

1950 MINE CAVE-IN

Valiant effort rescues one brother, recovers the body of another

BY RON DEVLIN
STAFF WRITER

At quitting time on a Friday afternoon, as three brothers were on their way out of their independent Schuylkill County mine 74 years ago this month, a cave-in sent tons of coal dirt careening down the shaft.

In the moments that followed, two successive cave-ins would seal the mine.

Kasmir Burda, 32, who was nearest the entrance to the mine, was buried up to his knees in muck but managed to wiggle out of his boots and make it to the surface.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his brother, Joseph, 30, dart into a gangway on the side of the mine to avoid the onslaught. Another brother, Edward, 25, was carried into the abyss.

The incident occurred in a bootleg mine near Morea, a patch in Mahanoy Twp., on Jan. 13, 1950. The Burda brothers had been working the Skidmore vein of the abandoned New Boston Colliery for 10 months.

The headline in the Pottsville Republican the day after

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Miner Joseph Burda, who was trapped in a mine for 39 hours, was taken to Ashland State Hospital for observation after being rescued on Jan. 15, 1950. With him as he enters the hospital are, from left, nurse Marian Flamini, Mahanoy City ambulance driver Thomas King and brother Frank Burda. This photo ran in the Pottsville Republican on the day after the rescue.

1950 Jan mine rescue of Joseph Burda

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MINE: Crew poured food, drink through pipe to Joseph for sustenance

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the cave-in — “Believe One of Two Trapped Brothers is Alive, a 3rd Wiggles From Boots and Escapes” — sent a shock wave through the county and beyond, as rescue crews worked tirelessly to reach the entombed miners.

Chances of reaching Joseph were thought to be good, provided the gangway in which he sought refuge about 50 feet from the surface held up. Prospects of reaching Edward, who it was feared had been swept to the bottom of the 130-foot shaft, appeared dim.

Rescue effort

Efforts to reach the trapped miners began almost immediately. Responding to Kasmir’s appeal, miners from nearby workings rushed to the scene and began the ominous task of unearthing tons of dirt and debris that sealed the mine. Recent rains had turned the coal-black earth muddy, hampering rescue efforts.

About 150 miners, working in crews of six for three-hour shifts, participated in the rescue effort.

State mining inspectors Charles Schneider, of Ashland, and Ben Reinhoel, of Mahanoy City, assumed command of the rescue operation.

The morning after the cave-in, mining inspector John Morgan, of Frackville, estimated that it would be several days before the miners could be reached.

Mining officials devised a two-pronged rescue plan.

Veteran miners would dig a shaft parallel to the Burda mine, while a power shovel would attempt to unearth a chute that led to within 25 feet of the gangway where Joseph was believed to be holed up.

Meanwhile, working amid coal and fallen timbers, min-

ers formed a bucket brigade, passing 15-pound containers of debris up a shaft to the surface.

Joseph freed

Perseverance paid off, and Joseph Burda was brought to the surface at 5:16 a.m. Sunday, Jan. 15, ending a 39-hour ordeal.

A crowd that kept a vigil at the mine entrance applauded as the weary miner was escorted to safety. He was transported to Ashland State Hospital in the Mahanoy City ambulance.

Joseph told his brother Frank, who accompanied him to the hospital, that he “sat and prayed and listened to the rescuers working above him.”

“The rescue was one of the most dramatic victories over death by determined miners to save fellow workmen in a mining disaster,” the Pottsville Republican reported. “The memorable combination of skill, courage and determination writes another chapter in the glowing record of service to one’s fellow man that has become traditional in the coal regions.”

Rescuers had doggedly pushed through a narrow 4-by-4 foot slope to reach Joseph, risking their own lives in a water-soaked area swelled by recent rains.

They were spurred on by what they interpreted as tapings from Joseph. Rescuers heard several dynamite blasts below them, raising hope that Joseph was still alive.

About 6 p.m. Saturday, approximately 11 hours before the rescue, miners heard a voice. Minutes later veteran miner John Becker, of Morea, heard Joseph saying, “Hurry up, I’m getting weak.”

The news was relayed to the trapped miner’s brothers, John and Frank, who kept a vigil at the surface.

“The rescue was one of the most dramatic victories over death by determined miners to save fellow workmen in a mining disaster.”

The Pottsville Republican
Report on the rescue

They rushed home to tell Joseph’s wife, the former Mary Simko, and their mother. They could not tell his father, Michael, who was in bed with shock and complications from miner’s asthma.

Assisted by a power shovel that scraped away debris, miners came within 12 feet of Joseph by midnight Saturday.

Mine inspector Ben Reinhoel ordered that a half-inch pipe be pushed through the clutter to where Joseph was entombed.

“Milk, eggs, hot coffee and liquor were poured through the pipe into Joseph’s parched mouth at the other end,” the Republican reported.

It was the first sustenance he had since the cave-in. Later, as the opening to him widened, rescuers managed to get him sandwiches and hot coffee.

A crowd of onlookers and reporters, including an NBC camera crew, braved bitter cold to greet Joseph as he was escorted from the mine at 5:16 a.m.

“Visibly exhausted, his face blackened, Joseph stepped through the log bordered opening at the top of the slope to gentle and waiting hands that wrapped him in blankets,” the Republican reported. “He gulped in fresh air and uttered, in a low tone, ‘It’s wonderful.’”

Dr. Thomas Hale, of Frackville, who had been on scene for hours, gave him a quick examination before the



Miners form a bucket brigade to reach Joseph Burda, who was trapped in a bootleg mine near Morea by a cave-in on Jan. 13, 1950. He was rescued after 39 hours underground. This photo ran in the Pottsville Republican on the day after the rescue.

ambulance whisked him off to the Ashland hospital.

Tried to free brother

At the hospital, Joseph told of how he tried to free his brother, Eddie, after the first cave-in. Before he could reach him, the second fall occurred, and he sought refuge in a gangway.

Joseph confirmed that he had detonated dynamite, as rescuers suspected. He set it off three times, then two more, although he was confused about the exact time of the second volley.

“I was trying to blast my way to the chute,” he said, “but then I was afraid I might injure the rescuers above.”

Conserving the flame on his carbide lamp, he used it to light the sticks of dynamite.

Edward recovered

Shortly before noon on Jan. 18, five days after the cave-in, the body of Edward Burda, 25, was recovered by a crew from the Maple Hill colliery.

He was found lying face-down, about 115 feet from the surface.

Ben Dillman and Edward Wolfgang, both of Frackville, Julius Herring, of Mahanoy City, and John Antalosky and Ray Jones, both of Morea, dug through the muck with their hands to free the fallen miner.

From the position of his body, it appeared that Edward had tried to drag himself through the muck.

“Hardened and barrel-chested miners, relieved from the tension of their

grueling and dangerous task, bit their lips as they gently lifted the body past the gangway where Edward’s brother Joseph had sought refuge,” the Republican reported.

Doctors at the scene determined that he had died instantly, smothered by the second or third cave-in. Clergy from three area churches administered last rites as Edward’s remains reached the surface.

In a footnote, the Republican noted: Miners in the rescue crew were about 19 feet below the water level when they reached Edward’s body. Had the dammed water broken, the entire crew would have drowned.

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