

Early Social Workers

as DISASTER RELIEF WORKERS

The Minnesota Fires of 1918 and the Work of the Red Cross

CAMELA R. HAASE

On the afternoon of October 12, 1918, a set of five major and up to fifty smaller fires in the Cloquet-Moose Lake area of north-eastern Minnesota cost more lives and destroyed more property than any other natural disaster in Min-

nesota history. According to a 1921 report of the Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission, more than 1,500 square miles burned within an area of 8,400 square miles. A total of 52,371 people were affected. Nearly 8,000 families lost their homes, 85 people were seriously injured, and 453 people burned to death. Forty-one schools,

4,089 houses, and 6,366 barns were destroyed. Total losses escalated to more than \$30 million, a staggering figure within the 1918 economy.¹

Multiple causes led to the disaster, according to a 1919 report by Walter Fisher, manager of the General Inspection Company in Minneapolis. These included strong winds, an exceptionally dry summer, sparks from passing trains igniting the dry grasses, ongoing bog fires that were difficult to extinguish, and area residents practicing slash-and-burn methods for clearing farmland. The fires spread quickly amid the windy, tinderbox conditions. The difficulties

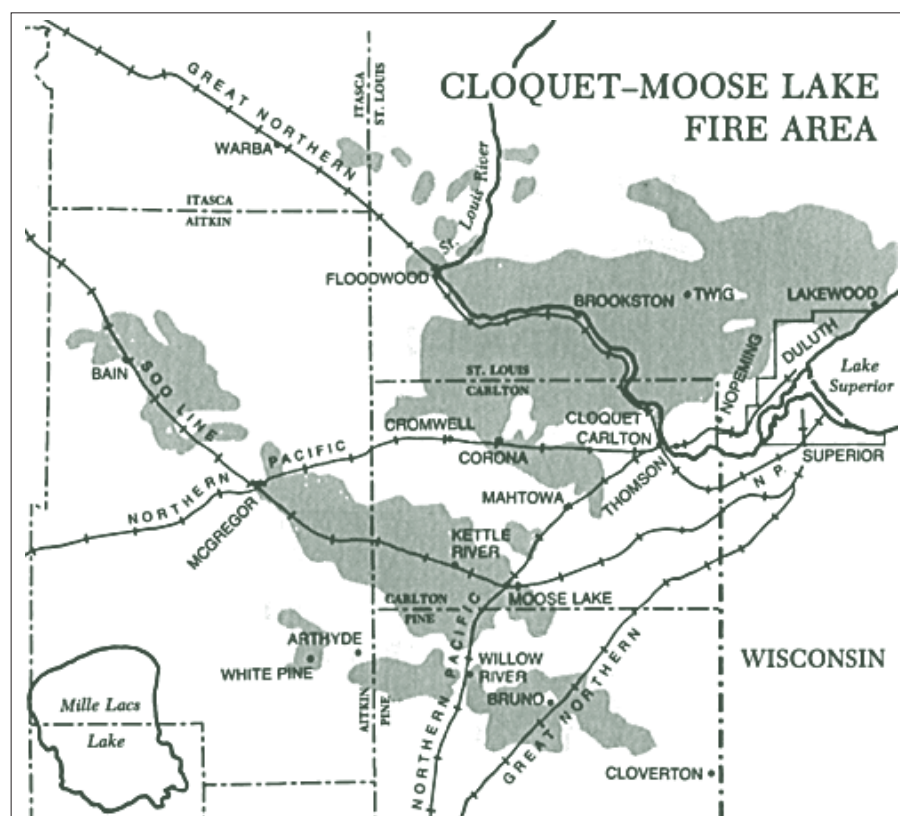
Red Cross serving meal to National Guard and survivors, Moose Lake forest fire.



of alerting residents in rural and isolated areas added to the devastation, as did reduced firefighting capacity due to soldiers fighting abroad during World War I.²

Amid this disaster, an incredible relief effort grew overnight in Duluth and in neighboring Superior, Wisconsin. An integral part of these efforts were dozens of professionals sent by the Red Cross from the emerging field of social work. Founded in 1881, the Red Cross was privately funded but accountable to Congress, which designated it the official US disaster relief organization. The Red Cross quickly assembled fire relief efforts, even though the agency was stretched thin while assisting wounded soldiers abroad and also working throughout the United States to eradicate the growing influenza epidemic. Despite staffing challenges, the Red Cross later reported, "In Duluth and Superior, the Red Cross workers, organized and trained for war effort, arose to the new emergency. They ministered to the needs of the fire sufferers from the first, and they continued to do so until their services were no longer needed. Others came from the Twin Cities and from other communities, anxious to help, and they were exceedingly efficient in their ministrations."³

Alongside local volunteers, nurses, and doctors, the Red Cross brought into the area 51 trained social workers. At this time, social work was evolving from primarily a volunteer position to a profession. The New York School of Philanthropy (now Columbia University) and the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy (now the Uni-



Area of northeastern Minnesota stricken by Cloquet-Moose Lake fires, October 1918.

versity of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration) had begun offering the first social work-related training classes in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. The field did not become professionalized in the United States until 1917—only one year before the Minnesota fires disaster—with the creation of the National Social Work Exchange (renamed in 1921 the American Association of Social Workers). This organization focused on setting professional standards, standardizing education and training, and serving as a placement bureau for social workers. Social workers' unique skill set—understanding and identifying the psychological and emotional

needs of the survivors—as well as their work to determine the level of relief needed for each family, added a heretofore overlooked aspect to the Red Cross's 1918 Minnesota fire relief efforts.⁴

As the fires continued to burn throughout northeastern Minnesota, including parts of Duluth, "every automobile owner [in Duluth] who could be reached responded to the call. Hundreds of cars rushed from the city into the surrounding country to rescue farmers and their families seeking safety from the flames." The Red Cross Motor Corps "deliver[ed] both National Guard and Home Guard troops . . . at various fire sites around Duluth." Drivers then brought victims to the Duluth Armory, where Red Cross volunteers had quickly gathered to give first aid.

According to the regional office in St. Paul, the Duluth Red Cross

CAMELA (SWANSON) HAASE holds a master's degree from the University of Montana and is currently a middle school teacher of English learners with South Washington County Schools. She was born and raised in Moose Lake, Minnesota—one of the communities devastated by the 1918 fires disaster. Her first job was summer caretaker of the Moose Lake Depot & Fires of 1918 Museum.



Ruins of a residence after forest fire, Duluth.

chapter “took the lead and twenty-four hours before anyone could reach Duluth, that chapter had its relief plan matured and working within two or three hours of the beginning of the conflagration.” Many burn victims were treated at the Duluth Armory, with the serious cases being taken by the Motor Corps to local hospitals. Fire refugees were immediately housed in schools, churches, stores, hotels, private residences, and public buildings. National Guard and Home Guard units would stay in the fire-stricken areas for many months to clear roads, patrol towns, and assist with both the cleanup and the rebuilding process.⁵

Due to its close proximity to Duluth, Superior became a major center of relief work. While fire victims arrived in Duluth mainly by car, thousands more poured into Superior by train. As noted in a Superior Fire Relief Committee report, “If the railroad bridges [in Duluth] had not been made unsafe by fire, the people brought here [by train to Superior] would have been taken to Duluth, a city in their own state.”⁶ Seeing the vast needs of the fire victims arriving in their community on the night of October 12, several Superior business-

men met and immediately formed the Superior Fire Relief Committee. This volunteer committee coordinated the efforts in Superior to provide shelter, food, medical care, clothing, and transportation for the incoming refugees. On the first night alone, more than 9,000 fire sufferers were registered in Superior.⁷ By Sunday night, only one day after the fire, “every ref-

ugee in Superior slept in a real bed,” with many citizens of Superior sleeping on the floor to give up their own beds to the incoming fire refugees. Women of the local churches began cooking and serving meals, and nine eating stations were set up around the city. Fire survivors were provided clothing at the Masonic Temple, and “a corps of women was in attendance to alter and make over garments.” Eventually, more than 32,166 pieces of clothing were distributed to fire sufferers in Superior. Doctors worked without pay and rest while treating 202 fire-related cases, and emergency hospitals were opened for influenza patients as the illness spread among the fire refugees. Two weeks later, 4,690 refugees still remained in Superior. Months later, in March 1919, nearly 175 families of fire survivors were still in Superior.⁸

Although they were neighbors, Duluth and Superior were organized under different regional Red Cross headquarters. The Superior, Wisconsin, chapter of the Red Cross

National Guard giving out clothing to refugees after the fire at Moose Lake.





Fire relief efforts in the Duluth Armory.

belonged to the Central Division with headquarters in Chicago, while the entire state of Minnesota belonged to the Northern Division with headquarters in St. Paul. When Frank Bruno, Northern Division director of the Bureau of Civilian Relief, the unit of the Red Cross responsible for care and relief of civilians “suffering from disasters, floods, fires, earthquakes, explosions, etc.,” arrived in Superior on October 15 to assess the situation, he recognized the need for more

rary organization [i.e., the Superior Fire Relief Committee], made up of volunteers, needed the direction and assistance of those more experienced in disaster work, [formally accepted] the offer.” The Central Division then sent “several social workers” to Superior to assist with relief efforts.⁹

Likewise, as the Northern Division Civilian Relief confirmed in an October 1918 report, Duluth and Twin Cities social workers were responding to the urgent situation and “the work

AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE RELIEF EFFORT WERE DOZENS OF PROFESSIONALS SENT BY THE RED CROSS FROM THE EMERGING FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK.

workers. With Superior belonging to the Central Division, Bruno contacted the Chicago headquarters and quickly received a response. As the Superior chapter detailed in a 1920 report, “The Bureau of Civilian Relief, American Red Cross, headquarters Chicago, formally tendered its services to aid, and [Bruno,] fearing that the tempo-

of this disaster has practically stopped all other work in the division. Every resource and worker in the division office and in the social agencies of the Twin Cities has been used to handle the emergency.” The opportunity to receive resources from two divisions increased the professional support for the fire refugees.¹⁰

Over a period of three months, the group of Red Cross social workers in Duluth and Superior grew to a total of 51. Some hailed from Duluth and Minneapolis–St. Paul, while others came from the Red Cross Central Division headquarters in Chicago, from the United Charities of Chicago, and from various other organizations around the country. The social workers fulfilled many roles: registering refugees, reuniting family members, meeting with the 16,000 families affected by the disaster, determining the level of relief needed, and serving on local case committees. With their training and experience in dealing with families, the social workers also brought many unique skills and abilities to the disaster relief efforts, including filling the roles of doctors and nurses when needed and understanding and administering to the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of survivors.¹¹

Who were these 51 Red Cross social workers? While the identities of most of them remain unknown, newspapers and other primary

source documents from this period expand our knowledge not only of the Red Cross relief efforts after the 1918 fires, but also of the early history of the social work profession. Early records also reveal some information about seven of the social workers that the Red Cross Central Division headquarters in Chicago sent to Superior. While some of these seven social workers came from other organizations, they all represented the Red Cross during the 1918 fire relief efforts. Beyond their roles in response to the 1918 fires, these seven Red Cross relief workers had careers in social work that show their connections to the field and their status as professionals. Five of the seven women completed coursework at the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. A few of them completed the school's one-year social work training program, among the first of its kind in the United States. Following

THE SOCIAL WORKERS UNDERSTOOD AND ADMINISTERED TO THE PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF SURVIVORS.

are brief biographies of the seven women.

ROSE MCHUGH. McHugh earned a bachelor of philosophy degree from the University of Chicago in December 1904. She worked as a social worker for the United Charities of Chicago for 10 years prior to her employment with the Red Cross, where she was assistant director of the Central Division Civilian Relief. She was the first social worker sent from Chicago, arriving in Superior at the end of October 1918 along with two assistants. Their work began on November 1, with McHugh in "direct charge" of the Red Cross efforts in

Superior. The *Duluth News Tribune* referred to her as "an expert in conducting relief work." In 1921, McHugh was elected second vice-president of the American Association of Social Workers, assisting the organization with its focus "to stimulate professional growth in social work." During her career, McHugh was an instructor in the theory and practice of social casework at the National Catholic Service School in Washington, DC, and she served as assistant director of the National Catholic Welfare Council's Social Action Department. In 1924, McHugh attended and presented two papers at the Fourth Pan-American Congress for Child Welfare in Santiago, Chile, as one of five representatives of the US government.¹²

MARJORIE POTTER. According to an April 1919 bulletin from her alma mater, Potter received a certificate from the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy in June 1918. She arrived in Superior with McHugh and began fire relief work on November 1, 1918. The 1919 school bulletin listed her occupation as a social service worker at the Michigan Children's Home Society and the Bureau of Social Service in Flint, Michigan.¹³

EDITH HENNESSEY (née Sigler). A 1911 alumna of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, Hennessey was a guest lecturer during the school's 1920 summer session, teaching alongside other pioneers in the field of social work, including Jane Addams of Chicago's Hull House and Grace Abbott of Hull House and the Children's Bureau in Washington,

Forest fire refugees receiving rations.





Rose McHugh (left), the first social worker to arrive after the fire, and Frances Brayton (right), a social worker from Red Cross Central Division.

DC. Hennessey arrived in Superior on November 2, 1918, and served on the Superior Fire Relief Committee as its first director of social work and its executive secretary. By January 1919, she was back at her post in Waukegan, Illinois, where she was a home service agent for the Red Cross Central Division Civilian Relief. She later continued her career as a national Red Cross field worker in Texas, where she visited local chapter meetings to discuss the responsibility

of the Red Cross in times of disaster and the need for local committees “who are informed on the proper methods of handling such an emergency should a disaster occur in the county.”¹⁴

GRETTA MARSH (née Hubbard). Marsh attended Ottawa University in Ottawa, Kansas, through her sophomore year in 1914. With experience in civilian relief and the juvenile court system, she came from Chicago with

Hennessey to conduct the relief work at the federal building in Superior. Later in her career, Marsh worked for the Illinois Relief Commission in Chicago and in 1935 became the administrator in charge of Illinois Emergency Relief for McHenry County. Marsh and her husband, Samuel, eventually owned a cabin on Mission Lake near Brainerd, Minnesota. Neither Marsh nor her husband was originally from the area; perhaps her relief work following the 1918 fires influenced their decision to purchase a cabin in northern Minnesota.¹⁵

FRANCES BRAYTON (married name, Person). A 1908 graduate of Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, Brayton enrolled in the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy’s summer session courses in 1916. At that time, she was employed as secretary of the Associated Charities in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. In November 1918 she made field visits to Superior “to assist with the relief work for

Red Cross workers riding in automobile, Carlton County.



refugees” as the Red Cross Central Division field supervisor for Illinois. From 1925 to 1927, she taught social work classes at the University of Wisconsin–Madison while she completed her own graduate work in the sociology department. Brayton died at the age of 88 in 1974. Her obituary in the *Wisconsin State Journal* noted she was “one of the first social workers in the Madison area with the Children’s Society and the Family Service Agency.”¹⁶

CLARA KUMMER. In 1907 Kummer graduated from the one-year program at the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. The Red Cross Central Division’s report for January 1919 stated that Kummer, field representative for Wisconsin, had “not been in the field as she was still needed in connection with the fire sufferers from the Minnesota forest fires.” Kummer replaced Hennessey as director of social work and executive secretary for the Superior Fire Relief Committee in January of 1919 and served in this position until leaving Superior in April 1919. In an article

published after Kummer’s death in 1938 at the age of 60 in Chicago, the Associated Press referred to her as “a nationally known social service worker.” The article continued to detail Kummer’s remarkable career: “Mrs. Kummer joined the American Red Cross in 1905 and worked with that organization for the next 15 years. In 1919, she directed Red Cross work at Superior, Wis., following a disastrous fire. During the spring floods of 1937, she returned temporarily to Red Cross work to direct relief activities at Cairo, Ill. Ten years ago, Mrs. Kummer was appointed head of the Memphis [Tennessee] Children’s Bureau.”¹⁷

MRS. RODIG. Though records of Rodig are limited and omit her first name, according to the *Duluth News Tribune* she was part of “a corps of workers experienced in relief work [that] is assisting Mrs. Hennessey, among whom are Mrs. G. Marsh, Miss Marjorie Potter and Mrs. Rodig.” The *Duluth News Tribune* noted that Rodig was from “the girls’ protective association from the war department, Chicago.”¹⁸

In addition to these seven women, Red Cross documents enumerate other social workers who came to the fire-stricken areas to assist with relief efforts. As described in the Northern Division’s November 7 bulletin, “twenty workers from Chicago, St. Paul, and Minneapolis” were working with Emil Steger, general secretary of the United Charities of St. Paul. Steger served on the Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission as the Red Cross representative and director of all Red Cross relief work for the fire disaster taking place in both the Northern and Central Divisions. The Central Division’s November 1918 report stated, “At the request of the Northern Division we have secured a number of workers from the United Charities of Chicago and sent them to that district to help out in relief work.” As general secretary of the United Charities of St. Paul, Steger may have helped encourage the arrival of the additional social workers from the United Charities of Chicago. The number of social workers helping with the relief efforts kept growing, and the Northern Division report filed at the end of November counted more than 30 social workers who had been sent to the fire disaster.¹⁹

In the following month, the number of social workers serving under Steger reached its peak. The Northern Division’s December 1918 report stated: “December marked the commencement of the third month of work in the fire region around Duluth where is now a staff of 51 trained social workers under Mr. E. G. Steger, the General Secretary of the United Charities, St. Paul.” The report continued, “E. G. Steger [is] representing the Northern Division of the American Red Cross, and directing the staff of social workers, who, at the request of the Commission are at work throughout the fire zone.” Furthermore, “The membership of the Red

Red Cross and National Guard with forest fire victims, Carlton County.



Cross staff is made up of experienced social workers . . . [who] have been secured from various organizations throughout the country." The Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission corroborated this information in its 1921 report when referring to the social workers as "experienced workers which it [the Red Cross] was able to draw from different parts of the country."²⁰

While the *Superior Telegram* reported the arrival of Rose McHugh, Marjorie Potter, Gretta Marsh, Edith Hennessey, and Frances Brayton over the course of three different articles, this same newspaper did not report on any other social workers arriving from Chicago or from the "various organizations throughout the country." Additionally, in December, the same month that the Northern Division reported 51 workers, the Central Division recorded that only two of its Red Cross social workers were still working in Superior. One conclusion is that many local social workers assisted with the relief efforts, and the out-of-state social workers may have made up only a small percentage of the 51 recorded social workers. Northern Division Civilian Relief director Frank Bruno mentioned both the Minnesota and out-of-state social workers in his February 1919 report: "Nearly all those sent from the East have been recalled and the social agencies of Minneapolis are pretty badly handicapped by the long continual absence of so many in the north."²¹

Within days following the fire, Minnesota governor Joseph Burnquist traveled to the disaster zone and established a state-authorized committee to oversee and coordinate the relief efforts. Initially chaired by William McGonagle (chairman of the Duluth chapter of the Red Cross) and then by Charles Duncan,

THE WORK DONE BY THE RED CROSS SOCIAL WORKERS TO REESTABLISH THE FIRE VICTIMS WAS LARGELY DONE BY INTERVIEWING FIRE VICTIMS TO DETERMINE 'THE SOCIAL LOSSES OF THE FAMILIES.'

the Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission focused on "taking up individual cases on their merits and giving only needed relief and withholding from those who were able to take care of themselves." Thus, the focus was not on replacing everything that the fire destroyed but rather on providing fire sufferers with what they needed to restart their lives. The commission was "immediately recognized by the American Red Cross as a Red Cross commission and was given full authority also to direct its part of the work."²²

The commission formed a Central Replacement Committee (headquartered at the Duluth Armory) and four District Replacement Committees (St. Louis County, Northern Carlton County, Southern Carlton County, and Aitkin County) to meet and consider applications for "immediate and temporary needs, conducting investigations so as to be able to pass upon the applications intelligently." In addition, the commission organized "a local committee in each community, composed of business men and farmers of that particular locality who knew conditions and the needs of the people," and the Red Cross took over the task of "gathering the needed statistics throughout the territory." Thus, the local committees were able to make their decisions based partly on the findings of the social workers and partly on their own knowledge of the facts.²³

More specifically, the work done by the Red Cross social workers to reestablish the fire victims was

largely done by interviewing fire victims to determine "the social losses of the families." The social workers from the Central Division in Chicago quickly began this effort. The *Superior Telegram* reported on November 1 that McHugh and her assistants were starting to interview refugees to determine personal losses and needs following the fires. When two more "experienced civilian relief workers" came from Chicago (Marsh and Hennessey), the *Superior Telegram* reported again on November 4 that the Red Cross social workers were "holding personal interviews with refugees trying whenever possible to get them into homes of their own and to place them as nearly back to conditions before the fire as possible." Two days later, the *Superior Telegram* reported, the "work of interviewing refugees in hospitals was started this afternoon by Miss Marjorie Potter, Chicago civilian relief worker, who is now devoting her time to fire refugees in Superior." The article continued, "The work of interviewing refugees has not yet been half completed . . . and it is believed that two or three weeks' time will be needed to finish."²⁴

During the interviews of fire survivors, the Red Cross social workers used detailed forms to register each family and document their requested needs. The two-page form (see next page) recorded the family's location of land, assessed value of assets (both burned and salvaged), additional personal assets, names and ages of all family members, any disabilities in the family, and immediate necessities.

The form also included a space for the social worker's recommendation for what the family needed to reestablish itself.²⁵

After each family was interviewed and their needs determined, the local committees met to decide the final aid for each family. The Superior Fire Relief Committee was considered one of the local committees under the Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission. As such, the Superior Fire Relief Committee's director of social work (first Hennessey, then Kummer) recommended "the relief in each case she, from her experience, thought ought to be given and would be ample to put the family in a normal self-supporting way of living." In Superior "the Case Committee

met daily and considered the case of each family separately, and heard the recommendations of the Executive Secretary [director of social work], and to no family gave less aid than was recommended."²⁶

Just five days after the fires, on October 17, the Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission authorized the construction of standardized shelters and barns for the refugees to ease the overcrowding and to rebuild the fire-stricken areas. The two varieties

of houses were 12 × 16 feet and 16 × 24 feet with "one room each, constructed so that they could be extended or remain a part of the permanent farm home." With lumber provided by the commission, some fire sufferers built these simple homes themselves. In other cases, volunteers and commission members did the construction. By November 15, 250 homes had been completed in the Cloquet area. With the commission's swift work, all refugees who wanted to return to their

Relief form used to assess fire victims' needs.

MINNESOTA FOREST FIRES

**Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission
AMERICAN RED CROSS**

No. _____ Date _____

Surname _____ Nationality _____ Citizen Yes _____ No _____

Permanent Address _____ Map Description _____

Present Quarters _____ Phone No. _____

Title of Property in Whom _____ Acres Cleared _____ Unc'd _____

Nearest Ry. Station _____ Auto Road _____ Wagon R'd _____

Two Nearest Neighbors _____

	Age	Occupation	Wages	Disability	Insurance
Man's Name					
Woman's Name					
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
Others in Family					

Resources	Value	Indebted	Loss	Ins.—Name	Amount
Real Estate					
Buildings					
Equip'm'ts & Stock					
Personal					

Registration on Front Page of Heavy Manila Folders, (Original size 8 1/2 x 11).

RELIEF COMMISSION

45

Assessed Value \$	Size	Burned	Value	Salvage	Loss	Ins.
House, Basement						
No. of Rooms						
Barns, No.						
Other Bldgs.						
Household Goods						
Hay, Tons						
Grain, Bu.						
Potatoes, Bu.						
Other Veg., Bu.						
Lbr., ft. Wood						
Farm Impl'ts						
Cows, No.						
Holsteins, No.						
Other Cattle						
Horses						
Hogs						
Sheep						
Poultry						
Mortgage \$						
By whom held						

Total Insurance..... Company..... Agent..... Paid

Money on hand and in Bank.....

Stocks or Bonds.....

What Source of Income.....

Mtg..... Signature of Applicant.....

Temporary Buildings Needed.....

Immediate Necessities.....

Lumber Needs.....

Recommendations.....

2nd Page of Heavy Manila Folders, (Original size 8 1/2 x 11).

land were able to during the winter of 1918. Eventually, 95 percent of the fire refugees returned to the same land they had occupied before the fire.²⁷

By April 1919, Red Cross workers “had visited every one of the 16,000 families often enough to secure accurate analysis of losses, recommendation for their temporary treatment, and to make the plan for their permanent replacement.” The local committees used this information to make their final decisions, and “some of the committees met in practically continuous sessions from eleven in the morning to eleven at night every day in the week for nearly two weeks. They considered an average of 50 cases a day, although some of them went as high as 100.” When the director of social work in Superior (Kummer) left her post in April 1919, she praised the work of the Superior Fire Relief Committee, saying, “The standard established ranks second to none, and it has been said on authority that it is the highest that has been established by a committee in relief work.”²⁸

Franks Bruno observed in the Northern Division’s November 1918 report, “The work in the north woods is peculiarly trying. Large areas were destroyed, roads became impassable; and the influenza settled down on the refugees very soon after the work of relief began.” The absence of a “considerable number of doctors” due to service with the US Army in World War I and the growing influenza epidemic taxing the remaining doctors in the area also created challenges for meeting the medical needs of fire survivors. The Superior Red Cross chapter reported, “Superior nurses and doctors gave all their time, strength and ability, but found it impossible to care for all the [influenza] cases which seemed to develop



Temporary standardized shelter authorized by the Forest Fires Relief Commission early in the emergency.



Temporary shelter, Moose Lake, October 2015.

simultaneously.” Influenza also spread among the relief workers.²⁹

Despite the difficulties, the Red Cross social workers demonstrated great perseverance and flexibility. Bruno reflected in the Northern Division’s November 1918 report: “They jumped in without complaining and did whatever was necessary filling the place of physicians and nurses until physicians and nurses could be secured. The same thing can be said

for no other group.” In referencing the difficulty of the work in the rugged and cold north woods, he seemed quite impressed that none of the social workers “in the whole group of over thirty that were sent there” broke down and left. Bruno continued: “Not only have the social workers shown their vitality in this severe test but also their worth. Mr. McGonagle, chairman of the State Forest Fire commission, who at first was quite



Refugee and relief worker, Moose Lake fire.

skeptical of the value of the social worker, made the statement last week that of all the groups that have gone up to help in the fire relief there was one group whose morale had steadily increased with the difficulty of the work and who were now doing the big job on the field, namely the social workers."³⁰

While the nurses and doctors focused on the physical needs of the fire survivors, the social workers understood their psychological and emotional needs. As the 1921 "Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission Final Report" underscored: "The efforts of the Red Cross workers in dealing with social problems were of invaluable aid. Illness and discouragement were relieved by tact and knowledge gained of long experience. Not only the material necessities were supplied on application, but families

were visited, their needs sought in order that they could be supplied, and the family stated properly toward the rehabilitation of the home."³¹ Bruno also highlighted the value of social work: "The membership of the Red Cross staff is made up of experienced social workers who have all received special training for their task with dealing with individual refugee families." The *Superior Telegram* expressed similar sentiments on October 31: "These women are experts in their work, and have had special training in just the lines of relief that are needed in Superior now." Their special training enabled the social workers to advise the local case committees on how much aid each family needed.³²

As their social work careers advanced after the fire, with Rose McHugh traveling abroad as a US government representative and serving as second vice-president of the American Association of Social Workers; Rose McHugh, Edith Hennessey, and Frances Brayton all instructing social work coursework at various schools and universities; Gretta Marsh and Marjorie Potter becoming experienced social workers in different organizations; and Clara Kummer leading the charge on future disaster relief projects around the country, the great work done by these early social workers following the 1918 fire disaster likely influenced their careers and thus impacted the developing profession.

In addition to the efforts of the social workers, examples of extraordinary kindness, generosity, and care were shown through the quick-acting leadership, organization, and willingness of the people of Superior and Duluth to help the thousands of refugees who arrived on their doorsteps just hours after the fire. These fire refugees were in shock, in need

of medical care, and without most of their material possessions or a place to go. When interviewed by the *Superior Telegram* upon her arrival in Superior, Rose McHugh, who had certainly already heard other amazing stories in her many years working with the United Charities of Chicago and the Red Cross, said: "There is no story in the history of American disaster relief more thrilling than the story as I have heard it from various individuals here and elsewhere, of how Superior took care of 10,000 refugees on the night of Oct. 12. Citizens acted like trained soldiers; it was as if the whole community had been drilled before, and when the call came they fell silently into their places."

Clara Kummer echoed these sentiments in her final report in April 1919 before leaving Superior: "Words can never express the feeling of helpfulness extended to the fire sufferers by the City of Superior. The citizens of Superior may forget that they opened their doors to a stricken people and it may become a passing incident in their lives, but to those who were sheltered, clothed, fed, and even loved, during those awful hours, the memory will be kept clear and definite and every act of kindness will be told and retold to children and grandchild. They will never cease to be grateful."³³

The story of the 51 Red Cross social workers following the 1918 Minnesota fires disaster is just emerging within the early history of the profession. These workers were highly trained, and the lifelong careers of the named social workers demonstrate their commitment to their profession. Even from a modern perspective, Red Cross Civilian Relief director Frank Bruno's comment about these social workers still rings true: "Not only have the social workers shown their vitality in this severe test but also their worth."³⁴ ■

Notes

1. Francis M. Carroll and Franklin R. Raiter, *The Fires of Autumn: The Cloquet-Moose Lake Disaster of 1918* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990), 3 (hereafter cited as *Fires of Autumn*); Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission, "Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission Final Report," Feb. 28, 1921, 115.K.16.2 F, MN State Archives Governor Relief Records, Gale Library, MNHS Archives, St. Paul (hereafter cited as MN Final Report). *Fires of Autumn* is the most informed and thorough analysis of the 1918 fires written to date.
2. Walter I. Fisher, *Report on Minnesota Forest Fire of October 12, 1918* (Minneapolis: General Inspection Company, 1919); H. W. Richardson, "The Northeastern Minnesota Forest Fires of October 12, 1918," *Geographical Review* 7, no. 4 (1919): 231.
3. Marian M. Jones, "The American Red Cross and Local Response to the 1918 Influenza; American National Red Cross," *Annual Report of the American National Red Cross* (Washington, DC: American National Red Cross, 1919), 21 (hereafter cited as Annual Report ARC); MN Final Report, 14.
4. "Milestones in the Development of Social Work and Social Welfare, 1900–1950," National Association of Social Workers, https://www.socialworkers.org/profession/centennial/milestones_3.htm; "National Association of Social Workers: History (1917–1955)," *Social Welfare History Project*, Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries, <http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/social-work/national-association-social-workers-history/>.
5. *Fires of Autumn*, 104; "Arms of Duluth Open to Victims; First Aid Given," *Duluth News Tribune*, Oct. 13, 1918, from *Duluth News Tribune* Collections, Oct. 1918, MNHS, St. Paul (hereafter, *News Tribune* Collections); American Red Cross Civilian Relief, "Report of Division Directors of Civilian Relief," Oct. 1918, p. 36, box 5, folders 32–37, Northern Division, Minneapolis, MN, Papers, Gale Library, MNHS Archives, St. Paul (hereafter cited as ARC Civilian Relief Report); Superior Fire Relief Committee, "Report to Donors," Nov. 1, 1919, 1918 Forest Fire Documents, S6057 f2, Martin Library Archives, University of Minnesota–Duluth, 8 (hereafter cited as Superior Committee Report).
6. Superior Committee Report, 8; *Fires of Autumn*, 113.
7. Superior Committee Report, 8, 11, 14, 19.
8. Superior Committee Report, 8, 11, 14, 19; Superior Wisconsin Chapter of the American Red Cross, "Report of the Superior Wisconsin Chapter of the American Red Cross," Mar. 1920, p. 30, copy in possession of David Johnson, Superior, WI (hereafter cited as Superior Chapter ARC Report); ARC Civilian Relief Report, Oct. 1918, 36.
9. Superior Committee Report; ARC Civilian Relief Report, Oct. 1918, 91; Annual Report ARC, 21; Superior Chapter ARC Report, 31; *Fires of Autumn*, 113.
10. ARC Civilian Relief Report, Oct. 1918, 36.
11. ARC Civilian Relief Report, Dec. 1918, 97.
12. Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 79; ARC Civilian Relief Report, Oct. 1918; "Relief Comes from Chicago," *Superior Telegram*, Oct. 31, 1918, 4, from *Superior Telegram* Collections, Oct.–Dec. 1918, Douglas County Historical Society, Superior, WI (hereafter, *Superior Telegram* Collections); "Superior Will Be Given Assistance by Red Cross," *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 1, 1918, *News Tribune* Collections; National Catholic Welfare Council, *N.C.W.C. Bulletin* 6, no. 8 (1925): 4.
13. Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, *Bulletin* No. 43 (1919). Child and Family Services of Michigan, Inc. (formerly Michigan Children's Aid Society/Michigan Children's Home Society) confirmed that Marjorie Potter's name had been seen in some of their old files; however, the Flint office was closed in 1989 and the files had not yet been organized or digitally formatted and thus were not searchable for Potter at publication time.
14. Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, *Bulletin* No. 17 (1912); Superior Chapter ARC Report, 29; "Red Cross Chapter Board Meeting Tuesday Morning," *Hopkins County (TX) Echo*, Jan. 12, 1938.
15. "Many Refugees Get Aid after Personal Probe," *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 3, 1918, *News Tribune* Collections; "I.E.R. Is Carrying out Great Deal of Work, Reported," *Crystal Lake (IL) Herald*, Mar. 14, 1935; "Marsh Family Get 123 Fish, Report," *Crystal Lake (IL) Herald*, Aug. 15, 1935. Ottawa University did not have any additional information on Marsh or her coursework.
16. *Proceedings of the Wisconsin State Conference of Charities and Correction* (Madison, WI: Cantwell Printing Company, 1916), 6, 68; Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, *Bulletin* No. 35 (1917); "Report of the Bureau of Civilian Relief Central Division, American Red Cross for the Month of November 1918," Dec. 1918, box 210, Records of the American National Red Cross, 1917–34, National Archives II Gift Collection, Collegeville, MD; "Miss Brayton, Relief Worker, Returns to Chicago Office," *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 19, 1918, *News Tribune* Collections; "96 of 201 Social Work Graduates Actively Engaged," *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 28, 1927; Bart E. McCormick, ed., *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, General Alumni Association 28, no. 6 (Apr. 1927): 220; "Pearson [sic], Frances Brayton," *Wisconsin State Journal*, Mar. 14, 1974.
17. Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, *Bulletin* No. 17, 29; ARC Civilian Relief Report, Jan. 1919, 35; "Mrs. Clara Kummer Dies," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 12, 1938.
18. "791 Refugee Families Interviewed in Superior," *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 9, 1918, and "Fire Relief Probe Continues," *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 10, 1918, both *News Tribune* Collections.
19. "Relief Commission to Help Red Cross with Fire Relief," *Northern Division Bulletin*, Nov. 7, 1918, from *Northern Division Bulletin*, 1(51), Record Group 200, Records of the American National Red Cross, 1917–34, National Archives II Gift Collection, Collegeville, MD: 1; MN Final Report; "Report of the Bureau of Civilian Relief Central Division, American Red Cross for the Month of November 1918," 8; Northern Division Civilian Relief, "Report for the Month of November 1918," Dec. 1918, p. 1, box 4, folder 25, Northern Division, Minneapolis, MN, Papers, Gale Library, MNHS Archives, St. Paul (hereafter cited as Northern Division Report).
20. ARC Civilian Relief Report, Dec. 1918, 97, 103; MN Final Report, 20.
21. ARC Civilian Relief Report, Dec. 1918, 103; ARC Civilian Relief Report, Feb. 1919, 42.
22. *Fires of Autumn*, 104; MN Final Report, 4, 5, 15.
23. MN Final Report, 19, 20; ARC Civilian Relief Report, Mar. 1919, 16.
24. "Relief Commission to Help Red Cross with Fire Relief," *Northern Division Bulletin*, 1; "Refugees are Being Visited," *Superior Telegram*, Nov. 1, 1918, "Two More Relief Workers are Here," *Superior Telegram*, Nov. 4, 1918, 11, and "Hospital People are Interviewed," *Superior Telegram*, Nov. 6, 1918, 4—all *Superior Telegram* Collections.
25. "Relief Comes from Chicago," 4.
26. Superior Chapter ARC Report, 31; Superior Committee Report, 19.
27. MN Final Report, 22, 23; *Fires of Autumn*, 120; Superior Committee Report, 24.
28. ARC Civilian Relief Report, Apr. 1919, 26; ARC Civilian Relief Report, Mar. 1919, 16; Superior Committee Report, 18.
29. Northern Division Report, 1; Superior Committee Report, 7; Superior Chapter ARC Report, 32.
30. Northern Division Report, 1.
31. MN Final Report, 24.
32. ARC Civilian Relief Report, Dec. 1918, 103; "Relief Comes from Chicago," 4.
33. "Relief Comes from Chicago"; Superior Committee Report, 20.
34. Northern Division Report, 1.

Map on p. 249 by Alan Ominsky from Carroll and Raiter, *Fires of Autumn*, 2; photos on p. 251 from *The Fury of the Flames* photo album, MNHS collections; p. 253 (McHugh) National Catholic Welfare Council. *N.C.W.C. Bulletin* VI, no. 8. Washington, DC, January 1925, 4, (Brayton) Lawrence University: Appleton, Wisconsin, 1909 yearbook, 41; p. 256 and p. 257 (top) Minnesota Forest Fires Relief Commission Final Report, MNHS Collections; p. 257 (bottom) courtesy of author. All other photos are in MNHS collections.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).