

Milford Mine Disaster ...

Part II – Recovery, relief efforts

CONNIE PETERSEN

On Feb. 5, 1924, communities on the Cuyuna Range were flooded with grief and shock after the worst iron mining disaster in America. Forty-one men drowned in the Milford Mine, a few miles north of Crosby.

Without warning, a portion of the mine caved in under the weight of an overhead bog near Lake Foley. Murky "black rolling water" rushed through the mine with such force that most miners never had a chance.

Six men "ran like the wind" across dark drifts (passageways) to the only shaft. The seventh, Emil Kainu, sensed danger when power kept going out in the pump room. Mud and mire kept gaining on them as the seven miners climbed a 175-foot ladder to safety. In less than 15 minutes, the 200-foot mine flooded to within 15 feet of the surface.

Months of effort to recover bodies

By midnight, in frigid temperatures, attempts to pump

the shaft were underway. Crews organized into three eight-hour shifts. When Lake Foley continued emptying into the mine, they had to drain the lake.

"Mining companies and officials of Cuyuna and the Mesabi ranges joined together to de-water the mine," said Berger Aulie in *The Milford Mine Disaster*. Manganiferous iron ore, prevalent on the Cuyuna Range, was in high demand by steel mills. Yet the competing companies and ranges united in a brotherhood.

Two pumps worked on Foley Lake, pumping the water into Lake Wolford, which flowed into the Mississippi. Another special pump and crew was loaned from the Oliver Mining Company on the Mesabi Range.

It took 12 days to empty Foley Lake. When they started on the mine, the shaft and drifts were choked by mud, weeds, timbers and other debris. Workers had to hose off thick muck so it could drain toward the shaft and be pumped out. They

methodically hand-shoveled their way through blockages, like archeologists preserving artifacts.

Recovery was a slow process, difficult and dangerous. Any equipment that shook the ground could cause a cave-in. The first two bodies were found March 28, a third on April 17. By June, they had uncovered about 16 bodies, including Frank Hrvatin Sr. found with his mining partner, Frederick Harte. Although Frank Jr. had helped in the recovery, he quit after they found his father.

Additional bodies were recovered throughout the summer and fall. Grieving families waited for news, lives on hold, until word came and they could make burial plans. Funerals sometimes were relatively close together, depending on how many bodies were found at a time and in what condition.

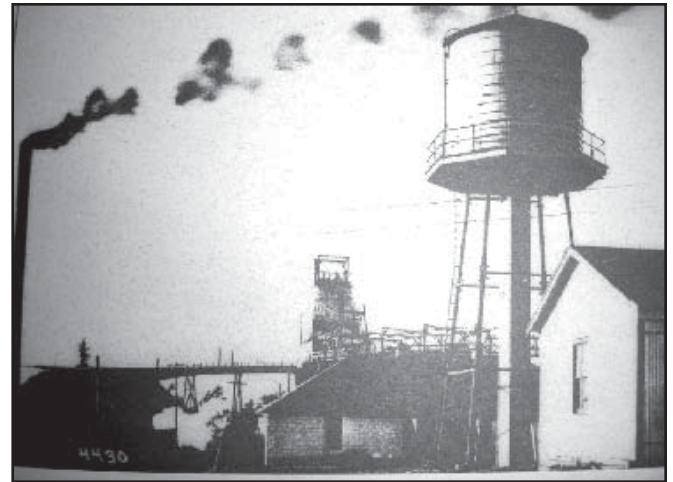
Sometimes the stench was so bad, crews could only stay 15-20 minutes below ground. In addition to human remains, the flood had washed in decaying fish, turtles and

muskrats. After a half hour in the fresh air, men returned to work, only to repeat the process. Men wore masks sprayed with a formalin solution recommended by the undertakers.

When a body was found, it was placed in a wire stretcher and taken to a temporary morgue. Belongings were recorded; clothing cut off and the corpse hosed down to get it as clean as they could. It was then transported by one of the Crosby mortuaries or sent to Brainerd, Duluth, or other destination, depending on the wishes of relatives.

After many months in the mines, some bodies were more difficult to identify. Often, a numbered brass tag was still in a pocket. The tag was a locker number for the changing area where miners showered after shifts ended. Lockers held personal items that helped with identification.

On November 4, nine months after the accident, the last body was removed. Mining resumed shortly after. Recovery and cleanup had cost at least \$250,000.



The Milford Mine as it looked around the time of the accident. Photo courtesy of Cuyuna County Heritage Preservation Society

The Milford Mine continued to be operational until the early 1930s. It closed during the Great Depression and ensuing lower demand for steel. Records indicate that two and a half million tons of high-grade manganiferous ore still remain where the Milford was mined.


Relief activities after the accident

The National Red Cross set up an office, and a Disaster Relief Committee organized with mining officials, churches, legions and lodges. A well-known mining engineer and superintendent of mines, Mr. Wilbur Van Evera, was treasurer. Van Evera was also on the investigation

committee requested by the governor.

The Whitmarsh Mining Company (owned by George H. Crosby) carried compensation insurance since the 1913 Workman's Comp Law. Death benefits were paid within a week to families of married Milford miners, but no payments went to relatives of single miners. Widows would receive a total of \$7,500, to be paid weekly, not over \$20 or under \$8.

Compensation ended after seven years; earlier if a widow remarried. Many who died in the accident had large families, including young children. At least two widows gave birth after the accident. *Continued on page 15*



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Milford Mine Disaster ...

(Part II continued from page 13)

Supplemental incomes ended before most dependent children finished school. In some families, the older child quit their education to work and help support the family.

In a few cases, the local American Red Cross paid a mortgage on widows' homes. They provided

food, coal, wood and clothing as needed. The Cuyuna community also pulled together to help grieving families. They shared what they could – meals, clothes, washing machines, etc. Some families moved away to be closer to relatives, but the majority remained to wait

for recovery.

According to Berger Aulie, "Widows with small children 'made do' with weekly compensation . . . The bereaved communities became closely knit as everyone tried to help the less fortunate. That closeness lasted through the second generation of

the immigrant workers and is continuing into the third. Children and grandchildren of 'old timers' on Cuyuna Range show a love and compassion born in sorrow and tempered by years of hardship through a Great Depression and War. "We are all family."

Good or bad luck depended on the circumstance

Many stories surfaced after Milford Mine disaster. Ronald MacDonald, a young mining engineer new to the area, was learning the mining business at the Milford. He drowned, leaving a wife and daughter in Scotland. Two telephone operators, Jenny and Maybelle Myhres, handled hundreds of emergency calls until their relief shifts came, despite concern for their brother Arthur, who worked that morning at the Milford. He died in the accident.

One scary tale is a ghost story that insisted Clinton Harris, the skip tender who died in the Milford, frightened the first crew of miners telling them to "get out" as they returned to work after the Milford reopened.

A lot of ironies surfaced in the aftermath:

- The night shift was spared by about 15 minutes; the day shift was lost

by the same margin.

- Several miners quit before the accident, citing dangerous conditions. Others recently started work at the Milford – one man just the day before.

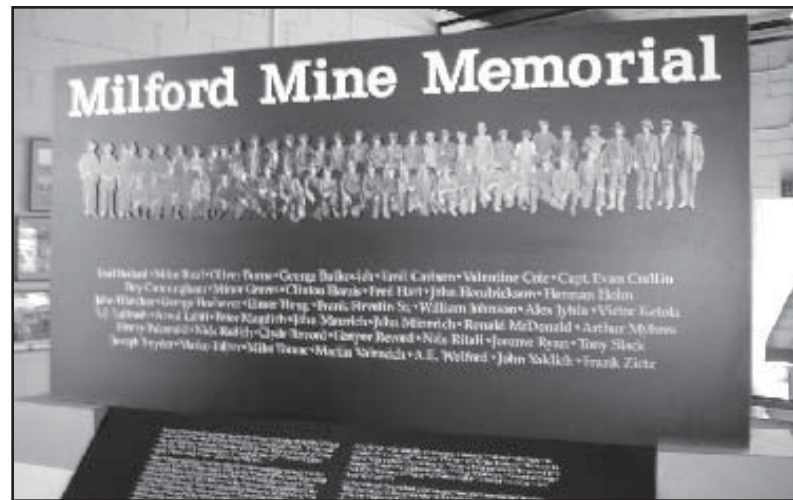
- Having no transportation to work saved one man's life. Others were sick or changed shifts.

- A mechanic was called to the surface shortly before the flood to fix equipment.

- Several miners were going to quit before spring thaw, thinking chances of a cave-in would increase in the spring. However, the water and mud did not freeze that far underground.

- A few miners who died had recently taken out life insurance policies.

In his 1976 interview, Frank Hrvatin Jr. said his mine captain approached him a few hours before the tragedy. "Captain Crellin asked us, me and my partner, 'Would you boys



A memorial at the Croft Historical Park in Crosby MN lists the names of those who drowned in the Milford Mine, February 5, 1924. Names of the 41 miners lost in the Milford Mine (note the many nationalities): Earl Bedard, Mike Bizal, Oliver Burns, George Butkovich, Emil Carlson, Valentine Cole, Evan Crellin, Roy Cunningham, Minor Graves, Clinton Harris, Fred Harte, John Hendrickson, John Hlacher, George Hochevar, Herman Holm, Elmer Haug, Frank Hrvatin Sr., William Johnson, Alex Jyhla, Victor Ketola, Leo J. LaBrash, Arvid Lehti, Peter Magdich, Henri Macki, John Maurich, Ronald McDonald, Arthur Myhres, John Minerich, Nick Radich, Clyde Revord, Gaspar H. Revord, Nels Ritari, Jerome Ryan, Tony Slack, Joseph Snyder, Marko Toljan, Mike Tomac, Martin Valencich, Arthur Wolford, John Yaklich, Frank Zeitz.

Connie Pettersen photo

be willing to haul some timber back to contract #3? There were just three men in the mine – me, Harry Hosford and Emil Kainu. Everybody else was up eating lunch," Hrvatin said. When the crews returned to work, Crellin wanted Frank to take a platform back to where his father worked, which he did. "That was the last time I saw my father alive."

The most tragic irony was the timing of the flood into "Contract Thirteen," an area or "room" that had been blasted down on the previous Friday. If water had burst into the Milford between Friday and Tuesday, after blastings had occurred, the mine would have been nearly empty. Mines were dynamited at the end of shifts. However, the water broke through on Tuesday afternoon when 48 unsuspecting men were working.

Next in the series: Part III: The Milford Mine Disaster – The Investigation

Pictures and oral histories from the Cuyuna County Heritage Preservation Society and Iron Range Research Center used with permission (1987.0802); Frank Hrvatin Oral History, 05/11/1976; Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN (www.ironrangeresearchcenter.org). Recommended reading: Cuyuna Country, A People's History and Berger Aulie's The Milford Mine Disaster – A Cuyuna Range Tragedy (available through www.cuyunaheritage.org) and Ghosts of the Prairie by Troy Taylor.

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