach far underground.

Perhaps all was not lost. Roberts writes, “Hope was revived when a few men emerged from the mine. John Gill was followed by David Richer, Jacob Adams, and Frank Sheridan. These men had been working at the foot of the shaft and, though blown down by the force of the concussion, had been able to ring for the cage” (36). Efforts were made to force air into the mines, and crews were sent to begin the task of digging out a pathway to those who were trapped. Other routes were explored and even the nearby Clear Springs mine was used to try to break through to those trapped. Rescue teams were desperately working to get to the men, but their progress was slow—sometimes only 15 to 20 feet a day. Hope faded as the hours turned into days. Rescue was moved to recovery. The danger and treacherous work proved to be too much, and it was decided to close off the workings. The men were entombed in the mine where they had fallen.

The death of the men, mostly Irish with a lesser number of Lithuanians and other ethnicities, left 101 children without fathers, 34 women without husbands, and 58 men buried over 400 feet below ground.



Investigations that followed produced conflicting reasons for the disaster. Gangways, the underground roads used to pull the coal out, were said to be too wide. Props were not placed properly for support nor were the pillars of coal wide enough to support the roof above. In fact, the pillars had been “robbed”, that is, coal had been taken from them making them too weak to effectively support the roof. Roberts reports that a relief fund set up “throughout Pennsylvania raised \$80,000” to give to the families of the victims (45).

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Explore Pa. History Twin Shaft](#)

[Underground Miners Twin Shaft](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Glahn, Bryan. *Mining Disasters of the Wyoming Valley*. Carolina, S.C.: Arcadia Press. 2016.

Roberts, Ellis. *The Breaker Whistle Blows*. Scranton, Pa.: Anthracite Museum Press. 1984.

ACTIVITIES

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Presentation Ideas

Topics and Ideas

Appendix