

1902 Negaunee Mine disaster

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There was no mine in the whole Lake Superior mining district which worried the miners more than the Negaunee, located in the city bearing the same name. When opening the shaft in the late 1880s, it was soon discovered that the ore body was beneath a great bowl-shaped basin of quicksand into which water flowed freely.

To the miners who went down into this “wet mine,” the fear of cave-ins was ever present. Nearly a dozen men died from various accidents in the mine’s early years. By 1900, repair gangs were fighting a constant but losing battle to keep the drifts open so that they could be used. However, the company kept sending miners down into the mine, even though the danger of a major catastrophe loomed larger with each passing day.

Finally, in 1901, a major cave-in occurred. A number of surface buildings disappeared into a large crater-like hole. Fortunately, there was no loss of life.

When the American Steel and Wire Company continued operations, some miners finally quit because of the owner’s open disregard for the safety of its employees. These miners warned others that the worst was yet to come.

Such a protest didn't seem to bother the company. Just as soon as a miner quit, his job was immediately filled with a fresh "off a boat" immigrant looking for work. These poor, unfortunate men were blindly led into the death trap known as the Negaunee Mine.

At noon on Tuesday Jan. 7, 1902, the trap finally snapped shut.

Nearly all of the miners working that day went to the surface to eat their lunches. However, a handful of men decided to eat in the pump room in the sub-level twenty-five feet below the cage landing at the 485-foot level of the mine.

Sitting above the pumphouse was a miner named Hasset. While finishing his lunch, he felt a strange rumbling around him. Suddenly, his candle flickered and he immediately realized there had been a cave-in somewhere in the mine. He screamed to the men below, "It is coming!" and scrambled up the ladder in the main shaft towards the surface.

In the pump house below, men dropped their lunch buckets and raced towards the sub-level ladderway which lead up to the cage landing. Just as Angelo Ricardo and Jacob Hannala reached the landing, a hurricane force wind, caused by the pressure of the immense block of descending ground, came screaming through the drift, followed by a tidal wave of water and sand.

The air was driven through the mine with so much force that it tore the stringers out of the main shaft for forty feet and forced sand and debris into the sub-level from which the trapped miners were escaping. The wave of mud struck Ricardo, carrying him through the drift, while Hannala was lifted up against the roof with so much force that he died instantly.

John Pearce also made it up the ladderway to the cage landing, struggling towards the ladder leading up the main shaft. He reached the foot of the ladder, just a few feet from safety when the mud grabbed him and never let go.

Meanwhile, Billy Hakkinen watched as the others scrambled to get out of the sub-level against the in-rushing water. Possibly seeing that their escape route was cut off, Hakkinen turned and ran towards the back of the sub-level attempting to find another way out. He found sanctuary, but not escape, in a small pocket above the drift.

On the surface, the miners eating lunch felt the ground quiver violently and then watched in horror as a great funnel-shaped chasm opened up. The shaft was quickly filling up with water and sand, and word was immediately sent to other mines in the area to send pumps for the rescue effort.

The scene at the mine was one of confusion. Those in charge tried to get a head count of the survivors, but because the miners were scattered all about the property because of the dinner break, an accurate count was impossible. Panic spread

through the streets of Negaunee as the news spread that the mine had just caved-in with an appalling loss of life.

A rescue party was organized and a number of very brave men risked their lives, descending down into the still caving mine to search for survivors. Miraculously, Ricardo was found alive, while Hannala's lifeless body was also recovered. By that time, the water was rising rapidly in the shaft and the rescuers were forced to retreat.

Finally, it was confirmed that nine miners were still entombed in the mine. Their names were John Pearce, Erick Lahti, John Pascoe, William Williams, Angelo Carilli, Louise Mattson, Julius Anderson, Billy Hakkinen, and John Sullivan.

The company stated that there was no possible chance of reaching them. The families of the missing men, not wanting to give up hope, angrily pressed the company to do something to rescue the miners in case some were still alive.

The continuing cave-ins made another rescue attempt impossible. Pumps were set up and by Wednesday the flow of water coming into the mine was finally brought under control but the following day, the blacksmith shop went down and out of sight. It was evident that it would take a long time before the entombed miners could be reached.

It was two months after the cave-in that rescuers finally reached the cage level where the dead miners were buried. On

Tuesday, March 11, the bodies of Pearce, Mattson, Williams, and Sullivan were recovered. On Thursday, the remains of Lahti and Anderson were located, while a week later, Hakkinen's body was found in the small room where he had taken refuge. Unlike the others who were killed immediately, he had suffocated. The last body, Carilli, wasn't found until April 12.

The final death toll was ten. If the cave-in hadn't occurred at lunch time when many the miners were on the surface, the toll could have reached over a hundred.

By June, the Negaunee Mine was reopened and the dead were replaced by new miners. Less than two months later on August 1, 1902, the name of Henry Wiirtanen appeared on the front page of the Iron Herald after he died while working in the Negaunee Mine.

The cause of death? You guessed it ... killed "by a fall of ground."