

ROSSLAND WEEKLY MINER.

Per Year \$2.50.

ROSSLAND, B. C., THURSDAY, MAY 29, 1902

Seventh Year, Number 31

THE FERNIE DISASTER



Explosion at the Coal Creek Mines at Fernie Causes the Death of From 125 to 150 Men—First Intimation Which Those on the Outside Had of the Disaster Was a Rush of Coal Dust and a Column of Fire Which Rose 1000 Feet Above the Fan—Several Days Before All the Bodies Will Be Recovered—Heart-Rending Scenes—Many Acts of Bravery—Relief Parties Were at Work Inside of Twelve Minutes From the Time the Accident Occurred—The Body of Willie Robertson Was the First One Taken Out

FERNIE, B. C., May 23.—One of the worst coal mining disasters in the history of British Columbia occurred at the Coal Creek mines at 7 o'clock last night, when from 125 to 150 men met almost instant death in mines Nos. 2 and 3. The explosion occurred in the depths of No. 2, and not a man of over 100 employed in that mine escaped to tell the tale. From No. 3 workings, which are connected with No. 2, about 21 men escaped.

COAL DUST AND FIRE.
The first intimation of the disaster which those on the outside received was a rush of coal dust and fire to the height of over 1000 feet above the fan. Word was immediately sent to Fernie, five miles from the mines, and inside of 12 minutes from the time the accident occurred relief parties were at work. R. Drennan, Dr. Bonnel and True Weatherly were the first to enter the mine. When about 500 feet into the workings Drennan was overcome by afterdamp, and had it not been

THOSE WHO ESCAPED.

C. Burrows, James Baker, P. McNeil, C. Dunlop, A. Farquharson, James Carr, James Dobie, John Sharp, H. Monahan, H. Salter and a number of foreigners.

ACTS OF BRAVERY.

Many acts of bravery were witnessed during the night. The heroic work of a miner named True Weatherly, who time and again entered the pit where men were falling all around him, was particularly noticeable. So far only ten bodies have been taken from the mine and several days will elapse before all are recovered. The dead so far recovered are:

DEAD RECOVERED.

Steve Morgan, Joe Saugala, Willie Robertson, Victor Johnson, John Leander, Frank Salter, John McLeod, T. Fearful, Thomas Johnson, and a miner whose name is unknown. The mine is free from fire and the bodies will be removed as fast as the afterdamp is cleared from the mine.

WORKING FOUR-HOUR SHIFTS.

The rescuing parties are working four-hour shifts and the company are doing all in their power to assist in the work. General Superintendent Stocket and Superintendent Drennan have been on the scene ever since the accident, and are doing all in their power for the comfort of the men who are working.

TOWN HORROR STRICKEN.

The town is horror-stricken and heartrending scenes meet the eye on every side. All day the trains to the mines have been crowded with anxious friends and relatives of the imprisoned men, hurrying to the scene of the disaster.

FOR RELIEF FUND.

A meeting of the board of trade has been called for tonight to organize a relief fund for the sufferers. The cause of the accident is unknown, but the opinion of many of the miners is that it was the result of a heavy shot from one of the machines.

EMPLOY NEARLY 1000 MEN.

No explanation has yet been made as to the cause of the explosion. The Crow's Nest mines, in which the explosion occurred, are situated on Coal Creek, six miles from Fernie, having immediate connection with the town by rail and telephone. There are three working seams at Coal Creek which have been extensively developed and which gave employment to nearly 1000 men. Many nationalities are represented by the working force at the mine, the Slav element being predominant, although Scandinavians, Italians, English and Welsh miners are well represented.

THE MINES ARE WORKED FROM LEVELS.

There is no ascending or descending in cages. The ventilation of the mine and removal of inflammable gases was carefully looked after by the management, the most modern system of ventilating plants having been installed. This is the worst fatality that has ever occurred in Southeast Kootenay.

APPALLING CATASTROPHE.

(Special to the Miner.)
FERNIE, B. C., May 23.—A most appalling catastrophe was enacted about 7:15 p. m. Thursday, May 22nd, at the mines situated on the banks of Coal Creek, at Fernie, in which between 125 and 200 miners were literally wiped out of existence. All night long crowds of frenzied mothers, wives, sons and

PROMPT RELIEF IS OFFERED

Early yesterday morning Mayor Clute became aware of the frightful catastrophe that had overtaken the sister city of Fernie, and promptly took occasion to extend sincere condolences, coupled with a hearty offer of every relief that the corporation of Rossland could extend.

A reply was not received up to an early hour, but it is likely that a request of some nature will be forthcoming. The death of so many miners must of necessity create great suffering, and financial assistance will probably be timely. This will be dealt with by a special meeting of the council, if necessary.

CHURCHES HELP.

At the evening service in St. George's Anglican church yesterday a collection was taken in aid of the Fernie sufferers. This is an indication of the deep feeling existent in Rossland and the very general disposition on the part of all to come to the assistance of the scores of families left without support by the terrible calamity that has befallen the sister mining town. Other churches are likely to take the same steps, in addition to which the congregations as individuals will appear on the subscription lists to be opened today.

NO LIST YET.

The excitement is so great and such confusion prevails that it is impossible to gain a list of the ill-fated miners, and as the work of recovering the dead is accomplished under great difficulty, it may be several days before the mountain gives up its dead.

NONE ALIVE.

There is no hope that there is any alive in the workings who were into work before the explosion. As fast as the bodies are taken from the mine they are wrapped in shrouds and taken to Christ Church, which has been turned into a morgue for the time being. The relatives are removing their dead and the fraternal societies are busy with their deceased members.

LIST OF DEAD.

The following is the list of the dead taken up to the time of writing: Steve Morgan, Joseph Saugala, Willie Robertson, G. Johnson, John Leander, unknown Italian, Thomas Johnson, Thomas Fearful, Sr., John R. McLeod, Frank Salter, W. H. Brerley, Joe Tuka, John Korman, Ronald Jones, Walter Wright, Andrew Cartledge, Thomas Glover, James Howett, Owen Holmes, William Ferguson, M. J. Fleming, Sam Hand, Thomas Stephens, James McIntyre, Harry Wilson, George Housby, Tony Matzeo, William Neace, William McPhail, John Zeonik, Thomas Fearful, Jr., Joseph Welch, Antonio Frederico, J. Walsh, Amos Buck, George Barber.

SCENES ARE TERRIBLE.

The scenes attending the disaster are terrible and some most sorrowful circumstances are revealed. Two young lads who were employed to operate the doors intended to quit the town with their parents and miner buried his wife last night and left seven small children to seek work in Fernie. He and his wife were in the town when the disaster struck and he is now en route and still in his shroud. A miner named Fleming arrived this week from Montana with his wife. He went into the mine last night to work his first shift and his first was the last.

MANY DESTITUTE.

Many miners were killed who have left families almost destitute, and some sons were killed who were the sole support of widowed mothers. A great gloom has settled down over the town, and the enormity of the calamity is just beginning to dawn in the minds of the people, and the burial of the dead will bring into one great gathering all people to pay their last sad tribute to those whose end was so sudden and fearful.

(Special to the Miner.)

FERNIE, B. C., May 24.—This was a day of funerals in Fernie and one which will long be remembered. The arrangements were well systematized. As the bodies of the victims were taken from the mine they were made presentable in the company's wash house, and as each shift of the rescuers was relieved the bodies were loaded on the train and brought into Fernie. At the depot, in many instances, the bereaved were waiting to claim their dead and in such instances the bodies were taken to the homes, but in the majority of cases the relatives had no knowledge that the bodies were on the train, which made round trips every four hours, and the bodies were taken to the Church of England, which was

THE LOTTERY OF LIFE.

The scenes which presented themselves in front of the offices of the coal company were heartrending in the extreme. For hour upon hour a throng of anxious people were gathered around the windows of the company waiting expectantly for the notice of the death of a father, a brother, a son or a friend. There was no greater chance for them in the lottery of life, since hope for any of the unfortunates imprisoned in the mine was long since dead. They waited around the windows hour after hour for the posting of the names when they brought in the list of the bodies recovered. It was a strange throng in many respects. It was a throng of individuals met for a single purpose, and yet it was rare that a word was exchanged. It was a throng more solemn than even its garb of black would suggest. As names after name of the victims recovered and identified was posted in the windows there was noticed a movement in the anxious mass of humanity, and two or three would work their way out, but

MAKING THE MINE SAFE.

At the mine itself the active work of recovering the bodies has been for the time suspended, and all energy is being expended along the line of making the mine safe for the rescuers. The gas is clearing, but the force of the explosion is now seen to be almost insupportable. The roof in some places has been fearfully shattered, and to such an extent that it would now be nothing but foolhardiness for the rescuers to remain long in the mine without taking necessary precautions for their own safety. Lack of air is greatly impeding the work of the rescuers. It is possible to go into the mine for a considerable distance now, and in the No. 2 the rescuers can see a number of the victims, but it will be days in some instances before the rescue party can work around to them.

KILLED BY CONCUSSION.

The men in the No. 2 mine were evidently killed by concussion from the explosion. The bodies so far as can be seen do not appear to have been mutilated, and in the majority of instances there is nothing in their position to even suggest that their lives have been snuffed out, but not one of the entire crew in the mine escaped except the motorman, who fortunately was out when the explosion occurred.

SUPPOSED CAUSE OF EXPLOSION.

Opinions as to the cause of the explosion differ widely, but one that is generally offered by the miners themselves is, that it was caused by the drilling machine hole close to the "rib." When this is done the black powder has not sufficient chance to expand and not infrequently catches fire. It is said that experiences of this kind have been had before and that difficulty was experienced in getting the fire out. It is now thought, in view of the position in which a number of the bodies taken out were found, that W. F. Brearly, the fire boss, had endeavored after the explosion to get as many men together as possible and effect an escape. Where Brearly's body was found there were some sixteen others. They were all overtaken with the damp and died together without a tremor.

NINE ADDITIONAL BODIES.

Nine additional bodies were taken from the mine today, making 49 in all that have been recovered. Those identified were: EDGAR REID, JOE PETER, JAS. FLOA, PHILIP CHRODA, ANDREW PESTECK, JOHN D. RAVETT, RENNIE M. M'ILLAN, JOHN HALLEY, and an Italian who has not been identified.

LOSS WILL BE HEAVY.

The loss of the coal company by reason of the crowd did not diminish. There were even yet too many unfortunates buried in the great death trap upon the hill for the posting of a few names to cause any diminution in the gathering, whose only hope was that what remained of those who were most dear to them should be yielded up to them for burial.

SUBSCRIPTIONS AGGREGATE \$4000.

A meeting of the committee was held this evening at which it was reported that subscriptions aggregating \$4000 had been received for the relief of the sufferers. This amount, while commendable in the short time that has intervened since the call was first issued, will fall far short of the requirements, as fully 50 per cent of the victims of the disaster are men of families.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS.

Of the contributors the principal sum far is the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, which has responded with a check for \$3000. Other names which appear in the list are Hon. Clifford Sifton for \$250; E. C. Smith, M. P. \$200; W. W. Tuttle of Fernie, \$100; Nelson Daily News, \$100; L. M. Proctor, \$100; A. McDougall, \$100; William Eschag, \$100.

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(Continued on page eight.)

HEADS THE LIST.

The first of the labor organizations represented in Rossland to take steps toward extending practical sympathy to the Fernie sufferers is Rossland Typographical Union No. 335. At the regular meeting of the union yesterday a resolution was carried authorizing Secretary J. P. Barkdoll to devote \$25 of the union's funds toward the local relief movement. The types thus have the distinction in leading off in a course which will be generally followed by sister unions throughout the district.

VOLUNTEERS CALLED FOR.

Volunteers were called for and a score of brave men sprang to the work and for nearly six hours this policy was pursued with tireless energy. Every few minutes the men would collapse and were borne to the outer air, and their places were quickly filled by new volunteers.

WILLIE ROBERTSON, LAD OF 13.

The first body recovered was taken from No. 3 mine about 11 o'clock, and was that of Willie Robertson, a lad of 13. Several hours elapsed and then three more bodies were recovered. None of the victims gave the slightest signs of life and were removed to the wash house.

GAS BECAME UNBEARABLE.

At 4 a. m. the relief parties had penetrated so far that the gas became unbearable, and operations had to be suspended for an hour or two in order to let the mine clear of the afterdamp. Among those who escaped from No. 3 mine were:

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A GRACEFUL ACT.

That Rossland's big mining companies propose to take an active part in extending assistance to Fernie sufferers along with other citizens and corporations is indicated by the prompt and graceful manner in which the Le Roi No. 2, Limited, took up the question. On Victoria Day the following communication was placed in the hands of Mayor Clute:

Rossland, B. C., May 24, 1902.

Hon. J. Stillwell Clute, Mayor, Rossland.

Dear Sir: In view of the awful disaster that has befallen the miners of our neighboring camp of Fernie, leaving scores of widows and orphans to face life unprovided for and unprotected, the people of this city, in addition to their deep sympathy, will doubtless wish to extend material aid to those who are thus forced to continue life without the care and help of their natural protectors.

The two directors of this company—Messrs. Haggard and Dickinson—who happen to be in Rossland at this time, have expressed the desire that their company should officially tender its sympathy to the bereaved and participate in any public subscription that may be taken up for the purpose above referred to. Respectfully yours,

(Signed) BERNARD MACDONALD,
General Manager Le Roi No. 2, Limited.

DAUGHTERS LINED THE TRACKS.

Daughters lined the tracks and treated work at the mouth of the mines, and scenes of the most heartrending nature took place, the grief and despair witnessed during the awful tragedy under the feet of the multitude. In all about 210 miners marched in to work their shift, the larger proportion going down to labor in the workings of No. 3 tunnel, while a number went to dig their coal in No. 2 tunnel. The news of the No. 2 and No. 3 mines have

under the fan forced the whole unit air to be forced through the whole system. The tunnel is connected by an air shaft to a fan of mammoth proportions some distance from the mouth of the mine. Just as the dusk of evening was settling down over the noise and bustle of the busy camp the roof of the building in which the fan is enclosed suddenly shot into the air and like a rocket travelled upward to a height of several hundred feet. Immediately after, the mouth of both tunnels vomited an immense cloud of blinding dust and gases.

STRANGE COINCIDENCE.

This was the first intimation that anything unusual had taken place inside the mine. The people who rushed to the mouth of the mine were astounded by the great rush out from No. 2 tunnel blinded with dust and all but dead. These men came out after the explosion, but not one can tell how he got out nor can they tell what took place in their particular places. From No. 3 tunnel, in which all the men were at work, not one man emerged alive.

RELIEF PARTIES ORGANIZED.

Immediately after the explosion relief parties were organized and an effort was made to investigate the interior, but the great difficulty was experienced in doing anything at all for although, strange to say, the big fan was still pumping air into the slopes, the terrific concussion had almost completely wrecked the mine, and piles of fallen rock, coal, timbers, and air farther and farther in, and as the day came on the awful work was demonstrated in the dead bodies of the men who were carried out by the search parties.

A TREMENDOUS CANNON.

Your correspondent was early on the scene, and after going into the mine and seeing the condition of the dead to nothing more than a tremendous cannon. The tunnel was the barrel, the explosive dust and gases was the powder and the rocks and coal formed the ammunition. When the discharge burst from the mine it blew the roof off the trestle, and all timbers in the path of the blast were splintered, and pieces of flying rock were deeply imbedded in the solid woodwork.

FRIGHTFULLY MANGLED.

The dead bodies were most frightfully mangled and appear to have been shot to death by flying pieces of rock and coal, and several have not an unbroken bone in their person. The majority of their faces are terrible to look upon,

BY INNINGS.

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SUMMARY.

Rossland, 5; Nelson, 0.—
Vaughan (2), Three on. Stolen bases—Holteary, Gibson, Worth, Eacrett. Struck out—by A. McDonald, 5. Hit by pitched ball—Eases on Balls—By McDonald, 3. Sacrifices—A. McDonald, Double on to Gibson; Vaughn. Time of game—Two hours—Doherty. Official

DRUCK OIL.

G., May 20.—A notable gas was struck on the near here. Pressure is being to lift a sinker bar pounds.

WAS IT DANGEROUS?

Have the Fernie coal miners been in dread for a year past of a calamity such as has overtaken them? There are a number of coal miners in Rossland, several of whom are ex-employees of the Crow's Nest Coal company, who unhesitatingly state this to be a fact. Other citizens who have been in Fernie in the past 12 months bear witness to the assertion that a disaster of some description has been predicted at the East Kootenay coal mines for a year. It is barely a twelvemonth since an explosion of fire damp took place in the mines, and the government inspector of mines took action at that time to remedy some of the evils of bad ventilation. Ever since that time, the Miner is informed, the coal miners of Fernie have looked for further and more aggravated explosions, but, of course, nothing equal in magnitude to what actually occurred was expected. The statement is made that the mines were continually full of fire damp, and that the miners believed this would eventually lead to trouble.

The Rossland men who have worked in the mines believe that the real explanation of the disaster is that the fire damp was ignited by the flash following a heavy shot in one of the stopes, but as the facts will never be known for obvious reasons, this can only be surmise.

The statement is made that more than one Rosslander has been offered a post of responsibility about the underground workings of the Fernie mines, but has declined owing to the hazard referred to above.