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The crush of 'fire': Author set to explore 1913 tragedy killing 73

By Maureen Johnston
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Truth stranger than fiction makes for interesting reading — and writing.

As guest speaker of the annual Friends of the Library luncheon May 1, author Steve Lehto will tell the story behind the story of a 1913 mining town where 73 were crushed to death when someone yelled "fire."

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An attorney and adjunct professor at the University of Detroit Mercy, Lehto had heard the story of the tragedy all his life. The details he found investigating the deaths in Calumet,

became the book, "At Death's Door: The Truth Behind Michigan's Largest Mass Murder."

The author luncheon, sponsored by the Friends of the Northville, Novi, Plymouth and Canton libraries, will be held at the Fox Hills Golf and Country Club in Plymouth. Seating is at 11:30 a.m., with the luncheon following at noon.

The \$25 tickets can be purchased from any of the participating libraries.

Jim Morche of the Northville Friends group said Lehto follows in the footsteps of past authors who have addressed library supporters like chef Keith Famie, former reporter Tim Kiska and former newscaster Mort Crim.

"People have said Lehto is a good speaker," Morche

said. "They thought it was kind of an intriguing topic."

"At Death's Door" explores the Italian Hall tragedy when someone yelled "fire" during a Christmas Eve celebration when there was no fire.


Lehto sets the scene of the disaster amidst a bitter struggle between the mining company and the striking workers, raising accusations that the mine officials were responsible for the false alarm.

In the ensuing panic to escape, Lehto wrote, 73 men, women and children were crushed to death, their bodies jammed against the doors that opened inward.

With family ties to the Calumet area, Lehto finally decided to investigate the incident.

For information about the luncheon, call the Northville District Library at (248) 349-3020.

Maureen Johnston can be reached at (248) 349-1700, ext. 107, or via e-mail at mjohnston@gannett.com.

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