

# M Historical Commentary

## A Reexamination of the Granite Mountain-Speculator Fire

by James D. Harrington

**A**t the turn of the century, as the popular image of Montana focused on the solitary cattleman and farmer fighting for survival, men in a wholly different environment worked and died together in the Butte underground. Butte, America, has never fit the myth of the West. Throughout its history, it was an industrial city in a rural environment. Men relied on women and other men for survival, and they formed labor and social organizations to protect their lives and livelihoods. Butte thought itself the “Gibraltar of Labor” and was celebrated as the “Richest Hill on Earth.” The city provided union leadership to fight perceived corporate greed and its minions throughout the mining West, while its men mined a vast mineral store of copper that helped electrify America and the world.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Butte lived up to its boasts. “Every labor history scholar supports the contention that Butte is a site of national importance in labor history,” wrote Carol D. Shull,

1. Robert Wayne Smith, *The Coeur d’Alene Mining War of 1892* (Gloucester, Mass., 1968), 110-14; Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners: A History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1863-1893* (Berkeley,



chief of the National Park Service’s National Historic Landmark Theme Study on American Labor History (theme study). “In addition, Butte is a site important in WESTERN labor history. Since

1974), 182. Between 1895 and 1916, 31 percent of the nation’s copper was produced in Butte. Jerry W. Calvert, *The Gibraltar: Socialism and Labor in Butte, Montana, 1895-1920* (Helena, Mont., 1988), 3-4.

most of the [national labor] sites . . . are from the east,” she added, “Butte takes on an even added significance.”<sup>2</sup>

Butte has received the major share of attention, but others have long recognized that the history of

2. Carol D. Shull, National Register of Historic Places, to Paul Putz, Montana State Historic Preservation Office, February 23, 1996.



On June 8, 1917, at the height of wartime copper production, fire raced through Butte's Granite Mountain and Speculator mines, killing at least 167 miners. The tragedy led to a climactic clash between capital and labor in which the unions were crushed. Today, the Granite Mountain-Speculator Memorial (below) overlooks the site atop Butte Hill.



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Anaconda, a city twenty-six miles west of Butte that was built to smelt Butte's ore, is integral to interpreting the region's ethnicity, labor activity, technological development, and mineral production.

3. Congressman Pat Williams to author, October 30, 1991; Paul Cole, secretary-treasurer, AFL-CIO, to author, February 3, 1992.

4. Mark Reavis, Butte-Silver Bow Historic Preservation Office, conversation

My involvement in attempts to interpret and preserve the region's rich history began in 1991 when Butte-Silver Bow Archives director Ellen Crain, archives board chair Marilyn Maney, and I initiated a project to create a memorial dedicated to the men who lost their lives at the Granite Mountain-Speculator mine site in June 1917. In an attempt to gain backing for the project, we corresponded with Montana Congressman Pat Williams and AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Paul F. Cole. Both promised support and advised us to work with local historic preservation groups.<sup>3</sup> I presented the idea to Butte-Silver Bow Historic Preservation Officer Mark Reavis, and he assigned Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA) volunteer Gerry Walter to pursue creation of the memorial.<sup>4</sup> At about the same time we learned that Congress, in response to the theme study, had passed legislation charging the National Park Service (NPS) to survey landmarks at significant labor history sites in the United States and identify "possible new park units appropriate to this theme"<sup>5</sup> (that is, a labor history landmark proposal).

Butte had already been designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962 by the Department of the Interior. Nevertheless, open-pit mining continued to encroach on the uptown area; buildings were moved or destroyed

with author, March 25, 1998 (hereafter Reavis conversation).

5. Cole to author, February 3, 1992; U.S. Congress, "An act to authorize a study of nationally significant places in American labor history," Public Law 102-101, August 17, 1991, 102d Cong., 105 Statute 493.

6. Reavis conversation; Dale Martin and Brian Shovers, *Architectural and Historical Inventory of the National Landmark District* (Butte, Mont., 1986), 1.

7. Connie Kenney, Butte Chamber of Commerce, conversation with author, February 5, 1998; Reavis conversation; Janet Cornish, former project manager,

with little regard for the historic integrity of the district, and little was done in the community to acknowledge the honor.<sup>6</sup>

During the mid-1980s, however, the region's economy was devastated when mining activities were greatly curtailed in Butte, and the great smelter in Anaconda was dismantled. Environmental cleanup activities promised some temporary economic relief, but community leaders sought more permanent solutions. One source of revenue actively pursued was increased tourism based on mining history. Historic preservation projects were developed in both communities, and a Butte-Anaconda Historical Park was planned in 1985. Financial resources were few, however, and follow-up efforts were limited. Still, the park service's labor history landmark proposal, along with Superfund and ARCO cleanup responsibilities, helped to revitalize the park concept.<sup>7</sup>

In 1992, the Butte-Silver Bow Government Council of Commissioners created a Labor History Committee, to which I was appointed, "to oversee" the development of a labor history park for Butte and Anaconda.<sup>8</sup> To those of us on the committee, our primary goal was to achieve recognition of the contributions of Butte and Anaconda to American history. Secondly, we hoped that park service participation, in conjunction with money spent on

Regional Historic Preservation Plan, Butte-Anaconda Heritage Corridor, conversation with author, February 5, 1998. Cornish estimated that a park would result in \$88 million and 1,700 jobs for the community by 2005. Janet Cornish, "Butte-Anaconda Regional Historic Preservation Plan Briefing Paper," Labor Landmark Materials, box 1, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana (hereafter BSBA); Renewable Technologies, Inc., *The Butte-Anaconda Historical Park System: Master Plan, 1985* (Butte, Mont., 1985).

8. Marie King, secretary, Butte-Silver Bow Government Council of Commissioners, to author, September 17, 1992, in author's possession.





environmental cleanup activities, would bring their expertise in preserving and interpreting important labor history components in the area. Our most optimistic dream, however, was that the region would be designated as a National Labor History Park, that public and private entities would be united in its creation, and that it would play a major role in portraying the mining history of the West.

Today, although concern for historic preservation has increased, there remains little recognition by the Butte community—but for brief mention in promotional literature—of its National Historic Landmark status. The state highway commission has not erected any road signs that inform travelers of Butte's special designation nor has local government added the designation to existing road signs that direct visitors to Butte's historic district. Not surprisingly, Butte has not measurably benefited from its federal landmark status.

At present, plans have been submitted to the park service to

upgrade and expand the Butte and Anaconda listings on the National Historic Register, which would include additional sites, corridors, and other contributing elements that would help to interpret the labor-rich history of the area. The possibility of expanded landmark status has also brought some renewed interest in the labor history park proposal. The Montana Historic Preservation Office recently received a grant from the NPS to clarify physical descriptions of primary contributing buildings on the National Historic Register.<sup>9</sup> An important element in preparation for expanded landmark status is documentation of the physical features reflecting the historically significant events that shaped Butte's labor history.

As a volunteer for the landmark study in 1991, I began to review the Granite Mountain–Speculator fatalities as I considered the accident the key event in our proposal. My initial research into those killed in the fire was inciden-

As the bodies of victims were removed from the fire-ravaged shafts, the community attempted to cope with the Granite Mountain–Speculator tragedy, the worst hard-rock mining disaster in the nation's history. Efforts to keep track of the dead and preserve an orderly record nevertheless quickly succumbed to confusion.

tal to my interest in mine-related fatalities throughout the Butte district. Since 1987, I have collected the names of more than 2,300 people killed in mine-related incidents, including the Speculator tragedy. Most of the information—available from coroners' registers, mortuary records, death certificates, and newspaper accounts—was not difficult to retrieve. While reviewing the Granite Mountain–Speculator fatalities, however, I found numerous problems in dealing with the source material. It was a troubled time in the history of Butte mining, and tumult quickly overwhelmed the details of the Speculator catastrophe.<sup>10</sup>

Although not the worst mining disaster, the Granite Mountain–Speculator Mine fire on June 8, 1917, was the nation's worst *hard-rock* mining disaster, with at least 167 fatalities. The second largest catastrophe from hard-rock mining, by contrast, killed 91 miners in Kellogg, Idaho, in May 1972. In addition to many other multiple fatality accidents, two major hard-rock mining accidents took place in Butte. On October 19, 1915, sixteen men were killed in the Granite Mountain Mine, and on February

9. Ellen Crain, First Montana Parks and Partners, conversation with author, December 17, 1997; Lon Johnson, Montana State Historic Preservation Office, telephone conversation with author, December 19, 1997, March 24, 25, 1998; Reavis conversation.

10. Brian Shovers, "The Perils of Working in the Butte Underground: Industrial Fatalities in the Copper Mines, 1880–1920," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 37 (Spring 1987), 26ff; James D. Harrington, comp., "Mining Related Fatalities in the Butte and Anaconda Region: 1865–1997," typewritten document, BSBA.

11. *World Almanac, 1997* (Mahwah, N.J., 1996), 301; Harrington, "Mining Related Fatalities."

12. Arnon Gutfeld, *Montana's Agony: Years of War and Hysteria, 1917–1921* (Gainesville, Fla., 1979), 20; Charles Merz, "The Issue in Butte," *New Republic* (September 22, 1917), 215.

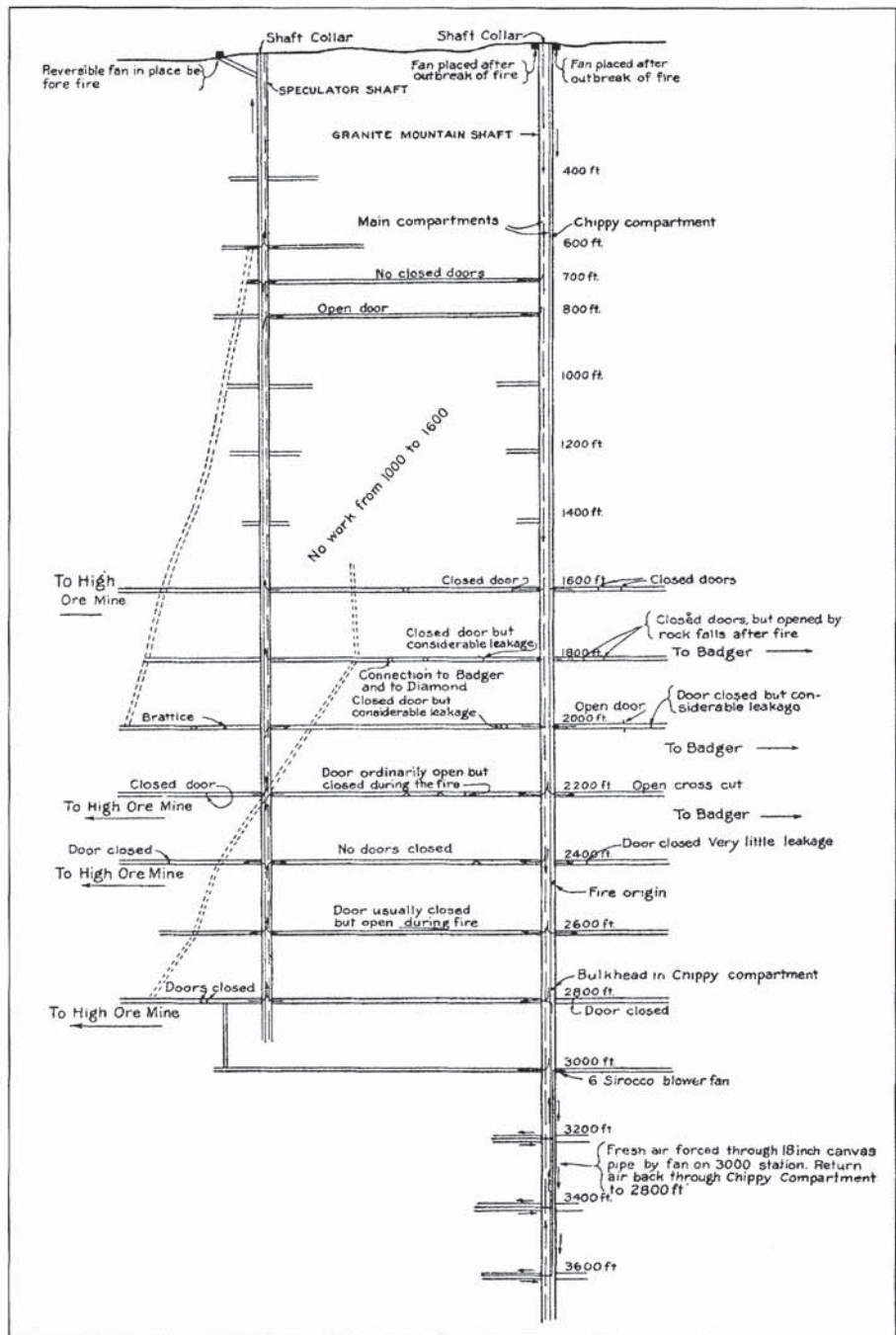


As indicated by this illustration from Daniel Harrington's report, published in 1922, interconnecting shafts that linked the Granite Mountain, Speculator, and other mines allowed for the rapid spread of fire and gases throughout the shafts. Deep underground, men were caught in an environment that quickly turned lethal.

14, 1916, 21 men were killed in the Pennsylvania Mine. Ultimately, however, the events surrounding the Speculator fire and their contribution to subsequent labor conflict and repression gives the tragedy added significance to labor history and thus, to the labor history landmark proposal.<sup>11</sup>

The history of mine fatalities, labor militancy, and mineral production all reached a peak in Butte at the time of the Speculator disaster. The fire occurred during World War I when war production was at its peak. Indeed, the 15,000 people employed in Butte's mines were setting production records, supplying approximately 20 percent of the nation's copper and one-half of the quality zinc needed by the military.<sup>12</sup> Massive production and a huge work force notwithstanding, the Butte underground was one of the world's most deadly work places. Throughout the war—from August 1914 to mid-November 1918—pressure to get the "rock in the box" cost some 437 men their lives in accidents in Butte's mines. As noted, at least 167 of these were lost in the Granite Mountain-Speculator fire alone.<sup>13</sup>

13. U.S. Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, *Mineral Resources of the United States, 1916*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1919), 1:393. Although other mining companies operated in Butte, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company (ACM) dominated production. Its records are indicative of trends. "Total Production by Anaconda Copper Mining Company, June 1895-December 31, 1944," Mining, Employment Data, and Production vertical file, BSBA.



Ironically, an attempt to install a fire suppression system in the Granite Mountain and Speculator mines caused the fire itself. At 11:30 P.M. on June 8, several men were lowering electrical cable into the shaft of the North Butte Mining Company's Granite Mountain Mine. The line, intended to power a fire sprinkler system, slipped, tearing the lead coating from the wire and exposing fiber insulation. While attempting to retrieve the line, the flame from assistant foreman Ernest Sullau's carbide lamp came in contact with the

insulation, which quickly burst into flames. As chemically treated mine timbers in the shaft soon ignited, smoke and gas from the fire spread rapidly throughout the Granite Mountain Mine and, through interconnecting underground workings, to the Speculator, Badger State, Bell-Diamond, and other mines in the immediate area.

Prior to the Granite Mountain incident, a fire had been burning for two months in nearby Modoc Mine. On two occasions, smoke alerts had sent men scurrying for the Granite Mountain shaft, a



downcast shaft that brought fresh air into the mines from the surface, to escape the smoke. Many miners apparently assumed that the June 8 fire was a recurrence of the Modoc troubles and committed the fatal error of moving toward the source of the fire. Because of the previous fire, concrete bulkheads had been constructed in the High Ore Mine to limit smoke and gas to the Modoc Mine area.<sup>14</sup> Prolabor advocates later claimed that these bulkheads blocked escape routes in violation of state law and caused additional deaths. Although Daniel Harrington, an inspector for the Bureau of Mines who also coordinated the rescue attempts, stated in his initial federal report that only one body was found near a concrete bulkhead, the accusation contributed to subsequent labor discontent.<sup>15</sup>

**C**oincidental to my research was that of Gerry Walter, who was given the responsibility of developing the long postponed memorial at the Granite Mountain Mine site. In Butte, the disaster is referred to as the Speculator fire. The North Butte Mining Company's memorial at Butte's Mountain View Cemetery refers to it as the Granite Mountain fire. Other sources use names at their discretion. Thus, because the names the Speculator (or Spec) fire and Granite Mountain fire were used interchangeably for the June 8, 1917, event, Ms. Walter and I, after consulting with others, hyphenated the name of the

disaster as the Granite Mountain-Speculator fire. In researching the names of those killed, Ms. Walter, not wanting to exclude anyone from the memorial plaque, listed 168 names.<sup>16</sup>

Although my research had shown that at least 167 men were killed, I knew that additional fatalities were possible because the total varied in press and official reports at the time. The names and numbers of those killed changed daily even within the same newspaper. On June 15, 1917, for example, a week after the disaster, the *Butte Miner* reported that 161 bodies had been brought to the surface and that seven bodies had yet to be recovered. Two days later the paper noted that 10 bodies remained in the mine. Five more bodies were removed on June 22, three of which were eventually identified. The following day, another body was removed and identified, which, under ordinary circumstances, would indicate that 167 bodies had been removed and that others probably remained in the mine.<sup>17</sup> A handwritten note on the list of unidentified dead in Silver Bow County's coroner's register indicated that an additional body (not included in my determination) was found in the Speculator Mine the following year.<sup>18</sup>

Most historical reports list the number of fatalities at 163, the number used by the mining company in the Montana Industrial Accident Board's report.<sup>19</sup> Daniel Harrington also had used that number but nonetheless admitted uncertainty. "Several bodies were later found," he wrote, ". . . which

brings the total fatalities to 163 as far as can be ascertained."<sup>20</sup>

Researching the fire is difficult because the coroner's inquest record number 8193, which included testimony from more than 60 individuals, is missing from the Butte-Silver Bow Clerk of the Court's office. The Silver Bow County coroner's inquest concluded at the end of June that 98 identified and 66 unidentified bodies were recovered for a total of 164. Some discrepancies exist in the names in the county's inquest index and the coroner's register.<sup>21</sup> In the Clerk and Recorder office records there are references to 169 fatalities. The coroner issued death certificates for 95 identified and 74 unidentified bodies. The mortuary record at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives lists the same number of unidentified bodies but also lists 97 as being identified. Neither the Clerk and Recorder records nor mortuary records contain a compiled list of names.<sup>22</sup>

All sources examined differ in names, spellings, and whether a body was identified. Often, as in the coroner's register, there is discrepancy within the same document. One finds in the inquest index, for example, two names that do not appear on the coroner's list. They are listed in the Montana Industrial Accident Report, however, and one of their names also appears on the Granite Mountain Memorial to the unidentified victims at the Mountain View Cemetery. Other names appear and disappear on various official lists and in newspaper articles published day to day at the time. Based

14. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, "Lessons from the Granite Mountain Shaft Fire, Butte, Montana," *Bulletin 188*, prepared by Daniel Harrington (Washington, D.C., 1922), 15-17, 44-46 (hereafter *Bulletin 188*); Butte-Silver Bow County, Coroner's Register, 1917-1918," pp. 33-34, handwritten documents, Public Room, BSBA (hereafter Coroner's Register).

15. *Bulletin 188*, p. 46; George R. Tompkins, *Truth about Butte: A Little History for Thoughtful People* (Butte, Mont., 1917), 35; Calvert, *Gibraltar*, 104.

16. Gerry Walter's list is on the new memorial at the Granite Mountain overlook, north of Butte, dedicated on June 8, 1996.

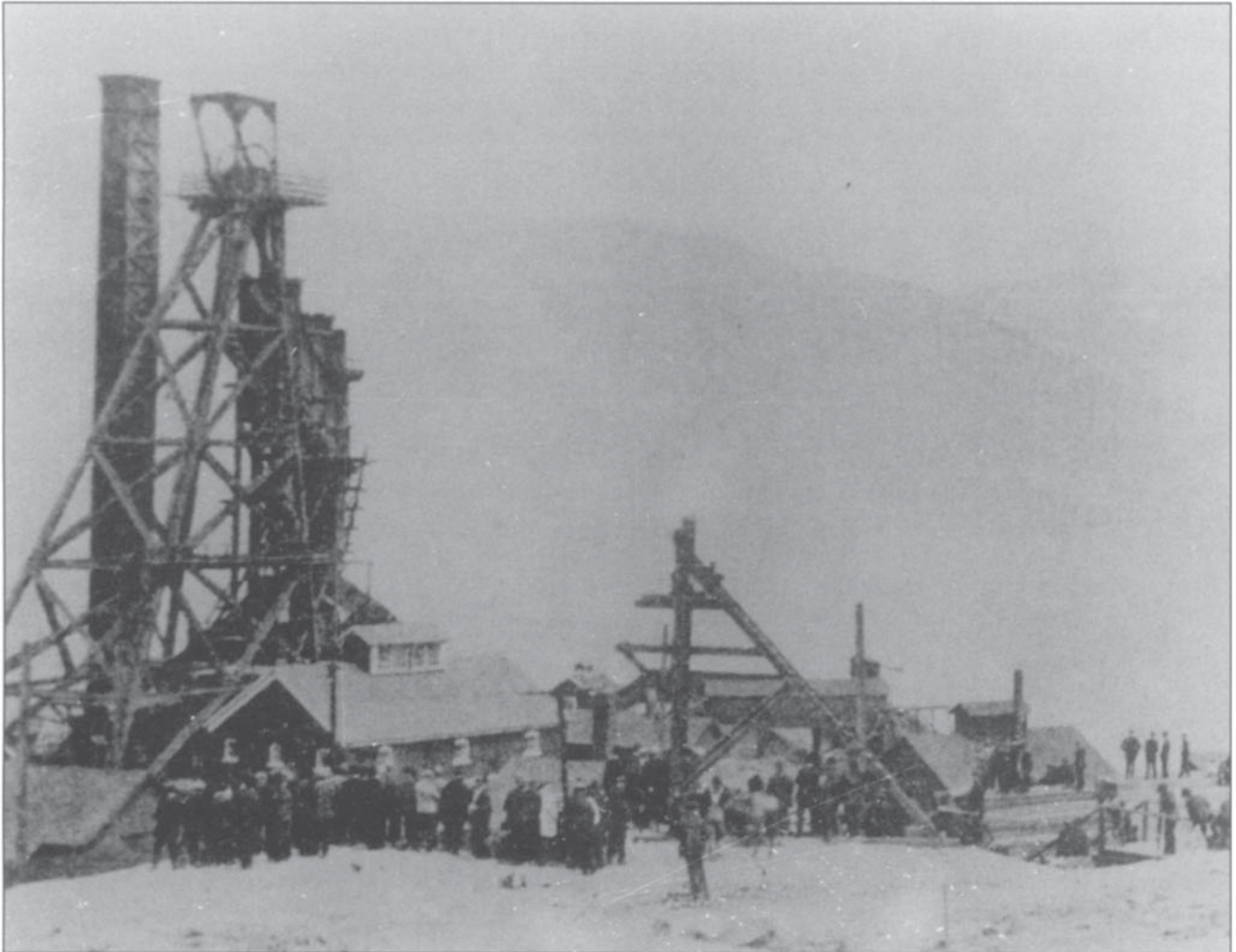
17. Harrington, "Mining Related Fatalities"; *Butte Miner*, June 15-24, 1917. See also Tompkins, *Truth about Butte*, 35.

18. Coroner's Register, 32. No additional information has been found regarding the body.

19. State of Montana, *Second Annual Report of the Industrial Accident Board for the Twelve Months Ending June 30, 1917* (Helena, Mont., n.d.), 32.



World Museum of Mining, Butte



Above ground, crowds like this one at the Speculator Mine soon gathered at the shaft collars to hear news of loved ones trapped underground. Rescue was extremely difficult because gas had contaminated the air in hundreds of miles of underground workings.

on available information, it is nearly impossible to state the exact number of fatalities.<sup>23</sup>

Some have accused the mining companies and their company-owned newspapers of deliberately muddling the information in an attempt to limit benefits paid to miners' dependents. Others have blamed the confusion on the incompetence of those involved. A

more realistic conclusion is that the simple enormity of the Speculator tragedy is to blame. Unorganized rescue efforts began by 1:00 A.M. on June 9—within an hour and a half of when the fire started. Those frantic first hours undoubtedly offered little opportunity to document who was involved. Organized rescue attempts, begun later that morning, involved different mining

companies, mine shafts, and mines.<sup>24</sup> Gas had contaminated the air in more than 300 miles of underground workings, each mining level and innumerable drifts had to be searched for bodies, and a thousand feet of the Granite Mountain shaft as well as other mining areas had caved in and had to be cleared during the search.<sup>25</sup> In addition, lower levels of the Speculator Mine, from the 3,000- to the 3,700-foot level, where at

20. Emphasis added; *Bulletin 188*, p. 21.

21. Coroner's Register, 32-35; Inquest Index, Butte-Silver Bow Clerk of the Court, Butte, Montana (hereafter Inquest Index). The index contains the names of all those whose deaths resulted in inquests throughout the history of the county.

22. Butte-Silver Bow County Clerk and Recorder, death certificates, nos. 21800-

23300. Certificates for unidentified victims are located in numbers 23070 and 23143; Butte-Silver Bow County, Mortuary Records, January 1914-December 1917, *passim*, handwritten document, Public Room, BSBA.

23. Coroner's Register, 32-35; Inquest Index, *passim*; *Second Annual Report . . . Industrial Accident Board*; Granite

Mountain Memorial Plaque, Mountain View Cemetery, Butte, Montana; *Anaconda Standard*, June 9-30, 1917; *Butte Miner*, June 5-July 10, 1917.

24. *Anaconda Standard*, June 10, 1917; *Bulletin 188*, pp. 18-22.

25. *Butte Miner*, June 17, 1917.



least one body was found, had been flooded and had to be pumped.<sup>26</sup>

Confusion also arose from the inability to identify many of the dead. It was noted that those who died by fire had their extremities burned off. Indeed, in one of the more horrifying incidents, two individuals were incinerated on a cage at the collar of the Granite Mountain shaft in front of people assembled at the site.<sup>27</sup> Some bodies had swollen into grotesque shapes, while others rapidly decomposed in the gaseous air. The stench was severe, and many were buried quickly upon removal from the mine.<sup>28</sup> Sources estimated the number of unidentified bodies variously from 65 to 74, and Richard's Funeral Home added to the discrepancy when it noted that "one sixth of forty six bodies" was buried.<sup>29</sup>

The Granite Mountain-Speculator tragedy took place in an atmosphere supercharged by national controversies that included world war, antilabor legislation, and patriotic fervor. Two months before the fire, in April 1917, the United States had officially entered World War I. Three days before the fire, on June 5, the state militia had assisted in arresting several Butte Irish, Austrians, and Finns who were demonstrating against the draft and against the nation's alliance with Great Britain.<sup>30</sup>

After the Speculator fire of June 8, the local press and a representative of the North Butte Mining Company hinted that pro-German sympathies may have been responsible for the fire. A letter on company stationery stated that carelessness caused the cable to fall, and that Ernest Sullau was born in Germany and his parents still resided there.<sup>31</sup> The *New Republic* emphasized similar themes, stating that pro-German influence in Butte was possible and that the companies were emphasizing this in their attempt to stifle criticism of their methods of operation.<sup>32</sup>

In subsequent months, units of the United States Army replaced the state militia in Butte where they guarded mining properties and enforced "patriotism," an assignment that lasted until 1921. The effect was not good. A federal report stated that after 1917 "troops in Butte changed from a fair, restrained body of men to an unfair unrestrained, vicious and violent body of men carrying on a veritable reign of terror."<sup>33</sup>

Labor, which had been seething since the introduction of the open shop and rustling cards, an elaborate blacklisting scheme, considered the massive number of deaths in the fire the final insult.<sup>34</sup> Butte's first major mining strike in

thirty-nine years erupted as the miners walked off the job within a few days of the disaster. The local press, controlled by the mining companies, announced that there were no worker grievances and that pro-German influence had caused the strike. The Industrial Workers of the World, labeled antiwar, socialistic, and reportedly pro-German, provided a convenient scapegoat.<sup>35</sup> When Frank Little, an IWW general executive board member and head of its metal mines division, came to Butte to organize the strike, he was assassinated by "unknown assailants." Montana Senator Henry Meyers, who claimed that Little's murder could have been avoided if he had been censured and arrested for the content of his speeches, proposed enabling legislation. Seeking to correct a loophole in the Espionage Act of 1917 that allowed Little to freely express his opinions, Meyers quickly introduced a national sedition bill into Congress that would severely restrict freedom of expression. That bill was delayed in committee, but a similar state-level measure, the Montana Sedition Act, faced no such difficulty, and the Montana Legislature passed it in special session in February 1918. Congress followed

26. *Bulletin 188*, pp. 8, 18-22.

27. An Interior Department report said 163 were killed but also claimed only two individuals were burned. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Major Disasters at Metal and Nonmetal Mines and Quarries in the United States*, Information Circular 7493, comp. John Hyvarinen, et al. (Washington, D.C., 1949), 11. Other sources do not list numbers of those burned but indicate more than two. *Butte Miner*, June 9, 1917.

28. *Butte Miner*, June 11, 1917.

29. "Funeral Record, 1916-1918," Richards Funeral Home, handwritten document at Wayryen-Richards Funeral Home, Butte, Montana.

30. *Butte Miner*, June 6-9, 1917; Calvert, *Gibraltar*, 104; Gutfeld, *Montana's Agony*, 14-16.

31. *Butte Miner*, June 11-26, 1917; Copy of letter to White E. Gibson, special assistant attorney general, April 10, 1918. The author was unable to identify who wrote the letter to Gibson.

32. Merz, "The Issue in Butte," 215. Despite continued rescue operations, coverage of the fire declines daily, with a final front page article in the *Butte Miner*, June 14, 1917. The final *Anaconda Standard* article is on the following day.

33. U.S. Department of Justice, "Use of Federal Military to Quell Domestic Disturbances in Butte, Montana," prepared by D. J. Glasser, n.d., p. 78, file LH031, BSBA.

34. Tompkins, *Truth about Butte*, 33; Calvert, *Gibraltar*, 104.

35. *Butte Miner*, June 6-July 10, 1917; Calvert, *Gibraltar*, 108.

36. Gutfield, 37-48; Calvert, *Gibraltar*, 104-13.

37. K. Ross Toole, *Twentieth-Century Montana: A State of Extremes* (Norman, 1972), 155-56; Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History*, 6th ed. (New York, 1982), 332.

38. Janet Orr, "Labor and the New Deal in Butte, Montana: The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers' Strike of 1934" (master's thesis, Washington State University, Pullman, 1987), 30-31.

39. Isaac F. Marcossion, *Anaconda* (Kingsport, Tenn., 1957), 251-71.

40. Harrington, "Mining Related Fatalities."



suit in May by passing the national measure, which amended the Espionage Act of 1917.<sup>36</sup> The laws, enforced on both state and federal levels, were two of the more repressive pieces of legislation in American history and were used to suppress the civil rights of socialists, pacifists, the IWW, and others until 1921. Enforcement of the federal measure, for example, resulted in the trials of such individuals as Socialist labor leader Eugene Debs and Congressman Victor Berger.<sup>37</sup>

The Armistice that ended the fighting in Europe in November 1918 did not bring peace to Butte. There were more strikes, but they were unsuccessful. Labor was largely an ignored entity until 1934, when federal legislation allowed the closed shop to be restored.<sup>38</sup> In the

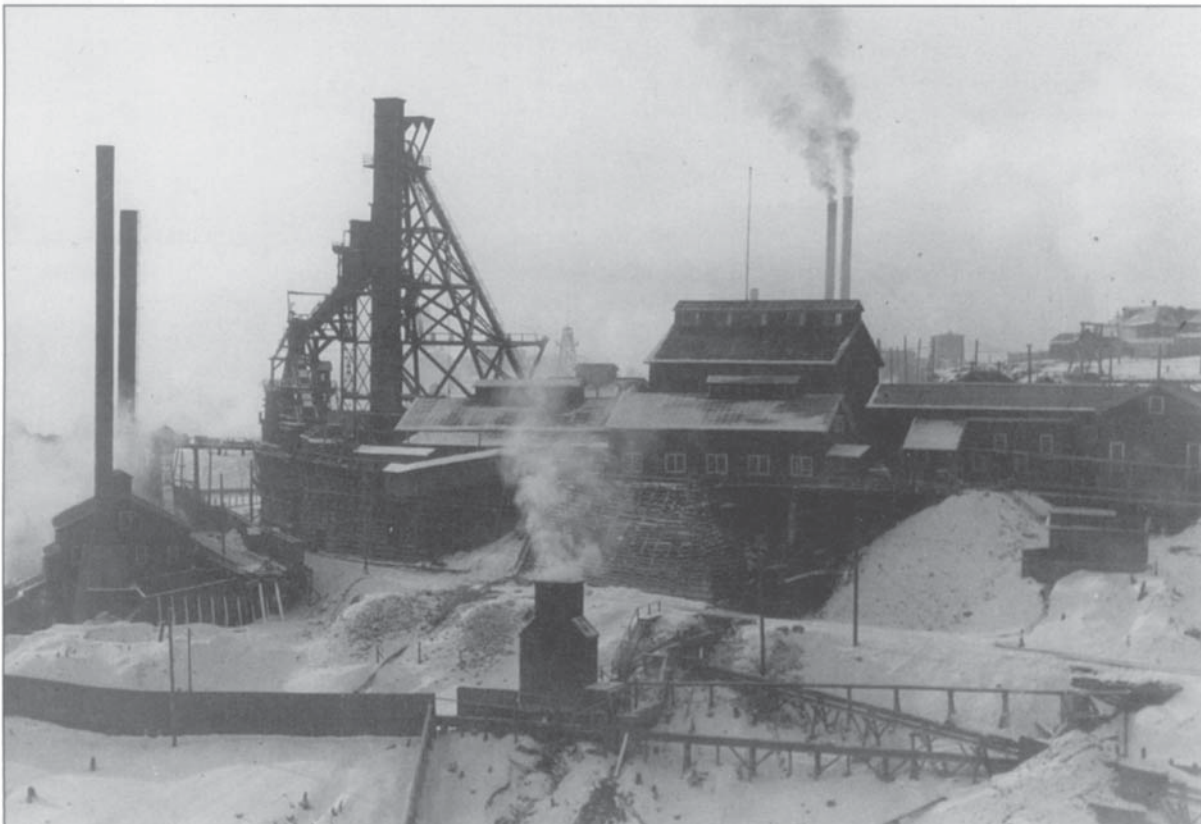
meantime, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company continued to consolidate the Butte Hill, but “The Company” had also become more interested in developing mines in cheaper and less restrictive countries such as Chile.<sup>39</sup> Production in Butte never again matched 1916 levels. Annual fatalities, which reached a high of 229 in 1917, were reduced to an average of 35 during the 1920s.<sup>40</sup>

Few events could more adequately depict a turning point in a community’s history than did Butte’s Granite Mountain–Speculator fire. As the place of the nation’s worst hard-rock mining disaster, it stands as an important national labor heritage site. In addition to the magnitude of the immediate tragedy, the fire served as a catalyst for labor militancy and repressive

state and national legislation that helped squelch labor and social protest not only in Butte but throughout the nation. Recognition of Butte and Anaconda as a labor history landmark would contribute significantly to acknowledging and interpreting this period in the history of the American West. *~*

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Although the mines eventually reopened, production in Butte never regained 1916 levels. The above-ground operations of the Speculator Mine, owned by the North Butte Mining Company, are shown below circa 1920.



Courtesy Allan G. Hooper Coll., MHS Photograph Archives, Helena