



# Lackawanna County News

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*The Scranton Tribune-Republican, Friday, April 28, 1911*

**WITH BLAZING BREAKER ABOVE THEM,  
FOUR HUNDRED MINERS SCRAMBLE FOR SAFETY;  
BREAKER BOYS JAM DOORWAYS  
AS FLAMES LICK UP TAR-PAPERED ROOF OF GYPSY GROVE**

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**TWO MEN ARE DEAD IN RUINS**

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**Trapped in Headhouse of Gypsy Grove  
John Early and Antonio Batiste Lose in Mad  
Fight for Lives and Fall Back in Seething Furnace.  
Others Jump Forty Feet to Safety,  
While Four Force Their Way Through Flames**

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**REMEMBERING PANCOAST,  
MINERS FLEE IN PANIC**

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**Rickety Ladders Serve as Sole Exit for Many Inside Workmen -  
Cool-headed Party Trail Behind Closing Doors  
and Cutting Off Smoke,  
John Dykes, Weighman, Slides 160 Feet From  
Headhouse to Top of Carriage**

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**THE DEAD**

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**JOHN EARLY, thirty-eight years old, check weighman, of 317 North Apple street, Dunmore; married,  
ANTONIO BATISTE, forty years old, head tender, of Spencer street, Dunmore; leaves wife and four children.**

**THE INJURED**

**HARRY STEVENS, sixteen years old, an oiler, of 540 Warren street, Dunmore; cut and bruised about the head. At State hospital.**

**MICHAEL WALSH, boss headman, of Dunmore; face and hands burned.**

**PETER CLAPP, fifty-eight years old, headman, of Smith street, Dunmore; face and hands burned, and bruised about back. At State hospital.**

**ANTONIO MECCA, eighteen years old, truck boy, of Smith street, Dunmore; arm broken by jumping.**

**JOHN DEYKES, twenty-four years old, company weighman, of 313 Drinker street, Dunmore; face and hands burned and suffering from inhaling smoke.**

Following so soon after the terrible Pancoast disaster, a fire that yesterday afternoon completely destroyed the Gypsy Grove breaker, north of Dunmore, and cost the lives of two men, the injury of five others and the possible death of several who are missing, was filled with dramatic interest, in which the hurried scramble of 400 men from the mine, after they received a warning was a significant feature. Fifty breaker boys, none of them more than sixteen years old, escaped from the burning breaker, rushing through the doors and sliding down chutes as the roof blazed over their heads.

The two men who lost their lives worked at the top of the structure, with eight others, four of whom jumped thirty-five feet to the ground and were injured, one of whom, John Dykes, weighman for the company, grabbed the mine cage cable as he was falling backwards into the shaft and slid 160 feet into the mine to the top of the cage which was standing at the middle vein. Deykes' face and hands were burned as he slid through the flames.

The other three men who were at work in the "headhouse" escaped by running through the fire into the lower part of the structure.

### **Inside Men Escape.**

The warning that was sent in to the 400 men in the three veins of the mine filled them with panic. Men and boys dropped their tools, deserted the gates they were tending, left mules standing in the gangways and fled in all directions towards openings they knew of. The memory of the Pancoast disaster, in which so many men were smothered, added to their fears and prompted them to rush blindly for safety. A few who did not lose their heads closed the mine doors after the fleeing men had passed through and cut off all possible danger of suffocation by smoke. Within a few minutes after the fire started the engineers closed down the fans and the heat of the burning breaker, which was built directly over the shaft, drew the smoke from the workings.

There being no gas in the Gypsy Grove mine, the turning off of the fans was not attended with any danger of a gas explosion.

The 400 miners escaped through four openings that were easy of access. The greater number were hoisted on the cages at the No. 1 colliery, located about 200 yards west of the burned breaker. Thirty men, led by John Deykes, who warned them of the fire after he had slid down the rope, ran through the "Middle" vein to the foot of an abandoned air shaft, a mile distant, only to find the ladders that formerly reached to the surface, broken and rotted. The men climbed out by means of nails and spikes they drove into the shaft timbers as they ascended. Others came to the surface through the Mountain shaft, two miles from the fire, and a few who had worked in the upper vein found their way out through a drift that opens 100 yards from the main shaft.

### **Checking Up the Names.**

Mine Inspector David G. Williams reached the burning breaker an hour after the fire started. He began an investigation at once and helped the Pennsylvania officials check up the breaker and mine employees. Capt. W. A. May, general manager of the company; W. W. Inglis, general superintendent; J. Palmer, district superintendent; Alex Bryden, consulting engineer; and Mine Foreman Peter Pinckney went into the mine through the No. 1 shaft shortly after the fire had started and spent more than two hours exploring the workings to see if any miners had been unable to find their way out. At 7 o'clock Captain May and his party came out of the mine and announced that every employee had escaped with the exception of the men killed and injured at the breaker. The first aid crew of the upper Pennsylvania district led the officials through the mine.

Ample fire fighting facilities had been provided by the company but these facilities were so close to the breaker that they could not be used.

At 8 o'clock last night Mine Inspector Williams ordered the company officials to take steps toward extinguishing the blazing embers so that a search could be made for the bodies of the two men who had perished in the fire. Fire fighting apparatus from this city and from Dunmore was sent to the breaker and hose connections made with a tank on an Erie railroad switch that passes through the property.

The breaker was located between the Sport Hill section of Dunmore and Throop, and is about a half mile north of the end of the Drinker street car line and the beginning of the Moosic Lake railroad. The Pancoast mine is not more than two miles distant from the Gypsy Grove.

### **Locomotive Spark Starts It.**

The fire started at 4:20 o'clock. A spark from a passing locomotive dropped on the roof of the breaker and the tindery, oil-soaked wood began to smoulder. A chute tender shouted to Outside Foreman Floyd Munson that the breaker was burning, and Munson sent word to Engineer George Taylor to blow the fire alarm and stop the breaker machinery. Munson started to pull out the breaker hose to fight the fire on the roof which, he said, was not of uncommon occurrence, locomotive sparks having frequently dropped on the breaker and started small fires that were put out without difficulty.

The locomotive spark had fallen on a tar-papered roof that covered the lowest chute of the breaker and rose to the headhouse, more than 100 feet above it. Before Munson had time to connect the hose the flames swept along the tar-paper roof as if it had been a powder train and whirled about the headhouse. The tooting of the fire gong and the shouts of the men on the ground attracted the attention of the ten men in the headhouse and of the breaker boys, who forgot all about fire drills and rushed to the doors that opened from the building. Thirty boys jammed the main doorway fighting their way out. A dozen others dropped into the coal chutes and found their way out through the bottom of the building.

### **Little Warning to Men.**

The men in the headhouse had hardly a minute's warning of the fire. Deykes, one of the men who escaped, says that he heard the shouts of fire before the gongs were blown, and looking out of a window saw Foreman Munson unreeling a line of hose. Deykes says he told the other man there was a fire in the breaker, but since no smoke was visible from the window, the men did not hurry any in getting out.

The position of these men in the headhouse is familiar to most mine workers. Their duties consist for the most part in taking the cars of coal from the carriage, dumping them and then shoving the empty cars back on the carriage. From the point where the coal is dumped, the lump coal chute runs down and over this chute, at only a few feet above, runs the main roof of the breaker. Along the side of this chute extends a flight of steep stairs, and this is usually the only means of egress from the headhouse, excepting for the carriage. The eight workmen at the Gypsy Grove were, therefore, trapped. The flames swept up along the tar-covered roof and consumed the structure like tinder, the flames bellying down so that passage by way of the flight of steps was cut off.

Early, the check weighman, Deykes says, went looking for his tally sheets, and the other men leisurely prepared to get out of the breaker.

In less than a minute, Deykes says, the flames burst through a window in the headhouse, cutting off every escape except by jumping from a window forty feet above the ground or being lowered on the cage.

### **Engineer Doesn't Respond.**

The ten men scrambled for the cage, and signaled the engineer to lower them. There was no response from the engine room, and the flames which were growing fiercer and closer every second drove the men from the cage toward the window, the only escape left. The ten struggled to get through the window, but only four succeeded. These four jumped to the ground and were injured. Deykes says he was pushed backwards from the open window and fell into the shaft, grabbing the hoisting rope as he fell. Early also fell into the shaft, grabbing the hoisting rope as he fell. Early also fell back from the window, Dykes says, but he fell into the flames that were eating through the floor of the headhouse. Batiste met the same fate. The other three men ran through the flames and fought their way under the burning roof to the lower part of the breaker, where they got out after the breaker boys.

### **Deykes Leads Them.**

When Deykes reached the top of the cage that stood at the middle vein, and clambered from the hood to the floor cage, he found ten miners signaling the engineer to hoist them to the surface. Shouting that the breaker was burning, Deykes led the men to the deserted air shaft, where they climbed to the surface on the decayed ladders and by means of the nails and spikes they drove into the timbers.

Thirty other men in the middle vein ran toward the No. 1 shaft opening, closing the doors behind them as they went. Small puffs of smoke from blazing embers that dropped into the shaft, added to the panic of their flight. These men descended ladders to the lower vein at the foot of No. 1 Shaft and were hoisted to the surface. The men in the upper vein, which is so close to the surface that in some places it permits of stripping, ran toward the slope opening near the breaker.

The greater number of the miners were at work in the bottom vein, nearly 200 feet below the surface. A telephone warning was sent into these men by Engineer Gray and foot-tenders, and company hands ran through the workings to warn the miners. They notified most of the men, but there were a few in the innermost working who had not heard of the fire until 5 o'clock, their regular quitting time. These men were found by company officials who had been sent in to search for them.

### **No Danger to Miners.**

At no time, however, Captain May and Superintendent Inglis say, were the men in the mine in any

danger of being smothered. With the turning off of the fans, they explained, the breaker fire, instead of forcing smoke into the mine, created a natural draft that drew it through the shaft opening.

Joseph Murro, sixteen years old, of Throop, a nipper boy in the middle vein, who escaped with the men who were hoisted through No. 1 Shaft, says, however, that there was plenty of smoke near the foot of the shaft when the men started to run after they had been warned of the fire. The smoke burned his eyes, the boy said, but it did not follow them after they had closed the first two doors west of the shaft.

### **Old Tinder Box.**

The Gypsy Grove breaker was one of the oldest in the northern anthracite region, and one of the few breakers that stand over the shaft mouths. The breaker was erected in 1867, several years before the Avondale disaster, which led to the enactment of a law that no breaker be build over a shaft. The wood in it was dry and in many places rotted and oil soaked, and the tar-papered roof and thick coating of coal dust made the breaker blaze like burning oil once the fire got under way. The rapid spread of the blaze made it impossible for the outside employees to reach the pumps or fire-fighting apparatus, before they too were destroyed by the fire. All of the buildings near the breaker, including the blacksmith and carpenter shops, boiler rooms, offices and several wooden shanties were burned, and the flames started half a dozen fires on the culm dump nearby.

The property loss will amount to \$50,000 Captain May said, and the breaker and other buildings were insured for \$40,000. The breaker will not be rebuilt, the officials announced last night, plans being already under way to mine the coal from the No. 1 Shaft workings. Only a few of the 450 man and boys on the Gypsy Grove payroll will be thrown out of employment.

### **To Be Inspected Next Week.**

Captain May said that for several years his company the advisability of abandoning the Gypsy Grove breaker, and that under his orders the structure was to have been inspected next week, with that aim in view. He declared that everything about the property had been safeguarded against fire as much as possible, and that men were employed at all times to remove coal dust and debris as it collected. Superintendent Inglis said that he had ordered signs to be posted throughout the interior of the mine, with directions to the men how to reach the surface in case of fire or panic. These signs, he said, were to arrive in a few days, and were part of an order placed for all the mines of the Pennsylvania Coal company.

The signs had been ordered, Superintendent Inglis said, because of the lessons taught by the Pancoast fire. Another precaution which the company had taken in the event of fire, the officials said, with the establishing of a regular fire drill in the breaker. At least once a month, they said, the fire gong, five taps of the breaker whistle, had been sounded, and the breaker boys were taught to form ranks and march from the building. This precaution, Outside Foreman Munson claimed, aided in preventing any casualties among the breaker boys yesterday.

### **Working in the Ruins.**

A large force of men worked all night trying to extinguish the blazing ruins of the breaker so that a search may be made for the bodies of Early and Batiste. Mine Inspector Williams supervised the work and the company employees were aided by firemen from this city and Dunmore. Three thousand feet of hose were sent to the fire by Superintendent H. F. Ferber, of the local department, and the Dunmore

department sent two fire engines and several thousand feet of hose.

A search was also made for the bodies at the foot of the shaft, some of the officials being of the opinion that Early and Batiste may have fallen into the mine. The sump at the bottom of the shaft was filled with debris and before this could be cleared away the falling timbers from the shaft made further search impossible. At midnight the shaft timbers were in flames and there was danger of the fire spreading through the mine, the officials feared.

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*The Scranton Tribune-Republican, Saturday, April 29, 1911*

Searchers in the ruins of the Gypsy Grove breaker yesterday came across a small heap of human bones scattered among a pile of charred wood just inside a stone wall that surrounded the shaft opening at the base of the breaker. The bones were in small pieces and were gathered from the debris by the use of a screen through the wood ashes were shaken. The largest pieces were gathered from the debris by the use of a screen through which the wood ashes were shaken. The largest piece of bone was part of a human's pelvis. Another searching party found another small heap of bones at the foot of the mine shaft. These bones, too, were broken in small pieces, and as in the case of the bones found in the breaker, the largest piece was a human pelvis.

The bones are those of John Early, the check weighman, and Antonio Battiste, the headman, who lost their lives in the breaker fire Thursday afternoon. Nothing that might lead to their identification could be found by the searchers. No buttons, pen knives, watches or even shoe nails remained of the apparel or articles carried by either man. Both bodies had lain in the fire until even the metal trinkets they carried were melted away.

[summary follows]

The pelvis bones found in the breaker ruins were smaller than those found at the foot of the shaft. The smaller belonged to Early, the larger identified as Batiste. Early's remains were found by John W. Covaleski, special policeman of the Pennsylvania company, around 2 o'clock yesterday. Earlier in the morning, 10 o'clock, searchers at the foot of the shaft found Batiste's remains. These searchers were led by District Superintendent Jesse Palmer and Mine Foreman Peter Pinckney.

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**Transcribed and contributed by Richard M. Reese, 2000**

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