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**A coal mine exploded
in Scofield, Utah,
on May Day 1900**

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On May Day 1900 at 11.25 a.m. a loud bang was heard in Scofield, Utah, situated on the bank of the Rio Grande and along the Western track. It was thought to have something to do with the May Day festivities of the town. There was a children's party in process at the recently completed hall and there was to be a May Day ball in the evening. Soon, however, a message was brought that Section 4 of the Winters Quarters Mine had exploded and men were trapped also in Section 1. There were hundreds of men working in the mine and there were many Finns among them.

Hundreds thousands of people left to North America to gain money for a house or to become wealthy otherwise. Many indeed did succeed, but several had to pay a steep price for their migration. The Finns, 40 of them, who sank to the frigid waters of the Atlantic with the Titanic we know best. However the number of Finns who died in the mines, forestry work and other dangerous occupations in North America is by far larger. Only a small package arrived in the home country, carrying the watch, wallet and other personal belongings of the young man who left for America with high hopes, along with a note telling that he had died under a boulder in a mine or perished in an explosion. This is an aspect of migration that has hardly been studied at all.

A desperate rescue operation started right after the Scofield explosion. The first who attempted to enter the mine were carried away unconscious. Of them at least two died. The rescuers tried to enter Section 4 through Shaft 1 but they had to retreat because of a gas fire. When the dead horses had been cleared away from the fourth entrance and air started to circulate the mine could be entered. The first victims were found at the depth of 180 metres. A man still alive, his face burnt beyond recognition, asked the rescuers to end his suffering. He died the next night.

The miners in Shaft Four had been aware of their approaching death. Coats had been drawn over heads; some had buried their faces in sand trying to protect themselves from the gas. Someone had been lighting his pipe, others eating their sandwiches. Some had ran to the gallery trying to take the shortest way out, not realising that it was there that the danger lurked. Among the blackened bodies of men there were a dozen boys lying beside their fathers and brothers. They had been hired as helpers to connect the ore cars.

On the surface the bodies were washed and taken to the mine company's buildings to wait for recognition. The clearing was difficult and took very long. A week later the Salt Lake Herald said the Finns were claiming that 15 of their fellow countrymen were still in the mine. As late as August one victim was found; his son had convinced the mining engineers that his father's body had been buried under the masses of coal.

The estimates of the number of victims in the Scofield mining accident vary from 200 to 300. If the lowest estimate is used as a starting point, every third victim was Finnish. Marjatta Pulkkinen says in the Keskipohjanmaa newspaper on 1st May 1988 that the number of Finns dead is estimated as 62; most of them were from Central Ostrobothnia. Genealogist Timothy Laitila Vincent from Salt Lake City, Utah, says that there were at least 68 Finns who perished in the accident. The exact figure shall probably never be known. Reverend A. Granholm from Wyoming performed the funeral ceremony for the Finns.



Abraham and Kaisa Luoma sitting in front of the Luoma brother's home. On the left, son Matti, who was saved from the accident, and on the right, daughter Tilda, who lost her husband. On the background, widows, orphans and fellow workers of the brothers. Courtesy of the Utah State Historical Society.

The Tragedy of the Isoluoma Family

Six sons, two grandsons and one son-in-law from the Isoluoma family from Räärinki, Veteli, died in the Scofield accident. The seven sons and two grandsons of Abraham and Kaisa had gone to America and ended up at the Scofield mine. They invited their parents from Finland to come to America to spend their old age. The last name had been shortened to Luoma, or, in the American way, Louma. Abraham and Kaisa, 70 and 65 years old respectively, arrived in Scofield only three months before the accident. The boys had promised to take care of their parents since they were making good money. Only one son, Matti Leanteri, was able to crawl out of the mine with the last ounce of his strength. The husband of the daughter Tilda, Aleksanteri Välikangas from Toholammi, perished in the accident. The grandsons Juho Heikki and Aaprami Aadolf were only 18 and 17 years old. When the Luoma family's victims were about to get buried in separate places, Kaisa Luoma insisted that all nine should be buried in the same row. Six months after the accident Abraham and Kaisa returned to Finland, where they still had one son.

The Centennial Memorial Ceremony on 1st May 2000

The effects of the Scofield accident are still felt as painful memories both in the United States of America and in Finland. On May Day 2000 a memorial ceremony was held on

the scene of the accident. In the ceremony genealogist Timothy Laitila Vincent expressed the condolences of the Institute of Migration for the losses of the accident. Furthermore, local associations and private citizens were encouraged to work towards knowledge of the victims' personal data and their families' destinies.



Old and new markers in Scofield Cemetery (2000). Photo: Timothy Laitila Vincent.

More information:

Articles & pictures:

- http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~utcache/scofield_mine.htm
- <http://www.media.utah.edu/UHE/c/COPPERMINE.html>
- <http://www.media.utah.edu/UHE/>