

Milford Mine Disaster ...

Part III – The investigation

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(This is Part III of a series. Part I & II can be read online at www.newshopper.net.)

Two days after 41 miners drowned in the Milford Mine, on Feb. 5, 1924, the *Duluth News Tribune* and *Minnesota Daily Star* reported that “after a thorough investigation” mine inspectors called the Crosby tragedy “an act of God” and, therefore, unavoidable.

In *The Milford Mine Disaster*, Berger Aulie wrote that those articles caused quite a stir on the Cuyuna Range. “At the time of the so-called inspections, the disaster was barely 24 hours old, and water was still bubbling near the collar of the shaft,” said Aulie. The Duluth Labor Union petitioned Minnesota Governor Jacob Preus, calling for a thorough investigation, with one member chosen by the union.

Preus appointed a five-man committee; however, they lacked subpoena power, a critical flaw. Three hundred witnesses testified “voluntarily.” That meant miners had to be very uncomfortable criticizing management. Miners, often poorly educated immigrants, knew no other employment. If “blacklisted,” they were branded as troublemakers and could not work in other mines.

Berger Aulie thought it “quite a coincidence” many miners gave identical answers to questions. “It was as safe as any mine,” was often said when asked if they thought the Milford dangerous. Did they rehearse political answers so comments

would not be construed as “personal opinion” to avoid being blacklisted?

The Milford Mine Disaster said there was a “frenzy” to obtain manganese. “Were safety functions overlooked?” asked Aulie. “Was the mine encroaching on Foley property? And under the lake?” (if so, the Milford stole ore from Foley owners). “The investigating committee reported to the contrary . . . Draw your own conclusions.”

Slander or unsubstantiated gossip

Rumors went wild. A controversial article entitled “Who’s to Blame?” appeared in the March 1 1924 *Brainard Farmer Labor Record*. In his book, Aulie criticized the article’s “facts” as yet unsubstantiated. They accused people by name of things that had not been proven, using sensationalist “yellow journalism” tactics.

Since it was an election year, Aulie wondered if the Labor had a hidden agenda preoccupied with blame and “stereotyping management” as all greedy, for profit, blind to safety. The article never mentioned mining officials taking part in relief activities or that Cuyuna, Mesabi and Vermillion ranges furnished men and equipment. “There are two sides to every story,” said Aulie. “Decisions should not be influenced by rumor, emotionally charged opinions, or politically motivated comments in the media. All facts should be fairly considered.”

The March 1 *Record* also ran an anonymous ex-Milford

“miner’s story” with many reasons why he quit: “In the first place, the mine only had one shaft, and that is against the law in other states and ought to be so in Minnesota, because if it caves in, there is no other way out and we’re goners,” said the unidentified miner, “and the shaft was dangerous because the lathes were bulging out under the pressure of the wet sand, and any miner can tell you what that means.”

Other accusations emerged about the Milford:

- Unsafe ladders with loose or missing rungs.
- No ladder from the low level except up through the pump shaft.
- The tram men on the low level had to depend on the “skip” to escape.
- The cage held about eight men and took three minutes per trip.
- The cage was unprotected and men sometimes had scrapes and torn coats.
- Some “rooms” were “hung up” (the blast did not cause the rock and upper stratus to come down solidly to give proper bracing).
- Green timber . . . springy, and snapping.

Hearings and committee findings

The first committee hearing was May 9-10, a second June 27-28, and the last hearing was July 11-12. Over 300 pages of testimony were taken. Records of the proceedings and copies of news articles, etc., were kept by J.



Milford miners – taken before the tragedy. Notice the carbide hats and dirty faces from coming off shift. Miners breathed iron dust and often looked like they wore dark mustaches, but it was sometimes a dirty face. PHOTO COURTESY OF CUYUNA COUNTY HERITAGE PRESERVATION SOCIETY. Some of these 1924 Milford miners are unidentified. Standing: 1-2 unknown; 3. Ronald MacDonald; 4. Minor Graves, 5 unknown; 6. Charlie Swanson, 7. Joe Sabyan, 8. Victor Wadsten. Seated: 1-4 unknown, 5. Bill Gutenkauf; 6. Lee Fiester, 7. Arthur Myhres, John Grgurich, Sr.

Wilbur Van Evera, a Crosby resident and mining engineer who was on Gov. Preus’ Committee.

W. E. McEwen, Committee Chairman, told everyone, “Tell your story here . . . do not make statements on the street.” But miners wanted guarantees of not losing their jobs. After assurances were given, some agreed to appear, but later “changed their minds.” Others testified they had been “wary” of the mine.

Past and present Milford Mine owners, underground mining experts, former miners, survivors, and widows of the victims testified. VanEvera wrote a final report with a notarized statement indicating all testimony was given under oath.

The Milford Mine Disaster was published in 1994. Aulie questioned if the Committee’s

final decision, then 70 years earlier that absolved George H. Crosby and the Whitmarsh Mining Company of all responsibility, may have been “a hasty conclusion.”

Aulie quoted a portion of the final report to Governor Preus by Chairman McEwen: “No blame can be attached

to the mining company for this unfortunate accident. The real cause of the disaster was the fact that imminence and danger from such a rush of mud was not recognized by anyone.” Aulie wondered, “Why not?”

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The Committee felt the accident happened when "some power decreed that this arch should break through in the middle of the afternoon of February 5th when men were peacefully working." They concluded that, although the mine had been wet, "there was no place where it was necessary to work in waterproof clothes." Regarding the criticism that there was only one escape shaft the Committee explained, "in this particular case, an additional outlet placed in any point where it was possible to place it, would not have saved lives of any of the men."

They also reported: "of the many mines developed in Minnesota under marshy ground," the Milford was the first major catastrophe and "it has since been learned swamps are treacherous and may include deep pockets of mud and water."

The Committee asked for legislation to provide safety education for miners. They also requested funding for inspectors to attend safety conferences and give them more assistants. Other mine safety improvements included:

- Improving first aid, breathing apparatus and rescue stations.
- Warning systems, mine maps to help with rescue work.

- Redesigning the cage.
- Forbidding any digging upward within 12 feet of water and completing a borehole check if water is suspected.
- Improving mine ventilation systems.
- Draining any nearby swamp, marsh, or body of water and keeping it drained.

Memories and opinions years after the accident

Joe Sabyan, a mechanic called to the surface shortly before the Milford tragedy, said in a 1963 *Brainerd Daily Dispatch* story: "The practice was to set off dynamite and cause a cave-in to fill the empty cavern where the ore had been removed. At the Milford, this was not always done. And these caverns filled with water, causing heavy pressure which caused the initial cave-in near the lake."

Lenore Jackson Stark's father, Rudolph Jackson, had worked at the Milford before the accident, but had been fired for "talking too much" in saying the mine was too close to the lake. Rudolph was going to testify. Lenore, still a child, remembered hearing her parents talking: "My Dad used to like to walk uptown, you know, and he was always whistling," said

Lenore. "As he was walking home one night, two men started walking with him. And they said, 'Well, Rudy, you like your wife and daughter pretty well, don't you?' He said, 'Of course!' They said, 'Well, if you go there to testify, you won't see them anymore.' He didn't testify."

In May, 1976, Frank Hrvatin Jr. was the last remaining survivor of the tragedy. At age 67, he was interviewed from his hospital bed in Seattle by researchers from the Iron Range Interpretative Center in Chisholm:

"They wanted that ore real bad," said Hrvatin. "In those days they needed steel . . . every place they could get it. Everything was working. . . After the Armistice, they had to replace supplies because steel was gone. You know with the first world war was like. We practically supplied everybody with steel and iron."

Hrvatin continued, "My father told me we would not be working here (the Milford) that long. They never openly discussed it, but they knew they were heading for the lake . . . It was a real wet mine. In parts of the mine you had to work in rain hats and slickers . . .

warn other men. "But no one would believe the lake was coming in, or a young scared kid. Five others heeded my warning and went up the ladder." Hrvatin thought several other miners might have made it if they'd reacted. He had stayed three hours at the mine after the accident

know. Obvious mistakes were made, but management was absolved of negligence. After so many years, it does little good to point fingers – unless, of course, past knowledge benefits future generations. History lessons that are not learned are destined to be repeated.

Shortly after the 2006 coal mining accidents in West Virginia, relatives of deceased miners questioned safety issues. The Associated Press said lawmakers and the mining industry were uniting to demand the occupation be made safer. West Virginia's Congress called for a major renovation of federal and state safety laws. Everyone should be allowed to speak, without fear of retaliation, to learn from mistakes.

The most glaring error from the Milford Mine Disaster was the rush to obtain valuable ore that took precedence over draining a bog and lake. What a difference that precaution would have made to 41 men and their families.

Hindsight is always 20/20. But isn't any loss of life too big a price to pay just to make a profit?

Future features will include "Miners' Memories" with pictures of Cuyuna Range's later years before the mines closed. If you have information to share about later mining on the Cuyuna, contact the *NewsHopper*, 218-927-6990, or e-mail, hopper@emily.net.

Pictures and oral histories used with permission of the Cuyuna County Heritage Preservation Society and Iron Range Research Center (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.cyunaheritage.org.



Ironton miners' rental "cottages" show examples of some of the affordable housing provided by mine companies for their workers. Photo courtesy of Cuyuna County Heritage

They were under the lake. Directly under the lake. The mining inspector's report will probably say different, but we were under the lake . . . The mining engineer told the company many times about the danger, but they wouldn't listen. They just wanted that ore."

Hrvatin remembered seeing water rising, and tried to

in shock and dread of going home to tell his mother his dad was dead.

The interviewers asked what he personally thought of the official investigation after the tragedy. Hrvatin answered, "That farce they called an investigation? They went in immediately and got their stories all conflicted and it was 'an act of God – nobody at fault,' said Hrvatin. "And how does a small person without any funds going to fight a guy with a lot of money or a group with a lot of money? How are they going to do that? It's absolutely impossible. So they made it stick and that's the way it was written off." Hrvatin died shortly after the interview from a debilitating lung disease.

"Who's to blame?"

Should the owners have been held more responsible? Did they know more than they let on? Was it really just bad luck in the actual timing of the flood and, therefore, an 'act of God?'

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