

Way We Were

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For whom the bell tolls, the head rolls

While the Park Record is decorated with grisly stories that leave little to the imagination, the following story is one of particularly gruesome and peculiar misfortune...

In 1893, in the Daly West Mine, a veteran miner named James O 'Connell leaned upon a timber and waited for the cage. Once it had arrived, a loaded car was brought to the edge of the shaft. The men on board asked Jim if he was going up as well. He was, and as he climbed onto the loaded car, he stuck his head between the timbers and the upper deck of the cage. Then, as he was about to climb aboard, the cage trembled and shot up, tearing off his head. As the horrified men shot towards the surface, Jim's body fell five hundred feet down the shaft.

Clarence Horaford, the hoist engineer, was apparently unaware of the accident below until informed by his passengers. Retreating back into the denizens of the shaft, which had become a crude grave, they retrieved the bruised body. The head could only be found in small pieces.

The men on the cage insisted they had not struck the bells, and they had not witnessed any signal at all. In addition, the other cage was at the surface so there was no reason for the sent signal. Horaford and another worker on the surface both insisted that the three bell signal was heard. So, it was determined that someone else within the mine had made the signal.ⁱ

There is a very specific system for signaling the hoist, comprised of rung bells and pauses (bars). Three bells meant that all the men were on and ready. Miners were supposed to be on before any signal was given. Likewise, the bell strokes and bars must all be equal in length so that the signal is clear. Regardless, failure to follow this procedure properly created the gruesome scene.ⁱⁱ

Yet the story has one final twist. Two years before his death, Jim had been on the same cage, and Clarence Horaford had been the hoist man on duty. The steam for the hoist could not be shut off, and Jim would have died were it not for Horaford, who ran the cage up and down the shaft until the steam could be turned off. Walking away from near doom, Jim never could have guessed his guardian angel would two years later be an unknowing servant to the angel of death.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Park City Historical Society & Museum is celebrating 30 years of preserving, protecting, and promoting Park City's history and heritage.

ⁱ Park Record, "His Head Cut Off", May 27, 1893.

ⁱⁱ"Official Mine Signals" red wood frame, white painted metal sign, 1900.

ⁱⁱⁱ "His Head Cut Off", May 27, 1893.



Image# Digi.2.4204

Credit: Park City Historical Society & Museum, Himes-Buck Digital Collection

Caption: The mine cages behind these miners (Matt Conley, 2nd from left and Dave Baxter 4th from left) is where poor Jim lost his life while down in the shaft.