



Big Annie and the Party That Changed a Town

By Deborah A Butler

It was supposed to be an uplifting event, a party planned for the striking copper miners and their families. The women's auxiliary group to the *WFM* (Western Federation of Miners) had gathered donations to purchase little trinkets like hats, mittens, candy, and small toys to give the miners' children – the only gifts they would have gotten that year with their fathers' being out of work. The party was meant to be a glimmer of light in an otherwise dark and depressing time.

Six foot two, Calumet, Michigan-born Annie Clemenc organized the party and served as the Master of Ceremonies. Born to Slovenian parents, Annie was a high-profile local woman married to a copper miner. She established and was

president of the Calumet Women's Auxiliary No. 15 of the Western Federation of Miners. The striking miners noted her active role in the 1913 copper miners' strike. It was duly noted by the mining company as well. For this night, however, she was only interested in giving the out-of-work miners and their families a night of fun and a reprieve from the daily stresses of the strike.

The Società Mutua Beneficenza Italiana Building, better known as the Italian Hall, served as the party's venue. Recently erected in 1908, it was a commercial and recreation building with two floors of commercial space and a large hall. Aside from hosting community events, the building was home to the Italian Mutual Benefit Society. That night, it was decorated for Christmas and filled with excited children, about five hundred. Over two hundred adults were also in attendance. A jolly Santa Claus sat near the Christmas tree while Big Annie played festive music on the piano. The building was crowded with families and alive with high spirits.

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Copper became the element upon which Calumet was born. Before Europeans flooded the area, native indigenous groups mined its copper by using stone hammers to break the surrounding rock and wooden planks to extricate the pieces from the 18-foot pits they had created. Scientists have estimated that indigenous peoples had been mining the area for about six thousand years prior to the arrival of Europeans. However, copper mining became a booming industry once someone discovered a section of rock from the Precambrian Era bearing copper. The area became known as the *Copper Conglomerate*.

The Calumet and Hecla Consolidated (C & H) Copper Company began its mining industry in 1865 with the help of investors from Boston. The company soon spread throughout the *Keweenaw Peninsula* of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In a short time, the C & H Company had become the copper mining industry's leading producer, generating about 700,000 pounds of copper between 1906 and 1913. Throughout its run, the company paid over 72 million dollars to shareholders.

The C & H Company employed over five thousand men. Finnish, Italian, Croatian, Slovenian, and other immigrants were employed as miners, while many mining captains were from Boston, New York, Ohio, and Scotland. The miners often spoke only their native tongues, and they could not always communicate with each other through the spoken word. The company did provide a library for its workers that contained literature in over 20 different languages. They also staffed the company's hospital and built the frame houses they rented to the miners.

Nevertheless, the working conditions of the miners differed drastically from those of the management. Though the company did build company houses, a school, and a hospital, all those benefits would be halted if a miner was injured and could no longer work or died in the mines. The miners' families would be evicted without compensation for the loss of income. In glaring contrast, the general manager received an eighty-five thousand dollar per year salary. Men worked ten-hour days for an average of two dollars and forty cents a month. On that wage, they were expected to pay monthly fees of fifty cents for water, seven dollars for company-supplied heating coal, and one dollar and ten cents for housing, and they still needed food for the family. The math does not work out. To require an average of eight dollars and sixty cents – not counting food costs– each month on two dollars and forty cents is impossible. Yet, miners performed physically demanding and dangerous work every day in an effort to make a living.

Injuries and fatalities were a daily threat to all men working in the mine. The biggest threat to safety was the use of the one-man *pneumatic drill*. This drill, dubbed "the widow-maker," necessitated one man to work alone while drilling under several-ton *stopes*, which allowed direct access to ore bodies and directed ore and waste underground. These stopes were created by drilling holes, placing explosives, and blasting a space open, which resulted in a precarious overhead rock ceiling. The one-man drills caused more deaths and injuries in the mines than any other factor. Between 1860 and 1929, at least 1,036 men lost their lives due to falling rocks or the machine itself. That number does not include the many injuries, often leading to loss of limbs, damaged eyesight or hearing, or paralysis caused by the drill. By 1913, many miners

decided to join the WFM for leverage in asking management to institute eight-hour work days, a three-dollar minimum daily wage, and replace the one-man drill with a two-man drill for safer working conditions. When the mining company consented to an eight-and-a-half-hour day but refused the other demands, Big Annie worked side by side with the men to organize a strike.

Having been put off by the general management at the company, over nine thousand men walked out on strike on 23 July 1913. During the days following the strike, men, wives, and children paraded through the streets of Calumet with picket signs carried above their heads. Big Annie led the parades with a six-foot by ten-foot American flag proudly lifted above her own head. Some of the Calumet's citizenry supported the strike and shouted encouraging words to the strikers as they paraded past them. Many, though, despised unionization and hurled insults, rotten vegetables, and rocks at those marching by. Strikers standing in a picket line near the mine entrance threw stones at the Cornish supervisors, who they considered "company stoolies." Wives of miners shook brooms dipped in outhouse filth at those who crossed the picket line. Through it all, Big Annie remained a staunch supporter and activist for the miners.

As the summer advanced, the company's management grew worried. Production was down, and the violence from both sides increased. They called upon Michigan's governor, Woodbridge Ferris, to send help. Ferris deployed the National Guard to Calumet to keep the peace. Rather than instilling peace into the volatile situation, the violence grew. During one parade, soldiers were driving back the flag bearers in the parade. Annie was left standing alone after the soldiers drove the other flag bearers back. She began to follow the order to move back when one of the soldiers struck her on the wrist and breast with his bayonet. Rather than backing down, Annie lifted the flag in front of her and proclaimed, "Go ahead now, do your work, shoot me, I am willing to die behind the flag. If you don't respect the flag, I do."

A striker witnessed the assault and pulled Annie away before the violence escalated. Still, the incident was reported in several of the local newspapers, lauding Annie as "an American Joan of Arc." Through this and her other work toward better working conditions in the mine, Annie became a local legend. One National Guard officer confided in a journalist that the strike could be broken if only the C & H Mining Company could buy her off. Annie's notoriety even brought Mother Jones to Calumet in August of that year.

The summer and autumn months of 1913 were hard on the miners and their families. Without pay, they relied on their respective ethnic benefit societies for food and fuel. Some miners were evicted from their company homes. Many families left the area to find work in other cities or states. The strike started to weaken. The management pulled all the financial strings, and they had the strength of the militia and the newly-formed *Citizens Alliance* on their side. In the ensuing months, Citizen Alliance members and company-hired strike busters killed two miners from the nearby town of Seeberville, wounded another, and grazed a baby asleep in its mother's arms with a stray bullet. By winter, many mining families were becoming despondent. People were disheartened by the violence and dreaded the coming Christmas in which they couldn't afford a tree, Christmas dinner, or gifts for their children.

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Big Annie saw the despair of her fellow mining families. She leaped to her natural inclination to organize something that would help them. With the aid of her fellow women's auxiliary members, Annie organized a Christmas Eve party for families. She wanted to give them something to lighten their burden and a reason to celebrate. She especially wanted the children to have a Christmas. The auxiliary women went to work collecting donations for treats and small gifts for the children. They used the Italian Hall to house the party. On Christmas Eve at about two o'clock, about two hundred adults and five hundred animated children made their way up the narrow, steep steps to the party.

As the party progressed from socializing, eating, and listening to Christmas songs played on the piano, Annie tried to quiet the children down. It was time for them to line up and get their treats from Santa. The rowdy group of children gathered near the stage to listen to Annie as she claimed that Santa had not forgotten them just because "their fathers had been denied work." They waited anxiously for their promised treats. At about 4:40 in the afternoon, a man walked into the room. Though the precise details vary slightly, all agree that the man cried, "Fire!" and then walked back out. With all the noise from the hundreds of people, not everyone heard it at first. Those closest to the door did, though, and they crowded into the narrow stairway to escape the building.

Annie's six-foot-two form scanned the room for the culprit, but she could not discern which man he was among the throng of people now rushing toward the stairway. She tried to tell everyone that there was no fire and that they should all sit down and listen, but it was too late. One of the other women helping Annie with the event tried to calm the group by playing the piano. While Annie continued to gain control of the group, she noticed that the rush of panicked people to the stairway had seemed to stop.

Annie knew something was wrong, but she couldn't see beyond the throng of people who had suddenly stopped at the top of the stairway. Though the chaos in the room was settling down a little, something was causing the steady outpouring of party attendees to stop. When it quieted enough, shrieks and cries for help could be heard from the stairs. It was then that Annie realized someone was holding the door closed from outside, causing a blockage in the stairway.

Moments later, a few men who had witnessed the event's aftermath on the first floor, followed by firefighters, ran up the ladders into the main hall. The partygoers left in the hall soon discovered what happened in the staircase. They knew that the stairway was 23 steps down a narrow staircase with no landing, except the one at the bottom, which reached the doors, giving way to three steps down to the street. The doors opened outward, but somehow those fleeing had gotten trapped in the staircase. With all the confusion and panic, there had been a stampede.

When the first man to see what happened, the Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company manager on the first floor, and saw the doorway, he knew there was nothing to be done downstairs. He and several men who arrived at the downstairs doors tried to pull the trapped children from the heap,

but they could not budge them. They alerted the fire station and then went upstairs to begin pulling people up from the top of the stairway. At about 4:50, merely ten minutes after the false cry of fire, the effort to extricate bodies was begun.

With the mere five-foot-nine width of the staircase and no windows for ventilation, many people had died of suffocation. The men worked as quickly as possible to save anyone who may have had room to breathe and may still be alive. It took over half an hour to finally pull the bodies of the dead and survivors from the pile and get them back into the hall. Annie watched in horror as one dead body after another, primarily children, was laid on the floor or stage. When Annie was asked if any of the children were hers, she answered that they all were.

Fifty-nine of the seventy-three people that died in the panic that day were children. Annie did not let the tragedy weaken her resolve to improve working conditions for miners, but she later told people it had changed her life forever. A year after the Italian Hall Disaster, she divorced her husband. She remarried twice and divorced those husbands as well. But Annie was ahead of her time. She led strikers, stood up to the militia, and fought against a mining colossus. She was sentenced to ten days in jail for assaulting a miner who crossed the picket line. She would not stay in any marriage to an alcoholic or abuser.

The year after the event was spent touring the Mid-West and giving lectures to raise money for the families of the tragedy. Annie also worked in those towns to organize labor unions for miners. However, she left for Chicago shortly after returning home and going through her first divorce. She ended up opening a hat shop with a man who was her co-owner. Her brother once told an interviewer in 1986 that he knew his older sister was like a soldier who had been in the war and never wanted to talk about it. Annie rarely spoke about the tragedy after she moved away from Calumet, its mining company, the Italian Hall and the tragedy within its walls, and the victims' families.

Big Annie Clemenc lived in a time when women had very few rights. For much of her early life, she could not vote or hold a position of power in the men's world. Yet, she led a movement for better treatment of workers, putting herself at the forefront. She left three marriages when they became abusive and petitioned the court for divorce, a scandalous affair in her time. She set out on her own and began her own business. Annie came from what is now a small town. She is not well known apart from the local area. Nevertheless, her impact on Calumet is as big as her stature and her heart.

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