

The Weight of Coal Country

A Miner's Life Beyond the Mines

The Story of Joseph Kordish (1911–1989)

Written by Dawn King Carson

Joseph Kordish was born on Christmas Day 1911, in Portage, Pennsylvania,¹ at a moment when the American coal industry stood at the height of its power. His parents, Andrew Kordish and Mary Kasicz, had immigrated from Poland and Hungary, respectively. They settled in Pennsylvania's bituminous coal region, where thousands of Eastern European families had settled to work the mines that fueled America's industrial revolution. The town of Portage existed because of coal—the mines dictated when people worked, when they rested, who had money and who went without. His birth in Portage was his entrance to a community where nearly every family's fortunes were tied to what could be extracted from the ground.



Joseph Kordish

Growing up in a coal town meant breathing coal dust from childhood, hearing the mine whistles mark the days, and understanding that your father's work took place in darkness and danger. Joseph, known as Joe, was one of eight children in a family where mining wasn't just a job but a way of life passed from fathers to sons. At the age of eighteen Joe was living with his parents and working as a miner, he had already followed the path that boys in coal towns were expected to take. He had completed eight grades of school²—the standard education for working-class children, since practical skills earned in the mines mattered more than books. The Depression was settling over

the country, but in Portage, work in the mines continued, if irregularly. A man could still make a living underground if he was willing to risk his life for it.

Building a Family



Margaret Agnes Conley

On November 24, 1934, during the depths of the Depression, Joe married Margaret Agnes Conley; she was born in 1914 and raised in nearby Wilmore. They started their family in uncertain times but with the confidence that mining, whatever its hardships, offered steady work. The couple welcomed their first son, John, in 1936. He was followed by Andrew and then Susan and lastly, Louis in 1949. In 1940 the young family lived on Spring Hill Road in Portage Township, with Joe working as a coal miner, Margaret keeping house, and Joe's sister Julia and her husband Mike Mackovyak living with them—Mike also worked in the mines,³ part of the extended network of families whose lives were completely intertwined with the

industry's fortunes.

The 1940s brought both prosperity and danger to coal country. World War II created massive demand for coal to power war industries, and miners worked long hours to meet it. When Joe registered for the draft on October 16, 1940, he was twenty-eight years old and employed by the Johnstown Coal and Coke Company. He was recorded as five feet five and a half inches tall, weighing one hundred thirty-five pounds, with blond hair, blue eyes, and light complexion. Joe would not serve in the military;⁵ he was more valuable in the mines, part of the workforce that kept American industry running while others fought overseas.

But sometime in the late 1940s, the mines exacted their price. Deep underground, where Joe had worked since age eighteen, an accident cost him an eye. The day started ordinarily, but without warning, a metal shaving found its way into his left eye. His lack of concern for immediate attention resulted in a week-long stay at Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia.



Coal Miners With Their Mules

It was a long journey from Portage to one of the nation's premier ophthalmology centers. The doctors had no option, but to fit him with a glass eye. Fortunately, after his eye healed he was able to return to his career as a miner.⁷ Mining injuries were common—men lost fingers, broke bones, suffered burns and crushing injuries, breathed coal dust that would destroy their lungs decades later. An eye was a significant loss, but not necessarily a career-ending one, not if a man was determined and had other skills to fall back on.

A Skilled Electrician

In an era when most miners did manual labor their entire working lives, Joe had acquired technical knowledge. He had been educating himself. Through home study courses—correspondence programs advertised in magazines and newspapers—and on-the-job training, he had learned electrical work. By 1950 Joe was working as an electrician in the coal mine.⁴ This was a significant transition. He could read blueprints, understand electrical theory, and maintain the complex systems that powered underground operations. His daughter proudly remembered that he once built his own television set—a remarkable feat for anyone in 1950, let alone a coal miner in rural Pennsylvania who had completed only eight grades of formal schooling.⁷

The skills that Joe developed should have secured his future. In the coal boom years of the 1940s and early 1950s, skilled electricians were valuable. Mines needed men who could keep the electrical systems running safely in the dangerous underground environment. Joe's glass eye was a disability, certainly, but his knowledge and experience made him employable. He had reinvented himself, moving from the hard physical labor of mining to the more technical work of maintaining industrial systems.

The Collapse



But then the ground shifted beneath coal country in ways that no individual skill or determination could prevent. The 1950s brought a fundamental transformation in American energy. Oil and natural gas, long secondary to coal, became cheaper and more convenient for heating

homes and powering industries. Homeowners converted from coal furnaces to oil and gas heating. Factories switched fuels. Railroads, which had consumed enormous quantities of coal, shifted to diesel locomotives. The demand for bituminous coal from Pennsylvania's mines began a long, steep decline that would continue for decades.

The mines responded by mechanizing. Machines that could cut and load coal faster and more cheaply than human labor replaced the men who had worked underground for generations. A mechanized mine operation might employ a few dozen workers where a traditional mine had employed hundreds. The displaced miners—men in their thirties, forties, and fifties, men like Joe with families to support—found themselves competing for a shrinking number of jobs with an ever-growing pool of unemployed workers.

In Cambria County, where Portage sat in the heart of the bituminous coal region, unemployment rates in mining communities often exceeded twenty or thirty percent by the late 1950s and early 1960s. Men who had worked since they were teenagers, who knew no trade but mining, walked the streets looking for work that didn't exist. Small operators shut down permanently or ran intermittently, calling men back for a few weeks then laying them off again when orders dried up. The company towns that had been built around the mines—towns like Portage, where nearly everyone depended directly or indirectly on coal for their livelihood—faced economic catastrophe.

Fortunately, Joe—a man known to be able to fix even the most stubborn electrical problems, found work at Lehman Machine Company in Portage. His lack of traditional education and disability of sight loss did not deter him from working. His job at Lehman's fed his family and fulfilled Joe's need for problem solving. However, the late 1950s–1960s in Portage saw shrinking employment and Joe lost his job at Lehman's.⁷

Lehman's wasn't a coal mine but a machine shop, part of the broader industrial economy that served the mining industry and other local manufacturers. As coal declined, so did the businesses that had grown up around it. For Joe, approaching or past fifty, with a glass eye and a family to support, the layoff must have felt like profound injustice. He had done everything right. He'd worked hard, educated himself, and developed valuable skills. But when entire regional economies collapsed, individual merit gave no protection.

Pennsylvania offered unemployment insurance, established in the 1930s as part of the social safety net built during the Depression and expanded after World War II. The weekly benefits—typically twenty to thirty dollars—were meant to tide workers over between jobs, not to support families indefinitely. Joe drew his unemployment checks and looked for work. He traveled to Ohio, where two of his sisters-in-law had settled, exploring whether his skills might find a market in another state. But Ohio's industrial towns faced their own contractions. The same forces that were destroying coal mining in Pennsylvania were reshaping the entire industrial Midwest. Electrician jobs went to younger men, men without disabilities, men with local connections.⁷

Back in Portage, Joe watched the unemployment calendar move toward its end. Pennsylvania's unemployment insurance typically lasted twenty-six weeks, though extensions were sometimes available during particularly severe downturns. The 1958 recession had prompted federal supplements for workers in distressed regions, and Cambria County certainly qualified as distressed. But even extended benefits had limits, and for a man in his fifties competing against younger workers in a devastated regional economy, the prospect of finding steady work before the benefits expired was dim.

Joe and Margaret faced a choice that thousands of displaced coal families confronted during the 1950s and 1960s: where do you go when the place that has sustained you can no longer provide? Many families left Pennsylvania entirely, heading to Ohio, Michigan, or other industrial states where factories might still be hiring. Others doubled up with relatives, combining households to share rent and expenses. Some men took whatever work they could find—low-wage factory jobs, construction, anything to bring in some money while hoping the mines might revive.

A New Chapter in Graterford

In 1963, the Kordish family—Joe, Margaret, and their youngest son Louis, then twelve—packed up their belongings and headed two hundred miles east to Graterford, Pennsylvania. Graterford, a small community in Montgomery County was where their eldest son, John, was living. Young John and his family, along with Joe Sr. and Margaret's daughter Susan, occupied the first floor of an apartment house, and for a time, all ten family members shared the two-bedroom apartment. Eventually, when the second-floor apartment became available, Joe and Margaret moved upstairs with Susan and Louis, relieving some of the pressure. It was a practical arrangement, made more viable because Joseph Sr. had secured a job alongside his son at Miller Pump Systems in Skippack.⁷

Graterford existed in a completely different economic landscape than Portage. It sat in the agricultural countryside of southeastern Pennsylvania, close enough to Philadelphia to feel the influence of urban employment but still distinctly rural. There were no mines, no industrial infrastructure built around extracting resources from the earth. For

Margaret, the change may have been liberating. She found work as a cook at a nursing home down the street from their house, and for the first time in her married life, she was earning wages. The work gave her independence, purpose, and a regular paycheck that didn't depend on mine conditions or company decisions. She liked Graterford. She liked having her own job. For a woman who had spent thirty years managing a household on a miner's irregular income, the stability must have felt satisfying.⁷

For Joe, the move meant something different. He was living away from home—a strange and unfamiliar landscape, a new home, and a new job. Perhaps the feeling was almost one of charity. He was now renting, where he had owned, he was working with his son, John—his role was more of an equal rather than bread winner. His new circumstance may have challenged everything he understood about manhood and responsibility. In the working-class culture of coal country, a man's identity came from his ability to provide for his family through his labor. Unemployment wasn't just about lacking money; it was about losing the core of who you were. Joe had skills—he could read blueprints, maintain complex electrical systems, solve technical problems—but in Graterford, there was no mine, no machine shop, no industrial employer who needed what he knew how to do.

Then—the phone rang.

Joe's sister-in-law Anna, who was still living in Portage, called with word that Lehman Machine Company wanted Joe to return to work. This was wonderful news. Lehman's needed him. It had taken a year, but they had work for a skilled electrician, and they wanted him specifically. It wasn't charity or sentiment. Even in a contracting regional economy, skilled tradesmen who could read blueprints and maintain machinery were valuable. Lehman's had apparently found enough work to justify rehiring, and they knew Joe's capabilities.⁷

What Now?

The phone call created a dilemma. Returning to Portage meant work, income, stability, and the restoration of Joe's role as provider. But it also meant leaving Graterford, where Margaret had built something of her own for the first time in her adult life. She wanted

to stay. She had a job she enjoyed, her family together, a community where she felt comfortable, a life that wasn't defined by boom and bust cycles. The nursing home work was steady, respectable, and gave her an identity beyond wife and mother. She was happy.⁷

In most working-class families of the 1960s, the man's work decided where the family lived. Wives' preferences, even wives' economic contributions, came second to the imperative of the male breadwinner's employment. Whether Margaret agreed willingly or simply accepted the inevitable distribution of power in their marriage, we'll never know. What is certain is that the Kordish family returned to Portage around 1965. Joe went back to work at Lehman Machine Company, doing the electrical work he knew so well. Margaret left behind her job at the nursing home and the life she'd found in Graterford.

Joe worked at Lehman's until his retirement. The job carried him through the rest of his working life, providing steady income and the daily purpose that came from using his skills and knowledge. He and Margaret settled back into their house in Portage, back into a community where everyone understood what it meant to have survived the death of coal. The mines continued their decline—by the 1970s and 1980s, Pennsylvania's bituminous coal industry would be a shadow of what it had been in Joe's youth—but for the Kordish family, the crisis had passed.

The Weight

The later years brought the health consequences that coal mining always exacted, even from men who had transitioned to other work. Joe was a lifelong smoker, a habit virtually universal among coal miners. The common wisdom in mining communities held that tobacco somehow mitigated the effects of coal dust, though medical evidence suggested it actually compounded the lung damage. Joe suffered from "black lung" disease—pneumoconiosis, the medical term for lungs scarred by years of inhaling coal dust.

In his later years, Joe faced many health ailments: diabetes, arteriosclerosis, hypertension, and eventually a stroke. His body, which had survived underground

darkness, industrial accidents, the loss of an eye, and decades of hard physical labor, gradually gave way to accumulated damage. In his final years, complications from diabetes required amputations. On October 16, 1989, Joe died at Mercy Hospital in Johnstown. He was seventy-seven years old.⁶

Joe was buried alongside Margaret, who had died on February 18, 1987 from stomach cancer. She was seventy-two years old. His burial in Cresson, Cambria County, completed a circle that had taken him through the rise and fall of an entire industry, through displacement and return, through the transformation of the American economy that left men like him struggling to find their place.

In the context of the coal country's collapse, Joe had succeeded. But it was success that required constant adaptation, frequent sacrifice, and the willingness to keep going when easier paths would have been to give up or give in to bitterness about an economy that had no use for men like Joe.



Joseph and Margaret (Conley) Kordish

About the Author

I'm Dawn, a genealogist and storyteller with 26 years of experience bringing ancestors back to life through research and writing. I've gathered the stories of my family and my husband's family so our children and extended relatives can know the people behind the names. These pages are my way of making sure these lives aren't lost to time—they're an invitation to understand where we come from and feel connected to the generations that made our lives possible.

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