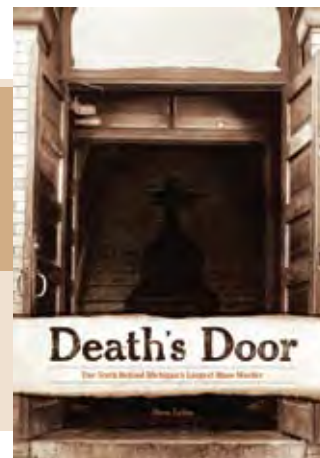


# Death's Door: The Truth Behind Michigan's Largest Mass Murder

By Steve Lehto, published by Momentum Books (2006), softcover, 232 pages, \$19.95, <http://www.momentumbooks.com/death.htm>



Reviewed by Frederick Baker, Jr.

**"T**he most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic." *Schenck v United States*, 249 US 47 (1919) (Holmes, J.).

Holmes might well have had in mind the circumstances of Michigan's largest mass murder, the 1913 Italian Hall tragedy in Calumet, Michigan, when he penned that line, for that is precisely what happened there. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, a party was held in the hall's second-floor auditorium. Over 700 were present, most of them children of striking miners. They were given small gifts and candy, perhaps the only presents they would receive, because the strike had begun in July and the miners were hard pressed.

Then a flash of movement and a loud voice drew attention toward the swinging doors at the top of the stairs. A man wearing a dark coat and a hat pulled low over his eyes stepped into the main hall and yelled, "Fire!" He motioned with his hands as if trying to get the attention of people who could not hear him. On his coat was a white pin with red lettering: CITIZENS ALLIANCE. He waited a moment to make sure his message had been heard and then he ran back through the double swinging doors and down the stairs to the street.

In the moments that followed, the warning was repeated and, though there was no fire, soon people, most of them children, were swarming to the steep stairway that descended to the safety of the street. The

first few made it down safely, but then someone fell, and others soon stumbled and began piling up in the stairway. In less than a minute, the pile of humanity was several feet high and ran from the bottom of the stairs upward for 30 feet. Children on the bottom of the pile suffocated from the weight of the bodies piled atop them and people struggling to escape stepped on those who had fallen. A woman who realized she was going to die lifted her baby over her head. The baby was found alive, clutched in his dead mother's hands.

The story is incredible—it seems impossible that whoever shouted that fatal "warning" intended such a catastrophic and cruel result: though the total number of dead is uncertain to this day because some parents may have carried off their dead children before authorities imposed some semblance of order after the calamity, at least 62 children and 11 adults died in the crush.

Steve Lehto's gripping account of the conflict between the mine owners and the miners leading up to this tragedy is at once riveting and conscientiously accurate and objective. His exploration of the powerful forces brought to bear by the mine owners and their pocketed local press and law en-

forcement authorities to divert all blame from them and the Citizens Alliance they funded, and cast it instead upon the miners themselves, reads like something Orwell might have written. Lehto exposes the marvelous callousness of the mine owners, who considered timbering for the shafts an unnecessary expense, because timbers were expensive, but miners killed in cave-ins "do not cost us anything." He meticulously traces their relentless, and ultimately successful, effort to crush not only the strike, but the miners themselves.

Lehto's research is exhaustive. He carefully debunks the myth that the tragedy was caused by inward opening doors at the foot of the stairs that trapped the children on the stairway. The book's cover includes a never before published photograph of the double sets of doors at the foot of the stairs of the now demolished hall. The photo, which Lehto discovered in a private collection, clearly shows that the doors opened outward. He also provides a fascinating glimpse into the Michigan politics of the era, including an account of the ultimately ineffectual efforts by Governor Ferris to bring peace to the distant region, which is as far from Lansing as Washington,

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The Italian Hall in Calumet, Michigan, as it appeared in 1913. The arched doorway on the left led to the staircase down which miners and their children stampeded to escape a fire that didn't exist. Seventy-three people, mostly children, perished.

D.C., by offering his assistance to mediate the dispute. The mine owners spurned his offer, abetted by the commanding general of the state militia Ferris sent to quell the violence inflicted on the miners by the untrained deputies the mine owners enlisted, armed, and set loose on them.

Lehto is the grandson of a dean of Hancock's Suomi College, so none of his direct ancestors were among the many Finnish miners involved in the strike. Even though Lehto is of Finnish descent on both sides, he found himself viewed with some suspicion during his work on the book. Despite his deep family roots in the area, including five older brothers born in Hancock, many regarded him as an "outsider" because his parents moved away just before he was born. Nevertheless, the last survivors cooperated with interviews, and it is obvious that Lehto has read every available published account of the events leading up to the tragedy and the two investigations that ensued. These included a long-missing copy of the transcript of the testimony taken in one of those investigations that mysteriously reappeared during the course of his research.

Though the book would be improved by an index, its chronological organization; logical, detailed, and descriptive table of contents; running heads and chapter sub-headings; impressive bibliography; and exhaustive endnotes (organized by chapter)

make this work not only an engrossing read, but a useful and highly usable tool for the serious researcher.

No review of this book could be complete without mentioning the profuse and fascinating illustrations, which include an image of some of the children who died, who appear to be sleeping, taken at the makeshift morgue established after the bodies were unstacked, and views of the endless procession of mourners, who walked in the snow from every church in Calumet, bearing the bodies of 73 victims to the cemetery. It was so long that all mourners had not yet joined it when the first of them arrived at the cemetery, two miles outside of Calumet.

Lehto's book, which is, above all, a determined effort to arrive at the truth of what happened at the Italian Hall on December 24, 1913, will surely prove to be, of the several that have been published, the definitive and authoritative account of that event. Already, according to the June 22, 2007, edition of *The Daily Mining Gazette*, the State Historic Preservation Office is reviewing the evidence Lehto has mustered to determine whether the historic marker at the site of the now demolished hall must be amended. Currently, the marker states: "Although there was no fire, seventy-three persons died while attempting to escape down a stairwell that had doors that opened inward." When a book corrects history by documenting and telling the truth, instead of the accepted version of events, its author has succeeded in the historian's task. Lehto is to be commended for a work of high scholarship. ■

Doug Elbinger, Elbinger Studios



*Frederick Baker, Jr. has chaired the State Bar Publications and Website Advisory Committee for over 20 years. He has edited dozens of Bar Journal articles and one book, published more than a dozen articles of his own, and received the Urban Law Annual Writing Award and two Thomas M. Cooley Law Review Distinguished Brief Awards. As a co-founder of the John D. Voelker Foundation and a lover of the U.P., he willingly volunteered to review Steve Lehto's book.*