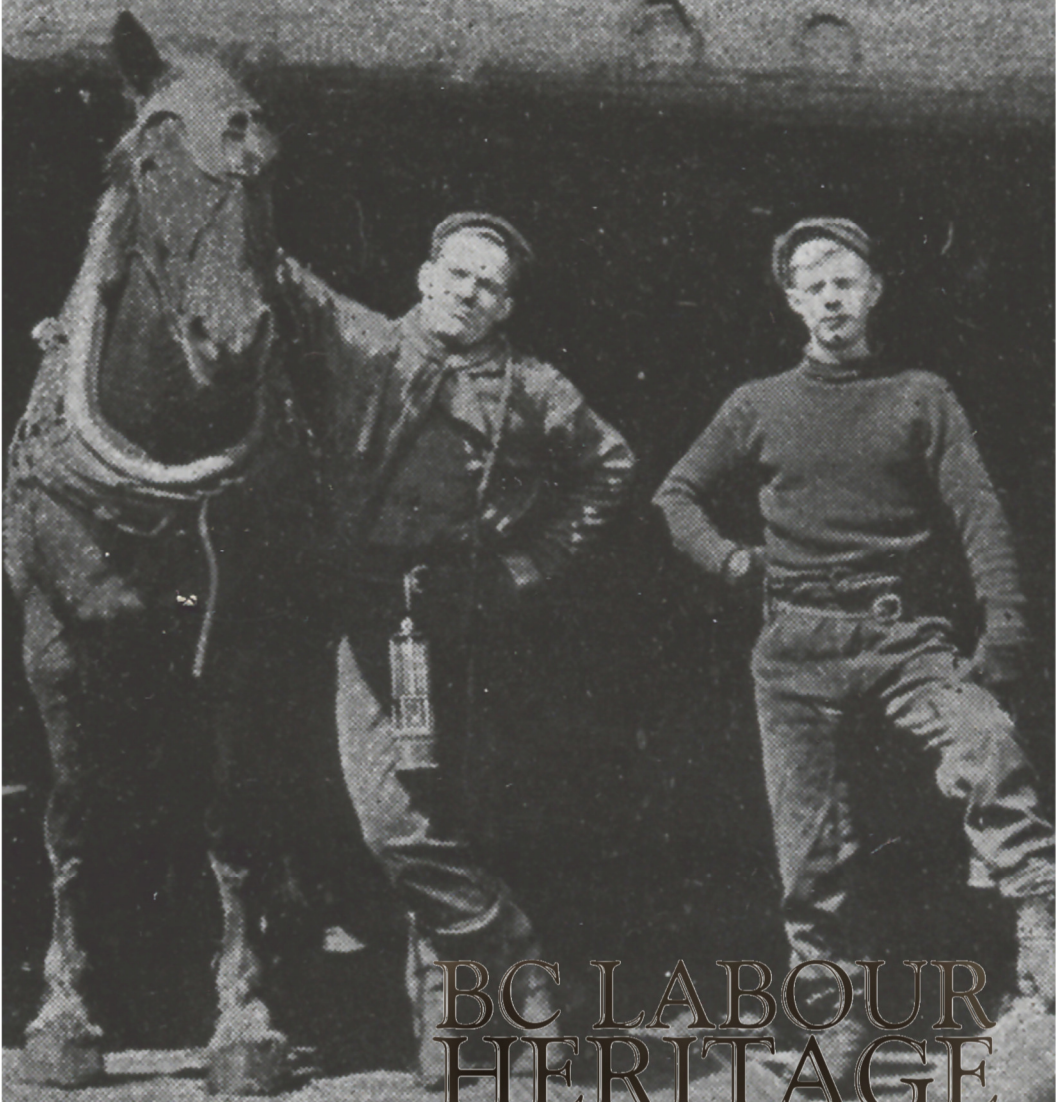


# Coal Creek Mine Disaster

April 5, 1917



BC LABOUR  
HERITAGE  
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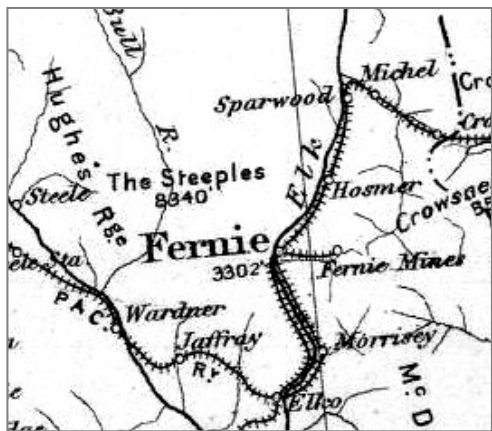
**“...it is the one disaster that led directly to a strike entirely concerned with a demand for safer working conditions.”**

## Coal Creek Mine Disaster 1917

by Wayne Norton

Anyone familiar with the early history of coal mining in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley knows that loss of life through accidents and explosions is a distressingly persistent strand of that history. Estimates vary, but the number of men killed while employed by mining companies in the region is at least 500. The disaster at Coal Creek in 1917 is but one tragedy amongst many and has been overshadowed by others resulting in greater loss of life. However, it is the one disaster that led directly to a strike entirely concerned with a demand for safer working conditions.

The Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company claimed an unenviable share of lives lost in the region's coalfields. Just four years after mining first began at Coal Creek, an explosion took the lives of 128 men. That disaster of 1902 remains one of the worst in Canadian history.<sup>1</sup> Apart from single fatalities resulting from



ABOVE: Map No. 20, Railways: British Columbia and Yukon, 1906. In Department of Interior: Atlas of Canada.

COVER: Four miners and horse at the entrance to a Coal Creek mine. Courtesy Fernie Museum J00012

accidents, explosions in the company's mines at Morrissey and Michel took nearly three dozen lives prior to 1917. Following another explosion (and another death) at Coal Creek in 1915, shareholders attending their annual general meeting in Toronto were told that working the mines at Coal Creek generated twice as much gas as was produced by the most dangerous coal mines of Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The events of April 5, 1917 served as a grim reminder to all members of local union 2314 (United Mine Workers of America, District 18) of the dangers they faced underground on a daily basis at Coal Creek. At 10:30 in the morning, what was later thought to be the greatest explosion ever to occur at Coal Creek ripped through the No. 3 mine. All thirty-four of the men then at work in the mine were killed instantly, their names published a week later in the *Fernie Free Press*.<sup>3</sup>

## EXPLOSION AT COAL CREEK

X Just as we were on the press news arrived of a terrible mine explosion at Coal Creek, which has probably snuffed out the lives of thirty-four or thirty-five men employed in No 3 Mine. X

The disaster occurred at 20 minutes past ten and only the merest details are obtainable.

One body, that of Hugh Malarkey, has already been recovered near the pit mouth. He had evidently been in the mouth of the tunnel and his head was crushed by flying rocks.

Grave fears were for a time entertained for the men employed in No. 2, which is directly connected with No. 3, but all the men in this mine have come out safely.

A rescue train with the full government rescue plant was immediately rushed to the mine and the men are working hard to enter the mine but very slow progress can be made owing to the tremendous area of the mine, which extends nearly two miles underground.

Following is a list so far as we have been able to obtain of the men at work in this mine:

Jos. Atkinson	Wm. Bird
Geo. Richardson	J. Steliga
J. Bravieno	Hugh Malarkey
Thos. Whitley	John Monks
Wm. Puckey, Fireboss.	Albert Barton
Albert Smith	Teddy Coates
Frank Smith	P. Cherkey
Harry Haydock	Joe Campbell
Wm. Silverwood	J. Machin
Wm. Brown	Buseti Giovochino
Bennie Clarkstone	Vittorio Bagiole
W. Clarke	

A large crowd of anxious wives and children are eagerly waiting for news from the mines but the Company clerk in charge, J. S. Irvine, refuses to give out any information at this time and the above list of men has been obtained by questioning those who have comrades in the mine.

The General Manager, Mr. Wilson, is in Calgary but is expected home this morning.

Nearly all the above mentioned men are well known about town and it is hoped that later reports will bring the news that the explosion has not extended to all parts of the mine, and that some of them will be rescued alive.

This is the second big accident which has occurred at this mine, it being partly affected by the big explosion of 1902, when some 128 men lost their lives.

Fernie Free Press, Friday, April 6, 1917, p.1.

Atkinson, Joseph	Giacomazzi, Giovanni
Bagioli, Vittorio	Gormaly, Pat
Barton, Albert M.	Haydock, Harry
Benazeth, Firmin	Leonard, Augustin
Bird, William	Leonard, Hector
Bosetti, Giaochima	Machin, James R.
Bravin, Joe	McDougall, H.J.
Brown, William	Melarchey, Hugh
Campbell, Joe	Monks, John
Checkley, Thomas	Puckey, Wm. R.
Clark, Wm. Geo.	Puillandre, Frank
Clarkstone, Ben	Redoulez, Auguste
Coates, Ed.	Richardson, George
Evans, Thomas	Silverwood, William
Falip, Henry	Smith, Frank
Falip, Jules	Smith, James
Giacomazzi, Bernardo	Stelliga, Joe

It was quickly recognized that recovery work would be extremely dangerous and slow. The first four burials on April 9 drew a huge attendance. To the sound of dirges supplied by the Coal Creek Colliery Band, the procession slowly climbed the hill to St. Margaret's cemetery. The local union's plans to host an ambitious programme of Mayday celebrations in Fernie were abruptly cancelled. It was not a time for celebration.

The horror had a profound impact, not only on the families of coal miners, but on all residents of Fernie and Coal Creek. The chief constable of the region's provincial police stated the event had cast a profound gloom over the entire district. School children were able to view the severely burned bodies of victims at the funeral parlour in Fernie.<sup>4</sup>

In November, all miners on shift managed to escape when another severe bump shook the No. 1 East mine. Investigation of the deadly explosion of April 5<sup>th</sup> eventually resulted in no clear explanation of its cause, but demands from the local union for a judicial enquiry were dismissed. After the last four bodies were finally recovered in June 1918, miners began officially to press their contention that accumulating gas significantly increased risk of explosions when mining was resumed by a second shift immediately after a first shift completed work. Producing the greatest amount of gas, the No. 1 East mine was of particular concern. In July, the local union adopted a position in favour of a single shift to allow gases to dissipate safely, and, although the mines at Michel did not generate comparably high levels of gas, the Michel/Natal local union 2334 (United Mine Workers of America, District 18) voted to support that position as well.

In mid-August, the District 18 executive announced it endorsed the stance of the two local unions.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Thomas Biggs, president of District 18 and himself a member of local union 2314,

gave a pledge to the general manager of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company that no action would be taken until October. During the years of the First World War, however, miners at Coal Creek frequently acted contrary to the wishes of their union officials. A well-attended meeting at the Miners' Hall in Fernie on September 5<sup>th</sup> adopted the slogan "Safety First" and voted to walk out immediately. (The previous day, although it resulted in no injury, another heavy bump in the No. 1 East mine was taken as further evidence that concerns about the dangers of working that mine in particular were justified.)

If the background to the strike was extremely complex, the path to its eventual resolution was even more so. The strike was highly unusual in that it had nothing to do with compensation and dealt with the single issue of safe operation of the mines—something the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company regarded as chiefly

***"A well-attended meeting at the Miners' Hall in Fernie on September 5th adopted the slogan "Safety First" and voted to walk out immediately."***

its prerogative. The president of the company declared the walkout was "probably the most inexcusable" strike ever to hit the district.<sup>6</sup> Because the strikers had completely ignored the provisions for conflict resolution in their contract, the company's

general manager refused to discuss the dispute with



Mine rescue team, Coal Creek, ca. 1912. Bill Puckey, second row was killed in 1917 explosion. Evan Evans, front row, was killed in an explosion in 1915. Image courtesy Glenbow Archives.

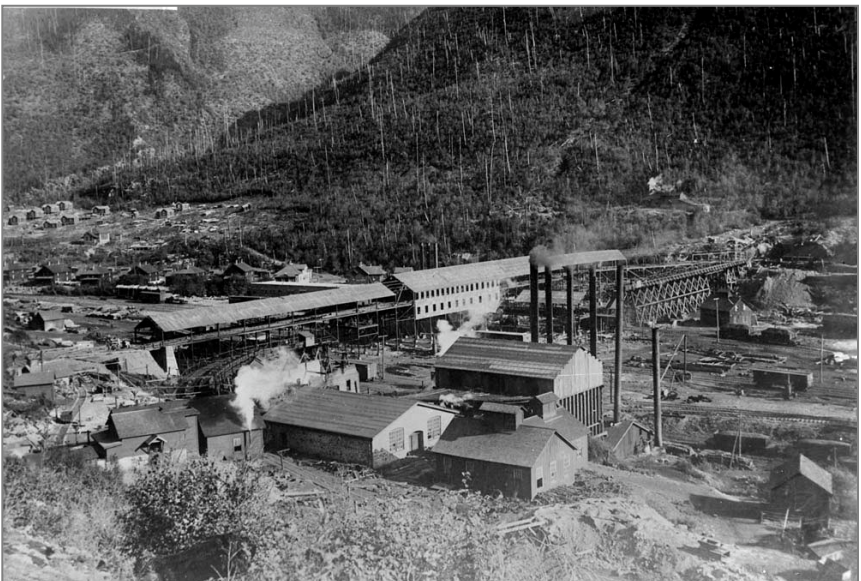
them until they had returned to work. Although the issue affected only operations at Coal Creek, miners began to press for strike action throughout District 18.

That presented difficulties as almost all of the District's three dozen local unions were in Alberta, and safety issues in the mines of British Columbia fell under the jurisdiction of the provincial government and its Coal Mines Regulation Act. Complicating matters even further, all coal mines in the Elk Valley/Crowsnest region had effectively been under federal government control since June 1917 when Vancouver businessman W.H. Armstrong had been appointed as sole commissioner to settle disputes between coal companies and their workers for the duration of the war. His



authority in this respect was so complete he was often referred to as “the coal czar.” <sup>7</sup>

Encouraged by Commissioner Armstrong, the provincial minister of mines called the parties to Vancouver for negotiations in mid-September. Delegates from Coal Creek and Michel were selected to accompany District President Biggs for talks with the company and the government. However, the company’s general manager of the mines at Coal Creek, who was in Vancouver on personal business, refused to participate in the talks until the miners ended their strike. Miners’ delegates were then invited to present their concerns to a meeting of the provincial cabinet in Victoria. Premier John Oliver and the minister of mines each indicated that their chief objection to the proposed single-shift



Coal Creek colliery photo from 1907. Canada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys / Library and Archives Canada / PA-015174



system was that it could reduce production; Biggs insisted it would not.<sup>8</sup>

During the talks, Biggs threatened a general strike throughout District 18 if the demand of the local unions at Coal Creek and Michel for a system of single shifts was not met. The minister of mines then offered to introduce legislation to bring in an eight-hour single shift if a commission of enquiry recommended it. That offer was turned down by a large meeting of the local union at Fernie on September 21, forcing Biggs to leave Vancouver with nothing to show for his efforts. Talks involving the union, the British Columbia minister of mines and Commissioner W.H. Armstrong reconvened a few days later in Calgary, where it was suggested that No. 1 East alone should either be operated on a single shift or closed down entirely. The miners' negotiators were not enthused about the proposal, and company officials still refused to talk about anything until work resumed. An impasse had been reached.<sup>9</sup>

Well aware that a district-wide strike on an issue affecting only Coal Creek would be ill-advised, Biggs turned to Commissioner Armstrong. At the request of District 18, Armstrong issued an order requiring the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company to reopen its mines on the basis of the single-shift system and recommending appointment of a commission to examine the issue.<sup>10</sup> When Biggs presented the terms to yet another meeting of local union 2314, he initially received yet another refusal. Apparently, workers in several outside

occupations were unhappy at the complications a single-shift system would require. Finally, following a confused series of votes at both Coal Creek and Michel, miners agreed to Armstrong's order and returned to work on October 8.<sup>11</sup>

The disaster of April 5, 1917 deserves to be remembered for reasons both obvious and not so obvious. In this centenary year, it is simply necessary to commemorate the explosion itself and the 34 lives that it claimed. The British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre is proud to have been a part of that commemoration. It is also necessary to recognize that the single shift strike of more than a year later was a delayed consequence of that disaster. Calling for "Safety First," the miners achieved their goal of a system of single shifts. Fundamentally, the primary outcome of the strike was recognition that miners had gained a meaningful voice in matters of mine safety. It would be comforting to state that danger disappeared from the mines as result, but of course it did not. Yet only once more would a significant disaster claim lives at Coal Creek. In August 1928, six miners were killed in a blow-out. It would have come as no surprise to the men on strike a decade earlier that the tragedy occurred in No. 1 East.

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*Wayne Norton was born in Calgary and now lives in Victoria. He has published in newspapers, magazines and academic journals on subjects that include music history, women's ice hockey, prairie settlement, public health, and the local histories of Kamloops and Fernie. His most recent book is **Fernie at War: 1914-1919**.*

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>"In Memorium: Coal Creek, 22 May 1902," in *A World Apart: The Crowsnest Communities of Alberta and British Columbia*, eds. Wayne Norton and Tom Langford (Kamloops, BC: Plateau Press, 2002), pp. 178-181.

<sup>2</sup>*Nineteenth Annual Report of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company (1915)*, Address to shareholders by William Wilson, p. 13, Glenbow Archives, Crowsnest Resources Limited Fonds, Crow's Nest Coal Company, Series 3, Annual Reports, M-1561, file 21.

<sup>3</sup>*Fernie Free Press*, April 13, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Sydney Hutcheson, *Depression Stories* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>*Lethbridge Daily Herald*, August 13, 1918, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Address to shareholders by Elias Rogers, *Twenty-second Annual Report of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company (1918)*, p. 8, Glenbow Archives, Crowsnest Resources Limited Fonds, Crow's Nest Coal Company, Series 3, Annual Reports, M-1561, file 21.

<sup>7</sup>Wayne Norton, *Fernie at War: 1914-1919* (Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2017), chapter four.

<sup>8</sup>*Victoria Daily Times*, September 21, 1918, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>Because of the involvement of the provincial government, the strike attracted more attention at the Coast than was usually the case for events in East Kootenay. The Anti-Hun League in Victoria was convinced enemy aliens were responsible for the strike and demanded action from the federal government. One member said miners should return to work for \$1.10 per day—the same as a soldier received. Another suggested the mines be converted into internment camps where enemy aliens would be forced to work. A third said if the striking miners won't work willingly, "let us get some returned men with bayonets behind them." See *Victoria Daily Times*, September 26, 1918, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>*District Ledger*, October 10, 1918, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Report by Fred G. Perry, October 1918, Library and Archives Canada, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, vol. 307.

## Who we are

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

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