

POSTSCRIPTS

THE ARTICLE, " 'At the Time of Our Misfortune': Relief Efforts following the 1918 Cloquet Fire," published in the Fall, 1983, issue of *Minnesota History*, drew an interesting response from Leslie J. Gustafson of Northfield. The article, written by Francis M. Carroll and Franklin R. Raiter, "brought back memories of my boyhood," Gustafson noted, "and sent me to my scrapbook to look up an article my mother wrote back in 1959 about the Cloquet-Moose Lake holocaust. She wrote it . . . from the point of view of a resident of Duluth and one who was involved with the relief effort conducted from the Armory during those trying days.

"My mother, a widow at the time, whose name was Olga Marie Gustafson (she married Charles Fremling in 1919), lived in a flat above the furniture store on 21st and Superior Street with her two unmarried sisters and two sons (my brother Herbert and me). I was 12 years of age and my brother 15. We, too, were pressed into service at the Armory (more perhaps to keep us under the watchful eye of mother) to do what we could to help. I seem to recall that we worked in some kind of check room to take care of clothing. Duluth presented a weird environment during the fire: the acrid smoke of burning trees and leaves, almost zero visibility, sifting ashes, and people wearing flu masks."

Gustafson enclosed with his letter a copy of his mother's article, which appeared in two of George M. Fisher's "Along the Iron Range" columns in the *Hibbing Tribune* on January 8 and 9, 1959. Following are excerpts from the article:

"ANYONE familiar with the beautiful Indian summers of Northern Minnesota could well understand our reluctance to go to work that gorgeous Saturday morning, October 12, 1918. My two sisters and I, a young widow with two sons, were on our way to one of the leading department stores in Duluth where we were employed. We sighed when we thought of the long day ahead as store hours on Saturdays were from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. 'Let's pack a lunch tomorrow and go out somewhere and spend the day. It will be fun wandering around the woods gathering hazel nuts and autumn leaves enjoying the beauties of nature.

"Duluth, as most people know, is a Minnesota city situated at the southwest extremity of Lake Superior, 156 miles northwest of St. Paul. . . . Great wooded areas of spruce, fir, cedar, pine, birch, and other trees surround the city. A period of drought that Fall, created a tinder dry condition, among the resinous, pineaceous evergreens, 'the worst in 40 years,' they said. In 1918 fire prevention or 'smoke spotters' was in its infancy. As the day wore on it became evident, from the heavy pall of smoke and saffron colored sky, that forest fires were raging nearby.

"Customers, nervous and distraught, rushed to the store telephones, calling up their husbands and homes. By this time a wind had sprung up . . . which rapidly attained a velocity of 65 and 75 miles per hour. The roaring wind, caused by the fire, carried branches, leaves and other debris down Superior St. About 3 p.m. the management of the store, then the George A. Gray Co., now Edward Wahls, realizing that an emergency existed, closed the store for the day. The wind was so strong it was with great difficulty that we arrived at the corner of Second Ave. W. and Superior St., where we boarded a west bound street car; the car was jammed with fire refugees from the eastern part of the city; some carrying their possessions tied up in sheets. By now the Northland Golf Club at 38th Ave. E., was in flames.

"THE WIND was terrific, trees were uprooted, and on the wind, were riding hot embers that burned wherever they fell. Fireballs caused by the gases set fire to whatever they touched. These fireballs caused many to remark, 'This is the work of those German Huns.' World War I was in progress, with its sabotage and rapaciousness and people were suspicious. At Pike Lake Resort, about 10 miles north of Duluth, over the hill, there were many summer homes. This day which promised to be so beautiful, many Duluthians drove out to enjoy one more fling with nature before closing up for the winter. Yes, there was a tang of smoke in the air, but no one was unduly alarmed at first.

"At about 2 p.m. it became evident, with such a gale blowing, that a fire hazard existed. All dashed for their cars and headed for Duluth. Already the fire was at their

heels and ahead of them. The resinous forests went 'poof.' Blinded by smoke the first car ran into the ditch, at a part of the road called 'Death Curve.' It surely lived up to its name that October day. . . . In the meantime, the Duluth Red Cross Chapter, under the direction of Mrs. J. R. McGiffert and the Home Guard went into action, opening up the Armory in the east end for the fleeing refugees from Duluth's outlying districts.

"Canteens were set up to serve coffee and food, cots procured to house the refugees over night. The fact that the whole city of Duluth, with its 98,000 inhabitants, was in danger of being annihilated, was lost sight of in the problems of the moment. Soon the city was in darkness, except for the glow of the conflagration north, east and west of us. We now realized our western exit

was blocked. A subconscious thought that Lake Superior would be our means of escape turned out to be 'wishful thinking' as we later were told that the lake was a seething fury, whipped up by the gale, where no boat could live. There were 98,000 people who probably had the same idea. About 10 p.m., it really looked bad for Duluth and its inhabitants.

"WE HAD AN apartment on Superior St., not far from the waterfront, where the grain elevators are located. We gathered a few of our belongings together ready to go. 'But where will we go, mother!' exclaimed my little son. I couldn't answer. Fire trucks and ambulances shrieked along Superior St. on their way eastward. (No firemen slept that night). We just waited, wondering what to do. . . . Then about 11 p.m. a miracle happened. Suddenly . . . the wind stood still. In less than an hour, everything became calm. The lake quieted down, the fires gradually burned themselves out and before morning Duluth was out of danger.

"At about midnight, leaving my boys with one of my sisters, another sister and I hurried out to the Armory to assist the Red Cross in whatever way we could. As I was supervisor of a Red Cross unit at the George A. Gray Store, consisting of 200 girls, I knew many of those girls would help wherever they were needed. Though the

Armory floor was filled to capacity with cots, no one really slept. Those who were badly burned were sent to hospitals, which became full to overflowing. We helped soothe superficial burns on hands, face and eyes with witch hazel and other ointments. Pale, wide-eyed children roamed around, some carrying pets, their eyes eloquently pleading, not to be separated. We directed the refugees to the canteens for nourishment and tried to comfort those grieving for lost relatives and burned homes.

"About 3 a.m. refugees from the western area, Moose Lake, Cloquet and other towns and rural districts, arrived by train. They stood at the registry desk with staring impassive faces, most of them, with large families, gathered around them. I saw no tears. They had seen too much to cry. They had seen many trapped in that raging death blaze who could not get on the rescue train, there wasn't room. It took brave and resolute men to run that train through that fiery right-of-way. It was estimated that between six or seven hundred lives were lost in this holocaust. Four Minnesota counties were devastated within 12 hours or less. . . . As the terrible 1918 flu epidemic was at its height that Fall, Red Cross issued orders that all at the Armory must wear flu masks.

"Our job was to tie these gauze masks on all incoming refugees and workers. Most cooperated very well, except for a few male 'belligerents' who would refuse to wear those 'contraptions.' They wanted fresh air after all that smoke. One could hardly blame them. A great job was done by the Red Cross that night, finding room for the late arrivals, as by now the Armory was really full. Every cot was occupied. We stayed until 5 a.m. Sunday, taking two of the Cloquet refugees home with us. Sunday turned out bright and fair. The events of the preceding day and night seemed like a horrible nightmare. All that remained of the beautiful woods with its delicate lacy ferns, Indian paint brush and ground pine which we had planned to enjoy that Sunday, was the acrid tang of smoke and blackened stumps. Verily man proposes and God disposes."





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