

'47 Down' details 1922 gold mine disaster

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"47 Down: The 1922 Argonaut Gold Mine Disaster." By O. Henry Mace. John Wiley & Sons. 273 Pages. \$24.95.

The California gold fields had long since lost their romantic allure by 1922, with the process of extracting the glittering mineral from the earth largely reduced to the hot, dirty and dangerous job of deep mining.

So it was on Sunday, Aug. 27, when miner Steve Pasalich, waiting for a fellow worker to bring a newly cut board, noticed a haze in a shaft more than 4,000 feet below ground, and then smelled smoke. Pasalich and two others jumped in a cart used to ferry men and ore and rang for it to be brought up through the billowing smoke.

What happened next - and for three weeks as miners made a desperate effort to save the 47 men trapped below - are detailed by O. Henry Mace in "47 Down: The 1922 Argonaut Gold Mine Disaster."

Pasalich and his companions huddled in the bottom of the cart, called a skip, as it passed through flames and smoke. They were nearly dead before they got to clear air at 3,000 feet where they could raise the alarm and try to direct water on the fire below.

Powerful fans designed to bring air into the mine pulled the smoke out through a ventilation system and generated endless debate about whether they should be left on, turned off or reversed to best help the men trapped below the blaze.

Monday, Aug. 28, began Day One of the rescue effort, as miners and government experts debated about how to reach the trapped men.

A decision was made to try and tunnel in from an adjacent mine, an effort that took longer than anyone thought. It's detailed in the book, which also examines the anxiety of the families waiting above ground, the news media's efforts to cover the ongoing story and the lives of the men who worked in mines.

Along the way the reader meets Mary Warrington, head of the local Red Cross, who helped tend to frantic families.

"On the first morning of the ordeal, Warrington noticed the wife of trapped miner Mike Vujovich standing very near the Argonaut shaft. Warrington approached her slowly from behind and quietly asked if she needed help. 'If I know my man is dead,' the woman said without turning, 'I throw myself down there.'"

Warrington led the woman away and told her staff to keep a close watch on any family members who got too close to the mine.

Then there is newspaper reporter Irving Moore, who on Day 19 secretly wrangled a job on a mine rescue crew, planning to work several days for a first-person

story. By the end of the shift he was so exhausted he had to crawl on hands and knees.

"It was over. Again I was in the open air. I made a firm resolve that I would never go underground again for man, devil or gold."

And there was shift boss Clarence Bradshaw, who rode up in that escape car with miners Pasalich and Mitchell Jogo. Bradshaw then went home, never to return to the mine.