The Bog Walk Tube

The early morning of June 24, 1904 dawned clear and crisp. In Spanish Town, St. Catherine, and other areas outside of Kingston, men and women were lined up waiting to catch their tram to work as usual. They waited until they realised it was not coming. The lucky ones caught rides in wagonettes and buggies; the unlucky set out on foot

No one was quite sure what had happened - only that there had been a temporary delay that would soon be fixed. By the time eight o’clock rolled around, wild rumours had begun to circulate about a horrible accident at the Bog Walk Power Station that had affected the tram car system run by the West India Electric Company. It was said that up to 80 men who had been cleaning silt and debris in the eight-foot long cast iron pipe (also known as a flume) that carried water from the Rio Cobre River to the Power Station, had been washed into the turbines and drowned. The collection of silt and debris was not uncommon, nor was the need for it to be removed so as not to inhibit the flow of water, and therefore of hydroelectric power. Nothing like this had ever happened before. By 9 o’clock, railway stations, newspaper offices, anywhere information could possibly be found, were packed with anxious enquirers. Much later, the only news to be had was that 33 coffins were sent out to Bog Walk by train. The AccidentIn Bog Walk, by this time, crowds had gathered at the Power Station. According to Dr. Hammond, who was called to the scene, it was one he would never forget as long as he lived: “men, women and children lying on the ground, rolling over, clutching handfuls of grass, stones and earth, and screaming aloud in the last extremities of mental agony” as they searched for their loved ones who seemed to be lost to them forever. At that time, 33 were believed dead and 17 missing. A few hours later, it was confirmed that the 17 had managed to escape through a manhole near to the dam itself. At one o’clock in the morning 61 men had gone down into the huge pipe located about 15 yards from the power station. The pipe curved slightly upward and then sharply downward running directly into the power station itself. The men encountered about a foot of water and got down to work as usual. Colin McDonald, one of the survivors, in speaking to a Gleaner reporter at the scene, explained that within an hour of going into the pipe he felt the water level rise but he didn’t think it was anything to worry about. It couldn’t have been coming from the dam because the dam was closed. It was always closed when the men were working in the pipes. But the water kept rising slowly but surely and by 4:00 a.m., the men started to panic. Their supervisor, a Mr. Douparrouzel, apparently tried to keep his men calm by telling them there was plenty of time to get out - there was an exit closer to the dam. But his men panicked and threw their torches into the water so that they were all covered in darkness. Soon it was said a man appeared at the manhole with a torch lighting the way and calling to the men. Twenty-eight managed to get out in the over twenty minutes it took for the water to fill the pipe. If they had listened and remained calm, site reports reveal, that twenty minutes could have saved 300 men instead of 33. The remaining men

According to Gleaner records of the event, Douparrouzel, distraught by the experience and trying his best to come to terms with this catastrophe, could only seem to say that the water must have over time swelled to the point where it rushed over the sand and debris to flood the pipe. Although no one lived to tell this tale, it is believed that three of the men located in a very narrow section of the pipe, panic-stricken, Douparrouzel explained, had tried to exit through a 2 foot 8 inch wide manhole at the same time and effectively formed a human plug, entombing all 30 behind them. These 33 were found drowned, all heaped together, their clothes torn, their faces and bodies completely mutilated.

Afterward

Within a few days, the tram car system was back in operation. Meanwhile families who had lost fathers, brothers, cousins, tried to come to terms with their losses. Although the West India Electric Company behaved very sympathetically towards the families, helping to organise funeral services and financial retribution, the general feeling was that someone had blundered somewhere for that level of water to have appeared. Ensuing investigations ruled the catastrophe an accident, small consolation to the any who suffered great losses. Today

Today the Bog Walk Power Station stands closed. In the 1930s the tram car system was replaced by a bus system. The tram lines were uprooted and replaced with wider roads. Some lines, such as the one at Cross Roads, do still exist. The tramcars stopped running in 1948. As for the large pipe in which so many were drowned alive, only a shell remains, preserving the memory of the catastrophe on that June 24th morning. - Rebecca Tortello

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