



## **Death's Door**

### **The Truth Behind Michigan's Largest Mass Murder**

*A Review by Gerry Mantel*

Seventy-three people die in a suffocating stairway pileup when someone apparently yells "Fire" at the crowded Italian Hall in Calumet, Michigan, on Christmas Eve 1913.

If true, who was this mystery person, why did he do it and how did he get away with it, making for the still-present deep divisions over the event in the community?

Nearly a century now after the "Italian Hall disaster" (or as Woody Guthrie called it, "massacre"), one might understandably think that any and all new leads would have been exhausted, and any potential revelations reduced to the realm of "old news."

Well, I was one of those people, and along with other like-minded folks I was dead wrong to be sure.

But along came Steve Lehto of Farmington Hills, Mich., who put to good use his unique combination of talents and qualifications—a legal "sharp eye," a history degree, previous historical writing experience and impressive Copper Country roots (which by definition usually precipitate lingering wonderment about Italian Hall)— to further the investigation while (of utmost importance) keeping the discussion within a larger context of history.

That context is the Great Copper Strike of 1913-14, which coincided with the cresting of the "radical" labor movement and the massive efforts of the corporate state to thwart its dreams of unionization.

Lehto takes us down this road in his pleasingly up-tempo and free-flowing yet aggressively detailed study. He starts from the earliest days of copper mining in the Keweenaw and marches into its turn-of-the-century glory days. The topics include settlement and immigration patterns and social/community structures including, most significantly, the relationship between mine management and labor that resulted in the "seeds of discontent" sown by the whole scenario that labor organizers no doubt found quite enticing.

This tension culminated with the July, 1913 call for a strike, causing nothing short of a panic on the Copper Range that, not surprisingly, encouraged "dirty dealings," bloody violence and ultimately intervention by State of Michigan security forces. We hear about the heroes as well as the villains.

And soon after, Italian Hall.

Lehto bases his logic largely upon the widely read, well-received foundation laid by Calumet native Arthur Thurner in his *Rebels on the Range*. In *Rebels*, Lehto indeed finds a worthy building block, but as he proceeds to meticulously re-check Thurner's alleged facts, interpretations, and conclusions, he begins to question and refute some of the previous findings—expressing "grave" doubts aimed at the usually taken-for-granted integrity of the local and regional press. Lehto's climactic assertion that the press was often less than honest is quite convincing given his determination to keep his evaluations within the framework of the strike. Thus, he never strays very far (if at all) from the proverbial, political hot potato that was cooking in the wake of more than 70 deaths (the exact number being a story within itself), on top of the general stress level and the High Stakes of the strike.

The author similarly questions the spirit of local inquiries into the matter, and here is where Lehto parts company with Mr. Thurner, with Lehto providing much proof that these investigations were prematurely terminated, Warren Commission-style, so as not to butt heads with the Powers That Be.

Was the press, in fact, biased by mine management? Lehto seems convinced and cites the many other underhanded, no-punches-pulled attempts by managers to sabotage unionization, an observation that's strongly supported by the research of others.

But wait a minute, what about those damned doors—did they open inward or outward? Isn't that what it's all about and does anybody really care? Lehto believes they shouldn't and dismisses the issue of the doors as moot.

I'm hard pressed to find fault with anything here; the argument's dramatic in tone and very conclusive. The photos are the best such collection (at least from what I've seen to date). But what captivates me the most is the relatively recent aftermath of this story as

extrapolated into the 1970s, then the 80s, right through the demolition of Italian Hall and beyond . . . the weird incidents, foggy recollections, revisionist recountings, ghostly tales, dubious "confessions" and whatnot. And Lehto has done a very interesting job with this aspect.

So what exactly does the author of this fine work conclude about Italian Hall? Does he know what happened, who did "it" and why? Or was it just a bunch of mistakes, poor judgment and misunderstandings? You'll have to read his book to find out, but for fans of Copper Country history at any level of expertise, half the fun will be getting there.

Let's hope we hear more from Steve Lehto in the future.

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