

The Lost Creek Disaster

In the heyday of coal mining in Iowa, from about 1890 to 1920, thousands of men were employed in and around the commercial mines operated in the State. Early in the new century, production had reached five and a half million tons a year. More than twice as many mines were operated in Appanoose than in any other county, but Monroe with only sixteen mines in 1902 led in production with over a million and a quarter tons. Polk County produced nearly a million tons that year and Mahaska, which had formerly been the banner coal-producing county in the State, was third with nearly 725,000 tons. New mines were continually being opened and others abandoned. Fortunes were made and lost, but during this period of expansion the industry brought prosperity to the Iowa coal fields.

In the deep mines, where the coal was from two to seven feet thick, the room and pillar system of working was generally used. The coal was blasted loose with charges of powder or dynamite, loaded on cars, and hoisted up the shaft to the surface. Fresh air was supplied by air shafts and ventilating fans. Power-operated machinery

was equipped with safety devices to prevent accidents, but some operations were naturally dangerous. Men were frequently killed by explosions and falling coal or slate. Mine inspectors continually urged greater care in shot firing and timbering.

One of the worst mine disasters in Iowa occurred at noon on Friday, January 24, 1902, a bitterly cold day, in the Lost Creek mine located about ten miles southeast of Oskaloosa. As was the custom at midday, Andrew Pash, who was working in room ten about five hundred feet from the shaft on the east side, prepared two shots to break out the coal for the afternoon's work. One new hole was drilled but the other shot was put in a hole from which the tamping had been blown when it was fired the night before. Later examination showed that this hole was "five feet deep, four feet, ten inches on the point, slim heel, coal three feet, eleven inches high below the black jack," and close to part of an old hole drilled at a right angle and penetrating to about seven inches of the one recharged on the fatal day.

After the sixty-seven men in the pit had gone to places of safety to eat their lunch, the fuses were lighted and the shots were fired. But in room ten, instead of the usual explosive effect, flame shot out along the roof. These "windy

shots" which blew out the tamping instead of shattering the coal were not uncommon, but the condition of the atmosphere in the mine that day was unusual. The air was laden with a fine carbon dust. The flame from the shot ignited the dust and caused a terrific explosion. A solid wall of fire swept through the mine carrying everything before it and leaving a trail of death and destruction in its wake.

The force of the explosion killed several men instantly, but the greatest loss of life was on account of the damps that followed the explosion immediately after the flash of flame. The concussion blew the doors off the ventilating shafts so that fresh air could not be circulated through the rooms. The helpless miners were suffocated wherever the foul air and smoke penetrated. Some of those killed by the shock were terribly mangled, one so horribly crushed as to be beyond recognition.

The men working on top were thinking of the nearness of the noon hour, when without warning there was a sudden and awful crumbling sound. The effect was like an earthquake and some of the men mistook it for that. The explosion sent timbers and debris flying from the shaft two hundred feet into the air and wrecked part of the shaft house. The guides for the cages were misplaced

and damage was also done to the fans that furnished ventilation to the mine. Those on the surface knew that an explosion had occurred but its extent could not be conjectured.

Manager J. M. Timbrell was informed of the explosion and hurried to the shaft which was about three-quarters of a mile from the store. He took charge of affairs and called for volunteers. Some twenty men responded, pledged to take any reasonable chances to save the entombed men. The cages could not be operated, however, and the fans were out of commission. Two hours or more were required to make repairs, but the operation of the fans at full speed proved of little use until the ventilating doors in the mine could be replaced. It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon before the rescue workers could enter the mine and remove the bodies.

The company store was converted into a morgue and thither the bodies were ordered by Coroner Foehlinger for identification and proper care and dressing before being exposed to the view of bereaved ones. The bodies were wrapped in blankets as they were brought from the mine, placed in wagons and carried to the store. There they were placed side by side in a long row that reached almost the entire length of the dismal building.

About half the men in the mine, those farthest from the explosion, escaped serious injury. But twenty were dead and fourteen badly burned, some of whom died later. According to the report of the State Mine Inspectors, the miners who lost their lives were John Bert, Sylvester C. Crayton, Charles S. Crews, George Denchok, John Elder, Daniel Fish, Russell Fish, Michael Fox, Jr., Michael Fox, Sr., Frank Gaspari, Joseph Gaspari, Alexander Gray, James Humphrey, Samuel Humphrey, John Kovall, John Martin, John Menally, Andrew Pash, John C. Stovall, and David Walters.

Nearly all were married and left families "in poor circumstances". Several were immigrants whose wives could speak little or no English. Their anguish seemed especially harrowing because nobody could understand their frantic appeals. Two were Negroes. The seven Catholics were buried in the Catholic cemetery at Eddyville, while the other thirteen were interred in Forest Cemetery at Oskaloosa.

The disaster at the Lost Creek mine attracted much attention. Governor Cummins appointed a commission of operators and miners to make a thorough investigation. T. J. Phillips was elected chairman and Mine Inspector Verner, secretary. The commission inspected the mine on February

18th and listened to the testimony of witnesses. No evidence of negligence was found in the operation of the mine.

The cause of the explosion was faulty shot firing. The hole in room ten, close to an old one, should not have been charged a second time. According to the report, the side of this hole "was evidently shattered by the charge exploding in it the first time, and when the second charge was fired in the same hole, communication between it and the old hole was easily established, if it had not been established before, and through it and the fissures near it the flaming gases were projected into the room with great force and so intensely hot that the thin layer of coal adhering to the roof was blistered and burned. Along the right rib a considerable amount of soot and cooked dust furnished additional evidence of intense heat. It is undoubtedly true that the dust stirred up in this room by the firing of the shot and ignited by the flaming gases increased the initial force of the explosion considerably." It seems apparent that the flame "traveled close to the roof. Not a keg or vessel containing powder was exploded, although in several instances the stoppers had been removed, and several dinner pails found in low positions, having wooden handles painted and varnished, that would show the effects of fire,

while covered thickly with soot, showed no evidence of fire having touched them."

The State legislature in session at the capital took notice of the disaster. There ought to be a law, they declared, to insure greater care in shot firing. A bill was introduced at once, and on April 17, 1902, the shot examination law went into effect. It required that competent persons should be employed in all mines to inspect "all shots before they are charged" and to prohibit the charging and firing of any unsafe shot. To guide the shot examiners, the State Mine Inspectors described certain dangerous methods. First in the list was the cause of the Lost Creek disaster: "A hole which has blown the tamping must not be recharged and fired again." During the following year no lives were lost in Iowa coal mines on account of explosions.

From first place among Iowa coal-mining counties, Mahaska has gradually declined in importance. Nothing now remains of the once thriving mining camp at Lost Creek except a great heap of red shale and the grades where the railroad ran.

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