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Friends mourn local film star

Cambria native became legend

By **KIRK SWAUGER**
THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

EHRENFELD - Charles Bronson's tough-guy image was forged on the slag-covered hills rising above Ehrenfeld.

"Charlie" to his friends in the rough-and-tumble company, neighborhood overlooking the Little Conemaugh River, he was a hellion at heart, prone to knocking over outhouses on Halloween or robbing the company store.

Bronson, the suburban Johnstown coal miner turned Hollywood action legend, died Saturday of pneumonia at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. He was 81.

"When he was in the movies, he wasn't acting. That was Charlie," said childhood buddy Robert Myers, 81, of South Fork.

During the height of his career in the early 1970s, Bronson, the star of the "Death Wish" vengeance movies, rivaled Clint Eastwood in popularity.

His ruddy-faced, no-nonsense style paved the way for two generations of action heroes: Sylvester Stallone, Steven Seagal, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Bronson was hugely popular in Europe, where he was known in France as "le sacre mostre," or the sacred monster, and in Italy as "Il Brutto," or the ugly man.

In 1971, he received a Golden Globe as "the most popular actor in the world."

"He was just like the rest of the guys in Ehrenfeld," recalled Guy Galosi, 76.

"Just the way he acted in the movies, he acted in his younger days. He was pushy. He was a tough guy."

Like others in the rough-and-tumble Scooptown neighborhood where he grew up, Bronson naturally gravitated toward the mines.

Born Charles Buchinsky on Nov. 3, 1921, a year earlier than studio biographies claimed, he was the 11th of 15



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Charles Bronson poses next to his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in this 1980 file photo. The Cambria County native died Saturday.

children of a coal miner and his wife, both Lithuanian immigrants.

The Buchinskys lived in a crowded shack, their front porch just 4 or 5 feet away from the rail that whisked coal from the mountain where the tiny community is perched.

"There was no money and no jobs," said Louise Spiegel, 83, a South Fork native now living in

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Davidsville: "The young men congregated not too far from where we lived. My mother had a soft spot for those boys - they didn't have any jobs. One of them was Charlie Buchinsky.

"He was exactly like you saw in the movies. He was so very tough, it wasn't even funny."

Spiegel still has a hard time believing "Charlie" became an American movie legend - especially because one of his brothers was far more athletic and good looking.

"I never expected him to land in Hollywood," she said. "When I saw him with Elizabeth Taylor, I'll never forget my reaction."

Misery in the mines

Bronson's father died when he was 10, and Charles followed his brothers into the mines after graduating from South Fork High School eight years later in 1940.

He was paid \$1.10 per ton of coal, and volunteered for more dangerous jobs just to get an extra buck or two.

"We worked an eight-hour day - no lunch," Bronson recalled in a 1958 interview. "You ate your lunch on the way out. It's the most miserable, frustrating feeling in the world."

Julia Fisher, 79, has lived on Third Street in Ehrenfeld for 60 years, in her half of the company house where Bronson was born at 121 Third St.

Fisher disputes the many stories about Bronson that say he dug through garbage for food and was made to wear his sister's dress to school as a 6-year-old because that was the only hand-me-down his family had.

"It's just not true," Fisher said. "I knew his family, and yes, they were a large family. But they had the basics just like the rest of us. No one went without. They were a typical coal mine family - everyone was the same."

As an outlet, Bronson painted pictures of coal miners, or his mother washing his father's back when he came out of the mine.

"He was a very good artist," Myers said.

Bronson spent two years in the mines before he was drafted into the Air Force. He was a tailgunner on a B-29, flying 18 missions over the Pacific.

When he got out of the Air Force, Bronson returned briefly to Ehrenfeld to decide what he wanted to do.

Boardwalk to Tinseletown

Myers said Bronson went to Atlantic City, where he worked bingo stands with Jack Klugman, who went on to become Felix Unger in the hit TV show "The Odd Couple."

Bronson married Harriet Tendler, another fledgling actor with Hollywood connections, and moved to Philadelphia. The couple had two children before divorcing.

"In South Philadelphia, I met a lot of people studying voice and acting," he said in 1958. "In a police gym where I worked out, I met a fellow who



PETE VIZZA/THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Children ride their bikes past Charles Bronson's old house on Third Street in Ehrenfeld.

suggested I try acting. I did."

Bronson joined the Philadelphia Play and Players Troupe, painting scenery and acting in minor roles, before heading west to California in 1950.

There, he improved his diction at Pasadena Playhouse school, where he supported himself by selling Christmas cards and toys on street corners.

He soon was discovered by studio scouts and cast as a sailor in the 1951 Gary Cooper film, "You're in the Navy Now."

As either Charles Buchinsky or Buchinski, he had supporting roles in a number of Hollywood films. In 1954, he changed his last name, fearing reaction in the McCarthy era to Russian-sounding names.

Bronson's first starring role came in 1958 with "Machine-Gun Kelly," made in just eight days. That same year, he appeared in the brief TV series "Man with a Camera," followed by another short-lived television show, "The Travels of Jamie McPheeters," five years later.

His image began to grow with roles in some of the top Hollywood movies of the time, including "The Battle of the Bulge," "The Magnificent Seven" and "The Dirty Dozen."

But real stardom eluded him.

Instead, Bronson found acclaim in Europe before Hollywood noticed.

Action legend

Finally, in the late 1960s and 1970s, Bronson became the prototypical tough guy in films rife with action, shooting and dead bodies.

He starred in "The Valachi Papers," "Chato's Land," "The Mechanic," "Valdez," "The Stone Killer," "Mr. Majestyk," "Breakout," "Hard Times," "Breakout Pass," "White Buffalo," "Telefon," "Love and Bullets," "Death Hunt," "Assassination" and "Messenger of Death."

His most controversial film was "Death Wish," released in 1974.

As an affluent, liberal architect, Bronson's life is shattered when young thugs kill his wife and rape his daughter. He vows to rid the city of bad

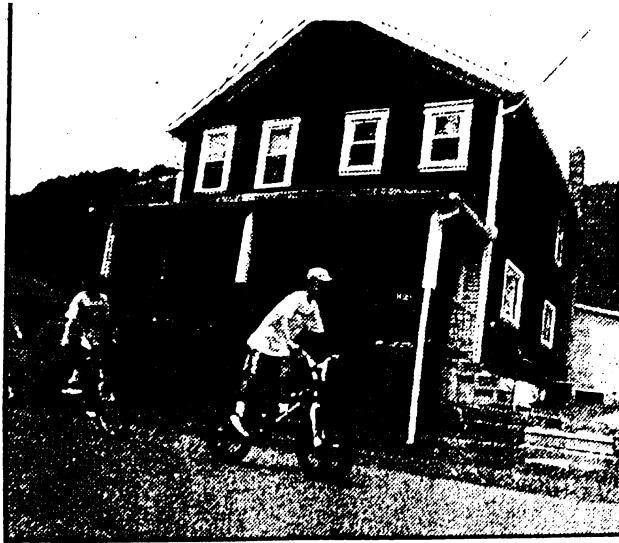
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- Some of actor Charles Bronson's films:
- "Death Wish V: The Face of Death," 1994
 - "Death Wish 4: The Crackdown," 1987
 - "Murphy's Law," 1986
 - "Death Wish 3," 1985
 - "Death Wish II," 1982
 - "The White Buffalo," 1977
 - "Death Wish," 1974
 - "Red Sun," 1972
 - "Once Upon a Time in the West," 1969
 - "The Dirty Dozen," 1967
 - "Guns of Diablo," 1964
 - "The Great Escape," 1963
 - "The Magnificent Seven," 1960
 - "Machine-Gun Kelly," 1958
 - "House of Wax," 1953
 - "You're in the Navy Now," 1951

guys, executing the enemy.

Bronson went on to make four "Death Wish" sequels.

"I think they provide satisfaction for people who are victimized by crime and look in vain for authorities to protect them," he said in a 1987 interview.

"But I don't think people try to imitate that kind of thing."

Bronson was married three times, including 22 years to striking British actress Jill Ireland, who died of cancer in 1990.

He is survived by his wife, Kim, whom he married in 1998, along with six children and two grandchildren. Funeral services will be private.

Fading star

In Ehrenfeld, Bronson's legacy is fading with the generations. Now, children say, "Charles who?" when asked if they know where Bronson was born.

Galosi said that for as many times as Bronson "brought his wives through" during the years, he never stopped to say hello.

"Hack Wilson was one of Charlie's best friends, and he would never stop to speak to him," Galosi said with a hint of resentment. "That burned me up the most."

Galosi said Bronson, an altar boy at the former Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Roman Catholic Church at the bottom of the hill in Ehrenfeld, would stop by the church and other landmarks when he returned home.

"I saw him about three years ago, after his brother's death," Galosi said. "He drove a black Explorer with his third wife, and he stopped in front of the church he used to go to and she took his picture in front of it."

Fisher said Bronson visited the village probably more than anyone knew, but would never talk to anyone.

"He would never stay here," she said. "He always stayed in Johnstown or with his brother in Portage."

Staff writer Julie Benamati and The Associated Press contributed to this report.