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The Monongah Mines Disaster Relief Committee

Roger A. Lohmann and Craig Johnson

Formally organized and professionally delivered social services are not indigenous to Appalachian culture. Most of the existing formal social welfare infrastructure in the region grew up quite rapidly following the 1960 Presidential campaign and rediscovery of the region. It occurred largely through external support from foundation grants and federal grants and contracts. A formal service delivery system was superimposed on top of indigenous Appalachian systems of mutual aid by families and communities. While both the formal social service literature and the literature of Appalachian Studies make numerous references to the traditional system, relatively little accurate, detailed information and analysis are found in the current literature on the interaction between formal and informal systems.

This paper examines the unique junction of traditional mutual aid and early modern professional approaches which occurred in the aftermath of the Monongah Mines disaster in December, 1907. It is based upon a review of secondary and primary sources including reports released by the Monongah Mines Relief Committee (MMRC), case records of victim families, and contemporaneous news articles in local papers. The MMRC kept scrupulous records which offer a detailed picture of the extent and social consequences of the disaster. While a considerable literature exists on the disaster, most of it is concentrated on the mine, company, and miners. Remarkably little attention has been paid to the women, children, and dependent elderly survivors.

On December 6, 1907, simultaneous explosions in two Fairmont Coal Company mines created the worst coal mining disaster in American

history, resulting in an official death toll of 359 men and boys in the small community of Monongah, West Virginia. Immediately following the explosion, residents of Monongah and the nearby communities of Marion County mobilized in the time-honored manner of small, rural communities to provide immediate aid for the widows, orphans, and elderly dependents of those killed in the explosion.

Apart from the staggering death toll, one of the things which characterized the Monongah disaster was that the majority of the victims were foreign nationals. The report of the MMRC categorized the victims as follows: 74 Americans; 11 Americans (colored); 171 Italians; 15 Austrians; 52 Hungarians; 31 Russians and 5 Turkish subjects. The high rate of immigrant labor at Monongah introduced a major international element to the relief effort which challenged the locals and the leading national figures in charity relief who became involved in the Monongah relief effort (MMRC 1910).

The traditional local effort included formation of committees to solicit donations and coordinate volunteer labor, organized by church women and overseen by several all-male committees of substantial citizens. In an age prior to social or private industrial insurance or union relief funds, the Monongah relief effort included a long-term subscription committee seeking indemnities for survivors deprived of breadwinners.

The Monongah relief effort also involved national philanthropic officials representing the Carnegie Hero Fund, the American Red Cross, and the Russell Sage Foundation, formed only a few months earlier and beginning its famous *Pittsburgh Survey* less than 100 miles away. The *Survey* was the first major community-wide study (or "needs assessment") in an American city and resulted in a six-volume report on industrial, labor, family, and other conditions in the city. Dr. Edward T. Devine, editor of the *Pittsburgh Survey* and general secretary of the New York Charity Organization Society, arrived within a few days of the explosions and advised the MMRC on establishing a fund-raising campaign and methods for determining an accurate list of victims and the financial needs of survivors (MMRC 1910, 175). Margaret Byington, a Red Cross social worker who authored one of the volumes of the *Pittsburgh Survey*, spent several months in Monongah organizing the collection of case records on survivors.

Several distinct initial relief efforts were largely local and uncoordinated. The report credits the Fairmont Coal Company with "prompt and substantial aid to the many distressed widows and children" from company stores (MMRC 1910, 8). An official statement issued the day following the disaster declared, "There is no destitution among the families. The company is providing for all temporary wants," (*Fairmont Times* 9 December 1907).

However, no details of the extent or duration of this provisioning are given, either in press reports or the committee report. The mayor and town council of Monongah are credited with forming a committee of nine citizens [all men] to “give the application of relief official direction.” That this initial response was deliberately local is clear. On the day following the disaster, Monongah Mayor W.S. Moore declined offers of assistance from West Virginia Governor W.M.O. Dawson with a telegram which read: “About 400 men in the mines with no hope of getting them out alive. No help needed” (MMRC correspondence 1908).

At the same time they were putting off the state, the committee issued an appeal for “all the necessities of life. Our homeless need substantial aid” (*Charleston Gazette* 9 December 1907; *Fairmont Times* 9 December 1907). The Coal City Home Furnishing Company began collecting “donations to the Relief Fund for Monongah” and warned the public against “impostors soliciting alms” (*Fairmont West Virginian* 9 December 1907).

As knowledge of the extent of the disaster spread, the relief efforts quickly expanded beyond the control of the company and the local community. Meetings were held in churches to form a number of additional committees in Fairmont, a city of 20,000 about five miles from Monongah, and then consolidated into a single city-wide committee with the assistance of Carnegie Hero Commission staffers. On December 9 the Union Relief Organization, composed of the “women of the different churches and societies of Fairmont,” organized to distribute aid to the Monongah sufferers (MMRC 1910). Thus, within forty-eight hours of the explosion, there were already three separate committees seeking to coordinate the relief effort.

Although headlines proclaimed “SITUATION IS WELL IN HAND” (*Fairmont Times* 9 December 1907), concern over the progress of relief grew evident. On December 11 the *Fairmont Times* printed a letter in both English and Italian purporting to show “HOW FOREIGNERS APPRECIATE THE EFFORTS TO PROVIDE FOR THE NEEDY.” However, it also observed that “considerable suffering is likely to occur during the winter months.” On December 12 Mayor Moore protested that contrary to the assertions of “some newspapers, all that is possible to be done is being done for every stricken family” (*Fairmont Times* 12 December 1907).

Behind the scenes the various relief committees were being consolidated, and the scope of their mission broadened from immediate relief to longer-term economic security for the survivors. This redefinition was carried out largely through the efforts of Frank M. Wilmot, manager, and George A. Campsey, special agent, of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, who had arrived on the scene within four days of the

explosion. Wilmot and Campsey met with officials of the Fairmont Coal Company and the Fairmont-based Central Relief Committee on December 13. The following day the Monongah Relief Committee and the Central Relief Committee of Fairmont were merged under the name of the Monongah Mines Relief Committee. Mayor Moore was elected chairman, while the Fairmont contingent supplied three of the four remaining executive officers. (MMRC 1910, 9-11).

Conspicuously absent from the MMRC ranks was the Union Relief Association, composed of church women from Fairmont and Monongah. The official report of the MMRC stated "it was agreed that this Association should devote itself to looking after sickness among women and children" (MMRC 1910, 12), and this is generally corroborated by contemporary news reports (*Fairmont Times* 14 December 1907). However, no members of the Union Relief Association (or any other women) are known to have attended the MMRC consolidation meeting.

Wilmot and Campsey's involvement immediately paid off. On December 24 the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission granted \$35,000 to the MMRC. The committee's initial determination was that a fund of at least \$200,000 would be necessary to provide adequately for survivors. Subsequent newspaper appeals and letter writing campaigns undertaken by the MMRC Subscription Committee resulted in the contribution of a total of \$154,360.10 to the Relief Fund accounts (MMRC 1910, 171). Among the list of donors were Adolph Coors of Denver, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt.

How to manage and equitably disburse these funds became the central concern of the Committee. As the days passed, the complexities of the relief effort became increasingly apparent. On 1 January 1908, the *Fairmont Times* wrote of the relief efforts: "The Work is Being Done With Splendid System." Nonetheless, an accurate census of dependents remained problematic. Complicating the task of determining an accurate list of victims on which to base compensation to survivors was the practice of regular employees "subcontracting" with children and others; the company only maintained a listing of regular employees and not subcontractors. Local priests and pastors were delegated this responsibility, and board member Bishop Patrick J. Donahue of Wheeling was appointed the task of developing a census form (*Fairmont Times* 24 December 1907).

The *Times* observed: "The county officers are kept busy nowadays with fiduciary matters as a result of the explosion," and it was "suggested that a portion of the fund be used to employ some lawyer who will represent widows and orphans who are endeavoring to get their share of the fund" (*Fairmont Times* 8 January 1908). Mayor Moore informed the Executive Committee that by some oversight "Slavish and

Polish families had not been favored with vouchers for weekly support” (MMRC Minutes, 13 January 1908). The Union Relief Association, its funds exhausted, reported that “among the bereaved families was [sic] approximately fifty pregnant women and other cases of sickness” (*Fairmont Times* 10 January 1908; MMRC Minutes, 20 January 1908). The beleaguered committee cast about for assistance.

Their attentions focused on Margaret F. Byington, the Red Cross special representative at Monongah. On January 9, 1908, she was in Washington, D.C., where her report to the Red Cross was noted by the *Fairmont Times*. “Miss Byington praises the work accomplished by the Monongah mines relief committee. It is evident that there has been a superabundance of relief during the month” (10 January 1908).

The *Times* report was not entirely candid. Later Byington commented: “The lack of logic on the part of a sympathetic public was shown by the men’s clothing sent to a community which had lost half its wage-earners.” Of the MMRC’s projected \$200,000 goal she noted “it will be none too much to meet the situation” (1908, 1451). Moreover, MMRC correspondence suggests that considerable friction existed between local clerics and Byington (MMRC Correspondence 15, 16 January 1908).

The influential Bishop Donahue saw little need for employing Byington. Writing to MMRC Secretary J.M. Jacobs, he stated, “I confess that I am at a loss to understand where all the difficulty lies in procuring a correct list of the relatives and dependents of the mine disaster. If they were given to understand that no notice would be taken of them unless they came forward and proved their claims upon the fund, all concerned would soon display the necessary alacrity.”

Nevertheless, the increasingly anxious and preoccupied Executive Committee moved to obtain Byington’s services “to procure a correct list of all the dependents and to assist these people to procure homes and positions whereby they can at least partly provide means for their support “ (MMRC Correspondence 15, 16 January 1908).

The MMRC records detail little of Margaret Byington’s subsequent activities at Monongah. A letter received by MMRC Board member R.T. Cunningham from Red Cross official Francis McLean suggests that Byington likely would have trained “Visitors” and coordinated contacts with foreign consuls (MMRC Correspondence, 25 December 1907). The official “History” of the MMRC described her efforts to provide a complete and accurate census of dependents as a “Herculean task” (MMRC 1910, 16).

Careful reading of MMRC minutes for the early winter and spring of 1908 suggests Byington’s impact on the relief effort. The early January meetings appear to have been somewhat chaotic as the members attempted to deal with a variety of unfamiliar and pressing problems. On

January 23, after considerable discussion, the Committee moved to invite Byington back to Fairmont to coordinate the relief. "Placing her work at Pittsburgh for the time being in other hands, Miss Byington spent weeks at hard labor helping the Committee" (MMRC 1910, 15). From almost exactly this point forward those meetings concerned directly with the application of relief took on an orderly, routine quality. Individual cases were presented, discussed, and voted upon with little evidence of dissension or conflict (MMRC Minutes, 1908).

Despite Byington's organizing, the MMRC continued to encounter obstacles and criticism. Carleton Jackson (1982) has noted a mistrust of foreign governments evidenced by the Committee's decision to employ a New York banking firm to distribute benefits from overseas. Additionally, although the precise nature of the dispute is difficult to discern from the surviving records, it appears that some contention existed between Treasurer J.E. Sands and certain board members over the placement of Committee funds in interest-bearing accounts (MMRC Minutes, 1908).

On January 8, 1908, the Committee began a weekly distribution of relief funds to the dependents of Monongah victims. In August of that year, in accordance with a decision to award payments on a strictly pro rata basis, the Committee disbursed to every widow the sum of \$200, and to every child under sixteen years of age the sum of \$155, the previously distributed weekly allotments being deducted from these totals. Sufficient funds were left in Committee accounts to provide for the unlocated dependents of several victims. In late 1909, following "every reasonable effort" to locate such dependents, the Committee settled an additional nineteen dollars upon each dependent child. A small amount remained in Fund accounts until 1925, when it was donated to the survivors of those killed in the Barrackville Mine disaster (MMRC 1910, 22-23).

The Monongah Mines Relief Committee fell short of its \$200,000 goal by more than 20 percent. Some thirty-eight years previously the Relief Fund Association for the Avondale, Pennsylvania, mine disaster had bettered the Monongah total by more than one thousand dollars. This organization had settled upon the widows and children of the 110 victims \$200 and \$100 respectively, these payments to continue yearly until the fund was exhausted (Chase 1869, 35). By comparison with the Avondale relief, the achievements of the MMRC appear disappointing. However, the MMRC had to compete for the attention of the national donor population with a string of other mine disasters that erupted in December 1907. As Carleton Jackson has noted, "All of these operations severely taxed the willingness and the capabilities of the general public to keep 'footing the bill' for one disaster after another" (1982, 69).

Two years after Monongah a fire in the St. Paul Coal Company's mine at Cherry, Illinois, claimed 259 lives. The relief efforts of 1909 stand in marked contrast to those at Monongah. In Illinois the miners were organized, and the United Mine Workers would pay over \$55,000 in death benefits to the families of union members. Most significantly, as the result of a mediated settlement, approximately \$400,000 would be paid to dependents by the St. Paul Coal Company (Illinois State of Board of Commissioners of Labor 1910).

There is a clear pattern of traditional mutual aid in the organization of the Monongah relief effort which indicates much about the underlying social realities of life in a turn-of-the-century mining community. Laboring men from nearby communities were fully committed to the grueling volunteer labor of searching for survivors and/or bodies. Women of all social classes worked together around the socio-emotional tasks of helping survivors cope with the reality of death and the practical tasks of household life. Meanwhile the leading male citizens of the community (or, in this case, county) looked briefly to coordinating the efforts of volunteers and then to the future, long-term financial interests of the survivors.

At the same time, there are clear patterns of rational organization to the effort which point toward modernization and professionalization of case work, disaster relief, fund raising, and industrial insurance and assistance programs. Acknowledgments of donations in the *MMRC History* include temporary office space in the Masonic temple and a local bank, local and long distance telephone and telegraph services, office furniture, Remington typewriters, and even 375 large manila envelopes for permanent storage of case records. (1910, 175-176)

Progressive standards of donor accountability were also clearly at work. The hard-bound printed report took great pains to explain the Monongah relief process and to reassure donors that gifts were properly employed, including earmarking of interest on donations for printing the report. All contributions and all disbursements were listed individually by name. The financial statement was certified by the American Audit Company of Baltimore. By contrast, when similar information was sought from trustees of the \$1 million relief fund established for victims of the 1985 floods in West Virginia, we were informed by a representative of the West Virginia Department of Finance and Administration that all funds had been disbursed, no details were available, no public accounting of that fund was necessary, and none would be made.

The involvement of representatives of the charity organization movement is clearly reflected in the summary tables included in the *MMRC History* (1910). Tables 5-7 show details on the race, nationality, and family status of the 801 official survivors of the disaster. Complete,

detailed case records on all survivors (presumably in the original, donated manila envelopes!) are still in the archives of the West Virginia collection at West Virginia University (1910). We know of no other instance in which the statistical and informational record of relief efforts and survivors of an Appalachian disaster is so complete.

The Monongah relief effort was truly an international one. The Hungarian government donated \$1,610. The MMRC *History* (1910) lists donations from every state and from Americans in five foreign countries. The relatively large amount from Germany was from American residents of Dresden. Payments were made to survivors in at least four foreign countries (Italy, Russia, Hungary, and Turkey). Even with all of the national and international implications to the Monongah Mines Relief effort, however, it should not be overlooked that the single largest category of donors (\$43,160.19) was from the state of West Virginia (1910).

In the long and gloomy history of mining disasters, Monongah stands alone simply because of the sheer number of casualties. But the Monongah Mining disaster of 1907 is significant in other ways as well. Traditional mutual aid patterns are evident, particularly in the gendered division of labor which emerged. Yet, there are also unprecedented professional and international dimensions to the Monongah relief effort which make it unique. Largely due to accidents of timing and the proximity to Pittsburgh, some of the leading figures in American philanthropy at the time were available to consult and help organize the local relief effort.

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