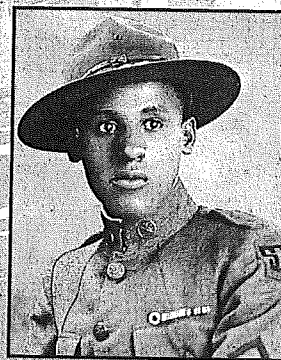


D. J. Tice

Minnesota's Twentieth Century



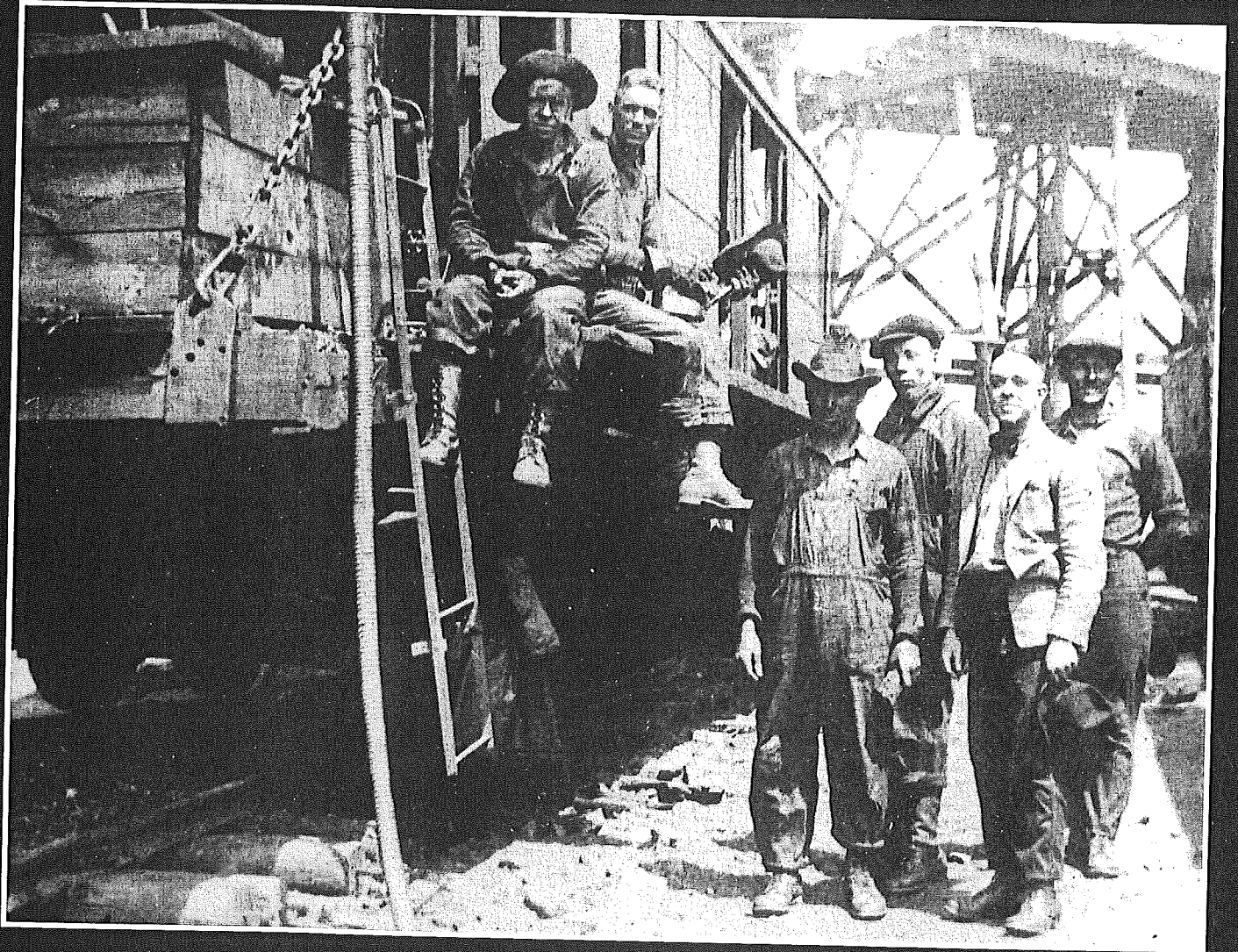
STORIES OF
EXTRAORDINARY
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Minnesota underground iron miners, about 1920. They worked like mules, Frank Hrvatin said, and these men show it. Photograph courtesy of the Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, Minnesota.

**SAVE YOUR BREATH
AND START CLIMBING**

The Milford Mine Disaster, 1924

At about 3:45 on the afternoon of February 5, 1924, Frank Hrvatin (pronounced her-VAH-tin) was pushing an ore car along a shaft of the underground Milford Mine.

The dark, cool, horizontal shaft, called a “drift,” was about eight feet wide and eight feet high. It was heavily timbered on all sides for support. The drift lay 175 feet below ground on the Cuyuna Iron Range in north-central Minnesota.

Hrvatin was seventeen days short of his fifteenth birthday. He was a “dirt tramer,” one of forty-eight miners at work on the afternoon shift. His job was to shovel loosened iron ore into a tram, a big steel wagon on wheels, and then push the load by hand down rail tracks laid along the drift.

Hrvatin had just dumped a load of ore down a transfer chute when he was hit, he said, by “a terrific wind.” The powerful rush of warm air was “very, very, very odd for a mine that was so quiet and cool all the time. There wasn’t supposed to be no wind. No way.”

Hrvatin then “looked down the chute. And I seen water coming through on the level below us. It bounced up into the chute and dropped back down and rushed on. I said to my partner, Harry Hosford, ‘Look at the water, Harry.’

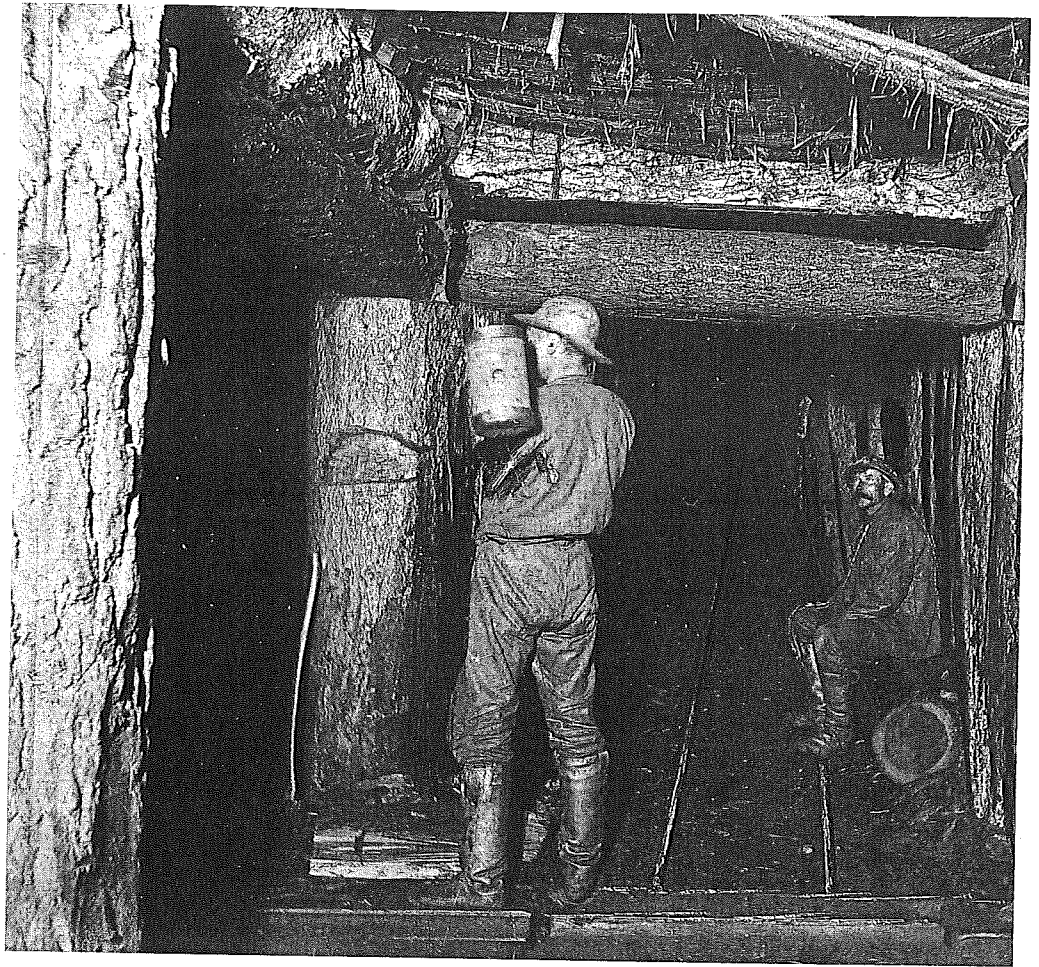
“He said, ‘Water, you’re nuts.’ And then he looked and said, ‘Oh, my God! My God!’”

Frank Hrvatin died in 1976, just weeks after recording his story of the Milford Mine disaster in an oral history. It is now in the collection of the Iron Range Research Center in Chisholm, Minnesota.

More than a half century after the worst accident in Minnesota mining, Hrvatin’s voice rose and cracked and his breaths came quickly as he remembered.

Electric lights went out throughout the mine. The unnatural gale kept extin-

A photograph taken at the Zenith mine on the Vermilion Range in 1911 gives a sense of the damp creepiness of early underground mining. *St. Paul Pioneer Press* file photo.



guishing the carbide gas lamps the miners wore on their hats, plunging them into absolute blackness. Frantically, they relit the lamps again and again as a liquid roar rose from the depths of the mine.

“Oh man, scared,” Hrvatin said. “Don’t tell me about scared.”

A Way of Life

Underground iron miners rarely worried about the hazards of their work, according to Hrvatin. “It was a way of life,” he said. “These were men who earned their living that way every day for years and years. If you let yourself worry about danger, you’d never go down in that shaft to begin with.”

Mining was a way of life Hrvatin’s parents had tried to leave behind. German-speaking immigrants from Austria, the elder Hrvatins were among many thousands of poor newcomers from eastern and southern Europe who journeyed to northern Minnesota around the turn of the century. The richest iron ore deposits in the world had been discovered there in the 1880s.

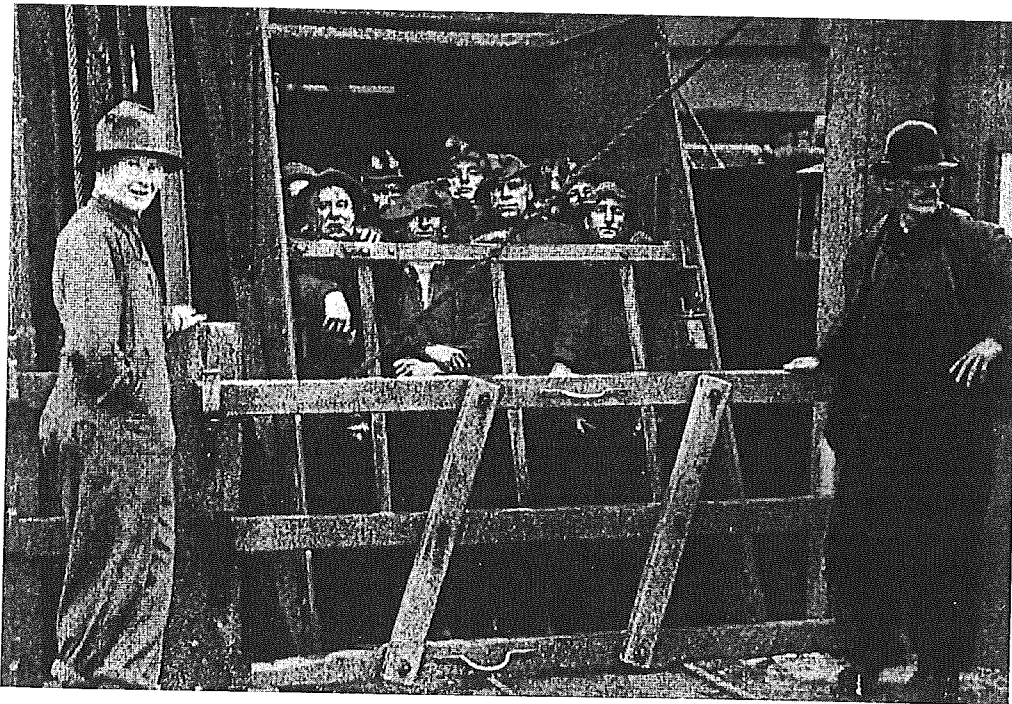
The Hrvatins settled in Chisholm, on the largest of Minnesota's iron ranges, the Mesabi. There, after working in the mines for a time, Hrvatin's father, Frank Sr., opened a saloon, while his mother, Frances, ran a boardinghouse for miners. A disastrous 1908 forest fire destroyed much of Chisholm, including the elder Hrvatins' business. Frank Sr. was forced back into the mines. Frank Jr. was born a year later, the second of nine children and the only son.

Hrvatin's father sought a fresh start on the Cuyuna Range, a newly discovered iron region near what is best known today as a popular resort district north of Brainerd. The deep-lying ore of the Cuyuna was often mined by underground methods. It was prized because the Cuyuna ore contained large concentrations of manganese, making it ideal for heavy, high-grade steel. Top-quality steel was consumed greedily during and after World War I.

In 1922, the elder Hrvatin went to work for the Milford Mine, by then the only underground Cuyuna mine still producing the best manganiferous ore. Owned by George H. Crosby, a mining magnate after whom the nearby town of Crosby was named, the Milford tapped a rich ore body that ran near Foley Lake.

Just how close to the lake the mine reached would soon become a question of considerable interest.

The eleven Hrvatins lived in Crosby, a typically drab company town of that era on the Iron Range. They had a five-room house on a one-acre lot. They kept a cow and a few pigs. Young Frank's eight sisters "idolized" him, the way he remembered



Minnesota miners prepare to be lowered into an underground mine. "If you let yourself worry about danger," Hrvatin said, "you'd never go down in that shaft to begin with." Photograph courtesy of the Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, Minnesota.

it. Rich in such boyish pleasures as fishing, hunting, and brawling, Hrvatin had, he said, "as much fun as any kid in the country."

He didn't much care for school. In the fall of 1923, he joined his father in the Milford. There was no problem about the fourteen-year-old's age. "They never asked, if you were a strong boy," Hrvatin said.

Hrvatin earned \$3.80 a day as a dirt trammer. His father, an experienced miner skilled in the underground blasting that loosened the soft red ore, earned \$6.00 a day. They both "worked like mules," Hrvatin said. But with two paychecks coming in, the family "had just started to get on our feet real nice financially" as February 1924 arrived.

It was a boom time on Minnesota's Iron Range, a region whose economy has always experienced extreme cycles of prosperity and hardship. "Everybody needed steel like crazy," Hrvatin said. "Everything was working. They couldn't get the ore out of that mine fast enough."

Somethin's Wrong!

Hrvatin and his fellow miners couldn't get themselves out of that mine fast enough once they realized the Milford was filling with water and mud. "I'll tell you, I had superhuman strength," Hrvatin said. "Boy, did I go."

Along with five other miners at the 175-foot level, Hrvatin scrambled up a 40-foot manway to the 135-foot level. From there they were about two football-field lengths away from the vertical shaft and its ladder to the surface.

"We heard that water coming down the drift and felt that wind," Hrvatin said. "We didn't know if we were going to make it. We just ran and ran for our lives."

Several men who had a chance to survive failed to save themselves. A miner named George Butkovich had run from the far end of the mine, near the cave-in. "He was all in," Hrvatin said. "He couldn't make it. He died right there."

Two other miners, Valentine Cole and Mynar Graves, refused to believe the mine was flooding. "They turned and went the other way," Hrvatin said. "They walked right into death."

Cole and Graves apparently realized their mistake, but by then they couldn't outrun the flood. They were eventually found, still standing, only fifty feet from the main shaft, their arms wrapped around each other.

"The mud must have trapped them so they couldn't move their legs," Hrvatin said. "What could they do? They grabbed each other and said a prayer, I guess."

Sprinting and stumbling their way down six hundred feet of dark drift, Hrvatin and the others at last reached the vertical shaft. There, another miner, Emil Kainu, met them. He had climbed up from the pump room.

Said Hrvatin: "Kainu cried, 'What's the matter? Somethin's wrong! Somethin's wrong!' He was a Finn. One of the older men answered him: 'Save your breath and start climbing. We know what's wrong.'"

Bubbling, Bubbling, Bubbling

In fact, to this day, it's not possible to know with complete satisfaction exactly what went wrong in the Milford Mine that day.

An exhaustive official investigation was conducted that spring by a special panel appointed by Governor Jacob Preus. But the committee lacked subpoena power. This meant that all three hundred witnesses testified "voluntarily." It's natural to worry that voluntary witnesses might have held back criticism of their bosses for fear of retribution.

The committee concluded that the flooding of the Milford was an unavoidable "act of God," and that no one was to blame. The committee ruled that the mine was nowhere closer to Foley Lake than three hundred feet, a distance engineers were justified in considering safe.

Labor advocates and miners, including Frank Hrvatin, have always insisted that part of the Milford Mine reached under Foley Lake, an irresponsible risk inspired by mining company greed.

What isn't in doubt is that a cave-in occurred in the far reaches of the Milford Mine. Mud and water, perhaps from a swamp bordering Foley Lake, poured into the mine with horrible force and speed.

Of the forty-eight miners on the afternoon shift, most were working quite near the cave-in and had no chance of survival.

For the seven lucky men who reached the main shaft, survival depended on how fast they could climb 135 feet of wooden ladder. Their tomb was close behind, gaining on them.

"We were climbing that ladder as fast as we could go," Hrvatin said. But Matt Kangas, just above Hrvatin on the ladder, was an older man whose strength was failing.

"The water and mud caught us right in the shaft," Hrvatin said. "That's how fast it was coming in."

Hrvatin's partner, Harry Hosford, was the bottom man on the ladder. "He was in mud up to his hips!" Hrvatin said. "He shouted up, 'If you can't climb, get the hell out of the way and let somebody climb who can climb!'"

Hrvatin had to get Kangas moving. He pushed himself up between the old man's legs, boosting Kangas up the ladder as if giving a child a ride on his shoulders.

"He just hung on to the ladder with his hands," Hrvatin said, "and I carried his



"Main Street" at the Milford Mine property, February 5, 1924. Iron miners lived spartan lives, some in these cramped shacks on mine property itself. The Hrvatin family lived in a house in the nearby company town of Crosby. St. Paul Pioneer Press file photo.

weight. Harry Hosford kept on hollering, and the men kept struggling their very, very best."

Those seven men reached the surface, where their legs buckled and they collapsed as if they'd been shot. Alarm whistles were madly shrieking and, already, "people were crazy in that town," Hrvatin remembered. "They couldn't believe it."

It was obvious there would be no other survivors. Mud rose to within twenty feet of the top of the shaft, where Hrvatin watched it "bubbling, bubbling, bubbling."

He added: "I knew then I'd never see my dad no more. They were all dead."

The Milford Mine disaster killed forty-one men, leaving thirty-eight widows with ninety-six fatherless children. Workers' compensation, then in existence for only a decade, paid the widows up to twenty dollars a week for up to seven years. But that's about all the help they got.

Mining companies were unusually generous toward one another. They launched a heroic recovery effort, using equipment and workers donated from many firms on all the ranges. Month by month, they pumped out not only the mine but Foley Lake. It took from February to November to bring up all the bodies.

Shortly after that, mining of the Milford's rich ore resumed.

Hrvatin worked on the grisly recovery effort until his father's body was found in the middle of June. Then he quit. He was fifteen years old, and on his own.

Hrvatin worked in later years as a factory hand, a construction worker, a truck driver, and a ditchdigger. He married in 1933 and fathered five children.

At various times, Hrvatin even returned to underground mining, descending again down damp and narrow shafts with a carbide light on his hat. He worked in Montana mines as deep as five thousand feet.

"It didn't bother me," Hrvatin said of going back underground. "I was with my kind of people: miners."