

“Monongah: My Story”

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2nd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

December 6, 1907 came as any day in the tiny, snow covered town of Monongah, West Virginia. Many men and children, most of them foreign from far away countries, awoke that morning to go work in the coal mine. As miners finished breakfast, and wished good-bye to their loved ones, they set out for the coal mine just across the river. This was the day after the Feast of Saint Nicholas, and many miners did not go to the mine that morning; these would be the lucky ones.

As I put my boots on, and packed my lunch pail, my son came running from his room. He told me of a terrible incident that would occur at the mine, and begged me not to go. I assured him that this was only a bad dream, patted him on the shoulder, and left the house at a brisk walk.

I reached the crest of the hill and saw the massive smoke stacks roaring with a thick, dark cloud of smoke. The air had a piercing feeling as it came across my face. Then, a thought jumped into my mind making me stare awed on the top of the hill. A voice behind me said, “Are yaw coming, or you just going to stand here all day?” It was my best friend, Tom. I came out of my trance, and followed him to the entrance of the mine where we retrieved our caps, shovels and pick axes, and headed for the lift.

At the bottom of the shaft, the lift came to an unsteady halt, having plunged us into total darkness. Tom, I, and probably twelve other people turned our head lamps on, and stepped out of the lift. We started our journey into the labyrinth of twisting tunnels, listening to the sound of the lift creak back to the surface to retrieve more miners.

Tom and I met our friend Ricardo, walking back to the lift with an overwhelmed expression on his face. “What’s got into him?” asked Tom. “I dunno,” I said. Just then, my lamp went out. “I’ll be back,” I said annoyed. I went to the supply building to get a new light, but there were none there. So I walked across the bridge to the main building, but just as I had traveled half way, an explosion erupted from behind, throwing me to the ground.

I spun around to see the hillside above the mine collapse. From a far distance, I could hear cries of distress, coming from the town. I ran back to the place where the opening should have been, throwing all my gear to the ground, and began to dig to the helpless miners. As I dug, sweat pouring of my forehead, another explosion occurred just down the river. It felt as though the world was spinning around me, vision spinning in my head.

Tom, my best friend, was trapped inside the mine, along with hundreds more innocent souls. The thought of Tom lying inside the mine gasping for air made me a little sick. Then, about ten feet from where I stood, a man began climbing out of a fox hole, crying and screaming in denial. I held my breath, thinking it might be Tom, but it was only Peter Urban.

That day, over three hundred miners, including Tom, lost their lives in what later would be known as the worst mining disaster in the history of the United States. I retired from mining and began working for a bureau that was formed in 1910, to help create safety laws for mines so that nothing that disastrous would ever happen again. I still go back every year to pay my respects to Tom. The memory of what happened that cold December morning will probably haunt me for the rest of my life.