Milford Mine Disaster ...

Part III – The investigation

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(\( Part \) II of a series. Part I-6II can be read online at www.newshopper.net.)

Two days after 41 miners died in the Milford Mine, on Feb. 5, 1924, the Duluth News Tribune and Minnesota Daily Star reported that “after the 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 come from the mine, get off work, take the train, and be preoccupied with blame and not make statements on the record. They were branded as troublemakers and could not be influenced by rumor, said Aulie. “Decisions should not be influenced by rumor,” Berger Aulie quoted a portion of the final report to Governor Preus by Chairman McElwen. “No blame can be attached to the mining company for this unfortunate accident. The real cause of the disaster was the fact that ignorance and danger from such a rush of mud was not recognized by anyone.” Aulie wondered, “Why not?”

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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.

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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 that many mines developed "it has since been learned that many mines developed..." the many mines developed..."

They were under the lake. Directly under the lake. The mining inspector's report will probably say different, but we were under the lake... After the Articosis, they had to replace supplies because steel was gone. You know with the first 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 and steel..."

The most glaring error from the Milford Mine Disaster was the "uneconomical" one that took place... under the lake. The mine's... 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 Aitkin Range's later years before the mines..."Who's to blame?" They should have been held more responsible? Did they know more than they let on? Was it really just "an act of God?" Did they know more than they let on? Was it really just "an act of God?"

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