

To Mark Bryant:

You have my permission to print my column called: The Pride of
a Coalminer.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Roger Kratochvil". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Roger Kratochvil

1-28-16

THE PRIDE OF BEING A COAL MINER

By Roger Kratochvil, Guest Columnist

First of 5 parts

For most of my early life growing up in a coal mining town, I was influenced by the values and principles of my coal mining family background. This series of articles attempts to highlight the pride of being a coal miner and being a member of a coal mining family. This was witnessed by me on a daily basis by observing my family, friends, neighbors, and others in this great industry. As you have heard before, I have always been a good listener to their tales, their interesting stories, and their life experiences. I never realized what I would eventually do with this vast knowledge gotten mostly from others. You see, I never worked in a coal mine, but I feel that same pride of those who did. My one visit underground to a working coal mine helped shape my future. From that one experience, I developed an attitude that college had to be for my future even though my family had no money to pay for it. This one experience underground was a tour visit to the Little Dog coal mine in Gillespie with George and Josie Popovich of White City. Fortunately I was young and thought brave as the experience did scare me, but it also gave me an appreciation of the conditions of working underground. Up until that time my understanding of the coal mining experience was by what the miners said in their conversations. Now I was able to see them in action bringing out the black gold from the mines. My visit underground this time was fun thanks to the predictable sense of humor of George. His humorous exchange with his wife was really funny as he tried to get a reluctant her to step on to the cage (elevator) for the trip down. I always remember how white the walls were at the underground entrance of the mine because of the white rock dust that was sprayed on the walls during the midnight shift to control the explosive coal dust, and how dark it was at the face of the mine or working area. I also remember how Josie was justified with her fear of getting on the cage. It was scary to get on to because it was open on all sides, so that you could see the walls go by as you descended 300 feet into the ground in a small area. I remember recognizing the voices of Red Kertis and "Boob" Kaganich working in the dark, but I could not see them. It was fun, exciting, and at the same time scary. But this one experience of a working mine caused me to break family tradition of both of my grandpas, dad, uncles, and brother Don as they all worked in the mines and loved it. My reaction was to enroll at Eastern Illinois State Teachers College in Charleston in August of 1956.

The coal miners love of working in the mines has always fascinated me. I know their ending up as coal miners was part family tradition and having a job. Danger lurked everywhere, lung diseases such as asthma or the future black lung could be your destiny after many years of mining. Coal dust was usually in every pore of your body and then there was always the dreaded threat of injuries. I knew a lot of people who sustained injuries from the more usual foot or hand ones to the more serious being squeezed between cars or suffering from a rock fall. Then there was the dreaded "black cloud" or roof slate to worry about that came down with no warning and fell on miners unexpectedly. Those crushing injuries were often fatal. My father in law once told me that his father was crushed in the mine after a hard life of working in the mines. As he laid on his death bed, his son told him that he was seriously injured with little hope of recovery. His father looked up at his son and said with an old German twist, "Ach! I about had enough" and he promptly died. This was always a threat over all miners heads as they worked and lived hard lives in order to put food on the family table, and they always lived it to the end.

THE PRIDE OF BEING A COAL MINER
BY ROGER KRATOCHVIL, GUEST COLUMNIST
PART 2

Most miners that I knew chewed tobacco. Mail Pouch or Red Man seemed to be the favorite brands. I thought it was a disgusting habit as I can remember relatives choking when the tobacco juice went down the wrong pipe and they choked for a few moments. That use to scare me but I finally got use to it. I later found out that most of them chewed because by chewing you had to breathe out of your nose, and that way you had some protection there to keep some of the coal dust out of your lungs. Most miners also were drinkers particularly of beer, whiskey, and wine. Those drinks were usually purchased at the neighborhood taverns as there were many of those. Many made their own beer(home brew) or wine. With no refrigeration in the early years, the miners keep it usually in the cistern. A cistern was a well where you piped water directly off of you homes roof into the cistern. I still remember when it would start raining, we had to run outside to turn off the gutter to the cistern for a short time while the rain washed the roof. Then the gutter was turned on so that the relatively clean water would go directly into the cistern. That water was seldom used for drinking, but was used for washing clothes. When relatives visited, going to the cistern meant going to get the home brew.

Speaking of neighborhood taverns, there were literally a large number of these taverns near the homes of its customers. They were not just on the main streets of the towns, but were actually in the neighborhoods too. Between Mt. Olive and White City, there were over 20 taverns. They all did a good business and many served free lunch for its customers. Some miners use to stop at the local tavern on the way to and from work. A popular combination of drinks was a "boilermaker." This was a shot of whiskey and a beer. Often the mines worked crazy schedules as you were not always sure they were working. In our very early days of mining, miners would mill around the taverns and when the mine whistle blew, they had to go to work. Also, the mines did not always work regularly during the summer because of the low demand for coal. The miners then had to live off of their gardens and what they could gather from hunting and fishing. Most people raised chickens or had a pig. Chicken was so plentiful

That you had chicken very often. I do not dislike chicken, but I have never ordered chicken in a restaurant. That almost sounds un-American, but I do like apple pie and Chevrolet. With the hundreds of banquets that I have attended, you know chicken is always the primary meat. We had chicken so often that I did not know you could prepare it that many ways. Fried chicken was very rare, but chicken soup and baked chicken with dressing was an every week meal.

In my public speeches that I make to clubs, banks, and other interested groups, people always ask me why I say that I liken coal miners to policemen. I have always found coal miners to be tough, brave, strong, and, most importantly, they always seem to stick together. Both are dangerous job and they view that danger as just a part of the job and it serves as a bonding feature. You have a problem with one policeman or coal miner, you have trouble with all of them. They sort of "circle their wagons." I think that is why their organized groups or unions are some of the strongest in the country. Growing up in the small village of White City, there very seldom was a presence of police because the citizens figured they could take care of any trouble. A problem with an out of town group being in one of the taverns, causing trouble, and then leaving vowing to bring back many of their friends to settle the dispute, usually was viewed as a challenge. When they returned they would be met with a large group who usually "convinced" them to go back to where they came from. That would not work today, but it served as a reminder that the coal miners would be willing to take care of business. All coal mining towns were like that. In Mt. Olive you had the southeast Slovak area, the northeast Croatian area, and the rest German area. They all protected their areas. My mom once told me that Fedor's Store in the southeast section of town had the best meat. Since people did not have good refrigeration, meat was usually purchased for one day only. Her family was German and one of their male children would be sent over to purchase the meat. When he came home, he would show the wear of being in a fight as he would have to fight his way out of the neighborhood. Since my mom had 9 brothers and one sister, several of the brothers would go the next time for the meat purchase. This was not unusual as the ethnic groups protected their neighborhoods. In later years when romance occurred between people from different ethnic neighborhoods, the problem was still there. There are many stories of ethnic crossovers after many of them went to school together even though at one time there were, Catholic

two Lutheran, and a public grade school in Mt. Olive and one in White City that served neighborhoods. There also were rural schools for the farm kids.—

THE PRIDE OF BEING A COAL MINER

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PART 3

So, who were these coal miners? They could be any male member of the family. They came in all shapes and sizes. Of course, today there are a number of women who work in the mines. Most often they were not big in stature, but they had to be strong to do this “backbreaking” work. I was bigger than my dad in the eighth grade, but he always was tougher than me. That respect was learned early in my life.

The old hand loading days were a time when the pick and shovel were the basic tools of mining. Dynamite or black powder charges were used to blast the coal out and unlike today when you have machinery that does a lot of the work, miners had to shovel the coal into the small mine cars that ran on a rail. In the early days of coal mining, you were paid by the number of cars that you could fill in a day. That is why many miners took their young sons into the mine at an early age of 10 or more. Eighth grade education was probably the peak of your formal education as these young boys would have to go work with their dad. Dad mining coal by himself might result in a couple of cars a day, but with a couple of son, you could double or triple your pay. Eighth grade graduation in these neighborhoods was a big event because for many, this would be the limit. Some went on to high school and even some others, college. College was often only available to young boys who’s families could afford it. Once in a while, a boy would go into the mine after grade school, work a couple of years, then decide to go on to high school. Johnny Orr, the former star athlete at Taylorville High School, college star, and University of Michigan head basketball coach, once told me that he remembered playing the Mt. Olive Wildcats and some of their 20 year old seniors as he referred to them. In fact, we lost a South Central Conference football championship in the 1920s because of a player being too

old who played. All of these coal mining towns including Taylorville faced that same problem at one time or another. Orr told me this story with a smile on his face as he remembered with fondness those very competitive games with the Wildcats, Benld, and others.

No matter how strong you were, there was always that element of danger mentioned earlier. The one sound you did not want to hear was the mine whistle blowing at a time not scheduled, because it was the sound of a miner down in the mine. That sound was always a sign of urgency. Wives and mothers and their children would then rush to the mine to await the cage to come up and see who was injured, or worst, killed. That was what families all lived with because it went with the job. An injury or worst would put the family in jeopardy of not having any money coming in to the home. You have to remember that there was no disability insurance or any kind of insurance that you could afford. The first kinds of insurance were provided by the Bohemian, Slovak, Croatian, or other lodges that each town was part of. Some of those insurances are still in existence with being around for over 140 years. Many of those local lodges also provided social activities and some even offered May Day activities. I grew up with little or no medical insurance. That was the way it was. Some of the basic medical insurances did not cover very much and cost only a couple of bucks a month. One of my favorite insurance agents, the late "Shine" Dragovich approached me in 1960 when I was starting out here as a teacher and coach of three sports at a whopping salary of \$4200. a year. He said he had a policy for me that did not cost very much, but it did not cover much either. I kidded him about that until his death, as I remembered him and that offer fondly.

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PART 4

Speaking of the danger of working in the mines, the miners have come a long way in the development of lights for their hats to see where they were working. The earliest miners actually had a lighted candle in place on the front of their hats. If you ran into black damp gases like methane, your open flame on your hat would immediately let you know it was present. Of course you would have to keep an eye on the cage with the parakeet in it as some of the earlier miners used these parakeets to detect gas. Later it was not much better as carbide lamps were used and they also had an open flame. Carbide was a rock substance that when mixed with water it would form a gas and with a flint to strike it, would become a bright flame like a flashlight with an open light. Carbide was also valuable as a cleaning material for open commode toilets that some folks had in their homes for use so that they did not have to outside at night to the outhouse. Mothers would put a little carbide dust in the toilet water to clean it and of course the water and the carbide would mix and form a small pocket of gas in the bowl. There is an old story about an east end coalminer sitting on his pot with the carbide/water mix in the bowl and he was smoking a cigarette. Well, he mistakenly tossed it under him into the bowl it blasted him off of the pot. He had to have stitches you know where, and he probably learned a valuable lesson. Go outside next time where you were only concerned with the cold in the winter and the spiders in the summer.

Many years ago new coal miners had to go through a "rite of passage" or more commonly known as an initiation. Young coal miners were given a "greasing" on their first day. You can use your imagination as to what body part the greasing took place. They do not do that anymore, but at one time it was sort of looked forward to, because after that you were one of the boys.

Young boys were expected to go into the mine as soon as they could get their miner papers. It was an opportunity where fathers and sons could work together and maybe bond a little bit. In that way, it was good as it was difficult

to find quality time with your father. This way you were providing something for the family and that was good. Young men were expected to give 90 % of their income to the family and to keep only 10%. My father told me he had to do that until he got married at the age of 25. It was expected. Of course every family was not the same, so the expectations were sometimes different from family to family.

There was a great comrade-ship between the miners. Besides working in the mines, they had pit committee meetings and a lot of social activities that were all locally based. Often the local tavern provided a newspaper and a place to play cards. Dances, weddings, and other social activities usually did not involve invitations, but it was expected that everyone was invited. Local nationality clubs in the neighborhoods provided many of these activities. In White City, it was the Pokrok 355 lodge of the Czech Society of American, an insurance company. In other towns they had the same type of groups and that was the major part of their social life.

Many of the coal miners had nicknames acquired as children. There are some people I have known all of my life and I still don't know their real first name. Every nickname has a history of its own and many of those are interesting. Some sounded like nicknames, but were actually their nationality name for their American proper name. Good friend Puda Vuckovich use to refer to many of his friends from White City by their nicknames, and he was frustrated when someone not from White City did not know who he was talking about. I was born and raised out there and I am still learning some of those names. Anne Zupsich Morris, formerly of White City, and now from Taylorville, once wrote a small book listing all of those names like a directory of nicknames.

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PART 5

Many of those nicknames go back nearly 100 years since these ethnic areas go back that long. In the German and Slovak sections of Mt. Olive the same could be said to be true. Since there were a number of mines in town at one time or another, most of the citizens were tied to one mine or another. Remember most of the early coal miners in Mt. Olive were of German descent and it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that central European citizens came to this area. Mining was the preferred occupation most available to them. Also, many of these immigrants were encouraged to settle here at that time, so that the German cliques in the mines could be broken up. That was interesting because these same immigrants then created their own cliques with the Bohemians, Serbians, Montenegrans, Slovaks, Croatians, Blue Ridge Yankees, and others creating their own little neighborhood groups. The Slovaks in the southeastern section of Mt. Olive, Croatians in the northeast, and the Germans in the rest of the town. In White City it was the Montenegrans, Serbians, Bohemians, and Yankees doing the same thing. They were all expected to marry, but marry only someone from their group. This never lasted as we all know that love is blind, and before long, marriage across nationality lines began taking place. It was not easy at first, but after a while they accepted it. As an old timer once said to me, "With this inter-marrying, they made good stock."

Organizations like the Turner Hall/Mt. Olive Gymnastic Society or Turnfrein), Bohemian Lodge, Gavruns Hall, Liederkranz choir were at one time closed organizations.

Even the fire department at one time was limited to one nationality membership. Some of these groups had a two no vote policy. If you were put up for membership and two members voted against you, you could not become a member. That way, closed membership was insured. That is no longer true as most organizations are happy to find people interested in them.

I guess you have figured out by now that I have a lot of respect for coalminers and have always appreciated the stories about their lives. Their lives were hard and too often short.

I like to end this series on a lighter side as a friend of mine told me a joke about a tough coal miner many years ago. The old coal miner shuffled in to town leading an old tired mule. Mules were often used in the mines because they were durable and reliable in pulling the small coal cars. They headed to the best saloon in town as he probably had 16 or 17 to chose from. He walked up to the saloon and tied his old mule to the hitching rail. As he stood there, brushing some of the dust from his face and clothes, a young tough gunslinger stepped out of the saloon with a gun in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other.

The young gunslinger looked at the weak old man and laughed, saying, "Hey old man, have you ever dance?" The old man looked up at the gunslinger and said, "No, I never did dance.....never really wanted to."

A crowd had gathered as the gunslinger grinned and said, "Well, you old fool, you're gonna' dance now," and started shooting at the old man's feet. The old miner, not wanting to get a toe blown off, started hopping around like a flea on a hot skillet. Everybody was laughing, fit to be tied.

When his last bullet had been fired, the young gunslinger still laughing, holstered his gun and turned around to back into the saloon. The old man turned to his pack mule, pulled out a double-barreled shotgun, and cocked both hammers. The loud clicks carried clearly through the air.

The crowd stopped laughing immediately. The young gunslinger heard the sounds too, and he turned around very slowly. The silence was almost deafening. The crowd watched as the young gunman stared at the old timer and the large gaping holes of those twin barrels.

The barrels of the shotgun never wavered in the old man's hands, as he quietly said, "Son, have you ever kissed a mule's derriere?" The gunslinger swallowed hard and said, "No sir...but....I've always wanted to."

There are two lessons for us all here: 1. Don't waste ammunition and 2. Don't mess with old coal miners.

About the author(February, 2016)

Roger Kratochvil was born in White City on May 10, 1938. He is the son of Louis and Norma Kratochvil and had two brothers, Louis(Junior) and Donnie and a sister Mary Ann. Junior and Donnie are deceased as are his parents.

Roger is a graduate of White City Grade School in 1952, Mt. Olive High School 1956 and Eastern Il. University in 1960. He holds two master degrees. He was awarded a Masters Degree in Secondary Education-History in 1966 from Southern Il. University and a Masters Degree in Educational Administration from the University of Illinois(Springfield branch) in 1984.

He is married to the former Mary Scheller and they are the parents of Jane, founder of Infinite Connections, an eRate consulting company. Tim, Principal of Pawnee, Il. Jr and Sr High School His wife, Wendy, a former medi-vac helicopter nurse at Granite City and now cardiac nurse at St. John's Hospital in Springfield, and they are parents of two boys, Jack 13 and Luke 11 and a daughter Olivia 6 year old

Roger is presently the only President in the history of the Mt. Olive Schools Academic Foundation since its creation in 1996, Former Chairman of the Macoupin County Housing Authority and now a commissioner, and is a retired board trustee at Eastern Il. University serving as Chairman twice.

He has chaired the Annual Christmas Celebrity Bell Ringers for the Mt. Olive Food Pantry and serves on a meals on wheels delivery team with his wife, Mary.

He is a member of Zion Lutheran Church of Mt. Olive having served in many capacities including chairing the committee for celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the church.

He was inducted into the Illinois High Schools Coaches Hall of Fame in Chicago 1980 and was inducted into the Eastern Il. University Athletic Hall of Fame in 1998.

He has served as a member of the College Advisory Commission for Lincoln Land College and been Chairman of the Macoupin County Sheriff's Scholarship selection committee.

He is a retired social studies teacher, high school football, basketball, and baseball coach from Mt. Olive High School.(34 years) He was a member of the Illinois High School Association Baseball Advisory committee and was elected by central Illinois Principals to represent them as a member of the Illinois High School Association Legislative commission, the governing board of the IHSA. He also served as Mt. Olive high school principal for ten years retiring in 1995.

He is a speaker specializing in sports, labor history, education, and local history. He has authored 31 newspaper columns like White City history, For the Love of Trains, Interesting Personalities I have Met, Pride of a Coalminer, Remembering the Class of 1956, I am a Teacher, and others. He served as a St. Louis Cardinal scout for over 20 years.