

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY  
MARCH 22



On March 22, 1906, a coal mine explosion at Century in Barbour County killed 23 miners.

**CSO: ELA.8.1, SS.8.9**

**Investigate the Document:** (*Department of Mines Annual Report, 1906*)

1. How long had the mine been open? What was the mine's average daily production?
2. What was the cause of the explosion at the Century mine?
3. Eleven miners died from a direct result from the explosion; to what did the others succumb? One victim, who was removed from the mine, died from "fright or acute insanity" due to the imaginary fear that what was going to happen?

**Think Critically:** Does this summary provide for an accurate representation of underground mining during the early-twentieth-century? Based on your reading of the explosion, do you think that the fire bosses or the coal company should have been liable for the lives lost, or do you think they did their jobs appropriately and tragic accidents happen? How has mine safety changed since the explosion at the Century mine?

ner indicated that those charged with voluntary manslaughter had voluntarily or wilfully contributed to the destruction of life, and on April 20th, upon trial before the Criminal Court, the State was unable to sustain the charge, the State's evidence being set aside by the Court.

There still remain on the Court's docket indictment for misdemeanor against the officials noted above.

No motive other than a desire to impress the importance of complying with the law prompted the Chief Inspector in making the information before the Grand Jury; and, while he has been the object of some censure and criticism for his action, he entertains no malice and feels justified in the action taken, although his information was injudiciously used to the humiliation of two citizens who now stand exonerated of a serious charge.

Respectfully,

JAMES W. PAUL, Chief Mine Inspector.

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#### EXPLOSION — CENTURY COAL COMPANY.

4:30 P. M.

On March 22, 1906, at 4:30 P. M. an explosion occurred in the No. 1 Shaft Mine, at Century, Barbour County, owned and operated by the Century Coal Company, resulting in the death of twenty-three (23) persons.

The Century Shaft is about 156 feet deep and is located in Barbour County, 16 miles by rail from Philippi, and operates a coal mine in the Redstone coal, which coal appears about 40 to 65 feet, vertically, above the Pittsburg bed of coal.

The mine has been in operation for about five years, and has a daily production of 1200 tons. The mine is developed on the panel plan, with tripple and double entries. The ventilation is produced by a 14-foot Capell fan, driven direct by a 250 H. P. steam engine. Two shafts are provided, one of which is used for hoisting coal and the other for ventilating purposes. A third opening is had by means of a drift driven 3300 feet from the bottom of the main shaft to the outcrop, which offers natural drainage and facilitates ventilation.

Few doors are used within this mine for ventilating purposes, since overcasts and regulators are used almost exclusively, and the air is split for each section of the mine. Brick and cement stoppings are used in all break-throughs along all entries, except room entries, where wooden stoppings are used.

The workings and ventilation of the mine have been carefully planned with a view of giving adequate ventilation for the need of a gaseous mine.

In the development of this mine some explosive gas has been discovered in different parts of the advanced workings, and to make sure of the removal of any danger arising from this source, a system of daily and nightly inspections was had, and daily written reports were made by the fire boss and assistant fire boss.

Some parts of this mine were dry and dust accumulated, and to pre-

vent danger from this source a sprinkling car was used to dampen the entries and rooms.

From the foregoing one would be led to believe that this was a mine perfect in all of its appointments and that an explosion within the mine was beyond the range of probability. However, conditions to be enumerated below may dispel such belief when the physical condition of a part of the mine and the practices of the miners in that part of the mine where the explosion originated are described.

All the indications within the mine after the explosion, and evidence taken at the investigation, were conclusive that the explosion was caused by a blown-out shot, which inflamed the dust and produced a typical dust explosion.

A careful inspection of the workings in the part of the mine affected failed to disclose the presence of any fire damp (explosive gas), and so far as the records of the fire bosses relative to that part of the mine, no gas had ever been found, however, other parts of the mine had shown the presence of gas, but those parts were on a separate split of air from the part affected.

The explosion originated in heading A, second section, southwest, by a shot in the end of the pillar between rooms 18 and 19.

This hole had been drilled 6 feet 2 inches deep, square on the solid, about 18 inches from the bottom, and sloped toward the pavement advancing.

Two men, brothers, by the name of James and Joe Majieka, were engaged in robbing out a pillar of coal 20 feet thick between rooms 18 and 19, and they had prepared and fired a shot on the solid coal on the end of the pillar. About 50 feet back from the end of the pillar was a cross cut through the pillar, and these two men had returned to this cross cut for safety after having lighted the squib. They had also carefully arranged their tools in a pile along the rib near this crosscut. These two men were found lying dead in the cross cut, both of whom were badly burned, one having his shirt burned off.

Near the entrance to this cross cut were found the remains of two metallic powder flasks which had been damaged by the powder within having exploded.

The hole in which the charge had been placed had not been destroyed and no coal appears to have been dislodged near it, unless a slab of coal at its mouth had been blown off. The surface of the coal surrounding the mouth of the hole was covered with a deposit of charred coal dust.

The force of the explosion traveled in all directions from this hole, but the evidence of the greatest heat appeared to have been confined to the rooms and across the ends of the pillars being robbed and in the cross cuts between the rooms. Along the course of this force the posts within the rooms and the ribs of the coal and mine cars had deposits of charred dust adhering. In some instances this charred dust was two inches thick. There was little evidence of the flame of the explosion having reached the A entry, except at the entrance to rooms 20 and to 23, and the force came down and out these rooms and traveled along the entry and then crossed over into the air course of A entry and advanced in both directions along the air course, destroying a brick regulator near the third section entries.

On the A entry there were five pillars being robbed and ten men were at work at the time of the explosion. In addition to the ten men, a driver and a mule were in this entry, near room No. 20, when the explosion occurred.

These eleven (11) men were the only persons who were killed by the direct force of the explosion.

Twelve others lost their lives by reason of getting into the after gases of the explosion, two of whom died after being rescued and taken outside. One of the rescued died from "fright or acute insanity," but it is most probable that an analysis of his venous blood would have revealed the cause of his death to have been due to carbon monoxide gas poisoning. This subject had the delusion that the roof was about to fall upon him and constantly pleaded to be removed from this imaginary danger. He exercised his strength to make an escape and could only be made to remain indoors by the physical force of his attendants.

Another man died after having been removed to the outside, but his death was due to the shock resulting from the amputation of both legs, made necessary by reason of his having been run down by an electric motor and loaded mine cars within the mine shortly after the explosion occurred. This unfortunate circumstance was brought about by reason of the motorman, who was in another part of the mine when the explosion occurred, not knowing that an explosion had occurred. Just after the explosion occurred the motorman collected a trip of 16 loaded cars in the third section, northeast entries, and started with the trip for the bottom of the shaft, and not until arriving into the main east entry did he know anything unusual had happened. Here he encountered blinding smoke and hot suffocating gases, and his first thought was to continue his trip to the bottom of the shaft. This line of travel is 12 to 14 feet wide, and is provided with electric lights placed 200 feet apart, and, although the electric lights were not extinguished, the smoke was so dense that they were of no service to the motorman or to those who were traveling this entry in an effort to get out of the mine.

The motor and its loaded cars continued some distance along this main entry, and three persons riding on the front end of the motor heard some persons hollow and immediately the motor passed over some obstruction, and, thinking that the track might be blocked, one of the three called to the motorman to stop, which he did. It was later discovered that the obstruction passed over was the man whose legs were crushed, the motor and six cars having passed over them. It was also found that the motor had stopped immediately over another body and half way over a third body; the latter two, however, had not been mutilated other than the body under the motor had a crushed foot.

At the time of the explosion there were 125 men in the mine; 102 of them escaped without any injury or ill effect.

The prompt action of the superintendent in reversing the current of air in the mine, no doubt, saved many lives in this disaster. The mine boss happened to be at the bottom of the shaft when the explosion occurred, and he immediately sent word to the surface requesting the air current to be reversed.

In this connection it may be well to state that the air had been entering the air shaft returning from the mine by way of the main shaft, as well as the drift opening, thus putting the vitiated air from the explosion into the three channels of escape, until the current was reversed.

The conditions favorable to an explosion existed within the rooms affected by the explosion in so far that the rooms were dry and some very fine dust deposited on the pavement and ribs. This fine dust, while not prevalent in large quantities, was exceedingly fine and dry. The roof had broken and fallen back to the face of the "robbings," and it is held by the writer that the heavy falls in the robbed out parts materially stirred up and drove quantities of fine coal dust into the rooms where the pillars were being robbed. The evidence at hand was to the effect that some time during the day a heavy fall had occurred just beyond the end of the pillar, between rooms 18 and 19, bust just at what time this occurred we do not know. It may have fallen just immediately preceeding the windy shot in the end of the pillar nearby. In this event the conditions would have been most favorable for a dust explosion.

The flame went principally against the current of air and was extinguished in passing through the air course of the A entry, where a body of water was prevalent for a distance of at least 100 feet. The indications were that this water was picked up by the force and thrown into the air of the mine, since mud from the pavement was found bespattered on the roof and ribs.

The shot that proved fatal was charged with black powder, and in the placing of the hole the miners neglected to exercise the judgment of practical coal miners, else the shot would not have been placd in the solid coal, with the line of least resistance being the longitudinal axis of the hole.

Respectfully,

JAMES W. PAUL, Chief Mine Inspector.

Charleston, W. Va., September 1, 1906.

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*Brooke County.*

July 29, 1905. Paul Hover, Beech Bottom No. 1 Mine, was attempting to get coal enough from under stone to finish loading last car. Stone fell, catching his head and killing him instantly.

February 6, 1906. Aurelio Michele, Locust Grove Mine, had been riding on mine cars and got caught between a boiler standing on side track and mine cars. Was not employed to handle those cars, and should not have been there. Head crushed.

May 18, 1906. John Sasse, Beech Bqttom Mine, was off traveling entry on haulage entry, taking tools to shop, and fouled trolley wire on back of neck at base of brain and instantly killed.

*Marion County.*

August 25, 1905. Cosmo Barnado, Monongah No. 3 Mine, was shoveling coal when slate from roof fell on him. He had timbers on hand and was instructed to use them, but failed to keep the place properly timbered.