

Miner Dives to Safety, But... *Tragic Scene Etched in His Mind*

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Philipsburg coal miner Buck Koptchak has spent the greatest part of the past four days thinking how good it is to be alive.

He's tried hard not to think at all.

If he does, it's far too easy to relive a terrifying moment Tuesday afternoon, when he looked up in the darkness of the Rushton Mine and made out a 30-foot section of roof rock peeling back toward him like a piece of ancient wallpaper coming unglued.

He remembers diving for cover, choking on thick black dust, scraping flesh from his knee.

His partner in that section of the mine, 35-year-old Marilyn McCusker of Coalport, doesn't remember anything. She was buried in Chadwick, N.Y., this morning.

"I was running the roof bolting machine," Mr. Koptchak recalled yesterday as he watched the steady rain from the window of his Decatur St. house. "I was going to work an hour overtime between shifts."

The time was precisely 3:15 p.m. He and Mrs. McCusker were just completing a regular shift of inserting steel rods into the mine roof to bind the layers of rock together.

She wasn't his regular helper. She was only filling in for the regular crew man who had taken the day off to drive his wife home from the hospital.

"Mrs. McCusker didn't want to work overtime," he said. "She was just standing there in the intersection (of the main tunnel and a heading) waiting for the rest of the crew to come by in the Jeep to go out."

As he sketched their relative positions at the time of the accident, Mr. Koptchak explained that the headings, or splits, are mine passageways that run perpendicular to

the main tunnel. Paralleling horizontal layers of bituminous coal, the headings are lined with pillars, from which the coal is methodically removed, working from the far ends of the split back toward the intersection.

Mr. Koptchak estimated that he was working on a roof area approximately 45 feet from Mrs. McCusker's position, when he heard her say, "Harry, the roof's dribbling over here."

"I turned and I saw it coming. The roof fell started further down the split—beyond where she was," he said, indicating a place on his drawing. "One big piece of slate

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tore loose. It pulled out four roof bolts."

Mr. Koptchak said he turned and dove for some props (roof supports) away from the main tunnel entrance. He remembers seeing Mrs. McCusker running toward the huge 4- by 18-foot bolting machine, which was parked at the intersection.

"I thought I had had it," he said in an almost inaudible voice. "When I hit those breakers, the first thing I thought about was my four kids."

The rest of the eight-person crew was just backing the Jeep into the main tunnel from a nearby heading when the rockfall occurred. While Mr. Koptchak was half-crawling, half-running the 60 feet through the mined-out coal pillar in which he had sought safety, the others were almost frozen in horror, assuming both forward miners had been killed.

"The crew was yelling and screaming for us," Mr. Koptchak said. "And then they saw me."

But when the coal dust cleared somewhat, it became evident that Mrs. McCusker hadn't escaped.

"This one big slab came down and half-crushed the bolter machine," Mr. Koptchak said. "She made it to the side of the machine, but the rock just wedged her down. They said at the hospital that she suffocated."

The crew set jacks and freed Mrs. McCusker in a matter of 10 minutes, Mr. Koptchak said. But there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she was dead.

The mine has been closed pending investigation of the accident by state and federal inspectors, and, in the meantime, Mr. Koptchak has had time to think—too much time.

A five-year veteran of Rushton, Buck Koptchak started at the Osceola Mills mine only a few months after his father was killed there in an accident identical to the one that occurred Tuesday.

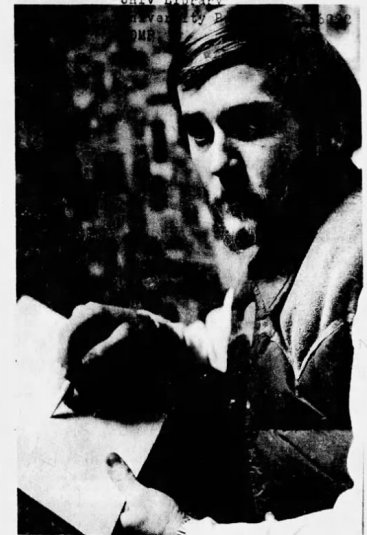
"My mother wants me to quit," he said yesterday. "But I'll be reporting back Sunday night."

Just like five years ago, his family needs the income and he doesn't know of any other well-paying jobs in the area.

"Rushton is one of the safest mines," he said simply. "There was no way this could have been prevented."

While Buck Koptchak unquestioningly cares very much about the death of his partner Tuesday, he remains firm in his conviction that "women don't belong in the mines. Their reflexes and reaction time aren't as fast as a man's," he said.

Then, thinking back again to that moment now indelibly etched in his mind, he added, "She seemed to hesitate when that rock started coming. Maybe she waited to see if I made it."



HOW IT HAPPENED: Buck Koptchak of Philipsburg, survivor of the fatal roof rock fall in the Rushton Mine at Osceola Mills, on Tuesday, describes the circumstances that led to the death of his partner, 25-year-old Marilyn McCusker of Coalport.

1979 Rushton Mine Fatality McCusker
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