

ALLENTOWN**Quarry drowning victim
ID'd as Allentown man**

A swimmer whose body was pulled Tuesday from an abandoned quarry in Allentown's South Mountain Reservoir has been identified as Matthew Ruch, 24, of Allentown.

Ruch, of the 600 block of South Fifth Street, was pronounced dead at 5:33 p.m. by a Lehigh County deputy coroner after the city Fire Department's water rescue unit recovered his body.

An autopsy Wednesday determined that Ruch had drowned, according to the coroner's office, which ruled the death an accident.

Ruch had used a rope swing to enter the water-filled quarry in the city's 156-acre South Mountain Reservoir Park, which includes a capped reservoir that is part of the city's water supply system.

The coroner's office said witnesses saw Ruch briefly surface after landing in the quarry water, but he went under again while struggling to swim.

Authorities said another swimmer called 911 about 4:20 p.m., and the water rescue team recovered his body about 5 p.m.

ALLENTOWN'S SOUTH MOUNTAIN PARK

Danger sign urged for Mine Hole

Allentown drowning may prompt changes at secluded swim spot.

BY FRANK WARNER
Of The Morning Call

After a drowning in a water hole on Allentown's South Mountain in the late 1950s, scuba divers went down to explore its cold, murky currents.

According to local lore, the divers were surprised at the depth of the swimming spot they called the Mine Hole.

"They never found a bottom, but they did find a car hung up on the rocks on the way down," remembers David Stoneback, who was a boy growing up in Allentown at the time.

Last week, another man drowned in the 250-foot-wide water hole just east of the South Mountain Reservoir. The death reminded Stoneback, who lives in neighboring Salisbury Township, of the Mine Hole's hazards.

"It's extremely dangerous," he said. "The police are calling it a pond, and they shouldn't be. It's not just a pond. There are whirlpools. This thing up there on South Mountain is very deep. They couldn't find a bottom.

"It's important that the public not swim there."

At 4:20 p.m. July 22, Matthew Ruch of Allentown jumped into the water from a rope swing during a day out with friends. He failed to resurface safely.

About 40 minutes later, a city Fire Department diving team

pulled the 24-year-old's body from a spot 15 feet deep.

Police and fire officials later cautioned against swimming in the Mine Hole, which sits in the secluded woods of the city's South Mountain Park.

"There are no lifeguards, no supervision," police Capt. Bill Lake said. "You don't know what kind of debris might be there, or other hazards. We would recommend that people go to a city pool or a similar location."

Lake said city police want the public to be safe in the park, and new steps may be recommended after the Lehigh County coroner's office completes its investigation of Ruch's death.

Coroner Scott Grim has ruled



FRANK WARNER/THE MORNING CALL

The July 22 drowning of a 24-year-old man in the water hole east of Allentown's South Mountain Reservoir has raised safety concerns.

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that Ruch died of accidental drowning, but his office is studying the evidence closely to determine more specifically what went wrong.

Stoneback said the city should bring back the "No Swimming" sign that stood in front of the water hole more than a half century ago, when he often fished there.

He said the sign repeatedly was ripped down, but it used to be replaced. He told police about the missing sign about seven years ago, he said, but he's not sure it ever went back up.

Neighbors who regularly visit the park said last week they haven't seen a "No Swimming" sign at the Mine Hole for at least a decade. They pointed to the

30-foot-long rope swing tied to a tall elm on the water's south edge.

Next to the rope is a platform of planks nailed to three trees. That's where Ruch leaped in two weeks ago.

"What disturbs me is, police don't seem to take it seriously," Stoneback said. "They talked about a lifeguard, but even if Allentown was going to supply a lifeguard, they couldn't do it in good conscience."

Lake said police have long advised people in the park to stay out of the water hole.

"It's been an unwritten rule to tell people it's not wise to swim there," he said. "We recommend that people not swim in those [unsupervised] areas, whether there are signs or not, due to safety concerns."

"Places like that are particularly appealing to people because there is a sense of being by yourself," Lake added. "But it's hazardous, too."

Allentown fire Capt. John Christopher

also urges swimmers — and in the winter, skaters — to stay away from the Mine Hole, but he said the water there may not be so deep and swirling as folklore describes it.

"I've heard all those same stories," he said. "I grew up in Allentown, too. But I've been [scuba] diving in that pond for over 15 years now, and the deepest I've ever seen it is 20 feet."

"I've heard that thing about divers not finding the bottom. I never had a problem finding it."

Christopher said he has not encountered a noticeably strong whirlpool at the Mine Hole. To him, the most hazardous part of swimming and diving there is the water's grimy darkness.

"It's very dangerous because you don't know what's in there," he said. "Over 10 years ago, we did a cleanup there. We were pulling out lawn mowers and everything else — tires, rims and all kinds of stuff."

Before Ruch's drowning, the last Mine Hole swimming death on record happened July 16, 1983, when 29-year-old Harold J. Smith of Allentown died after he jumped in.

It took two days to find Smith's body.

The origin of the name Mine Hole is obscure. Local historians have speculated the spot was an American Indian jasper mine or a more recent settler's quarry. But Stoneback and Christopher say it appears to be a natural geologic formation.

Stoneback said the drownings may seem rare, but they could be much more unlikely with a little effort. A "Danger, No Swimming" sign would be a start, he said.

"The main thing is, this needs not to happen again," he said. "There could be people swimming up there right now."

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