

Explosion on board the
Queen of the Pacific
July 29 1886



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Coal Dust Explosion on board the Queen of the Pacific, July 29 1886

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by Tom Paterson

*It was all over in an instant, with a single flash of flame
like that of a lightning bolt.*

According to the headlines in the Nanaimo Free Press, 12 men had been severely burned and several others “slightly scorched” while loading the Pacific. The tragedy began with the cry of Fire! followed almost instantaneously by an explosion between decks and “the outburst of an immense sheet of flame through the forward hatch”.

Of the 20 men who were working below decks, trimming the coal, 12 received severe burns about the head, back, chest and arms. Some of them, panicking or in agony, jumped overboard and, upon being picked up by the ship’s crew, were rushed to the infirmary of Dr. D. Cluness, medical officer for the Marine Department. There, he and Drs. Renwick and Davis partially dressed their injuries while Dr. O’Brien attended to those still on board the ship. All the while, teams of horses and wagons were being rounded up to serve as ambulances

COVER PHOTO: “Loading Bunker Coal in Sacks for Shipment To Alaska - Nanaimo”, BC Archives A-06760

to take the injured men to the city hospital.

The newspaper described it as “a pitiable sight to see the poor fellows with the burnt flesh hanging to their arms, hands and faces”.

Immediately suspected as the cause of the blast was highly volatile coal dust. The fact that the coal was being loaded by chutes, meaning the unavoidable production of dust despite the use of canvas curtains, in the illumination of open-flame lanterns, had created the catalyst for disaster.

Upon the dumping of a coal car (five tons) down the chute, the explosion was described by a survivor as a dull, heavy thud “as like an earthquake”. Amazingly,



ABOVE: The SS Queen of the Pacific was a 336-foot, iron-hulled, commercial passenger cargo steamer/brig built in Philadelphia for the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. It was one of many steamers that ran from San Francisco to Alaska. *Islapedia.com*



Wharves for loading coal were built on Cameron Island , where the Queen of the Pacific was docked on July 29, 1886. The ship carried its own crew of longshoremen and seamen, however some locals were also working that day. The Snuneymuxw people inhabited their traditional village by Cameron Island until 1862 when they were removed. BC Archives, B-04707.

the resulting flame flared upward and outward through the forward hatch without causing injury to the ship. It was all over in an instant, with a single flash of flame like that of a lightning bolt. This was not the way of a gas explosion which, it was thought, would have caused greater damage.

“Another theory advanced,” reported the Press, “was that a giant cartridge had been accidentally left [by miners] among the coal and had been fired by the concussion of the [coal falling down the chute], but that

is so highly improbable that it is hardly worthy of serious consideration. The fire was a sudden outburst of flame, and in a moment had expended itself. We have made careful inquiries into all the circumstances and surroundings of this unfortunate and mysterious accident, and we draw the following conclusion:

At the time of the explosion the weather was extremely sultry and oppressive, and that the limited ventilation in the hold and between decks, was almost stagnant, and the air became impregnated with the fine particles of coal dust.”

“The quick rush of about five tons of coal down the chutes and into the stagnant atmosphere of the between decks, caused a sudden draught and the impregnated atmosphere was thrown into active commotion and while in this state the dust ignited from one of the several lamps hanging about the between decks. It is now a well-established fact that not only will the coal dust in mines, but the dust in flour mills, explode. The preventative for such explosions is good ventilation, and we feel confident that the explosion of Thursday was caused solely by the oppressive atmosphere causing the limited ventilation to stagnate, and the use of ordinary ship lamps...”

Already, despite four doctors and nine nurses working round the clock, some of the worst injured

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had succumbed to shock. First to die, the next afternoon, was longshoreman William ‘Frenchy’ Robee; although a resident of Seattle, he was interred in the Nanaimo cemetery. He was followed hours later, in death and in interment, by fellow Seattle stevedores James [William] Kade, aged 30, and Hans Hanson, 21. Four days after the explosion, August Johnson, a 28-year-old seaman on the Pacific, joined the death toll. This left six longshoremen and seamen in hospital with life-threatening injuries.

Because government-appointed medical officer Dr. Cluness doubled as coroner, between attending to victims’ medical needs, he chaired the first inquest, that of William Robee. Three further inquests, those for James (since corrected to William) Kade, Hans Hanson and August Johnson followed. In every case, Dr. Benwick cited nervous shock because of extensive skin burns as the killer, none of the victims having demonstrated internal injuries through inhalation.

By the ninth day, those still being treated were said to be having “a severe time of it,” some of them in such extreme pain that they had to be forcibly held down in their beds. Perhaps mercifully, next to go were Patrick Priestly, George Watch and Henry Jackson, all said to have succumbed to nervous shock. Sadly for Jackson, his “good heart and strong constitution” appears to have prolonged his agony. John Macdonald died on August 11. James Coffee also passed away several weeks after the explosion.

The Queen of the Pacific, apparently undamaged by the explosion, sailed from Nanaimo harbour on July 31, 1886 bound for San Francisco, with 1,000 tons of Nanaimo coal on board.

A Coroner's Inquiry in early October 1886, deliberated for a brief time and concluded that the death of the nine men were "from the effects of burns caused by an explosion of coal dust".

**Stevedores, Longshoremen and
Riggers' Union, of Puget Sound,
Branch No. 2, Seattle.**

SEATTLE, Aug. 3rd, 1886.

EDITOR FREE PRESS.—We wish through your paper to express our heartfelt thanks and appreciation ~~of the~~ services rendered our comrades by the Citizens of Nanaimo, following the recent accident on the "Queen of the Pacific." And should an opportunity ever present itself, the people of Nanaimo may rest assured that the Longshoremen of Seattle will endeavor to repay the debt that they so justly owe them.

F. D. SPRAGUE, President.

H. STOREY, Secretary.

William “Frenchy” Robee, longshoreman from Seattle

James [William] Kade, 30, native of Newfoundland, longshoreman from Seattle

Hans Hanson, 28, native of Norway, longshoreman from Seattle

August Johnson, 28, native of Sweden, longshoreman from Seattle

Patrick Priestley, 43, native of Ireland, longshoreman from Seattle

George Watch, 26, native of Finland, resident of Nanaimo

Henry Jackson, 42, native of London, England, seaman, boarded in Port Townsend

John Macdonald, 39, native of Massachusetts, longshoreman from Seattle

James Coffee, 32, native of Cork, Ireland, seaman

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