

Remembering Monongah

A NIAF grant recipient looks at the nation's worst mining accident and its Italian immigrant victims, who died in pursuit of the American dream.

By Monica Soladay

In 1907, the small town of Monongah, West Virginia, lost hundreds of its residents to an accident in a local coal mine. Half of the victims were Italian immigrants who had come to this country to seek a better life. Now, more than 100 years later, a NIAF grant recipient explores this tragedy and its far-reaching effects in the documentary “Monongah Remembered,” available for purchase on DVD.

An explosion thought to have been caused by an improper charge collapsed buildings and two mines in this rural town on December 7, 1907, killing 362 workers. Of the dead, 171 were Italian immigrants; 87 hailed from Molise and another 43 from Calabria. Other Polish, Serbian and Turkish immigrants were also killed in addition to Americans. It was the worst mining disaster in U.S. history.

In many ways, the Monongah tragedy is also a tale of the pursuit of the American dream, says writer and director Peter Argentine, owner of Argentine Productions, who collaborated with the Heinz History Center and the American Italian Cultural Institute (AMICI) in Pittsburgh to create the documentary.

“The [Italian] immigrants who came to Monongah were from the really rural regions. They might not have had much land or it was hard to eke a living out of the land,” Argentine said. “They were seeking to make a better living for themselves; a better way. Some ended in tragedy like this, and others ended in the great American dream. But for those who had to suffer this tragedy, the impact is still in some ways felt today in terms of the families.”

A resident of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Argentine first learned of the tragedy through his involvement in the local Italian American community and friendship with Nick Ciotola, the former curator of the Italian American Collection at the Heinz Regional History Center. When Ciotola unveiled an exhibition about mining disasters called “The Darkest Month,” Argentine was fascinated.

“I became interested in, ‘What is the impact when a worker loses their life?’” said Argentine, whose great uncle died in a workplace accident and whose father is a carpenter. “And in this case hundreds lost their lives and about half were Italian Americans.”

The documentary picks up on research done by Ciotola, Father Everett Briggs—a Catholic priest assigned to the region who erected a nursing home



in memory of the miners—and Joseph D’Andrea, a former Italian vice consul for the region, president of AMICI and a NIAF member. It includes original photos from the time of the accident and interviews with relatives of those killed.

A \$5,000 grant from NIAF helped the project get off the ground, allowing Argentine to commit to filming Monongah’s 100th anniversary commemoration of the disaster, which was attended by an Italian delegation and included the installation of a bell sent by the Region of Molise.

Released in December 2007, a half-hour English language version of this documentary aired on public television stations in West Virginia. In response to demand from Italy’s Region of Molise, from which many of the victims hailed, an Italian language version titled “Monongah: Cent’Anni di Oblio” was released in Italy. Italian professors and graduate students from the University of Pittsburgh provided voiceovers.

Although the documentary focuses on the history of the tragedy, it also examines the social and economic conditions that drove Italian immigrants to the United States, worker safety, and parallels between immigration issues of yesteryear and today. ▲

For more information on “Monongah Remembered,” visit www.monongahmovie.com.

