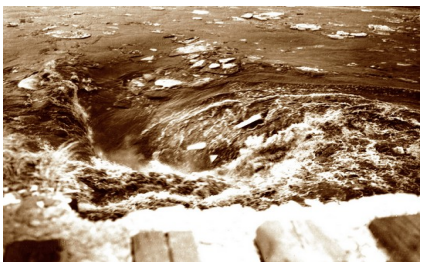
KNOX MINE DISASTER

WHEN?
January 22, 1959

WHERE? Port Griffith, Pennsylvania



EVENT
Susquehanna River broke through into the mine below

VOCABULARY
anticlinal air shaft borehole
chamber props Vortex
whirlpool

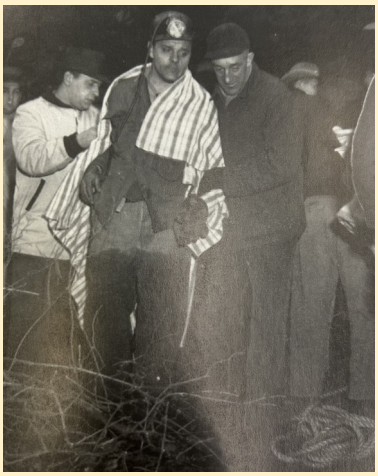
Out of the various mining tragedies, the most well-known is the Knox Mine disaster on January 22, 1959 in Port Griffith (near Pittston), Pennsylvania. With coal easy to get, the miners had taken coal that created a pocket too close to the surface. While 35 feet was supposed to be left between the roof of the mine and the surface, in this area perhaps it was less than 6 feet, maybe less than 2 feet. The river level was at 2.1 feet when a January thaw occurred with temperatures in the 60s. The swollen river filled with large chunks of ice rose to over 20 feet and covered the now thin layer. The weight of the water crashed through sending billions of gallons into the mine below. Three men were killed immediately. Nine more would lose their lives as the water flooded the mine.

The river coming into the mine was a surprise that day of course but had been anticipated by many of the miners. Herman Zalonis had said to his sister, "If that river comes in, we'll be drowned like rats." That area was filled with water dripping from the roof so frequently that men worked in raincoats. Boreholes made from the surface should have told the company that they were too close to the surface in that area. However, instead of taking the measurements for each hole separately to determine how much distance they had, the company made a critical mistake by averaging the measurements. When the men took coal from a vein that was traveling upward (called an anticlinal--like an inverted "V" shape) the event was a tragedy in the making as the coal was removed leaving a pocket between the surface and the mine.

Eighty-one men entered the workings that day at 7:00 a.m. They worked at various levels in the mine making tunnels through rock to get from one vein to another, digging coal, or working in the bottom-most vein repairing a pump. The story is told by Robert, Kenneth, and Nicole Wolensky in their book *Voices of the Knox.* They write '"At about 11:30 a.m., two men called for assistant foreman Jack Williams to come and investigate the sharp cracking sounds they heard coming from the wooden roof supports or props in a nearby chamber. "I no more than put my foot in the place and looked up," said Williams before a state investigating committee, "than the roof gave way. It sounded like thunder. Water poured down like Niagara Falls."'

The three men raced about two hundred feet up a slope to save their lives and report the caving of the roof. Once the order was given to get out of the mine, thirty-three others made their way to the elevators. Forty-five men were trapped by the on-rushing water.

Once the danger presented itself, Joe Stella, a surveyor for the Pennsylvania Coal Co., and Myron Thomas a mine foreman joined together to guide the men with them out. They could not get out via the elevators, so they had to work their way to the abandoned Eagle Air Shaft—which was supposed to be filled in long ago. Myron would take lead of the group and Stella would be the last man. They could not go the way they came in as the water was blocking the way. With the roar of the water and chunks of ice--some three-feet long and 16-18 inches thick now taking out mine cars and timbers--the men mainly communicated with waving lights or hand signals. Since they had no light except the battery lamps on their helmets, the trek to safety was unavoidably perilous.



The group got separated as some men moved more quickly than others. Joe was able to lead a group of older men to safety after a five-hour ordeal of dodging the rising water. They had to wade through thigh-high freezing, deep water with only their mining lamps for light. Ice chunks pushed mining cars, tools, and timbers at the men, too.

Myron Thomas was in a similar situation leading his group only his ordeal lasted 7 hours. He had missed a crucial turn and had to double back in order to get to the abandoned air shaft called the Eagle. Rescue workers were waiting thanks to Amadeo Pancotti (who was with the Stella group) climbing over 50 feet from underground to the surface. He was able to inch his way up the sheer walls of the air shaft using his toes and fingers to create places to hoist himself to the surface. He was met by Bill Hastie a miner who was patrolling the area to keep onlookers away. Hastie quickly called for rope and Stella's group was pulled to safety. All were taken to the nearby Pittston Hospital where they were taken care of by the hospital staff under the direction of Esther Tinsley. They were joined several hours later by the Thomas group. The devastation had resulted in the deaths of 12 miners.

The U.S. Geological survey instruments indicated that 10.37 billion gallons went into the River Slope and surrounding mines. For three days, men worked to fill the gap the river tore into its bed. Four hundred one-ton coal cars as well as 25,000 cubic yards of dirt, rock, and boulders were poured into the hole. Eventually, the water was slowed to about 20,000 gallons a minute. It was not until spring of that year that a permanent solution was found when 1,200 cubic yards of concrete and 26,000 cubic yards of sand were used to seal the hole.

As the investigation progressed and later court hearings, it was determined that greed, the ease of getting pure coal twelve to fifteen feet thick, weak mining laws and their enforcement, and union officials and mine owners secretly working together all contributed to this disaster.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Knox documentary PBS

PRINT RESOURCES

Wolensky, Robert, Wolensky, Kenneth, Wolensky, Nicole. *The Knox Mine Disaster*. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. 1999.

---- *Voices of the Knox*. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. 2005.