A Dangerous Job

The sound of picks clattering off the coal face rings out across the three foot tall work space. An eight year old boy, called a knobber, struggles to push coal down from where it was cut to the coal car waiting on the tracks 300 feet downslope. In the distance, a muffled “thwump” signals a possible cave-in in the depths below.

Cave-ins occurred when miners hit weak layers of rock. Explosions caused from firedamp (methane gas) and coal dust created additional hazards. Though these nineteenth-century coal mines presented many dangers, supportive communities gave the men the strength to return to mine another day.

Coal miners in the Mount Diablo Coal Field toiled in low light and cramped conditions to provide fuel that powered California in the late 19th Century.