



## THE NEW JERSEY ITALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION



# Grim Melting Pot

## The Monongah Mining Disaster of 1907

**Grade Level:** Secondary

**Subject:** United States History / Italian History

**Categories:** Modern Day Italy / History and Society

### **Standards:**

Please read the New Jersey Student Learning Standards on page 6 before conducting the lesson. They will help you give explicit instructions to your students and help you create rubrics most appropriate for your class.

### **Objectives:**

1. students will be able to describe the events surrounding the worst coal mining accident in American History, the Monongah Mine Disaster of 1907.
2. students will be able to explain why immigrants from several foreign countries as well as poorer Americans were among those killed in this West Virginia coal mine.
3. students will propose explanations as to why Italian immigrants made up the largest single group of workers at the Monongah Mine in this accident.

### **Abstract:**

In this lesson, students will learn of a terrible accident in the coal fields of West Virginia in 1907 that involved hundreds of unfortunate Italian immigrants. At around 10:30 AM on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1907, the peace of the small coal-mining town of Monongah, West Virginia was shattered by a double blast that shook buildings, knocked down horses and pedestrians, and left a layer of thick coal dust everywhere. The underground blast was heard as far as eight miles away. Two connected coal mines belonging to the Fairmount Coal companies had suffered two nearly simultaneous and catastrophic blasts deep underground. Within moments of the explosions, nearly all of the miners at work that day, at least 358 men and possibly hundreds more, were dead. A high proportion of the miners killed were Italian immigrants. The town they lived in would never be the same. There were hardly any survivors. It would be the worst mining accident in American history. The town of Monongah had a population of about 3000 people. Somewhere between 10% and 33% of them died that morning.

In the lesson students will have the opportunity to learn what happened in that terrible accident and why. They will have the chance to read about and examine primary source photographs from this event and draw conclusions about what happened and why. They will analyze the demographics of the miners involved, including the Italians, and make

reasoned conclusions about why these particular people found themselves in this particular situation that day. The lesson will conclude with them demonstrating their understanding of the event and the significance of the role of the Italian immigrants and others who were involved. They will also have the chance to evaluate the contribution of those who gave their lives in this disaster in terms of any progress that may have come from it.

### **Key Terms:**

- Black damp      n.      Miner's term for concentrations of methane gas that can fill a mine shaft when coal deposits are disturbed by the miners. The methane can be extremely flammable or explosive in high enough concentrations.
- Coal dust      n.      Small particles of coal that break off and fill the air in a coal mine when the coal is excavated. Without proper ventilation, this dust can be easily ignited and explode. Prolonged exposure of miners to coal dust can also cause "black lung disease," in which the victim loses lung function.
- Political Compromise      n.      Political agreement between two or more opposing parties in which both agree to concessions in return to getting some of what they want. In this case, Progressive reformers agreed to accept a watered-down safety bill for coal mines which had no effective enforcement provisions, in return for the mine owners accepting any regulation at all. The miners got to keep things as they were and the Progressives got to brag that they got a mine safety bill passed, but the miners got little or no improvement of their job safety.
- "Buddy" or "Pal" System      n.      Unofficial practice in the coal mines, where a miner could bring a friend or relative to work with him in the mine who was not an official employee. The "Pal" or "Buddy" would work with him and they would get to split the regular employee's pay. This sounds good, but results in each man getting half the pay he should get. Having two men working as one, however, made it easier to reach the work quotas expected by the coal mines for each actual employee. This system would only work if the quotas were much too high for one person to reach.

### **Background:**

At around 10:30 AM on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1907, the peace of the small coal-mining town of Monongah, West Virginia was shattered by a double blast that shook buildings, knocked down horses and pedestrians, and left a layer of thick coal dust everywhere. The underground blast was heard as far as eight miles away. Two connected coal mines belonging to the Fairmount Coal companies had suffered two nearly simultaneous and catastrophic blasts deep underground. Within moments of the explosions, nearly all of the miners at work that day, at least 358 men and possibly hundreds more, were dead. The town they lived in would never be the same. There were hardly any survivors, less than ten. There may have been only one, a young man named Peter Urban. (Ironically, he reportedly died in a mine cave-in 19 years later.) It would be the worst mining

accident in American history. The town of Monongah had a population of about 3000 people. Somewhere between 10% and 33% of them died that morning.

Due to the undocumented use of the “buddy” or “pal” system, an unofficial practice in the coal mines, where a miner could bring a friend or relative to work with him in the mine who was not an official employee, no one really knows how many people were in the mine that day. 358 were officially listed as dead. Leo L. Malone, the General Manager of the mines, said that 478 men had been checked off as entering the mines on the morning of December 6th. That number did not include up to 100 workers, who did other jobs in the mine besides digging coal, who did not have to be checked off as the miners did. A study of the cemeteries in town indicates that the number killed was over 500 victims. One of the grave diggers insisted that the total was 620. One newspaper reported as many as 956 dead.

From this scene of terrible suffering and grief, a picture can be drawn of the state of the coal mining industry in those days. By modern standards, the safety standards in coal mines in 1907 were inexcusable. Coal mines were generally disasters waiting to happen. Between 1907 and 1909, more than 1000 miners were killed in accidents. But, the Monongah accident was worse than most. At least four times as many miners died there than had been killed in any of the last eight mining accidents in the state before the Monongah accident.

The cause of the explosions was later determined to be a mishandled use of explosives or a faulty lamp that ignited “Black damp” (methane gas) and coal dust in the mine shafts. Some other information emerges from the records of this tragedy that is very instructive. Looking at the casualty lists, a pattern emerges of the face of the American underclass of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their profile is overwhelmingly a diverse mix of predominantly immigrants, with a minority of African Americans and poor, native-born whites. Of this multinational group, the largest single contingent was made up of Italian immigrants. 171 of the 358 identified victims were from Italy. Other immigrant casualties were from Ireland, Austria, Hungary, Turkey, Russia, Poland, Greece, Latvia, Scotland, and the Slavic countries. There were 85 native-born Americans on the casualty list, including 11 African Americans and, possibly a white woman named Fay Cooper. The dead were as young as 12 years old.

Among the Italian immigrants at the Monongah disaster, the names and home towns of many of the victims are known and give us some information that is useful to understand their situation. Though there were at least 171 Italians killed, the records show they were all from a relatively small number of towns in Italy. This might indicate that they emigrated from Italy in local groups, possibly recruited by local town leaders who contracted with employers in America to provide groups of workers. There is some evidence that some of the Italians were expecting to live and work in New York City or some other urban center, rather than toiling away in a coal mine. As sometimes happens to immigrants today as well, there sometimes were unscrupulous people who promised immigrants many things. Unfortunately, what happened to these immigrants when they got to America was sometimes quite different.

The use of the so-called “buddy system” was a good example. It sounds, at first, very appealing to the new immigrant. You get a job and you can even bring a friend or

relative with you to work too. What they didn't learn right away was that the two would only be paid for one and they had to meet a production quota. Then they might discover that the quota was a lot more than one person could easily expect to do. It would take two people working hard to meet this quota. But it only paid for one. The two would have to split the pay between them. It was a good deal for the employer, but not for the worker.

If there can be any good that came out of this terrible event that made the sacrifice of the lives of these Italian immigrants and their companions at all worthwhile, it was that the horror of the event spurred people into action. There was new interest in trying to make mining safer for its workers. The Progressive Movement in politics seized on the issue and worked to pass legislation at the state and federal level to better regulate safety in the mines. The efforts at first were disappointing. Progressives found they could get only meager improvements through if the powerful mining interests thought they might cut into their profits. Compromises were cut that allowed the Progressives to get some good publicity as reformers but really did not have the teeth in them to make much of a difference in the mines. Gradually, however, meaningful reforms were made. Laws favorable to miners' safety issues were passed. Mine workers organized and eventually secured recognition for their unions, empowered to negotiate better wages and working conditions for the miners. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mining was still a tough, dangerous job, but miners' pay had improved dramatically, safety conditions were better and workers' benefits included much needed health insurance.

On December 6, 2007, a delegation from Italy arrived in Monongah to join people from West Virginia and the other countries where the Monongah miners of 1907 had come from. A monument was dedicated to the hundreds who had died there so long ago. Miners today can point to a legacy of progress inspired by the Italian immigrants and many others whose lives were brutally snuffed out in the Monongah Mining Disaster of 1907.

### **Procedures:**

- I. Students will answer the following question in a brief statement: What do you think is the most dangerous job in the United States? (5 minutes)
  - a. Teacher will make a list on the board of the responses to the Do Now question. Among the jobs mention there will probably be included "coal miner."
  - b. Review why students think these jobs are so dangerous. Write down the risks for coal miners.
  
- II. Teacher will reproduce copies of the **Background for Teachers** section above, minus the last two paragraphs and adjusted for grade reading level.
  - a. Students will read the above material. Teacher will take questions from the class about the reading.
  - b. Students will go to the following website:  
<https://wolfordfamily.wordpress.com/resources/history-notes/wv-mining-disasters-resource-listings/dec-06-1907-monongah-6/>
  - c. If they do not have access to their own computers, teacher will project the website on the screen and go through the pictures from the Monongah

Mining Disaster.

- i. Students will be asked to explain what is happening in each of the pictures based on what they have read about the disaster.

III. Closure

- a. Teacher will distribute copies of the last two paragraphs in the **Background for Teachers** section above.
- b. Students will read the above paragraphs.
- c. Question for discussion:  
“Do the students agree with the conclusion that the loss of life at Monongah had value because conditions in the coal mines eventually improved? Why or why not?”

**Assessment:**

- a. Teacher will observe the level of verbal responses by students to the questions on the reading and the interpretation of the photographs on the website.
- b. Students will write answers, of at least one paragraph each, based on the information presented to the following open-ended questions:
  - a. Why do you think the Italian immigrants made up such a high percentage of the miners at Monongah?
  - b. Why were the coal miners mostly people who were recent immigrants from Italy and other less prosperous European countries, African Americans or poor, native-born white Americans?

## Social Studies

6.1.8.D.4.a Analyze the push-pull factors that led to increases in immigration, and explain why ethnic and cultural conflicts resulted.

## English Language Arts

RI.6.1 Cite textual evidence and make relevant connections to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.6.2 Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

RI.6.3 Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).

RI.6.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed in the text.

RI.6.7 Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

RI.6.8 Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

RI.6.9 Compare, contrast and reflect on (e.g. practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) one author's presentation of events with that of another (e.g., a memoir written by and a biography on the same person).

RI.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence and make relevant connections to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.7.2 Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.7.3 Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

RI.7.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his or her position from that of others.

RI.7.7 Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium's portrayal of the subject (e.g., how the delivery of a speech affects the impact of the words).

RI.7.8 Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient to support the claims.

RI.7.9 Analyze and reflect on (e.g. practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) how two or more authors writing about the same topic shape their presentations of key information by emphasizing different evidence or advancing different interpretations of facts.

RI.8.1 Cite the textual evidence and make relevant connections that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.8.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.8.3 Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

RI.8.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

RI.8.7 Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

RI.8.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

RI.8.9 Analyze and reflect on (e.g. practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) two or more texts that provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation.

RI.9-10.1 Accurately cite strong and thorough textual evidence, (e.g., via discussion, written response, etc.) and make relevant connections, to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferentially, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and how it is developed refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.9-10.3 Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetorical devices to advance that point of view or purpose.

RI.9-10.7 Analyze various perspectives as presented in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

RI.9-10.8 Describe and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

RI.9-10.9 Analyze and reflect on (e.g. practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) documents of historical and literary significance, (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, etc.), including how they relate in terms of themes and significant concepts.

RI.11-12.1 Accurately cite strong and thorough textual evidence, (e.g., via discussion, written response, etc.), to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferentially, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain

RI.11-12.2 Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development and how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

RI.11-12.6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

RI.11-12.8 Describe and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. and global texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

RI.11-12.9 Analyze and reflect on (e.g. practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) documents of historical and literary significance for their themes, purposes and rhetorical features, including primary source documents relevant to U.S. and/or global history.