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A friend's story continues

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I had a scare last week.

I heard in a roundabout way that an 89-year-old friend wasn't well. It turns out that he's still in pretty good shape, which is nothing short of amazing—but not quite as good as before.

Robert Guerrant and I have been friends for more than 40 years. We're an odd couple in some ways. He's a steak guy; I'm a fish guy. He's a jazz guy; I'm an old rock guy.

He likes to play poker; I don't. He works well with others; I don't. He thinks he's going to win the lottery; I know I won't.

He has a better smile, but my beard is fuller. He has a laugh that invites joining in, but my voice is deeper. He's a master at flirting; I'm way short of even being good at it. He fathered 14 children with his wife, Mary; I'm a dozen shy.

On the other hand, we have some similarities. We're the same height. We're both bald, though on him it looks good and on me it looks like I'm in cancer therapy.

We're both hopeful skeptics. We see much of the world in the same way.

But I breathe better.

That's because Robert spent 25 years working in an underground coal mine in southern West Virginia. When I visited a year ago, he was still coughing up black dust. This was almost 50 years after he had developed coal workers' pneumoconiosis (black lung) and his employer had "let him go."

For many of those years, he ran a continuous-mining machine. They were introduced after World War II when underground mining was mostly hand labor. By mechanizing the job of separating the coal from where it had been embedded for millions of years, continuous miners produced more tonnage faster and lowered labor requirements by 75 percent.

The worker who operated this 25-ton, mobile machine had to have the smarts, coordination and courage to push its front-mounted, rotating-cutting drum 20 feet deep into a coal face without roof support.

It was mining's dustiest job in the 50s and 60s when water sprays and personal protective devices were rarely used, and ventilation was less than sufficient.

When Robert was working, no dust-limitation standard was in effect, no dust-sampling program was operating and very few people cared that continuous miners were generating very fine dust that disabled workers. Some medical professionals denied that coal dust impaired lung function; a few even said it was beneficial. Not until the early 1970s would a federal dust standard be implemented along with a compensation program for those who could no longer work because of occupational lung disease.

Coal production depended on the continuous-miner operator cutting 12- to 15-foot-wide tunnels into the coal face to the height of the seam without taking incombustible rock from the floor or ceiling.

When a large grid of tunnels and coal pillars (square blocks, 25 to 45 feet to a side) had been excavated, the miner then went back and "robbed" much of the remaining pillars, one at a time.

The idea was to leave just enough coal in place to delay the expected roof collapse until the continuous miner could back out to where the roof was properly supported. (Today, an increasing number of continuous-miners are remotely controlled, which allows the operator to stay in less dusty conditions and under supported roof at all times.)

The room-and-pillar mining method was able to extract 80 to 90 percent or more of the coal, depending on roof conditions and the skill of the continuous-miner operator. Robert kept his high-paying job because he was good at it.

The genteel term that mine engineers use for "robbing pillars" is "retreat mining." Think about spending roughly half your days at work robbing pillars over 20 years.

The man running the continuous miner was the respected leader of his crew—shuttle-buggy drivers who hauled coal from the continuous miner to the conveyor belt, roof-bolter, scoop driver, belt shoveler, ventilation man and general labor. Both crew and management knew who among them would be best at the job and leading the crew.

You had to do many things right to run a continuous miner for years without getting hurt while extracting as much coal as possible.

The Guerrants were Huguenots (Calvinist Protestants) who were forced out of France by Roman Catholic monarchs in the 1500s and 1600s. Five hundred of them landed in the Virginia colony in 1700 and settled just

west of Richmond. Among these refugees was Daniel Guerin who founded the Guerrant line in America.

Robert's ancestors, however, came from Africa. One was sold to a Guerrant plantation in Louisiana. And before World War I, one of his descendants was recruited to work in the new Winding Gulf coalfield in Raleigh County, W.Va.

Justus Collins, who had gotten his start as a coal operator by leasing state prisoners to work his Alabama mine, was a central figure in developing southern West Virginia coal. To his company-owned coal camps, he recruited, what he termed, a "judicious mixture" of native whites and blacks, and immigrants from Italy and Poland.

Collins believed that racial and ethnic differences would prevent miners from organizing themselves into a United Mine Workers local, which would lead, he feared, to higher wages, more costly (better) working conditions and a less price-competitive product.

To buttress his faith in divide-and-conquer, his camps used armed guards and company-paid constables to maintain union-free order. Watch towers were erected in some camps; visitors were screened. Union sympathizers were fired. It was not until the 1930s, that miners in Collins's Winding Gulf were allowed to vote for or against a union.

Robert grew up in that segregated coal camp during the 1920s and 1930s. Joining the U.S. Marine Corps in 1943 at 20, he was sent to the South Pacific and then discharged after almost three years.

When he returned to Winding Gulf, he found his father, a 6'6" miner who was never trifled with, disabled. He went into the local mine to support his parents, and he stayed for 25 years to support his own family.

Jobs were not easily found in southern West Virginia in the mid-1960s for a let-go coal miner with black lung—or for anybody else.

Robert discovered -- and was discovered by -- Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. He had a knack for listening. People followed him. He got things done. He signed on to supervise VISTA volunteers in his home county as they worked to improve roads, education, housing and water systems.

pointed him to a Harvard program that accepted students with life experience equivalent to four years of college. He earned a master's in education there and went on to study at MIT and the University of Pittsburgh.

I offered him a job at West Virginia State College in 1973, but he turned me down because he felt obligated to finish his commitment to leading the James Jackson Putnam Children's Center in Boston, which

provided daycare, well-baby care and pediatric psychiatry, particularly for autism.

Later, he settled in Charleston, W.Va., where he served as Executive Director of the City-Wide Improvement Council for two decades.

He bought a modest house in a neighborhood where City-Wide worked and lives there still. He taught himself to be a professional photographer, and he's covered one wall of his living room with pictures of those he has known and liked. I'm one of hundreds on his wall.

Among the things he's taught me is a burdened patience that understands, if not always accepts, people as they are.

I live in a county that has had no black families for many years, although we do have a handful of antebellum houses with surviving slave quarters. Our mountain pastures were not suitable for plantation slavery.

Robert has visited several times and attended my daughter's high school graduation. I've introduced him to friends and neighbors when he's stayed with us. I've heard that some talked about it, but no one ever said anything. One advantage of being known as a writer is that you get cut a few breaks for being eccentric, which are always appreciated.

On one occasion, he and I went into a local store to pick up a few items. I introduced him to the owner who I've known for more than 25 years. They shook hands and passed the time.

Some weeks later, the owner told me he had immediately washed his hands after we left. It was like being hit in the face. I wasn't set for it.

I said something like, I'd trust my life in Robert's hands. He said something about the hot weather we were having.

In fact, I had put my new wife's life in Robert's hands many years ago when she took on the job of running a gubernatorial campaign in five southern West Virginia coal counties. She was working against the "slate" candidate, the guy who had paid into the county machines for support. This was serious business, and it could get tight.

Together, Robert and I put the word out, found her safe places to sleep and asked for a few favors. We put eyes on her. She went into places and got out safely where the candidate -- a native of the area -- would not go. I know of at least one instance where something was prevented. Her guy carried three of her five counties. She had reason to be proud of her work.

After giving it some thought, I decided to pass on the hand-washing comment with an eye roll and a what-can-you-do? look. Robert was startled, taken aback. He, too, wasn't set for it. His feelings were bruised. I regretted that I had said anything.

I had a small glimpse at that moment into what could have sneaked up on him in the Marines, the mines, his job and any grocery store at any time during his 89 years. It was a very small glimpse into having hands of a different color than mine.

I tried to joke about it. We had always kidded around about things like that. But this one had cut.

Sometimes you can't joke stuff away or joke yourself out of it.

I wish I could have done something to make it better.

Robert's not free of it, and as long as he isn't, neither am I.

I talked with him this week. He said he was okay, but he didn't sound quite right. I didn't push, and he didn't volunteer.

I'm worried.

The coal is with him. You can only rob so many of life's pillars.

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