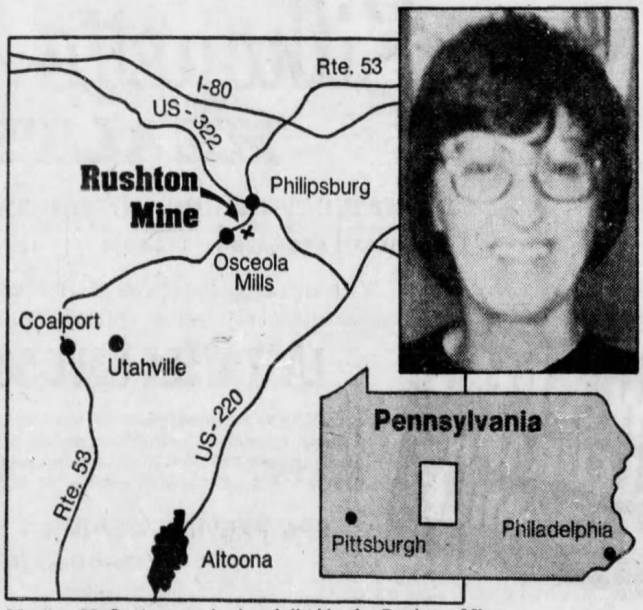
LABOR AND LOVE AND TRAGEDY

Woman won mine job—and death



Marilyn McCusker worked and died in the Rushton Mine.

On Oct. 2, the first woman miner in documented U.S. coal mining history died in an underground mine in Pennsylvania. Free Press staff writer Helen Fogel visited the area. This is her story of Marilyn McCusker's life and death.

By HELEN FOGEL
Free Press Staff Writer

PHILIPSBURG, Pa. — Over the crackling country telephone line, the voice of Pennsylvania Mines, Inc., administrator Barry Navotny was young and warm and sympathetic.

Even over the long distance wire, it was clear he was trying hard to be helpful to a caller who had been waiting long minutes while he located official documents that described a recent accident in the company's Rushton Mine in Osceola Mills, five miles south of this bustling little commercial center on the western slopes of the Allegheny Mountains.

People here and in the smaller coal towns that lie scattered along Route 53 generally agree the accident was sad but was no one's fault—just one of those things that happens to coal miners.

The Rushton Mines, most agree, has a reputation for being one of the safest deep bituminous mines in the country. Opened in 1963, Rushton is a relatively young mine producing coal to power electric generators exclusively.

"I'm sorry about your wait," Navotny said. "You have to understand that first of all, we must be very careful about the language. I mean in the mining business we use common, everyday words, but down in the mine they mean something very specific."

"Basically," he said," this is it," and he began to read the starkly simple communique.

"On Oct. 2, 1979, at approximately 3:15 p.m., an employe of the Rushton Mining Co. was fatally injured by the sudden collapse of a

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1979 Rushton Mine Fatality McCusker
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roof. The roof area that fell was rock 18 feet wide by 30 inches thick. . ."

For a moment, Navotny stopped reading. "I'm not sure how long it was," he said. "We couldn't go in to measure the length because it's an unstable area."

He explained that miners call the top of a tunnel area "the roof" and then he continued reading:

The rock fall ". . . pushed the employe against the bottom."

"That's the floor of the mine," he explained. "Try and imagine yourself standing on a city block with a street 18 feet wide. That would be the width that fell on her. It was 30 inches thick. We understand she suffocated.

"Yes," he continued, "there's the report of the company safety inspector. She died of shock and asphyxiation."

And he resumed reading the company communique.

"The victim was Marilyn J. McCusker, 35. She was married and had one child, 16. She had been employed at the Rushton Mine Since Aug. 8, 1977 . . . On the date of her injury, she was working as a roof bolter's helper, replacing someone (who was off) . . . She was a certified miner . . . She had 60 days or more experience (with roof bolting work). She was normally classified as a general inside laborer . . ."

Navotny explained that roof bolting is the term for driving long steel rods into the ciling of the mine and bolting them securely in place with eight-inch-wide plates to help shore up a shaky mine roof.

UNITED MINE Workers Safety Inspector Henry Yaskowitz had earlier explained much of the same information.

"She was doing what is called 'retreat work,'" Yaskowitz said. "It's part of the process of getting the very last bit of coal out of an area that has already been mined.

Admittedly, he said, it is risky work, and accidents like the one that killed Marilyn McCusker are not uncommon.

So, according to company and union records, that is the way the first woman miner in documented U.S. coal mining history came to die in an underground mine.

What neither record reveals is the struggle Marilyn mounted with three other women to win jobs in the Rushton Mine, at which they could expect eventually to make $65 to $70 a day.

Together, the four women, none of whom had graduated from high school but all of whom were impatient with their low-paying jobs in the local shirt factory or nursing home or bar, waded their way into the State of Pennsylvania and federal equal employment bureaucracies. Then, tired of months of waiting for the bureaucrats, the women hired their own attorney and filed a civil rights suit against the mining company and its parent company, Pennsylvania Power and Electric Corp.

In 1977, they won an out-of-court settlement that gave them back pay and seniority through 1975.

But that wasn't the end of it. Daily, they and the other women hired endured nitpicking hasslesfrom some company brass and from some of the men they worked with.

The men who work the Rushton Mine, like the mine itself, are young, but they are traditionalists who believe that a mine is no place for a woman. One woman said it is no place for anyone at all.

THEN THERE are the personal details. There is little room in either company or union records for the kind of personal details that made up Marilyn McCusker's life—like the middle initial "J" for Juanita. Her mother named her for her nursing nun at the Utica, N.Y., hospital where Marilyn was born.

Marilyn really hated that name, and her husband never quite understood why. He thought it was pretty, but he would tease her by calling her "Wa-a-ahnita, Wa-a-ahnita."The records don't mention that 16-year-old Michael Anthony, her only child who gazes out at the world through wide-spaced, blue-gray eyes just as his mother once did, is the sole survivor of Marilyn's five children: two stillborn, two who lived long enough to be named.

All were the issue of a bitterly unhappy first marriage, which Marilyn finally fled. She also left behind her a widowed father and six brothers and sisters.

She supported Michael when she arrived in Pennsylvania by working as a nursing home aide.

Michael is now a junior at Glendale High School. In the afternoon he takes vocational courses in Altoona. Everyone says what a nice kid Michael is.

MOST ESPECIALLY, the records don't tell you about her second marriage—an honest-to-true-life love story. Not even her closest friends really understand that.

When Marilyn met Alan McCusker some six years ago, the man seven years her junior was a hard drinking, brawling Vietnam navy veteran who was mostly unemployed and lived hand-to-mouth doing odd jobs. Sometimes his bouts with the bottle ended in bouts with the law—nothing really serious just a night or so in the Clearfield County Jail.

Somehow, out of the ragtag ends of their bad old lives, Alan and Marilyn McCusker created a new and better life together—working hard to fulfill shared dreams, supporting one another loyally, finding hope again each with the other, and comfort and even joy.

What the records basically do tell is how all that came to an end quite suddenly two weeks ago under a slab of Cambrian rock 18 feet wide by 30 inches thick.

FROM THE air in October the hills and valleys of the western Alleghenies look like cushions of tufted velvet — a rich plump tapestry of deep green and scarlet and gold. Scattered here and there along the ridges or nestled in the little valleys are clusters of small white blocks — houses — strewn like toys tossed by an angry child.

Route 53 winds steeply south from Philipsburg, clinging perilously to the ridges then plunging down into some small towns to become its main thoroughfare.

Miners travel that route and other roads even narrower and steeper as they go to work daily in sturdy four-wheel drive vehicles — many with bumper stickers reading "Coal—Now." They travel its posted 25-mile-an-hour curves past the numerous signs warning the road is "slippery when wet."

Over that same route, heavy tractor-drawn coal trucks move their product from the mine to the hungry coal-burning electric generators of the Pennsylvania power company.

From Coalport at the south end of Route 53, where Alan and Marilyn McCusker made their first home and near which, in Utahville, they were building a new one, to Osceola Mills, the site of the Rushton Mine, is 23 miles.

Almost everyone along there works in the mines.

In spite of their hardships, the people there are proud of their Allegheny Hills.

Gard Shoff, postmaster of the borough of Madera along the route, boasted about his Clearfield County home.

"This county produces more coal every year than any other in the state," he said. For that reason, it has been selected by federal contractors as the site of a new synthetic fuel plant — the only one in Pennsylvania.

"We could get 4,000 new jobs. Pennsylvania has everything — the coal, the gas. We could just cut ourselves off from the rest of the country and go it alone," he gloated.

But it has some drawbacks, too. A stranger called one local resident and began an introduction. The man interrupted.

"I know who you are," he said. "I know where you came from. I know what you are doing here."

"Listen lady, this is a small town. If your daughter stays out late at night before you find out where she's been, everyone else knows she's been out late. This is a hell of a place to live."

"WHEN I MET Marilyn," said McCusker, "she was running away — from everything. Her life had been hard — very hard.

"It was she and Michael against the world. That's the way it was — she and Michael against the world.

"She protected him good, though. I think I was the first person who ever hollered at him."

McCusker declined a drink. "I haven't had a drink in more than a year. It gives me problems with my stomach . . .

"Folks up this way couldn't pronounce Marilyn's name right. They called her 'Mer-lyn.' Later at the mine they got to calling her 'Murt.' Her name was Marilyn — Mar-i-lyn.

"When she told me she was going to put her job application in down at the mine, I just didn't take it too seriously. I'd had mine in ever since 1972. I figured if I couldn't get a job, they'd never give her one. I was wrong about that.

"This just all seems so unreal. I can't believe it is happening. When they first called me to tell me, I kept waiting to hear who else was hurt. I figured Marilyn couldn't be the only one. She was the most safety-conscious person in the mine. It shouldn't have happened to Marilyn at all. I figured there'd have to be at least 10 gone. I kept waiting to hear who the others were.

"When I went to the hospital to see her, her face was all dirty. All there was was this little bruise on the side of her head. Her hands though were cleaner than mine. She must have been wearing her gloves."

It may be the shock, but McCusker remains unsure he has been told the full truth about his wife's death.

"I got a letter from Arnold Miller (international president of the United Mine Workers.) He said if I needed any legal help, they'd provide it. I'm going to find out what happened in that mine if I have to take 'em to court to do it."

PHILIPSBURG miner Buck Koptchak saw Marilyn die. As operator of the bolter machine, he was the man she was helping when the roof caved in on them both.

"I heard her say, 'the roof's dribbling over here' . . . I turned and I saw it coming . . . One big piece of slate tore loose. It pulled out four roof bolts."

Koptchak dove for cover and turned to see Marilyn running.

Then "she was pinned against the floor," he said. The crew set jacks and freed her within 10 minutes, but there was no doubt in anyone's mind she was already dead.

Koptchak is a five-year veteran of the Rushton Mine. He went to work there mere months after his father died in an accident similar to the one that killed Marilyn. Although he mourns her death, he believes women don't belong in the mine.

"Their reflexes and reaction time aren't as fast as a man's," he said. As the rock started to fall, Koptchak added, he saw Marilyn hesitate. He believes she was trying to see if he made it out safely.

BERNIECE Dombrowski, who became a coal miner at the age of 41, was Marilyn's closest friend.

"I wasn't one of the women who sued. I had my application in too. But when Marilyn and the others sued, they hired me. I didn't know then that they'd sued and that's why I got hired — to prove they weren't discriminating.

"Marilyn and I — we got along with the men pretty good. I think we had more time at the face (that surface of the mine being actively worked) than any of the other women.

"She was a wonderful person. She'd had a hard life, but she always had a smile. She was always the same. She had a heart of gold.

"She and her husband were building a new house for themselves up Utahville way. They spend every minute working on it. He's doing the work himself. She helps him with it.

"When I called the mine to ask about arrangements for Marilyn, the first thing they said to me was, 'Well, are you ready to hang it up?'

"I told 'em I have a fmaily to support. I'm not ever going to hang it up.

"We have the same risks as a man. We are allowed to work like a man. I just don't understand why they treat us like that. It's not the men. You couldn't ask for a better bunch of guys to work with.

"We never bothered them none when they went into women's work. We never said nothing or laughed when they became nurses or something. Men sometimes make the very best nurses.

"But when a woman goes into a coal mine, for some reason, it's just a joke.

"The work ain't what you'd call hard. I love it. She did, too."

LATER McCUSKER said, "I don't know how openly she talked with you. Did she tell you that the men used

" 'Marilyn will get her name in the history books — being the first woman killed,' but that just doesn't seem like much swap for your life."

to have her reported and called into the office over and over again for swearing at them? Oh, she gave it back to 'em just as good as she got. Called 'em all kinds of ——. She's a tough one."

Though she didn't talk about her hazing, Berniece Dombrowski did recall her terror on her first trip down the 200-foot slope into the mine after Marilyn's death. That ride in a linked chain of small cars is called "the man-trip." There's some mantrip in at the beginning of each of three eight hour shifts and one out at the end of each.

"You don't turn on your lights or anything until you get to the bottom of the slope," she said. "But Marilyn had always been there with me, laughing and making jokes and talking. When she wasn't there, I just couldn't hardly stand it.

"At 5 a.m. that day (the day Marilyn died) I woke up with the cold chills. Something was trying to tell me I didn't have such a good day coming. She was the careful one. I always took too many risks.

"I tried to get her to take the day off with me, but she wouldn't do that. She was a good worker and she and Alan put all their money into that house they were building.

"Maybe if I'd got her to take the day off, she'd have been killed in the car going home. I don't know. Death. You know, you just can't control death."

THE HOUSE that Marilyn and Alan were building was their shared dream. Alan, al electronics specialist and jack of all trades, had designed the house himself to Marilyn's specifications — changing it as he went along to suit her most recent desire and need.

The wood comes from an old McCusker family farmhouse. Alan took it apart plank-by-plank. Together, he and Michael and sometimes Marilyn dragged the lumber for a half-mile to the road through waist-deep snow because there was no way to get their truck close.

McCusker is the kind of a man who can make or fix just anything, with a little time to figure it all out. He can read things in a book and then go ahead and do them.

One thing he did was design a solar energy heating system for his and Marilyn's dream home — not your average expensive kind, but something brand new and radically different.

"Solar energy right now," he said," is where oil was 100 years ago.

"Marilyn never cared about anything but that house. It was her pride and joy. I'd have to watch. She was forever robbing both Peter and Paul to pay for that house. I'd complain I didn't have money for materials and she'd say, 'Well, I just happen to have a little money right here.' Then I'd find out she hadn't paid the electric bill."

"That just about sums it up," said Michael, his stepson, softly. "That house was her pride and joy."

"The day she got her first paycheck, we went down to Sears Roebuck to get it cashed. We were waiting there and suddenly she just burst into tears.

"I asked her what was the matter and she cried however did you let me do it?' When I was working, she'd come by the office and pick up my check and go cash it. Now she didn't really want to cash her own and she was worried about how I had been feeling all the time she was cashing mine."

MARY LOUISE Carson, 40, who with Marilyn led the fight to get women jobs in the mine, is a short, round-faced woman with thick cropped black hair, which she runs her hands over and over nervously as she talks.

"I had heard somewhere that the federal government had ordered the mines to hire women. I was working in the shirt factory and in two weeks' time I couldn't clear a $100. You can't raise a family on that."

The mine superintendent, she said, "told us to go somewhere else. He said the men didn't want women in the mine. I asked who was boss—him or the men. He said we couldn't shower with the men. I told him I didn't want to shower with the men."

To resolve that problem, the mine ultimately got a trailer for its women workers.

"The men were sort of bitter when we came in with all that seniority. Actually, they ought to give a medal to the women work the mine—and to all the men too."

After the accident, she too was asked if she were ready to quit.

"I told 'em I haven't got no place to go or I wouldn't be there in the first place.

"I was thinking, though, that the lawsuit had just come to nothing. I told that to one of the guys and he said, 'Oh no, Marilyn will get her name in the history books — being the first woman killed,' but that just doesn't seem like much swap for your life."

ABOUT SOME things, McCusker said, Marilyn was peculiar. She was afraid of thunder and lightning — so afraid that she wouldn't let Michael go near the windows during a storm.

"But she loved to watch the dynamite set off deep in the mine when it makes the earth rumble all around you. She just loved to watch that roof come down. Sometimes the men let her do it.

"She would have a hard time getting to sleep after her shift. She couldn't go to sleep unless she was touching me. I had to be there with her—so she could hold on and not be afraid. Then she could sleep. She was such a scaredy-cat.

"When she was working midnights, she'd get home just as I was getting up to start work. Unless I held her, she couldn't sleep. Sometimes I stayed in bed for hours with her so she'd get some rest.

"It really raised hell with my work schedule. I finally rigged up some lights on the house so I could work while she was working. One of the neighbors threatened to take a shot at me. I told him I had a rifle too."

The problems with discrimination aern't over. The company has notified Alan that he will not receive Marilyn's survivor benefits — contractually between 51 and 60 percent of her income — because he, the surviving spouse, is a man.

THE COMPANY has decided that only females get survivor benefits. Alan thinks that's another possible case for Arnold Miller's lawyers.

"I want you to know what people really think of coal miners — how really rotten it is," he said, his voice tense with bitterness." We refinanced our present house to get money for the new one. We took out some mortgage insurance in case of accident. When they found out Marilyn worked in the mine, they just canceled us. They won't insure coal miners but they want 'em to get that coal out.

"Marilyn always thought when they won that lawsuit that everything was all settled, but it isn't. That's not the way it is."

Alan McCusker sat, like a loose end, his eyes focused on some deep inner space, his hands opening and closing, gripping at the empty air.

"The worst of it is that things were better for us. Things were going well—and with one blow, it's all ended. I tell you that afternoon it happened, if it hadn't been for Michael — waiting at home—I would just have packed it all in.

"I haven't been back to the new house since. Can you imagine being afraid to go to your own house? There are things I didn't make plans for. I left them open to see what she would want. Now, I don't know what to do.

"I'll be all right. We'll be all right. I know that. I just don't know what I'll do after I finish the house."