

# Tragic Anniversary: Girl, 7, disappeared into Upper Peninsula mine shaft

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CALUMET, MI - It's been more than a half century since a little girl named Ruth Ann Miller slipped through a crack at the top of an abandoned mine shaft and disappeared into the darkness below.

And yet long after the frantic search was over and a memorial was placed atop the spot where the wide-eyed 7-year-old was last seen, Ruth Ann remains in the collective memory of those in her Upper Peninsula community.

For decades after her death on July 16, 1966, the area surrounding her final resting place has been carefully tended. People still come to visit the mine shaft-turned-gravesite. Some of them know her family, or lived in Calumet when the call for help went out that afternoon. Others have just heard her story and want to see the spot.

"Now and again we will get a curious patron or a community member who remembers the event, stopping in to see what we have," said Lindsay Hiltunen, university archivist for Michigan Tech University. The campus collections contain newspaper clippings about the search for Ruth Ann and photographs of the futile rescue effort. All are available for the public to peruse.

This week marks the 51st anniversary of Ruth Ann's death. The history held by Michigan Tech and other sources have helped to keep the child's memory alive.

## Tragedy in Copper Country

Usually when you hear old stories about tragedies in Copper Country, they are about miners who lost their lives in the shafts hewn out of rock that criss-cross parts of the Upper Peninsula.

But on this day, Ruth Ann was out playing with her older brother, Gary, 10, and another little boy when she slipped inside a gap in the barbed-wire fence

surrounding the abandoned Tamarack Mine shaft #4, about a mile north of Calumet in Houghton County.

Unlike a lot of other mine shafts in that area than had been cut on an incline to follow veins of valuable copper, this Tamarack shaft was a vertical drop that ran nearly a mile deep. According to an article on the Keweenaw Peninsula's mining history, the Tamarack shafts had been cut straight down as a way to intercept a copper lode that a mining boss had a hunch was sitting beneath his feet.

He was right. Begun in 1882, Tamarack's five shafts were a U.P. success story for a time. By the 1930s, the shafts had been abandoned. A concrete cap was set across the top of shaft #4.

It was that eroding cap area where Ruth Ann crouched down that afternoon, hiding from her brother and friend. "You can't find me," she'd called out to them.

"When they did locate her, it was too late. She was already slipping down into the shaft," her stepfather, Eugene Taylor, told ABC Channel 10 for a memorial video the station produced in 2016.

Part of the way down, the steep shaft had been plugged. Mine authorities estimated that obstruction was topped by about 200 feet of water.

Rescuers launched a massive three-day effort to find Ruth Ann. They made many trips into the hole, risking their lives as they called her name over and over. When they tried to remove the mine shaft's concrete cap, it broke apart and fell in, further obstructing a hole already littered with debris.

Authorities determined there was no way Ruth Ann could have survived. The shaft was permanently sealed and a high fence was installed.

When Ruth Ann's mother died in 1988, she was interred next to her daughter's final resting place.

## **Holes in the Ground**

The 1966 tragedy made headlines across the country. It also created a push to securely cap the region's abandoned mine shafts.

Most of Michigan's abandoned mine tunnels are in the western U.P., on both state-owned and private land.

"These abandoned mines pose significant health and safety risks, which include the potential for collapse, falls, drownings, accidental detonations of misfired explosives, or exposure to lethal gases," according to a May 2015 report from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

A 1995 inventory of abandoned mines, conducted by Michigan Tech with a state contract, showed there were "more than 2,000 mine shafts or other openings to the surface that exist in Michigan," the 2015 DNR report said. "Assessments on the condition of these mines are ongoing, with progress largely limited by funding constraints."

The DNR received appropriations to help fund closings of state-owned mines between 1999 and 2002. This money paid for the closure of 16 mines in 2000, and another 15 in 2001. The average cost of closing the first nine was \$4,000, the state said. The most expensive? \$108,000.

Between 2004 and 2007, the DNR received a federal grant that paid for the bulk of the \$265,000 it took to close nine more mine shafts.