

A Hero

The Death of William John Merry of Kirkfield

Many are familiar with the significant contributions of Sir William Mackenzie, whose work greatly impacted the community of Kirkfield, Victoria County, now Kawartha Lakes, and the development of Canada's first transcontinental railway. His achievements in securing contracts for the construction of bridges for the Canadian Pacific Railway are well-recognized, and his legacy remains acknowledged.

However, it is perhaps less well known that William John Merry, Sir William Mackenzie's brother-in-law, also played a notable role deserving of recognition. Today, we take the opportunity to introduce William John Merry, a figure whose heroism warrants our attention.

Born on October 4, 1870 in Kirkfield to John Merry and Honora Sullivan, William 'John' grew up with his 11 brothers and sisters helping his father on the family farm on the Portage Road.

In the mid 1890s John moved to Toronto where he met Mary Augusta Vercoe, the daughter of Dr. Henry Vercoe and Phoebe Bristol. John, a bookkeeper, and Mary had a quick romance in the City and moved to Rossland, British Columbia in the Fall of 1897. Shortly after arriving in British Columbia the couple traveled to Nelson where they were married on November 17, 1897 and settled at the newly constructed Hotel Bellevue in Rossland.

John and Mary were married a week less a month when John was killed in the Iron Colt Mine in Rossland, British Columbia.



John Merry was to be Sir William Mackenzie's representative at the Rossland Iron Colt camp. Mackenzie had visited the camp in 1896 to learn about practical mining and held large interests in various properties in British Columbia, including the mine. With this end in view, John Merry entered the business office of John Ferguson McCrae, worked his way up and in a few short weeks was in charge of a drill. The Rossland Weekly Miner describes William as 'exceptionally hard working,' giving the example, 'he worked so hard that the foreman, Mr. Heacock, suggested that he lay off for a while and take a rest, but so anxious he was to improve himself that he declined the suggestion.'

In the evening of December 6, John and his partner, George Cattanach, were working a big steam drill alternately in two drifts in the mine. After the last couple of blasts sent into the mine, George's curiosity over came him and he went to check out what had been disclosed from the blast. On his way out, George succumbed to the 'deathly white damp,' powder gas. Seeing his friend drop to the ground, without hesitation, John ran to George's side and while helping George out of the mine, John fell unconscious.

From the Daily British Whig of December 10, 1897:

TORONTO, Dec. 10.- A private dispatch from Rossland, B. C., announces the suffocation there a day or two ago in the Iron colt mine of William Merry, formerly of this city, and brother-in-law of William Mackenzie, president of the Toronto street railway.

Mr. Merry was married only a couple of weeks ago, his bride being Miss Vercoe, of this city, who left here three weeks ago for that purpose. Mrs. Merry is bringing the body back to Toronto [sic].

White-damp

A noxious mixture of gases formed by the combustion of coal, usually in an enclosed environment such as a coal mine. The main, most toxic constituent is carbon monoxide, which causes carbon monoxide poisoning.

Recorded in the Rossland Weekly Miner, "All had a good word to say for the deceased, and deeply deplored the fact that so noble a young man should have met so untimely a death."

There was a large gathering in Rossland in honour of William, however it was decided that funeral ceremonies were not to be held until the time of internment in Kirkfield. Accompanied by William B. Townsend J.P. until she reached Revelstoke, Mary traveled by train back to Ontario with her husband.

William is buried next to his parents at the St. John's Roman Catholic Cemetery in Kirkfield.

George Cattnach survived.

Thank you

The Rossland Museum and Discovery Centre