

Mother Lode Disaster—1922

Argonaut Mine Fire Killed 47 Deep Underground At Jackson 50 Years Ago

By Mike Dunne
Bee Correspondent

JACKSON—Fifty years ago today, as Sacramentans spent a lazy Sunday afternoon looking forward to the opening of the California State Fair, a group of night-shift miners were lowered by skips into the deep shaft of the Argonaut Gold Mine.

It was the beginning of the worst mine disaster in the history of the Mother Lode.

The initial 43 men who entered the mine at 5:30 p.m. were dropped off at working levels at 4,500, 4,600, and 4,800 feet. A half-hour later the shift boss, Clarence Bradshaw, entered the mine, followed soon after by five more miners.

As the 11 p.m. lunch hour approached five hours later, a skip tender was lowered with lunch buckets and water kegs for the workers.

Now there were 50 men — 47 miners, a shift boss and two skip tenders — deep in the bowels of the mine.

After eating lunch, the 47 miners returned to picks and drills while Bradshaw and the two skip tenders were hoisted up the shaft on a skip. At the 4,200-foot level, alarmingly, they smelled smoke and in the light of their headlamps saw it descending from levels above them.

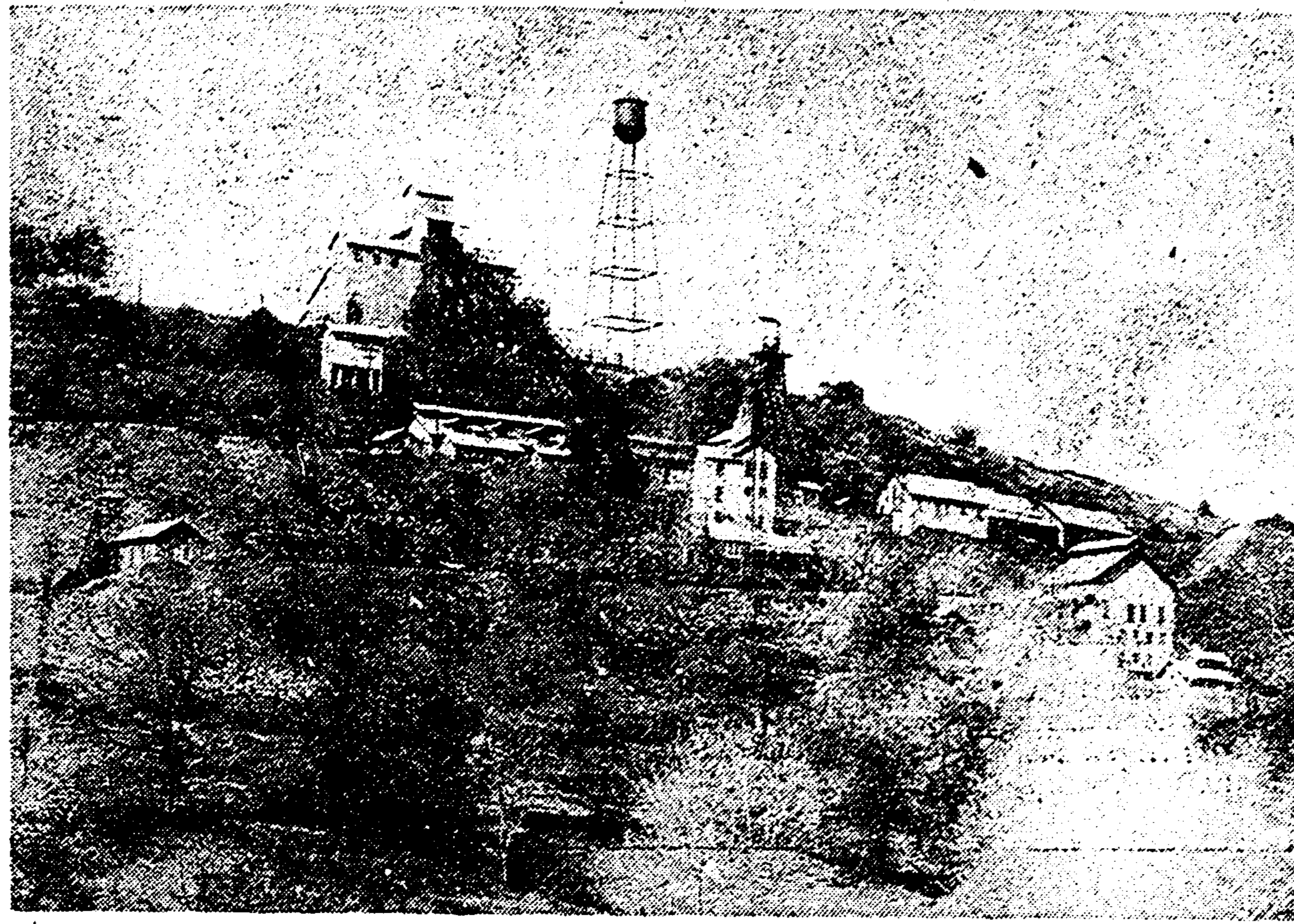
They continued upwards and discovered a fire at the 3,000-foot level where they signaled the hoist engineer for a stop. One skip tender remained at the scene while the other two men went up to the 2,000-foot level where Bradshaw telephoned word of the blaze to the hoist engineer on the surface. A miner at a lower level also telephoned a smoke alarm to the hoist engineer at about the same time.

Within minutes the telephone, signal system, and lights in the mine went dead, cutting off communication entirely.

Bradshaw and other crew members returned to the 3,000-foot level, joining the skip tender there in a futile attempt to extinguish a raging fire being fed by massive timbers that lined the shaft.

Rescue crews and equipment were

The Argonaut Mine 50 years ago today was the scene of one of the worst mine disasters in the Mother Lode.



summoned from as far away as Berkeley and Sparks, Nev. The first to arrive were lowered into the shaft but the flames already had spread so relentlessly they could not pass through the fire zone to reach the miners in the lower levels. The intensity of the heat soon warped the rails on which the skips traveled so they became useless. Even if the fire were extinguished now, there was no way to reach the trapped miners below.

The miners tried desperately to rescue themselves. As it was pieced together later, they assembled near the bottom of the shaft and began the long climb upward on a network of ladders. Except for their headlamps, they were in pitch blackness.

At the 4,350-foot level, blocked by increasingly heavy smoke, they entered a crosscut approximately 200 yards long. They ran toward the rear

of the drift, stopping midway to hurriedly construct a brattice (a barricade of boards, cloth and rubble) against the fumes. The frantic men grabbed loose boards, timbers and waste rock to erect the barrier. They ripped off clothing to cover the back of the brattice, jamming shirts and trousers in the smallest visible cracks and holes.

Gas continued to seep in. The miners moved another 25 feet down the crosscut and built a second brattice, using more rock and less clothes. Then they retreated more than 100 yards to the far end of the crosscut where they huddled in groups — 24 in one; 20 in another and 2 in a third — awaiting rescue.

One miner, William Feesel, was not with them. A maintenance man whose duties took him all over the mine, he was separated from the other miners

when the fire was reported.

Two days later, with hopes of reaching the imprisoned men via the main shaft all but abandoned, mining and rescue officials ordered a tunnel be driven from the 3,600-foot level of the adjacent Kennedy Gold Mine south to connect with a crosscut at the 4,200-foot level in the Argonaut.

A day later the same officials, uncertain of what rock conditions might be encountered in the first rescue tunnel, launched a supplementary rescue effort south from the Kennedy's 3,900-foot level.

Volunteers from the Argonaut, Kennedy and other mines in the area worked around the clock in four to six hour shifts. Byron O. Pickard, district chief of the US Bureau of Mines at the time, later said, "Never was harder or more trying work done by miners."

As the men bored into hundreds of feet of solid rock and debris, working conditions were hampered by poor air, intense heat and the low roof of the drift. Wheelbarrows were used to take out the muck and the passage was so narrow the men using them had their hands and knuckles scratched and torn by the jagged rock on the side walls.

Originally it was estimated the task would take a week. But the week passed and then more days. The State Fair opened and closed. Fall school sessions began. State Treasurer Friend W. Richardson defeated Gov. William D. Stephens for the Republican nomination for governor. Newspaper headlines on the Argonaut disaster grew smaller, reflecting hope one day, despair the next. Anxious relatives, weeping wives and terrified children who had grouped about the

mouth of the mine during the first days and nights now remained at home.

Early Monday morning, Sept. 18, three weeks after the men were trapped, rescuers broke through at the 4,200-foot level of the Argonaut.

Rescue teams wearing gas masks hurried into the subterranean labyrinths in search of the 47 miners. About 4:30 that afternoon they spied the first brattice built by the miners on the 4,350-foot level.

The air in front of the barrier was so bad that a canary, carried by a rescuer to test the air, toppled from its perch and the team's carbide lights were extinguished. They broke through the first bulkheads, then the second and explored the crosscut. Eventually their flickering lamps disclosed 46 decomposed bodies at the end of the workings.

It was evident none of the men had panicked. Some were sitting supporting their heads in their hands; others were lying with coats under their heads. A father and son were locked in each other's arms. Two brothers were lying side by side.

On the slate face of the crosscut one of the trapped men had used the smoke from his carbide lamp to write "3 o'clock gas getting strong." He also wrote the name "Fessel". His light and life apparently ended as he started to write "4 o'clock". The times were believed to have been early Monday morning, Aug. 28, only a few hours after the fire started.

"No indications of struggles, impatience, or fear were observed," Pickard said. "At the time the bulkhead was completed, considerable toxic gas is believed to have been in the crosscut."

Removal of the 46 bodies took two days. On Thursday Sept. 21, 46 gray coffins, draped in United States Flags and heaped with flowers, were loaded onto four trucks at a makeshift morgue in the mine office. With the Jackson City Band playing funeral music, the remains were interred in the community's three cemeteries —

See Page B2, Col. 5

The Sacramento Bee

Metropolitan News

Sunday, August 27, 1972

Page B1

Mother Lode Mine Disaster Killed 47 Men 50 Years Ago

Continued from Page B1

Protestant, Catholic and Serbian Orthodox — following outdoor funeral services at each site.

It was a year later that Fessel's body was found, buried under a mound of rubble on the 4,650-foot level. The miner who wrote the name Fessel may have been trying to leave word on Fessel's location but the message was never finished.

Today, half a century after the di-

saster, several of the burial plots remain unmarked, their only headstone the black gallows frame over the Argonaut Mine on the shoulder of a small hill northwest of the three cemeteries.

Cause of the fire was never determined. Some blamed a short circuit in the high-voltage cable in the mine; the mine management blamed the Wobblies — members of the radical International Workers of the World — who had in the past dabbled in arson.

The disaster did not close the Argonaut. Operations continued there until 1942 when the high cost of materials, the scarcity of labor and wartime limitations on gold mining shut it down. Over a 92-year period, the Argonaut had produced \$25,179,160 in gold.

School Staff Pay Boost Is Urged

Continued From Page B1

The bottom of the scale is what is earned by employes with only a college or university bachelors degree, whereas the top bracket reflects a masters degree plus 24 units

Sacramentan, 22, Is Electrocuted