

# Hillcrest Mine

## FACTS

CANADA'S WORST MINE DISASTER



On June 19, 1914 at 9:30 a.m. powerful explosions ripped through the black tunnels of the Hillcrest Mine. When the dust settled and rescue efforts were completed, 189 men lay dead. No one knows what triggered the deadly blasts. Perhaps falling rocks generated sparks, igniting methane gas and firing the highly explosive coal dust like gunpowder.

The day shift started at 7:00 a.m. after the mine had been shut down for two days. Of the 250 men on shift, 235 were working underground mining coal, placing timbers, and working on mine ventilation. Only 46 made it out of the mine alive.

The men underground faced the poisonous afterdamp, the term miners use for carbon monoxide and other gases produced when fire consumes available oxygen. Many who survived the explosions died as a result of inhaling the deadly gases. They were found face down in puddles of water with rags over their mouths, a last vain effort to breathe.

Eighteen men and boys managed to get out of the mine on their own. Corporals Mead and Grant and Constable Hancock, all of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, helped wash and identify bodies, and search for the last missing miners. Most of the miners were buried in mass graves in the Hillcrest Cemetery. One hundred and thirty widows and nearly 400 children were left behind.

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#### **AFTER THE EXPLOSION:**

- David Murray was rescued from the mine, but when he discovered his sons Robert, William and David Jr. were still inside, he went back to look for them. All four Murrays died.
- Fire Boss, Sam Charlton, was found with the firing cable still wrapped around his body and the battery lying nearby. The key to activate the battery was still in his pocket—he was not the cause of the explosion. For a reason we will never know, he hesitated instead of blasting the charge he had just set.
- Eight-year-old Julia Elick was in school when the whistle blew to warn of trouble at the mine. Her father, one of the mine workers who had escaped the Frank Slide in 1903, was not lucky twice. Julia's mother had a baby, buried her husband and lost her home, all in two days.

*For information contact:*

*Frank Slide Interpretive Centre at 403.562.7388*

*For toll-free calling in Alberta, first dial 310.0000*

*Fax 403.562.8635*

*info@frankslide.com • www.frankslide.com*