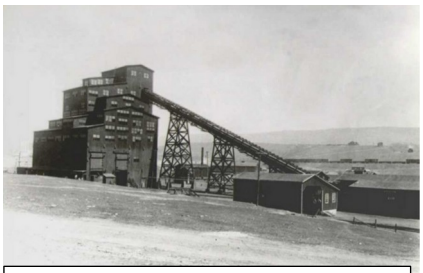
AVONDALE, TWIN SHAFT, BALTIMORE TUNNEL DISASTERS

WHEN?
1869--1919

WHERE? Plymouth to Wilkes-Barre



AVONDALE BREAKER

EVENT
Tragedies of mining in the Wyoming Valley

VOCABULARY
Black powder, props, shaft

The prosperity enjoyed by Wilkes-Barre before the 1950s was fueled by coal and the industries that supported it—production of large pumps to get water out of the mines, timbering to provide lumber for props in the mine, manufacturing coal cars and many more. The darker part of the story, however, were the challenges faced by those families who were part of the anthracite story. Life in the patch, child labor, and grinding poverty were endured by thousands. While the English, Irish, Scots, and Germans were early comers to the valley, they were soon joined by the Polish, Italians, Russians, Slovaks, Lithuanians and more. Often recruited by coal companies, over 30 immigrant nationalities came to work in the mines.

Some had experience working the mines in their native countries; others took the job because they had to feed their family. All were subject to the harsh conditions faced in the occupation. If they died in the early days of mining, their body was taken to their ramshackle company-owned house and placed on the front porch. The family had three days to mourn and then decide if a son would go to work in the mine or if they would move out. A new family would move in to live in the house which was drafty in the winter and hot in the summer. No indoor bathroom facilities were available.

There was nearly a fatality per day worked in the coal field. One of the worst fatalities was the disaster at Avondale, near Plymouth, Pennsylvania, on Sept 6, 1869. The one way into the 237-foot mine shaft and the only way out was covered by the breaker. That building (breaker) was where the coal was broken down into various sizes from the chunks brought up from the underground. The early theory was that the furnace that ran the ventilating fan overheated and started a fire which traveled up the shaft and caught the breaker on fire (Jaklevic p.41). With no way out, 108 men and boys died below ground as the oxygen was sucked out of the mine to feed the fire. (Two more would die in a train accident enroute to the disaster making the total 110.) Jaklevic quotes a newspaper account about the tragedy: "It is noticeable that nearly all the bodies found clustered together exhibited a spirit of devoted friendship in that hour of terror and dismay. Friends were found folded in each other's arms, or with hands clasped were overtaken by the grim messenger of the grave. A father was found with one of his sons on each arm, calmly resting as though they had laid them down to pleasant dreams" (41).

Subsequent investigations, however, have found that mostly Welsh miners died that day. There was a lot of tension and conflict between the Welsh and Irish miners particularly at Avondale. Only 4 days after a three-month long strike, the fire erupted. Most of the Irish miners were attending a funeral in Scranton giving rise to the belief that the resulting inferno was

deliberately set. There was compelling evidence from the charred timbers to support that belief. After the worst disaster in the history of U.S. mining, a new law was passed by Pennsylvania requiring more than one access into a mine plus other safety requirements. The tragedy also spurred greater interest in forming unions.

Another tragedy was the Twin Shaft cave-in. For several weeks before the collapse, miners could hear the groanings of the mine known as "squeezing" which was indicative of a roof fall. To avoid the collapse the company began to use heavy wooden timbers to hold up the roof. Edward Hughes, a miner who worked in the depths over 400 feet below the surface, refused to go into the mine to work saying the roof was going to collapse anyway. He was right. The early morning disaster took 58 lives on June 28, 1896. Bryan Glahn in his book Mining Disasters, notes that "over 100 children were left without a father and 30 women became widows" (87). After the tragedy, a commission appointed by the governor recommended that pillars of coal be used to support the roof. Glahn also notes that the commission stated that "maps showing air currents were required to be readily available to inspectors, and safety lamps used instead of open lamps" (96).

Mining laws and practices were changing by the early 1900s. Prior disasters and unionization forced companies to increase their safety regulations. One concession by the unions that proved fatal, however, was allowing the last car into the mine to carry black powder (Glahn 99). Near present-day Scott Street in Wilkes-Barre, ninety-two lives were taken in the Baltimore Tunnel disaster on June 5, 1919, and another 44 men were wounded in the blast. They had been riding into the mine on a mine car that carried kegs of black powder. While no one is really sure how the explosion happened, Glahn writes "it is believed a short circuit in a wire, a miner's crowbar, or a spark from an open flame may have caused the explosion" (99). Later investigations found that several damaged cans of powder were in the front cars which was against safety regulations (Glahn 104).

Glahn writes about Jacob Milz, a survivor, who remembered, "I heard men coughing… shrieking and groaning…All I remember is I kept crawling for the longest time…it seemed like years." Milz continued, "If I have saved a single life, I feel repaid a thousand times because God…saved mine" (103).

ONLINE RESOURCES

Avondale Tragedy this is part 1; also see 2, 3

Times Leader Twin Shaft

A Slavic Inferno Baltimore Tunnel

PRINT RESOURCES

Glahn, Bryan. Mining Disasters of the Wyoming Valley. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing. 2016.