Shortly after eight o'clock on the morning of January 25, 1904, a
day that dawned bitterly cold in southwestern Pennsylvania
and in the hamlet of Harwick, a mining town 15 miles north-
east of Pittsburgh and home to the Allegheny Coal Company's
Harwick Mine, a massive explosion tore through the 200-
foot-deep mine, claiming the lives of 179 miners, many of them
teen-age boys. The accident—"as if the earth had suddenly parted
and had broken in two"—still ranks as one of the worst in U.S.
coal-mining history. In the following days, the disaster laid claim to
two more lives, men who had entered the mine in rescue attempts.

Andrew Carnegie, then retired and living in New York,
was soon made aware of the disaster. It touched him deeply. By
March 12, only six weeks after the explosion, he had penned a
document—a "deed of trust"—that would serve as the philo-
sophical basis for the establishment of his newest philanthropy,
the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. "Gentlemen," it began, "we
live in a heroic age."

Southwestern Pennsylvania at the turn of the 19th cen-
tury was rich in bituminous coal deposits. Numerous mines and
compny-owned towns to house the miners were developed to
feed the great demand for coal by the iron and steel manufac-
turers of Pittsburgh. Selwyn M. Taylor, member of a prominent
city family, was a well-known mining engineer and consultant to
col companies, including the Allegheny Coal Company, and it
was he who had drawn the plans for the Harwick Mine. He had
equipped it with powerful ventilation, and, by commencement of
operations in the latter part of 1902, the mine was reputedly one
of the safer ones. Nevertheless, the industry was especially dangerous. A lack of regulation, limited equipment, and inexperienced miners—often immigrants of differing tongues—led to mistake and accident. The workforce at Harwick was mainly Hungarian, but Italian, Polish, and German miners also labored alongside English and American ones. Contemporary reports also noted that the mine at Harwick was gas-filled and dusty.

AN EXPLOSION THAT SHOOK THE EARTH

On the morning of the disaster, the circulation of fresh air in the mine had been cut off by the formation of ice at the bottom of the airshaft, allowing the accumulation of methane, a highly volatile gas. Coal dust, which is extremely flammable, was also present. A dynamite charge used to break up the coal ignited the deadly combination. In the words of a report by the Department of Mines of Pennsylvania:

The shot...lighted the gas, which, by the fine particles of coal dust suspended in the air, traveled into every place in the mine like a streak of lightening [sic], carrying destruction in its path, until it finally expended its force up the air and hoisting shafts.... The entire population of the village was in an uproar, and the utmost excitement prevailed. The explosion had been one of terrific force. The tipple, which was built of iron, was wrecked, the cages were blown out of the shaft, and a mule that had been at the bottom of the shaft was caught by the force of the explosion and blown out and over the tipple, a distance of about 300 feet. The accident had destroyed the organization that existed among the officials, as the mine foreman and the fire boss as well as almost all the employees had been killed. The officials who were present and had escaped the disaster seemed to be dazed and without confidence in themselves.2

The village suddenly came to know horror, confusion, panic, fear, and dread. Weeping, grieving women and children milled about the mine complex. Scores of caskets filled with bodies burned beyond recognition were soon being taken on sleds to the town's frame schoolhouse, turned morgue. The entire local mine workers organization had been wiped out, and with the mine foreman and fire boss killed by the explosion, there could only be speculation as to what had happened. An investigation into the cause of the explosion quickly got under way.
Immediate calls went out for volunteers and aid. When Taylor, 42, learned of the disaster, he hurried from his Pittsburgh office to the site and offered his services. There are conflicting reports on when the first rescue attempt was made. One said it was at 4 p.m., but the two men involved were driven back by the foul air. Taylor and his assistant, James McCann, and another man were lowered into the mine an hour later. Some 40 minutes later, McCann was hoisted in the cage. With him was the explosion’s sole survivor, 16-year-old Adolph Gunia. McCann reported that Taylor had collapsed from afterdamp, an asphyxiating mixture of residual gases after an explosion, and that he had attempted to bring him to the bottom of the shaft but had been driven back by the gas. Taylor was soon found and brought to the surface, but he died early the next day. The community was so taken by his sacrifice that many accompanied his sled-drawn casket from the mine to the Cheswick railroad station. A newspaper article said of Taylor: “Himself, he had not a single thought of. His way was to save or die. He died.”

Taylor left a wife and stepson.

Gunia, a German immigrant, lost both his father and brother in the accident. Brought out severely burned—described as more dead than alive—he was semiconscious and at first thought to have been blinded by the explosion. He spent four months in the hospital and bore the resulting deep scars from head to toe throughout his life. Interviewed shortly after he was rescued, Gunia said, “I saw a sheet of flame coming from back in the mine. I ran. Something seemed to hit me in the middle of my back. I fell unconscious and cannot remember anything until McCann picked me up.” Eventually he returned to coal mining, but, according to his grandson Bruce Gunia, he never worked underground again, and he discouraged his three sons from becoming coal miners. Adolph Gunia died of cancer in 1935 at the age of 49.

The day following the explosion, coal miner Daniel A. Lyle, 43, answered an appeal for volunteers and rushed to the scene from Leechburg, a small town 15 miles away. Although he suffered asthma and was aware of the dangerous conditions in the mine, Lyle and two other men worked from late afternoon well into the night, going deeper into the mine than other volunteers to look for survivors. The other two men surfaced the next morning and reported that Lyle, like Taylor, had been fatally overcome by afterdamp.
CHAOS AND COMPASSION
The calamity was sensational news, and vivid photos and bold front-page headlines underscored its scope. Charges of negligence and inefficiency arose and were bitterly contested by the government and the coal company. There was controversy over the loss of the fire boss's inspection report and debate about whether the dynamite was misplaced, misfired, or incorrectly tamped. State mine inspector Frederick W. Cunningham and mine superintendent Wilfred Snowden were later arrested on charges of murder and held for a grand jury. Both men were eventually released.

Benevolence developed, as well. The Cheswick Relief Committee was organized and more than $40,000 was soon collected from the general public for the bereaved families. Carnegie responded with matching funds. But it was the rescue efforts of Taylor and Lyle that compelled him to put form to his idea of many years, that of recognizing acts of selfless heroism. A report Carnegie received on Lyle's death noted: "Lyle made a valiant effort to rescue entombed men. He left a widow and five children. What a tragedy that his life had to go with his deed! He was a hero." Carnegie directed that gold medals be struck and presented to the families of the two fallen rescuers "in commemoration of the acts of heroism...wherein they sacrificed their lives in an endeavor to save their fellowman [sic]."*

HARWICK'S MINERS WILL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED
One hundred years after the disaster, the Harwick Mine and miners are far from forgotten, kept in memory by poem and news feature. The New Kensington Daily Dispatch in the winter of 1958 ran a series on the explosion entitled, "This Was The Day The Valley Wept." The articles were reprints from a pamphlet written shortly after the disaster to raise funds for the families of the deceased miners. The son of a man who helped bury the dead in 1904 provided the pamphlet to the paper.

Monuments to the miners have also been erected over the years. A stone memorial was placed by the United Mine Workers of America in front of a plot donated by the Allegheny Coal Company for the bodies of many of the miners. It is adjacent to a power plant on the Allegheny River just a few miles from the
mine and near where its coal was once burned. In 1996, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission placed a roadside marker just north of the small road leading to the mass grave. It commemorates the establishment of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission and the heroic acts following the explosion that led to the Commission's founding. In 1999, the Harwick community dedicated a memorial to all of its miners. It is a large, handsome block of black granite, etched with a rendering of the mine's tipple and shaft buildings, and is situated in the center of a small parklet. Carved into the bricks surrounding the memorial are the names of individual miners.

Crumbling stone walls, a few rails, and some concrete pads—perhaps the floor of the iron tipple—are the only remains of the once busy mine. The entry shaft is covered with a concrete slab and enclosed with a chain-link fence. A cable cordons off a grassy, grown-over roadway leading through a few sparse trees and underbrush to the site. The mine was closed in 1970.

On January 25, 2004, Mark Laskow, Commission president, just left of the stone memorial, and others visit the mass grave to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Harwick Mine disaster.