

The **Portage Area Historical Society**  
**Newsletter**



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www.portagepa.us

July 2013



**O**ur February feature story came from the hand-written notes of John Kovach, and his story continues in this newsletter. With the amount of documentation and the detail of John's script, readers might think that he spent his entire career in the mines. Not so.

John was born in Puritan in 1923 and lived "up the creek" most of his life. His mother immigrated from Hungary and after her first husband was killed in the mines, she married John's father who was also killed in the mines. John began working in the Puritan Mine at the age of 12 and continued working there until he went off to serve in WWII. Due to a bad back, he was unable to return to the mines and spent the remainder of his working career in other professions. So how did John know so much about mining? Family members told us that John would talk to anyone

willing to share their knowledge about our local mines and mining. He documented and sketched everything. Had he not died in 1997, he would have continued to write about our coal mining history. We are most grateful to John for the treasure of information he left us.

(follow John's narrative by looking at his drawing at the bottom of this page and his list of mines at the side)

#1 - Facing the highway at the Bluebird tittle was a large water gauge that looked like a giant clock with big numbers on it. The gauge showed the depth of the water in the mine in feet. When the gauge showed a large number it would automatically start the water pumps. When the number went down, it turned off the pumps.

#3 - The E-seam at the Jail Bird mine was level with the railroad but it was built with a slope entrance because they wanted the tittle to be high and long. They had plans to build coke ovens under the tittle, though this never happened. E-coal is best suited for making coke.

#4 - The Red Bird Mine was a slope mine that worked very steadily even when most of the other mines were idle. Every working day they loaded 18-20 fifty ton railroad cars of coal. They had a good order from the steam boat companies.

#5 - The Ghost Curve Mine on the upper end of Red Bird was the site of a massive rock fall. As the story was told, two men went to work one morning but never came home. Many people believed that the two men are still under the fallen rock. Some believe they got on the local train and went back to the old country, though no one saw them go and no one ever checked to see if they made it to Europe. World War I was going on and everybody was much

The letters after each coal mine listed at the right can be found on John's depth chart below.

Our <sup>part</sup> 2  
 Coal  
 Mines  
 Up the Creek

**UP THE CREEK**

**Blue Bird**

1. Bluebird - C
- Miller Shaft**
2. Miller Shaft - B
3. Jay Bird (Jail Bird) - E

**Red Bird**

4. Red Bird - C
5. Red Robin -  
 Ghost Curve Mine - E

**Fiddler's Green**

6. Beachly #6 - D
7. \* Little Onion
8. Beachly #2 - C
9. Fiddler's Green - D
10. \* Big Onion
11. Hog Hole - E
12. Robin's Nest - E
13. White Elephant - C

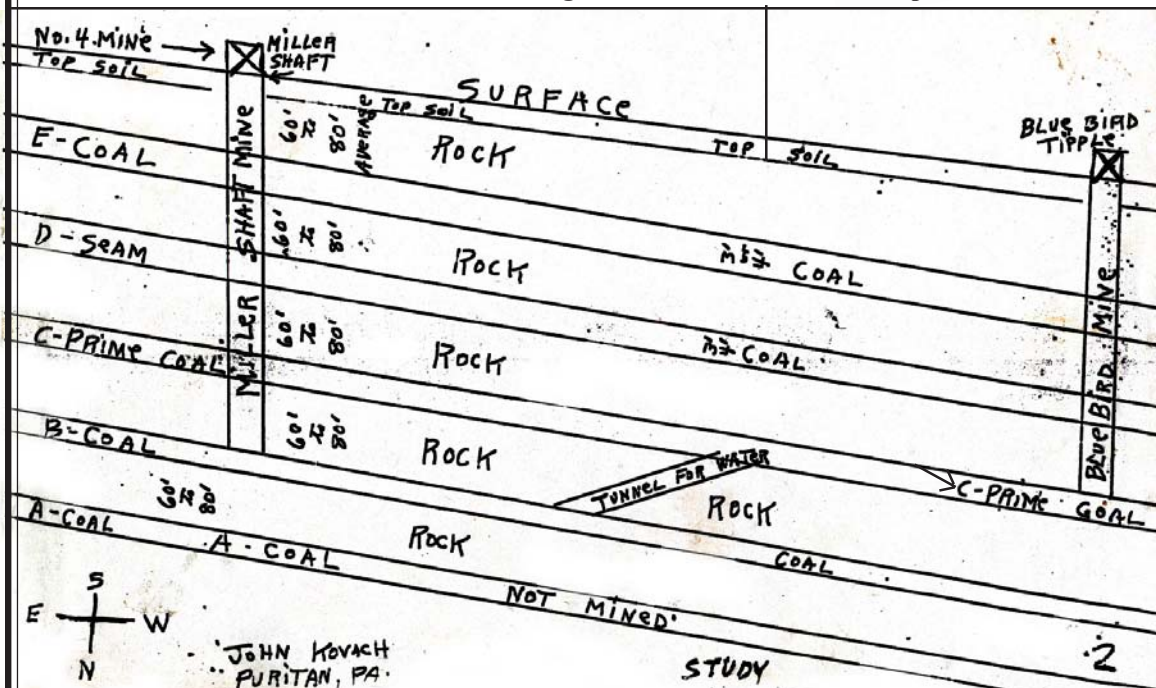
**Puritan**

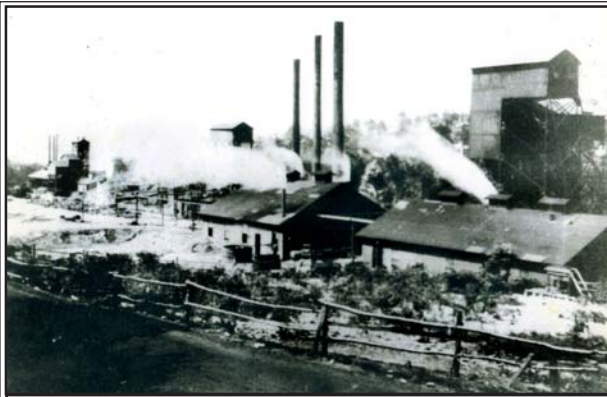
14. \* Puritan
15. Beachly #7 - D
16. Puritan Shaft - B
17. \* Big Apple
18. Pearce Lower - C
19. Pearce Upper - E
20. Wild Card (Wildcat) - C
21. Sauerkraut - E
22. Old Slope - B
23. New Slope - B
24. Penker - B
25. Buda - C
26. Pest - C
27. Mustard Factory - E

**Martindale**

28. Himes - E
29. Snowdrift - (New Drift) - B
30. Pee Wee - C
31. Beachly #5 - A
32. Harmony - D
33. White Weasel - C
34. Last Chance - B
- \* Bouchers Mine Puritan - D
- \* Hopfer - E
- \* Goat - E
- \* Weaver - E

Using Stanley Stovich's list of mines from the 3-D mining map (found on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the museum) and John Kovach's documentation, one can see the depth of each of the 34 mines that operated up the creek. There are a few discrepancies in the names of the mines.





occupied. Lewis Vasas, a retired coal miner from Martindale, told me that his dad said a whole crew of men, five or more, was lost in this mine and that their bodies were never recovered.

When the entrance of the mine caved in a mule was trapped inside. There was a small opening into the mine opposite the Beachly # 6 Mine tipple. I was told that miners would pass this area everyday and, feeling sorry for the mule, feed it handfuls of grass and leaves from the trees. Eventually it died from starvation. If this happened today they would search for the men until they were found and even the mule would have been brought out alive.

Back in the 20s and 30s few people had automobiles and almost everyone from “up the creek” walked to Portage. When walkers came near the Ghost Curve Mine some became very frightened, especially at night. Some even reported hearing voices.

#13 - The White Elephant Mine had a bore hole drilled somewhere near the sand house. They would shovel sand into the bore hole and it would fill the sand cars in the mine at a depth of about 150'. This mine had three steam boilers. The one installed at the Caldwell Avenue school was used to heat the building for many years.

#16 – The Puritan Shaft Mine had a mule barn inside the mine that held 20 mules. Once these mules were taken into the mine, some of them never saw daylight again. During the big coal mine strike of 1928, the mules were brought out at night through the Old Slope Mine entrance and put to pasture until the strike ended.

**Share your memories, photos, and memorabilia with us and we'll share them with the community.**

The Puritan Mine shaft generated its own electricity with its own steam boilers. This electricity was also used for its company houses. Every working day the mine would turn off the electricity to the houses at 7:00 a.m. and at 5:00 p.m. would turn it back on. They needed all the power for the mine.

#24 - The Penker Mine went north for a number of miles and cut through to one of the Benscreek Mines.

#29 - During WWI the New Drift Mine was owned by the Martindale Coal Co. All of its buildings were painted orange: the mule barn, the blacksmith shop, the large shelter over the drift mouth and the tipple – all orange.

#31 - In Martindale at the Beachly #5 Mine there was an entrance into a clay mine that was level with the tipple. Workers loaded gondola cars with clay. This was the same kind of clay that brickyards used for making bricks and other clay products.

#33 – The White Weasel coal was emptied into the railroad cars at the Last Chance tipple. It was constructed to keep the C-Prime coal separated from the Last Chance B-Miller coal.

**Mines Under the Highway:**

The Miller Shaft Mine crosses under the highway at a depth of about 400'.

The Jail Bird Mine goes under the highway in the Red Bird area. (almost under Eney's House) The mine entrance is only about 5' under the surface of the highway.

The Ghost Curve Mine goes under the highway on the upper end of Red Bird area at a depth of about 30'.

The Robin's Nest Mine and the Hog Hole Mine (2 entrances) left bumps on the road surfaces.

Beachly #7 Mine goes under the highway at a depth of about 25'.

Puritan Shaft Mine goes under the highway at a depth of about 200'

The Old Slope Mine goes under the highway at a depth of about 60'. In the 70s it caved in ~8' from the highway.

The New Drift Mine at the top entrance of Beck's Lane goes under the highway at a depth of 20'. It caved in on the north and south sides of the highway.

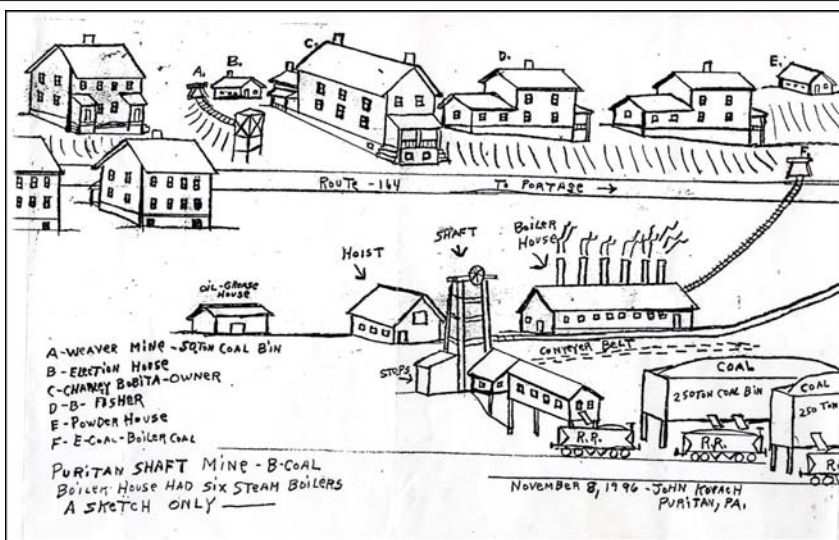
**Water Dams:**

Clean water was of utmost importance for the coal industry as sulfur water would destroy their steam powered equipment.

Behind the gas station at Fiddler's Green was a water dam built by one of the coal companies. On warm summer days the dam was filled with swimmers.

**From John's collection of photos - most ca 1923:**

**Top 2 mines: Blue Bird Mine on top left of photo Miller Shaft in front - 2nd photo: Red Bird Mine. Middle: Beachly #6 Mine - 4th: Fiddlers Green Mine - Bottom: Drift shaft opening of Fiddlers Shaft Mine. Notice how close to the highway this opening is. It has collapsed several times over the years. If you drive up Route 164 your car will dip at this spot on the road.**



### John's many sketches show the layout of the villages & their mines.

Alongside the road that went to the White Elephant Mine at the bottom of Hog Hole Hill was a large metal water tank about 30' wide by 20' high. Johnstown Coal & Coke used this water to operate steam equipment at their mines (1930s-40s).

Puritan had a large wooden water tank made from Douglas fir wood. The water came from the springs and the dam at the top of the hill. This water was also used by the Sauerkraut, Wildcat, and Puritan Shaft Mines.

There was a water dam beside the Buda Mine that was used by the Buda, Pest, New Slope, and Penker Mines.

Opposite the church in Martindale was another water dam. This was the reservoir built many years before the *\*Ice Block Dam* (see pg 4). A 4" cast iron pipe is still under ground along the side of the old railroad bed. During the summer months this dam was used by swimmers.

### Mines Are Connected:

Years ago a person could enter the Miller Shaft Mine and walk underground to the Puritan Shaft Mine, continue to the Old Slope Mine and onto the New Drift Mine coming outside in Puritan. Or he could continue walking in the New Drift Mine which goes under Gigguetown and towards Cedar Swamp and come out there. Today all the mine water runs through these areas and empties out at Blue Bird.

### St. Patrick's Day Flood – 1936:

The streams were overflowing everywhere because of the melting snow and the heavy rains.

Water ran into the entrance of the Old Slope Mine and found its way into the Miller Shaft Mine and seeped into the D-seam of the Goat Mine at Fiddlers Green. Management, alarmed by the volume of water, sent men and equipment to block off the entrances at both places

Many of the dams – Martindale, Buda, Fiddler's Green and others were destroyed. Water washed away the Buda and the New Slope Tipples. They were never rebuilt.

### Other Facts:

The ten tile double houses in Fiddlers Green were all built in the year 1918.

The width of the tracks in the different mines and the distance from track to track was not consistent. The Penker Mine had the widest width at 42" and the Last Chance and White Weasel the narrowest at 30".

The railroad steam engines traveling the tracks would throw hot sparks from the smoke stacks and start forest fires. Acres of land

along the tracks had no vegetation. The Puritan Shaft Mine mule barn caught on fire a number of times. In Martindale, the roof of a house caught fire.

If a miner used a pick and shovel to load his coal, it was called pick coal. When a cutting machine cut the coal, it was called machine coal. John wrote that in the year 1940, he was paid 98¢ a ton for machine coal and \$1.10 a ton for pick coal. He had to pay for his own tools and explosives and he had to pay to have his pick sharpened.

William Discavage, a retired coal miner from Martindale, told me that he got a job on company work at the Last Chance Mine in 1927. Company work was loading rock and timbering inside the mine. He was paid 25¢ an hour – that's \$2.00 a day.

### And John's stories continue...

The Kovach family has kindly given us permission to duplicate their father's documentation and sell it as a booklet for a fundraiser. Check our website in the fall for more information.

### Austin Rodgers

During the Portage Area High School Awards Day program in May, historical society President Irene Huschak presented Austin Rodgers with a plaque of appreciation for his 1700 community service hours at the Station Museum. His dedication and enthusiasm towards the Miniature Mainline has been amazing. Over the last six years Austin has done 85% of the detail work on the layout, spent his own money to buy materials, and has done Saturday programs for the public. Austin, we are most appreciative to you and thank you for your endeavors.



This picture shows Austin sitting in the Station Museum office wearing his PRR Station Master's uniform. He purchased items of clothing and the accessories at flea markets and on the Internet to put together his outfit.

### From our Readers:

Janet Folajtar, Pittsburgh, PA: My grandmother, Florence Moudy Hughes, was born in 1896. She was the daughter of William (Bill) Moudy and Orlena Deihl and the wife of William (Bill) Hughes. I believe that Bill Moudy had a hardware or lumber store and built houses in the area. Bill Hughes was involved in establishing the Portage Bank and was on the school board. The 1920 census shows that the family lived on Moudy Hill.



Bob Sease added this: The picture was taken in front of a building at 903 Main Street across from the ChatterBox. Main Street was bricked about 1913 so this photo predates that.

Visit our Website at  
[www.portagepa.us](http://www.portagepa.us)

Carol Paterick  
Web Master

Previous newsletters are archived here. Only members get recent editions mailed to them.

A reader asked this question, "Was the bar from the Mountain House Hotel sold to a hotel in Las Vegas?" The Stefanko family who once owned the Mountain House Hotel told us this, "The only thing sold to a restaurant / hotel from our building were the booths and they went to a restaurant in Philadelphia. However, the bar that was in the Keystone Hotel did go to Las Vegas."

We are in need of mannequins. When the old railroad station roof leaked, we lost all of the mannequins that were stored there.

\* *The Keystone Hotel was previously called the Diehl House*

Marie Diehl Cole of Littleton, CO recently contacted the historical society for information about her father, Harry Diehl. Marie, who is writing a book, needed some pictures of the Diehl House, the large hotel that once stood at the site of the S&T Bank on Main Street. Marie wrote, "My father lived in Portage for a time and owned a livery stable, a boarding house and a saloon. His business caught on fire and was destroyed so the Diehl's moved to Washington D.C. At some time, they moved back to Portage and purchased the Diehl House."



Liesa Helfer, Bloomfield Hills, MI: I loved this issue of the newsletter. I learned so much about mining, thanks to what you published. At one point my great-grandfather, Gustav Hermann Robert Groke, owned the "Redbird" and "Blue Bird" mines. The family lived at 900 Caldwell and donated the land 2 doors down for the First Lutheran Church.

Jerry Yancisin: The feature, "Our Coal Mines," was particularly interesting to me. Steve Gavlak's friend John Kovach did a great job describing the various mine occupations and mining life during his time. The article's explanation of things that probably seem so ordinary to Steve and John's generation are fascinating to me. Our generation, at least me, took for granted that our fathers/friends worked in the mines and know little of the daily routines associated with that environment.



The newsletter article paints a picture and puts a face on the "life in the mines."

Steve Gavalak said that if a man did not have enough money to buy his lady friend a ring, he would make it from the same kind of nail that was used to shoo a horse.

Also from Steve: The Martindale Reservoir was once called the *\*Ice Block Dam*. Blocks of ice were cut from it in the winter, covered with sawdust then stored underground. Before electricity, Joe Stager, the iceman back then, would deliver ice to homes. The buried ice lasted all summer.

#### Visitors:

The summer months bring a stream of visitors to our small railroad museum. Watching the video "63 Men Down" are Tobey, Evan and Sophie Becquet (Ebensburg) with grandmother Chris Bodenschatz (New Germany) and A. P. Schdfer (Marietta, OH).



#### Memorial Plaque

What better way to remember a loved one than with a gold plaque displayed at the Station Museum? Plaques can be purchased for \$50, \$100, \$500, and \$1,000. Three plaques recently added to the board are for Patrick & Mary Lou George, Regis & Irene Huschak, and Mary Kowalczyk.

#### Upcoming Events:

In August - **Artwork of the late June Voyzey** - free admission  
 October 20 - **"Next Generation of Native American Dancers"** - Tickets \$5 - reservation only - seating limited - call 814-736-9223 (this newsletter gives PAHS members first chance for tickets)



In March the Portage Station Museum was a "featured site of interest" for the K-Love radio station. Peter Kratz, regional manager, traveled from NJ to interview our board president and the broadcast was aired several times over the last few months.

#### 2013 Collectible

Sassy Sisters Restaurant, the latest collectible, is now on sale at the museum, the library, and online. All collectibles sell for \$16. This building opened as a car agency in the 20s and housed many different businesses until it closed as a restaurant on December 31, 2012.



PAHS Board - Irene Huschak-*President/Education Coordinator*; Ruth Richardson-*Vice President*; Mary Kostan-*Recording Secretary*; Barbara Havrilla-*Corresponding Secretary/Memberships*; Charles Edwards-*Miniature Mainline*; John Havrilla, Pat Fedorko, Judy Smith, Rose Sral, Judy Dubreucq, Michele Jaikes, Frank Yurchik and (HM) Betty Cann

Newsletter by Irene Huschak

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