

Mining Disasters



Mining is a very dangerous job, and serious injury and death could occur at any time. There are many reasons why mining is so dangerous. In the kit, there are reports of three accidents that resulted in the loss of life of many miners. The 1917 explosion in No. 12 Colliery in New Waterford killed 65 miners, the 1938 Disaster in Princess Colliery resulted in the deaths of 22 miners, and the No. 26 explosion in 1979 killed 12 miners.

Imagine that you are a reporter for a newspaper on the scene at the pithead in New Waterford in 1917. Describe what you see. Interview the rescue workers, mine management, and people who may have lost a loved one in the mine, and include it in your report. Use information from the Sydney Post Record, or Cape Breton's Magazine. (No. 21)

After reading the account of the disaster, what caused it? Do you think anyone was at fault? Explain. Did you find any evidence that coal mining would change to make it safer after 1917? (Cape Breton's Magazine No. 21, Inquest Report)

From the last page in the Cape Breton Magazine article, note the ages of the miners in the 1917 disaster. Do you think you would work in these conditions? Why do you think these young men went underground to work?

Many miners that died had come from countries all over the world. There were many from Newfoundland, and many were listed as “foreigners”. Why do you think that men would come from Newfoundland or countries in many parts of the world to work in a coal mine in Cape Breton? Indicate on a map or globe where these miners came from.

Write a reader response to the personal accounts of those affected by the tragedy. Use information from Cape Breton’s Magazine or the Sydney Post Record. Give your impression of the thoughts and feelings the people experienced, compare how you would have reacted, and speculate how their lives may have changed after the disaster.

Write your own poem about one of the disasters. Write from the standpoint of either a rescue worker, a family member, or a friend of the family.

With no insurance or income for those killed on the job earlier years, how would life change for a family of a miner killed in the mine. At a time when many people had to drop out of school at an early age, most miners’ wives had no training or job experience. What choices would a widow have to bring some money into the family? What could the children do?

Challenge Questions

1. Read the account of the inquest of the 1917 disaster from Cape Breton’s Magazine (No. 21). Have a mock trial or debate based on a mine disaster. Evidence given at the inquest would be quite helpful.
2. In groups, write a skit about one of the disasters. Use the accounts given of those involved.
3. Research and report how safety has changed in the mines in particular, and where people work in general, in the last century. Comment on the statement with reasons: Despite changes, today’s miners still face danger for the same reasons as the miners of many years ago. Compare the No. 17 disaster with the No. 26 disaster.