2004 First Place Informative Research Paper

1924 Castle Gate Mine Explosion and Its Impact on Local Families

On the cold, sunny morning of March 8, 1924, the residents of Castle Gate, Utah, awoke and complacently began those familiar daily tasks which quietly kept their community operating (Fraser 380). The men of the town went in to work for ten exhausting hours of mining coal while their wives put breakfast on the table for the children and readied the family for the day. No one anticipated the life-altering event that occurred only an hour into the morning. At 8:30 A.M., Mine Number Two exploded, killing all 172 men who worked within and simultaneously destroying the livelihoods of 417 dependent individuals, among them 25 expectant mothers (Costa 280). The explosion irrevocably altered the days, months, and years that followed for the families of the victims, thrusting them, husbandless and fatherless, into an uncertain existence in a male-dominated world. Although each family suffered essentially the same loss, their views on fate, their ages, and their ethnicities profoundly affected both their interpretation of the accident’s significance and the choices they made in response to their loss.

The mechanization of the Industrial Revolution brought America into a new era of manufacturing and made coal-dependent steamships and steam-powered railroads the chief means of transportation (World Book 716). In locations where coal was a natural resource, “company towns” popped up across the land and began to flourish at the turn of the century (728). These settlements were typically begun by coal companies that provided housing, facilities, and wages for workers and their families in exchange for the grueling work of mining coal (728). Coal miners often worked ten hours a day, six days a week, some beginning as young as the age of nine or ten (Americana 137). Thousands of people were killed from accidents, explosions, and diseases in this dangerous profession, particularly those who worked in the tunnels of underground mines (137).

In 1888 the Utah Fuel Company established an underground mine in Castle Gate, a company town named for the castellated cliffs of the western gateway to Castle Valley (Carmody 13). By the time of the 1924
explosion, the Utah Fuel Company employed about 1500 men in the coal mines, and the entire town centered on the industry (Harrison 25). Because the workers worked in such close proximity, they became extremely close. Thomas Harrison, a long-time resident of Castle Gate, recalled that “the guys all got together all the time to talk about how much coal they hauled and how much coal they got—that is all they had on their minds” (25). Castle Gate was a close-knit community of people where, according to resident Naomi Parkin, “everybody shared each other’s happiness or everybody’s sorrows” (22). Thomas E. Holton, a native of Castle Gate, spoke of the simple trust and closeness of the town: “In those days I don’t think we had a key to the house. You never locked anything up and it was just a good bunch of people” (2). The carefree happiness of the town ended with the tragic accident in the mines, an accident which seemed to be waiting to happen. When the company first dug the tunnels, they shot down some of the coal on the roof of the mine but left some where it was (Thacker 3). While the official cause of the explosion is unknown, most believe that on the day of the explosion miners shot down some of the remaining coal on the roof of the tunnel, releasing methane gas that had accumulated there unbeknownst to them (3). The gas probably traveled through the mine to places where the men were working with open flames, causing the gas to ignite the massive explosion (3). Rescue teams worked a full traumatic week to bring all 172 bodies out of the mine for identification and burial, a week that was forever imprinted into the minds of the victims’ families (Fraser 379).

When the residents of Castle Gate were interviewed in the 1970s by a team of BYU graduate students, their comments suggested that they had considered the “what-ifs” of the accident. Fate seemed to guide some of the men to their death while ensuring the safety of others, compelling some to mourn life’s injustice and others to rejoice in its good fortune. 1924 was a turbulent year for the price of coal, and the company had decided in February to close down Mine Number One (Costa 280). Single men were laid off first because they had no family to support—while this must have seemed at first a blessing to the married men, it was the disproportionate number of married to single men in the mine on March 8 that left such an astounding number of families without income (280). The married men were transferred to Mine Number Two on the morning of the explosion, an unlucky coincidence that many relatives of the victims felt deeply (Houghton 7). Charles Huff, who grew up in Castle Gate and was a working young man at the time of the accident, told the story of
how chance saved his life (5). He had been fired from the mines only a few weeks before because his boss disliked him. He later described watching the dead bodies being carried out of the mine and said, “They brought the man that they put on my job out in a gunny sack” (5). It was said that “young fellows were kind of glad that they were laid off” (Huff 8).

Two incidents testified to Castle Gate residents of the perils of ignoring spiritual manifestations and warnings. Several of those who were children or teenagers at the time of the explosion told the story of Bishop Thomas. Thomas was apparently warned “of the Lord” all through the night before the explosion not to go to work the next day, and his wife urged him to stay home (Houghton 8). Worried about supporting his family in a time when money was scarce, Thomas decided to go in anyway and therefore met his demise (8). The journal of young Lena Thorpe recounts the ominous warning her mother Eva received (Peterson). Eva Hall, wife of explosion victim John Thorpe, believed she had a premonition of the accident by way of a dream. A few weeks before the explosion, Eva dreamed that she saw a ball in the sky exploding into many beams of light, each beam falling on a specific house in Castle Gate. A month later, the explosion killed miners from each house that had been touched by the light in Eva’s dream. Forced to contemplate the matter in depth, many were impressed with life’s manipulation of apparently minor decisions.

When residents of Castle Gate were interviewed about their remembrances of the week of the explosion, different age groups emphasized different aspects of the experience. Those who were children in 1924 spoke mostly of the confusion they felt and of the gruesome images that remained with them as they watched the turmoil around them. When asked what she remembered of her childhood in Castle Gate, Annie Mills spoke of the explosion:

You know, we were just little kids and we didn’t understand what it was all about. They loaded [the bodies] all in box cars and brought them down here. I can remember my mother and grandmother crying and I thought, well what are they crying for, because I didn’t realize just how bad it was. (6)

Lena Thorpe, daughter of John Thorpe, recorded that her father was “burned as black as coal from the waist up, and they could only put his pants on—if they had tried to put a shirt on him, his arms would have fallen
off” (Peterson). Such graphic images were etched into the minds of many of the children of Castle Gate. Saline Hardee Fraser, thirteen at the time, wrote the following in her journal:

It just seemed like all I could remember, how those grey caskets, I couldn’t tell you how many, just seemed like an awfully lot to me. And they were all exactly the same, and they were all on those wooden horse stands. They had a list on the wall and kept adding, it just had names...It all runs together on things, like one long day that went on forever. (Fraser 387).

Saline related experiences that demonstrate how upsetting the time was for children. She told of being scolded for playing with a friend during such a sad time (Fraser 386). She described her confusion as she watched her despairing mother scream at her aunt for doing the dishes and then suddenly hug her for no apparent reason (386). She talked about the state of the town:

Downtown was chaos. Everybody was running every which way, everybody had different stories, people were crying, some were really screaming. Kids didn’t know what to do…Everybody was scared to death—but everybody kept saying, “Oh, they’ll get out, just wait, they’ll get them out, they’ll be all right!” (Fraser 383)

She closes her account by telling of how the event continued to stick with her in a tangible way:

When people got to thinking everyone was dead, Mother in a hurry had two black dresses sewed up. I believe it was a year we wore those damn black dresses to school, and they were not washable. Mother made us wear them everyday and I remember the kids in my class making fun of me in my black dress. (389)

Many of the children talked about the smell of death that lingered in the town. Fay Thacker remembered that “those dead bodies stunk of burnt flesh that you could smell all over town. We had to bury our clothes to get rid of the smell” (5). This smell forever served as a keen reminder of the horrible incident that the children did not really understand (Fraser 383).

The teenagers of Castle Gate, by contrast, understood the long-reaching effects of the explosion and considered what it meant for them in the future. Many of the young men had always expected to go into mining in their adult life, and some had even cut short their education in order to begin mining—as one man remembers
people were “striving to get underground” (Holton 3). After the accident, however, the career paths of many of these young men changed. Thomas Harrison, who was fifteen when his father and two brothers died in the explosion, said, “I used to say, ‘I wouldn’t go back in the mines again if they put windows in them.’ The guys used to say, ‘You won’t now, but I bet you will.’ Well I didn’t” (9). Many teenagers also shouldered more responsibility when the family breadwinner died—Agnes Thorpe, Lena’s younger sister, forever lost the opportunity to go to college because she had to work to support her large family after the explosion (Peterson). The older children who understood the disaster allowed it, in part, to govern what they did with the rest of their lives, changing the future course of their families.

The degree to which the accident affected the lives of Castle Gate families was governed not only by age but also by the ethnicities of the families. Coal mining in America had attracted people seeking more abundant job opportunities and better working conditions (Peterson). Castle Gate was no exception and by 1924 had become the home of Italians, Greeks, African-Americans, Japanese, northern Europeans, and Americans alike (Costa 281). Although some ethnic groups, especially the Japanese, remained somewhat segregated in their living areas and general cultural practices, people who grew up in Castle Gate claim that all the residents got on very well with one another regardless. Native John T. Houghton said, “People figured if they could work together, they could play together” (45). Ethnicity did play an important role, however, in the manner in which the widows conducted their affairs after the explosion. After the accident, the government established the Castle Gate Relief Fund Committee to appropriate compensation money to families based on their individual needs (Katsanevas 254). They hired social worker Annie D. Palmer to evaluate the families’ situations and report back to the committee (254). Palmer kept thorough records of the experiences of each family, prompting Janeen Arnold Costa to write an article about her fascinating findings. Costa writes, “The tragedy presents a unique opportunity to observe the actions taken by women in an era when choosing to maintain ethnic identity or to assimilate were options primarily exercised by men” (280). Costa goes on to summarize Palmer’s notes of the different ethnic groups of widows in Castle Gate, noting patterns in behavior that stemmed from cultural habits. The Greek widows in particular acted according to cultural expectations. Because male and female domains were separated in Greece, with men acting in the public arena and women in the privacy of the home, husbands
provided a crucial link to the outside world, a link which broke with the explosion (282). Excepting the widows who had teenage sons old enough to take on a father’s role, the Greek widows chose to use their compensation money to return to their homeland. Palmer described how difficult it was for the women to start out the voyage on their own: “The women kept up bravely until the train was in and they began to get aboard. Then they broke down and women and children wept aloud as they bade farewell to the spot where the saddest hours of life had been endured” (Costa 283). Those able to remain in America sought indefinite sojourn with relatives, but none of them ever worked in any job that required close contact with outsiders (284-285).

The Italians had established a population in America long before the Greeks, and subsequently possessed more experience in America and knew of work opportunities outside of the mining industry (Costa 286). All of the thirteen Italians widows chose to stay in America, and eight of them remarried quickly after the accident, losing the compensation from the relief fund but gaining a father figure and income provider for their families (287). Two of the Italian women who did not remarry supported themselves by selling wine, and although prohibition was at its height, local authorities closed their eyes to the situation (287). More open to “outsiders” than the Greek women, several of the Italian women also opened their homes to boarders to earn money.

Because anti-Black attitudes were even stronger than those against other foreigners, the two African-American widows struggled most of all—Cora Willis, who had not been legally married to her husband, was denied compensation and had to sell her own kitchen chairs to buy food (288). Both families eventually moved out of Castle Gate but continued to face discrimination everywhere they went.

The English, Scotch, and Belgian widows, although new to America, faced little discrimination and had little trouble assimilating into the new society because their skin color, language, and religious customs resembled those of American citizens (Costa 290). While a few of these women did emigrate back to their homelands, most stayed and earned money by taking in boarders, providing meals for single men, or finding jobs in local businesses (290). A few even pursued an education and found relatively high-paying teaching jobs. For these widows, the future looked considerably less bleak than for those who were unfamiliar with the American way of life.
Each widow grieved her loss, but only a few never recovered from the tragedy. Of one Scottish widow, Palmer wrote, “To her, life seems to be all sorrow—a sorrow to which she clings, from which she has no desire to be separated” (Costa 290). One of the Greek widows, Mrs. Kapakis, returned to Greece but died of “despair and insanity” three years after the accident (291). Most of the women pulled through the tragedy, stronger for their trial. Costa summarized their accomplishment nicely:

At a time in history when men provided the primary means of support and identification with the community, these women and their families were able to rely on relatives, company and relief fund support, and significantly, their own resources, talents, and strengths to survive a disaster in which so many lives were lost. (Costa 292)

Although almost all moved forward with persistence and determination, the degree to which to accident affected the views and actions of the Castle Gate residents differed with their views of life, ages, and ethnicities. These factors triggered unique reactions to the incident and provided an impetus for permanent change in the way of life in Castle Gate.
Works Cited


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