THE DARKEST MONTH
COAL MINING DISASTERS
OF DECEMBER 1907

By Nicholas P. Ciotola, Curator

On the morning of December 6, 1907, hundreds of coal miners—some as young as 12 years of age—entered the mines at Monongah, West Virginia, for another long and arduous work day in the depths of the Pittsburgh Coal Seam. At 10:25 a.m., a powerful explosion’s reverberations, which could be felt eight miles away, ripped through the mines. Three hundred and sixty-one of the miners who went to work that day never came out.
WomenAwaitingNewsfromtheMonongahRescuers

The miners killed in the explosion at Monongah left behind 196 widows and 468 children, many of whom held vigil at the mine entrance until receiving word from officials about the fate of their loved ones. The Consolidated Coal Company paid for funeral expenses and contributed approximately $150 to each surviving family. They also invested in a general relief fund, to which many industrial magnates nationwide, including Andrew Carnegie of Pittsburgh, also contributed. The Monongah Relief Commission then performed the daunting task of distributing relief to the families of the victims. Since many next of kin still lived in Europe or had returned to their ancestral homeland after the death of their spouses, the assistance of local consulates was needed to facilitate the process.
Arrival of Rough Box Caskets, Aftermath of Naomi Mine Explosion, December 1, 1907, Fayette City, Pennsylvania

On December 1, coal miners working for the United Coal Company's Naomi Mine near Fayette City, Pennsylvania, planned to work a full evening shift, despite the fact that it was a Sunday, their traditional day of rest. At approximately 7:26 p.m., the mine exploded in a fiery blast, entombing 34 miners who ultimately perished. In the aftermath of the explosion, newspapers reported that a miner carrying a lamp with an open flame had ignited coal dust and therefore caused the blast. The newspapers also reported on the arrival of the caskets for the deceased miners, illustrated by this photograph taken on the banks of the Monongahela River. Fifteen-year-old Robert R. Hawker, a wagoneer for the coal company, assisted with the gruesome task of delivering the caskets to the scene of the disaster. He is pictured here with two other mine employees and the undertaker.

Courtesy of Peggy Farnspher
On December 19, another violent explosion at the Darr Mine in Western Pennsylvania claimed the lives of 239 additional coal miners. Most were recent immigrants from Italy, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and other European nations who had come to the United States in search of work. Unlike other immigrants of the Ellis Island era, they failed to achieve their quest for the American Dream. Rather, they became victims of the darkest month in the history of American coal mining: December 1907.

In 1907, coal mining was tedious, dirty, and back-breaking labor.

Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia have long been the centers of the American coal mining industry. In the 1760s, Coal Hill—now known as Mount Washington—supplied fuel for the British outpost at Fort Pitt, making Pittsburgh the site of one of the earliest coal mining operations in the country. By 1907, the industry had expanded precipitously, and the global demand for coal reached immense proportions. It was burned to heat homes, run railroads, power ships, illuminate lighting, operate industrial machinery, and manufacture coke—the high-energy material needed to make iron and steel. The Pittsburgh Coal Seam, a rich bituminous vein covering northern West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania, became one of the most important coal deposits in the world. The growing demand for coal, in turn, necessitated a demand for immigrant labor. In 1907 alone, over 1.5 million immigrants entered the United States—more than in any other year of the Ellis Island era. Thousands of them went on to live and work in the mining towns of West Virginia and Western Pennsylvania.

In 1907, coal mining was tedious, dirty, and back-breaking labor. Miners entered the workplace early in the morning and left late in the day. In dark winter months such as December, they only saw daylight on Sundays—their one day off. To function, coal mines employed workers who performed a wide array of specialized tasks. Using pickaxes or machinery, mine workers undercut coal seams, detonated black powder or dynamite.

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Caskets in the Streets of Monongah

Much debate surrounded the actual number of miners killed in the Monongah mine disaster. Although official accounts stated that 361 miners died, some suggested that the number was much more. Initial newspaper reports indicated that 478 workers had checked in that morning—leaving a vast discrepancy between the official number dead and the number who may have actually been in the mine. Furthermore, it was common practice for young boys to accompany their fathers into the mines in order to assist in their work. Since these young helpers were not subject to the mine check-in system, it is impossible to determine how many perished in this mine disaster.

Courtesy of West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Libraries
Rescue Party, Darr Mine Explosion, December 19, 1907

Almost immediately after receiving news of the blast, Mine Superintendent William Kelvington organized several rescue parties that converged on the mine entrance. According to newspaper accounts, one of the initial rescuers was miner Joseph Mapleton, who was inside the mine at the time of the explosion. Mapleton was close enough to the entrance to escape with minor injuries, but after receiving medical attention, he rushed back in to help with rescue efforts. There were few survivors and 239 dead. As with the disaster at Monongah, the real number of dead may have been much higher due to inaccurate record keeping that failed to account for children accompanying their fathers at work. Furthermore, according to newspaper accounts, many Carpatho-Rusyn miners were saved because they missed work that morning in observance of Saint Nicholas Day. Had it not been for this religious holiday, the casualty toll could have been well over 400.

Courtesy of Anna Toth / Donald Lancaster
Fiorangelo DiSalvo was born in the town of Duronia in the Molise region of central Italy. According to Ellis Island passenger lists, 10-year-old DiSalvo departed Naples on January 26, 1906, aboard the steamship Lombardia and arrived in New York harbor on February 8. After undergoing the medical examinations and screening process at Ellis Island, DiSalvo traveled to Clarksburg, West Virginia, to join his cousin who already resided there. Like many of his fellow travelers, DiSalvo got a job as a coal miner and, by December 1907, was working in the mines at Monongah. He was one of 361 miners killed in the Monongah mine disaster and, at 12 years of age, was one of the youngest miners to die that day.

*Boy Miner, West Virginia, c. 1907*

*Courtesy of Library of Congress*
in the facings to loosen the coal, and then hand-loaded the fallen coal into wagons. These wagons were then hauled to the mine tipple, weighed, and transported to market by rail or barge. Miners received payment based on the amount of clean coal they loaded.

As men toiled underground, women played a significant though often overlooked role in the coal mining family. Their domestic work raising families was often supplanted with contributions to the household income through gardening, home crafts, and the housing of boarders. The coal mining towns where immigrant families lived were also vehicles of assimilation. While community and family networks allowed for the preservation of Old World languages, cultures, and ways of life, the multi-ethnic workplaces composed of both immigrants and American-born workers facilitated the acculturation process.

Between 1900 and 1910, more than 20,000 coal miners died on the job. By 1930, the mines had claimed over 70,000 total lives—more than all American battle deaths in World War I. The month of December 1907, proved the most costly. On December 1, an explosion at the Naomi Mine in Fayette City, Pennsylvania, killed 34 miners. The single worst coal mining calamity in American history occurred only a few short days later, at Monongah, West Virginia. The state of Alabama suffered next, when a December 16, explosion at the Yolande Mine—perceived to be one of the safest in the county—killed 58. Then, on December 19, the Darr Mine near Jacobs Creek brought tragedy back to Western Pennsylvania. The calamitous month ended with a small blast in Carthage, New Mexico, which left 11 dead. By the end of December 1907, over 700 coal miners had perished across the nation.

Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia have long been the centers of the American coal mining industry.
Miners working in the United States—most of European immigrant ancestry—were two to three times more likely to die than their counterparts who stayed to work in the mines of Europe, but jobs were more plentiful here and the potential for earning was higher.

Accusations abounded in the aftermath of these coal mining disasters. Mine owners blamed unskilled and lazy foreigners for causing the explosions with their ignorance and carelessness. Miners, in turn, blamed unscrupulous owners who purportedly failed to invest adequate resources in mine safety. Regardless of fault, the disasters at Monongah and Darr greatly influenced the future of mining in America. Mine owners, entrepreneurs, and wealthy citizens donated thousands of dollars to relieve the victims' families, representing one of the earliest private charity initiatives in American history. Progressive reformers concerned with workplace safety, meanwhile, used the December 1907 disasters to lobby for stricter governmental involvement in enforcing mine safety laws and, in 1910, created the U.S. Bureau of Mines. Technologically, December 1907 represented one of the first uses of self-contained breathing apparatuses in mine recovery operations and spawned a mine safety research campus in Pittsburgh to further study safety and rescue technology. To some, tragedy bred progress as the disasters at Monongah and Darr helped make the coal mining industry safer. To others, though, ongoing mine disasters across the span of the 20th century—and even today—show that there are still many lessons to be learned from the past.
Instead of hanging festive greenery to celebrate the coming Christmas holiday, many residents of Jacobs Creek adorned their homes with black wreaths commemorating the loss of loved ones in the Darr mine disaster. By Christmas Eve, the coroner had begun releasing the bodies from a temporary morgue. Local newspapers reported on the funerals that took place from Christmas through the New Year. Journalists also speculated about the cause of the explosion. Many reports absolved the Pittsburgh Coal Company, saying that miners had likely entered a cordoned-off area of the mine that contained elevated levels of gas that were detonated by an open lamp or flame.

For further reading: