Big Annie Clemenc, circa 1913

STANDING TALL WITH BIG ANNIE

By Diana Paiz Engle

A tall young woman sat in a Calumet jail cell, serving a ten-day sentence for assault. The surroundings were familiar—she had been there before. But her stay in mid-January 1914 was different than the other times. Life had turned for the worse. Much had been lost—the union cause, her marriage and so many lives. But despite these setbacks, the young woman was determined to remain standing tall. She was, after all, "Big Annie."

Born in 1888 in Calumet, Annie was the eldest of George and Mary Klobuchar's five children. To support their family, George worked in the copper mines and Mary was a cook and maid. They, like many other area residents, were among the thousands of immigrants who had flocked to the Upper Peninsula to work in the booming copper and iron mines.

Calumet prospered during the post–Civil War copper boom, thanks primarily to the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company (C&H). The Boston-based company operated in a manner later described as "benevolent feudalism." Because of C&H, Calumet was a city with all the modern amenities. The streets were paved and serviced by streetcars and trains. There were C&H-built schools, bathhouses, a library and a hospital. The opera house was a major venue for top-name entertainers like Enrico Caruso. Many residents had telephones (still considered a luxury elsewhere), and lived in low-cost C&H housing with water supplied by C&H free of charge.

But copper was getting more difficult to remove from the Keweenaw earth. Mines had to be dug deeper and more ore taken to get the valuable red metal. In 1874, one ton of copper ore produced ninety-seven pounds of copper. By 1913, one ton of ore produced only twenty-five pounds of copper.

Seeking a way to increase profits, C&H switched from using the two-man drill to extract ore to the one-man drill—the 150-pound "widow-maker." As one miner recalled, "Even before the one-man drill, we lost maybe a man a week in those mines." With the two-man drill, "one guy was always watching out for the other. The one-man drill scared the miners." Besides fear of the widow-maker, miners were fed up with the poor working conditions. They toiled four thousand feet beneath the surface of the earth for up to eleven hours each day. Their pay—$2.50 a day.

The Western Federation of Miners (WFM) had five locals in the Keweenaw. More than nine thousand men carried WFM union cards, including Joseph Clemenc (pronounced Clements), the husband of the six-foot, two-inch Annie Klobuchar Clemenc. Everyone knew her as Big Annie.

In the spring of 1913 a group of miners asked C&H for a meeting to discuss their concerns. The miners wanted a one-dollar-a-day raise, a shorter work day and a return to the two-man drill. The company refused to meet with the miners. Although the WFM advised the miners not to strike, on July 23, 1913, the copper miners—at the urging of their wives—voted to strike. James MacNaughton, C&H's general manager, was livid. "The grass will grow on your streets before I'll ever give in," he vowed.

On the third day of the strike, four hundred striking miners gathered to march down Calumet Avenue. A group of women and children gathered to one side of the men. Suddenly, a "tall, straight-backed woman, beaming confidence" stepped to the fore of the men, and the other women and children followed her. It was Annie, holding high a ten-foot-long staff from which flew an American flag "bigger than herself."

Every morning at six o'clock as many as two thousand people gathered behind Annie to march five to seven miles to the mines—the same time nonstriking miners were traveling to work. On Sunday mornings, the marchers exchanged their simple clothes for their church clothing. Annie was joined at the front of the line by two young girls dressed in white, who carried the ends of streamers that fell from the tip of flagstaff. When a reporter questioned Annie about the weight of her large flag, she responded, "I get used to it. I carried it ten

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Big Annie Clemenc led as many as two thousand strike supporters in daily marches to the mines. Here, striking copper miners and their families march along Calumet's Stanton Avenue.

miles one morning. The men wouldn't let me carry it any further. I love to carry it." The Citizens' Alliance, a group organized to support C&H, set up roadblocks so that the strikers couldn't reach the mines. Annie, carrying her flag high, simply walked around the obstacles.

Two weeks before the strike began Houghton County Sheriff James Cruse received secret approval from C&H general manager MacNaughton—who also sat on the Houghton County Board of Supervisors—to hire professional strikebreakers. Cruse called in the Waddell-Mahon Company whose staff of "strong-arm men, thugs and murders" came from the tenements of New York City. The "Waddies," as they were known, openly carried guns. Cruse also deputized 150 local men.

The earliest days of the strike featured only minor altercations between marchers and the Waddies, deputies and the Citizens' Alliance. Nevertheless, Cruse wired Governor Woodbridge Ferris claiming that the situation had become "desperate," saying that "immediate action is the only thing that will prevent greater destruction of property and loss of life." Ferris responded by sending the entire state militia—2,500 troops—to Calumet.

In early August 1913 Governor Ferris visited the Keweenaw to investigate the labor dispute and the many complaints he had received of the militia's drunkenness and womanizing. During his three-day trip, Ferris acknowledged the strikers' demands were real. After C&H rebuffed Ferris's suggestion that the company meet with the strikers, the governor termed C&H "arrogant and unfair." The governor also ordered the gradual withdrawal of the militia.

Ferris also told Cruse that the Waddies increased the "prospect for serious trouble." The governor was right. On August 14, two Waddies and several of Cruse's deputies killed two strikers in a shooting spree at a boardinghouse in Seeberville, south of Calumet. Warrants were issued for the suspects' arrest but Cruse made no effort to track them down. Annie, carrying her trademark American flag, led the funeral procession of five thousand people.

Two weeks earlier, a striker had told a *Detroit Free Press* reporter that Annie and the other women of the Keweenaw kept the strike going. He called them the "heart and soul of the cause. They urged us to strike and they're urging us not to give in." After the Seeberville murders this seemed even more true.

As summer turned into fall, Annie continued to lead the daily marches through the streets of Calumet. On various occasions, she was joined by prominent defense attorney Clarence Darrow; John Mitchell, president of the United

Mine Workers of America; and the eighty-three-year-old labor activist, Mother Jones. Newspaper and magazine reporters, dispatched from across the country to cover the story in Calumet, were captivated by the involvement of women and children in support of the labor dispute. G. R. Taylor described the women's actions in *Survey* magazine. "Not infrequently they attempt to snatch dinner pails away from scabs," Taylor wrote, "and sometimes, in addition to a tongue-lashing, they have applied to their victims a broom dipped in filth."

On September 10 Annie and five other women were arrested after forcibly stopping a man they had mistakenly identified as a nonstriker from going to work, and then getting into a fight with Cruse's deputies. Three days later, Annie was among a thousand strikers and supporters who marched in Calumet. The group, some on horseback, attempted to march into a neighborhood housing nonstriking workers. Annie and the others were blocked by armed militia and deputies, some also on horseback. A frustrated marcher threw his American flag to the ground and other strikers scrambled to claim it. Several mounted militiamen were hit by the flagstaff and a flurry of fists, horse hooves, bayonets and sabers followed. The flag exchanged hands, was slashed and reportedly was trampled. Annie, in the thick of the melee, held her American flag across her body. "Kill me!" she screamed at the militia. "Run your bayonets and sabers through this flag and kill me, but I won't move. If this flag will not protect me, then I will die with it."

During the following weeks and months, Annie was involved in many confrontations and was arrested several more times. The exasperated commander of the remaining state militia troops asked Annie why she wouldn't stay at home. "I won't stay at home. My work is here," she told him. "Nobody can stop me. I'm going to keep at it until this strike is won."

In early December, tensions were raised even higher in the Keweenaw. Two nonstrikers had been killed at a boardinghouse in Painesdale, south of Calumet. Each side in the labor dispute accused the other of the murders.

It was in this atmosphere that the WFM Women's Auxiliary No. 15, led by Annie, planned a Christmas party for the strikers' children. Families had suffered during the almost five-month-long strike. Many Calumet businesses had withdrawn strikers' credit privileges and the WFM never made good on its promise of strike relief pay. C&H was raising the strikers' rent, cutting off their utilities and evicting those who refused to work.

On Christmas Eve, children and their parents turned out in droves for the party in the second-floor ballroom at Calumet's Italian Hall. A union card was required for entrance to the party, but by midafternoon almost seven hundred people had arrived and identification checks became impossible. The children were so excited to receive their presents that a rehearsed Mother Goose play was postponed until after the homemade bags of candy, scarves and mittens were distributed. Annie stood on the ballroom stage with Santa Claus. Children pressed against the stage, struggling to get ahead of each other. The party was at a feverish pitch—so many children and so much noise.

Then a buzz went through the crowd. Had someone yelled "Fire!"? Some people swore they saw a man dressed all in black with his collar turned up and a hat pulled low, yelling "Fire!" and motioning the crowd toward the narrow stairwell that led to the street. Some witnesses claimed the man was wearing a white Citizens' Alliance button.

But there was no fire in Italian Hall. Annie tried to calm the crowd. "The way the women and children were screaming, it was almost impossible to make your voice heard," one miner recalled. Terror and panic reigned. The children turned from the stage and headed for the stairwell. Frantic, people pushed, stumbled and fell down the stairs.

An alarm was sounded in Calumet. Rescuers who opened the doors to the stairwell's street-level entrance found a tangle of bodies piled five feet high. Even as rescuers arrived, children and adults were throwing themselves head-first into the blocked stairwell. When the stairwell was finally cleared seventy-four people were dead, all but eleven were children.

"The only way you could breathe," one survivor recalled, "was to push yourself off the wall with all your might and then quickly suck in a breath of air before the force of the other bodies pushed your face back against the wall." Two young fathers died in the stairwell but saved their infant children by holding them high above the crush of bodies.

The magnitude of the loss was staggering. On Christmas Day, as the families were still in the early stages of shock and despair, WFM president Charles Moyer was beaten in his Hancock hotel room, shot, dragged through town and thrown onto a Chicago-bound train. The perpetrators, who openly wore white Citizens' Alliance buttons, told him never to return to the Keweenaw.

The winter was indeed bleak. In mid-January Annie sat in her jail cell, serving ten days for assault. It seemed the heart had gone out of the community and the union cause—and her marriage was ending. She had fallen in love with Frank Shavs, a reporter sent from Chicago to cover the copper mine strike.

But Big Annie would remain standing tall. After going on a short lecture tour through the Midwest, she left for Chicago, where she married Shavs and had his child, a daughter they named Darwina. Annie wasn't the only person leaving Calumet. Thousands of miners left to find work in the Detroit auto industry—Henry Ford was paying his workers an unheard-of five dollars a day. Under pressure from the federal government, C&H offered striking workers an eight-hour work day at three dollars per day—but refused to replace the widow-maker. On April 13, 1914, the strikers voted to return to the mines. ■

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