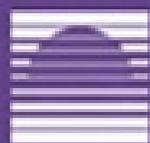


S O S

Stories of Survival

*True Tales of Disaster,
Tragedy, and Courage*

Ed Butts



TUNDRA BOOKS

S O S

STORIES OF SURVIVAL

True Tales of Disaster, Tragedy, and Courage

By Ed Butts



Tundra Books

For Austin, my grandson

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INTRODUCTION

Everybody's life is touched at some time by disaster. It could be something as temporary as the loss of a big game or an initial failure to achieve a desired goal. Or it can be something as deeply felt and permanent as the death of a loved one. There are some disasters, however, that are felt universally. These are the disasters that leave us shocked and sometimes angry and that move us to do something to help, even if we do not live in the places where they have occurred, nor personally know any of the people involved. Almost everyone who heard of the events had an emotional reaction to the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, the devastation caused by a tsunami in Southeast Asia, and the brutal terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. In each instance, millions of people responded to the call for aid.

Some disasters are natural: an earthquake or a hurricane strikes a populated area. Some disasters are man-made: a dropped match starts a deadly fire in a building full of people. War, too, is a man-made disaster. Many disasters are a combination of both. A flood caused by a violent storm is certainly natural. But if death and property damage result because a poorly constructed dam breaks, then there is also a human contribution.

Nobody can prevent natural phenomena such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. But unlike our ancestors, we have the technology to predict them with at least some degree of accuracy, and can be prepared for them. Buildings in earthquake-prone regions are constructed to resist tremors. People are evacuated from the path of a hurricane.

Man-made disasters are almost always preventable. They are usually the result of shortsightedness, stupidity, or greed. A movie-house owner overcrowds his establishment and ignores fire safety regulations. A man-made reservoir is filled beyond the limits of safety so that a privileged few can enjoy sailing. A mining company sends underpaid boys underground in order to maximize profits.

All of the disaster stories presented in this volume focus upon the young people who were involved. Some of them were heroes. Others had miraculous escapes. All, in one way or another, were victims; sometimes of the elements; sometimes of human exploitation. While all of these stories tell of historical disasters, we, the first people of the twenty-first century, must bear in mind that the conditions that spawned them are still with us. Children in Third World countries still work under conditions like those of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, and the products of their toil are sold in our stores. Many nations do not have the economies to construct defenses against natural calamities. Scientists have warned that the effects of global warming are already wreaking havoc with planet Earth. There are still measures that must be taken so that tragedies such as those described in these chapters might be reduced in impact, or even prevented.

THE ASIA

“THE BOAT IS DOOMED!”

Today, many people regard the waters and shores of North America's Great Lakes as summer vacation playgrounds, but in the nineteenth century the five linked lakes were the continent's principal transportation route. Roads were rough and traveling them was painfully slow. Railroads were still in their infancy, especially on the rugged north shores of the lakes. The most convenient way to move people and goods was by water. Every year millions of tons of farm produce, timber, ore, and manufactured goods – as well as thousands of passengers — crossed these inland seas on sailing vessels and steamboats.

Saltwater sailors tended to look down their noses at the freshwater sailors of the Great Lakes. Compared to the vast oceans they sailed, these old salts considered the lakes mere puddles. They changed their tune when they had to navigate the “puddles” of Lake Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan, or Superior, though. These confined bodies of water were often a mariner's nightmare. Tricky crosswinds could turn a routine voyage into a life and death struggle. Storms blew up with suddenness that astonished even the most experienced of sailors. There wasn't much room to maneuver a ship in bad weather and the lakes were mostly uncharted. A gauntlet of reefs and shoals lurked beneath the waves, ready to tear the bottoms out of ships. Still, if you wanted to go from Duluth, Minnesota, say, to Kingston, Ontario, there was really only one way. And maybe the weather would be fair all the way. Maybe!



Seventeen-year-old Christy Ann Morrison was feeling seasick the morning of Thursday, September 14, 1882, as the passenger steamer *Asia* pitched and rolled in the rough waters of Georgian Bay, the huge extension of Lake Huron that is almost as big as Lake Ontario. Christy was too ill to eat breakfast. She recalled the old saying about seasickness: “First you feel like you're going to die, then you wish you would.” She must also have heard that it was better to stay out in the open air than below in a bunk, because Christy remained on deck. Her cabin mates were also seasick, but had stayed in their bunks. They were suffering miserably as the ship rose and fell on the angry waters. Christy could not have known as she fought down her nausea that she was about to endure an ordeal much worse than seasickness.

The *Asia* was a large steamer, approximately 136 feet (41.5 m) long and 23 feet (7 m) wide at the beam (the widest part of the deck). Though she had been in service for nine years, the *Asia* had not been built for the open water of the Great Lakes, but was actually of riverboat design. Officially she was allowed to carry no more than forty passengers, in addition to the crew of twenty-four. On that fateful September day there were more than 100 passengers crowded aboard the ship.

The *Asia's* skipper, John N. Savage, had been sailing the Great Lakes for twelve years, but

he'd been a captain for only one year. Two months earlier, the ship's owners had sent Captain Savage a letter giving him strict orders to keep his vessel in shelter whenever the weather was bad. Perhaps Captain Savage did not fully understand these instructions. Some people claimed that he was illiterate.

On September 13 the *Asia* had already encountered rough weather. One passenger later reported hearing "... cracking sounds ... as if she were being torn assunder ... and then a loud report ... as if the vessel had burst in two." When they put in to the harbor at the town of Owen Sound, a steamboat inspector examined the *Asia* and told Captain Savage, "... she will never get to French River, as she is strained." The captain argued with the inspector and dismissed the warning. Moments later, Christy Ann Morrison boarded the *Asia*, bound for Sault Ste. Marie. She had every expectation of a safe journey. After all, her cousin John McDonald was First Mate.

Also on board the *Asia* as it sailed from Owen Sound at about midnight was Douglas Albert Tinkis, 18, who was traveling with his uncle, J.H. Tinkis. In all likelihood the boy and his uncle were returning to their home on Manitoulin Island after a visit to Owen Sound.

The sky was overcast as the *Asia* sailed down the sound toward the open water of Georgian Bay, but the waters were relatively calm. The ship made a brief stop at Presqu'ile Point to take on wood for the boiler and hay for ten horses that were on the main deck at the bow. Most of the passengers, whose number included nine children, slept soundly through what would be their last night on earth.

At about 8:00 on the morning of the 14th, a storm swept across the bay and suddenly the steamer was being tossed by heavy seas. Sailors knew from past experience that in rough weather the *Asia* did not "answer the helm well" (meaning that the ship was difficult to steer). Now the crew found their ship at the mercy of a storm that was building up to gale force. Douglas Tinkis, still unaware that there was any real danger, ate his breakfast. Most of the other passengers were too seasick to think of food.

For almost three hours the *Asia's* crew battled the raging seas. Christy Ann asked her cousin, the First Mate, if they were going to sink. McDonald said that they had already pushed the horses overboard and if necessary they would jettison the cargo to lighten the ship. Christy Ann saw some people putting on life preservers, but many of the passengers were so incapacitated by seasickness they seemed simply to not care what happened to them. By this time, just before 11:00, Christy Ann was so ill she felt she had to lie down. She went back to her stateroom and crawled onto her bunk.

At about the same time Douglas Tinkis, who had returned to his stateroom, heard his uncle's cry of alarm. "Duga! The boat is doomed!" Huge waves were crashing over the *Asia*, tearing the already strained timbers apart. The inspector's unheeded warning to Captain Savage was turning into a horrible reality. The *Asia* hadn't a chance of making it to French River.

J.H. Tinkis would not survive the shipwreck, but his warning to "Duga" may well have saved his nephew's life. Douglas rushed out of his stateroom, pulling on his hat and coat as he ran. When he realized that the ship was foundering, Douglas dashed back and put on a life preserver. Suddenly the ship listed dangerously to the starboard (right) side and the upper works broke away from the hull. Douglas hurried back out on deck and jumped over the po

(left) side. He managed to pull himself into a lifeboat in which there were about twenty other people.

When Christy Ann Morrison saw water rushing into her stateroom, she realized that the ship was actually sinking. Seasick or not, she had to get out! First she ran into the adjoining stateroom and tried to rouse a woman who was either asleep or prostrate with seasickness. She later said that she did not think the woman even left the stateroom.

Christy Ann pulled on a life preserver and stumbled out on deck. The *Asia* had already rolled over on the starboard side. The girl slid down a rail into the water and sank. When she came up again, she was right beside a lifeboat. In it were Captain Savage, First Mate McDonald, the two women from her stateroom and some other men. The captain grabbed Christy Ann by the arm and pulled her into the boat. Her cousin told her to hold tightly to the boat's lifeline and not let go, no matter what.

As the *Asia* disappeared beneath the waves, scores of people struggled in the water or tried to swim to one of three lifeboats the crew had been able to launch. Christy Ann's boat had a pair of oars, but one of the others had only a single oar and the third had none at all. The people in those two boats were helpless before the onslaught of the monstrous waves. Both boats flipped over. The boats would right themselves after capsizing, but each time it happened, people were lost.

Douglas Tinkis was thrown into the water again. His life preserver kept him afloat, but desperate people were grabbing at it and pulling the boy down. He pulled the life preserver off, and climbed back into the boat. There were so many people clinging to it that Douglas dove back into the water and swam to another boat. No sooner had he climbed in than it, too, flipped over.

Thus far Christy Ann's boat had remained upright. She saw the other two boats each capsizing several times. People kept climbing back into them, but in fewer and fewer numbers. Finally both boats were empty.

Then Christy Ann's boat overturned. She clung to the lifeline, just as McDonald had told her, and so stayed with the boat. Only seven people dragged themselves back into the craft: Christy Ann, Captain Savage, First Mate McDonald, a man named McAlpine, a man named John Little, an unidentified man – and Douglas Tinkis! Determined to survive, the teenager had swum to the lifeboat through furious seas after everyone else in his boat had perished.

Now only seven of the *Asia's* people were left, and their situation was not good. The lifeboat was upright, but the water was knee-deep, and there was no bailing bucket. All were wet and chilled to the bone, and a cold wind was blowing. First Mate McDonald fished an oar out of the water, but no one had the strength to use it.

The lifeboat drifted south as the storm died down. After sunset the people in it could see the lights of a town in the distance; probably Byng Inlet. But the castaways were at the mercy of the current, and the town might as well have been a hundred miles away.

In the darkness the men began to die, probably from exposure and exhaustion. "They seemed to go to sleep," Christy Ann said later. The unidentified man went first, followed by Mr. McAlpine and John Little. Then death came for Christy Ann's cousin.

"The mate put his head up to my face in the dark, and asked if it was me. I said 'Yes.' M

hair was flying around and he seized it in his death grip and pulled down my head. I asked the captain, who was near, to release my hair. He did so, and the mate soon breathed his last. Shortly after the mate died the captain laid his head down. I tried to arouse him, but he was dead. I think this was about midnight.”

Douglas and Christy Ann were now alone on the water in a boat full of dead men. She sat in the bow and he in the stern. Christy Ann was afraid that Douglas would go to sleep and die just like the men. She asked him to come to the bow and sit with her, but Douglas said it would balance the boat better if they stayed where they were. He promised he would not go to sleep.

All night the two young survivors kept up a conversation as the boat drifted with its grim cargo. Dawn revealed that they were near land, and the morning sun warmed them and dried their clothes. Using their single oar, Douglas maneuvered the boat to a rocky shore where he and Christy Ann at last set foot on solid ground.

They planned to travel on foot until they reached a community, but Christy Ann found that she could not walk. Douglas lifted the bodies out of the lifeboat and laid them on the shore. Then he dumped as much of the water as he could out of the boat. Christy Ann was too weakened to help him.

The two continued along the shore in the boat, but with only one oar they made very little progress. As night came on again, Christy Ann worried that the water would get rough. Douglas landed the boat on an island. There they made beds out of boughs and spent a chilly, hungry night.

Douglas and Christy Ann were up before sunrise. Once again they tried to row with their single oar, but by now neither of them had much strength left. They did not get very far. They stopped at another island where Christy Ann was sure they would die. Far off the shore they could see what they thought was a lighthouse. Douglas said that maybe someone going to or from the tower would pass by and see them. The exhausted teenagers fell asleep on the rocks.

Half an hour later Douglas awoke with a start to see a Native person, whose name is not known, standing over him. He jumped up and asked the man if he had a boat. The man said that he had a sailboat. His wife was waiting with it at the other end of the island.

In return for Douglas' watch – which was probably waterlogged – the Natives agreed to take the youngsters to Parry Sound, about 22 miles (35.4 km) away. They gave Douglas some bread and pork, which he devoured. Christy Ann could not get any food down. She managed only to drink some cold tea. The woman made a bed for her in the bottom of the sailboat. On Sunday morning, three days after the shipwreck, the sole survivors of the *Asia* reached Parry Sound. There, according to Douglas, “... we were hospitably treated by the inhabitants.”

When he had recovered from his ordeal, Douglas joined in the search for bodies from the *Asia*, hoping to find that of his uncle. A few bodies were recovered, but not the remains of J.H. Tinkis. Douglas' uncle was among the many claimed forever by Georgian Bay.

News of the wreck and the two teenagers' survival caused a great sensation. Holding her lifeline in her hands, Christy Ann posed for a dramatic photograph that became famous. People were amazed that a girl of 17 could survive a harrowing experience that had killed tough, veteran sailors. As time passed, however, Christy Ann became reluctant to talk about

the shipwreck and the terrible days and nights that followed. Her moment of fame was too tragic to relive publicly time and time again.



This staged 1882 photo of Christy Ann Morrison, the only survivor of the wreck of the Asia, became famous, but Christy Ann came to regret posing for it. She hated having to relive her ordeal in public time and time again.

Every one of the Great Lakes has at least one area called a “graveyard.” No one knows exactly how many vessels lie on the cold, dark lakebeds, but the number runs into the thousands. With them lie the bones of the unfortunate people who went down with their ships. The wreck of the Asia was one of the worst disasters that had ever happened on Georgian Bay. It brought about the enforcement of strict regulations regarding safety measures on Great Lakes ships, and the competency of ship officers. Even though the evidence given by Christy Ann and Douglas indicated that the Asia had foundered in the storm, some government officials wondered if the ship might have struck one of the many uncharted shoals in Georgian Bay. As a direct result of the tragedy, the Canadian government embarked on an eleven-year project to completely survey and chart Georgian Bay. Future generations of mariners and passengers would be less likely to share the fate of the people on the doomed Asia.

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THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD

“DON'T GO BACK FOR ANYTHING!”

In late May of 1889, a severe storm tore into western Pennsylvania. Quiet rivers became raging torrents and the water levels of lakes rose dramatically. High in the Allegheny Mountains, Lake Conemaugh, a man-made reservoir, swelled to over 20 million tons of water. In the valley below lay the community of Johnstown. All that stood between Johnstown's people and a major disaster was the South Fork Dam, about 14 miles (22.5 km) up the Little Conemaugh River. This aging structure had been neglected for many years and a few voices had warned that the dam was in need of repair. But not many people really believed the dam would collapse. In fact, there was a standing joke in Johnstown and other valley communities: “Well, this is the day the old dam is going to break.” On May 31, this was no joke.



Shortly before 4:00 PM on Friday, May 31, 1889, Horace Rose stood at a window on the second floor of his house and playfully used a broom to pass a piece of candy to Bessie Fronheiser. Eight-year-old Bessie was at the window of the house next door. After using the same trick to pass a cup of coffee to Bessie's mother, Horace Rose asked the little girl to come over and visit. She knew he was only teasing. It was pouring rain, the river was flooding, and the ground floors of both their houses were rapidly filling with water.

Horace had already complained to his wife that the water would ruin the new wallpaper downstairs, but he didn't think there was any real danger. Johnstown had experienced flooding before, and the water had never risen more than a few feet. Nonetheless, he had sent his son Forest to take the family's team of horses to higher ground. The younger Rose children, Percy, Winter, and June, were in the house with their parents.

Not far away 6-year-old Gertrude Quinn sat on the porch of her new brick home dangling her feet in the water. Her father, James, had given strict orders that everyone stay inside while he and his eldest son Vincent, 16, went to the family owned dry-goods store to move merchandise upstairs. But Gertrude wanted to watch the ducks that were swimming around the front yard. In the house were Gertrude's older sisters, Helen and Rosemary, her little sister Marie who was sick with measles, her Aunt Abbie Geis, who was visiting with her baby son, Richard, and Libby Hipp, an 18-year-old nursemaid. Gertrude's mother and baby brother were out of town.

Unlike Horace Rose, James Quinn was very concerned about the flooding, and not just because of damage to his store. He was worried about the dam upriver. When he'd expressed his worries earlier in the day to Abbie, his sister-in-law had said, “James, you are too anxious. This big house could never go.” James had considered taking everyone to higher ground, but was afraid of exposing little Marie to the foul weather.

Gertrude's father returned home just before 4:00 and scolded her for disobeying his instructions to stay inside. While the nursemaid took Gertrude to change into dry clothes and shoes, James told his family that they were going to the nearest hill. Then he went to the front door to flick ashes off his cigar.

Shortly before 4:00 George Heiser, owner of a general store, above which the family lived, sent his son Victor out to the barn to look after the horses. The animals were tied in the stalls, and on that stormy afternoon, with the waters rising, George thought that it would be better if they were free of their tethers. Sixteen-year-old Victor waded across the yard barefoot and went into the barn. It took him just a few minutes to do the job. He was about to dash back to the store when a noise such as he had never heard before stopped him at the barn door.

A few minutes before 4:00, a passenger on a train that was rolling into the village of Sarah Hollow, 4 miles (6.4 km) downriver from Johnstown. When the train stopped, Ben Heppenstall, 17, of Pittsburgh, and the other passengers learned that there was a problem with the line up ahead. For several minutes the railroad men talked over what they should do. Then, looking down on the swollen river that ran parallel with the tracks, they saw a startling sight rushing toward them from the direction of Johnstown.

With a population of about 15,000, Johnstown was a booming steel town in 1889. Set in the Conemaugh Valley, it was built on the flood plain of a river junction. Here the Little Conemaugh River met the Stony Creek River, and became the Conemaugh River. For most of the year these streams were tame, but in the spring they became raging torrents. The river channels that passed through Johnstown had actually been narrowed to make more building room. That meant that they were not wide enough to contain the volume of water produced by spring rains and thaw.

About 14 miles (22.5 km) up the Little Conemaugh was the South Fork Dam. Constructed of earth and rock, it had been built to hold a reservoir for a now abandoned canal. The dam was 72 feet (22 m) high, 220 feet (67 m) thick at the base, 20 feet (6 m) thick at the top, and stretched 918 feet (280 m) across the valley. At its eastern end there was an 85-foot (26-m) spillway through which water cascaded down into the valley. There had once been iron tubes at the base of the dam for water-level control, but by 1889 these had been removed.

Lake Conemaugh, behind the dam, was a little more than two miles (3.2 km) long and a mile (1.6 km) across at its widest point. Originally it was supposed to have been kept at a depth of 40 feet (12 m). After railroads put the canal out of business, the dam lay neglected for many years. In 1862 part of it washed away in a flood, but little damage was done in the valley below.

Then in 1879 a man named Benjamin Ruff bought the land around the lake – including the dam – and converted it into a resort called the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club. He rebuilt the broken part of the dam, and allowed the lake level to rise to 70 feet (21.3 m). Ruff built a clubhouse and cottages, and stocked the lake with game fish. He put iron gratings across the spillway to prevent the fish from escaping downstream. Wealthy businessmen suc-

as Andrew Carnegie came to Lake Conemaugh to hunt, fish, and sail. The resort was off limits to local people. Groundskeepers chased off "poachers." This was at least in part the cause of strained relations between the rich people up on the mountain and the common folks down in the valley. So when people expressed concerns about the dam, Ruff chose to ignore them.

There was good cause for worry, though. The artificial lake was too big. People complained that the workmanship of the reconstructed part of the dam was substandard, and that the dam had started to sag in the middle. They warned that it would not hold if the volume of water increased. Ruff said that the dam was sound, and that the spillway was sufficient to handle any excess water.

Then came that slashing storm of May 30, 1889. It dumped record-breaking volumes of rain on the Alleghenies. Water coursed down mountainsides that had been denuded of trees by over-logging. It turned the little creeks that fed Lake Conemaugh into violent torrents that ripped away low-hanging tree branches. Lake Conemaugh began to rise. Its surface was littered with branches that the current carried toward the spillway. There they were snagged on the iron grates.

The downpour continued for the next two days. By the morning of Friday the 31st, the rivers were rising at the rate of a foot (.3 m) an hour. In Johnstown, first basements, and then ground floors were flooded. Men were sent home from work and children dismissed from school. Some anxious people headed for high ground. Many more simply went upstairs.

Back at the dam the situation had become critical. The spillway was hopelessly clogged with logs, branches, and other debris. Workmen furiously shoveled earth to try to heighten the dam. Another crew tried to hack out a new spillway. A young engineer named John Parke could see that both efforts would be futile. By 11:00 am the water was slopping over the top of the dam.

Parke jumped on his horse and galloped down the muddy road to the nearest town, South Fork. When he told people that the dam was about to break, no one took him seriously. He sent a man to the railroad telegraph office with instructions to warn Johnstown. But the telegraph line between the communities was down.

At 3:10 PM the South Fork Dam broke. One witness described the noise as a "roaring like a mighty battle." Twenty million tons of water surged down the Conemaugh Valley with force equal to that of the water plunging over Niagara Falls. It stripped the valley walls to bare rock, scouring away trees, soil, boulders, and every living thing in its path. In a little over half an hour Lake Conemaugh was empty, its prized game fish flapping in the mud.

The monster that descended upon Johnstown changed shape and speed as it careened through the valley. At some points it was 40 feet (12 m) high, at others more than 80 feet (24 m). Where its momentum was checked by curves through a raceway of solid rock, the floodwater was slowed. But when the water had a straight downward grade, it accelerated. As it barreled downward, it picked up more and more debris. The water pushed trees, stones, and other solid matter like the shovel of a bulldozer into a great tangled mass. Many survivors would report that at first they did not see the water at all; just a moving pile of trash the size of a mountain.

South Fork was the first community to be hit. Fortunately, most of the village was built

high up on the mountainside and out of reach. Only three people were killed and a handful of buildings destroyed. But one of them was the railway station. Now the thundering pile of wreckage included a caboose, four railway cars and a tangle of twisted steel rails.

Below South Fork, a narrow canyon and an ox-bow loop in the passage slowed the water's descent. Then its progress was momentarily stopped when the great mound of debris piled up against a stone viaduct. But only momentarily! As the angry waters surged back and forth, the masonry crumbled under the pressure and the viaduct crashed down.

With renewed fury the monster fell upon the hamlet of Mineral Point and obliterated it. Sixteen people who hadn't fled for their lives were killed. Several others found themselves on a wild ride down the river on the roofs of their houses.

East Conemaugh was next. People there had a two-minute warning thanks to engineer John Hess, who came down the line in his locomotive just ahead of the flood with his whistle shrieking. That alarm signal saved some lives, but not all. There were three passenger trains parked on sidings, and not everyone had a chance to get out.

The juggernaut smashed into the rail yard and scattered locomotives, some of them weighing 80 tons. At least twenty-eight local citizens were killed. No one knew how many train passengers died.

Now the flood had a straight downhill run and it picked up speed. It slammed into Woodvale, a small community on the outskirts of Johnstown. By the time the brown water had rushed past, only one building in Woodvale was left standing. More than 300 people were dead. A factory that manufactured barbed wire was destroyed, adding miles of twisted, slashing, strangling wire to the already lethal mass of wreckage. Now it was Johnstown's turn. The time was about 4:07.

Some survivors would say that the first sign they had of something amiss was a sudden gust of wind that pressed them against buildings. Others said it was "a roar, like thunder." Many claimed that it was the appearance in the air above roofs and trees of a black cloud of dust and spray – a "death mist."

The monster rolled through Johnstown like a threshing machine through a field of wheat. Houses, railroad cars, trees, horses, and people vanished in the maelstrom of wreckage and brown foam. The advance wave struck a hill on the far side of the Stony Creek River, causing a huge backwash to surge over Johnstown, smashing anything that had withstood the first onslaught. With its velocity somewhat diminished, the wave threw its vanguard of rubbish up against a stone bridge that spanned the Conemaugh River just below the point where the Little Conemaugh and the Stony Creek met.

Once again the tons of debris formed a dam. This time the bridge held. A lake of filthy water now covered the ground upon which Johnstown sat.

Horace Rose had just passed the coffee across to his neighbor when he heard the first low rumble. He ran up to the third floor and looked out. Coming straight at his house was a 30-foot (10.6 m) high wall of tumbling debris. The thing was grinding down all in its path. One of Rose's sons was at his side. The boy cried, "Can we escape?" Rose quietly replied, "No, that means death to us all." Seconds later he was plunged into darkness.

When Rose awoke, he was pinned under fallen timbers. He was in agony, with his right ribs, shoulder, and arm crushed. He heard one of his sons cry for help, but was unable to get to him. His daughter, June, popped up out of the water, then went down again. Rose could not see his wife, Maggie.

Then a man named Phillips emerged from the swirling water. He found Maggie and freed her from the timbers that had collapsed on her. Someone – possibly Phillips – pulled June to the surface. Soon Horace, Maggie, June, and Forest, along with several other survivors were on a floating roof. There was no sign of Percy or Winter.

The roof drifted for hours before it finally bumped into a hotel that had remained intact. The survivors climbed in through an upper window and spent a night of cold misery huddled in the darkness. Horace was in excruciating pain and was certain that his missing sons were dead. Winter and Percy would eventually be found alive and unhurt. Their neighbors were not so fortunate. Little Bessie Fronheiser and her mother both died.

When James Quinn went to the door with his cigar, he saw the black mist and heard the roar of approaching doom. He ran back into the house and shouted, “Run for your lives! Follow me straight to the hill! Don't go back for anything!”

He dashed up the stairs and came down with little Marie wrapped in a blanket. He rushed out the door with Rosemary and Helen clinging to his elbows. Behind him were Abbie, with her baby, and Libby Hipp, who carried Gertrude.

The hill James Quinn headed for wasn't far away, but the water was already up to the children's chins. He fought his way through it, with the girls clutching to his arms for dear life. When at last they had scrambled up the hillside to safety, James looked around and saw to his horror that the others were not right behind him. He started to go back, only to see his house collapse into the water.

Instead of following her brother-in-law, Abbie had taken Libby and the two children back into the house and up to the third floor. Then as Abbie prayed and Gertrude screamed, “Papa, Papa, Papa!” the house shook violently. The floorboards burst open, and the dirty water welled up from below. One moment Gertrude could see her aunt, baby cousin, and nursemaid; the next, they were gone.

Gertrude spat out the “horrible water” and struggled to keep her head above the surface. She somehow managed to crawl out through a hole in the smashed house and onto a floating mattress. All of her clothes had been torn off except her underwear.

Gertrude almost fell off the mattress when it collided with a dead horse. She called out for help to a man on the roof of a house that floated by. He either didn't hear her, or ignored her. Then a roof with about twenty people on it drifted near. Gertrude again cried for help.

One man stood up and started for the edge, but others tried to hold him back. He fought them off and plunged into the water. As Gertrude screamed for him to save her, his head kept disappearing and then surfacing again. Finally, he pulled himself onto the mattress. Gertrude wrapped her arms around him tightly and wouldn't let go. They watched as the big roof that had just abandoned was sucked down by a whirlpool.

The man who had come to Gertrude's rescue was Maxwell McAchren. Even though he had succeeded in reaching the child, he didn't know how he was going to take her to safety. The

were entirely at the mercy of the wind and the current.

Then the mattress drifted near a house perched on a hillside. It was only 15 or 20 feet (4 or 6 m) away, but McAchren had no way to move in closer. Two men leaned out of a window and tried unsuccessfully to reach the mattress with long poles. Then one of them called McAchren, "Throw that baby over here!"

McAchren shouted back, "Do you think you can catch her?"

The man replied, "We can try."

One man hung out the window, with his companion clutching his legs. McAchren picked Gertrude up and tossed her across the water. The terrified little girl landed right in the dangling man's arms.

The men wrapped Gertrude in a warm, dry blanket. Later she was taken to a house that was crowded with other refugees of the flood, and put to bed. Nobody knew who the child was, and she was too traumatized by her ordeal to speak. It would be the following day before someone recognized her and told James Quinn that his daughter was alive. Maxwell McAchren was rescued when some men hauled his mattress ashore with ropes.

Victor Heiser had just freed the horses and was at the doorway of the barn when he heard the frightful roar. He looked across the flooded yard and saw his father at an upstairs window. George was frantically signaling to him to go back inside and climb to the loft. The teenager did so, and then went through a trapdoor to the roof. From there he could see the vast wall of wreckage bearing down on him. Before Victor's eyes his home was pulverized with his parents in it.

The barn was torn loose and began to roll. Stumbling and grabbing at anything that he could hold onto, Victor managed to stay on whichever part of the barn was on top. Then he smashed into the side of a house. Victor leapt onto that building's roof, only to find it collapsing under him. He grabbed at the eaves of yet another building that had crashed into it, and hung there by his fingertips.

Victor couldn't pull himself up, and pain from his hands was shooting into his arms. Finally he could hold on no longer, and fell. He landed hard on a piece of roof from the barn.

Now Victor was riding across the ruins of Johnstown on a rolling, heaving expanse of water. He saw a house with a family he knew well clinging to the roof. It was crushed under tons of wreckage. His own raft was carried in amongst the deadly piles of debris. Victor had to dodge falling logs and other pieces of junk, while trying to stay on the roof. He narrowly escaped being crushed by a railway car that came hurtling down. Finally he drifted close to a brick house that was still standing. Victor climbed onto the roof, which was already occupied by several shivering survivors. It had been but ten minutes since his home had been demolished.



Dozens of displaced buildings and tons of debris brought desolation to Johnstown. Survivors gathered on rooftops the day after the flood to survey the devastation.

The shattered buildings of Johnstown added to the huge mass of debris the current was washing toward the jam-up at the bridge. The flotsam included houses and toys, furniture and trees, drowned dogs and horses, and human beings both living and dead. Somehow the massive dam at the bridge caught fire.

No one was certain what started the blaze. Wreckage could have been covered with spilled oil from any one of a number of sources. Perhaps one of the houses that had been carried to the jam-up had a coal stove in which the fire had not been doused. Whatever the original flames were soon racing through the jumble of trees and broken timber. From 500 to 600 people were trapped in the wreckage. Throughout the night and the next day rescue workers, including Victor Heiser among them, struggled to get them out. But with few tools available, the rescuers could not reach everybody. At least eighty people were burned to death.

Downstream at Sang Hollow people did not know what was happening in Johnstown until the first bits of wreckage appeared on the river. Then through the spilling rain they saw people clinging to telegraph poles and pieces of houses. Bill Heppenstall and the other passengers poured out of the stalled train and rushed to the riverbank. They watched helplessly as the victims hurtled past. Then a house became entangled in overhanging trees. From it came the cries of a baby.



The raging floodwaters snapped large trees like sticks and turned them into battering rams that could pierce walls. This house was skewered by a huge tree, and then dumped in a new location. Miraculously, the inhabitants all came out alive.

Without hesitation, 17-year-old Bill said he was going after the child. Other people told him it was impossible, but the teenager ignored them. He tore the bell cord out of a passenger car, tied it around his body and dove into the furious water. While men on the riverbank held onto this lifeline, Bill swam out to the house. He soon returned with the baby. While the crowd was cheering him, Bill said that the mother was still out there, and he was going back for her. He took along a railroad tie to help hold her up. Bill rescued the mother just before the house was torn loose from the trees and borne away on the angry waters.

The flood took only ten minutes to ravage Johnstown. The number of dead was undoubtedly higher than the official count of 2,209. Among them were 396 children. Another ninety-eight children had lost both parents. Ninety-six whole families had been wiped out.

The days following the calamity were extremely difficult for the survivors. Flood conditions hampered the arrival of assistance from outside the mountain town. Hundreds of survivors had lost everything but the clothes on their backs, and some didn't even have that. There was little food and almost no medical supplies for the injured. There was no water. The filthy muck that lapped the hillsides where people had sought refuge was fouled by garbage and the waste from outdoor privies. Bobbing on the surface or trapped underneath were human bodies and the corpses of domestic animals and rats. It would be months before the body of the last flood victim would be found. The remains of hundreds could not be identified.

The Johnstown survivors rebuilt their town, and as best they could, their lives. Many, like the Quinns, stayed in Johnstown. Three years after the flood, Horace Rose officiated at the dedication of a monument to 777 unknown victims.

Others, like Victor Heiser, left. With his parents dead and his home destroyed, Victor had nothing to keep him in Johnstown. He went to medical school and earned international fame for developing a treatment for leprosy that saved millions of lives. But for the rest of his life, Victor would be haunted by nightmares about that horrifying day when he had been a long, frightened boy caught in the terrors of the Johnstown Flood.

The management of the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club, and the members who were present on May 31, made a hasty departure when the dam broke. Not one of them went down to the valley to help out when every able-bodied man was needed. Considering that they were all millionaires, the donations a few of them made to relief funds were paltry indeed. There were official inquiries and numerous lawsuits, but no one associated with the Club was ever made accountable for the disaster. There were definitely advantages to being rich and powerful.

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THE SPRINGHILL MINE DISASTER OF 1891 TERROR UNDERGROUND

Coal mining in the late nineteenth century was extremely dangerous. Mines could cave in or flood and there were frequent accidents with explosive materials. By February of 1891, the mine Springhill, Nova Scotia had already claimed the lives of twenty miners. One especially deadly hazard was the gas that came off coal. The lighter-than-air coal gas, called firedamp, generally rose out of the mine through ventilation shafts. But sometimes gas was trapped in pockets or cavities. Firedamp was highly combustible. Even the friction from a miner's drill was enough to ignite the volatile fumes. Then the exploding gas would set fire to the coal dust that always filled the air in the passageways. After the firedamp burned, it left behind three kinds of poisonous gases: "after damp" and "black damp," both heavier than air; and "white damp," which was lighter than air, odorless and colorless. A person might survive an encounter with after damp or black damp. But one breath of white damp was fatal.



At 7 o'clock on the morning of February 21, 1891, Danny Robertson was among the crowd of workers descending the steep slope into the Cumberland Railway and Coal Company mine at Springhill. Danny was a driver. His job was to handle a pit pony named Jenny that pulled a train, or rake, of coal cars through the gloomy tunnels hundreds of feet underground. Like the miners who rode down into the mine with him in one of those rakes, Danny wore a helmet equipped with a small oil lamp to light his way. His hands were calloused from hard work and his fingernails were constantly black from coal dust. The sun had not yet come up when Danny entered the mine, and it would be well after sunset when he finished his shift. Mine workers called that "working from can't see to can't see." Danny Robertson was 14 years old.

Danny wasn't the only boy heading down into the black pit that morning, nor was he the youngest. Jon Conway, a driver like Danny, was 13. Willie Terris was just 12. He was a trapper, one of the boys who spent long hours sitting on a chair, opening and closing the ventilation doors, called traps, that linked one tunnel to another. So was Willard Carter. That day was actually Willard's 13th birthday. His job was important because the traps let gas out and fresh air in. But it was also extremely monotonous and he looked forward to the time when he could be promoted from trapper to miner.

In mining towns like Springfield, boys left school at an early age to work for the colliery. The company employed boys for a variety of menial tasks. In addition to feeding and driving the pit ponies and working the traps, they loaded coal, cleaned lamps, and packed gunpowder into cans. When they had grown big enough, they went to work at the coalface as miners, just like their fathers. Putting boys to work was considered good economics for the mine owner.

They paid the youngsters substantially less than they paid the men, thus increasing comparative profits. The boys' earnings were important to their families' incomes, because even the fathers were not very well paid.

And so lads like Tom Davis, 15, Jim Johnson, 16, George Martin, 14, and Murdoch and Philip Ross, 14 and 16, pulled on their pit boots every morning and went down to toil in the mine. For many of them, that cold February dawn would be their last. Death awaited them underground.

The Springfield mine was one of the biggest coal producers in Canada, turning out more than 2,000 tons a day. It was also reputed to be among the safest. Pumps kept it dry and the trappers kept the air moving. At the insistence of the Miner's Union, inspectors regularly checked the tunnels for gas. Only two days before, Underground Manager James Conway had made an inspection and pronounced the mine clean.

The men and boys worked from 7:00 am until noon, when they stopped for lunch. Bits of sandwiches dirtied by coal-blackened fingers were tossed to the waiting rats. At 12:30 everybody resumed work. Thirteen minutes later, an explosion ripped through the mine.



Deep underground, young boys like this one toiled long days loading coal, driving pit ponies and working the ventilation shafts. Families needed the extra money the boys brought home.

But thirty teenage boys never returned home after a deadly explosion ripped through the Springhill mine.

In just a few terrifying seconds the ignited gas did its lethal work. First a rush of wind swept through the mine like a tornado, tearing through trap doors as if they were paper, and carrying clouds of dust, timbers, and other debris. The wind was instantly followed by

barrage of fireballs, both large and small, that rocketed down the passageways like roman candles. Then a mass of flame filled tunnels and roasted everything and everyone in its path. As the coal dust burned, it unleashed a creeping, murderous ghost of white damp into those parts of the mine untouched by fire. The poisonous gas hunted down men and boys trying to escape.

Danny Robertson was on the front of a rake, driving Jenny up a slope when the blast of searing air hit him hard enough to throw him right back into an empty coal car. At the same instant, Willie Terris saw a flash of fire coming straight at him. He dove under his chair and buried his face in his hands.

Moments later, Danny sat up in the coal car somewhat dazed. From up and down the tunnel he could hear the crash of falling coal and timbers. The lamp in his cap had been blown out, but he was not in complete darkness. His clothes were burning and by the dim glow he could see that Jenny was dead. Danny tore off his flaming coat and vest and discovered that his hands and arms were badly burned. In terrible pain, and with no light at all to guide him now, he began to grope his way through the pitch-black tunnel.

As Danny stumbled along, his heart racing with fear, he heard a boyish whimper; a weak cry for help. In spite of his injuries and his fright, Danny groped his way toward the sound. He found Willie cringing under his chair. The child had been only slightly burned on his ears and the backs of his hands, but was paralyzed with fear.

Danny's hands and arms were too badly burned for him to pick Willie up and carry him, so he persuaded the boy to climb onto his back. All the way up the long tunnel, Danny carried Willie piggyback, afraid that at any moment another explosion could blow them to kingdom come. As they approached the mine entrance, they met rescue workers who were already heading down. The men wrapped Willie in a blanket to take him home, but Danny wasn't quite ready to be rescued himself. He had an older brother who also worked in the mine, and the first thing the boy asked was if his brother was safe. When the men said that they didn't know, Danny started to turn around to go back. The men stopped him and sent him the rest of the way to the surface in a rake full of injured miners. One of them, it turned out, was Danny's brother, wounded but alive. Outside, someone offered to take Danny home on a sled, but the young hero insisted upon walking home. He said that he didn't want to alarm his mother.

Daniel Beaton, 13, also owed his life to a heroic act. He was badly burned, and had been struck on the head by a flying missile that tore off his scalp and left his skull exposed. His 17-year-old brother, John, had been working nearby. After the explosion, John, who had not been badly hurt, hurried to where Daniel was supposed to be, but couldn't find his brother. With no thought for his own safety he searched for Daniel until he found him. When other miners met John, he was carrying the wounded boy in his arms.

It took but fifteen minutes for people on the surface to organize rescue operations. Many of the men and boys who'd been down in the pit had been far enough away from the explosion to escape the worst of the blast, and had been quick enough to get out before the gas reached them. But approximately 150 men and boys were still missing. One was John Conway, whose father, James, had inspected the mine and declared it clean. James was at a meeting above ground when the accident occurred. He was one of the first to go down to look for survivors.

As crowds of frantic wives and mothers gathered at the mine entrance, miners and other volunteers crawled through rubble in the black pit. They had wet cloths across their faces to protect them from gas. Even so, at places their advance was slowed by the presence of noxious fumes.

As their lamps pierced the gloom, the glow revealed scenes of utter horror. Bodies were sprawled everywhere. Some were burned beyond recognition. A few had no heads. Others had not a mark on them, but were coated with a layer of ash that made them look like great statues. Some of the victims who had been asphyxiated by gas appeared simply to have gone to sleep, unaware that they were dying. The faces of others were contorted from their final struggles to breathe.

One searcher, Jesse Armishaw, found his two sons dead. The two Ross boys, Murdoch and Philip, were dead. Eerily, one of them was still standing, his arm propping him up against some support. Another man was held upright by rubble piled up to his waist.

James and David McVey, 14 and 16, were discovered poisoned, clasped in each other's arms. Adolphus Landry, 14, was found pinned beneath a dead horse, severely burned but alive. Willard Carter's trap had been completely demolished, and he was injured. The boy who had entered his teens that very day would live to enjoy future birthdays. Adolphus and Willard were among the pitifully few wounded to be taken out.

As the crowd at the mine entrance watched in grim silence, the rescue parties emerged into the cold daylight. Occasionally they bore a wounded victim. More often a man staggered out with a body on his back and his lamp clenched in his teeth. One of them was Oliver Dupee who carried the body of his son, Joseph. Fate was especially cruel to the Dupee family that day. As Mr. Dupee approached his house with Joseph in his arms, his four-year-old son ran out. The child slipped on the ice and struck his head so hard on the frozen ground that he died.

Down in the pit, after an hour of finding nothing but more bodies, the searchers were certain they would find no one else alive. They were about to return to the surface, when they heard a faint cry of "Mother!" Following the direction of the sound, the men found Joseph Conway pinned under a dead horse. The boy was only slightly hurt. The very fact that he was alive was considered a miracle.

Including those who would die from their injuries, the total death toll for the Springhill mine disaster of 1891 was 125. Thirty of the dead were teenagers. Seventeen of them were boys 16 or younger. Economic need had snatched childhood from them too soon. And then it had taken away the promise of manhood.

An enquiry found that no one was to blame for the disaster. The accident had evidently been caused by a gunpowder charge set off to loosen coal from the face of a seam. Ordinarily, packing around the explosive material prevented any flame from escaping into the mine. This time there was an unusual crack in the coalface that allowed the charge to ignite gas and dust that had probably accumulated during the lunch break. That explanation, at least, was the conclusion reached by the inquiry. The three miners who had set the charge had all been killed.

After the dead had been buried and the mine reopened, there were recommendations for

*improved safety. New equipment was installed to remove gas, inspections would be made after me
breaks, and gunpowder would be banned in areas where dust was heavy. But many years wou
pass before companies were forbidden by law to exploit adolescent workers, and wages improved .
that families would not have to depend upon the toil of their children. Today in the town
Springhill a white monument of a coal miner stands in memory of the men and boys who lost the
lives on that day of terror underground.*

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