

Disaster — or Murder? — in the Mines

by Robert P. Wolensky and Kenneth C. Wolensky



In the quietness of the above surface scene last Thursday and 12 men are still trapped in the mines. Behind the shaft

The nation's attention turned in 1959 toward Port Griffith, Luzerne County, when disaster struck. Nine days after orders to cease quarrying a roof close to the water were ignored, the bed of the Susquehanna River ruptured.

In Winter 1959, after two days of drenching rain and unseasonably high temperatures, the frozen Susquehanna River began surging wildly. A recording station in Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County, measured the rise of the water level from 2.1 feet on Tuesday, January 20, to just below the 22-foot flood stage by Friday night.

Wary Wilkes-Barre area residents kept a close watch, knowing that the river had regularly dispatched floods to communities in the surrounding valley, whose Indian name, Maughwauwame, evolved to Wiwaumic, Wyomink and, by the late eighteenth century, Wyoming. Freshets in 1865, 1902, and 1936 had virtually deluged every riverside community, from Nanticoke in the south to Pittston in the north. Less severe flooding caused damage to some towns every few years until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed a modern levee system in the late 1930s.

Because the Susquehanna River usually affected surface structures in the Wyoming Valley—houses, businesses, factories, schools, and warehouses—few residents could have anticipated the disaster that was about to strike underground at the Knox Coal Company's River Slope mine in Port Griffith, a small town about eight miles upriver from Wilkes-Barre and ten miles south of the Lackawanna County seat of Scranton. Few also could have known that during the preceding weeks several of the one hundred and seventy-four Knox Coal Company employees had voiced fears about working conditions at the River Slope. Many underground workers toiled in raincoats and boots because "droppers" of water constantly fell from the mine's "roof." One worried miner warned his foreman that the tunnel he was quarrying took an unusually sharp upward angle toward the riverbed. Another forewarned his sister, "If that river comes in, we'll be drowned like rats." And the river did come in, and Herman Zelonis did drown.

Disasters in northeastern Pennsylvania's hard coal region were not uncommon; the Wyoming Valley had suffered several catastrophes since mining began in the early nineteenth century. Among the most tragic, the Avondale mine fire in 1869 claimed the lives of one hundred and ten men and boys; the 1896 Twin Shaft cave-in, seventy-five lives; and the

Forty-five men were now trapped, and all would die unless they found a way out ...

Baltimore Tunnel explosion of 1919, ninety-two lives. Not since December 18, 1885, when twenty-six workers died in an inundation at Susquehanna Collieries' No. 1 Slope in Nanticoke, had a water-related mine accident of such catastrophic proportion racked the area.

At seven o'clock on the morning of Thursday, January 22, eighty-one Knox Coal Company employees reported for the first of three daily shifts. Seventy-five headed for work sites in the May Shaft, a hub of mining activity. Six traveled to the adjoining River Slope where they were "cleaning up" and developing lower coal beds because most anthracite in the Pittston Vein—or the Big Vein, as miners called it—had been taken. The second group consisted of assistant foreman John Williams, laborers Fred Bohn and Frank Demarowski, and tunnel diggers, or "rockmen," Gene Ostrowski, Charles Featherman, and Joseph "Tiny" Gizenski. Around 11:30 A.M. the laborers summoned Williams, a seasoned sixty-two-year-old Scottish-born mining veteran, to check the shrill cracking sounds in the wooden ceiling supports, or "props," in the Pittston Vein. "I no more than put my foot in the place," Williams testified later in a characteristic burr before a state investigating committee, "and looked up, then the roof gave way. It sounded like thunder. Water poured down like Niagara Falls."

The three scrambled two hundred feet up the River Slope. Once outside, they grabbed a company wire and called the superintendent, Robert Groves, whose office was located a short distance away. Groves immediately telephoned underground and ordered everyone out of the

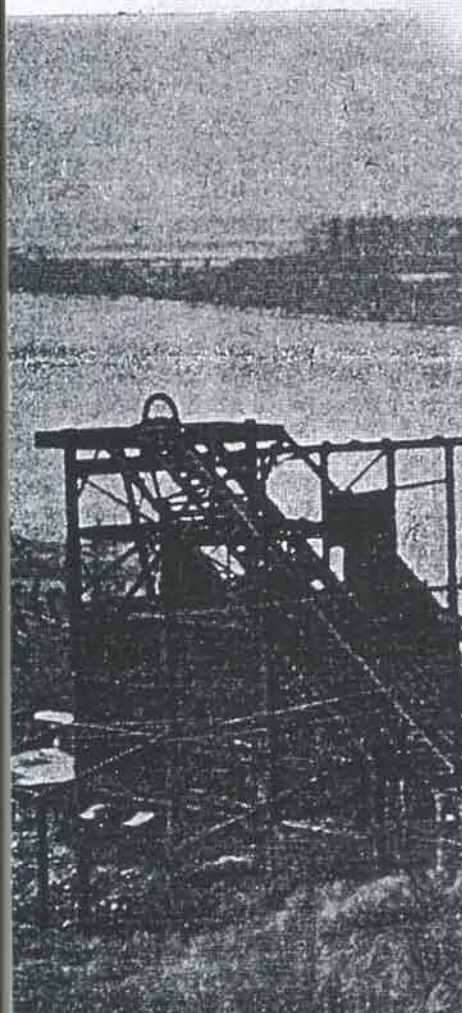
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mine. To prevent wholesale panic, however, he gave no explanation for his order.

Thirty-three workers promptly retreated from the mine by climbing into large elevator lifts, or "cages," at the adjoining May and Hoyt shafts. Mike Lucas, a stout fifty-seven-year-old miner, narrowly escaped through the May opening. With laborers Dan Stefanides and Willie Sinclair following, he lurched toward the exit, wading up to his neck in freezing water until finally reaching the cage. Turning toward his fellow workers and not seeing them, Lucas realized that their smaller size had prevented them from breasting the powerful, bone-chilling current. He knew that Stefanides and Sinclair had been lost to the churning black water crashing through the subterranean passages.

One of the narrowest escapes saved Ed "Big Zack" Zakszeski, a forty-six-year-

Amadeo Pancotti (below) received a medal for his role in leading stranded miners to safety through an abandoned air shaft upriver from the breach. Mine maps, carried by a visiting inspection party, were used to find the only remaining escape route and helped save thirty-three men.

old former Army swimming instructor. With a few men following, Zakszeski quickly set out for the Hoyt Shaft cage. After wading some distance he began swimming into the treacherous tunnel, dodging chunks of ice, timbers, and mine debris until, a half mile later, the water level dropped. He came to a tightly closed door that served as an air seal. Through this portal was the Hoyt Shaft exit. He was alone in the blackness. Where were his co-workers? They simply could not fight the tide and had turned back. Zakszeski forced open the door and waded a few hundred feet to the lift, becoming the last man rescued from this area.

Forty-five men were now trapped, and all would die unless they found a way out or unless officials expeditiously plugged the breach in the Susquehanna, whose waters whirled madly in a massive funnel along the river's east bank near the tracks of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Shortly before three o'clock, as state and federal mining officials huddled with company management to develop a rescue strategy, a soaked and mud-caked laborer, Italian-born Amadeo Pancotti, climbed out of the mine through what turned out to be the only outlet: the abandoned Eagle air shaft located a few hundred feet upriver from the breach. Thirty-three men eventually climbed to safety through the air shaft in two groups. Pancotti had traveled with the first group of seven led by Joe Stella,



a thirty-five-year-old employee of the Pennsylvania Coal Company, lessor of the mine to the Knox Coal Company, who had been inspecting the operation. Stella carried mine maps that enabled his group to travel directly to the air shaft. Myron Thomas, a Knox Coal Company assistant foreman, led the second group of twenty-six who became lost when they rushed ahead of Stella's contingent. They wandered for nearly seven hours until they were discovered by a search party. After a jubilant reception for the thirty-three survivors, all attention turned to the twelve men still missing.

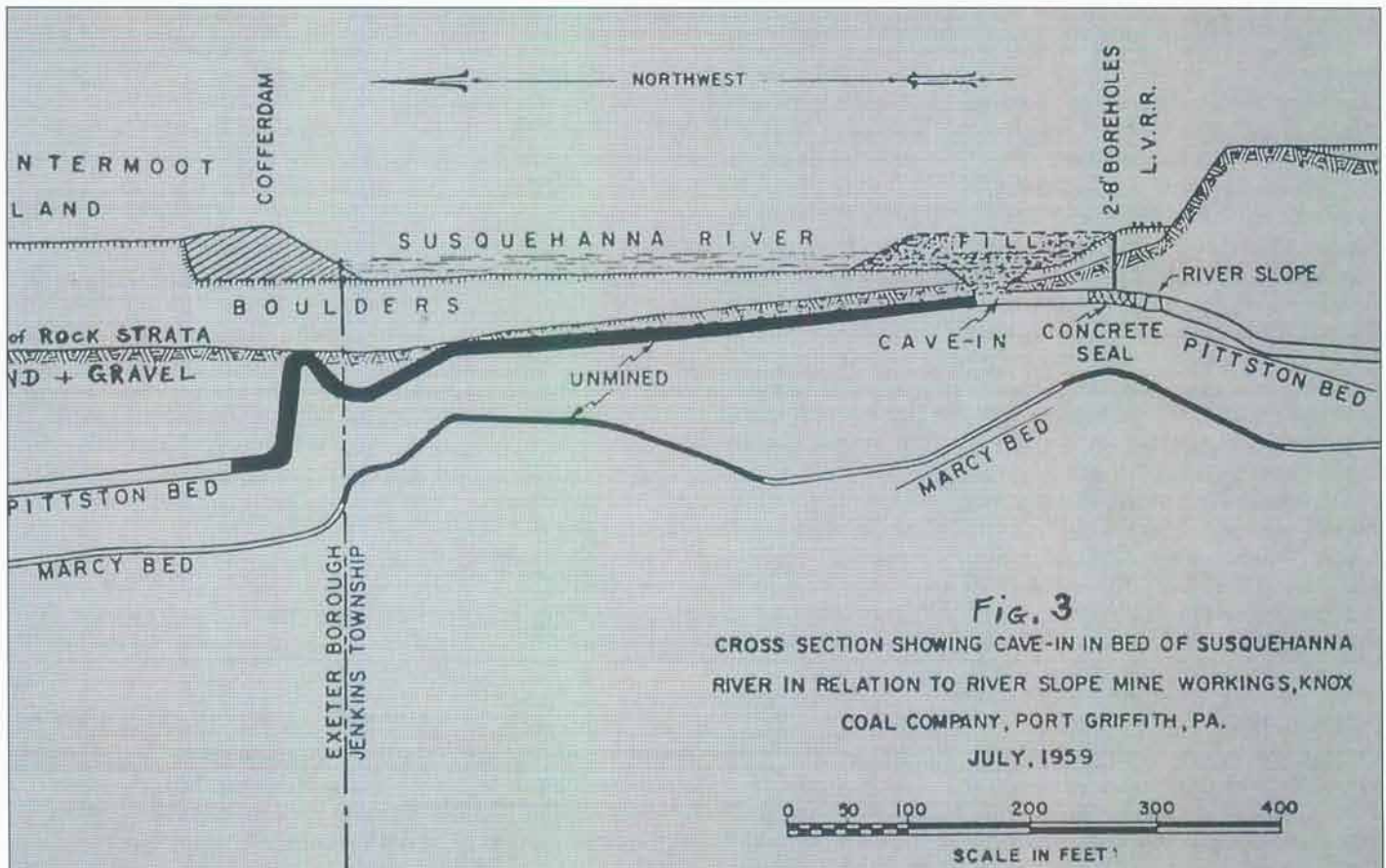
Hope for the missing workers endured for several days. Veteran miners thought that some of them could survive for a short time if they found an air pocket. The community rallied by offering prayers and conducting worship services. One pastor blessed the mine. On the second day, however, water continued to flow underground, causing methane gas to escape from the mine, and officials had no choice but to curb all rescue attempts.

Several who perished did so because they had delayed, briefly but fatally: Sam Altieri, a sixty-two-year-old electrician of Hughesville with sixteen years of mining experience, took Superintendent Groves' telephone call and traveled deeper into



Soaked and mud-caked, a survivor escapes the flooded mine (above). After the cave-in, two and a half million gallons of water poured underground each minute. It took workers three days to close the gaping hole.

A cross-section diagram (below) of the river slope shows where water broke through to the mine because two chambers were dug illegally, without proper surveying. Miners obeyed orders to quarry the chambers.





A massive funnel of river water rushes through the collapsed mine tunnel roof. "Water poured down like Niagara Falls," assistant foreman John Williams later testified. Some did not escape the torrent. Twelve trapped men died in the disaster caused by unsafe mining practices.

the mine to alert others. Pittston electrician Herman Zelonis decided to change into cleaner clothes before leaving. John Baloga of Port Griffith, a miner with thirty-five years experience, took time to put his tools away. Laborer Willie Sinclair climbed up a long chamber to warn fellow crew members but by the time he started toward the May shaft, the water had risen so high that neither he nor Dan Stefanides could follow Mike Lucas toward safety. They most likely ran from the flow toward higher chambers that branched out from the mine's main thoroughfare or "gangway." That area quickly flooded, though, and the two perished. "To this day," says Lucas, "whenever I go near that river I spit into it, it bothers me so much."

Other victims had little chance. Eugene Ostrowski of Wanamie, Charles Featherman of Muhlenburg and Joseph "Tiny" Gizenski of Hunlock Creek, were employed by the Stuart Creasing Company, a rock contractor, to dig a tunnel through solid rock to connect the Pittston Vein to the deeper Marcy Vein. The water instantly inundated their

workplace and they quickly drowned. Francis Burns of Pittston and Benjamin Boyar of Forty-Fort, both employed by the Pennsylvania Coal Company, were at work in the lowest-lying seam, the Red Ash, repairing a pump. The telephone lines to the lowest veins had not been maintained, and there was no way to warn them. Former Knox Coal Company employee Bill Hastie of West Pittston believes that, "Burns and Boyar must have died a horrible death because the only way out of that bottom vein was through a manway—an opening between two veins just big enough for a person to climb through. The onrushing water must have completely filled that passage so they couldn't possibly have gotten through. I hope they died of a heart attack or maybe gas poisoning or something else before they finally drowned."

For sixty-four hours after the emergency, more than two and a half million gallons of water poured underground each minute. United States Geological Survey instruments indicated that on Sunday, January 25, the subsurface water

pool in the mine peaked at five hundred and two feet above sea level—more than five times the usual level of one hundred feet. The cave-in allowed more than ten billion gallons of river water to course underground.

Crews worked around the clock for three days to plug the giant cavity in the riverbed. They pushed, pulled, and hoisted about sixty coal hopper cars, fifty-ton railroad behemoths called gondolas, into the gaping void. They added four hundred one-ton coal cars, as well as some twenty-five thousand cubic yards of dirt, rock, and boulders. Finally, and to everyone's relief, the giant hole stopped sucking water. In spite of the temporary patch, water continued seeping underground, and as late as the third week of March, twenty thousand gallons a minute flowed beneath the earth's surface.

The Pennsylvania Department of Mines launched a massive pumping operation to save nearby mining operations. Forty siphons, placed at strategic mine shafts, drained billions of gallons. A search team ventured underground to

inspect the temporary seal and look for bodies. Frank Handley of Kingston, mine foreman at the May Shaft, led the searchers. "After the water was pumped," Handley recounted, "the state Department of Mines had a commission of inspectors to inspect it. What I mean [is an] inspection and search. Well, I was with the search team too and [with] these inspectors. And as you traveled, the mud was deep, sometime it'd get to your hips. . . . And you'd have sticks with a point on to probe ahead of you, looking for bodies. . . ." No bodies were recovered, though.

In early spring, construction crews moved to permanently seal the breach. Laborers diverted the broad river and built an earthen cofferdam around the fissure which they then drained to expose the riverbed. They drilled several boreholes into the mine through which they pushed twelve hundred cubic yards of concrete and more than twenty-six thousand cubic yards of sand. Handley believed "that seal could hold the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean." Federal and state governments allocated nearly five million dollars for the overall costs associated with the disaster. The state presented bills totaling one and a half million dollars to the Knox and the Pennsylvania Coal Companies for costs incurred in the struggle to stem the flow of water into the River Slope. The Knox Coal Company paid nothing because it went bankrupt. The Pennsylvania Coal Company never paid its share because the firm successfully argued that it was not liable.

So much water had migrated from the River Slope into adjoining workings and caused such damage that two of the region's largest coal companies, the Lehigh Valley and the Pennsylvania, did not want to reclaim their mines. Within a matter of months, mining operations surrounding Port Griffith closed.

Eventually, county, state, and federal investigators discovered the disaster's cause in two chambers illegally dug beneath the bed

of the Susquehanna River, which extended far beyond boundaries known in the coal industry as "stop lines." The chambers were quarried without the benefit of surface boreholes to determine the thickness of the rock cover and without proper surveying. Miners obeyed company orders and quarried the chambers, following their path at a sharp upward angle toward the riverbed until the rock cover dwindled to a mere six feet in width. (The industry considered an acceptable width to be at least thirty-five feet.) Such a thin roof could not withstand the increasing pressure of the swelling river.

Federal and state mine inspectors had actually discovered the illegal chambers several months before disaster struck. They duly informed officials at both the Knox and the Pennsylvania Coal Companies but did not press the matter until mid-January 1959, when the tunnels and three crosscuts connecting them were virtually completed. On Tuesday, January 13,



Union official August J. Lippi was exposed as a secret partner in the company.

LAUGH IT OFF



"I'm sorry, Gerald, it's all over between us. Pick out your fraternity pin."

VOL. 12, NO. 52

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inspectors finally ordered all work stopped. Ignoring the order, the Knox Coal Company took one more shift's worth of coal that day. Just nine days later the riverbed ruptured at the site of the last mining, at a point where the roof of the chamber rose perilously close to the riverbed. "They didn't think the river would cave in," recalled Bill Hastie. "They were living in a fool's paradise, even making plans to do more mining in that area."

Why would knowledgeable company officials and experienced miners take such risks? Greed is but part of the answer. Coal in this section of the Big Vein glistened at twelve to fifteen feet and was nearly free of impurities. Company officials apparently could not resist temptation. Miners and laborers, on the other hand, did what they were told. "You had to make some compromises if you wanted to keep working in the mines at that time," lamented one worker. Weak mining laws and poor enforcement also played a part. Existing legislation for this type of illegal mining carried only a five hundred dollar fine and a prison term of ninety days.

But there were other underlying—and unspeakable—factors.

Criminal corruption in the anthracite industry was one. When reports of organized crime's influence in the Knox Coal Company and in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) surfaced, the United States Attorney General's Special Group on Organized Crime convened a grand jury in Scranton, which led to several indictments. Three state investigations followed, including lengthy hearings conducted by a joint

committee of the state legislature.

Authorities indicted a dozen individuals in the aftermath of the disaster: the Knox Coal Company's superintendent, one foreman, four owners, two Pennsylvania Coal Company officials, one officer of the District 1 UMWA, and three officers of the UMWA Local 8005, the local for the mine. Charges included manslaughter, conspiracy to obscure ownership of the mine, mining law violations, labor law violations, and income tax evasion. Six of the indicted were convicted and jailed. The greatest scandal involved August J. Lippi, president of District 1 UMWA, who was exposed as a secret, part-owner of the Knox Coal Company, blatantly violating the Taft-Hartley labor law. In exchange for his nearly thirty percent ownership interest, Lippi promised labor peace. Strikes were taboo and unionized Knox workers had to either accept standard wages and lax safety conditions or face unemployment in an already lagging local economy. Exposing the extent of corruption it was also revealed that Local 8005 officer Dominick Alaimo, a reputed member of the area's leading organized crime family, received thirty thousand dollars in illegal payments from the Knox Coal Company for his efforts to maintain a docile workforce. John Sciandra, whom the Pennsylvania Crime Commission called the head of the region's organized crime family, was an original part-owner but he died in 1949 and passed his shares on to his wife, Josephine. Louis Fabrizio and Robert L. Dougherty were the other owners. All were indicted.

The reorganization of the anthracite industry during the previous five decades proved also to have played a role. The large railroad-affiliated companies that had dominated coal mining at the turn of the century began leasing an increasing number of their operations to smaller independent coal contractors. This leasing system brought major benefits to the large firms. For instance, it lowered costs as one contractor was forced to outbid another, often at the expense of safety. It allowed the lessor to retain control over key aspects of the coal business while avoiding the actual mining

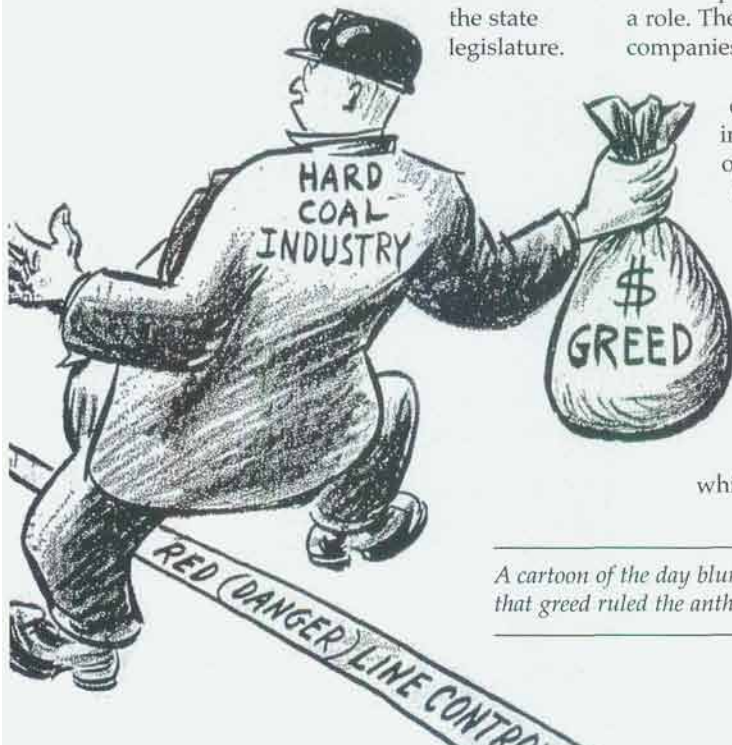
and thereby lessening its chances for conflict with a historically militant work force. The Pennsylvania Coal Company emerged as a leading proponent of the system and eventually leased all of its mines, including several to alleged members of organized crime. With the inauguration of the mine lease system, a new era in coal mining had begun, one where safety became less important than production and where widespread corruption encouraged illegal mining, bogus inspections, kickbacks for leases, and criminal conspiracy.

Despite a decline that had begun in the twenties, the anthracite industry still commanded a large share of the local economy. One estimate of the 1959 disaster's impact put the direct and indirect job loss at seventy-five hundred and the payroll deprivation at thirty-two million dollars.

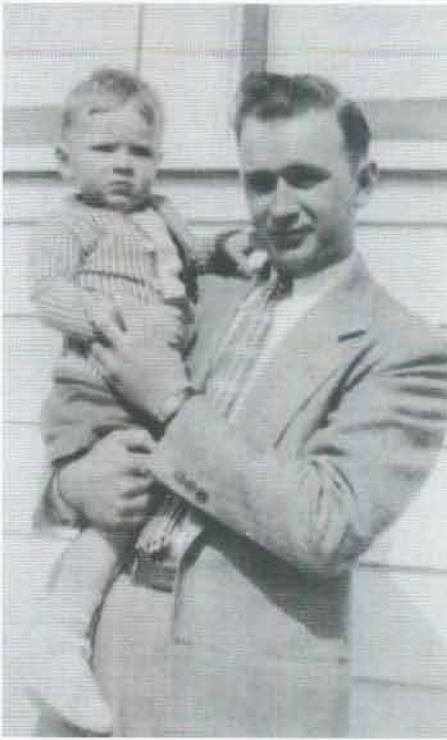
Notwithstanding the loss of the northern coal field's middle portion, deep mining continued into the early 1970s in the northernmost reaches above Scranton and in the southernmost areas below Wilkes-Barre. Yet, the Knox Mine Disaster marked the beginning of the end of an era. The high cost of removing water, coupled with anthracite's declining competitive position, eventually ended deep mining throughout the northern coal field and, indeed, much of the region.

The Knox Mine Disaster remains an important part of the coal region's history and culture. Its legacies are many. On the state level, changes in mine laws followed, including heightened restrictions on mining under waterways. In the region, the legacy includes remembrances of a dozen victims, as well as vivid recollections of grieving families and crowds huddled along the banks of the Susquehanna River; of wet and exhausted miners climbing out of the earth, one after the other, as family members welcomed each with tears of relief; of gondolas and mine cars being heaved into the whirlpool and swallowed like toys; of strong community support for grieving families; and of unyielding anger over the human causes—the greed, risk-taking, and corruption that had permeated the Knox Coal Company and much of the anthracite industry. One victim's daughter epitomized the local sentiment when she said, "I feel that they should call it the Knox Mine Murders."

The tragedy is commemorated at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Port Griffith with a monument recording the names of the victims, and by a mass each year in which survivors and victims' families



A cartoon of the day bluntly suggested that greed ruled the anthracite industry.



Laborer Dan Stefanides (above, left, with son) and co-worker Willie Sinclair tried to follow another miner to safety, but were unable to fight the powerful, bone-chilling current, and perished. Stefanides' widow and young family (above, right) were left to grieve his loss.

participate. Local newspapers carry anniversary stories, usually punctuated by interviews and accompanied by legendary photographs. In 1996, Luzerne County Community College devoted an entire afternoon of its annual regional history conference to a panel discussion of the catastrophe. To preserve the living memory of the event, more than fifty oral history interviews have been conducted with survivors, victims' families, former Knox Coal Company employees, prosecution and defense attorneys, and even a few reputed members of organized crime. This year the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum at Scranton, administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, is installing an exhibit commemorating the event's fortieth anniversary which will run through 1999.

Major disasters rarely have happy endings. No doubt the anthracite region's efforts to understand and reconcile the causes and consequences of the epoch-ending Knox Mine Disaster will continue well into the future. ❖

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Kenneth C. Wolensky is a Wyoming Valley native and a graduate of College Misericordia, the University of Delaware, and the Pennsylvania State University. He is a member of the PHMC's history division.

The Wolenskys' interest in anthracite mining began with their father, Nicholas, who worked for a lessee coal company in Swoyersville, Luzerne County. The brothers are finishing work on a book about the 1959 Knox Mine Disaster, which will be published by the University of Illinois Press.

FOR FURTHER READING

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