

# Failure to learn? Destined to repeat ...

## Part I – The accident at Milford Mine

First in a series about mining on the Cuyuna Range.

CONNIE PETTERSEN

If you watched recent coverage of West Virginia and Mexico's coal mining accidents, you know underground mining – be it coal, iron, diamonds or what have you – is one of the world's most dangerous professions, even with modern rescue systems.

Mining fatalities fascinate people, especially the media. People wonder what makes a mining community tick. How do they hold together? Why continue mining under such adverse conditions?

One answer is that, for generations, mining has offered job security, often through tough economic times. Communities learned early how to deal with danger, accidents and tragedy. Most emerged stronger because of it. The Cuyuna Range is an example from our own backyard.

In the late 19th century, Cyler Adams discovered iron near Deerwood. By 1906, ore was stockpiled above ground. Building access roads and railroads took longer. The first shipment from Cuyuna Range reached Duluth in 1911, and the new range quickly became a valuable asset to America.

Nine million tons of iron ore came from the Cuyuna Range during its operating years. Yet there was great personal sacrifice to get that ore. Over 200 men died in mine-related accidents and others were maimed or crippled.

Cuyuna's worst heartbreaking catastrophe is still considered the greatest iron mining accident in America. It occurred in February 1924 when 41 miners drowned in the Milford Mine.

Groundwater was a major problem at Cuyuna Range. A tremendous amount seeped into the mines and had to be continually pumped to prevent flooding.

Underground mines were cold and damp, although warmer in winter than working outside.

**"It was a bad dream, but it did happen."**

On the afternoon of February 5, 1924, alarm whistles screamed on the Cuyuna Range. The Milford Mine, seven miles north of Crosby, suddenly flooded with water and mud from Foley Lake. Most of the day shift, 41 of 48 men, drowned.

The 200-foot Milford Mine had multiple levels and one shaft to the surface. Pumps extracted 500 gallons of water per minute, most from the lower level. According to *Cuyuna Country, A People's History*: "The Milford was between two lakes, Wolford to the northwest, and Foley to the northeast, although the shaft was some distance from the first, the bottom level extended under a bog bay near Foley Lake."



Some of the Milford Mine crew before the accident: Superintendent Harry Middlebrook, Steve "Bubash" Perpich, Martin Valencich, Frank Hrvatin Jr., Gust Snyder (with the mallet on his shoulder), Jacob Ravnick and Clyde Revord. Valencich and Revord died in the Milford accident. Nearly 15-year-old Frank Hrvatin Jr., escaped, but his father did not. Jacob Ravnick also climbed the ladder to safety. Photo courtesy Cuyuna Country Heritage Preservation Society.

The Milford's ore held quality manganese, a metallic element used to enhance wear and strength of steel and was in great demand by steel mills. The manganiferous ore kept getting richer as the miners approached Foley Lake. But the closer they got to the lake and adjacent bog, the more nervous some

miners were. A few called the Milford "a bad mine," and quit shortly before the accident. Others trusted company engineers, especially when the Milford had passed recent inspection.

On that cloudy, frigid February day shortly after 3:30 p.m., the day shift was approaching quitting time. Suddenly a portion of the mine caved in under the weight of bog water above. A massive force of swampy muck rushed through passageways, knocking down timbers and slamming men against the walls.

**"I knew if we lost a minute, it was too late!"**

Veteran miner, Matt Kangas, later interviewed by *The Duluth News Tribune* said, "I was working not near anybody. Then the wind hit me. I fell down and my lamp went out. I lit it, it went out again. It was dark and cold. The wind hit me again. I knew what it was. I was in a time like that once before in Michigan. I knew if we lost a minute, it was too late. I yelled. Then I ran like hell. We can't save our life no more if we don't run. I know."

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# Failure to learn? Destined to repeat ...

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So I run. No time for the gates, no time for the cage. No time for anything. I just run and fall down, and run some more. I get to the ladder. I reach for it. I miss it. I grab it and start up. I am all in. But I'm damned if I stop!"

Nearly 15-year-old Frank Hrvatin, Jr., worked with his veteran partner, Harry Hosford. Workers under 18 weren't allowed underground, but Frank Jr., tall and husky, looked older. His father, Frank Sr., was an expert blaster earning \$6 a day. Young Hrvatin earned \$3.80 daily as a dirt trammer, shoveling ore into a tram (steel wagon hand pushed along rail tracks) along the drift (passageway).

Just after Frank Jr. dumped ore down a transfer chute, a "terrific wind" hit. He thought it strange for a mine so quiet and cool. When he saw rushing water on the level below, Hrvatin told his partner, "Look at the water, Harry."

"Water, you're nuts!" Hosford said. Then he looked. "Oh, my God! My God!"

### "Start climbing! We know what's wrong!"

"For God's sake, run! Faster!" young Hrvatin yelled, "The whole lake has come in!" Half sprinting, half tripping along a 600-foot dark drift, the two reached the shaft where Emil Kainu had come

over from the pump room. Kainu cried, "What's the matter? Somethin's wrong!"

"Save your breath and start climbing. We know what's wrong!" said Hrvatin.

Veteran miner Clinton Harris operated the electric hoist at the Milford shaft, which dumped ore into a bucket (a skip). When filled, the skip was raised to the surface and emptied. Harris was working for Harvey Rice, the regular skip tender who'd called in sick. Harris apparently could have escaped, but remained at his post. He yanked the cord of the whistle, warning miners in the upper level to get out. Either he tied it around his waist so the alarm would continue, or he became entangled in it.

— rung-by-rung — supporting him on his shoulders.

At the same time, Hrvatin reached down for his partner, the last of the seven who escaped. Hosford, soaked to his waist in rising muck, yelled, "For God's sake, hurry!"

When the seven survivors collapsed on the surface, men ran to help. They lowered the cage hoping someone could be pulled to safety, but it returned empty, encased in silt and muddy water. In less than 15 minutes, the 200-foot mine filled to within 15 feet of the surface. Everyone knew no one else would escape.

For over four hours, Clinton Harris's warning whistle blasted until someone from the engine room

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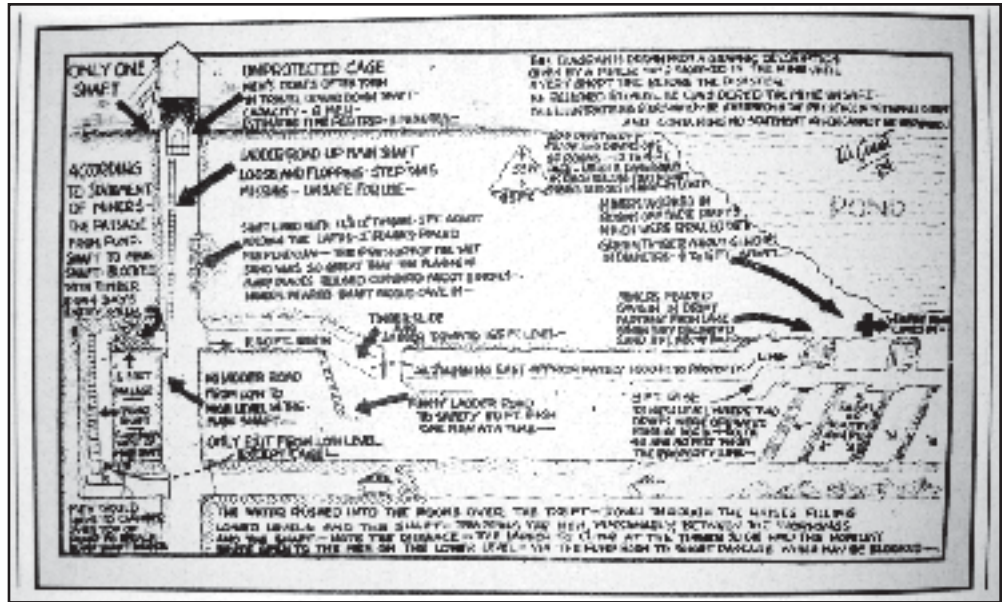
*Less than fifteen minutes. I knew I'd never see my dad no more. They were all dead.*

—FRANK HRVATIN, JR.—

15-YEAR OLD MILFORD MINER

When Matt Kangas reached the ladder, he had little strength for the 175-foot climb to the surface. Hrvatin Jr. and Hosford were behind Kangas on the ladder. With water already rising up the shaft, Hrvatin jumped between the older miner's legs and boosted Kangas up

could disconnect it. Other villages, mines and locomotives shrilled their alarms. As Berger Aulie said in *The Milford Mine Disaster: A Cuyuna Range Tragedy*: "Whistles, alarms and bells sounded like a pack of coyotes or wailing banshees . . . almost as if they thought hanging on



An artist's sketch of the Milford Mine by a former Milford miner who quit before the accident. Taken from "The Milford Mine Disaster – A Cuyuna Range Tragedy" by Berger Aulie, used with permission of Cuyuna Country Heritage Preservation Society [www.cuyunaheritage.org](http://www.cuyunaheritage.org).

the whistles would stop the disaster from happening."

Frank Hrvatin, Jr. remained by the shaft, staring down at murky, bubbling water. His father, Frank Sr. was trapped with the others. People standing near Foley Lake could see the thick ice crack and the water level drop.

Over 50 years later, when interviewed about the Milford disaster for Berger Aulie's book, Frank Hrvatin Jr. got emotional while remembering: "I took my partner out of the mud," Hrvatin said, choking up and sounding frantic. "He was in mud up to his hips. That's how fast the water came in — but we made it. Less than 15 minutes. I knew I'd never see my dad no more. They were all dead." Hrvatin remembered "super human strength" on his climb to the surface.

Thirty-eight of the 41 miners drowned were married, leaving over 80 children fatherless. New widows, shocked and grief stricken, joined arms and walked the streets waiting for news.

A Crow Wing County mine inspector doubted any bodies would be recovered. Some wanted the mine closed as a shrine. But the families requested their loved-ones be returned. Milford owners agreed, knowing if the mine reopened, valuable manganese was yet unearthed.

George H. Crosby of the Whitmarsh Mining Company who owned the Milford, said they would spare no expense


and do "everything possible to recover the bodies at the earliest possible time. Pumps will operate day and night."

Uniting in a brotherhood, men and equipment arrived from competing Cuyuna mines and Mesabi and Vermillion iron ranges. By midnight, in subzero temperatures, pumps were sucking out thousands of gallons of mucky water. But more continued emptying into the mine.

Pumping the shaft was pointless. First the lake would have to be drained.

*Next in the series: Part II – The recovery and investigation of the Milford accident.*

Pictures and material from oral histories recorded by the Cuyuna County Heritage Preservation Society were used with permission. For more information on iron mining see: Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN ([www.ironrangeresearchcenter.org](http://www.ironrangeresearchcenter.org)). Books: *Cuyuna Country, A People's History I & II* and *The Milford Mine Disaster – A Cuyuna Range Tragedy* by Berger Aulie are available through [www.cuyunaheritage.org](http://www.cuyunaheritage.org).



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