

# MINERS LEARNED TO FILL COMMUNICATION GAP



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SOUDAN, MINN. – The deep mining pits cut into Minnesota's Iron Range reflect the area's long history as one of the

country's most important sources of iron ore. And many of the men who reshaped this landscape in the early 20th century had just arrived in America.

Immigrants from dozens of countries were lured to northern Minnesota in the late 1800s to work in the newly established iron mines, where there were plenty of jobs for strong laborers — no experience required. They came from Finland, Croatia, Ireland, Italy and beyond, clustering in neighborhoods alongside others from their homeland.

Once the miners reached their worksite at the start of a 10-hour-plus shift, they were part of a diverse crew speaking a multitude of languages.

Reader Patty Kuppe, who lives in White Bear Lake, spent part of her childhood on the Iron Range and has family members who have worked in mining.

Kuppe works with computers, and noted that devices can't talk to each other without a shared language. So she wondered how all these foreign workers were able to build the Iron Range when they didn't speak the same language.

Kuppe sought answers from Curious Minnesota, the Star Tribune's reader-generated reporting project.

There were sometimes animosities among miners above ground, especially between those who were born in the United States and those who came later. But in the mines, the workers forged strong bonds within their crews and found ways to work and communicate effectively.

It was mutually beneficial, since these workers were paid by total tonnage.

They quickly learned words and phrases from their co-workers, according to Reed Petersen, a tour guide at the Soudan Underground Mine and history instructor at Minnesota North College in Vermilion. It started with production words like "drill" and "distance." Saltier terms were also required learning.

“From the research I’ve done, the No. 1 [words] they would learn is each other’s swear words,” Petersen added.

## A booming region

The population in northern Minnesota’s Iron Range boomed after major ore deposits were discovered there in the late 1800s. People representing 43 different nationalities lived in the region by 1920, when 85% of the area’s miners were immigrants, according to the Minnesota Historical Society.

There was a hierarchy among the workers based on where they were born. Though the majority of the miners were from Finland, American-born and Cornish workers had the top status and preferable supervisory positions, according to the historical society. The lower-level roles went to southern and eastern Europeans.

The Oliver Mining Co. employed more than 10,100 people in 1907, according to Marvin Lamppa’s robust history book “Minnesota Iron Country: Rich Ore, Rich Lives.” Fewer than 300 of them were fluent in English.

“All had one thing in common,” he wrote.

“They were willing to work and work hard.”

Much of the mining was done above ground with excavators, but some of the miners descended into dark underground mines to hunt for ore in teams of three using large, heavy drills.

One of the Iron Range’s top tourist attractions is the Soudan Underground Mine, which is Minnesota’s oldest mine and once boasted the best quality iron ore. It recently reopened after \$9.3 million in repairs. Visitors on a recent afternoon took a caged elevator ride 2,341 feet below ground to the enclosed mine that operated from 1882 to 1962.

Petersen, the guide, asked visitors to extinguish all lights as they navigated the darkness.

“Forever night” is how one former miner described working in a similar space in his journals.

This was the base level of light for the men who worked at Soudan.

Workers would follow the underground train tracks to a worksite, feeling their way with their feet, Petersen said. Some who sprung for the out-of-pocket expense of a candle sparingly used the flickering light affixed to the front of a helmet.

Not everyone could afford that luxury (a candle cost about as much as a single meal for a family).

### Navigating the dangers

Now consider the added level of danger and difficulty: the lack of shared language.

“Orders and directions were not always understood,” Lamppa wrote. “Miners wandered into unsafe areas. There were premature blasts.

Men got in the way of moving ore cars. They were caught in machinery. There were falls. Sides of pits gave way. There were cave-ins. There were deaths — lots of them.”

They developed bonds below ground that especially shone in times of disaster. Should a tragedy strike a crewmate, team members would band together to offer support to the affected family, regardless of ethnicity, Petersen said.

The communication gap worked in favor of the mining companies, according to Petersen.

Chatter slowed work. Too much talking, and the guys might find a way to organize and protest conditions — though the Soudan Underground Mine was known to be a superior place to work.

“The company was very careful not to allow any potential union activity,” Petersen said.

Some miners used song to greet their countrymen through the darkness of the underground, Petersen said. They would sing in their native language as

they worked their way toward a worksite. It was a comfort for those who recognized the language being sung.

The immigrant miners came to this part of the country to make things better for the generations that followed, Petersen said.

“In the United States today, we like telling the positive side of the story: hard work, unity,” Petersen said. “But we can’t forget the struggle these guys went through.”

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