

This Land: Calumet

On this spot children were crushed to death. Debates discuss how many, but you and I both know one child is too many.

The only portion that remains of the Italian Hall (Societa Mutua Beneficenza Italiana) is the Archway to the main entrance that was preserved after the building was demolished in 1984. The Archway rises in the center of a memorial park dedicated to the tragedy oblique from a disused church on the northwest corner of the intersection of Elm and Sixth Street in the city of Calumet, Michigan. Calumet is located in the Upper Peninsula finger that sticks out into Lake Superior. In this Keweenaw region was found the world's purest source of copper. We are in copper country and it attracted immigrants from Italy, Eastern Europe, French Canadians, Britain.

This is the site where children died as part of a 1913 Christmas Eve massacre.

Life most precious in our arms
Keep them, Lord, from hurt and harm

Help us bring them a world so kind
Where goodness and friendship they will find

Where love and grace is freely shared
Where hope and dreams are fervently dared

It goes so fast, the hours spent
Of these tiny lives to whom us are lent

May we live worthy of this incarnate trust
Creating for them a world so just

Thank you, Lord, from Thee they are given
For us to give them on earth your heaven

The numbers remain vague – most agree on more than 70, most of whom children. The cause also is undetermined. The informational signs at the site of the Archway and at the Visitors Center take an innocuous position: "...it was a false alarm;" "...the party was disrupted."

Copper miners. Copper hewed from deep mines. From bedrock. Conglomerate load with rock cemented by the copper. Float copper, so pure.

The World Federation of Miners (WFM) strike had begun five months before. Let us consider the miner's work load, their hours of hard work underground, company stores, meagre pay,

lack of safety regulations, lack of support for those injured at work, children laboring and unable to attend school and learn.

Let us appreciate today that it was the blood, sweat, and courage of union men and women who won the protected working conditions for you today. There's more to courage than carrying a gun or responding to an insult with an insult.

Or would you rather trust and rely upon the beneficence of bosses?

The event was a Christmas Eve party encouraged by Anna Clemenc, local labor leader and president of the Women's Auxiliary Local #15 of WFM. An agitator herself, she fought with the miners and remained committed to the plight of the oppressed. She saw how the strike was making the miners desperate, broke, hungry. The Upper Peninsula winter would be harsh. Christmas could "lighten their spirits." So what better than a party? My motto also: when the going gets tough, it is time for a party! They organized a moment of joy amidst struggle. Music, food, merriment, joy, kisses, laughter, until something terrible happened.

Was it a tragedy or a crime?

They met for the party in the large second floor room with a stage, folding chairs, piano. They weren't only Italians enjoying the Italian Hall, for they were all miners. Locals refer to this region as the "interior Ellis Island;" until, that is, Ford and his new factories offered better wages downstate.

Was it a tragedy or murder?

To the miners it was no mystery what happened that day, as Woody Guthrie sang to indict with his song, '1913 Massacre.' It was a crime --callous, cold, contemptible.

*The piano played a slow funeral tune,
And the town was lit up by a cold Christmas moon,
The parents they cried and the miners they moaned,
"See what your greed for money has done."*

Given the divided town and angry hostility toward the striking miners, a Citizen Alliance was formed to intimidate the miners. Rumors identified a Citizen Alliance member as the perpetrator, although an inquest exonerated him. Justice, frankly, never will be found this side of heaven. You want justice for those crushed to death? Bring the children back to life.

The reptilian brain cheapens the world into winners and losers, grinning at the prospect that you can only win if others lose. Really? Is that how you want to live?

Thugs barred the only exit. Thugs yelled: "Fire!" Panic began. Some tried to shout there was no fire. But panic spreads like fire. The crowd rushed for the only exit. The door was held shut. 73 or more died in the stairwell crush, most of them the children whom the Savior born on Christmas day loved the dearest.

After they buried their children, the miners gave up the strike and left. Persons who only weep for themselves have never truly wept.

In the year 2000 mineral tests proved that the copper that covers the Statue of Liberty came from Keweenaw. Lady Liberty's copper was dug out by hands of those miners and their wives and children who died, who, despite their hardship, were celebrating Christmas in the New World.

The stone Archway at the corner of Sixth and Elm stands to remind us amidst dilapidated homes and closed businesses. So too a song written and sung by Woody Guthrie. So too the townsfolk of Calumet who set out 73 luminaries from the Archway every Christmas Eve.

There remains another way for us to remember, as demanded on a plaque attached to the Archway by the AFL-CIO: *"Mourn the dead, fight for the living."*