

The White Ash Mine Disaster

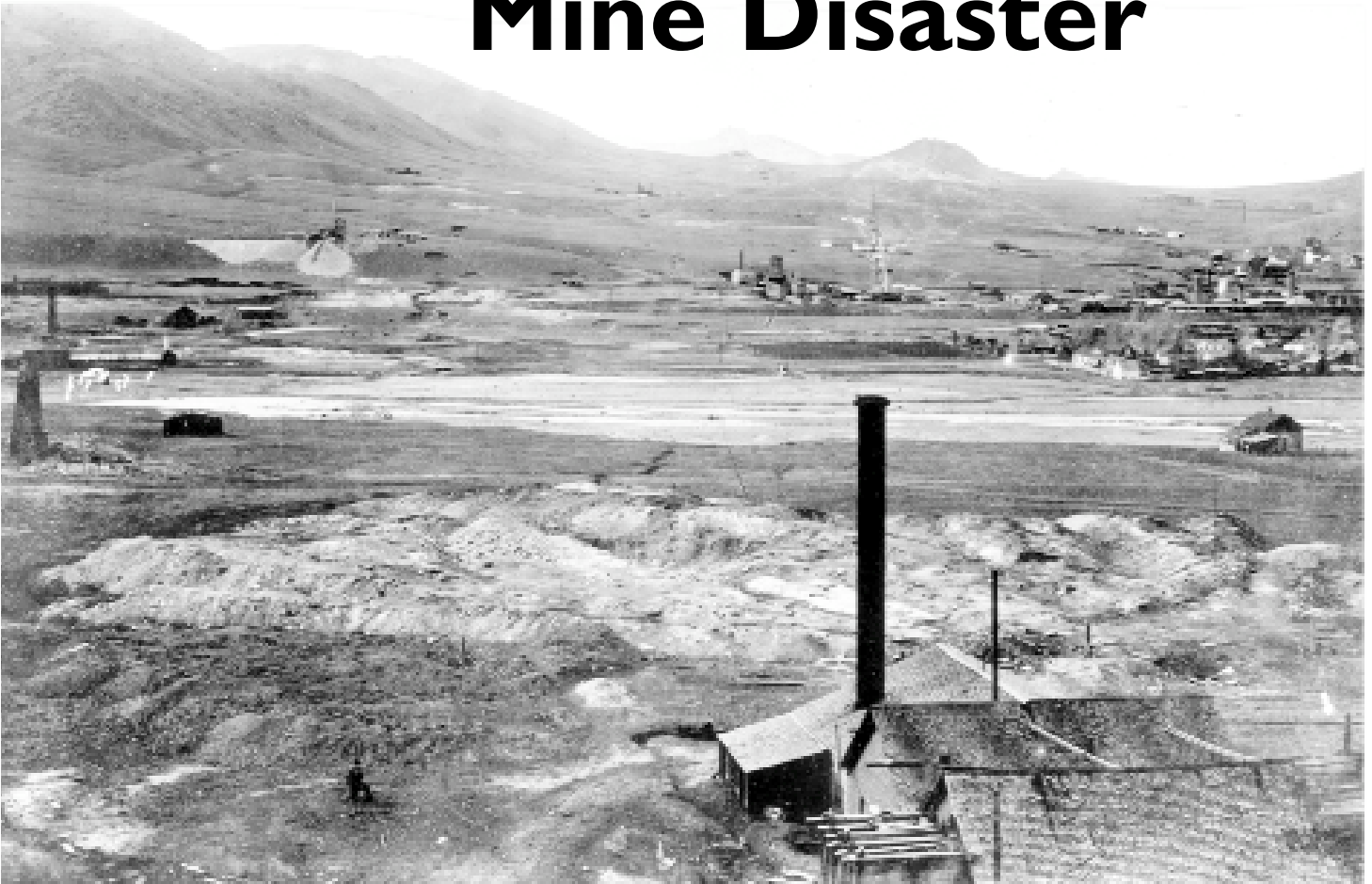


Photo courtesy DAR Pioneer Museum, negative #465

The White Ash Mine (in the late 1800s) and its dump can be seen in the foreground. The Loveland Mine can be seen in the top left corner. The city of Golden is at right.

Through the perils near we must march,
nor fear,
Or how shall men's work go on?
Though the price of coal be the life—the soul,
No less must the coal be won'
Ever and aye, though a million pay,
With blood for every ton.

—S. Gertrude Ford,
"How Shall the Miner Know?" 1911

Second Prize
Writer's Award Contest
By Scott Bloemendaal

The autumn sun slipped behind the Rocky Mountains, radiating its ruddy and smoldering sunset across the sky. Already, whispers and rumors were spreading

rampant through the town of Golden—whispers igniting into bleak hysteria as teary-eyed women and panicked men sprinted to the White Ash Mine. Something had gone horribly wrong. Crowds gathered in the lingering evening. Hundreds of people—possibly even upwards of one thousand—waited during the night, some stoically, some prostrate and wracked with grief, for a word of hope, a sign that the ten men still deep within the earth were somehow alive. Minutes passed. Agonizing hours crawled by for the relatives and friends of the missing. But as time

slipped by, so did hope. Still, workers on the surface refused to give up and continued to pump oxygen down the main shaft. The morning brought the despairing truth. The mine had flooded; the ten men were lost; and, there was nothing that anyone could do. September 9, 1889, brought a black day to Jefferson County history.

Mining in general was a dangerous job, and those coal miners who descended into the earth that day knew it. The men were faced each day with the very real possibility of dying within the mine. Coalmines were subject to

treacherous cave-ins, equipment failures, deadly gases, and even explosions, as the fine coal dust would be churned into the air by machinery and footsteps. Then, all it took was a spark to send a portion of a mine into fiery ruin. In the White Ash Mine alone were reports of miners narrowly escaping death as a full coal car, suddenly freed from a broken hoist, came crashing down the shaft; an unsecured

chain falling from a rising elevator almost striking the heads of two miners, but instead barely missing them causing less severe injury; and a luckless man who was crushed beneath tons of rock when a narrow air shaft he was working in suddenly collapsed, killing him instantly and injuring a nearby miner. In later years, even the coal dust itself was determined to be deadly. The dust scores and ravages the lungs of those that breathe it, causing a debilitating illness, similar to that caused by asbestos, called Black Lung Disease. Still, even in face of these perils, men went to work in the White Ash Mine—named after the white ash by-product created after burning coal. This was the titan of the Golden coalmines, an industry that once even overshadowed the famous Coors brewery.

Dr. L. W. Frary first discovered coal in the Golden area in July of 1860. This discovery helped extinguish doubts that Golden was to be a permanent settlement, and not evaporate into history like the once prosperous Arapahoe City that lay just three miles east of



Miners of the White Ash Mine in the late 1800s.

Golden. The discovery of coal helped establish industry; and soon Golden coal was even being hailed by blacksmiths as being superior to any of that found in the rest of the county. During this time, coal was even being sold on the Denver market for \$40 and \$50 per ton.

More and more mines opened during the 1860s and 1870s, following the coal supply discovered on Ralston Creek. By 1880, there were about ten coalmines in the county, producing about 45,000 tons of coal a year, most of which being used for domestic purposes in Jefferson County. A giant among these coalmines was the Ralston Springs, which lay just three miles north of Golden. Not only was the Ralston Springs one of the most profitable mines in the county, it was one of the most profitable in the state, producing

22,500 tons of coal in one year. Closer to Golden, mines named Loveland, the Boss, and the Pittsburg sprang to life. It is during this period when we first encounter one of Golden's deepest and highest producing coalmines, the White Ash Mine, which operated almost

within the city limits.

The beginnings of the White Ash Mine can be traced as far back as 1867, when, following a discovery of coal in the hogback made by Edward Berthoud in 1862, the

Golden City Mineral & Land Co. drilled holes into the hogback. Then, in 1868, the first shaft was sunk. Today, that location can be found at the far west end of Golden's 12th Street. The mine first started selling its superior coal to the local brick works, but soon began selling to the general public as well. The mine was then leased to the Hazelton Coal & Mine Co in 1871, and under its direction, the mine began to grow. More shafts were sunk; but, mostly these were just satellites to the main shaft, whose high production dwarfed all other neighboring mines. One such shaft was productive enough to splinter from the main shaft and be renamed the Black Diamond Coal Mine. However, water seepage ended the life of this mine prematurely. Interestingly enough, one can visit



The monument at the west end of Golden's 12th Street and at the site of the White Ash Mine reads: "White Ash Mine Disaster: Dedicated to the Memory of Joseph Allen, William Bowden, William Collins, John Collins, Henry Huesman, David Lloyd, Joseph Hutter, John Morgan, John Murphy, Rich Rowe who lost their lives here on Sept. 9th, 1889, and are entombed in this plot.

the location of this mine today by visiting Golden's Community Center—the center is built right on top of the site.

Three men took over the endeavor of the White Ash: R.D. Hall, Al Jones, and later W.S. Wells (who bought into the enterprise after Mr. Hall retired). During their reign, from about 1877 to 1889, the White Ash saw the majority of its growth. In pursuit of the precious vein of coal, the mine was sunk deeper and deeper,

finally reaching a depth of 730 feet. Combined with this abyssal depth, and the far-reaching network of tunnels and various levels, the White Ash became the deepest and most extensive mine in Golden. During its heyday, the mine employed about 40 men, who worked in 15 teams, and produced about 100 tons of coal a day. The White Ash was outlasting its neighbors, and showed no signs of slowing. Coal continued to be found, and it seemed as if the prosperity

of the mine would persist for decades to come. Sure, the mine had seen its share of accidents, but the White Ash showed no signs of foreseeable disaster. The White Ash passed inspections, seemed stable, and didn't show any signs of flooding, an occurrence that had closed the nearby Loveland mine.

Yet a glowing fire smoldered—slowly burning for at least a decade—within the walls of coal that shielded the White Ash from the flooded remains of the Loveland Mine; and no one knew that those walls were steadily weakening.

On September 9, 1889, the miners disappeared beneath the earth as usual. The flickering of their carbide lamps, which were attached to their hats, barely illuminated their cavernous and timbered world. With them, they also carried tin pails of thick-slabbbed biscuit sandwiches or dinner buckets of cold-meat pasties. Who could guess that at the end of the day, ten men would never return?

At about a quarter to four the engineer, Charles Hoagland, was the first to discover the disaster. He tried to send the cage (elevator) down, but for some reason it wouldn't go to the bottom of the shaft. He then tried raising the elevator, but, even with the full power of the engines, the elevator would not budge. Hoagland tried to send signals to the cage man, David Lloyd, who was stationed at the bottom of the mine, but his communications went unanswered. Immediately the engineer, with suspicions that something might be wrong, reported to the foreman, Evan Jones. Concerned by the report, Jones rushed to the ladder that

descended into the mine. Perhaps a nagging dread tugged at the foreman as he made the long descent, or perhaps he thought there was simply a break in the line of communication. When he descended 280 feet his thoughts soured. He heard a tumultuous roaring beneath him. The mine was flooding. If the miners at the bottom were to be saved from the rapidly filling caverns, then time was of the essence. He scrambled back up the ladder and immediately reported the disaster to the general manager, Paul Lanious.

Mr. Jones then marshaled as many men as he could find for a rescue expedition, but he couldn't get the mine lights lit. Plus, the elevator was stuck within the mine-shaft. The rescue was delayed as the men set electrical lights and secured heavy ropes down the main shaft. By this time, word of the disaster had spread throughout Golden, and distraught families and citizens were gathering outside to watch the activity. As the men worked, reports state that they occasionally heard a faint shout of a trapped miner far below, a brief anguished cry that sounded for a couple of minutes before the rushing water devoured his cries for help. Spurred on, the foreman once again made a descent, but could only make it 300 feet down before being repulsed by a surge of bad, sulfurous air.

Nothing could be done. Evan Jones, the remaining miners, the families, and the citizens of Golden waited throughout the night, hoping that the air being pumped into the shaft might rescue some of the men trapped below.

The next morning, Mr. Jones

once again descended; this time accompanied by Mine Inspector, John McNeil. Together they rode down in a heavy iron bucket, hung from an iron rope secured from another mine, to survey the disaster. With heavy hearts, they returned to deliver dire news: there was nothing that could be done to save the trapped men; they had died under 200 feet of water.

As the anguish and shock subsided, there was some thought of retrieving the bodies. But this idea was discarded. Not only would they need large enough pumps to drain the level, but they would also need pumps to stem the flow of water rushing into the mine. By the time this could be achieved, the bodies themselves might be in such decay, because of the water and harsh elements, that they would be unrecoverable.

The White Ash Mine itself was to be their tomb. The shaft was closed, sealing the ten miners in their watery grave.

After the tragedy there sounded one predominant question: what had caused the disaster? The foreman, Evan Jones, was the first to find one of the major culprits, the nearby Loveland Mine. The Loveland Mine lay just about a third of a mile away and as the miners followed the vein of coal, the tunnels between the two mines had been extending to each other. About ten years before the disaster, the Loveland had been closed because of flooding. But on September 9, 1889, the walls separating the two mines had suddenly been breached, draining the Loveland and sending torrents of water and debris into the depths of the White Ash Mine.

There are some reports that the

breach of the 90-foot barrier between the two mines was caused by the miners chipping away at the black coal. The more widespread and accepted theory is that the coal had been smoldering for many years, even decades, ever so slowly eating away at the wall that shielded the White Ash from disaster. Years earlier, mine inspector John McNeil, had discovered such a smoldering fire within the wall that separated the Loveland and the White Ash. He had ordered the section walled up in order to smother the fire. After numerous subsequent inspections, this proved to be a success. The fire had been snuffed out, but still the wall had been weakened. Unknowingly, a second fire had also been burning. McNeil later believed that the fire that had caused the disaster originated from the dump on the surface, then traveled under ground, slowly burning its way through cracks and crevices as it followed the lines of coal. Finally, the fire slowly burned through the critical barrier between the two mines, causing the wall to rupture. In an interview with the *Colorado Transcript* two days later, the inspector stated that he had readily surveyed the mine and cleared it from any dangers. The mine appeared to be in very good shape, but the hidden fire was an unfortunate calamity that no one could have foreseen.

The story of the White Ash doesn't quite end with the disaster of September 9. The owners looked to developing the northern shaft and christened it the North White Ash Coal Mine. In 1890, the *Transcript* reported that this newer coal was even better than



White Ash Mine Monument today; the School of Mines Stadium and Table Mesa are visible at right.

and the surrounding community to its knees in somber mourning. Standing at the site today, it's difficult to imagine the bustling White Ash Mine. But the mine — that fateful and terrible tomb — remains to this day, forever sealed within the earth,

the coal from the original White Ash. However, this mine had a meteoric success, a quick burgeoning that dissolved under two miner strikes. In 1895 the machines finally stopped, and the buildings were removed. The coal had run out. The White Ash mine had closed again, this time forever.

Today, among houses and playing fields at the far west end of 12th Street, a single, nearly forgotten shard of granite stands as a solemn reminder of the tragedy

that rocked Golden over a century ago. The monument, first erected on the 47th anniversary of the disaster, is situated at the very site where the White Ash Mine once stood, and silently proclaims the ten fallen miners. How simple it is to pass by that stone marker and not really understand the entire story of a mine that once overshadowed the great Coors brewery, or to comprehend that those ten names and the disaster that befell them brought Golden

eternally etched in Jefferson County history, and never forgotten.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Bloemendaal lives in Littleton, Colorado, and is a manufacturer's representative for various lines of restaurant equipment. He spends his free time writing short stories and singing with the Denver MountainAires Barbershop Chorus. Highly interested in history, he was eager to research the past of the county that he grew up in.

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