

Miike Mine Mikawa Pit

In 1937, with the Miyaura and other pits aging, Mitsui Group built a new mine shaft that incorporated the most advanced coal-mining technology available. Both Pit No. 1, used for transporting coal out of the mine, and Pit No. 2, used for transporting miners, were opened in 1940. Both incline shafts were 6.06 meters wide, 4.35 meters tall, and around 2 kilometers long. They terminated deep in the coal mine, at 520 meters below sea level. The shafts operated 24 hours a day—work was divided into three shifts—and produced 2 million tonnes of coal per year. During World War II, the Mikawa Pit made extensive use of prisoners of war from the United States, Australia, and other countries.

The pit was also the location of the country's largest postwar labor dispute. Mine workers went on strike in 1959 and 1960 over Mitsui's plans to restructure and streamline operations by increasing hours and reducing oversight. Mitsui eventually broke the strike, but in 1963, an accident

occurred at Pit No. 1: The mechanism connecting two coal cars snapped, and a coal dust explosion sent a ball of fire up the shaft and carbon monoxide down into the mine. The incident killed 458 people, 675 more were seriously injured, and 839 others suffered carbon monoxide poisoning.

The mine closed in 1997. Pit No. 1 was sealed and is now covered by an open field. The top of Pit No. 2 and approximately 20 meters of the shaft into the mine have been preserved.

During the mine's operation, miners would walk through the covered passageway in front of Pit No. 2 to the labor office to receive their shift assignments. They would then head down into the small entrance of Pit No. 2 and board the coal train into the mine. The miners had to change trains multiple times to reach the coal face, and by the 1990s, the trip took two hours each way.

The winches inside the wheel sheds were used to move the trains up and down the shafts. The Pit No. 2 wheel shed and machinery date to 1940, but the Pit No. 1 shed and machinery are modern, having been replaced after the 1963 explosion. Other surviving buildings include the guard room, compressor sheds, bathhouse, and changing rooms.

Some of the engine cars used on the Miike Coal Railway have been relocated to the Mikawa Pit grounds. The engine at the front of the line of four cars is the oldest electric locomotive engine in Japan.

The Mikawa Pit is open to the public on weekends and public holidays and for special events.