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His Blood Runs Coal

Even with a B.S. in business, Phil Walker prefers his black-collar job in the mines

BY ROBERT L. KAISER | VIRDEN, ILLINOIS | 2001

The coal mine in Virden, Ill., is 350 feet straight down, a one-way trip for the careless and the unlucky. Miner No. 428 has every reason not to go, including a ticket out of the mine that very few others have: a college degree. So why is he here, standing in line to board a hoist that will lower him for the midnight shift?

"It just gets in your blood, I think," Phil Walker says.

Don't expect a better explanation. Walker, 48, has cleaned up after death, seen his best friend nearly buried alive, watched co-workers succumb to black lung, been laid off three times--once for 6 1/2 years--and last winter barely escaped losing his job a fourth time. On March 14, just 10 days before the mine was to close, Central Illinois Light Co. announced that it would continue purchasing coal from the Crown II Mine--at least for now.

And yet Walker has gone back every time he has been called, with the decision to return proving difficult only once. When Freeman United



Coal Mining Co. called him in October 1997, and asked if he wanted his old job back, Walker asked for a couple of days to think about it. And he and his wife, Carlene, sat down to talk.

By then it had been 11 years since Walker had worked at Crown II and 6 1/2 years since he had lost his most recent mining job, at the Monterey No. 2 Mine in Albers. In the meantime Walker had suffered heart problems and undergone quadruple bypass surgery. He had finished work toward a bachelor's degree in business administration, opening up a world of seemingly endless job opportunities. These were all good reasons not to go back into the mines.

But last March, after Crown II received an 11th-hour reprieve, one of those feeling lucky to have a job mining coal on the graveyard shift was a man with a college diploma in his desk drawer and a bottle of emergency heart medicine tucked next to the leftover spaghetti in his lunch box.

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Walker, a short, stocky man with eyeglasses spotted from the hot-spitting metal he cuts with a torch, is the unlikeliest coal miner, a butcher's son who moved to Carlinville when he was 7. Nobody could have said then that coal mining was in his blood; not a single member of his family ever had been a miner of anything. But after Walker graduated from high school, where he served in student government, sang in three plays and aspired to college and a career in business, things changed.

At Lewis & Clark Community College in Godfrey, he found the woman



who would become his wife, a tall girl with a big laugh and a good two inches on Walker. ("I fell in love first," he says. "She didn't like short guys.") But he was unable to find his calling, and he became intrigued by the exploits of a friend who had gone to work at Crown II.

"The coal industry was booming," Walker recalls. "It was right after the oil crunch in the early '70s. I thought I could end up as a superintendent in a coal mine."

After earning an associate's degree from Lewis & Clark, Walker enrolled at the University of Illinois and tried to put himself through school doing carpentry work and other odd jobs but dropped out after a year.

In 1979, Walker went to work at Crown II, the 428th miner hired there. "I liked it," he says. "It was exciting, a challenge, a different environment."

But soon the industry changed. "Oil prices came down and the coal industry went boom," Walker says.

Fresh from earning a second associate's degree, this one in coal-mining technology, the father of three was laid off in 1982 when the mine lost a major contract. He was back within 90 days, but four years later he was laid off once again when Crown II became more mechanized in keeping with a nationwide movement in the mining industry to reduce coal-production costs.

Mechanization has changed the face of coal mining, which once drove the economy of southern Illinois. Today mines in Illinois--there are



about 20, down from 50 in 1980 and 35 in 1990--employ fewer than 4,700 people after a peak of 18,000 in 1980, said Taylor Pensoneau, president of the Illinois Coal Association. Nationwide the number of mines and miners has plunged since 1923 even as production has increased to more than 1 billion tons a year.

But mechanization is not the only threat to mining jobs, nor is it the greatest. Clean-air laws have had a huge impact, especially in Illinois. The coal mined Downstate is the high-sulfur variety that pollutes the air when burned. While many power plants in Indiana and other nearby states have installed scrubbers and other technology to meet strict federal emissions standards, most in Illinois have not, Pensoneau said. In fact, two-thirds of Illinois coal goes out of state while in-state plants burn mostly low-sulfur Western coal.

Less-optimistic people might call coal mining a dying industry, but here in the small towns of southern Illinois, they keep the faith.

"There's renewed interest in coal because of the California energy crisis and natural gas and oil prices," Pensoneau says. For the first few months of 2001, production statewide was up 15 percent over the same time last year, he says. Some small mines have expanded. And in June, Gov. George Ryan signed a \$3.5 billion energy package aimed at rejuvenating the industry.

Through it all, most miners still hope against hope that they'll be called back whenever this filthy, fickle work jilts them yet again. In rural areas it's virtually impossible to find any other work that pays as well; nationally coal miners average between \$45,000 to \$50,000 a year, according to the National Mining Association.



"I scrounged around trying to make a living," Walker says of being laid off. "Nobody [outside the mining industry] wanted to hire you because they figured that if you got called back you'd return to the mines."

Having made \$12 an hour at Crown II, Walker didn't try to fool prospective employers into believing he would stay in a \$4.25-an-hour minimum-wage job if called back to mining.

After nine months Walker finally found work, a summer job with a Carlinsville road crew. Then, he landed work mining coal for the Monterey No. 2 Mine in Albers. But he didn't expect it to last.

"The day they trained us they said they were going to have to make changes in the mine no later than 1993 in order to be competitive," Walker says. "I was smart enough to read between the lines. I went home and said, 'Well, dear, we've got four or five years and then I'm going to be laid off again.'"

"There were 20 of us hired. Nobody went out and bought a new car."

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As expected, mechanized mining forced layoffs at Monterey in April 1991. Out of work once again, Walker signed on with the maintenance department at Lake Williams Christian Center in Carlinsville and soon became a supervisor. Then he went back to college to finish his bachelor's degree in business administration.



For three years Walker worked days and attended classes full time in the evenings at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. But the dreams of a coal miner die hard. Even as he studied and worked to make a better life for himself and his family, Walker was doing something strange and incongruous: calling Freeman once a week, regular as clockwork, to see when he might be called back to Crown II.

"By the time I graduated, my boss was afraid of losing me and he offered me a better position in the department," Walker says.

Finally his name crept to the top of the list for rehiring. And, in the fall of 1997, when Freeman called to ask if he wanted his old job back, Walker had a decision to make. He asked for time to think about it, and he and Carlene sat down one night on the couch, hard by the railroad tracks and grain elevators in Carlinville, to weigh their options for the future.

By then Walker had a bachelor's degree and two associate's degrees, and had attended the equivalent of eight years of college. As he and Carlene talked, the clatter of passing trains--some bound north past the mine to Peoria--punctuated their conversation. Walker was excited--"Coal mining had become my love; I was tickled to death to go back," he said. But Carlene, who had driven him to the hospital from church on the night one year earlier when his chest had yanked tight like a knot, was considerably less enthusiastic.

Even for a man with a healthy heart, coal mining is dangerous work. A few years ago, Crown II nearly claimed Walker's best friend and longtime partner on the job, Dan Swift, whom Walker affectionately calls Swifty. The coal, bursting from a crumbling wall, was upon Swifty



before he could turn around, knocking off his yellow hard hat and pinning him up to the base of his skull.

"They couldn't see me until the coal dust settled," he says.

Walker helped dig his buddy out, but not all accidents end so well. Since 1976 there have been five fatalities at Crown II. Reporting to work once years ago for the shift that followed a fatal roof fall, Walker had to help clean up the blood of a family man who wouldn't be going home to his wife and daughter.

"It brings you down to what life really is," Walker says.

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In most things Walker isn't much of a risk-taker. He quit smoking 13 years ago when it occurred to him, "You're polluting your lungs enough working in the mine." And he respects the ominous crack and pop of coal breaking loose, and the duller sound of limestone giving up the ghost, recognizing in both the whisper of death and the imperative to drop everything and run.

Yet for all her protestations on that autumn day in 1997, Carlene knew it was futile to try to dissuade her husband from returning to Crown II once again.

"The pay was good," Walker says, "but that's not why I wanted to go back. It was fun. It was a challenge. It was a team effort to get all that coal out. What's nice about it, you got with a group of guys and you became close. It got into my blood early and it didn't matter whether I



had a four-year degree or not."

Only about half of coal miners working today have graduated from high school and 5 percent have college degrees, according to John Grasser, spokesman for the National Mining Association, and many of those are of the two-year variety proffered by junior colleges.

Walker, a 15-year veteran of the industry, has put in a total of 11 years at Crown II--though it has taken him 22 to do it. He serves as a mine committeeman, stepping in on behalf of union employees when there's a dispute with management. He works on the belts with Swifty.

With a son on the verge of college, he was relieved when Central Illinois Light officials said March 14 that they had decided to stay with Freeman because of improvements at the mine that ostensibly would cut coal costs.

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A week after it was announced that the mine would stay open and jobs would be saved, Walker stood at the kitchen sink rinsing coal and limestone dust off his lunchbox. He filled a Thermos with hot coffee, then set out for work, stopping on the edge of town to buy a Diet Coke before steering his red pickup truck north out of Carlinville.

"Speak to Me" came on the radio, which Walker keeps tuned to Christian station WIBI out of Carlinville. Then came the song "All Things New."

"Blue skies that take me back to being a child, trees with leaves that



turn the colors I love," the coal miner sang alone in the dark. "I'm so thankful for this life that I know, that I am no longer what I was."

Walker's animated face glowed soft in the light of the dashboard. Outside, the ghostly vistas of rural Illinois gave way only now and then to the sleeping towns of Macoupin County that had risen up in protest of Central Illinois Light's plan to end its contract with Freeman.

As the mine goes, so to a large extent go the tiny towns of Carlinville, Nilwood, Girard and Virden.

Girard, a town of 2,100 with one traffic light--the flashing-red kind--appeared to be sleeping as Walker drove through, slowing to 45 miles per hour as he passed the First Baptist Church and a Shell station. The grocery store where many miners and their families spend their money--and which felt the closing of Crown's No. 3 mine several years ago--was closed for the night.

From these sleepy towns and the flat rural landscape from which they rise, Crown II employs 225 people, all but two of them men. It's a place where the weariness and uncertainty of a beleaguered industry can be seen in the eyes of a vanishing breed of coal-smudged men with nicknames such as Camel Butt and Teletubby.

Arriving for another midnight shift, Walker pulled on three shirts, long underwear, thick socks and steel-toed boots that spilled coal dust as he laced them. Then he walked over to where Swifty was sitting, and together they waited for the siren that means it's time to line up for the hoist.



Even now, Dan Swift's 48-year-old back gives him trouble from the day he spent 20 minutes pinned under all that coal. But Swifty says, "I hope to be here until I'm at least 55. Coal mining gets to be a way of life. You get around a bunch of guys and you build up a camaraderie.

"Our lives depend on one another down there."

"Down there" is a place as deep as Lake Michigan, or the Russian submarine Kursk when it became a tomb, and it takes two minutes to get there on the hoist. The hoist is an elevator that looks like a cage. It lowers dozens of men at a time down the cold, dark shaft at the beginning of each shift.

A few minutes before midnight, Walker pulled a metal tag engraved with his employee number off the board marked "Out of the Mine," dropped it in a bin with those to be placed on the board marked "In the Mine," and lined up in the tunnel leading to the shaft.

Then Miner 428, his faith in God and Swifty, walked toward the hoist. -

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