

KNOX MINE DISASTER

WHEN?

January 22, 1959

EVENT

12 miners lost their lives when the river crashed through and flooded the mines.



WHERE?

Pittston, Pennsylvania

VOCABULARY

corruption	pillar	chamber
coal vein	vortex	
anthracite	whirlpool	
air shaft	slope	

The Knox Mine disaster took the lives of twelve men on January 22, 1959 near Pittston, Pennsylvania. Thirty-three others would have also died in the watery grave if it had not been for the heroic efforts of the men who led them to safety. This disaster proved to be the main event in the final chapter of deep underground mining in the valley.

The Susquehanna river had been at 2.1 feet earlier in the month. After two days of rain and sixty degree temperatures that resulted in a thaw, the river level rose close to the flood state of 22 feet on the night on January 21. The surging, ice-laden torrent tore through the valley during those days. It would prove to be a catastrophe for the families who worked for the Knox Mine Company's operation.

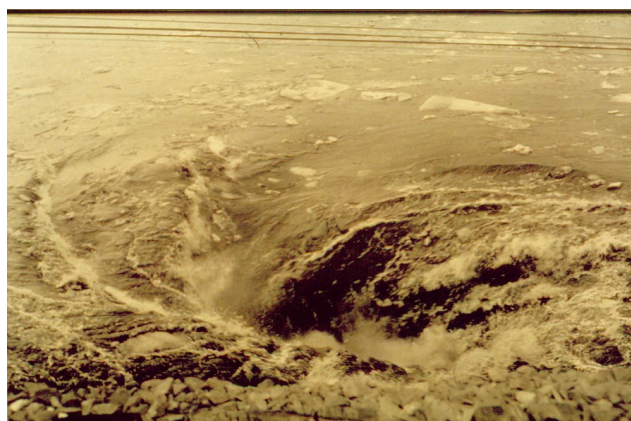
Eighty-one men reported for work at 7:00 a.m. on the morning of January 22nd.

They labored at various levels in the mine making tunnels, digging coal or working in the bottom-most vein repairing a pump. Carpenters, rock men (who carved tunnels from one vein to another), electricians as well as miners and laborers all worked in the mines. Robert, Kenneth, and Nicole Wolensky tell the story of this event 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 (props) in a nearby chamber. "I no more than put my foot in the place and I looked up," said Williams in a characteristic burr before a state

Three days men worked to fill the gap the river tore

Investigating committee, "than the roof gave way. It sounded like thunder. Water poured down like Niagara Falls."

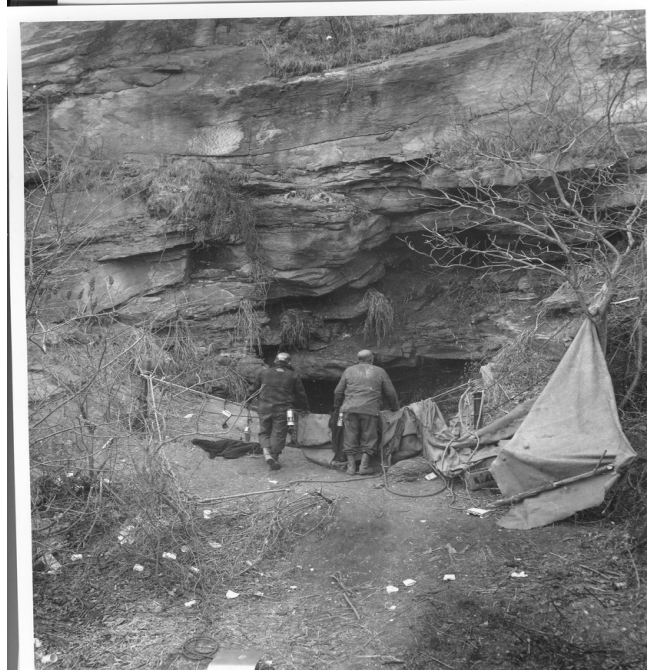
The three men raced about 200 feet up a slope to save their lives and report the caving of the roof. Once the order was given to evacuate the mines, 33 others made their way to the elevators. The on-rushing water trapped 45 men below ground. They had to wade through chest-high, deep freezing water at times with only their mining lamps for light. Ice chunks as large as 3 feet pushed mining cars, tools, and timbers at the men, too. It took nearly seven hours for 33 men to finally escape out an old, abandoned air shaft—the Eagle Air shaft. Twelve men lost their lives, some of them because they took the time to warn others. By the time they tried to escape the route was cut off by the rising water.



The U.S. Geological survey instruments indicated that 10.37 billion gallons broke through into the River Slope where the men had called out to Jack Williams. For

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 that a permanent solution was found. Twelve hundred cubic yards of concrete and 26,000 cubic yards of sand and other materials were used to seal the hole after the river subsided.

In the subsequent investigations it was learned that the Knox Mine Company had illegally mined under the river. Chasing after the thick, easy-to-get coal, mineworkers had dug too close to the river bed. Thirty five feet was supposed to be between the roof of the mine and the bed of the river. It turned out that only a few feet down to nineteen inches had kept the river at bay. The thin roof could not withstand the weight of the increased volume of the river. Greed, the ease of getting high carbon coal from veins nearly 15 feet thick in some places, weak mining law all contributed to this disaster and weight of the swollen river proved to be too much.



PRINT RESOURCES

Voices of the Knox Mine Disaster by Robert, Kenneth, Nicole Wolensky

The Knox Mine Disaster by Robert Wolensky

ONLINE RESOURCES

1. <http://www.rootsweb.com/~paluzerne/mines/knox.htm>
2. <http://www.minecountry.com/homeMine/know.cfm>
3. http://www.timesleader.com/new/20071230_30Stella_ARTO.html