LIFE OF A ROUTT COUNTY COAL MINER: BILL LEE

by Scott Sis and Chad Whitmore

"I WAS BORN AT MY FAMILY'S HOME IN LEADVILLE."

"I was born in Leadville, Colorado, on April 16, 1915. I was born at my family's home in Leadville. My dad was born in Ohio and moved to Kansas. His dad owned a big grain elevator, and he owned a confectionery store. After he was married, he moved to Leadville. He worked at the smelter, and he was foreman of the charge floor for two years. He then got lead poisoning. My grandparents had a homestead just south of Craig. They moved out on the homestead, and finally my dad bought a place of his own. I was about six months old when we moved from Leadville. In 1924, we left the homestead and moved to Mt. Harris. I've been there ever since.

"I lived in Leadville the same time as Baby Doe Tabor. She was an elderly lady when I first saw her. Mrs. Tabor would get her mail and stop at my grandmother's house to visit and rest. She walked all the way out to the mine where she lived.

"I was in the fourth grade when I moved to Mt. Harris. The one school on the homestead was a one-room building. There were grades one to eight. The one school in Mt.Harris took care of those grades also, but they had teachers and rooms for each grade up to fifth grade. They had five rooms then, but one big room for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. I liked the Mt. Harris school better, but I don't think that you learned any more.

"For entertainment they had a show hall, a picture place, it cost ten cents if you had the money, and if you didn't have the money you didn't go. We mostly had to make our own fun. We also played a lot of baseball and football. In the winter we would go sledding, ice skating and skiing. We made our own skating rink by flooding the river and then scooping the snow off the ice. We had a ski hill across the Yampa River, and we had to take care of it ourselves. I did ski, and we had to make our own skis. There were a few purchased skis in the county then. We made ours out of pine boards, some of the kids used barrel staves. Also, we kids had a baseball team every summer. Steamboat and Oak Creek both had teams.

"I've lived in Routt County since 1924. When I first moved to Mt. Harris there were about 1,500 people. There were three camps at Pinnicle Kemmer, Victor American Fuel was the Wadge Mine, and Colorado Ute was Mt. Harris. The whole vicinity was known as Mt. Harris.

"After getting out of school, I worked on a milk truck for awhile delivering milk at Hayden, Mt. Harris, and Bear River. Then I was working at Linde's gas station. Then one day the superintendent was at Linde's; he told me to come on up to the Victor, and he would give me a job, so I did. I was twenty-one years old when I started mining; that was back in 1937. Underground the top scale was $5.65 a day for eight hours. That was for machine runners, joy operators, mechanics and electricians, just a general run of miners, and that was a $5.10 basic scale, and the base outside was $4.10. That's a day, a full eight-hour day; this was during the Great Depression.

"Mt. Harris was just like everywhere else. You couldn't have everything that you wanted; you didn't waste anything. If you had a seasonal job, you could save almost nothing. Most of the miners were Democrats, so they were for Roosevelt.

"I still remember the attack on Pearl Harbor. That day I came out of the mine, and everyone was listening to the news on the radio and heard it. You

"I WAS IN THE FOURTH GRADE WHEN I MOVED TO MT. HARRIS."

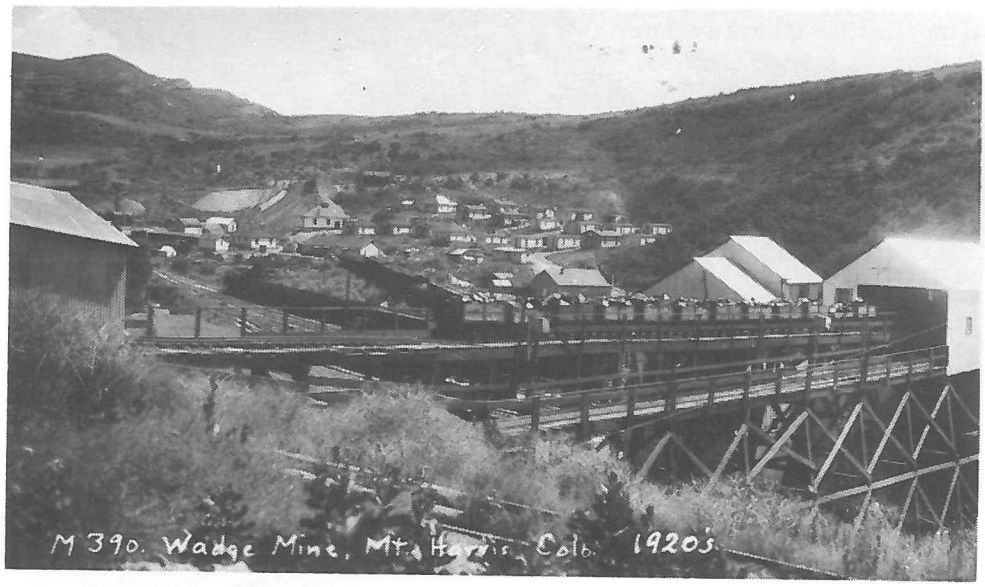
knew good and well something was up; everybody kind of figured something was brewing, but they didn't know who was doing what or where. They figured we could be getting hit by Germany. I don't think they were just off guard from Japan, because one of Japan's Ambassadors was in Washington, D.C. when they bombed Pearl Harbor. A lot of miners joined the military right off the bat. I joined the Navy in March, 1944, and became an aviation metal smith. Most of the young fellows around Steamboat during World War II were all in the service.

"The mines then started working six days a week. There were four years there that they worked around the clock. It never was seasonal during war time. We were part of the war effort; Routt County coal kept our war industry going.

"I STILL REMEMBER THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR."

"After the war, I went back to work for the mine. Those mines were union mines, the United Mine Workers. They would possibly get raises of a few cents an hour, but they were fighting for hospitalization and better working conditions in the mine. In those days, if you had any insurance you carried it yourself. Most of the bargaining was done with a committee from the Eastern coal mines. The only other Western state that had a voice in the bargaining session was Wyoming. Whatever the Eastern Coal Company accepted we had to also accept. Before the union became so powerful (1933), the miners were working 10 to 12 hours a day for under $3.00 per day. Every time the contract ran out we had a strike. They would usually settle a contract the first of April. A lot of times, they would go two or three months before they put the contract in because there wasn't any need for coal.

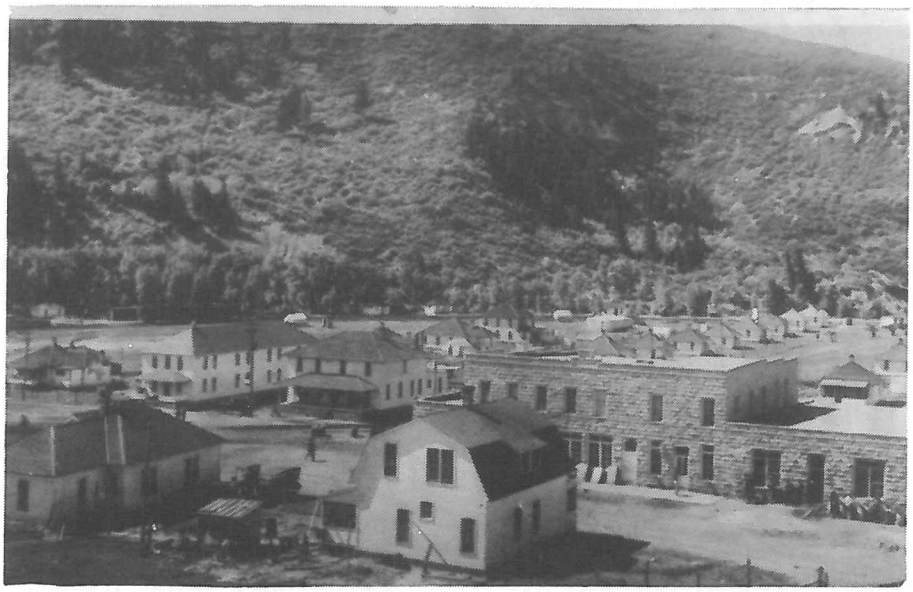
"I worked at the mine from 1937 to 1951, so I was there during the big explosion in 1942. On the night of the explosion, after I had just come out of the mine at 7:00 p.m., I had to wait for one of the trains because Lorene had to take Marlyn to Denver. We waited until 8:00 p.m., so I missed the explosion all together. The explosion was caused by a heavy build-up of methane gas. It was set off by a blower fan. It had been moved and was churning air into the gas area. Methane is very unstable; with 22 percent mixture of oxygen, it's combustible. When that gas hit the coal dust, it was where they were loading coal. It wasn't fully neutralized. When the dust was set off, it was just like black powder; it's highly explosive. They did have it neutralized with heavy rock dust, and they had what was known as explosive shells just sitting



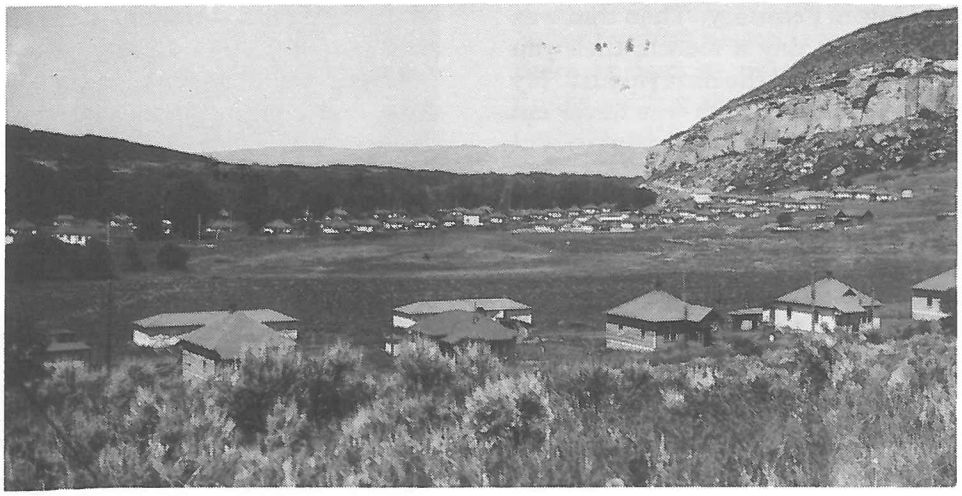
"I WORKED AT THE MINE FROM 1937 TO 1951."

on the coal. The redwood pegs and boards were sitting across some rock dust, which was sitting on top. There were holes drilled into the coal rib. Wooden pegs were put into the holes and wooden shelves were placed on the pegs. There were several big sacks of open rock dust on the shelves. Any heavy jar would upset the bags of rock dust, which in turn would put out any fire caused by an explosion. There could have been 25 shelves in there, which at the time of the fire there were explosions. If it hadn't been for the explosion shelves expanding, the rescue teams could not have gone back into the mine so early. It so happened that the fire was snuffed out, consequently letting the miners back down in the mine that morning. If anyone was around, they could have heard the explosion. We had our own boilers and generators, and when that explosion happened, it knocked the breakers out. They couldn't make the breakers go back in on the mine surface circuits, so they knew something had happened. I was almost in the mine when it blew up. Lorene got on the train to go on a trip to Denver, and I went home. I was going to get something to eat and was kind of tired; I fell asleep at the table. The next thing I knew a light flashed across the table, and I knew it was my dad driving into the driveway. My dad was night watchman at the mine, and he told me that the mine officials wanted me to come back to the mine. He then told me that the mine had blown up.

"When I returned, the first thing we did was to drop down through the air shaft. The good thing about it



"WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO MT. HARRIS, THERE WERE ABOUT 1500 PEOPLE."



"THE WHOLE VICINITY WAS KNOWN AS MT. HARRIS."

was that the explosion had not knocked out the main blower fan. The smoke was coming out of the main entry, and the return air was backed clear up into the intake air shaft. That was known as nine north and was 1,000 feet underground. The explosion happened just a little bit over a mile underground. To keep the air circulating, they got into the work area where the men were. There were 34 men killed in the explosion. Four men were in entry #13. The explosion had shut the power off on them. They had a good miner down there pushing the crew. The other three men were working, but this one seemed to know what he was doing. He came down to the entry and saw all the dust and smoke. He knew something had happened, and he got them and brought them down to the point from the main air intake over the main haulage. They went through the return air doors off that entry, over the top through the main entries, then dropped down into the air. When they dropped down into the air course, there was a lot of smoke in there. In a few minutes, they said the air was clearing because the big fan was pushing air into the main air intake. The mine was reopened after it was cleaned up, which took about six months. You see, they've got to find every individual that was in the mine, and if they hadn't found them all, they would have had to seal those entrances. It is a federal law.

"I made a lot more money going to work for the mine, but the mine in those days was seasonal. I would start work possibly in the middle of August and work

until the first or middle of February. Then that was spotty; you may have one day a month, then you might not have any work until the next August. My dad was the night watchman, so he was never cut from work. The others would draw unemployment and go fishing most of the time. In the winter, the Wadge usually had around 125 men, and Colorado Utah employed about 250 men. This mine was just across the river at Mt. Harris. It wasn't under one company. Mt. Harris is Colorado Utah Coal Company; Wadge is under Victor American Coal Company.

"I don't think there were any advantages in living in the company town. A lot of people lived in Steamboat that worked in the mine. The rent wasn't very high in the company houses and anything else we needed was not too expensive. We didn't pay for water, just paid rent.

"The reason that Mt. Harris is no longer around is because underground mining was too expensive for the little community. If they would have had coal prices the way they are now, I see no reason why they couldn't mine. But in 1958, we got seven dollars for a ton of coal. Right now the lump bituminous coal is about $40 and the smaller stoker coal is $35 per ton. We knew that the mine would close down, because the stockholders just didn't want to throw good money after bad. The town was sold, people bought houses and moved them. Several of them are in Hayden. They were all well-built houses; most of them had hardwood floors. Some of the five or six room houses were about $300; smaller ones went for $150. I then started working for Dry Creek Coal Company in Hayden; this was also a union mine. I worked there for eight years. After the mines closed, the people just scattered -- some went to Steamboat, some went to Oak Creek. Since I was a miner, everything now has changed to beat all. I don't think they even have a scoop shovel anymore around a coal mine. In the future, they are going to have to go underground, because the best coal is deep, unless they come up with a better way to get it and utilize that energy. They would have to go underground because the over burdened is too thick.

"I DON'T THINK THEY EVEN HAVE A SCOOP SHOVEL ANYMORE AROUND A COAL MINE."

"After leaving the mines, I did welding for Albert Baierl. Then I started working for Routt County as a mechanic until I retired in 1984."

To conclude our story, we got Lorene to tell us a little bit about herself.

"I was born in Oklahoma City quite a long time ago. When I was 8 years old, my folks moved to Craig. I went all through school there. All my school years were great. I met Bill in high school. We would always have dances, either in Craig, Mt. Harris, or Hayden. All the high school kids would go to the dances, and we just met at one of the dances. I finished high school in Craig. Then Bill and I were married and we moved to Mt. Harris, because that's where he lived. We were married in a Congregational Church in Craig, March 24, 1940. The wedding was small and to the point. We couldn't afford to have a honeymoon, not back in those days. I did not go back to work until my youngest daughter was 11 and could look out for herself.

"Mt. Harris then was about the same size as Hayden is now. Of course, we had only one school then. They would have to bus the kids to Hayden High School. Hayden High used to be bigger than the Craig High School."

Since Lorene was out of town when the big mine disaster happened at Mt. Harris, we asked her how she heard about it.

"I was on the way to Denver. I was on the train and it stopped in Oak Creek, and it had just exploded shortly after I left Mt. Harris. They knew that I had gotten on at Mt. Harris, and they asked me if I had any family working at the mine. They told me about the explosion, and if I wanted to go back, they would get someone to take me. I was taking my oldest daughter to Denver to see the doctor. They said it might be two days, or even three days before they would know what happened to anybody down in the mine. So I thought I might as well just go on to Denver. Then I would still be back in time to find out what happened."

We asked Lorene what her feelings were when the town of Mt. Harris closed up.

"I felt kind of sad about it, because we had lived there for so long. Everybody knew everyone else. A lot of people moved to Hayden like us, so it was pretty much the same. I liked to live in Mt. Harris, but a lot of people didn't. It was a good place to raise kids. I have two children, one in Steamboat Springs, and the other in Meeker. I also have five grandchildren."