

# BLACK TUESDAY

On Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1887, two explosions occurred in the No. 1 Esplanade Coal Mine that devastated the thriving city of Nanaimo and changed the lives of the local mining families forever.

The city of Nanaimo (comprised of 3 wards at that time), had a population of approximately 4000 people. The largest employer in the city was the Vancouver Coal Mine and Land Company which started construction of the No.1 mine in 1881. Full production was ramped up by 1883. At the time of the explosion, the No. 1 Esplanade Mine was British Columbia's second largest coal producing mine.

May 3<sup>rd</sup> started as usual with children making their way to school and shops opening for business. The miners working the afternoon shift packed their lunches and grabbed their equipment and headed out to the pit head of the No. 1 Mine for their 12:00pm start time. There was a total of 154 men working in the mine that afternoon. At 5:55pm, citizens were startled by two rumbles that were quickly followed by the piercing sound of the Mine's steam whistle that signaled the state of emergency at the Mine. In the Mine below, a raging fire engulfed the large ventilation fan and housing assembly and shot black smoke up the No. 2 shaft. The Nanaimo Fire Brigade was summoned at once. Emergency assistance was immediately requested from the city of Victoria via telegraph for additional fire hoses and medical supplies which were promptly delivered by train. Every able body in Nanaimo rushed to the Mine to assist with the fire containment and rescue efforts. Ships that were anchored at Nanaimo Harbor and Departure Bay spared their crews to assist the Nanaimo Fire Department in operating the manual pump Fire Engine.

One man who selflessly assisted the rescue efforts of the trapped miners was Samuel Hudson, a 46-year-old miner who worked at the Wellington Mine. As soon as he heard of the tragedy, he and a handful of fellow miners made their way to the No. 1 Mine. He descended into the shaft of the mine ahead of his team, but soon succumbed to the effects of the afterdamp (carbon monoxide gas). Samuel tragically left a grieving wife and 4 children.

Seven men survived the blast and were brought to the surface to the relief of their families. One such lucky man was Richard Gibson who was Mayor of Nanaimo and was also Overman of the mine. Following the explosions, he stumbled through the darkened tunnels of the lower portion of the Slope and through the airway shaft. With no light to guide him, he felt his way through the air shaft. He heard what sounded like a frightened mule and followed this sound until he found his way to the stables. (There was a total of 17 mules below ground at the time of the explosion). Once Mr. Gibson reached the stables, he was rescued along with six other men. It was reported that Gibson was extremely dazed from the effect of the afterdamp and was not able to give a sound account of the explosion except to say that when the Mine "fired" he was knocked down the by sheer force of the explosion.

In the days following the accident, wives of the still missing miners stood around the Mine in the rain desperate for any word on their husbands' condition. Despite repeated rescue attempts, 7 bodies were never recovered. The victims ranged in ages from 15 to 71. In the final tally, the explosion took the lives of 148 men (95 Caucasian men, 53 Chinese men). Left to grieve were 46 widows and 126 children. Fortunately, the Vancouver Coal Mine and Land Company sustained the standard of living of these grieving families by offering free housing and fuel along with the provision of food and money donated from relief groups across Canada and the United States. San Francisco, being a major buyer of Nanaimo coal, contributed a vast amount of money to these supportive efforts.

The fire took two weeks to extinguish, and regular mining operations resumed six months following the tragedy. The mine continued coal production until it was officially closed in 1938.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023, it will be 136 years since this tragic event in Nanaimo's history. It remains the worst mining disaster in the history of British Columbia and the second largest industrial accident in Canada's history. Nanaimo will forever remember this tragedy referred to by some as "Black Tuesday." The tragic loss of so many citizens was felt deeply by everyone around the world and triggered an outpouring of compassion and humanitarianism that has yet to be equaled.

The city will fly all municipal flags at half-mast in remembrance of the miners who were lost that day. The No. 1 Esplanade Mine Disaster memorial plaque is located at the corner of Milton and Esplanade Streets.

Written by Wanita Malkiewicz  
Nanaimo Historical Society  
April 14, 2023