



Jim Davis, The Arizona Daily Star

Paul Cantenella, 30, who suffered scrapes and bruises but "didn't break a nail," is visited at UMC by friend Bucky Metzger

Luckily for mine explorer, curiosity didn't kill

By Kim Mattingly Kelliher
The Arizona Daily Star

Based on the odds, Paul Cantenella should be dead or seriously injured.

The 30-year-old Tucsonan fell 30 feet down an abandoned mine shaft Wednesday and "didn't even break a nail."

"I'm really sore, and I can't really walk, but I didn't break anything," Cantenella said yesterday from his hospital bed at University Medical Center. "Nobody can believe it."

Except for scrapes along the left side of his body and a few bumps and bruises, Cantenella was not injured in his harrowing ordeal. He was released from the hospital yesterday afternoon.

The inadvertent spelunker was target-shooting with three friends about 35 miles northwest of Tucson Wednesday when he decided to explore a cave. The "cave" turned out to be the entrance to a vertical mine shaft - one of about 25,000 abandoned mines in Arizona, officials say.

State Mine Inspector Doug Martin said a study three years ago determined there are

2,000 abandoned mines in Pima County, many of which are dangerous.

Several of the old mines are in populated areas, he said. But he said the state has not had the money to ensure that they are properly secured.

The Pima County Sheriff's Department handles about three or four mine rescues a year, said Sgt. Rick Kastigar. And Martin said law enforcement and emergency agencies statewide handle an average of one mine rescue a month.

Most victims are not as lucky as Cantenella.

"An abandoned mine is an accident waiting to happen," said Martin. "Generally the result is death."

The Cantenella experience, while not deadly, is typical.

While hiking in the desert about 15 miles west of Red Rock, he and his three friends noticed the opening to what looked like a cave. Cantenella entered the cave alone and walked about 20 feet before coming to a fence.

He said he stepped through an opening in

the fence and began walking slowly toward what he thought was a continuation of the cave. What followed was a bumpy fall, darkness, and the stench of a dead animal.

The Tucsonan had tumbled into an abandoned mine shaft with a decaying javelina, which had fallen to its death a few days before Cantenella's fall.

While sheriff's deputies have maintained that Cantenella ignored the "barricade," he claims the mine was not secured and certainly not marked as dangerous.

Reasons always vary, Martin said, but "the big problem is that a mine opening is intriguing. People wonder, 'Are there bats in there, treasures?'"

Martin said Cantenella was lucky that the shaft was not as deep as many, which descend hundreds of feet, and that there were friends above who could go for help.

Craig Buebelie, 21, said he was nearby when he heard "rocks falling and a couple of moans." After determining what had happened, another friend, Joe Buflo, 27, tried to

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1991 Paul Cantenella rescued after fall into mine shaft



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Fall

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descend the shaft to rescue Cantenella.

Buffo went down about 12 feet before realizing the shaft was too deep. After a four-hour wait, he was extracted by a Pima County search and rescue team along with Cantenella.

Martin said the state mining inspector's office was allocated \$38,300 three years ago to address the problem of abandoned mines. But budget cuts have meant no further funding, and he said many areas of the state, particularly Pima County, need further attention.

The office is now pursuing a volunteer-based mine safety program.

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