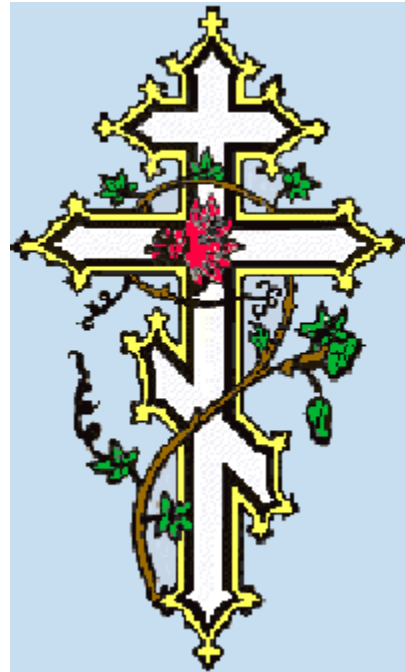


# The 100th Anniversary of the Miracle of the Intercession of St. Nicholas The Saving of More than 250 Carpatho-Rusyn Coal Miners in December 1907

by Christina Duranko



Years before television and radio, the December, 1907 newspaper headlines reported 601 men and boys killed in two of the worst U.S. coal mine disasters. These numbers were lower than the earlier articles estimating that as many as 1,000 killed. But some headlines and most early articles, including The New York Times front page on December 20th, highlight the "rest of the story" in various phrasing such as this headline in The Pittsburgh Press: *St. Nicholas Feast Saves the Russians.*

Today, when someone survives an airplane crash or other disaster, the story he relates about how he was NOT in the wrong place is often highlighted by the media. Imagine such a terrible tragedy occurring today, with 250 people interviewed by today's media, all saying that they were saved by attending a church service because it was the Feastday of St. Nicholas -- and twice in the same month and year.

How could two days with so many killed be considered a miracle, and how could both days be December 6th? Why was their minimal detail in public newspapers and government reports and how could the miracle details and the nationalities be so inaccurate in this historical documentation? Why is this miracle not widely known? Were the immediate relocation of many saved to find work elsewhere and the church division in America the reasons for the ineffectiveness of typical church methods that have

preserved history for centuries? What will occur on the 100th anniversary to help insure this miracle is remembered in future centuries?

## **The Dangerous Mine Conditions in 1907**

On December 6th, 362 were killed at the No. 6 and 8 Mines in Monongah, West Virginia. 50 miles northeast on December 19th, 239 were killed at the Darr Mine in Van Meter, near the southwestern corner of Pennsylvania.

These explosions are the 1st and 4th worst coal mine disasters in U.S. history. Except for at most 5 men near entrances who were able to escape, all of the men inside these mines were killed. Many were immigrants, with the highest losses suffered by Italians and Hungarians. The dates of these two disasters were one of two each year that even the most destitute Rusyns would refuse work - Pascha (the Greek word for Passover, known in the English language as Easter) and the Feastday of St. Nicholas. Even the coal mine owners, who otherwise had virtually complete control of the men with the threat of termination, knew that they could not force the men to work on those days. On the Feastday of St. Nicholas, his intercession saved as many as 300 faithful immigrant Carpatho-Rusyn coal miners. These boys, perhaps as young as ten, and men survived to become fathers of hundreds and grandfathers of thousands. More than a thousand would have been widowed and orphaned, which in 1907 meant financial destitution without any "safety net" assistance from the companies or government agencies. Most of the names of these men are known only to God and their descendants. Efforts to locate historical records have not been successful.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, coal mining and factory jobs were part of the great industrial revolution that built the U.S. infrastructure which benefits all Americans today. Men worked with few days off, no matter the freezing or sweltering temperatures. They risked death or severe injury every day to support their families. Most of these workers were immigrants from central, eastern, and southern Europe, and the government agency accident reports required each worker be classified by nationality. December 1907 became known as "the bloody month" with more than 1,000 deaths in official government records plus historical accounts of several hundred more intentionally or unintentionally not reported. The mining procedures, equipment, and safety standards of this period were nothing like those of today which still result in a number of deaths and injuries. Sometimes the mine owners could have improved conditions, but there were minimal mine safety laws and regulations. The technology available was very limited. The first "breathing apparatus" was used in the rescue efforts at the Darr Mine. Newspaper articles included a scientific theory which speculated the increase in explosions was caused by the unusual alignment of the earth to other planets, resulting in air pressure changes. Because of mine conditions

during this period, accidents and explosions occurred regularly, only the times and places were unknown.

Faced with the realities of the harsh life in America, immigrants began to help each other. All immigrant groups formed fraternal organizations. These functioned as both insurance companies and social clubs. Formed initially in individual towns, these "lodges" associated together on a regional or national basis. If the immigrant group included both Catholics and Protestants, each would have separate fraternal organizations. The scale of these mining disasters in 1907 pushed the remaining immigrants who did not belong to such organizations to either join or form new fraternal organizations.

## **The Significance of December 6th - the Feastday of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker**

Catholics and Orthodox Christians of various ethnic backgrounds venerate a particular saint as their patron, and pray for his or her intercession -- protection. For example, most Americans are aware that St. Patrick is the patron saint of the Irish. In the 4th century, St. Nicholas was the Bishop of Myra, now located within the country of Turkey. Wonderworker is the additional descriptive word for the spiritual gifts of this saint, known for his association to many wonders; miracles as they are more commonly described today. For example, other saints are described as Martyrs, Confessors, or Theologians. St. Nicholas is the patron saint of shepherds, likely one reason he has been the patron saint of the Carpatho-Rusyns for centuries. (Pronounced differently in each language, this saint's name was Sinter Claus in Norway, which in America morphed into Santa Claus. Please refer to [www.stnicholascenter.org](http://www.stnicholascenter.org) for additional information). St. Nicholas is also a patron saint for Croatians, and other regions and specific villages in both Eastern and Southern Europe.

Both Orthodox and Catholics follow traditions dating from the time of the apostles, including the considering some of those who have died as "saints". Saints are assumed to have been accepted into the Kingdom of Heaven, and their life stories provide examples of living the Christian life. In this tradition, the saint did not perform the miracle directly, but rather his requests (intercessions) to God to protect the Rusyn miners were answered. And instead of the date of a saint's birth, the date of death when the soul is released from its earthly body and enters the Kingdom of Heaven, becomes the Feastday when the saint is remembered. St. Nicholas died on December 6 in the year 343.

Rusyns living in the western Carpathian Mountain areas of Europe - Karpatska Rus' -- accepted Christianity in 863, over time spreading

eastward over the mountains. This was a century before Vladimir was baptized in 988 in Kyivan Rus' (considered the acceptance of Christianity for both the Ukrainians and Russians), which also then spread westward toward these mountains. Over 12 centuries, despite their lands being controlled for all but a handful of years by Roman Catholic and Protestant rulers, and attacks by Muslim rulers and pagans, Rusyns maintained their Eastern Rite (compared to Western or Roman Rite) faith.

Beginning in 1646, their Eastern Rite - Orthodox - began to change. For both political and economic reasons, bishops and priests agreed to submit to the authority of Rome. These agreements entered them into union with the Roman Church but retained their "Greek Rite" and "Eastern" ecclesiastical disciplines, such as a married priesthood.

The term "Greek Catholic" has traditionally been ascribed to the popular Hungarian Empress Maria Theresa of the 18th century. She used the term to describe in a positive sense those of her subjects who were, by her time, descendants of those Orthodox Christians living in the Hungarian Empire. The great majority of these subjects were Rusyns, who, along with other nationalities, were subjected to increasing Hungarian language and cultural assimilation. By the late 19th century, even children's schools began to teach only in Hungarian. The Greek Catholic Church became the remaining venue to preserve their Rusyn culture, leading many immigrants to indicate their nationality as "Greek Catholic".

In this Union, one Greek Catholic exception was the calendar. Even today, some Eastern Rite jurisdictions in Europe under the authority of the Pope, and numerous Orthodox jurisdictions continue to follow the Julian calendar. In the 16th century, to correct miscalculations since the birth of Christ, Pope Gregory decreed a one-time correction, with the day after October 1st changed to October 14th. In 1907, both the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches in all countries still followed the older (Julian) calendar with the difference of 13 days between it and the new (Gregorian) calendar. Therefore for those following the Julian calendar, the Feastday of St. Nicholas on December 6th is observed on December 19th; similarly Christmas on December 25th is observed on January 7th.

### **Each Explosion Matched the Local Church Calendar**

Monongah is in Marion County near Fairmont, WV. There was no Greek Catholic or Orthodox church and there was no priest within traveling distance. Therefore Rusyns attended a Roman Catholic church which followed the new calendar, celebrating the Feastday of St. Nicholas on December 6th.

There are very limited newspaper articles on this miracle, but the oral history provided by members of the Sabek (Šabak) family has preserved

information such as the number of men - 60 - that were saved, including their grandfather. Roman Catholics of other ethnicities whose patron was St. Nicholas would also have given up work to attend the service. The mine company had not opened the mine on December 5th. On the evening of December 5th, after evening services, the simple gifts for children would be left by St. Nicholas during the night to be found when they awoke on the morning of December 6th. (Clement Moore's 19th century publication 'Twas the Night Before Christmas was one of the first connections for the gifts to be left on December 24th, not December 5th). Also, most Italians had attended a grand dinner and dance event on the evening of December 5th. Understanding this, The New York Times article of December 8th appears to document the miracle or perhaps just the Italians unable to work after the party, but without further investigation the English-speaking reporters did not capture the full stories. It states:

"A thorough investigation was made by the company today, and it was discovered that many miners believed to be entombed had escaped because they had not gone to work on Friday after Thursday's holiday."

There is much written documentation for the second miracle, although the estimates of those saved ranged from 150 to 400. It should be noted that any numbers are always questionable due to the common practice of having more than one person work in an individual miner's name to increase his production numbers. As time passed, most written sources place the number from 150-250. On Sunday December 1st, 34 had been killed at a mine in Naomi, not far from Jacobs Creek, temporarily closing the mine and leaving the remaining miners without work. The Darr Mine owners knew the devout Rusyns would not work on the Feastday, and hired temporary workers for that day from the Naomi mine. If a mine was open, a day off was rare, men often worked 7 days a week. The Darr Mine had been closed on December 17th and 18th. Having missed 2 days pay, it was an even larger sacrifice for the majority of Rusyns who still refused to work that day. It is likely the numbers saved were estimates based on the total numbers of typical daily workers subtracted by the number killed, although the number traveling from Naomi would have complicated this calculation. Because their pay was often based upon production, perhaps some would have gone to work later in the day after the church service. Typically, Liturgies would have been served early in the morning, perhaps 7 or likely closer to 8 AM, as the sun arose at its latest time in mid-December. But newspaper reports of the 11:30 AM explosion indicate this was in the middle of the church service. How was this difference in timing possible, why would the service have been so late in the morning?

In 1907, there was no Greek Catholic or Orthodox church building in the Darr Mine company towns. Rusyns had not raised sufficient funds to construct a building and services were held in public buildings or individual homes, or they walked to other towns where a traveling priest would schedule services. There were coal mine entrances and miners lived on both sides of the Youghiogheny River. Jacobs Creek and the B&O Railroad were on the east bank, and Van Meter and the P&LE Railroad were on the west bank. The nearest bridges north and south were 2 and 3 miles away, or for a nickel, the "sky ferry" was used to cross the river. A large, box-shaped basket (a rudimentary cable car) was attached to ropes strung over the river. When a priest would travel to serve a Liturgy on either side, Rusyns on the opposite side would walk or ride the sky ferry to attend the service. Richard Custer, Editor of The New Rusyn Times, has researched church records available for all Rusyn immigrant parishes in Pennsylvania and provides additional information. Unable to provide for full-time priests, and with the limited number of priests sent to the U.S. from the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe, priests often served in more than one town. Parish records were often annotated with the town in which the sacrament was performed. His review of several parishes in southwestern Pennsylvania included annotations for both Jacobs Creek and Van Meter during this period. Reverend Father Aleksander Dzubay would have served his first Liturgy at his home parish of St. Stephen's Greek Catholic Church in Leisenring, organized in 1892 as the first Greek Catholic church west of the Allegheny Mountains. Then Father Dzubay would have boarded a train to travel most of the 13 miles. It is possible he also may have served another Liturgy in Star Junction or Whitsett, other coal towns without a church building, before arriving in Jacobs Creek.

In the middle of the church service, there was a terrible noise and the ground shook as if it was an earthquake. Immediately everyone knew it was a horrible coal mine explosion and rushed to help find survivors. Although it was against regulations, later reports speculate that the mine company had interconnected more than one mine which devastated a larger area on both sides of the river.

## **1907 Newspapers**

In 1907, most urgent information was communicated via telegram as very few phones were available. Newspapers of general public interest were typically available in relatively small geographic areas, with at least 3 within a 20 mile radius of the Darr Mine in addition to the newspapers based in Pittsburgh, the nearest large city. Typically, newspapers at a further distance depended on the sharing of articles from newspapers closer to the story. For example, sections of The New York Times articles are taken from

The Pittsburgh Dispatch. This limited communication apparently led to the association of Jacobs Creek, rather than Van Meter to the explosion in the vast majority of historical sources. There were phone lines available in Connellsville, the nearest larger town. But in 1907, only Jacobs Creek had phone lines connecting to Connellsville. Van Meter had no phones. All the newspaper article bylines were listed as Jacobs Creek, and this was the town name on hand-drawn maps and sketches reprinted in many newspapers. Specific groups with a common interest, such as members of the same union, profession, or ethnic group, also received newspapers by mail. With a circulation of 100,000 Rusyns in America, the newspaper weekly the Amerikansky Russky Viestnik (translated American Rusyn Messenger), published by the fraternal the Greek Catholic Union (GCU), overwhelmingly outnumbered the circulation of other Rusyn newspapers. In 1907, almost all articles were still in Rusyn. One edition was published using the original alphabet of the Rusyns, Cyrillic. Because the Hungarian government had pushed the use of their language in the prior decades, another edition was also written using the Extended Latin alphabet. Over the following decades, as immigrants learned English, articles were written in English.

## **General Public Reporting**

Other headline captions included: Pittsburgh Gazette Times: Majority of Victims Americans - Foreign Workers Lay Off to Go to Church and Escape Death; Pittsburg Dispatch: Many of the victims are English-speaking men. Foreigners escape owing to religious holiday.

These headlines reveal the reasons for limited reporting of details about the miracle. Reporters that considered immigrants worthy of attention could not communicate with most of them to obtain further details. Immigrants who spoke English, fearing the loss of future work if they spoke against the mine conditions, would likely have avoided speaking with any authorities or newspaper reporters. There was little time to reflect, these men were either helping in the initial rescue efforts or attempting to find work elsewhere. Due to the dangerous conditions, only unmarried men were permitted to help in the effort to recover bodies. Some reports indicated that 400 miners and their families had left within 2 days, making it difficult to confirm which miners were missing and trapped in the mine. An estimated 25,000 people came to observe the rescue work, local bars were ordered to close and additional police were assigned to take control of the area.

Because it was not near a major city, it was unusual for the Darr Mine to have a union, but it did. The United Mine Workers had membership there since 1890. Many articles relay information provided by the local UMW District 5 organizer, Michael Hallapy. He used his membership list to

canvas the area to determine the number of missing. However, many Rusyns could not wait for the mine to be reopened months later, and likely left to find work elsewhere. They would have been "missing" on his list, which helped lead to his conclusion that the death toll was initially much higher, potentially 400. In some reports he states after the mine was closed for 2 days prior to the explosion, he believed a large number of the Rusyns could not afford to take the day off for church and did go to work that day. Many bodies could not be identified and were placed in a mass grave, and although likely higher, the official number killed was 239.

Residing 13 miles away, Father Dzubay, was not near reporters in Jacobs Creek. Father Dzubay, along with Roman Catholic, Hungarian Reformed, Lutheran and Episcopal and other pastors, focused on helping the survivors, raising relief funds for the families. The 601 miners killed in the two explosions left 328 widows and 706 orphaned young children. These miners also supported other family members such as parents and sisters. At most, these dependents received small lump sums provided by the fraternal and company welfare plans. There were no monthly payments from government or company financial assistance programs. Early articles reported the formation of a Relief Committee to solicit donations from the public and some donations were listed. Other articles widely reported the company operating the Darr Mine purchased caskets for the bodies, and the number ordered was subject to speculation.

Except for the initial coverage focusing on the recovery efforts and estimated numbers of those killed, the miracle is not noted. Later articles focused on investigations into the cause of the explosions and the effort to help the widows and children as well as efforts to push the state and federal governments to enact safety laws and provide funds for worker injuries and deaths.

## **American Rusyn Reporting**

An article in the *Amerikansky Russky Viestnik* (ARV) about the Monongah explosion does not identify the author. It provides details of the mine conditions and names of those killed, it does not mention any miners were saved by attending the church service for St. Nicholas.

An article about the Darr explosion was published the next week in the ARV on Page 4. While it is difficult to understand today, generally the Darr Mine miracle was not considered extraordinarily newsworthy, even from a religious perspective. The article first explains the intercession of St. Nicholas and how this was truly a miracle. It describes the terrible explosion and suffering, and requested contributions, no matter how small, to the relief funds for widows and orphans. It points out the importance of belonging to the GCU so that families would not be destitute should something like this



occur again. Another article urged readers to contact congressmen requesting new safety laws, explaining what to write on a postcard in English letters, the amount of postage and the address for the congressman. We can only speculate as to why there was no further detail provided about the miracle. Perhaps it was because the Rusyns annually celebrated a number of remembrances of being protected in the past by the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas or other saint, this type of miracle was an integral part of their faith. Or Father Dzubay, having seen the destruction of the mine, thousands of body parts and disfigured unidentifiable faces, perhaps understandably could only focus on improving conditions and the survivors. Or perhaps it was due to outside forces dividing Rusyns in America. Other articles during this time were reporting current events which affected all of the immigrants, their children, and all future generations. Facing many difficulties to retain their Eastern Rite traditions in America, many Greek Catholic churches, priests and tens of thousands of their members were converting to become part of the Russian Orthodox Church in America. In response, in 1907, the Pope had appointed Bishop Soter Ortinsky as a Greek Catholic Bishop for America. Rome had never made any similar effort to provide for a specific nationality that had emigrated to America, and these activities were important news. Ortinsky was Ukrainian, not a Rusyn. Despite his title of bishop, newspaper articles were reporting he had virtually no authority. Each Greek Catholic church and priest still were under the full authority of the local Roman Catholic bishop, who typically had limited knowledge of the Eastern Rite and refused to recognize married priests. Within a decade, the well-known and respected Father Dzubay would convert and become an Orthodox bishop in America.

### **Misleading Historical Records**

Unfortunately, inaccurate information of the Feastday celebration can never be corrected as it is often quoted from what most readers would consider the most accurate published record. There are other indications of inaccuracies of greater significance in this report, but they are not the focus of this essay.

### **"festival of the Greek Catholic Church"**

**The Pennsylvania Department of Mines 1907 Report states:**

"About 400 men were regularly employed at the mine, and the reason there was not a greater loss of life was owing to the fact that many of the foreign miners were absent observing a festival of the Greek Catholic Church. The mine had been closed down on Tuesday and Wednesday to celebrate St. Nicholas Day, and many of the miners had not returned to work."

All newspaper articles agree the entire mine was closed on December 17th and 18th, but not for this reason. Miners could not afford to celebrate for 3

days without pay. Even when the mine was open without the Rusyns on December 19th, there were many other immigrant miners available for work. For a single immigrant group to completely control the mine owner's ability to open a mine is illogical, but this is re-quoted in later accounts of the explosion. As this was one of the few unionized mines outside of a major city area, there was some speculation the lack of work may have been an attempt to break the union. The best documented information was that the mine was considered unsafe by the management and it was closed to install additional ventilation equipment. Because the installation was delayed for another day, one of the mine foreman refused to enter what he knew was an unsafe mine that day and was fired. He lived to tell his story and was quoted in various newspapers stating that the mine should have remain closed.

At this time in America, most reporters, government and union officials would have had a Protestant religious background, only a small minority would have been either Catholic or Orthodox. Translating Feastday to "festival" indicates a misunderstanding of Orthodox/Catholic traditions. A Feastday is a Holyday or perhaps Holiday, not a festival.

## **Nationalities**

Newspapers and government reports identify the nationality of those saved as either Russians or Greeks. But the miners saved were neither Russian or Greek. From an understanding of the immigration patterns of that period in these areas, oral history, and area church records, the great majority were Carpatho-Rusyns. Not understanding a people without a country as having an identity helped lead to the translation of Ruskyj to Russian instead of Rusyn. Also raised with a great respect for St. Nicholas, and having to attend the same limited number of churches, some of those saved were likely Ukrainians, Slovaks, Belorusians and perhaps Serbs or Croats. How is it possible these and other nationality classifications are wrong?

The Pennsylvania Department of Mines reports also contain various statistics of how many of each immigrant "nationality" and Americans were injured or killed in that year for each mine region, but the information quoted above did not provide any specific nationality other than members of the Greek Catholic Church. During this period, there were a limited number of Greek immigrants in America, particularly in this region, and few names in any records of the period are of Greek origin. As noted earlier, asked their nationality, Rusyns often answered "Greek Catholic". The nationality being considered Greek obviously was assumed by some because of the name of their church - Greek Catholic.

Today, there are more than 3000 nationalities but less than 200 countries in the world, and in 1907 there were even fewer countries. A country's borders

do not typically surround only those of one nationality. However, in 1907 the amount of information available about nationalities was quite limited, most Americans knew only of countries. At this time there were only 4 countries in central and eastern Europe - Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire which allowed some limited autonomy for Romania and Serbia. In 2007, there are 19 countries covering roughly this same area: Germany, Russia Federation, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Ukraine, Czech, Slovakia, Romania, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Bosnia. The remaining portion of the Ottoman Empire was called Turkey. Comparing these lists illustrates why immigrants from these 4 countries did not consider the name of the country as their nationality, and why it would be difficult for most Americans to understand these differences. During this period Carpatho-Rusyns lived mostly within the pre-WWI borders of Austria-Hungary.

The immigration period of 1880 to 1920 included comparatively small numbers of people who lived in areas located now in easternmost Ukraine or Russia, those whose culture and nationality would be Russian. Millions of immigrants, of various nationalities, came from areas closer to the Carpathian Mountains which are located in the geographic center of Europe. The Department of Mines classifications includes a category for Russians. All sources agree at least some of the men went to work and not to church, but no Russians are listed as killed at the Darr Mine. For all of 1907, only 1 dead and 3 injured miners in this district are classified as Russian. If this classification was correct, with such low numbers, either the Russian miners were exceptionally lucky or there were very few of them. If they were not Russians, what was the nationality of these miners? One of the classifications is Slavonians, with 17 listed as killed at the Darr Mine. Today, no organized group of people identifies their nationality as "Slavonian" or "Slavish", which is a nationality found in the Monongah records. There are some individual Americans that use these terms for the nationality of their ancestors, but these words would not be recognized in Europe.

In these reports, there are no categories for Ukrainians and Slovaks, both of which are universally accepted as unique nationalities. There are no categories for Rusyns, Carpathians, Lemkos (who consider themselves a subgroup of Rusyns who lived in the northwest areas toward those of Polish nationality), or Galicians (the 1907 name for the region that is now mostly in the west/central portion of Ukraine). Living in a strategic military area, post-WWII borders split most Carpatho-Rusyn inhabited areas into 5 countries controlled by the U.S.S.R. Using forced relocation and continuous

denial of the language and nationality, the Communist governments "ethnically cleansed" Rusyns. However today, Ukraine remains the only country that does not recognize Rusyns as a separate nationality. With some Rusyn villages being drawn within seven different country borders during the 20th century, understandably many Rusyn Americans do not identify themselves as Rusyns. They consider themselves Slovaks, Ukrainians, or Poles. If they agree they belong to a separate nationality, they do not agree upon one common name, and utilize one of a dozen names and spellings. Additionally, during the 19th century under the authority of the Hungarian Kingdom, many names from all of these nationalities were "Magyarized / Hungarianized", therefore at least some of those listed as Hungarian were not Hungarian.

Many other nationalities, such as those matching more of the newer country names above also were subject to interpretation and would also have been subject to classification errors.

For Darr Mine, the ARV article states the most to least losses were: Hungarians, Italians, Rusyns, Slovaks, Poles. It also provides information regarding the membership of the various fraternal. Upwards to 100 belonged to Hungarian lodges, 10 to National Slovak Society lodges, 28 to Slovak Jednota Protestant lodges and "some" to Slovak Jednota Catholic lodges. 8 Rusyns belonged to GCU lodges, but it also estimates 25 belonged to other fraternal or to no fraternal. The initial estimate of those saved by attending church services was 100, of which 85 were estimated to be GCU members. With so many miners immediately moving out of the area, there is no way to prove any given number. A follow-up article increases these numbers, but also notes those saved are known to God.

Monongah official reports were also subject to these nationality classification issues. With 171 Italians killed, an article in POINTers (Proud of Our Italian Name Tradition) published in 1999, includes a section which reclassifies 85 Americans into specific nationalities and provides insight into the complexity of classifications. Two excerpts from this article:

"The official listing classifies the Polish dead as Austrians, Hungarians, and Russians. Technically speaking, this threefold classification is correct, inasmuch as Poland at that time still was partitioned among those three powers. Actually, however, there were few miners of strictly Austrian, Hungarian, or Russian stock among the deceased."

"In the next classification, detailed in the official record, a note is made of 15 Austrian, 52 Hungarian, and 31 Russian victims. Actually the vast majority of these men were of Polish extraction. Some were of Slavish descent, a few Turkish; very few Russian in origin."

The most definitive classifications for Monongah are found in two articles in the December 1907 issues of the ARV. It states the largest losses were suffered by Italians, Americans, English, and Poles. Then it lists 54 miners killed whose villages in Europe were located in areas populated by at least a sizeable minority of Rusyns. They are listed by their homeland county and village. The list provides their age, family status, and whether the family lived in Monongah or in "starym kraju" (the old country). A reader from that village, or a nearby village, was likely to know these Rusyn, Slovak and Hungarian miners. Two Hungarians, one Catholic and one Protestant was listed. The rest are known to be either Greek or Roman Catholic, and identified as either Rusyn or Slovak. 20 are noted as belonging to the National Slovak Society and others to the Roman Catholic Jednota Slovak Society, and as yet unknown number of GCU members. A review of the census for each homeland village during this timeframe identifies many as likely Slovak or likely Rusyn, while others would require individual research.

## **Enlightening Future Generations - Church Traditions Convey the Miracle**

Since the time of the Apostles, the Eastern Rite Church has preserved "history" without utilizing video, audio, or written materials that required literate church members. Churches were given saint's names, icons (religious story pictures) were painted, oral history was preserved in chant to be sung during services, and annual pilgrimages were made to the location of weeping icons or other miracles. Searching the internet, there are not many references to St. Nicholas saving the coal miners. None of these references combine Darr and Monongah, or provide a broad perspective including the correction of historical documents, which is the intention of this essay. As we reach the 100th anniversary, both the Orthodox and Byzantine (Greek) Catholic Churches are utilizing these 4 traditional methods to insure the miracle enlightens future generations of faithful.

### **Churches and Icons**

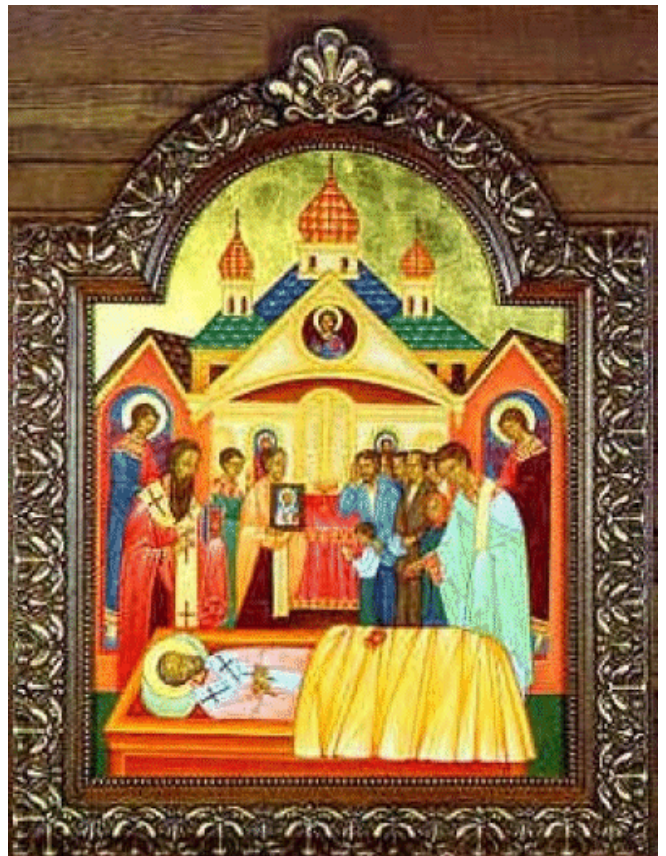
By 1910, the Darr Mine fully reopened. Also working in other nearby mines, remaining Rusyns on both sides of the river raised sufficient funds to formally organize two parish churches. Founded by some of the men who were saved, they asked their bishops to consecrate these churches in his name.

On the Van Meter side of the river, Perryopolis was chosen as the location in 1911 for services held in a public building, and lots were purchased in 1913. They continued to raise funds and built a magnificent structure under the jurisdiction of the Greek Catholic Church united with Rome (now known as

the Byzantine Catholic Archeparchy of Pittsburgh). In 1997, St. Nicholas Greek Catholic Church in Perryopolis was added to the register of National Historical Places.

In 1911, an unused Protestant church building was purchased in Jacobs Creek under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Metropolia (now known as the Orthodox Church in America). Decades later members of the parish voted to transfer to the newly formed American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Diocese (now known as the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese). In 1960, the men of the parish, mostly retired or unemployed coal miners, worked together to construct a new brick building with their own hands. It remains in the flood plain, but the new building is located further from the river and has never been touched by flood waters. However, a 2001 fire destroyed the area surrounding the altar and smoke damage ruined the interior and basement. The fire did not touch anything on the altar. With inadequate insurance coverage, the church members again worked together to rebuild the church, donating countless hours. A candle chandelier, which came from the original church building, was disassembled into hundreds of pieces to be cleaned individually and then reassembled.

More than 20 years ago, an effort by the Greek Catholic Union, which maintained its membership as the largest of several Carpatho-Rusyn fraternal organizations in the U.S., publicized the miracle to help insure it is never forgotten. At their offices in Beaver, Pennsylvania, the GCU built a chapel in 1992 whose design is a typical historic Rusyn wooden church structure. The chapel was placed under the patronage of the patron of the GCU, St. Nicholas. Because it includes so many icons which depict various events in the life of St. Nicholas, the interior of the St. Nicholas chapel is unique. The booklet "More Blessed to Give than to Receive - Legends and Miracles of St. Nicholas of Myra", was compiled by Michael Roman, Honorary Editor of the GCU

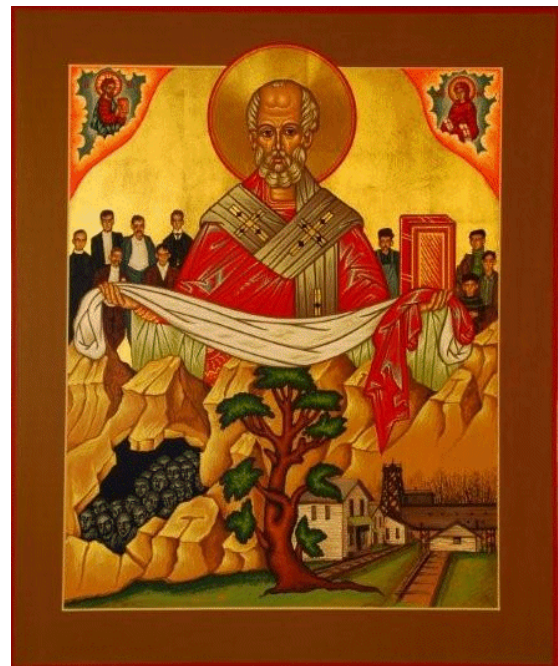




Messenger, and published by the GCU The Miracle of the Saving of the Coal Miners icon. in 1996. This booklet includes explanations of each icon in the chapel, including one that remembers the miracle of the saving of the coal miners. Coal miners, a priest and angels surround an open casket in which St. Nicholas lies, with a backdrop of the altar area of a church topped by typical roof domes and crosses.

In Eastern Rite tradition, icons convey a biblical story or events of the life of a saint. Although they appear to be painted pictures, icons have a religious purpose and the artist does not rely upon his creative artistic design abilities. In church terminology, the artist is an "iconographer", he is "writing" the religious story or life of a saint. Until recent times, most people were not literate, but could learn by viewing icons. Because so many depend on the quality of the content of the icon, the iconographer follows standard procedures and designs. some of which date from Apostolic times.

A new icon is being written for the Jacobs Creek church by Iconographer Philip Zimmerman of New Florence, Pennsylvania. The bottom portion of this icon represents earthly scenes typical of the daily life of a coal miner; company homes, a tippie, and a mine entrance. St. Nicholas wears vestments recreating icon designs typical for centuries in the Carpathians. He reaches down from the heavens with outstretched arms (arms in this position in icons represent protection). He raises the miners up and away from the explosion, gathering the miners onto an ruchnyk (embroidered cloth). Another copy of this icon will be installed at the American



St. Nicholas Saving the Coal Miners icon.

Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocesan youth facility, Camp Nazareth in Mercer, Pennsylvania, in Saints Cyril and Methodios Orthodox Church. Consecrated in 2003, this church is also designed to replicate historic Rusyn wooden churches. In this location, all children attending summer camping sessions will view the icon and learn of the miracle.

## **Pilgrimages and Chant**

Eastern Rite tradition should have also brought people to these areas on an annual basis to offer services in thanksgiving for the miracle - a pilgrimage. This pilgrimage would have been organized by the pastor with support of his bishop, and others from surrounding churches would have been invited to participate. After being suppressed by the Communists for decades, once again there are pilgrimages attended by thousands in Eastern Europe. The original 1911 charter for the Jacobs Creek church, untouched by the 2001 fire, is still displayed in a simple frame in the vestibule. The charter names this a Russian Orthodox - not Carpatho-Rusyn church. This frame was reused, as many of our frugal grandparents would have done, with the charter covering most of the original picture below. Knowledgeable Rusyns recognize the roses that can be seen as a border for the printed copy of the weeping "Our Lady of Máriapócs (Marijapovc)" icon. The site of annual pilgrimages for thousands of many nationalities for 4 centuries, Poc is today in the northeast region of Hungary, on the western side of the Carpathian Mountains. (This icon would not be displayed in a church founded by Russians, who would have instead displayed an icon from pilgrimages in their region.)

Despite this printed copy proving these immigrants had attended pilgrimages in Europe, pilgrimages in honor of this miracle did not develop in America. Again the reason is subject to speculation. As noted previously, facing pressures to change their practices, Rusyns were already dividing under different religious jurisdictions with separate bishops. These bishops also were under the authority of different Patriarchs or the Pope. In America, typically each bishop designated one site for an annual pilgrimage, and only members of that specific jurisdiction participated. Since 1907, Rusyns have moved over the entire U.S., and unfortunately, priorities that



existed for centuries have been challenged by new priorities, resulting in lower pilgrimage attendance. However, in recent years, ecumenical efforts to work together have begun bearing fruit, and some members of different jurisdictions now attend each other's pilgrimages in both Europe and America.

### **December 19th, 2007 - the 100th Anniversary**

December 19, 2007, will be the 100th anniversary of the Miracle of St. Nicholas and the Darr Mine explosion. Although not a full pilgrimage, His Eminence, Metropolitan Nicholas of the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese will celebrate an Akathist to St. Nicholas at the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Jacobs Creek beginning at 7 PM. Any one with an interest in remembering this miracle, those that were killed, and the sacrifices of both life and limb of thousands of coal miners over the last century, is welcome to attend this service.

Metropolitan Nicholas extended an invitation to His Eminence, Metropolitan Basil of the Byzantine Catholic Archeparchy of Pittsburgh to join in this celebration. Immediately upon the receipt of this invitation, Metropolitan Basil replied with his acceptance and will also join in this celebration. On behalf of the parish, their pastor, the Very Rev. Dr. Edward Pehanich has also extended an invitation to Rev. Robert Halus and members of the St. Nicholas Greek Catholic Church in Perryopolis.

An Akathist is a standard Eastern Rite church service format. This format provides for sections that reflect on the life of the specific saint and requests for intercession, chanted by both the clergy and the laity. Following standard formats and one of the standard eight tones (chant melodies), a new Tropar and Kondak have been composed. For the first time, this new content describing the miracle of the saving of the coal miners will be added to this service. The sacrifices of all coal miners of all nationalities will also be remembered with a short memorial service for the deceased known as a Panachida.

### **Directions and Information**

Growing up in coal towns with active mines, both Father Ed (Taylor, PA) and his wife, Pani Kathy (Windber, PA), have knowledge of and great appreciation for the sacrifices of coal miners. Please call them for additional information at 724-863-3741. Jacobs Creek is located near the junction of Interstate 70 and the PA Turnpike. Off of Route 51, follow the signs toward Smithton, following Route 981 South, to the signs for Jacobs Creek. Turn right following the road between the railroad and the river. For specific directions, lifelong residents of Jacobs Creek, Chuck and Becky Bobich can

be contacted at 724-872-6509. Visitors are always welcome to attend the weekly Divine Liturgy, which is offered each Saturday evening at 5 PM.

## **A Responsibility to Preserve History**

When I volunteered in 2002 to assist the faithful of the Jacobs Creek parish, Metropolitan Nicholas agreed and emphatically stated a much wider purpose for this effort. "It is the responsibility of this generation to document this miracle, so that both it and the sacrifices of many immigrants are remembered and passed on to future generations."

At that time, I had no understanding of either how much effort would be required or how much I would benefit spiritually. I am grateful for the help provided by many people who work to insure coal mine history is preserved. I have attempted to provide accurate information from the sources available. It is a great blessing to offer this essay as a supplement to the churches, the icons, the chant, and the centennial service, to pass to future generations an understanding of the Miracle of the Intercession of St. Nicholas, the Saving of More than 250 Carpatho-Rusyn Coal Miners in December 1907.

Christina Duranko