

The Butte Mining Disaster and its effect on Mining Safety
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On June 8th, 1917, a brand new cable that was being lowered into Butte's Granite Mountain shaft broke free. The three ton cable fell, bouncing and grating against the wall of the shaft. The cable crew only just managed to get clear, huddling in the 2,600 foot station as the massive lead sheathed wire dropped past. When the dust cleared, the men inspected the snarled heap at the foot of the shaft. In little mood to begin removing the ruined cable, the men headed home. They had worked for nearly eighteen hours, and all for nought. The cable was terribly damaged. It had a copper conductor in the center, and was protected by a layer of oil soaked jute or hemp fiber, which in turn was capped by a lead sheathing. The fall had scraped off over half of the lead, exposing the fibers and wire. The men of the crew dreaded their fate after playing a role in damaging a \$5,000 piece of company property. Little did they know that they had set off a chain of events that in time would leave 163 men dead.

The men reported the cables loss to assistant foreman Ernest Sullau. The responsibility of removing the cable would fall to him. Sullau rode the auxiliary cage down to the 2,400 foot station, which the cable lay fifty feet below, and climbed out to inspect the cable. There, he and a shift boss named John "Baldy" Collins crawled along the timbers of the shaft, a 1,300 foot drop beneath them to the bottom at 3,740 feet. On him, Sullau wore a carbide lamp. So as he probed the frayed cable, Sullau kept an open flame on his head to light his way. As he probed through the darkness, his light touched the oil soaked insulation. He jerked back and ignited more flammable fibers. He yelled to Collins to help, and they attempted to stomp the fire down. It seemed to work- until fire broke out on the other side of the behemoth cable. The two men climbed up towards the cage, and made it to the 2,400 station, where they called for water. It was too late. The fire had begun catching on the timbers on the sides of the shaft. Flames raced upwards, defying the prominent downdraft of the Granite Mountain Mine, which normally brought fresh air down into the mine. The updraft only made the flames reach higher, and the fire was now roaring upwards. Sullau began running and shouting to get the men out of the mine. He knew that miners were also at work in the adjoining Speculator mine, and that they needed to be warned. Whatever thoughts crossed through his mind that night, Ernest Sullau did not hurry to escape. He ran for others, hoping to save the men toiling in the depths of the Granite Mountain and Speculator mines. Though his efforts would save many, he and 162 other men would pay the ultimate price for their work.

Through this tragedy came one of the greater advancements in mining safety: mandatory signage in mines. For as many men groped through gas and smoke in the deep shafts of the Granite Mountain and Speculator mines, there were few or no signs to guide them to the surface or to the safety of adjoining tunnels. After changes introduced in the decades following the disaster, all mines require signs to guide miners to lift stations, water hydrants, tool caches, and neighboring mine systems. This ensures that if a fire were to break out, men in the mine could

more easily find their way to safer locations. The tragedy of the North Butte fire of 1917 caused mining companies to place more emphasis on the safety of miners. Improvements were also made to the mine systems to better working conditions, and strikes by miners unions hastened the process. In Butte at the turn of the century, most mines had no signs to guide men from lift station to station, and many workers new to the job were sent down with only a vague sense of where to go. Now, according to the Code of Federal Regulations of the United States, all signs must be maintained and kept up to date, be easy to see and read, and be made of durable materials. Safety signs concerning the risks of an area and the mine in general are also to be posted and maintained. This regulation alone has improved mining safety in the last century to make emergency evacuations of mines much more efficient. Mandatory signage is the greatest safety advancement in Montana mining history.

References:

Punke, Michael. *Fire and Brimstone: The North Butte Mining Disaster of 1917*. New York: Hyperion, 2006. Print.

(Richard Skovlin, personal communication, April 16, 2016)