

Britannia - The Story of a Mine

by Bruce Ramsay

Extract from book about Jane Camp tragedy

Monday, March 22, 1915 was only three minutes old when disaster struck. At the Tunnel Camp the sudden load thrown back on the motors and generators at the power station and the slackening of the pressure on the air compressors spelled trouble somewhere up the mountainside. A check was made, first one camp, then another, to try and pin down the cause of the trouble. Camp 1050 was silent.

At that moment, 12:03, Monday, March 22, 1915, it had shared the same fate as did Frank, Alberta, when at 4:10 a.m., April 29, 1903, at least 66 persons were killed when the steep sides of Turtle Mountain collapsed on the Crows Nest Pass mining town of Frank. Here above Howe Sound, between 50 and 60 men, women and children died and 22 more were injured.

Men working in mines were accustomed to tragedy; a caved in stope, an early, or a delayed blast, a tramway collapsing; a thousand and one things might go wrong. These are risks, accidental or not, that the miners and their families learn to take with a shrug of the shoulders, but this one, high up at Camp 1050 was something entirely different. It was as though one of the cataclysmic forces of creation was at work again, and in a way this was so; the face of the mountain peak, pried loose by alternate seepage into a fault and then freezing hard, broke loose and started an avalanche that ploughed through the camp leaving in its wake, death, injury and devastation. It is a miracle that anybody survived, and it was a miracle that the new Tunnel Camp was spared. Only two days before the bald face of the mountain had been inspected by a team of company geologists and it appeared to these experts to be solid.

As soon as the trouble was noted at the Tunnel Camp emergency crews set up the Jane Creek draw towards the little camp. As the men trudged through the deep snow, fear was in every heart and it didn't take long to realize how close disaster had come to Tunnel Camp itself. Standing in the blackness of night, scarcely ten minutes from home, the men saw before them the 1000-foot wide swatch the slide had made down the mountainside, and they heard a voice, a voice which spoke in tones of terror and horror. And out of the darkness and into the light of flickering candles staggered a Japanese workman who blurted out, almost incoherently, the tragic story. A few minutes later the rescue party found H. Dupuis who had been picked up by the slide and rode it down the mountain, miraculously surviving the ordeal.

Two hours after the tragedy occurred the telephone rang in Provincial Police constable M.T. Spence's home at the Beach, and within minutes, one by one, candles were lit in homes and little groups began to form on the streets to discuss the tragedy and organize relief work. Spence lost no time in heading up the trail towards Tunnel Camp, and with him were James Drysburgh, Donald McDonald and Dr. W. F. Dudley, the camp medical officer. And at Tunnel Camp, every available man had rushed to the scene. When the Beach party arrived a large gang of men were digging out the dead and injured the best way they could, utilizing the feeble light of mine candles.

Later that night an exhausted Constable Spence told newsmen who had rushed up from Vancouver, "I found that the mine office, store, rock crusher, tram terminus, a big bunk house and a half dozen homes had been blotted out by the millions of tons of rock, mud and snow, which in some places was piled 50 feet deep over what had been the level of the camp. Also destroyed that night was Cotto Damton's school house near the mouth of the mine, and he was amongst the missing.

"The cookhouse," said *The Vancouver Sun*, the next day "lies beneath a small ugly hill of rock and earth which completely obliterated it."

All food and provisions had been carried away and now the Herculean task of packing, on the backs of men, vast quantities of goods, shovels and medical supplies.

News of the disaster did not reach Vancouver until mid-morning when an almost exhausted man arrived by rowboat at Horseshoe Bay and called the authorities to make an appeal for doctors and nurses. He did not know the details of the mountain tragedy, only that there had been a terrible accident.

At 11 a.m. Dr. R.E. McKechnie, Dr. George Clement and a Dr. Simpson were enroute to Britannia on the SS *Ballena*. Accompanying them were nurses Lillian Turnbull, M.J. Mobbs, Mrs. Scribner and Miss Rhodes. Vancouver police chief Malcolm B. MacLennan offered the police launch *PML No. 1* to the Provincial Police and 20 minutes after the offer was made Sergeant George Hood, Constable Samuel North, J.C. Moss and Sid Saunders were on their way. Accompanying them was Bruce A. "Pinkie" McKelvie, of *The Vancouver Province* editorial staff, years later to be acclaimed British Columbia's leading historical writer.