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DEATH AND DEVASTATION IN THE DEPTHS: THE MONARCH MINE EXPLOSION

Eight Die, One Never Found
in 1936 Disaster

Constant, short shrieks of a mine steam whistle broke the silence of a crisp winter's morning January 20, 1936. It was a sound no one connected with coal mining ever wanted to hear because it signaled an emergency and probable disaster in the mine.

The word spread that there had been an explosion at the Monarch #2 Coal Mine about two miles south of Louisville and a similar distance east of Superior. A huge explosion deep in the mine rocked the region around 6:20 that fateful morning. The night or graveyard crew was just about finished with its shift and a day crew numbering over 100 was waiting to enter the mine for their stint which would have begun at 7:00.

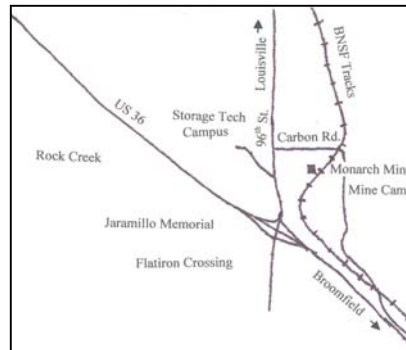
Amidst the dust and debris in the mine, Italian immigrant Nick Del Pizzo cried out to his partner, Bill Jenkins, "We gonna run like rabbits . . ." The two miners then ran 400 feet down a horizontal tunnel and then climbed a ladder 300 feet up a ventilation shaft and into the open air to safety.

Word of the explosion spread quickly and rescue crews were organized, eager, in spite of the obvious threat to them, to descend into the Monarch to rescue the eight men from the graveyard shift. The team's job was to clean the floors of the shaft,

"One of these mornings you're going to see the Monarch blow," disaster survivor Nick Del Pizzo once said to his sister.

oil and grease machinery, test for gases, and get the mules ready and in place for the day shift.

The rescue teams were hampered in their attempts to rescue the stranded miners due to the presence of the "after damp" or "black damp," a deadly mix of carbon dioxide and nitrogen. Rescuers didn't want to risk making the disaster worse, but eight men remained unaccounted for. Officials, family, friends, and fellow miners milled about the mine entrance, wrestling with the enormity of the disaster and stymied in their attempts to get the others out.



Over the next few days, everyone's worst fears were realized. The bodies of seven men were found and the eighth was never located, forever consigned to the bowels of the Monarch.

"The price King Coal extracts of the men who go down in the mines was being paid Monday . . ." was the lead-in for a Denver Post article, January 21, 1936.

The roster of the lost men is as follows:

Tom Stevens, Louisville
Ray Bailey, Broomfield
Oscar Baird, Rickard's Camp
Tony Di Santis, Louisville
Steve Davis, Louisville
Kester Novingger, Broomfield
Leland Ward, Monarch Camp
Joe Jaramillo, Monarch Camp

"Some of the men were discovered seated on the floor of the mine, their equipment at their side, their faces turned toward their lamps, as if to watch the flame burn out with the creeping presence of carbon dioxide, the black damp," is the description by author Phyllis Smith. Tragically, the body of Joe Jaramillo was never found.



Joe Jaramillo, Sr. holds his son Ernest and is flanked by Joe, Jr., nephew Lawrence Montez, and daughters Josephine and Henrietta left to right.

The cause of the explosion was investigated and discussed. The National Fuel Company owned the Monarch and eventually was blamed for the tragedy by a coroner's inquest



Joe Jaramillo Sr. and Jr. are seen in a studio setting. Note Mt. Holy Cross in the background, a long way from the Monarch Mine Camp in reality.

and by the federal government. Since sub-bituminous coal of Northern Fields was unstable by nature, the mine owner and superintendent were responsible for covering the loose coal dust (some reports indicated five or six inches thick) with rock dust, a limestone mixture that supposedly reduced the explosive factor of coal dust to zero. Documentation showed the mine did not do that. Consequently, when a spark from an unknown source most likely ignited methane gas hovering in the tunnel, the explosion was accelerated by the standing coal dust.

The deceased miners were symbolic in many ways. They represent the hard work ethic of the industrial laborer, the dangers implicit in that line of work, and were a virtual United Nations reflecting the amalgam of many nationalities and ethnic groups.

Joe Jaramillo's circumstances were unique yet typical. He migrated from the coal fields of northern New Mexico, eventually settling in the Monarch Mine Camp, a collection of company owned houses, a store, and school located next to the mine itself.

By 1936, Joe was the stable or barn boss taking care of the mules who

worked below pulling mine cars and were stabled underground. It is supposed that he was working near the explosion site and his body covered with rubble. Rescue teams continued to look for Jaramillo, but the threat of another explosion forced them to cease the effort on February 6, 1936, leaving him permanently entombed in an ebony grave

The mine company erected a red granite stone at a spot determined to be 300 feet above where Jaramillo's body was thought to be. It was visible from US 36 for more than 60 years. When the Flat Iron Crossing Mall was built, it was necessary to move the monument which is now located in Varra Park at the northwest corner of the mall grounds.

The inscription on the stone reads:

**Joe C. Jaramillo
1887-1936**

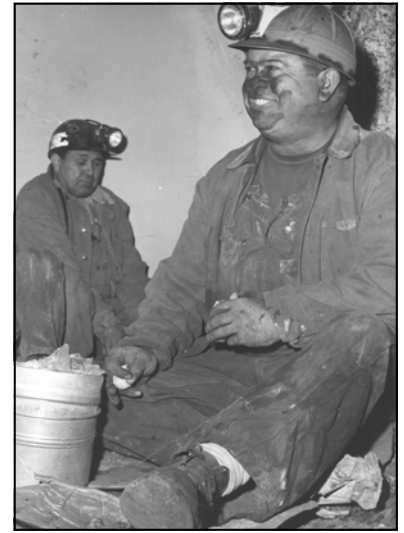
"A faithful employee who died in the performance of his duty"

A new stone now adorns the park just a few feet from Joe's, commemorating the seven other miners who perished.

Joe's widow and children were in difficult straits after the explosion. His fourteen year old son, Joe Jr., went to work as a coal miner in order to support his family. Joe Jr. spent over 40 years in the mines, 28 at the Eagle mine near Erie. He represented the idea that mining "gets in your blood," something he shared with a Denver Post reporter in a 1960 interview.

Joe Jr. lived modestly in Lafayette and, according to his wife, never suffered more than a "mashed foot" in those 40 plus years, retiring in 1978. Although only 56 years old, he was exhibiting some health issues and, sadly, died of a massive heart attack a mere three months after retiring.

Joe Jaramillo, Jr. was drafted to fight in World War II in spite of the fact he was married with five children. He fought in Europe, was captured and a POW for 18 months, received



Joe Jaramillo, Jr. is shown eating lunch during his shift at the Eagle Mine near Erie. The photo was part of a Denver Post article on a day in the life of a miner in 1960.

the Purple Heart, and was decorated by Charles de Gaulle. After 42 years in the mines, loyal military service, and a diagnosis of black lung disease, his survivors had a difficult time proving they qualified for black lung survivors' benefits.

The Jaramillo father and son both paid the ultimate price for mine work. Joe Jr. never talked about the loss of his father; he lived a simple life, content with his decisions and providing a comfortable living for his family.

The Monarch Mine # 2 reopened a few months after the disaster (the site of the explosion had been permanently sealed off), then closed for good in 1947 because it had been "worked out." Now, as the past fades, memories are kept alive by family, monuments and by the naming of Monarch Middle and Monarch High Schools, located not far from the place where the utmost sacrifice was made.

Sources: Personal interview with Josephine Najera and Barbara Barela, daughters of Joe Jarmillo, Jr.; Phyllis Smith, Once a Coal Miner; Bill Cohen, Blast: the 1936 Monarch Mine Explosion; Carnegie Branch Library for local history, Boulder, CO, various print materials on Monarch Mine.

Map and text by Larry Dorsey, Superior Historical Commission.