



## **ARGONAUT MINE DISASTER FACTS and HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### ***The Argonaut tragedy remains the worst mining disaster that has ever occurred in California***

The Argonaut Mine deposit on the Mother Lode gold formation in Jackson was discovered in the early 1850s by two African American freedmen, William Tudor and James Hager. They called their mine The Pioneer and operated it until it was purchased by the Argonaut Mining and Milling Co. in the late 1800s..

In 1922, the Argonaut was the second richest mine in California, producing more \$25 million in gold before being closed by executive order to aid the war effort in 1942.

In 1922, the Argonaut's inclined shaft was 4900 feet long. Temperature at the lowest levels reached 90 degrees F. More than 72,000 gallons of water were removed from the mine every 24 hours.

### ***The Disaster, August 27, 1922***

The 47 miners trapped by the mine fire were mostly immigrants, listing birthplaces in 13 countries.

The managements of the Argonaut and neighboring Kennedy Mine put aside longstanding bitter legal differences and suspicion to work together in the rescue effort.

The rescue was covered by an army of reporters and motion picture crews, arriving by plane, train, automobile and motorcycle. Pilots slept in their biplanes at the tiny Amador County airport, ready to deliver photos to Stockton, Sacramento and San Francisco newspapers. Italian and Serbian language newspapers covered the story in detail.

Pilot Lt. Lee Port flew Industrial Accident Commission officials in a De Haviland airplane from San Francisco to Jackson, 122 miles, in the record time of 58 minutes.

The Southern Pacific train carrying personnel and a Bureau of Mines Rescue Car broke all previous speed records for the 139-mile trip from Elko, Nevada (4 hours, 15 minutes).

As many as 200 men worked almost 3 weeks to reach the doomed miners from the neighboring Kennedy Mine, wheelbarrowing rock and debris through a tunnel too narrow to allow ore carts and too low for the men to stand up. The tunneling was so arduous that the underground crews worked for 30 minutes and then had to rest for 1 hour.

For the purposes of raising morale, the local Red Cross received special dispensation from the federal Prohibition director to obtain 480 bottles of bourbon to issue to the rescue workers (Prohibition banned sale of alcoholic beverages in 1920).

No photos or reporters were allowed underground during the rescue attempt. *Sacramento Star* reporter Irving Moore disguised himself and succeeded in being hired onto the rescue crew to work undercover. He lasted only one shift and risked physical violence from the miners had he been discovered. His life was threatened after his story ran.

At least eight female journalists covered the disaster. Ruth Finney, a novice reporter with the *Sacramento Star*, got her big break in covering the rescue, with her by-line appearing on the front pages of newspapers world-wide.

Live radio newscast of the breakthrough of the rescue tunnel was the first in history, carried over radio KPO in San Francisco, broadcast by the *San Francisco Call* on September 18, 1922.



## FACTS and HISTORICAL CONTEXT, cont...

### ***Aftermath & Impact***

Sympathetic Americans banded together to raise money for the miners' families. At a ball sponsored by Grauman's Million Dollar Theatre in Los Angeles, several of the rescuers -- friends of the dead miners -- made special appearances in their denim mining garb and described the ordeal. In all, more than \$45,000 was raised nationwide -- about \$1,000 per miners' family.

California Governor William Stephens appointed a special committee to investigate the conditions in the mine and causes of the disaster. The committee released seventeen mine safety recommendations which began the decades-long progress toward Federal regulation and enforcement of the mining industry.

The Argonaut and Kennedy mines were required to maintain a permanent connection between the two mines, providing an emergency exit at the lower levels of the mine. Improvements in ventilation systems in both mines were made.

Mine Superintendent Virgilio Garbarini, a brilliant, self-taught mining engineer, resigned a few months after the disaster. Clarence Bradshaw, shift boss the night of the fire, moved his family out of Jackson in November, 1922. Neither returned to mining.

The summer after the 1922 disaster, Argonaut and Kennedy miners received a raise of 50 cents per day – a 9 percent raise designed to “attract a better class of miners.”

Ruth Finney scooped more than 100 newsmen at the disaster. She went on to work in San Francisco and Washington D.C. covering the Teapot Dome Scandal, the Colorado River dam project, and writing an acclaimed series on Eleanor Roosevelt.

In 1928, a fire on the Kennedy property spread to the headframe, severing the hoisting cable. The miners underground were able to escape through to the Argonaut in the connection opened during the 1922 rescue effort.