

# Trapped coal miner tells of his ordeal

By Gary Massaro  
Sentinel staff writer

PAONIA—Last Tuesday was a normal working day for coal miners at the U.S. Steel Mine near Somerset until, less than two hours into the afternoon shift, two workers were suddenly buried in a cave-in.

Bruce Lewis, 21, a newlywed who made his home in Paonia, died instantly at 5:15 p.m. when tons of rock fell from the ceiling of the mine.

Jesse Erickson, who was working with Lewis, was in a mining machine that was imprisoned in rock when the ceiling fell. It would be 10 hours later before he would see the outside again.

Erickson was at first reluctant to talk about his experience. He said he did not want to cause Lewis' widow any more grief by uttering the wrong phrase, or by someone misunderstanding what he said. Besides, he was a friend, neighbor and carpooler with Lewis.

Erickson did not know Lewis had been killed until he himself was rescued.

Erickson, who lives on Minnesota Creek, about three miles southeast of Paonia, returned to work for the Friday afternoon shift. He said early Saturday morning: "I felt like I had to think I got one of the hard steps out of the way."

Erickson was rescued from the air pocket after about 10 hours. He said at least 30 feet and untold tons of rock separated him from his rescuers. The mining machine he was operating is still buried.

"I don't feel like no hero or nothing like that," Erickson said. "I thank God I'm here today and I'm thankful to the men I work with. They're real men. They're a certain breed of men."

Erickson was "pulling pillars"—digging out a block of coal—1,200-1,600 feet below the surface when the cave-in occurred.

"It was a normal day. Everybody was in good spirits, ready to give it hell," he said. "Then, one split second

and it was all over with. The machine was completely buried."

That's also when Erickson was scared the most. "The scariest part was when it first happened," he said. "I started hollering to see if anybody could hear me. At the same time, they were hollering for me. We couldn't hear each other."

"Not hearing anybody answer back

and being there all alone those few minutes—that was probably the most terrifying part of the whole thing."

Unknown to Erickson, the other miners began the rescue operations almost immediately.

Erickson helped the rescuers by talking to them. They kept asking him if he was all right. His voice led them.

"They could just guess and try to lis-

ten to my voice so they could estimate how close they were to me."

The talking also reassured Erickson. "There were moments when my mind would get to drifting," he said. "Then I'd just be reassured over and over again, and my buddies would talk to me and ask me if I was all right. Then I'd hear them working."

When his mind wandered, he said,

he had "the fear of not ever seeing my wife or kids or buddies or nothing ever again. Then I'd snap out of that."

He said he was awake during the whole ordeal. "I didn't sleep," he said, "but I rested."

The protective cage over the driver's seat of the mining machine has been credited by some as saving

Erickson's life.

The cage is pretty small. I could sit, but not stand. I could lean back and stretch my legs up and out, and changed positions. It's lucky I'm a little man (5-foot 8-inches, 50 pounds).

"Most of the time, I just tried to keep my head and listen and be quiet. As long as I could hear my buddies out there, picking, shoveling, talking—as long as I could hear all that, I knew they were coming to get me. I knew I was getting out. It was a relief to hear and know they were coming after me."

The rocks imprisoned Erickson. He could touch rocks blocking his way in the front, back and left of the cage. The right side was a little better.

He said, "There was an open pocket. You bet that was reassuring. At least, could see a little ways. It was better than being completely closed in. There was a little open pocket, about 24 inches high, and I could look straight out maybe five, six feet and about 10 feet long. It was like sitting in a little air bubble."

Was he wearing a watch? "No, thank God. If I'd been wearing a watch, just like everybody else I'd been looking at it every ten seconds. And the hours I was down there would have seemed two or three times longer than it really was."

The other miners dug a tunnel under the cave-in. At about 2:30 a.m., almost nine hours after he was trapped, Erickson was greeted by fellow miner Roy Rundle, who had crawled through the tunnel.

"He was an awful courageous man to go and do what he did," Erickson said. "He asked me if I was all right and if I was ready to go. I said, 'We've got a couple of rocks here we've got to move.'"

"So we moved the last two rocks and then squeezed through."

About 20 minutes later, Erickson was free.

He said, "I hope to God I never have to experience seeing anyone go through that again."

## 'Perk up! Primo's coming out...' mine boss tells waiting miner's wife

By Gary Massaro  
Sentinel staff writer

PAONIA—It was a 50-50 proposition for the two men caught in the cave-in Tuesday afternoon at the U.S. Steel Mine in Somerset. One survived, the other did not.

Jesse Erickson, 28, husband, father of two, was the lucky one. He survived when the ceiling of the mine came crashing down about 5:15 p.m. He walked out of the mine about 10 hours after he was trapped.

His partner, Bruce Lewis, 21, was killed instantly. Some mine officials say Erickson was saved from death because he was protected by a steel cage covering the operator's compartment of a continuous miner—a coal digging machine—in which he was riding. Lewis was working outside the machine.

Erickson's mother-in-law, Karen Martin, and his wife, Debbie, 23, attribute the survival to prayer and the dedication of the rescue crew, many of whom refused to be relieved until their mission was complete.

Mrs. Martin, of Minnesota Creek, near Paonia, is a Roman Catholic. She attends mass every Friday and Sunday. She used to attend mass daily when she lived in Paonia.

She also belongs to a non-denominational prayer group. She called on that group Tuesday night.

"I feel like all the power and glory belongs to God," she said Saturday. "We just began to say prayers, and we knew Jesse would be reached."

Mrs. Erickson, also of Minnesota Creek, said: "The mine notified us (of the cave-in) about 6:20 p.m. They actually talked to my mom. I was downstairs, rocking my baby to sleep. When mom told me, I put the baby down."

"I felt terribly scared. I had a sick feeling inside of me." She, her mother, her sisters and brother held hands and prayed. "Then after that, I started to cry," she said, "because it just hit me then."

The initial telephone call from the mine was abrupt, Mrs. Erickson said. "They said Jesse had been buried and that they had talked with him. Then they got disconnected off the phone."

Mrs. Erickson called back. She was told, "Jesse" was in the continuous miner. There had been a cave-in. They had contact with Jesse and could hear him. "I asked them if I could come to the mine, or if I should stay home. They told me to stay by the phone and wait. They said it would be a while before they could get Jesse out of there."

"The rescuers kept calling to tell us of the progress. It was real reassuring to me. That helped a lot," she said.

"At 11:45 p.m. I got a phone call again. I think it was (mine employee) Brian Justice. He told me they were close to Jesse, and that in the next hour or hour and a half, they would be getting him out."

Mrs. Erickson went to the mine, accompanied by

her sister Johana.

She sat in the office, where she said she was reassured by Justice and mine officials Lloyd Miller and John Weldon.

Miller, she said, was probably as happy as she when news of the rescue party's progress filtered back to the office. "The Primo's going to make it," Miller kept saying. Primo is Erickson's nickname. It means No. 1 in Italian, or cousin in Spanish.

The rescuers, in almost constant communication with the office, reported the progress. "The men kept calling, telling Lloyd Miller they were getting closer. Another six feet. Another six feet. It seemed to last forever," Mrs. Erickson said. "But they were getting closer all the time."

"I was getting exhausted. I told them I was going to lay out in the car for a while. I asked them when Jesse was reached to come and get me."

"Not much later, Lloyd Miller knocked on the window and said 'We've got Jesse,'" she said.

Mrs. Erickson went to the portal about two minutes before Erickson walked out. "We hugged each other, and I told him how glad I was he was alive. It was almost 3 a.m. Wednesday.

Dr. Woodrow Brown of Hotchkiss examined Erickson, who suffered scratches when he crawled through the rescue tunnel, Mrs. Erickson said. Throughout the wait, Mrs. Erickson said Miller kept telling her, "Perk up. The Primo is coming out of the mine."

And he did.



## 1979 Jesse Erickson trapped in US Steel mine for 10 hours



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