



Photos: Crowsnest Museum

Family members of workers waited with hope for loved ones to return to the surface after the Hillcrest mine disaster, which killed 189 people on June 19, 1914.

Hillcrest: Canada's forgotten disaster

100 years ago, 189 died in depths of Alberta coal mine

*They say you don't go
Say you don't go down in the Hillcrest Mine
'Cause it's one short step
You might leave this world behind
And they say you don't go
Say you don't go down in the Hillcrest Mine*

—James Keelaghan's ballad Hillcrest Mine

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CALGARY HERALD

Coalminer Charles Elick may have thought himself a lucky man. He survived the Frank Slide in 1903 when a massive rockslide buried part of the little town of Frank in southwestern Alberta. He and co-workers at a nearby mine were trapped by the rubble, but managed to free themselves after digging for 13 frantic hours.

Charles then relocated his growing family to the nearby mining town of Hillcrest and went back underground. His luck ran out on the sunny morning of June 19, 1914, when he said goodbye to his wife Julia, pregnant with their fifth child, and went off to work at the Hillcrest Mine.

Two hours after the morning shift began, a methane gas and coal dust explosion ripped through the mine, killing Charles and 188 other men.

The very next day, Julia gave birth to their son, joining the grim tally of 90 women widowed and 250 children left fatherless by the disaster in a town of 1,000.

"That's my dad, born on June 20, 1914," says John Elick, 70, of Calgary. "My grandmother was left to raise five kids on her own, with no social welfare. Just think of the women."

Next Friday, June 19, is the 100th anniversary of the Hillcrest Mine Disaster. The event will be mourned and celebrated June 18-21 throughout the Crowsnest Pass (see sidebar).

But it's not until you hear the stories of families indelibly marked by the tragedy that the term "Canada's worst mining disaster" really comes to life.

Despite its tragic distinction, most Canadians are unaware of the Hillcrest Mine Disaster. It helps to know the town, much diminished since its mine closed in 1939, forms part of the Municipality of Crowsnest Pass in the Rockies, along with Bellevue, Blairmore, Coleman and Frank. It's a rough-and-tumble region legendary for its history of rum running and home of the last woman to hang in Alberta.

The area is also notorious for the province's three deadliest disasters, all of which happened within a few kilometres of one another. The Frank Slide killed 90 people in 1903. Seven years later, an explosion at Bellevue Mine took 31 men. Four years after that, in 1914, 237 men on the morning shift went underground in the Hillcrest Mine. Only 48 came out alive.

"You wonder why, growing up in Calgary, why didn't we hear about



The Hillcrest mine disaster of 1914, which claimed 189 lives, eventually led to changes in the Workers' Compensation Act.

Remembering

The Hillcrest Mine Disaster 100th Anniversary commemoration is June 18-21. It opens Wednesday with a new exhibition at Crowsnest Museum and launch of the book, *Snowing in June*. Thursday, the actual anniversary date, features a funeral procession re-enactment with pipers, a graveside service, the opening of a new walking tour and an evening commemorative concert with James Keelaghan, Connie Kaldor and Tim Hus.

Friday showcases the Crowsnest Pass area with events at Frank Slide Interpretive Centre, Bellevue Underground Mine, Crowsnest Museum and Crowsnest Pass Art Gallery. A miners' picnic and outdoor dance with live music, beer gardens and barbecue take place that evening. Saturday is Bellecrest Days with pancake breakfast, wagon rides, horse pull, guided hikes to Hillcrest mine site; evening is Emerson Drive (live music) at the Hillcrest Ball Complex.

For a complete schedule, go to www.hillcrestmine100.com

this," says musician James Keelaghan, who released his crowd-rousing song, *Hillcrest Mine*, in 1990, and will perform at a concert in Hillcrest on June 19 as part of the centennial events.

"I've been doing my best to change that for the past 25 years, one concert at a time. When I'm out performing, I ask people where the largest mining disaster was in Canada. People think it was Springhill, Nova Scotia. They're shocked when you say, 'No, it was Hillcrest.'"

Belle Kovach is co-author with her sister Mary Bole of a new book that

Learn More

To pay homage to the 189 miners who died 100 years ago, the Crowsnest Museum set up a website to tell the unique story of each man. See www.hillcrestminedisaster.com

commemorates the centennial.

Snowing in June is published by the Crowsnest Museum and slated for release June 18. Over the past four years, the sisters, descended from English and Italian coal miners who immigrated to the Crowsnest, have painstakingly tracked down the individual stories of the 189 killed in the Hillcrest Mine Disaster.

"The stories are heart-wrenching," says Kovach, who is particularly haunted by the tragedy of the "Johnson boys."

Brothers William and Alfred Johnson lost their mother to a heart attack in 1912. A year later, their widowed father Edgar, a coal miner originally from Nova Scotia, left them to work in the Hillcrest Mine and took his three younger children back east to be cared for by relatives. There, Edgar was kicked in the stomach by a horse and died of complications.

A few months after his dad's death, Alfred married Florence, a coal miner's daughter.

"The two young men are working the day of the disaster and are killed," says Kovach. In a single morning, Florence lost her new husband Alfred, 22, his best man, her own father, her brother-in-law William, 18, and countless friends and neighbours.

Accounts of the day describe the scene outside the mine as one of utter desperation, according to Cathy Pisony, program co-ordinator for the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre, which is unveiling a new

permanent exhibition to mark the disaster's centennial. Smoke from the underground fires billowed into the air. Coal cars came up to the surface, laden with charred or suffocated bodies as those not killed directly by the explosion or subsequent fire died from the poisonous gases miners dub "afterdamp." Police attempted to control the crowd as townsfolk surged forward trying to identify loved ones.

Most of the men were buried in one of two mass graves. Given the scope of the disaster, it was the only way a small community could cope, says Chris Matthews, executive director at the Crowsnest Museum and chair of the Hillcrest Mine Disaster Memorial Committee.

"Every single person was connected to a victim."

Over the years, the cemetery, declared a provincial historic resource in 1985, has been refurbished. Leading up to the centennial, roughly \$300,000 of public and private money has gone into redoing sidewalks, adding signage and parking lots, and lighting the area with replica miner's lamps.

After burying their men, the days and months following the Hillcrest Mine Disaster were the worst for the survivors.

The disaster happened on a Friday — payday, says Kovach — but the miners' cheques went into a trust fund and widows were left "without a cent to live on and feed their children."

In her book, she cites an interview with one of Julia Elick's grown daughters, who was eight years old when her dad Charles died. The daughter (also named Julia) recalls that a huge windstorm pushed a tree over the day after the mine disaster, crushing their house. That night, her little brother was born. Also, she remembers that it was snowing in June when they buried her father.

"I don't know how they survived," says John Elick of his grandmother and others living through those hard times, but he admires their resourcefulness. "Everyone in the hamlet pitched in and helped each other out. And they had their own gardens and chickens."

Women from the surrounding communities also brought food every day and helped out as much as they could, says Pisony.

Formal relief funds provided some aid, but the lack of labour legislation meant families of the victims were forced to sue the company, Hillcrest Collieries, to seek compensation. Some, not all, received up to \$1,800 per victim and waited a year to get their money.

"They lived very, very poorly. Most took in washing, opened boarding houses and heaven knows what else," says Kovach, adding that many widows, including Julia Elick, opted to remarry — sometimes with complete strangers — to support their families.

If any good came out of the Hillcrest Mine Disaster, it may be the changes made to the Workers' Compensation Act in 1918, followed by a host of occupational health and safety laws in the following decades, although it's difficult to prove a direct correlation, says Pisony.

"There are some references, but with the war starting just seven weeks later, it's hard to find information. The Hillcrest Mine Disaster was so hugely overshadowed by the First World War that nobody really knew about it."

Pisony, who grew up in Crowsnest Pass, is often asked why the area celebrates the disaster.

"Coal miners understood that every time they went underground they might not come back out. So they celebrated life, with dancing, music and playing sports. We celebrate the spirit of our miners, who created the communities we live in today."