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Italian Hall confession

Did a couple of drunks holler 'fire'?

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Gazette writers

CALUMET — Was it just a couple of drunken men, out on the town and looking for fun, who were responsible for the deaths of 72 people on Christmas Eve of 1913 at the Italian Hall in Calumet?

According to Leslie Chapman of Calumet, that's exactly what one of the two men told him in a hotel lobby in Butte, Mont., 58 years ago.

The Italian Hall tragedy is one of the saddest chapters in the history of the Copper Country, written at the height of a bitter copper mining strike on the Keweenaw Peninsula. The popular opinion then, and for years afterward, was that strikebreakers had falsely yelled fire at the crowded hall as a heinous act of vengeance against the union.

Men, women and children ran to the stairwell leading down and out of the hall, which still stands on Seventh Street in Calumet. The doors opened inward. The first people to reach the bottom of the stairs tried to push their way out, and it wasn't long before the stairwell was filled with bodies of men, women and children, who had been crushed or suffocated to death.

Chapman recently told the story of the confession to Lawrence Westola of Calumet, whose father, John, was a victim of the tragedy. Westola said he ran into Chapman downtown. While the two were talking, Westola happened to mention that his father died at the hall that Christmas Eve. Chapman then told him of the hotel encounter in Butte, Westola said.

Chapman, who will be 88 next Sunday, confirmed the story this week.

He said he was in Butte in 1924 — 11 years after the tragedy — for a trial in which a Copper Country man was suing the Anaconda Copper Co. At the time, Chapman was a security officer for the Calumet & Hecla Mining Co.

News of the trial had appeared in the Butte newspaper, and it was mentioned that several persons from Michigan's Copper Country would be in town.

Chapman said a sickly-looking man "in his 50s or 60s" came up to him as he sat in the Butte hotel lobby.

"This fella got to talking to me, and he asked me if I was from the Copper Country. I said I was and he said, 'I've got a confession to make. Do you remember the catastrophe they had in 1913 in Calumet, where all those people died? Well, I was there at the time with my partner. We were both single men and drunk and thought we'd have some fun. As we walked by the hall we decided to holler fire and watch the people come down. We didn't know it would turn out bad. We both left town afterward.'

"My doctor told me I have a few weeks to live as I have tuberculosis. I want to get that out of my mind."

Chapman said he asked the man his name, but the man told him it didn't make any difference.

"People have wondered why it happened, and I wanted to relieve my mind," the man said, according to Chapman.

Chapman said he may have mentioned the man's story to a few friends when he returned to the Copper Country about a week later, but he didn't make any type of announcement, he said.

"I was too busy with other things those days," Chapman said. "Anyway, I don't like notoriety."

Chapman said the man also told him that his partner had been killed in a mining accident about a year earlier in Butte.

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