

# THE *Miracle* OF Friendship

The miners couldn't know when they entered the dark and dreary recesses of the mine that their lives would be forever changed

BY JIM MUIR  
THE SOUTHERN

COULTERVILLE — This is a story about true friendship, acts of pure heroism and an abiding faith in God. It's also a story about lives entwined together forever.

Miners on the evening

shift at the Zeigler Coal Company Mine No. 11 near Coulterville, were eager to get their shift started on Friday, May 24, in anticipation of the long Memorial Day weekend only eight hours away. The day was much like any other for these miners, many of whom had spent 30-plus



PROVIDED

The miners were in this continuous miner machine when the roof of the mine entry collapsed on them. The machine is used to cut the coal. 'I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit afraid,' said trapped miner Raymond Smith.

years mining coal.

Miners entered the wash house that afternoon carrying their dinner buckets. They changed into their "pit clothes" while offering their usual daily greetings to co-workers, many they'd known and worked with for decades.

Of course there was also the ever-present kidding and good-natured exchanges before the miners stepped into the elevator that would lower them 250 feet into the ground to begin their shift.

The miners couldn't

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## TRAPPED: Miners survive horrific ordeal as tunnel collapses

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know when they entered the dark and dreary recesses of the mine that, before the shift was over, their lives would be forever changed. They also didn't know that within the next few hours some of them would become heroes and—for two men—their lives would hang in the balance. Everything looked normal.

After going underground, nine of the 75 miners who work on the evening shift at Zeigler No. 11 entered a mantrap for the 3½-mile journey to a working section of the mine. The crew arrived at their work area at approximately 4:30 p.m.

Once he reached the coal face, Kenny "Poon" Penrod, 56, of Herrin, who has 30 years of mining experience, did the exact same thing he does every working shift.

"I looked the area over and 'sounded' the top. I thought it looked good," Penrod said. "My buddy (Tom Jeter) and I looked it over and decided it was all right and I went in to mine it. Everything looked absolutely normal to us."

**A Massive Roof Fall**  
Only moments after Sharon printed her Web page on friendship, her husband was preparing to load the second shuttle car of the shift.

"My buddy Tom was standing behind me and then one of the buggies (shuttle car) was having trouble getting to the miner, so he went out to help," Kenny Penrod said.

"When the next buggy came I turned the conveyor on and all I could see was the top coming down. There was no chipping, no warning, no nothing. I had never seen anything like it before."

Penrod said the next few moments were like a blur. It wasn't until the dust cleared that he realized the magnitude of what happened.

He was trapped. "I took one step backwards and I guess I had my hands up in the air a little because the

next thing I knew I was on the ground," Penrod said. "I laid there for a few seconds and then I could see the lights on the miner were still burning. The next thing I tried to do was find my hard hat and light."

Penrod said the area he was trapped in was approximately 2 to 3 feet high, and 4 feet wide. He estimated it to be about 8 feet long.

"I crawled back and forth like a rat four or five times," Penrod said. "And then I heard (Tom Jeter) start screaming for me and I answered him and told him as far as I could tell that I was all right ... except I was trapped."

Penrod said the fact that the rock was actually on top of the buggy saved his life.

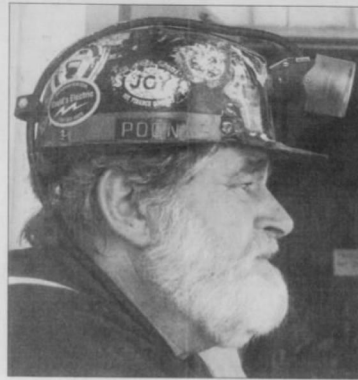
"If the buggy had not been there or if it would have fallen 30 seconds earlier it would have killed me instantly," Penrod said.

"The place that I was trapped in was under the rock that was hanging out over the side of the buggy. Even if the rock would have broken over the edge of the buggy it would have killed me."

Penrod said a few moments later he realized that Raymond Smith, who was running the shuttle car that was directly behind the miner was also trapped.

"When I heard them start calling for him and heard him answer, then I began talking back and forth with him," Penrod said. "I figured that Raymond had a chance to get out, but he was trapped inside the cab of the buggy with the canopy holding the rock off him. I thought it was going to fall again, me and Raymond both told the guys trying to rescue us that if we didn't make it to tell our families that we loved them."

**It was already a bad day**  
Raymond Smith of Valier had only returned to work for Zeigler Coal Company four weeks ago, following a 10 year absence from the mines. He had previously worked at Old



Miner Kenny Penrod knows that his safety hat alone wouldn't have saved him with the size of the rock that covered him. He credits a higher power.

Ben Mine 21 for 20 years.

Smith recalled the night of the roof fall as one where Murphy's Law was prevailing.

"It was an odd night and I was already having a bad day," Smith said. "The first time I got on the shuttle car I hit a corner and cut a cable in half and that really aggravated me. Then later I was driving a (mining nail) and hit my finger with a hammer and smashed it and it bled forever."

I remember telling the other buggy runner that I should just go on home right now. But I thought to myself that I've always been a Christian and God would see me through the night, that was the thought that came to my mind."

Smith said he also surveyed the top prior to taking the shuttle car to the face to be loaded. He also thought the top looked fine.

"I pulled under the miner and within seconds the roof came in, just boom, and then I heard the sound of the rock on top of the canopy," Smith said. "I had a little rock inside the cab with me but all I could see all the way around me was rock. I could hear Poon talking and that's when I realized that we were trapped. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit afraid, because I thought from past experience that it was going to fall again. It was then that I just gave it to the Lord and said 'If this rock stays up it's going to be by your hand.' After that I was pretty determined and focused on just trying to get out of there."

**The Rescue**

Tom Jeter doesn't mince words when he talks about the determination and efforts of the miners involved in the rescue. Jeter, of Coulterville,

was 10-15 feet away when the massive fall took place.

"I have to admit that I was excited. I was upset and I was mad," Jeter said. "I was mad that this happened on my watch and to my buddy. But once I got a positive response from Poon and Raymond when I yelled at them, I never had a doubt that we were going to get them out."

The problem facing the rescue efforts was the size of the fall—a fall unequalled by all the miners who witnessed it. Most roof falls consist of a huge combination of broken rocks and coal. However the roof fall that had Penrod and Smith trapped was one solid slab of rock that measured 72 feet long, 19 feet wide and 7 feet thick.

After failing in an attempt to tunnel in to the miners from the side, rescuers decided to go over the top of the massive fall and tunnel downward.

While fellow miners set props and jacks, Jeter and other miners went on top of the fall and discovered a crack in the massive rock. The miners began tunneling and made an opening

approximately 20 inches in diameter going toward the canopy of the shuttle car where Smith was trapped.

After a while they shined a light through an opening and Smith confirmed that he could see the light.

Within moments, Jeter went into the opening and finished clearing the path that allowed Smith to escape.

Approximately 15 minutes later, Penrod also was able to snake through the small opening.

"It was quite a celebration when both men finally got out," Jeter said. "It was very emotional and everybody just felt like they were totally drained."

**An Impromptu Prayer**

Paul Wayne Purdie, a veteran miner with 30 years experience had been among the rescuers who had worked feverishly to get Penrod and

Smith freed. Purdie, of Valier, cut short the celebration following the rescue by making a suggestion to his fellow miners.

"I think everybody recognized that we'd witnessed a miracle," Purdie would say later. "And I felt like we needed to offer a prayer of thanks."

Smith said he has no doubt that his life was spared.

"I give all the praise to God," Smith said. "I don't think it has anything to do with what we did, but just the grace of God that we came out alive."

Jeter, who risked his own life to crawl through the small opening, labeled himself as "not a religious guy." He added though, that the events of May 24 have changed him.

"In my mind both those individuals have got something left to do in their life, something that is left undone," Jeter said. "I've never been a religious person, I believe in God, but I can tell you that I believe more now."

**That Horse that Threw Us**  
Two days following the harrowing experience Penrod and Jeter brought their respective families together for a holiday/celebration dinner. It was during that dinner that Jeter made an offer to Penrod that showed his mettle not only as a coal-mining buddy but also as a human being.

"I had some vacation days turned in after Memorial Day, but I didn't want him to have to go back to work by himself. So I asked him if he minded me canceling my days off so we could go back to work together," Jeter said. "The way I look at it, that horse threw us but we've got to get back on it and ride it again. I didn't want him to have to ride by himself. I don't think I ever will understand all that happened, but I know it was a miracle."

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