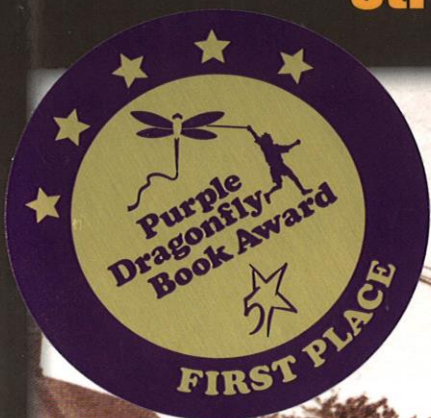


LIVING ON SISU

The 1913 Union Copper Strike Tragedy



Deborah K. Frontiera

Living on Sisu: The 1913 Union Copper Strike Tragedy

By Deborah K. Frontiera

This book is dedicated to all those who lived and died that year,
to the young people of today and tomorrow, so they will know what it was like, and to
my grandchildren: present—Hailey Wilhelm and James and Riley Bonilla—and future . .
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Thank You

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The Finnish word “sisu” does not have an exact English translation. It might be defined as a quality people have giving them the courage, determination, and strength to make it through life’s most difficult situations, or (as defined by Dr. Robert Nara) “a characteristic that takes over when determination and fortitude run out.”

Emma Niemi, her family, and friends in *Living on Sisu* are fictional characters. The Calumet and Hecla Mining Company (usually referred to as C&H) and the strike of 1913 were, sadly, very real. Emma’s experiences are as close to what it may have been like for a young person as research can make them. A list of historical people can be found in the appendix, along with acknowledgements of resource people, photo credits, and a list of references. The historical photographs included are to give the reader a sense of time and place. The names of most people in the photographs (unless the caption refers to historical people) are unknown and should only be considered to be “like” the fictional characters.

Introduction

I grew up in Lake Linden. My father, Clarke Olson, taught math and mining engineering at Michigan Technological University. My grandfather, Louis Chester Pearce, grew up in Lake Linden. He graduated from the same high school that my mother, brother, sisters, and I did various years later. Chester graduated from the Michigan College of Mines (later re-named Michigan Technological University). He and my grandmother, Jessie Otto Pearce, lived in the mining regions of Mexico the first several years after they married. They were not in the Copper Country at the time of the 1913 strike, but returned to Lake Linden a year or so later when my

grandfather began working in his father's hardware store and helping with other business interests.

I can't begin to count the number of times while growing up that some teacher, parent or other adult shook a finger at a group of children with the warning, "Never yell 'fire' in a crowded room!" During most of my school years, the C&H whistle blowing at the end of the day shift was as familiar a sound as the voices of my friends. I remember clearly the concern of classmates whose fathers worked at the stamp mill when C&H closed in 1968.

I never really appreciated my heritage until I reached adulthood. Employment opportunities took my husband and our children from Michigan to Colorado, then to Kansas, and finally to Texas in 1985. We returned to Lake Linden often on summer vacations and took our children to the local museums and to our favorite beaches on Lake Superior.

In 1998, we bought a cottage on Rice Lake, nine miles from Lake Linden, and began to spend our summers there. The idea of writing a story about the strike of 1913 from a young person's point of view came to me the summer that a friend and I attended the premier of the opera, *Children of the Keweenaw*, at the restored Calumet Theater. I bought my copy of *Rebels on the Range* that night. I spent the next few summers reading books and historical documents on file at the agencies listed, talking to local historical experts, walking the streets of Calumet, sitting inside restored churches, hiking from the top of the hill in Swedetown to Kearsarge Street in Laurium, getting to know "Emma" and her world, and gaining a sincere appreciation for those who lived and worked in the mines during the early twentieth century.

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Photo #1 inserted here.

Caption: A typical Finnish family, not exactly like Emma's family, but this is how most Finnish families looked when having a formal portrait done.

Photo: FAHA

Photo #2 inserted here.

Caption: A girl like Emma dressed for high school graduation. In the story, Emma has not reached this age.

Photo: FAHA

NOTE: To see the historic photos, purchase the book, either in print or electronic format.

Thursday, May 1, 1913

I am twelve years old today. It has been a wonderful day. Even the sun helped, and it was most welcome. Winter is always long in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, but this year it seemed especially so because we had snow and sleet even in April. At school today, we danced around the May Pole. I was right next to my best friend, Marie Beauchamp. We laughed and laughed as we passed our ribbons over and under each other's with the rest of the sixth grade girls. At lunch, we talked of things we will try to do together when school is out in June.

The best part came this evening. Mama had supper ready, as she always does when my father, my brother Jaako and Juhani Hakala, who is also from Finland and boards with us, come

home from pushing tram cars in the Calumet and Hecla copper mines. Papa went upstairs first, something he does not usually do. When he came down, he handed me a packet and said, “Happy Birthday, my not-so-little New American girl. Here is something you can write down more of those ideas in—the ideas you get so many A’s for in school. Always stay in school and learn even more. That is the best thing you can give yourself or your family.”

He said it in Finnish, but I have put what it means in English. He always calls me his “New American girl” because I was the first of my family to be born an American citizen and in the first year of a new century. Papa says in Finland they celebrate a child’s name day, the day of baptism, rather than a birthday. So we celebrate my brothers’ name days because they were born in Finland, but my sisters’ and my birthdays because we were born in America, where birthdays are the thing to celebrate.

The packet was wrapped in brown paper from the grocery store and tied with a piece of twine. I opened it and there lay this journal, two pencils, a penknife to sharpen them and a rubber eraser! It is much more than I ever expected for a gift. There is never much extra money in our family, and what there is always goes into Mama’s jar on the top shelf of the pantry for Papa to buy a farm.

“It is a good year,” Mama said, also in Finnish. “You are almost through with grade school and nearly a young lady.”

Jaako, Mattii, Jenni and Katri all clapped for me. Mr. Hakala gave me a pat on the back. Mama’s fish *mojakka* was especially good because the stew was made from fresh fish, not smoked fish like we had all winter. We had *marjavelia* for dessert. Mama made it from a jar of last summer’s raspberries.

Katri looked at the fruit sauce. “I thought we ate all the raspberries,” she said.

“I hid the last jar,” Mama told her, “to save it for Emma’s birthday.”

Jenni and Katri (who are nine and seven years old) are already asleep in our bed. The front windows of our house at the very end of Tunnel Street in Swedetown face nothing but another row of company houses. I am glad my upstairs window looks west across the meadow to the forest. As I watched the sky change from red and orange to lavender, I could still hear Mama, Papa and Mr. Hakala talking in the kitchen.

Mr. Hakala said the man from the Western Federation of Miners talked to him again today, and asked him if he would join. He asked Papa what he planned to do. Papa said what he always does, “I don’t want to join that union. I don’t hold with their socialist ideas. Besides, I put up with this job almost thirteen years now. I can stand it another six months until we have all our land money.”

Mr. Hakala said, “That’s all well and good, but what about me? I’m just starting out. I have saved barely enough money to bring my wife and son to America. My son is tiny. There is no one to work but me.”

Papa told Mr. Hakala he has to decide for himself.

Mr. Hakala raised his voice a little and said, “Yes, but if we don’t all stick together, none of us will ever get anything. C&H won’t listen as long as it’s only a few.”

It is the same talk almost every night. Papa always says he just wants to get out. It makes me tired and confused.

Now, here I sit at the window. It is almost dark. I make this promise to myself for Papa: I will always use my very best English grammar in this journal as my teachers tell me, and I will get as much education as I can.

Friday, May 2

Winter might finally be over, but it was not much above freezing when the mine whistle blew at seven o'clock. Jenni and Katri and I slept all curled up together with two quilts over us. We did not want to get out of bed, but I had to get up. It is my job to take the chamber pots to the outhouse and bring in another bucket of water. Although the big red water tower on our hill helps give our homes good water, we do not have pipes inside the house. A pump at the edge of our garden brings us water from the town's pipes.

The men ate eggs and bacon and walked to the mine shaft before we woke. My sisters and I had *juustoa* and *korppua*, oven cheese and toast. I dunked my *korppua* in coffee now that Mama lets me have some. My sisters dunked theirs in hot milk. Jenni and Katri helped Mama wash the dishes. They have only a short walk to Swedetown's school. I must walk much farther to my school because Swedetown's school has only grades one through five. First, I always take our cow Daisy across the street to the town pasture.

At school, my teacher praised my essay again, and asked me to read it aloud. James Richards, who sits right behind me, whispered, "Teacher's pet! You think you're smart, but you're just a dumb Finn." Then he put the tip of my braid into his ink well.

I felt my face and neck get hot. Then he whispered, "There's a little red in your neck. You must be a Red Finn," and snickered. He always does something mean if I get a better grade. I said nothing to my teacher because I have enough trouble from him without being called a tattletale as well. I would like to stick my foot out and trip him the next time he walks by. Five weeks and I will be rid him and his friends.

Lunch is always the same at school. We all sit in our little groups—James and his ilk, the Poles and Slavs together, the Italians, we Finnish from Swedetown, and so forth. It is strange how Marie and I, a Finn and a French girl, ended up together. It was at the start of the school year. The boys were picking on her because she was new and did not know much English. I could not stand it. I told them we should all just get along.

They yelled, “Greenhorn and dumb Finn,” at both of us as I led her to where I was sitting.

The others from Swedetown began to ignore me because I befriended someone who isn’t Finnish. With my help, her English is pretty good now and we are happy being friends.

After school, Daisy was very stubborn on the way back from the pasture. I think she wanted to stay and eat all that nice fresh grass after a winter of hay. Her milk and Mama’s *viiliä*, or cultured milk, taste better when she eats fresh grass.

When I finally got into the house, there sat Jenni’s teacher in our parlor.

“Guess what!” Jenni said, “It’s our turn to have Miss Prince stay with us.” I greeted Miss Prince politely but sighed to myself. I know it is necessary, but I hate our turn to have one of the teachers at our house. It means we girls must give up our room and sleep on a pallet on the floor in my parents’ room. I wonder if Miss Prince doesn’t like being in different houses much either. She has no place to call home.

I barely got to eat my supper since I must always translate for my parents and Mr. Hakala.

“Emma,” Miss Prince said, “I heard you won your school essay contest. Please, tell me about what you wrote.”

“We had to choose some recent news and tell what we thought about it,” I told her. I explained how, last February, I read in the newspaper about a state representative who had

introduced a law not to cut so many trees from the forests here. Then in March one representative spoke before the Michigan Senate to ask them to pass the law. The law only went to some committee and never was considered. There are too many people who think we must have even more industry and that there is no end to the forests. I had written my essay about what the representative said and how I thought he was right. I also wrote that there must be someone smart enough to find a way to have industry and forests together.

“Your parents must be very proud of you,” Miss Prince said.

There was all the usual conversation about the weather, how hard the work is in the mines, and Papa’s hope to buy land. He said he has his eye on a piece in the Trap Rock Valley that has some meadow and some forest. We Finnish people call the Trap Rock Valley *Karjala*, like the *Karjala* in Finland where our national epic poetry, *The Kalevala*, was written.

“Meadow for crops and cows. Trees to cut for a house,” Papa said. “And enough land for all my sons.” He said “all” very loud because he was a second son, with no land to inherit in Finland.

Sometimes I get tired of translating so much, but then I remind myself maybe God made me good at both English and Finnish so I can help people understand each other. Would that make people like James Richards not hate us so much?