

119 Souls: The Benwood Mine Disaster of 1924



In April, 1924:

Adolf Hitler - Beer Hall
Putsch

Frank Capone killed

First book of crossword
puzzles

The Dawes Plan

Tornados killed 110 people

Marlon Brando (3rd)

Gil Hodges (4th)

Henry Mancini (16th)

President Calvin Coolidge

Pope Pius XI was Pope...

In April, 1924:

Adolf Hitler was found guilty of treason in the Beer Hall Putsch and sentenced to five years in prison...

Frank Capone, age 28, Chicago mobster and older brother of Al Capone, was shot and killed by police...

The first book of crossword puzzles was published...

The Dawes Plan to reorganize the German economy and restructure reparation payments was initiated...

A series of tornados killed 110 people across the southern US...

Actor Marlon Brando (3rd); baseball all star Gil Hodges (4th); and musician Henry Mancini (16th) were all born...

Calvin Coolidge was the US President...

And Pius XI was Pope...



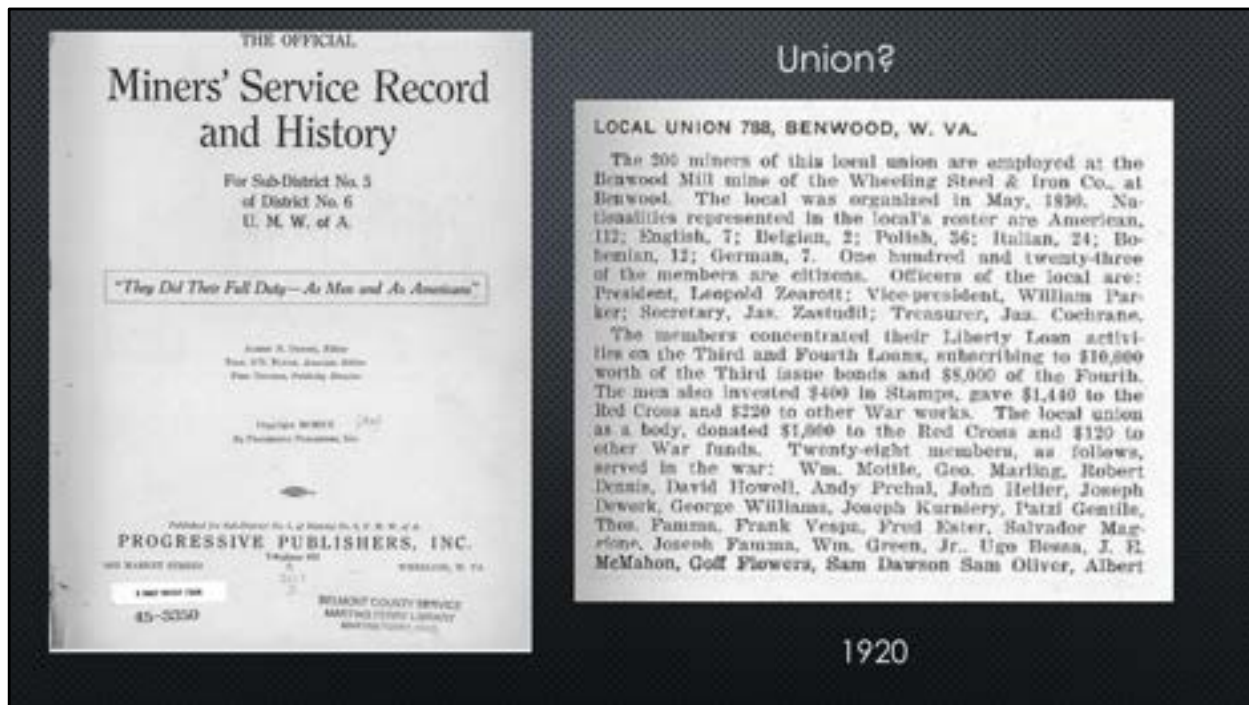
By 1924, Wheeling Steel Corporation was the biggest employer in the Upper Ohio Valley in 1924—a massive merger (in 1920) of several companies...



including nail works, corrugating, blast furnaces, open-hearth works, tinplate mills, tube works, skelp mills, sheet and fabricating mills, nail mills, and, of course, coal mines to fuel everything.

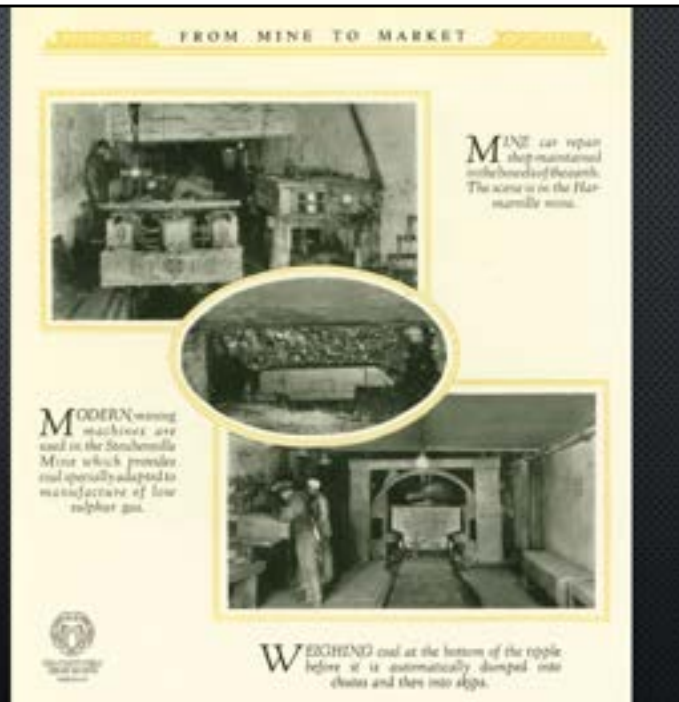


In the southern WV Coal Fields, the largest labor uprising in American history and the largest armed uprising since the American Civil War, **Battle of Blair Mountain**, had ended in defeat for coal miners and the United Mine Workers of America in September, 1921...

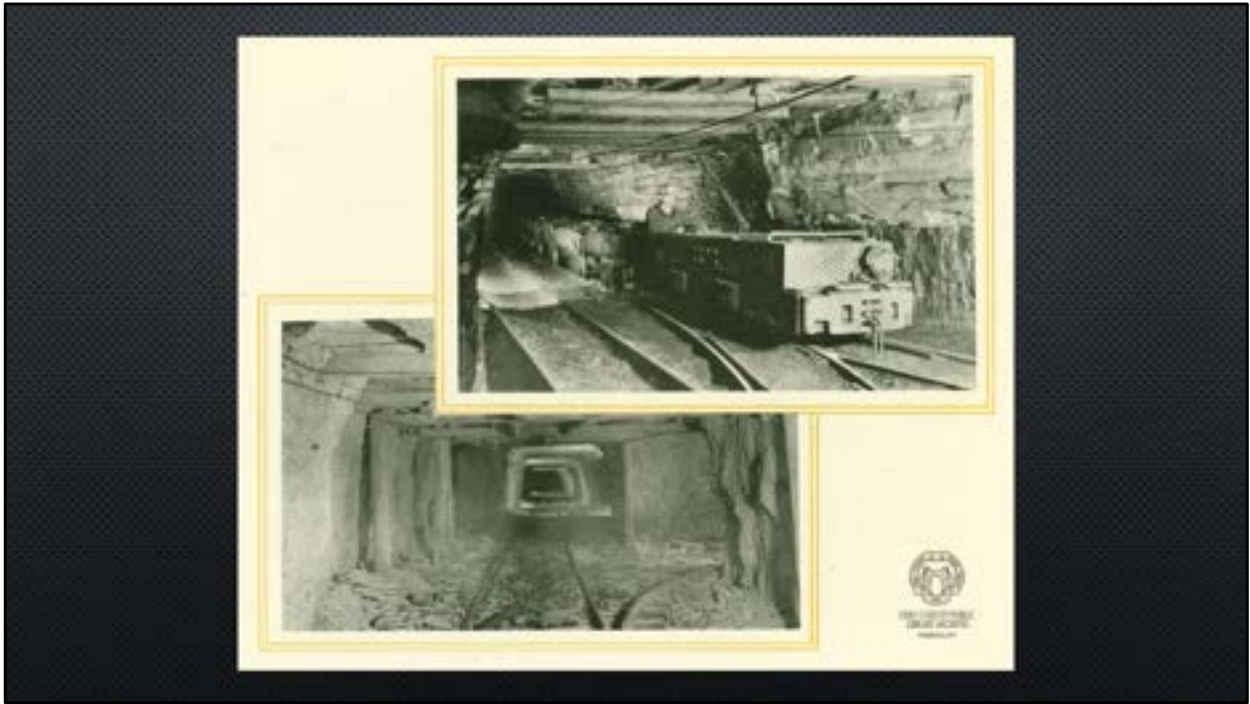


The United Mine Workers union was badly weakened, even in the northern panhandle where it had been prospering in Benwood just 4 years earlier in 1920, as we can see from this publication. But as we'll see, there's little to no mention of the union during the disaster.

From Mine to Market : the facilities and scope of steel manufacture of the Wheeling steel corporation of Wheeling - West Virginia, published by The Wheeling Steel Corporation, 1926.



What did coal mining look like in that era? These images of Wheeling Steel's corporate promotional publication, *From Mine to Market* (1926) *the facilities and scope of steel manufacture of the Wheeling steel corporation of Wheeling - West Virginia* provides some insights.



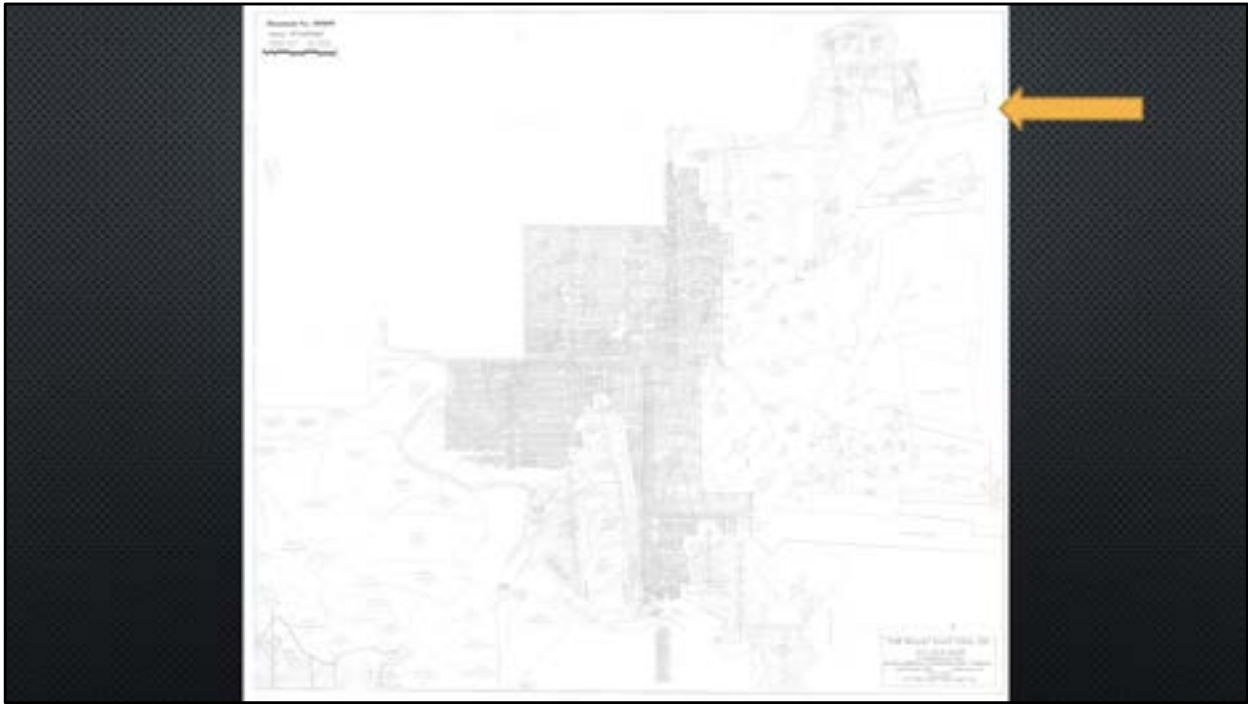
Here you see the motorized tracks and cars used to get miners to their work stations miles under the earth.



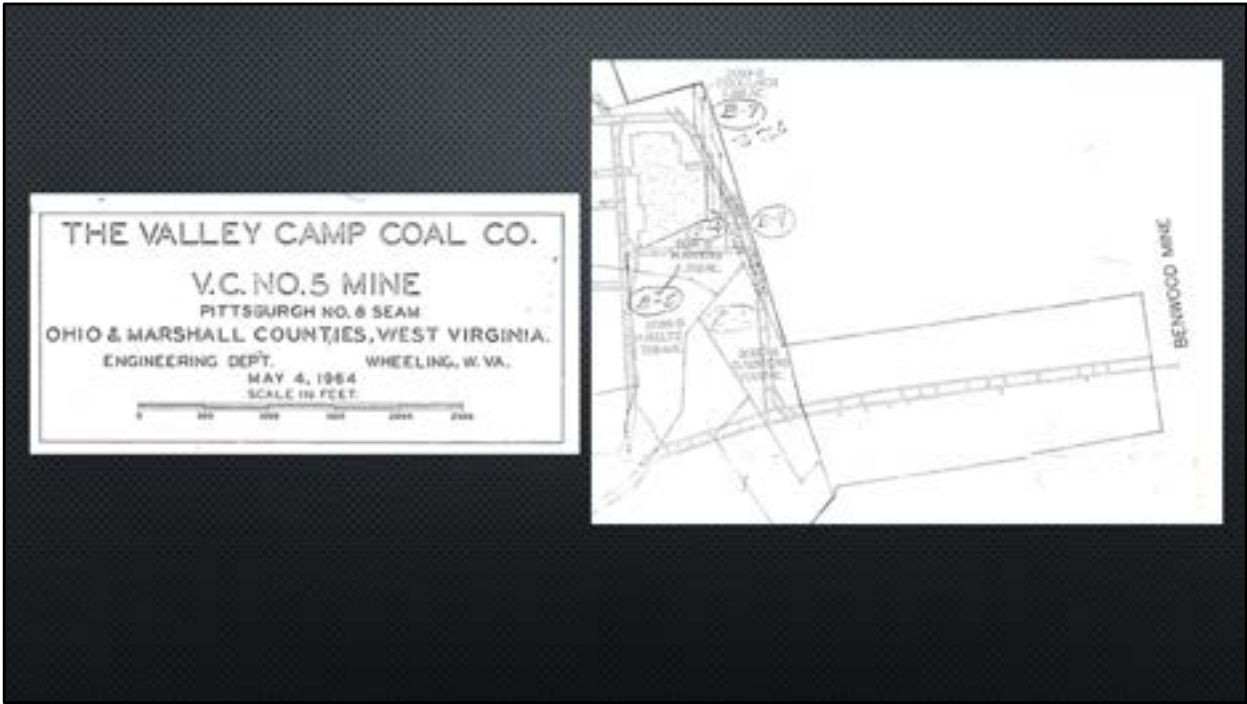
Here's a miner at work on a wall of coal. In Benwood this meant the Pittsburgh number 8 seam.



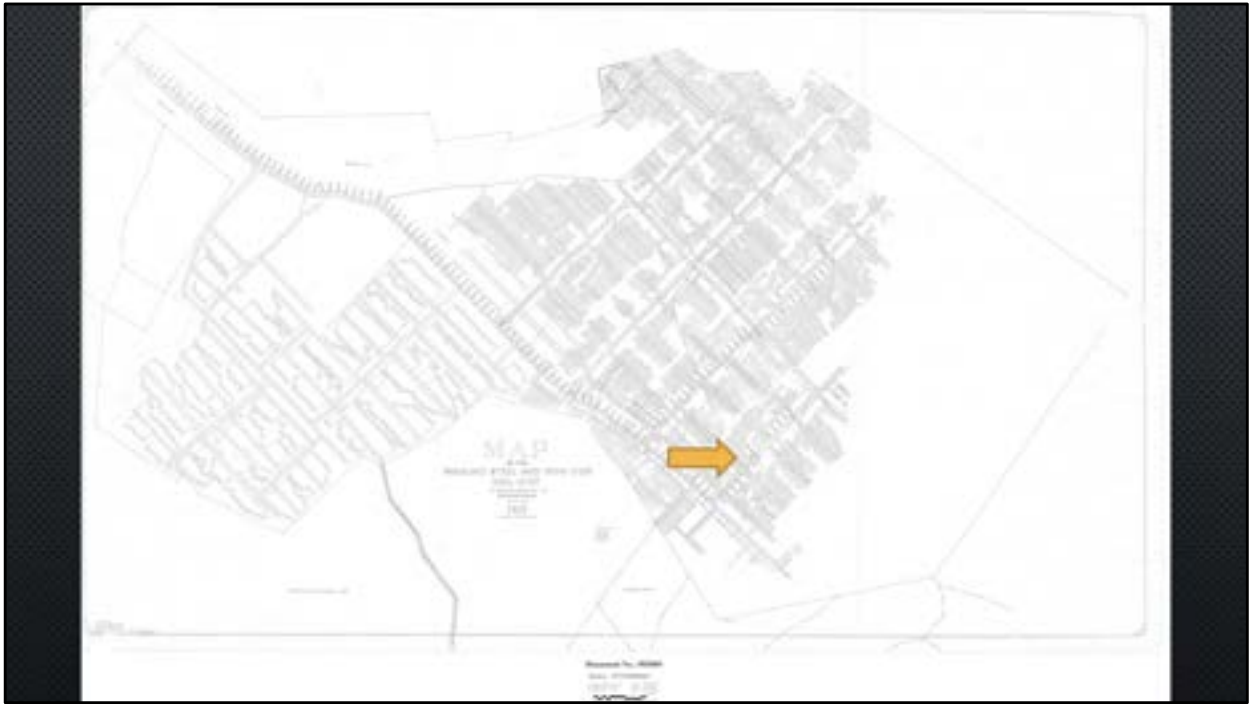
Here are 2 miners drilling the wall for blasting in Steubenville.



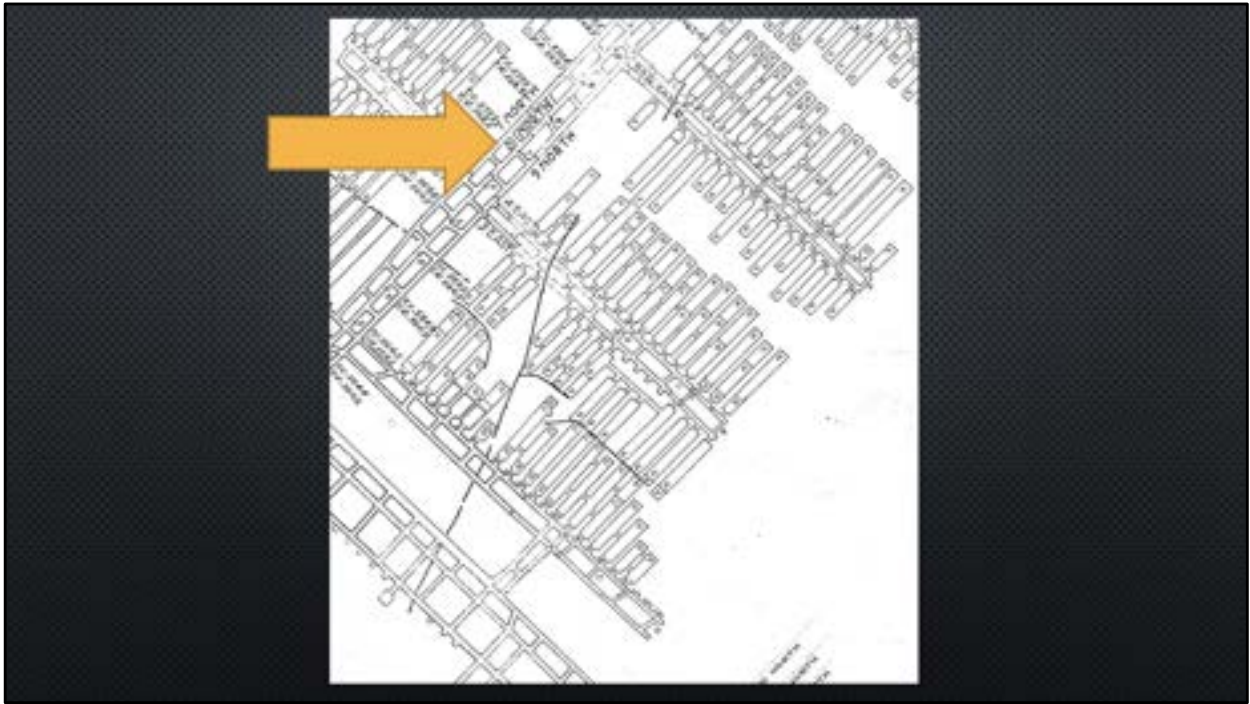
Though it's from 1964, this map really shows you the scale of the mining operation near Benwood. The entrance to the Benwood mine is way up here in the righthand corner.



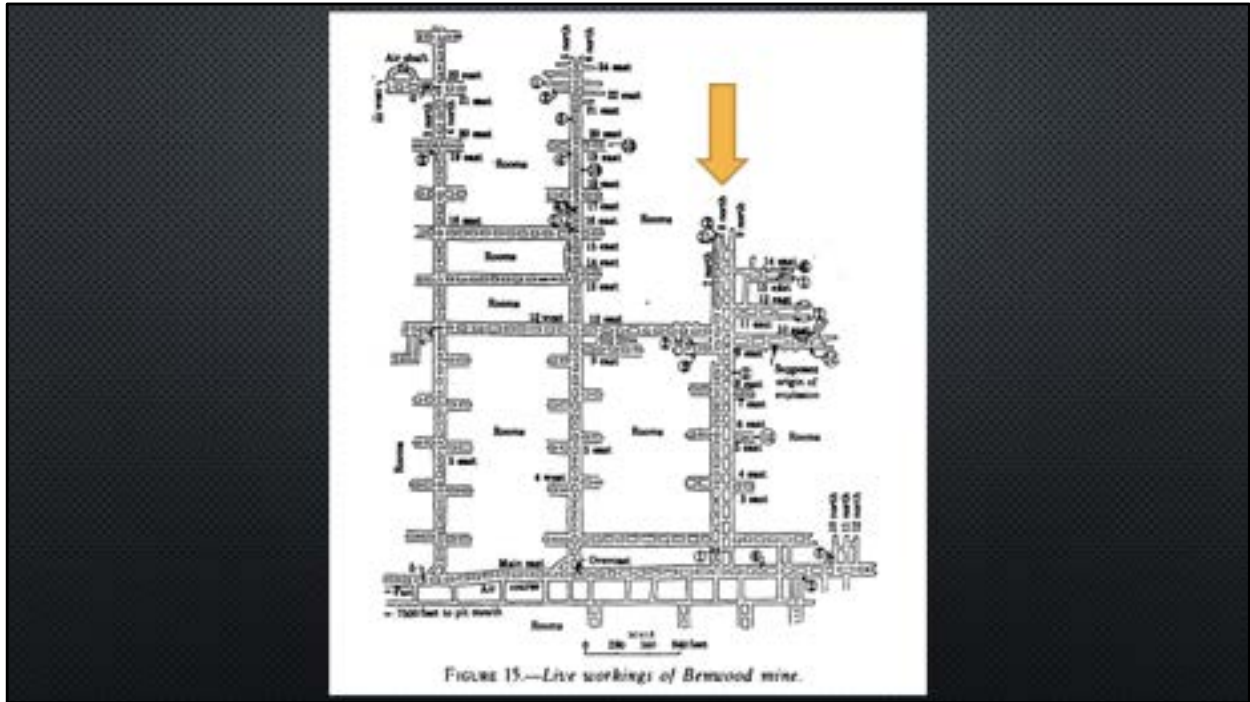
Here's a closeup of that entrance.



Here's an overview of the entire Wheeling Steel & Iron Co Coal Mine. The arrow shows you the 8 North section near where the major explosion will occur and most of the men were trapped.



Here's a closeup of 8 North.



Here's a map showing the rooms. This is from "COAL-MINING INVESTIGATIONS Under Auspices of CARNEGIE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, U. S. BUREAU OF MINES, AND ADVISORY BOARD OF COAL-MINE OPERATORS AND ENGINEERS," 1923.



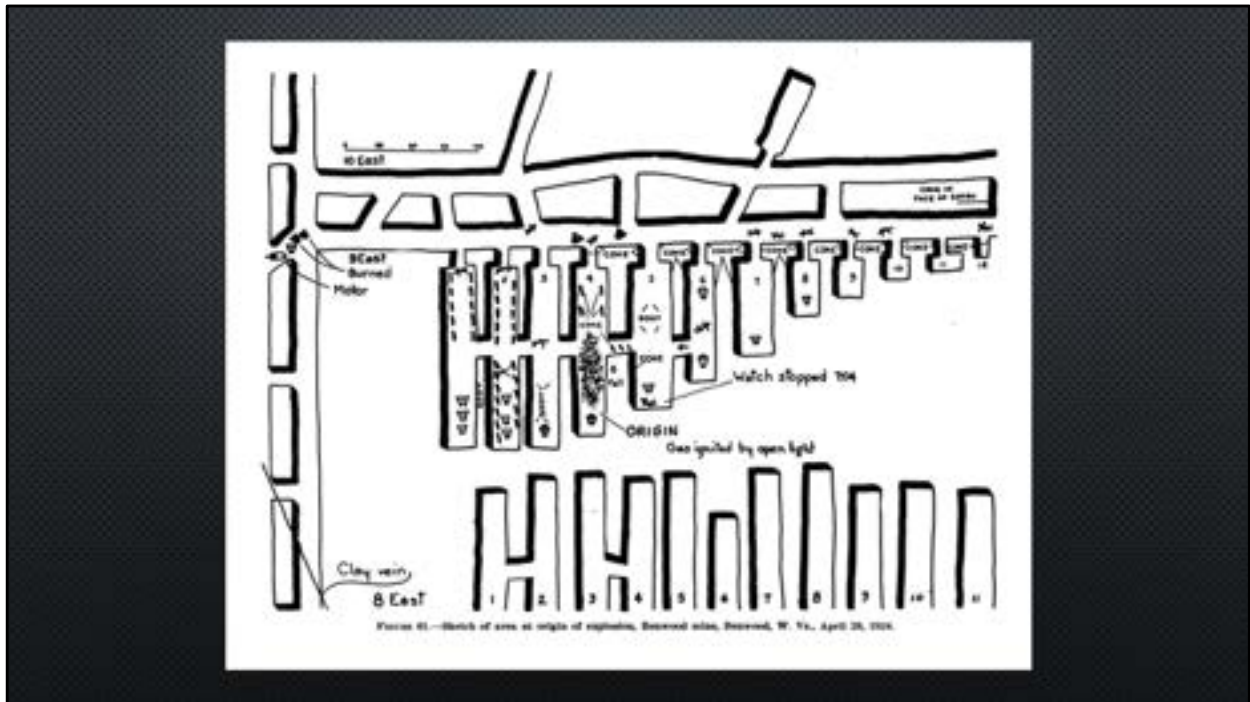
April 28, 1924 was a Monday. It was pouring rain in Benwood, West Virginia. The newspaper was full of stories on the upcoming election – for national, state, and district offices.



1-82-year old Albert Fortney, one of Wheeling's last working blacksmiths, was run down and killed by an automobile. The Pittsburgh Pirates with future hall-of-famer 3rd baseman Pie Traynor, were playing a series against the Chicago Cubs. 2-Members of the KKK attended church services in Elm Grove. 3-In Benwood, 22 year old Joseph Donovan died of appendicitis. 4-Steel production was on the decline, 5-as was coal.



At 6:30 AM – the Monday morning shift started at the coal mine operated by the Wheeling Steel & Iron Corporation in Benwood, a 60 year old, 3-entry, **room and pillar mine**, newly mechanized with nine electric mining machines. Men rode to their work stations on electric mining cars, taken miles underground on tracks.



As the federal mine bureau would later describe it, “The interior of the mine is really a big city, it is laid out with main streets and avenues and the cross streets running off the avenues... Running...the same direction as the main avenues, will be found the alleys and off these alleys will be found the working rooms in which many of the men were employed digging coal. The miniature railroad tracks run down these streets and avenues and back the cross streets.” Intell, May 2. But the mine had a questionable safety record. There had been a gas explosion a year prior that killed three people. An air shaft was added (a third entry at **Brown’s Run**—important to the story later). But ventilation remained an ongoing issue. The roof was known to be “weak and treacherous” with support timbers needed every two feet. As methane was thought to be low, the company still used **open safety lamps**, meaning that even a small fall of slate could trigger a methane explosion. Two fire bosses had supposedly checked each room at 3 am and “reported no gas in any section of the mine.” (Lambie’s report) The Intell reported that the fire boss bulletin board had been found near the entrance, marked “April 4-28-24 SAFE.” Signed JT Pyle (more about him later) Some of the miners had not gone through the proper check-in procedure. The miners were just getting their work sites, preparing to do their jobs, putting on overalls, etc. Some were still climbing out of the mine cars that brought them there. At 7:05 AM, about 35 minutes after the morning shift had entered the

mine, a pocket of methane gas exploded near the **8 North section of the mine**. The force of the explosion dislodged timber supports and caused numerous roof collapses. People felt the thud of the blast three blocks away and witnesses say white smoke and a “sheet of flame” shot from the mine entry (Intell). One miner’s watch was stopped at 7:04. This diagram is from "HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF COAL-MINE EXPLOSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES," BY H. B. HUMPHREY, 1959]. It shows where some of the bodies were found. Diggers used black powder for “**shooting**” the **coal face** then sprinkled water from a water car during coal extraction. (as we’ll see, black powder was not the safest explosive)



Coal dust trapped inside the mine was ignited, triggering a second, more devastating explosion, forcing a wall of fire through the shafts of the entire, poorly ventilated mine. The heavy mine timbers were shattered into splinters, allowing roof collapses everywhere. Men who weren't crushed by falling rock and debris from the force of the violent explosions were burned to death. Roof falls occurred in almost every section of the mine. But many were probably killed by **"Afterdamp,"** [or **"Firedamp"**] a deadly cocktail of toxic gases, primarily carbon monoxide, caused by the fire.



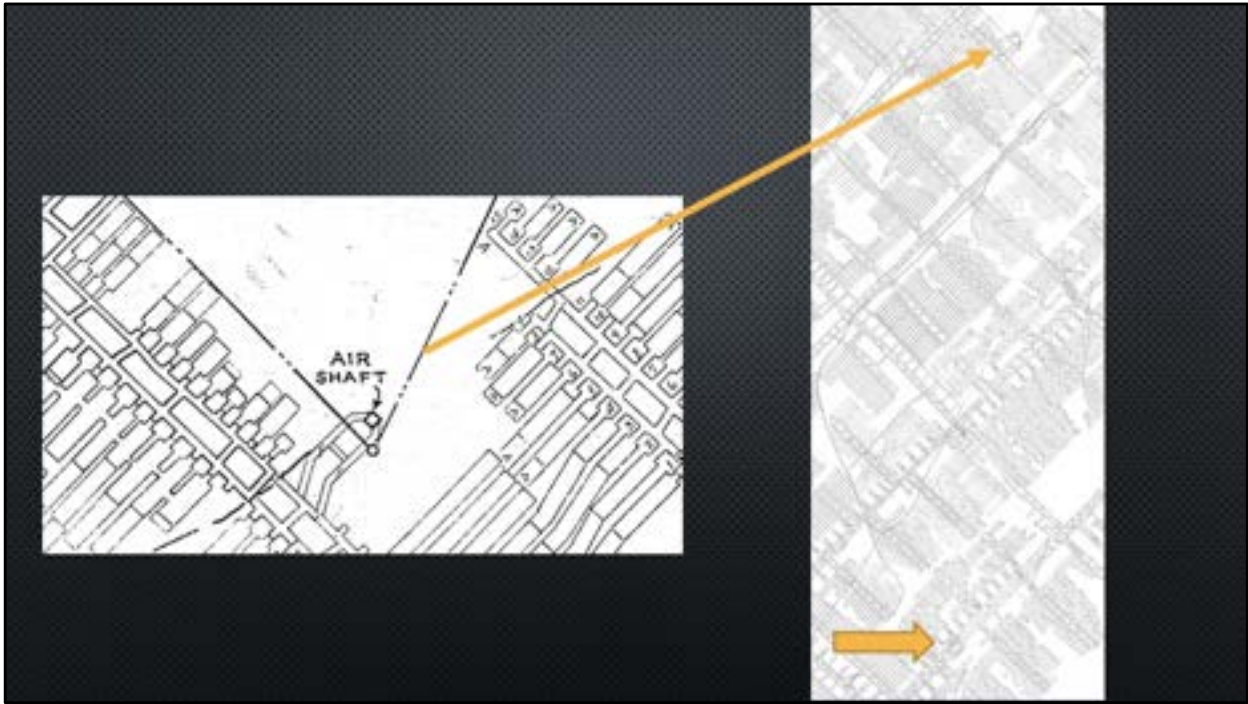
A number of dead miners were found with handkerchiefs or articles of clothing wrapped around their heads in failed attempts to block the afterdamp. The mine inspector later speculated that some might have survived had they been equipped even with simple gas masks.



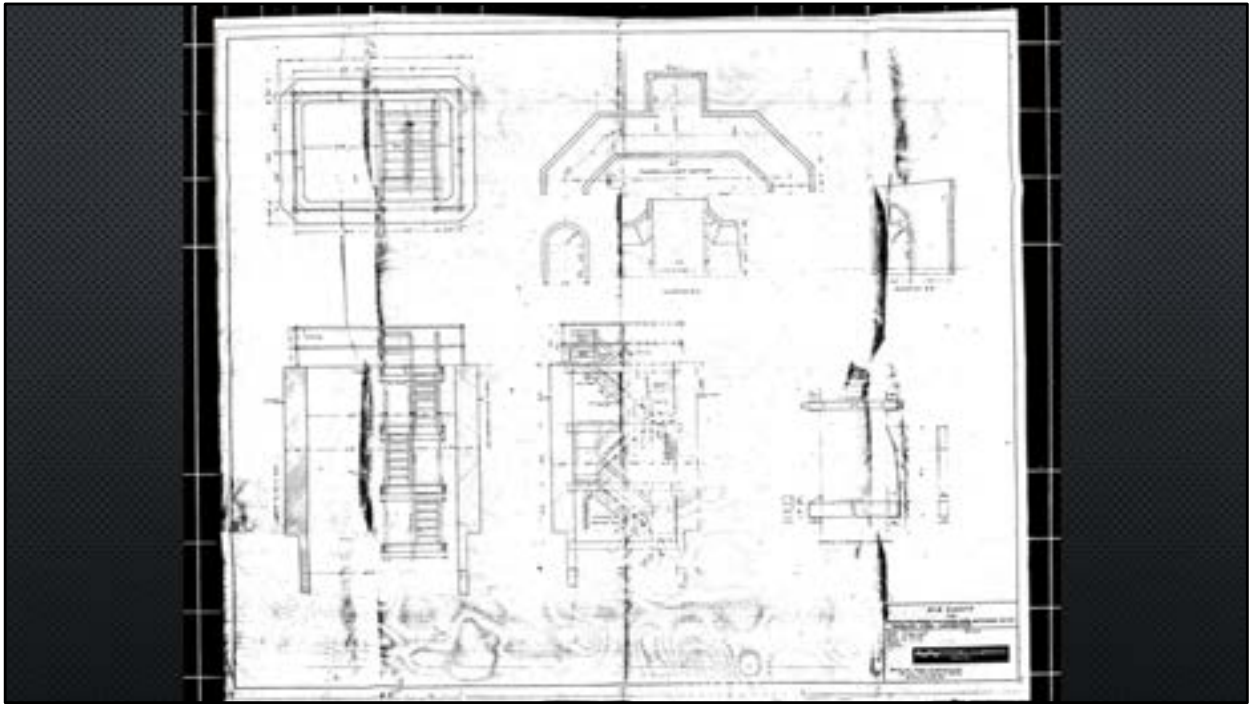
The poisonous afterdamp hindered the ensuing rescue effort, which was also slowed by a collapsed roof and fallen rock and debris.



Blockage near the main entrance and the secondary entrance forced the rescuers to shift their focus to the air shaft at Brown's Run-a mile from the main entry. Here again you see the overview of the whole mine. The air shaft is up here. And Section 8 North is way down here. It took several days for rescue teams to dig through the rubble and reach Section 8.



Here's a closer view of the air shaft on the map.



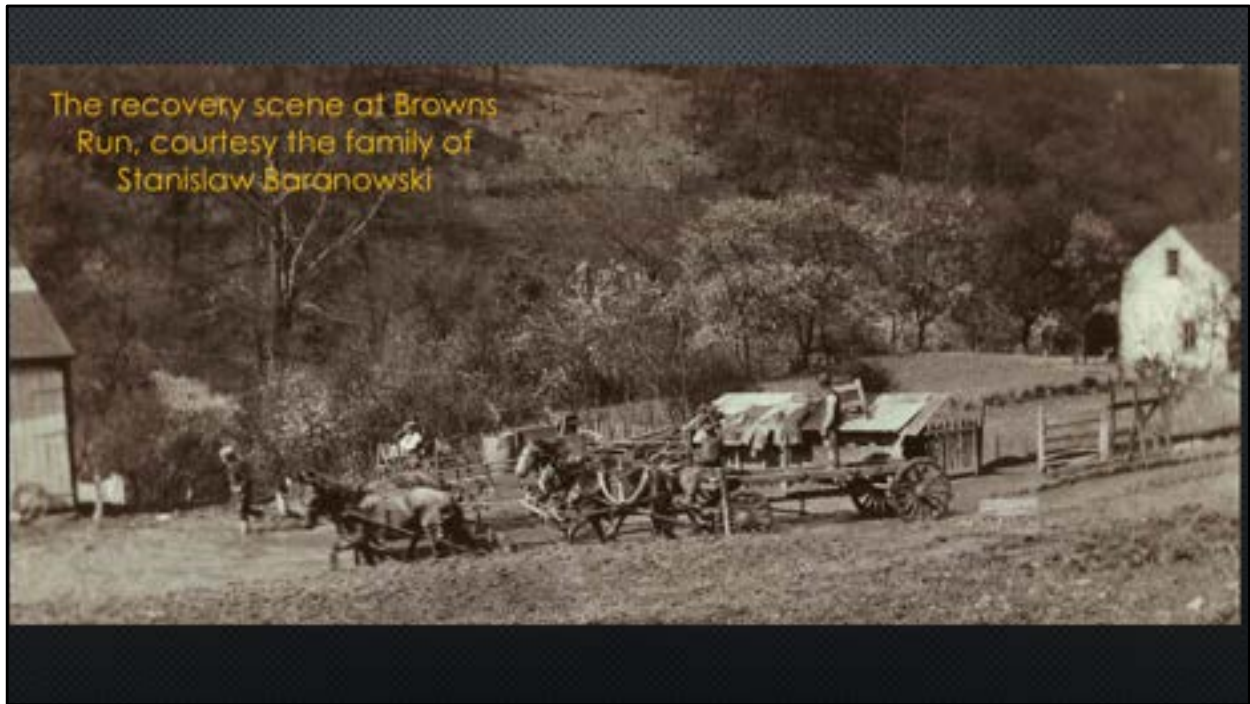
A spiral staircase repaired by carpenters allowed entry for rescuers. (Intell) You can see the staircase in this diagram.



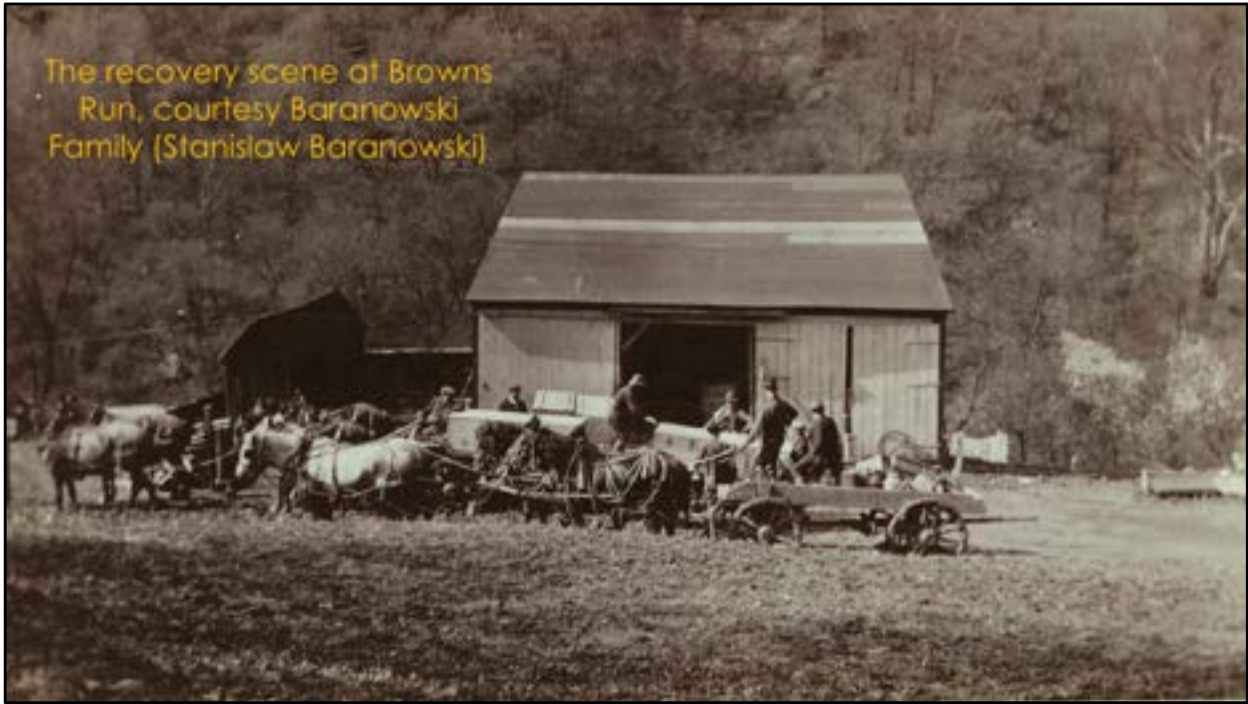
Above the air shaft, this makeshift rope and pulley system was constructed to lower supplies and hopefully, retrieve living victims. In the end, it only pulled up the dead bodies.



Would-be rescuers rushed to the scene from the nearby Hitchman Mine in Benwood, nearby Bellaire, OH, the Richland Mine (in Warwood), from Glen Dale Gas and Coal mine, and Williamson, WV, from Bridgeport, Steubenville, and Cincinnati, OH, from Pittsburgh, PA. The News-Reg reported a LaBelle mine rescue team on site. They were accompanied by John P. Wilson, superintendent of the LaBelle mine." Nurses from the Wheeling Chapter of American Red Cross and a number of Wheeling physicians were soon on hand, hoping, waiting to treat rescued miners.



The rain and mud made the 3 mile dirt road to Brown's Run shaft impossible for trucks. Automobiles that could no longer move, slid and blocked one side of the 3 mile road, making progress more difficult –more than a thousand (NR). Rescuers had to use horse drawn wagons, "old country" sleds drawn by horses, and tractors. You can see a horse drawn wagon in this image from the Baranowski family.



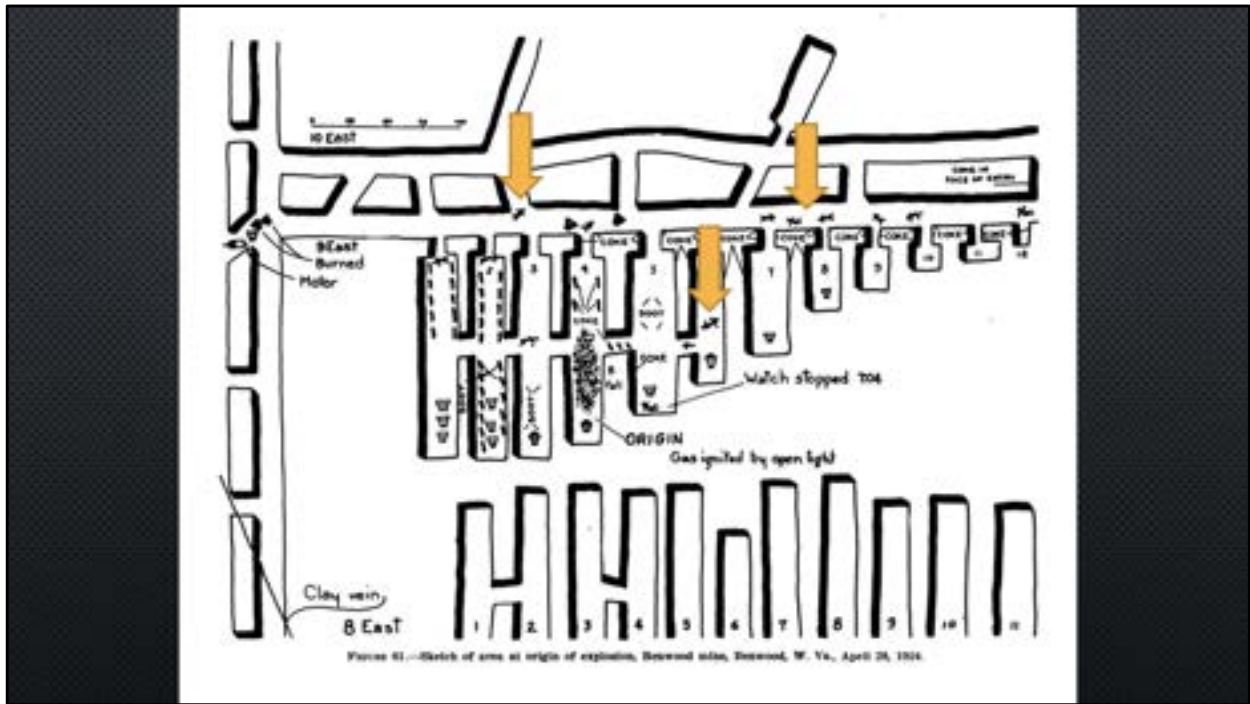
And in this one as well.



Rescuers worked in relay teams every 750 feet to pull stretchers over fallen rock and shattered mine timbers, and twisted steel track, through tight spaces. At least 50 Burrell All Service gas masks were used “and about 90 per cent of the work was done by men wearing them.” “self-contained oxygen breathing apparatus was used to explore places where it was thought the percentage of oxygen in the air was not sufficient to support life...Men wearing the gas mask penetrated distances as great as 125 feet beyond points at which the carbon monoxide content of the air killed canaries.” (Lambie) Canaries were taken into the mine to test for gas. (Intell) Several died. An old miner told the paper miners welcome rats because they will not live in a mine that is full of methane.



News-Reg: "There's no hope, I fear." Andy Wilson, captain of the LaBelle team gasped as he reached the top of the long winding stairway up the (Brown's Run) shaft. During the first few days, there was hope that some of the men who had not been burned to death or crushed by the explosion had barricaded themselves into old workings to escape the afterdamp. But would prove untrue. Dillon: "It took 8 men to carry one body." This indicates body parts. Hundreds of miners volunteered to help remove bodies, but only 35 were selected. (Intell)



“From the position of the bodies it appeared that most of the men had been stricken at the spot where they worked, first stunned by the terrific concussion of the explosion, and then suffocated by the after-damp.” (NR) According to Dillon, “one motorman had been found sitting at his controls on the motor, buried under an avalanche of slate.” **Looking again at the diagram, we can see the various spots where bodies were found.**

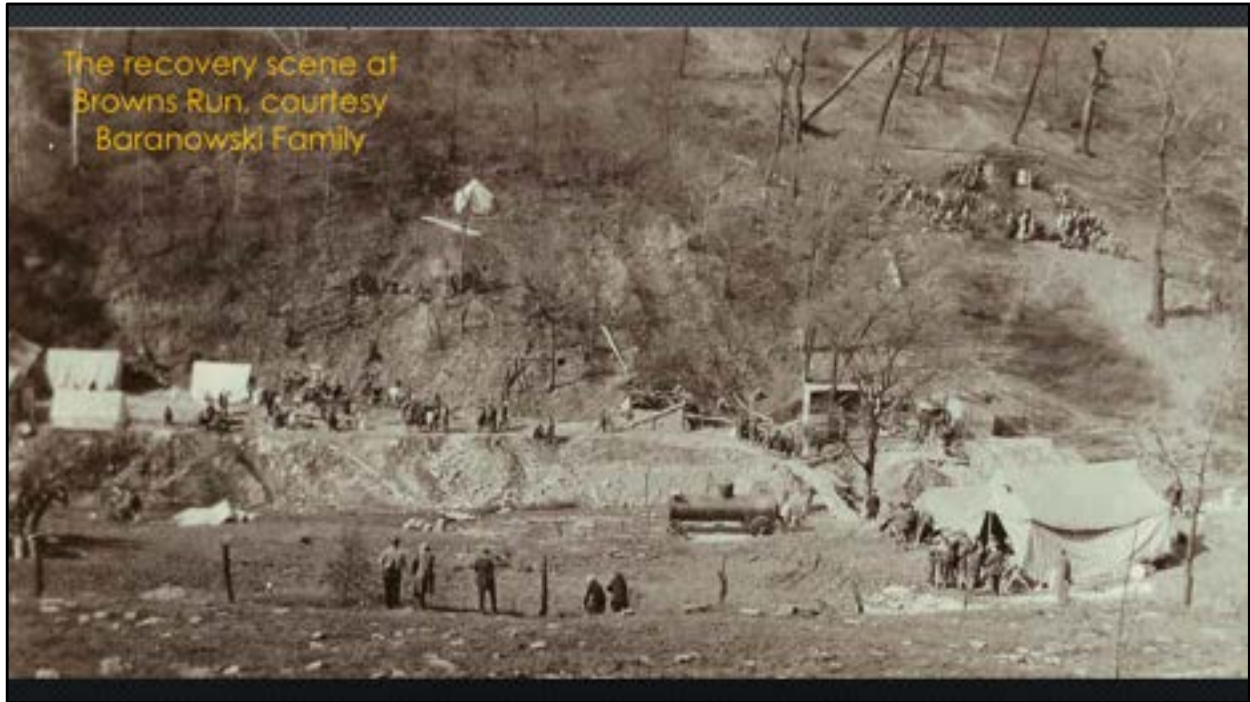
"Grief-stricken miners' wives..."
Image from the Washington D.C.
Evening Star, April 30, 1924.



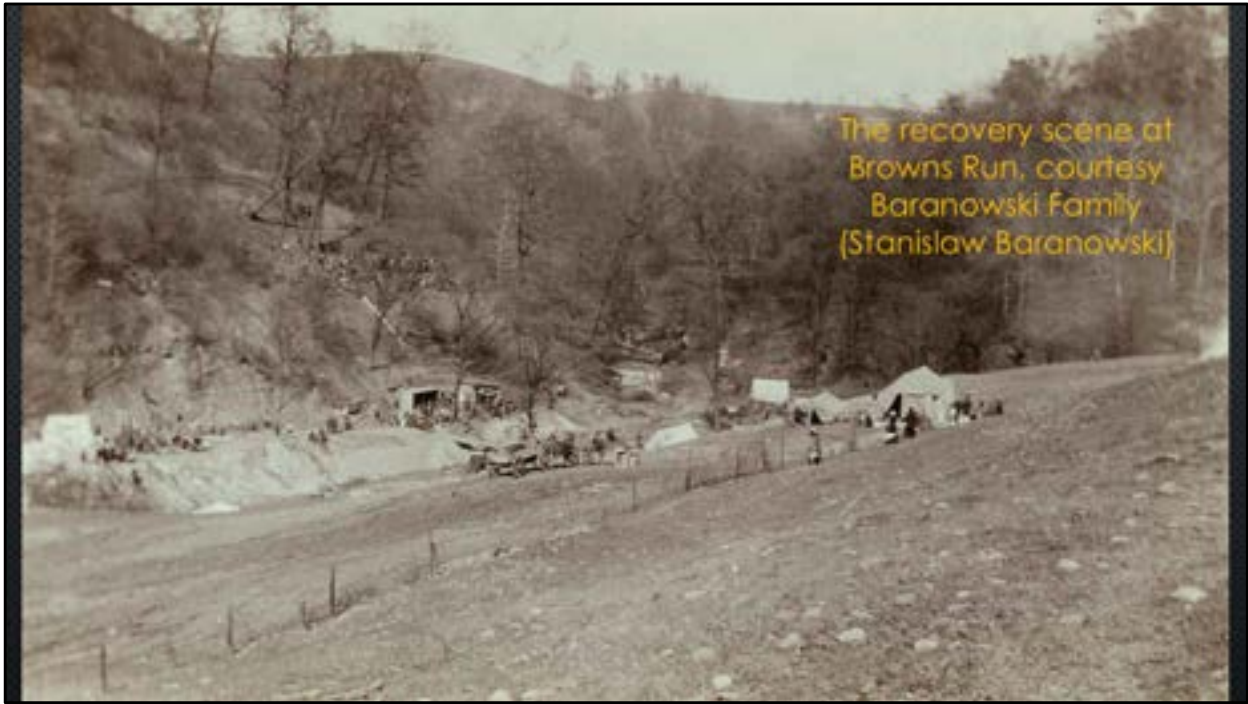
The scene outside the mine was one of wrenching grief and confusion. Women and children rushed to the site, hysterically screaming and sobbing, asking for word of their husbands, fathers, brothers, or uncles trapped in the mine. Wives of the miners tried to bypass the barricades, and some searched for alternative ways into the mine. Many simply wandered the streets of Benwood, sobbing. According to one account, a grieving widow tried to drown herself in the Ohio River after learning of her husband's death. Onlookers rescued her. According to one report, nuns canvassed the neighborhood after the disaster found a young "foreign" woman in bad with child who had recently married one of the lost miners. She was unaware of the explosion and wondering where her husband was. They got a doctor and nurse for her and vowed to keep her unaware until the baby was born.



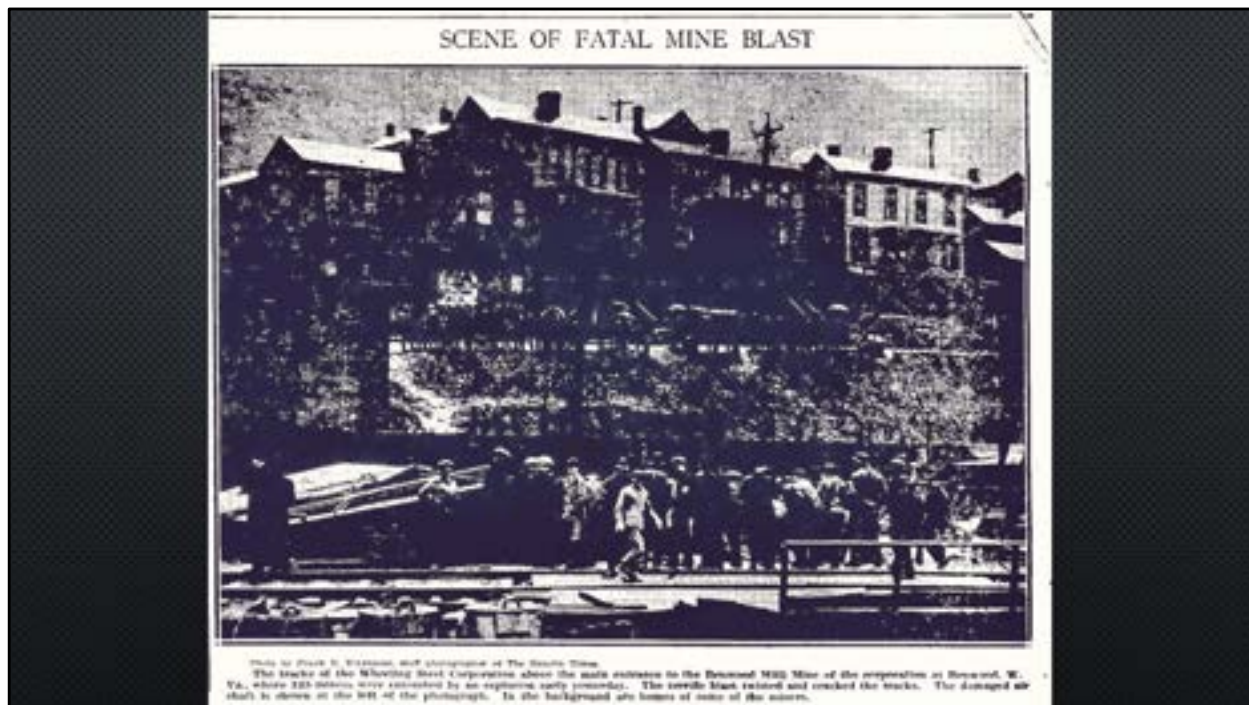
Relatives and friends kept a constant vigil outside the main entrance and air shaft despite a heavy, drenching rain.



At Browns Run, they sat around fires, waiting for word. When it was learned that men had suffocated by afterdamp the grief intensified, causing “a moaning sound that could be heard for a considerable distance.” This image from the Baranowski family show some of the encampments at Browns Run.



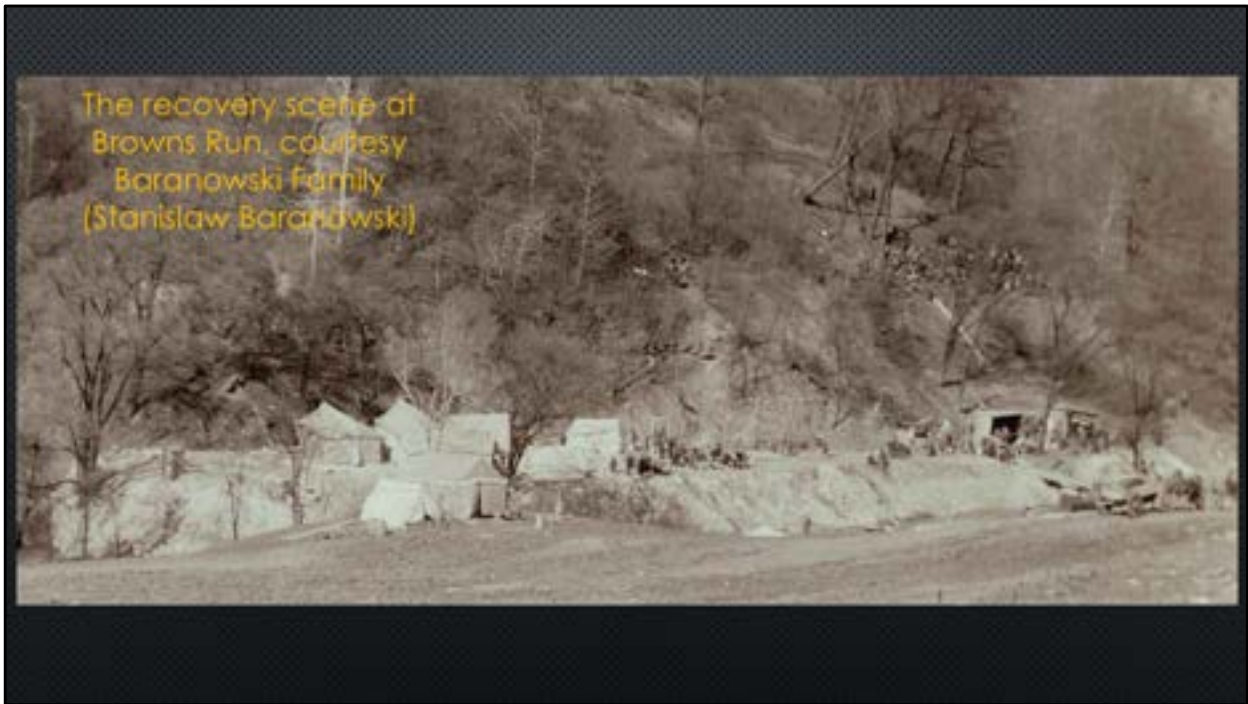
As does this one.



In addition to the bereaved, crowds of curious onlookers and news reporters descended upon Benwood, standing behind hastily constructed barricades. 100 rescuer outfits were reportedly stolen by unscrupulous people posing as helpers. Mrs. Caroline (Olinski) Melcher, age 68, of Jacob Street, was struck and killed by a speeding truck rushing supplies to the rescue teams on April 30.



Early optimism soon waned, as one dead body after another was carried from the mine. After a few days, the odor of decaying bodies became overwhelming. Doctors sprayed disinfectant on corpses before they were removed. (Dillon) "The conditions of the dead bodies were appalling..." The after damp was believed to accelerate decomposition (Intell). Bodies were "too gruesome to describe." Yet the newspaper said one man was "practically baked. He was swollen to almost twice his normal size."



Temporary morgues were set up in the fields surrounding the air shaft at Browns Run. A morgue was set up in a man's wash room.



Later a morgue was set up at the Cooley-Bentz Building in South Wheeling, which then provided funeral services in addition to selling furniture. Another morgue was at Blue Ribbon Hall in Benwood. Each corpse received a tag marked with the location in the mine where the body was found. Identification was a slow, emotionally draining process. Immigrant groups interacted at Cooley Bentz and at Blue Ribbon Hall in Benwood during this grieving process. They spoke to each other, one reporter noted, “not by the tongue, but by the language of the heart.” The last of the bodies was removed by May 6.



Among the dead were three pairs of fathers and sons, as well as five pairs of brothers, and three pairs of cousins. In one pit, they found two Italian brothers clasped together in their last moments." Rocco and Michele Capobianco. Rocco had been working at OVGH and was new to mining. They tried to reach the entrance together, hands clasped, but were cut down by the after damp. 1500 feet from their dinner buckets. Intell. They were said to have heart beats when found, but, despite efforts to revive them, both died before being brought to the surface.

RESCUER FINDS BODY OF "FATHER"; DID NOT KNOW HE WAS IN THE MINE

Spends Forty's Hours in Attempt To Recover Body of the Cause But Was Failed.

Of all the pathetic incidents experienced by hundreds in the Newwood mine disaster on Monday, the experience of James Forgie, an inspector and rescuer here with the Ohio state mine car, is one of the most pitiful.

When word of the disaster was received at Columbus on Monday he was sent to Newwood with almost a score of other rescuers to aid as much as possible in the disaster.

Forgie's uncle, Walter Sneddon, who resides at No. 1 North Huron street, had reared him from almost childhood. Husband of an uncle Mr. Jackson to Forgie was practically all that a father could be.

Three weeks ago Forgie visited his wife and her mother at their Island home. He then returned to Columbus and occupied his mine work. Reaching Newwood early in the

evening of last Monday among the first volunteers from Ohio, Forgie quickly entered the rescue work at the Brown's mine shaft.

Led Relief Team.

He led the relief team into the mine. After they had penetrated the interior about two thousand feet Forgie found the body of one of the miners.

What caused him to want to get a closer view of the dead man, can hardly be explained. But when he lowered his lantern so that the light would play on the man's face he discovered that the man was his uncle. Up until this time he did not know that his uncle, who was practically a father to him, had been one of the entombed men.

After removing the body of his uncle to the surface he learned that his cousin was also one of the entombed men. For forty-six hours he has penetrated the interior of the Newwood mine but his efforts to find his cousin have failed.

ENTOMBED MINER HAD PLANNED TO BE MARRIED NEXT SATURDAY

MOUNDVILLE YOUTH AND HIS FATHER MET DEATH MONDAY IN THE MINE DISASTER

With the identification of the body of John Frank, Jr., of Moundsville, as one of the miners killed in the Newwood explosion, was revealed another tragic light. The young man was to have been married this week to Miss Lulu Glasgow of Thompson avenue, Moundsville.

John Frank, Sr., the father of the lad, was also killed in the disaster, leaving a wife and four children. His eldest daughter Mary, was also to have been married on May 18.

The family and the fiance of the dead man are almost prostrated with the double sorrow, as the preparations for the wedding are abandoned.

CONFER WITH MASON

J. B. McLaughlin, of Charleston, secretary of the West Virginia State Farm Bureau, will be in town today to confer with C. W. Mason, county agent of the Ohio County Farm Bureau.

The men will discuss the wool problem in the state.

ACHES AND PAINS QUICKLY VANISH

One of the Ohio rescuers, a James Forgie, found a body that he identified by lantern light as that of Walter Sneddon, Forgie's uncle, who had been more like a father to him. Forgie was not aware that his uncle had been in the mine. Walter's son and Forgie's cousin Alexander Sneddon was also among the dead. John Frank Jr was to be married a week after the explosion. His father, John Frank Sr. was also killed. Raffaello Vitiello was in a mine for the first time in his life, having been persuaded by his father Samuel Vitiello to accept a job at the mine. Both were killed.

"My Dear Wife and Daughters: I have the home completed and will have it furnished so that when you come to this place, you will have everything just like a queen in Italy. We will have a little garden and we already have planted something that will be fine when it grows and you get to this country. I have been working extra and will have money to send you next pay day. I am lonesome for you and the sooner we can make arrangements that you come, the better I be pleased."

~ Domenico Cognitti

A letter home was found in the boardinghouse room of deceased Italian immigrant miner Domenico Cognitti at Boggs Run. The letter read: "My Dear Wife and Daughters: I have the home completed and will have it furnished so that when you come to this place, you will have everything just like a queen in Italy. We will have a little garden and we already have planted something that will be fine when it grows and you get to this country. I have been working extra and will have money to send you next pay day. I am lonesome for you and the sooner we can make arrangements that you come, the better I be pleased." The letter was folded and set aside incomplete. The Cognitti family in Florence was expecting to travel to Benwood in June.

The "Man of Mystery": Matthew V. Herron (alias J.J. Boyle)

**Rumors Benwood Mine
Was Not Inspected**
FIRE BOSS SAID TO BE AGENT OF
SECRET SERVICE DEPARTMENT

MATTHEW V. HERRON, POSING AS FIRE
BOSS, WORKING HERE UNDER
NAME OF J. J. BOYLE.

BROTHER-IN-LAW, HERE FOR BODY,
TELLS STARTLING STORY OF
VICTIM'S EMPLOYMENT.

CHECK UP INDICATES PROPER INSPEC-
TION WAS NOT MADE AT
MINE MONDAY.

**MAN OF MYSTERY LAID TO REST
IN BURIAL PLOT NEAR HIS HOME**

SERVANTS ARE LARGELY AT-
TENDED—MANY LODGES TURN
OUT TO PAY RESPECTS.

HERRON, Who Lost Life in Ill-Fated
Bldg. at Benwood Last Week,
Laid to Rest.

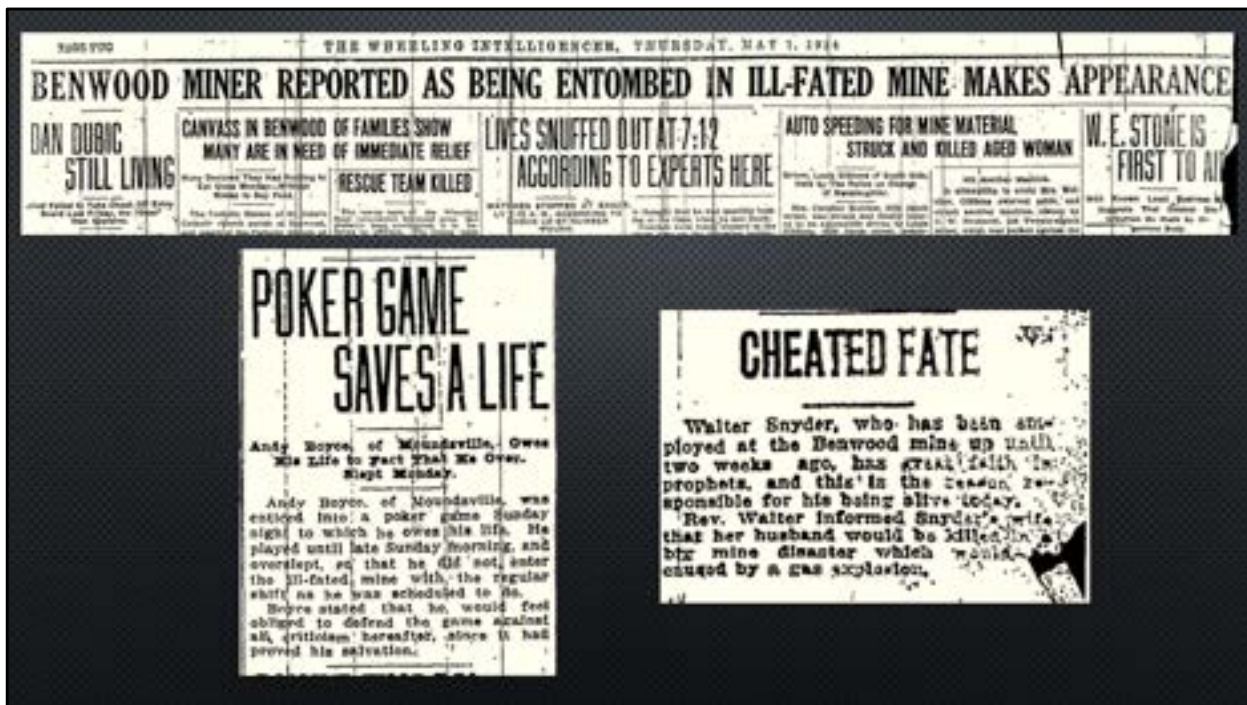
Monongahela, Pa., May 4.—Matthew
V. Herron, aged 31 years, well-known
local fireman, was laid to rest this
morning in the Roman Catholic cem-
tery at this place. His widow and
two small children attended the ser-
vice.

demonstrated in connection with the
work that is being done at Brown's
Run.

Heavy tractors haul the wagons
over the bad roads and often two and
three wagons are coupled together
and hauled over the roads, where
four horses are needed to do the
same work.

**MINE MOTORS ARE
ALL DAILY UNBROKEN**

Man of Mystery: It was found that J.J. Boyle (known in pool halls as JT Poyle or Pyles) was said to be an undercover agent of the Secret Service, was not a real Fire Boss, and did not (and could not have) conducted a real inspection. Never left his boarding house Sunday night. He was actually Matthew V. Herron of Monongahela PA. Left Pittsburgh by train that weekend before, saying he did not want to go back to Benwood. Records later showed that he was an “expert auditor and bookkeeper.” (Intell, May 5) “he could add a column of numbers quicker than any other man with whom he loafed.” **According to Joey Tellitocci:** Jerome T. Pyles (reported as an alias for Herron) was one of the fire bosses who declared mine conditions safe on the morning of the explosion. But he did not die in the explosion. Pyles was killed in a coal mine explosion on April 30, 1927 in Everettville, West Virginia where 111 miners were killed.



Others escaped death through various turns of good fortune. 1-Dan Dubic of Benwood was initially counted among the dead as he had failed to remove his check from the mine entry board on a previous shift. 2-A man named **Andy Boyce** of Moundsville, was supposed to be in the mine, but overslept because he played poker Sunday night until early morning. “Boyce stated that he would feel obliged to defend the game against all criticism hereafter since it had proved his salvation.” Intell. 3-A man **Walter Snyder** who had been working at the mine stopped two weeks before the explosion when his pastor warned him that he saw a vision that the man would be killed in a mine in a big gas explosion (Intell).

A Shameful Act



Relief Funds. A relief fund was established for the widows and children of the miners at the Bank of Benwood. Local ethnic societies made contributions. Though some money did make it to the families, two bank employees, William Leach and Joseph Ward, embezzled a lot of money, which was never recovered. The embezzlers were caught and convicted, receiving ten year sentences in the West Virginia State Penitentiary at Moundsville in June 1925. Damaged by the scandal, the Bank of Benwood closed that same year.

Donations, Fundraising, Relief



On a more positive note, 1-Relief & Fundraising: The city of Wheeling sent money (raised at picture shows), as did the Italian government. 2-Prisoners at the Ohio County Jail collected \$13 (about \$200 in 2020)—“the last penny they had.” Intell. Steelworkers from Wheeling Corrugating and Martins Ferry made donations of over \$500 (\$7500 in 2020 dollars). The Red Cross, which had worked with the Polish community during WWI, helped during and after the mine disaster as well. 3-Many families were left without a breadwinner. 4-There were 32 widowed women on a single block in Benwood, and fifty to sixty more in a two block area of South Wheeling. “Crying women and weeping children ...on every doorstep.” By 1924, West Virginia had a **worker’s compensation law** that ensured each widow \$30 per month for life. That’s about \$445 in 2020 dollars. And \$5 a year for each fatherless child until they turned 16. \$75 now. \$75 per year, per child. Not much. Wheeling Steel paid each widow a lump sum of \$500 (\$7500) and \$150 (\$2200) for funeral expenses. So, less than \$10,000 for each human life.

QUARTERLY REPORT WHEELING STEEL CO. VERY ENCOURAGING

After deducting Expenses and Depreciation Net Profit for Period was \$941,901.39.

The quarterly report of the Wheeling Steel Corporation issued yesterday shows the total income for the three months ending March 31, 1924.

after deducting provisions for repairs and maintenance of plants amounting to \$1,179,542.91, to be \$1,010,688.78.

After deducting provision for general depreciation, exhaustion of minerals and interest, the net profit for the period was \$941,901.39.

The report in detail follows:

Income Account and Statement of Surplus for the three months ending March 31, 1924.

Total income after deducting provisions for repairs and maintenance of plants amounting to \$1,179,542.91	\$3,010,688.78
Less:	
Provision for general depreciation	\$ 747,288.44
Provision for exhaustion of minerals	24,254.35
Interest on bonds and borrowed money	298,281.97
Net Profit for the three months	\$ 941,901.39
Surplus at January 1, 1924	\$9,442,022.27
Net Profit for the three months ending March 31, 1924	941,901.39
Surplus at March 31, 1924	\$10,383,923.66
PREFERRED Dividends:	
On Preferred "A" Stock—2%	\$ 114,391.00
On Preferred "B" Stock—4%	1,972,972.22
Outstanding Dividends	\$ 44,211.00
On Preferred "A" Stock—2%	242,774.40
Net Surplus at March 31, 1924	\$7,336,249.41

The above figures are subject to change after annual audit.

By order of the Board of Directors,
A. C. GLENN, Chairman.

May 1

It was rather jarring to see ensconced amid all of these reports about the horror of this disaster, this little article about Wheeling Steel Corporation's healthy profits for the quarter. Net profits were \$942,000. Roughly 14 million in 2020 dollars. **Editorial Comment:** In the end, it seems like these men were expendable. Had money been spent on safety, this disaster might have been avoided. But proper safety equipment would have cut into those profits. It was easier and cheaper to go to NY and recruit new labor from Ellis Island.

May 2

WHEELING STEEL CORPORATION IN EXPRESSION OF SYMPATHY

The Wheeling Steel Corporation realizes the extent of the frightful explosion of last Monday and the deplorable consequences resulting from the death of so many men, and it deeply sympathizes with the families and friends of those who lost their lives.

The Corporation desires at this time to express its deepest appreciation to all those persons: official, individual and corporate, who have aided and are still aiding in the relief work.

Such aid has not only been extended unselfishly and generously, but in many instances has been marked by heroism of the highest order, and much has come from sources outside this locality and the State of West Virginia.

WHEELING STEEL CORPORATION.

The day after their profits were reported, Wheeling Steel Corporation issued this expression of sympathy regarding the disaster, saying...



But what about the would-be rescuers? The hard labor in foul air left most rescuers sick and exhausted. One man accidentally drank disinfectant instead of coffee and had to be hospitalized. Members of the US Mine rescue team reported that it was the “worst wrecked mine” they had ever seen. “Bodies were hurled into the air and blown with the force of a cannon against the roof or walls.” Rescuers often had to reach and grope in complete darkness for dead bodies. Stretcher bearers had to carry bodies as far as two miles to the shaft, often crawling to get over obstructions, dragging the bodies through tight spaces. So it was harrowing. And they did their utmost.



And for their efforts, the rescuers were given this medal and fob for their extraordinary but sadly hopeless recovery effort. The Front reads: “Benwood Mine Explosion, April 28, 1924.” The Back reads: “For exceptional service rendered to humanity, Wheeling Steel Corporation.”



Despite their efforts, no one who went into the mine that morning survived. In the end, 119 were killed. **Caveat:** Miners who were hired on as hand-loaders were assigned a place in the mine, and very often shared it with a friend. **They got paid by the weight.** The two loaders would remove the broken coal to mine cars. Miners were issued tags to identify a filled coal car as his work so that he could be paid based on the weight. In theory, then, all one had to do in the event of disaster was look at the tag board and see who was in the mine and who wasn't. In practice, this didn't work as well as it should have. Miners were free to take anyone into the mine with them in order to load more coal, and companies turned a blind eye to most restrictions that were on the books. Teenaged sons, smaller children, and newly immigrated brothers often accompanied miners. To get a day off, miners would swap tags with relatives. These helpers weren't employed by the mine and probably weren't reported as missing. Such conditions rendered an accurate head count all but impossible. The actual number of men and boys who died in the Benwood Disaster of 1924, therefore, may never be known. **(source: Becky Morgan and Jeff Phillips.)**

Safety Epilogue



Rock dusting



Gas masks

Safety findings: State mine inspector R.M. Lambie found that in gaseous mines like Benwood's, only approved electric cap lamps (not open lamps), explosion proof motors, and permissible explosives (not black powder) should be used. Better rock dusting should have been done. The regulations were weak and companies routinely abused them, taking advantage of loopholes to increase profits. Lambie informed the governor of a rumor that the Benwood mine had not been properly inspected. Led to better rock dusting practices and miners being equipped with gas masks. Again, a little effort and expense could have saved lives.

Worst West Virginia Mining Disasters

1-Monongah	(Fairmont Coal Co.)	1907	362 dead (171 were Italian immigrants) Worst in US History
2-Eccles (near Beckley)		1914	174 dead
3-Benwood		1924	119 dead
4-Everettville (Monongalia County)		1927	111 dead
5-Bartley (near Bluefield)		1940	91 dead

Benwood is still the third worst mining disaster in West Virginia's sad history.

1-Monongah	(Fairmont Coal Co.)	1907	362 dead (171 Italian immigrants) Worst in US History
2-Eccles (near Beckley)		1914	174 (180?) dead
3-Benwood		1924	119 dead
4-Everettville (Monongalia County)		1927	111 dead
5-Bartley (near Bluefield)		1940	91 dead
6-Farmington		1968	78 dead
Willow Grove No. 10 in St. Clairsville		1940	72 dead

Numbers by Nationality

Poland	39
Italy	30
Greece	15
Austria	4
Scotland	4
Croatia	3
Hungary	3
Russia	3
Serbia	3
England	2
Lithuania	2
Ukraine	1
Wales	1

9 were "American"

75, the most by far, were "low-skill" workers, "loaders"

An overwhelming number of the dead miners at Benwood were recent immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. 103 of the 119 to be exact. The largest numbers were from Poland, followed by Italy and Greece. Others hailed from Hungary, Russia, Serbia, Croatia, Lithuania, and the Ukraine.

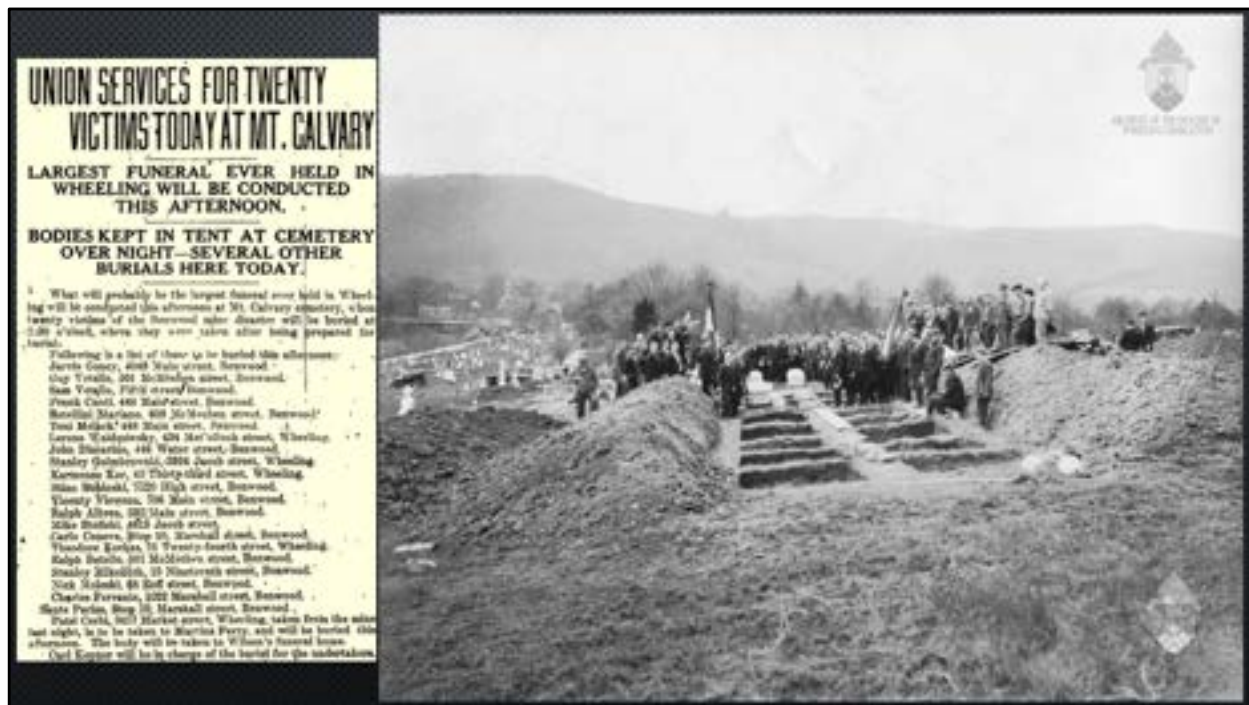
Numbers by Nationality

Poland		39
Italy		30
Greece		15
Austria		4
Scotland	4	
Croatia		3
Hungary	3	

Russia		3
Serbia		3
England	2	
Lithuania	2	
Ukraine	1	
Wales		1

9 were "American"

75, the most by far, were "low-skill" workers, "loaders"



Benwood and South Wheeling saw funeral after funeral for many days. Many of the deceased were Catholics who belonged to St. John Church in Benwood. Most of those men were buried at Wheeling's Catholic cemetery, Mt. Calvary.



On May 5, 24 of the dead miners were buried side by side at Mt Calvary.



This is a closeup of the best known image from the Benwood Mine Disaster (rediscovered by Margaret Brennan). The service was conducted in English, Polish, and Italian.



1-The bodies were placed under tents before being buried. 2-“Two bodies were placed in each grave as they worked in the mine side by side.” One mother reportedly collapsed upon seeing her son lowered into the ground crying, “My boy! My boy! In Polish. Intell, May 6.



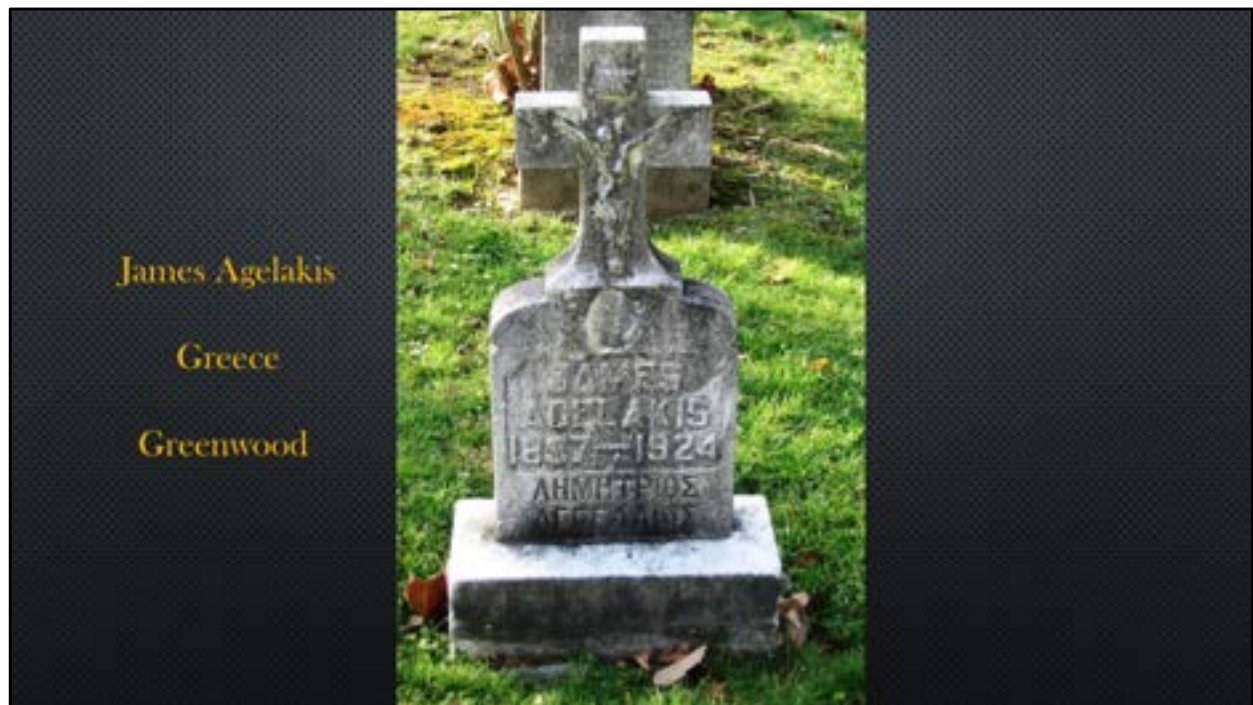
Here's a seldom seen image from a different angle.



And another of the site after the service had concluded.



And this is what the site looks like today.



Unidentified dead miners who were burned beyond recognition were buried in a mass grave at Greenwood. Those Catholics later identified, largely by process of elimination, were moved to Mt. Calvary. Many, like the Greek miners, remained buried at Greenwood. This is tombstone of Greek miner James Agelakis at Greenwood cemetery. Fourteen of the fifteen Greek miners are buried side by side at Greenwood near Mr. Agelakis, but only two of them - James Agelakis

Nikolaos
Mavrigianakis
Greece
Greenwood



and this man, Nick Mavrigianakis - have markers.

Four Schoolmates from Island of Crete Who Lost Lives in Benwood Mine



Nick Mavrigianakis
601 Market Street, Wheeling.

Born in Apokorona, Island of Crete and came to this country in 1901 and worked in many mines in Colorado, Illinois, Ohio and in West Virginia. In 1911 he came from Illinois to this city to visit a sister and decided to stay and get a job in the Benwood mine, of the Wheeling Steel corporation. He is survived by his father and mother, three sisters and a brother in college whom he was educating. He was the whole support of the family. He has a number of relatives in this city.



Emmanuel Papadimitropoulos
820 1/2 Market Street, Wheeling.

Born in Iraklion, Island of Crete, and came to this country in 1917. He was married three months ago to Miss Androniki Papadimitropoulos a native of Greece, who lives in this city and manages his untimely demise. Before taking up employment with the Wheeling Steel Corporation he was employed in the Benwood mine of the National Tube Company. He was well known in this city and had a host of friends who will mourn his untimely demise. He is survived by his father, one sister and four brothers.



Dimitrios Giannoulakis

Born at Plipton, Island of Crete, and came to this country in 1911, he worked in various coal mines and came to this city about three months ago, when he secured a position as a miner with the Wheeling Steel corporation. He is survived by his father, three sisters and five brothers. His brother Nick Giannoulakis, resides in this city. He was well known throughout the district in which he lived and was popular with all.



Peter Myliannakis

He was born in Roonata Klemon, Crete, and came to this country in 1913. He worked in various mines throughout the country and came to Wheeling about two years ago. He worked Utah, Ohio, Illinois and other states before coming here. He is survived by his father, mother, three sisters and has a cousin who resides at 1402 Market Street, city, where he operates a shoe shining parlor. All of the above are friends of Nick Myliannakis, of this city.

Four of the Greek miners, including Nick Mavrigianakis, were said to be classmates from Crete. Those miners not interred at Mt Cavalry or Greenwood are buried at local cemeteries around the Ohio Valley.



I think it humanizes these men to take Closer Look at Some of the Miners of whom we do have photos—most of which are from their tombstones: Jan Piechowicz, Poland, Loader was only 16. His family were Poles from Galacia. Jan immigrated 1907 as an infant with father Lukasz and mother Katherine. Eventually had 4 children. Lukasz mined coal. Then he started millwork at Wheeling Steel, taking family to Benwood by 1924. He died April 9, 1924 of chronic myocarditis (inflammation of the heart) at age 53. Only 19 days later Jan died in the mine disaster. Son Stanley, working for Wheeling Steel, died 2 years later after falling from a truck and fracturing his skull. He was also just 16.

Dominik Kuprewicz
28
Poland
Loader



Jan Wiewiura
51
Poland
Timberman





Carlo DiGiorgio
21
Italy
Trip Rider

Gaetano Vitiello
37
Italy
Loader





Giuseppi Rea
35
Italy
Loader
WWI Veteran

Raffaello Aprea
21
Italy
Loader



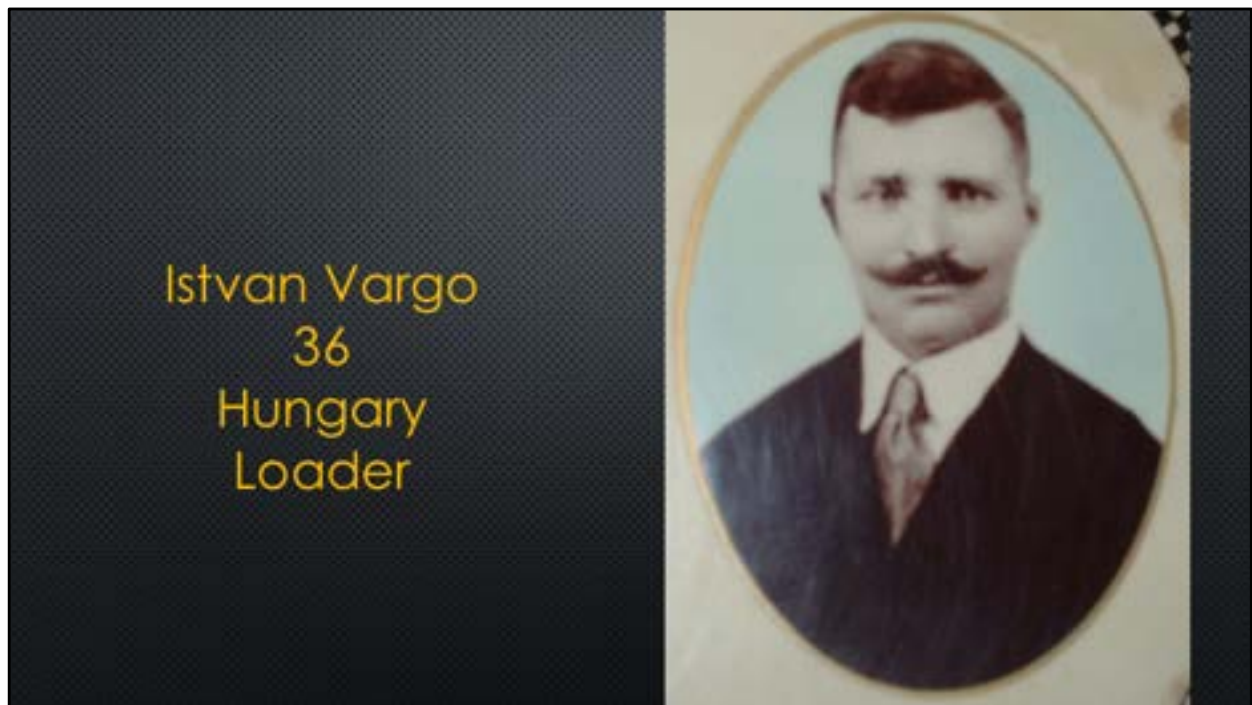


Ignazio Pirrera
50
Italy
Loader

Pasquale Fana
42
Italy
Trackman



Pasquale Fana, Trackman. He was 42. Immigrated in 1904 at age 22 from Citta Sant'Angelo, Italy. He was Joey Tellitocci's great grandmother's first husband. She remarried. Had Pasquale not been killed, Joey would not exist. Life changing.



Istvan Vargo, Hungary, Loader. 36. Immigrated to USA in 1914 from Szany, Hungary. Joey's great-grandfather. Istvan was very ill the morning of the explosion and considered not going to work that day. How fates can change with one decision. Butterfly effect.



Emil Yurasic (Jurasic)
29
Croatia
Cutter



John Jelacic
37
Croatia
Loader

Mile Mislenovic
Croatia
Cutter





In 2009, a Historical Highway Marker was erected on South Marshall Street in Benwood near the former Wheeling Steel mill by the West Virginia Division of Culture and History to commemorate the 1924 Disaster.



Benwood Mine Disaster Memorial Committee

Joseph Anthony "Joey" Tellitocci, Co-Chairperson,
Treasurer, Historian

Susan Marie Reilly, Co-Chairperson

Joseph "Joe" Tellitocci, Jr. (12/31/1952 –
03/15/2018), Project Coordinator

Catherine Feryok, Monument Designer

Gladys Elizabeth "Betty" (Otte) Key
(11/24/1921 – 07/24/2020)

Edward Herman "Ed" Sherman

John David Mercer

Henry Eugene "JR" Cross, Jr.



Memorial: Joey and his dad led the effort to finally have a proper memorial for the 119 souls. Consol Energy donated the land for the monument at the mouth of Boggs Run in Benwood. The committee raised approximately \$120,000.00 in donations plus an additional \$30,000.00 in time and material from various contractors.



And on September 27, 2014 – The Benwood Mine Disaster Memorial and the Hitchman Mine Disaster Memorial were dedicated at a ceremony held at the site with 200 people attending.

"I remember...at nights, the flame that hurtled skyward from
now cold furnaces of Wheeling Steel's Benwood plant...
Here in the cramped, dun-colored mill homes below and
above Wheeling, awaits the human resource from which
she may tap the energy of fresh aspiration..."

Here dwell the peoples of lasting metal whose steel is the
alloy of the hundred cultures and tribes of a vanished Europe.

Serb, Croat, Greek, Slovene, Czech,

Slovak and Montenegrin and Pole.

Their singing tongues lit and ring in myriad babble

on the bus to Benwood..."

– Davis Grubb, "The Valley of the Ohio"

"It breathed not smoke, but dust – a roof fall,
the mouth of the mountain clamped shut,
eating its children..."

–Diane Gilliam Fisher

119 Souls

James Agelakis

Salvatore Albano

Raffaello Aprea

Frank Balanzo

Stanislaw Baranowski

Pete Bezanis

Wasył Bilyj

Carlo Caneva

Michele Capobianco

Rocco Capobianco

Tony Christos

Domenico Cognitti

Jozef Conjeski

Francesco Conte

Pasquale Corbi

Mark Crosby

Mane Cvjeticanin

Carlo DiGiorgio

Giovanni DiScanna

Adam Dlugoborski

Sam Dombroski

Jan Dupla

Pasquale Fana

Celestino Ferrante

Pasquale Ferri

Mick Fittrakis

John Frank, Sr.

John Frank, Jr.

Mike George

Gus Giannakos

James Gionis

Ignacy Gojewski

Jan Golebiewski

Stanislaw Golebiewski

Mike Heras

Matthew V. Herron (J. J. Boyle)

Antoni Hmiel

Jozef Hojda

George William Holliday, Sr.

George William Holliday, Jr.

Sandor Horvath
James Howe
John Jelacic
Llewelyn Joseph

Emil Juracic
Theodore Karakas
Michal Kazemka
Kazimierz Kocur

Jozef Kolodziejski

Kazimierz Kopetz

John Kupcha

Dominik Kuprewicz

Antoni Kwicien

Wladyslaw Lakomy

Leonard Levicki

Feliks Lisak

Mike Malaxanakis

Mikolaj Malicki

Jan Malyska

Daniele Marafino

Jozef Marko

Nick Masino

Nikolaos Mavrigianakis

Frank Mazzella

George McGill

Hugh McGill

Antonio Migliaccio

Stanislaw Mikolich

Mile Misljenovic

Wladyslaw Oblizajek

Peter Onost

Ignac Orban

Nick Padula

Meli Paich

Andy Panac

Emanuel Papolas

Mike Paradise

Santo Parise

Mike Patrick

Jan Piechowicz

Ignazio Pirrera

Giuseppe Polsinelli

Joshua Rawlins

Giuseppe Rea

Stanislaw Robinsky

Mariano Rotellini

Stanislaw Rudawiec

Salvatore Sabatino

Joseph Samilli

Angelo Savinos

Sam Senchok

Andy Shalayka

Izydor Shalayka

Pete Simos

Albert Slaga

John Slaga

William Smith

Alexander Sneddon

Walter Sneddon

Gennaro Spignisi
Wojciech Stachawicz
Michał Staszewski

Joseph Sunich

John Swoski

Istvan Vargo

Gaetano Vitiello

Raffaello Vitiello

Samuel Vitiello

Leo Wagner

William Webster

Lawrence Wiadrawski

Jan Wiewiura
Vincenty Wiewiura
Russell Williams

Kenneth Wood

Felice Yannucci

Mike Zajackowski

Dane Zelic

John Zuk



Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord
and let perpetual light shine upon them.
May they rest in peace.

Read More at
www.archivingwheeling.org

Copyright © 2024 Ohio County Public Library

Written & created by Sean Duffy