



[http://www.tribdem.com/news/laurel-highlands-haunts-tragedy-spawns-eerie-stories-of-phantom-miners/article\\_3fb6095e-bb8a-11e7-a0be-c3b860baf59f.html](http://www.tribdem.com/news/laurel-highlands-haunts-tragedy-spawns-eerie-stories-of-phantom-miners/article_3fb6095e-bb8a-11e7-a0be-c3b860baf59f.html)

FEATURED

## Laurel Highlands Haunts | Tragedy spawns eerie stories of phantom miners

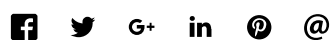
By Ronald Fisher

rfisher@tribdem.com 5 hrs ago



The aftermath of the July 10, 1902 explosion at the Rolling Mill Mine in Johnstown that killed 112 miners is shown.

Courtesy of Johnstown Area Heritage Association



The first large-scale mining began in the Johnstown area when the Cambria Iron Co. opened the Rolling Mill Mine in 1856.

The Rolling Mill Mine, located off Route 56 on the hillside next to the Johnstown Inclined Plane, covered the largest area in the nation worked by a single opening. In 1922, it covered 10 square miles and the farthest working face was 5 miles from the entrance.

On July 10, 1902, approximately 11 a.m., a powerful gas explosion occurred in the Klondike section of the mine, ultimately claiming the lives of 112 miners.

"This devastated the immigrant communities," said Johnstown Area Heritage Association President and CEO Richard Burkert.

"A lot of the immigrants were young and from Eastern and Central European countries," he said. "There were 40 Polish miners and many Slovak immigrants that lost their lives in the explosion."

During the turn of the 20th century, coal was the dominant power source in the United States, which led to the creation of many jobs in the area.

The demand for workers attracted many unskilled laborers to the area.

Most of the immigrants did not plan to remain in the area; however, two-thirds of them eventually stayed, according to Burkert.

"Single men, living in temporary arrangements," Burkert said.

Because of the large number of temporary residents working in the mine, it took longer than usual to identify many of the bodies discovered.

In the July 11, 1902, edition of the Johnstown Tribune, an article titled “A ‘Tribune’ Man In The Mine” recalls the account of an unnamed reporter’s two-hour journey through the Rolling Mill Mine just a day after the disaster.

The reporter, with a miner’s lamp in hand, made his way unnoticed down the steps leading into the shaft.

The article reads: “From the womb of the mine came up intermittent blasts of chilling air which smelled of the night and reminded one of bats hanging down from damp places in musty chambers and of rats gazing stealthily at one from behind rickety doors.”

Further into the story, it reads: “At one place five or six miners had been stationed, with orders to allow no one to enter through the doors before which the men stood guard, for beyond these doors, lurked a gripping, subtle death which can kill by filling the lungs with a gas as deadly as that which did Mt. Pelee’s bidding.”

The explosion was attributed to what miners refer to as “firedamp,” a methane gas mixture.

While only seven of the miners were killed during the explosion, the rest were killed by an asphyxiating gas called “afterdamp” that spread throughout the mine as they fled to the only other exit, the Millcreek Portal, located several miles away.

The mine was reopened on July 14, 1902, but the disaster devastated the immigrant community in Johnstown, which provoked calls for investigations and greater safety measures. An inquest discovered that the disaster was caused by an unnamed miner who had used an open flame lamp in a mine section known to be dangerously gaseous.

The “Rolling Mill Mine Disaster” still ranks as one of the most deadly accidents in the history of mining in the United States.

Many ghostly stories have been passed around the area since the accident. Some people have claimed to see apparitions of miners walking the James Wolfe Sculpture Trail, near the Inclined Plane, that leads to the mine entrance.

According to the Southwestern League of Apparition Technologists (S.P.L.A.T.), there was a story circulating about a 10-year-old boy who reported seeing phantom miners carrying lunch buckets on the trail.

“It was said that the boy had no prior knowledge of the Rolling Mill Mine.” said S.P.L.A.T. co-founder Walter Hutsky.

While S.P.L.A.T. is no longer in existence, the stories once shared by the organization remain to be heard.

Burkert admits to hearing a story similar to the one shared by Hutsky, but said that he finds the haunting tales of Rolling Mill Mine not to have much merit and to be more along the lines of a tall tale.

The story, told by a former CamTran employee, is about some boys seeing miners on the trail leading up to the mine, Burkert said.

Burkert noted that he hasn’t heard of many haunting stories that have made their way through the area, which he said is surprising.

“With all of the tragedy that took place in this area, you would think that you would hear even more ghost stories,” he said.

Few traces of the mine exist. All that remains is a sealed-off mine portal located along the James Wolfe Sculpture Trail.

---

Ronald Fisher is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. Follow him on Twitter @FisherSince\_82.

MORE INFORMATION



[Laurel Highlands Haunts | Inmate who escaped from the hangman heads legends list at Old Cambria Jail](#)

[Laurel Highlands Haunts | Bedford resort has 'magic' to it](#)  
[Laurel Highlands Haunts | Martha of the Midway among region's most famous 'ghosts'](#)  
[Ghosts wanted in Windber, as hotel seeks world record](#)

0 comments

Sign in

2 people listening

	+ Follow	Share	Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest

### This Week's Circulars



Tribune-Democrat Events

- WED  
1

**Brit Floyd**  
Cambria County War... | Johnstown, PA
- SAT  
28

**Raise the Spirits - Halloween dinner**  
The Crow's Nest | Johnstown, PA
- SAT  
28

**Ace's Kid Friendly Halloween Party**  
Ace's | Johnstown, PA
- SAT  
28

**Halloween ComicFest at BENT WO...**  
BENT WOOKEE COMIX | Johnstown, PA
- SAT  
28

SUN  
29

MON  
30

TUE  
31

WED  
1

THU  
2

See all events Add your event

Ronald Fisher

