MT. HARRIS: FROM ROUTT COUNTY GOLD TO DUST

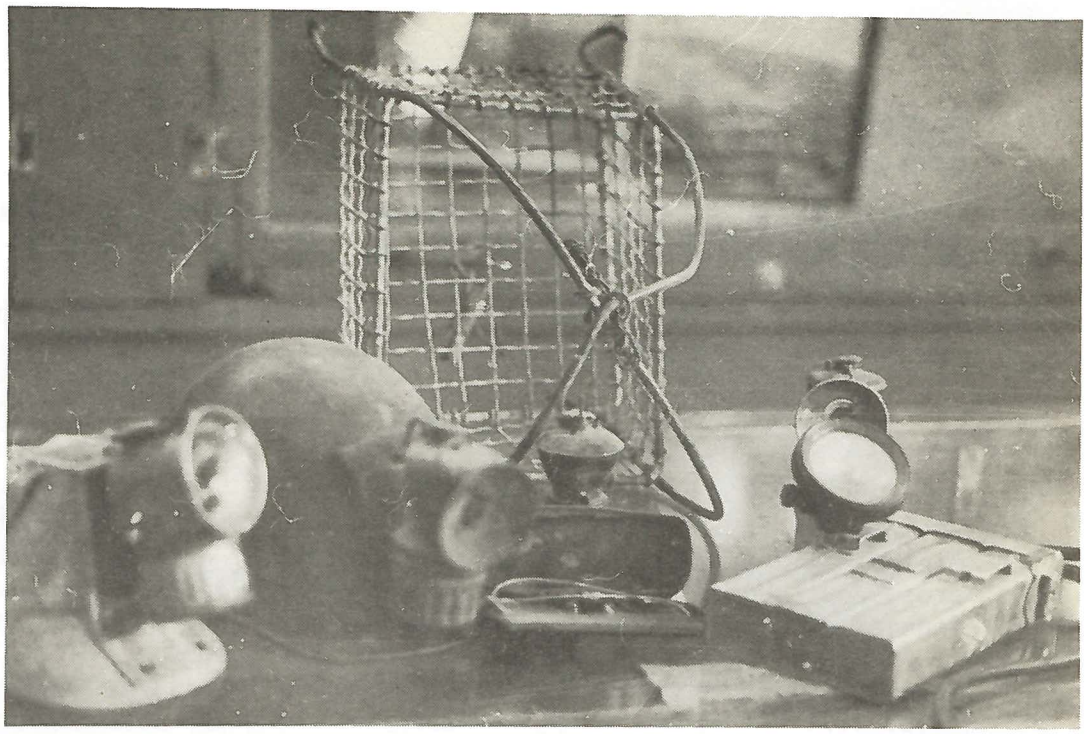
By Judy Seligson

"Mt. Harris was a legend." That's the way old timers describe the small coal mining community which, between 1914 and 1958, grew from a tent colony into a prosperous company town and then faded. Today cattle graze among scattered foundations, and cottonwoods line what used to be Main Street for 1500 people.

It was in 1886 that James Wadge homesteaded the little valley that lies seven miles east of Hayden. Wadge mined coal along the river banks and sold it to settlers for $1.50 a ton. His ranch was known as a great stopping place for freighters and travelers because his wife was such a good cook. The railroad reached Mt. Harris in 1913, making it possible to move coal in bulk and at a profit. Within five years four companies moved into the area to take advantage of what's been called "Routt County Gold."

On June 12, 1914 the Colorado-Utah Coal Company, led by George and B. A. Harris, broke ground for the first Harris Mine. During its first two years, the company extracted somewhere between 1000-1600 tons of coal daily, and by 1915 production was estimated at 119,000 tons. The Harris Mine was the largest of the mines in the area, owning over 2000 acres in Routt County. The business district sat on Colorado-Utah land, and the town was managed by the company.

It wasn't until two years later that the Victor-American Fuel Company, Colorado's oldest mining company, began digging on the south side of the Yampa River east of the Harris Mine. Because their camp sat on the site originally homesteaded by James Wadge, they named their claim after him. Youngsters living in the area, which housed 300 people, giggled at the old man and claimed his house was haunted. After his death the Victor-American Company built a baseball field where



These are some of the tools used by coal miners in the 1920's. Lanterns attached to miners' helmets burned a mixture of carbide gas.

his log cabin had been. Residents had their own general store and swimming hole but used Mt. Harris facilities. Their houses were painted various colors while Mt. Harris residents painted theirs white with grey trim.

The Pennacle-Kemmer Company, affectionately called "the P-K", brought 150 men from Wyoming into the valley to work its mine east of the Wadge Mine. It was the smallest of the four mines and the least productive.

Two miles east of Mt. Harris was the site of the Bear River Company mine which was also small. The area had its own post office and school, but residents went into Mt. Harris to vote and shop.

Coal from all four underground mines was shipped by rail to South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming, as well as northern Kansas and Denver. In the 1920's it sold for $2.50 a ton. The passenger train from Denver came in at 4:30 with the mail but freight trains loaded with Mt. Harris coal were constantly on the move. The coal was semi-bituminous, high in heat units, free from impurities, and the best coal from the western slope according to state tests.

Tunnel mining was the biggest industry in Routt County in the 1920's, when 1295 people lived in Mt. Harris. The population remained steady for thirty years until strip mining proved to be more efficient and less expensive. By 1950 the town's population fell to 769. Routt County felt the impact. The total county population in 1940 was 10,525, in ten years it had dropped to 8940, and by 1970 Routt County's population was only 6592.

The end began in 1940 when Pennacle-Kemmer sold out. Strip mining was simply more economical; it was also safer. After the war there was less demand for the diesel fuel which the area was producing, and six years after the war ended the Wadge Mine closed and the Victor-American Company moved out.

On January 15, 1958, Colorado-Utah Coal Company closed the Mt. Harris Mine. "People just didn't believe that Mt. Harris would ever close," commented one resident. "Most of us ignored the rumors. The company never told the men what was happening, but with the other mines closed we knew something was in the wind." News of the end leaked out in a funny way.

"It was real honest to God living. I mean the hard way, don't you see. And you enjoyed it, you didn't think anything about it. You didn't think it to be hard times then."

Freda Bugay, then a janitor in the Colorado-Utah office, made the discovery: "I was dusting B. A. Harris' desk and found a letter about liquidation. I went home and told my husband, and well, you know how word gets out."

Mt. Harris was dismantled on May 20, 1958, when the whole town was auctioned off. Despite the efforts of residents to buy and maintain the town, it was carried off piece by piece to create homes throughout the county. The Mt. Harris church was cut in two and moved in halves to Hayden where it is now used as the American Legion Building. Other houses were torn down, moved, and rebuilt in Steamboat, Hayden, Craig, and Baggs.

For awhile hippies summered in the ruins and displaced residents returned to picnic and pick flowers. Today Alfred Camilletti runs cattle among the foundations; fences still stand and the remains of road and sidewalks crisscross the site. "If they put the valley back now I'd sell everything I have and move right back," says one teary-eyed old timer. "It was real honest to God living. I mean the hard way, don't you see. And you enjoyed it, you didn't think anything about it. You didn't think it to be hard times then."

Mt. Harris was a pretty town. Homes were large and each had a spacious yard with ample room for a flower garden. Rent was cheap: a five room house with bath rented for $25 a month if a company felt the family needed accommodations. Electricity ran 50¢ per room and water was free. Companies furnished paint for the houses every two years, and gave local youngsters free movie tickets for cleaning the river banks and sidewalks. The town was clean and friendly and many coal miners settled in Mt. Harris rather than Oak Creek which was considered rough and ugly by comparison.

"We didn't have dishwashers and all those gadgets you've got today," explains Edythe Johnston, long-time Mt. Harris resident, "But we were plenty comfortable. Everyone had a chick sales special (outhouse) in the back and most had running water in the house. If not inside, a pump was usually next to the coal pile, so that anyone could bring in a bucket of coal when he went for water. The wood pile was almost always between the chick sales and the house so that women could bring in wood for the stove in the morning without having to make an extra trip. We women were always bringing in the wood," Mrs. Johnston smiles. "I don't know anybody who didn't have a dog or a cat and a nice big garden," she adds, "We had the nicest yards you ever saw - always filled with kids playing and women tending their sweet peas or holyhocks or strawberries."

Main street was always at a bustle. On one side stood the company offices, the general store, the drug store, the barber shop, the post office, and the pool hall which served 3.2% beer and provided a round-the-clock meeting place for men. This complex was built in 1917 out of sandstone blasted from the rimrocks. On the other side stood the depot, the B.A. Harris home, the two doctors' homes and offices, and the Colburn Hotel which boasted the only phone booth in town. The fire department was headquartered in a two wheel cart with a water tank and hose.

"We weren't that far off from modern shopping centers," observed a one time resident, "We had everything except a jail and a newspaper." When Highway

40 cut through a hill in the Victor-American camp, a two story gas station was built on the hillside. The lower level served cars in town and the second floor serviced people on the highway. Main street was never formally named and it was years before the town had three official streets: Moffat, Ruby, and River.

The Bargain Store of Yampa Valley, the Colorado-Utah company store, was the largest general merchandise shop in the valley and people from all over the county traded there. Mr. Dowel managed the store which carried everything from meat and dairy products to second hand furniture. The cashier's office was in the back of the shop where she received payments in a cup pushed along a wire, and sent back change in another hanging cup.

In the winter Hayden ranchers rode around Mt. Harris selling meat and dairy products on the back of a sled. "The housewife would have to bundle up good and warm to go outside and see what she wanted for the family's dinner that day," recalls Mrs. Johnson. "I remember times when the meat was so frozen it had to be cut with a saw. We'd always keep it hung around the back of the house in a clean flour sack until we were ready to cook it." Some of the bosses' homes had ice boxes but most of the miners did not. Ice was cut off the Yampa River in the winter and

Men working in the Harris Mine lived in homes nearby.

Wadge miners lived on the south side of the highway.

stored in two large sheds, packed with sawdust to keep it from melting in the summer.

Everyone went to the post office at least once a day, generally when the afternoon train from Denver brought the mail in at 4:30. Three employees worked until six to put the mail out. Many remember a two hour wait before the train passed through town when they could cross the railroad tracks to get home.

Youngsters used to gather at the depot to watch the mail being picked up. Often the train never stopped: one bag was thrown from the cars as the outgoing mail bag was grabbed from a sidearm. One of the fifty post office boxes was specially reserved for miners' savings bonds by Dacy S. Johnston who served as postmistress for more than sixteen years.

The old song about "You owed your soul to the company store," best describes the days before the unions came to Mt. Harris in 1933. People had very little; many never carried cash and used only Colorado-Utah script, clover-shaped brass coins issued on pay day, that was good only in the company store. This meant that a Mt. Harris miner could not spend his earnings anywhere other than company controlled businesses. If a family ran short of money they could "draw script" on Tuesdays to be taken from their coming pay. Victor-American Coal operated much the same way. Miners charged all their expenses to the company and this was deducted from their weekly pay. James Clifton, former Victor-American supervisor, thinks back: "I'd seen times at the end of the month when some of the men still owed for their rent and script. This was especially true in the summer when the mine wasn't working. I was outside supervisor then and made about $225 a month, but the miners never made more than $5 a day before the unions. You made enough to feed your family but only if you worked. The company paid just barely enough for a family to live, and they didn't give you anything more."

At a 1933 mass meeting in Milner, the men working in Mt. Harris organized the first United Mine Workers local. When the unions first came into the area, the Colorado-Utah Company wouldn't let the miners meet on company property, but after two months of government pressure, it was forced to let the miners assemble in the basement of the Liberty Hall Theater. The four companies, fearing violence sent for the state militia, but the miners simply went on strike until their demands were met. Before the unionization, one miner recalls receiving $4.80 for a day's work; the week after the UMW was organized, the same man was earning $6.10 a day. "Before the union I never did know what a vacation was. The only days we got off then was when the mines weren't operating," says another Mt. Harris resident.

Ed Bugay remembers the change the union brought. "The school was on Victor-American property right next to their general store. Before the unions, Mother used to give me two bits to buy hamburger - you could do that in those days. I'd go home with the meat and Mother would cook and we'd all eat supper. One day the Colorado-Utah people called my father into the offices and said he'd lose his job if our family didn't buy meat at our own company's store. I remember after the men had organized Saturday nights were very exciting. You'd get your pay in cash, rush right home, eat supper, and drive the whole family to Steamboat. We'd always go to Ed Furlong's Furniture and Hardware Store and then take the kids to see a picture show or do something else. It was real good to be able to spend your money anywhere you wanted!"

With the exception of a few Saturday night jaunts, most of the miners and their families stayed in Mt. Harris. Bachelors lived in tar paper shacks on the far side of the river, but reports have it that most unmarried

men who moved into Mt. Harris didn't stay single very long. Many miners felt that other people looked down on them because their work was dirty and left them without much money. As a result, Mt. Harris families stayed home and the town became quite self-sufficient. Martha Baierl, of Hayden, says, "Men that go into the earth and work with it all the time are a special breed. They were a totally different class of people in those days - good people. A miner is always a miner, no matter what." Others remember the men who worked the mines as rugged and dure, but always "with their hands in their pockets looking for something they could give somebody else who was in need."

This photo shows the Victor-American store and the Mt. Harris school with rimrocks in the background.

For the women, life in Mt. Harris was typical of life in any small town in the early twenties. Alice Skufka speaks about her years in Mt. Harris, "Most of us had children to raise and husbands to feed and homes to look after. If you don't think that didn't keep us busy, well I'll tell you something different. You got up in the morning, put wood on the fire, got the family dressed and fed and off to school or work. There wasn't that much in Mt. Harris but we had lots to do. Friends were always coming over for cards or lunch, or having showers for all the girls that got married or had babies. It was considered bad luck for a woman to go into the mines and very few ladies worked. But the Goodwill Club and the Community Club always had something happening, and when the war came all the women went to work sewing for men in the Army. We cleaned our houses and planted our gardens and kept up on all the local news. It was a simple life and we were happy with it that way."

For children there was a magic to life in Mt. Harris. Long-time Mt. Harris residents are quick to remember growing up on the massive sandstone rimrocks just south of town. Little ones scrambled on the "Pound of Butter Rock" and the "Pair of Elephants Rock" while bigger kids climbed up crevasses to reach the "Rocking Chair Rock" on top. Saturday mornings everyone got together to choose up sides for an intense two day game of cowboys and Indians, stopping only for Saturday night supper and Sunday morning church. When fruit trucks from Grand Junction came through town to spend the night in summer, the adventurous would pilfer peaches from the trucks while others waited on the rimrocks for the goods to be delivered. Everyone ate until they were sick, and then cowboys and Indians battled out their differences with over ripe peaches and pits. The story has it that the truckers soon learned to sleep in their trucks. In the fall the boys equipped themselves with BB's and .22's for afternoons of rattlesnake hunting on the rimrocks. Springs were spent enduring the mud that made games of kick-the-can and tag quite a challenge. In the winter youngsters

made skis of wooden barrel stays, soaking the tips of the stays in hot water until the wood curled. They then climbed the hill where the water tank stood for a race to the bottom. One pair of skis seldom lasted more than a week and by the second month of snow, sledding and snowmen had become the craze.

Adults, as well as youngsters, enjoyed a wide variety of sports in Mt. Harris. A homemade grandstand circled the large baseball field that stood in the center of town. Sunday afternoon games ran through the summer and in the winter the field was flooded and used as a skating rink. For three years rodeo grounds brought people into town from all over the country. Boxing tournaments in the basement of the theater inspired betting among friends, and poker games were always in the making. Rabbit hunting was a major pass time for almost everyone throughout the year. And, on a warm summer evening up to 200 people splashed in the Sand Island swimming hole just west of town.

Mt. Harris had a substantial black community for a small Colorado town. Over 100 Black families lived west of Main Street in what was known as Hickory Flats. They had a boarding house and Masonic Hall, but shared facilities with the other residents. Locals remember gathering around the Yampa River to watch the Black's annual baptism at Sand Island: "I never saw so much yelling and singing in all my days," one old timer muses, "They didn't just sprinkle on the water either, a kid really had to know how to swim." Althought the Ku Klux Klan threatened many families in northwest Colorado, Mt. Harris residents were seldom bothered. "We just always figured if one man had any disputes with another it should be dealt with in the open," James Clifton comments.

Mt. Harris residents placed strong emphasis on education, and the Mt. Harris school was known as the best primary school in Routt County. The first classes were started in the skinner home by Mrs. Colburn in November, 1914. Two years later a four room school house was built on the north side of the old highway on Victor-American land. In the early thirties it burned and was replaced in 1932 with one of the few two story buildings in Mt. Harris, made from sandstone blasted from the rimrocks. A few remains of the building can still be seen today. Students from the first through eighth grades walked to school in Mt. Harris every day, while older ones took the bus to Hayden High School.

Most of the mining men were hesitant about religion, regarding church services as fine for women and children, but not for men who had other things to do. The Mt. Harris church was not built until three years after the mines opened in the valley. By 1917 a small community church was erected, but preachers came and went. As in most mining towns, families came from so many different backgrounds that most preferred to practice their religious beliefs privately. Others felt that if you loved the land were good to your neighbor, God would be content.

"We were hard workin' sonsuvbitches. If you wasn't you didn't stay a miner too terrible long," explains one lifetime coal miner. The mines operated at full force from September to April and the men working hard during those eight months. In the summer everybody relaxed, hunting, fishing, and camping. Hayden men usually came into

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Mt. Harris in January to work the mines until it was time to farm again in the fall.

On Friday afternoon the men would gather enough spare coal for their families for the coming week, marking the beginning of another Hay Day weekend. On weekends the Liberty Hall Theater showed moving pictures for 35¢ a head, and the gym in the basement was always open. Card parties, dinner sociables, and all-town dances were plenty, and you could always call on somebody to put on a hometown play every couple of months. Then, when people had cars, there was always Steamboat. "I don't have to say anything about Steamboat on Saturday night," smiles Sidro Arroyo, "There weren't many who stayed home and read books."

On Saturday nights the whole town turned out to dance. Men paid one dollar to get into the Community Hall and women came in their new long skirts to stand along the walls until someone asked them to dance. Kids walked down the railroad tracks from Bear River and the P-K camp, singing "Barney Google" and "Red Hot Mama." Little ones were brought in wicker baskets and put in the coat room until the party ended; there was no such thing as babysitting in those days. There were always local bands willing to play 'til midnight, when everyone adjourned to the nearby boarding house for refreshments the women had baked earlier that day.

During Prohibition most men carried a bottle in the car and invited friends outside for a taste of chalk beer or bathtub gin. Women never drank, or if they did it was secretly in a closet or the outhouse. The pool hall sold 3.2% beer to the men, but as Lupe Arroyo remembers, "You can bet there were those who made their own!" Wine was pressed from almost any kind of plant; the most common was made from dandelions, rhubarb, or grapes. A few families brewed their own beer in barrels and used their basements as pubs for friends. Others became quite wealthy bootlegging chalk beer and whiskey. After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the Colorado-Utah Company would still not permit a bar in Mt. Harris, so families continued to make their own until the town closed in 1958.

January 27, 1942 was a day Mt. Harris veterans remember well. The town suffered one of the worst coal mining disasters in the history of Colorado. Thirty-four men lost their lives when a spark deep inside the Wadge Mine touched off lethal methane gas. Damage to the mine's equipment and surrounding area was devasting. In an explosion that took less than five minutes, the Victor-American Fuel Company lost over $.5 million. The Wadge tipple exploded at 9:45 p.m., shortly before the night shift was scheduled to go on duty. If it had occurred between shifts more men would have been killed; as it was only four men survived the explosion. The next morning rescue crews from other mines went into the Wadge to find the bodies. A temporary morgue was set up in the theater where families walked past rows of men trying to identify lost ones. Many could be recognized only by their teeth.

All four mines in the valley closed so workers could help the widows. Schools in Mt. Harris and Hayden were closed and used to feed and shelter some of the forty-three children who were left fatherless. Harold Wixon was one of the several men who volunteered to dig graves. "The weather was bitter cold and it got to the point where we couldn't keep up with the funerals. Many times we would see the funeral procession coming down the highway and we wouldn't have a grave ready."

James Clifton shakes his head, "It was a living hell. We all had somebody close to us killed and the whole town grieved for months. Seemed like it never was quite the same in Mt. Harris after that. It doesn't matter what gets written

about those days because it's an established fact that we all helped each other out as much as you could in a situation like that."

Like any town Mt. Harris had its own unique personalties. B. A. Harris and his brother George, from Iowa, brought the Colorado-Utah Coal Company into the valley. George was president of the company but visited from Denver only occasionally. B. A. ran the show, serving as secretary-treasurer and general manager of the Harris Mine. Locals remember their boss as Byron; a well dressed, gentle man, who had a nice wife, a large family, and a beautiful horse he rode through town in the afternoons inspecting the company grounds. The Harris home was a two story stone house, described by all as the prettiest house in town. Old timers think of Byron affectionately remembering his openness and honesty. "He never let anybody go hungry and he always gave the miners as much script as they needed on 'draw day. The whole town mourned when he died."

Jenny Brock was one of the first businesswomen in Routt County. She abandoned her dress shop in Hayden every morning for Mt. Harris where she sold yard goods and miscellany from the back of a horse and buggy. People were poor then and she often took chickens in exchange for goods. Later Jenny sold supplies from the back seat of a Model A.

There were other faces that made Mt. Harris a special place to live. Rattlesnake Carson, a Wadge miner and Mt. Harris native, used to climb the rimrocks hunting rattlesnakes. The story has it that he boxed with snakes tied around his body and was "right in the middle of any mischief to be found." Later he read the Bible, decided to quit snake-boxing, took off for California, and has not been hear from since. Doc Sloan was everything a small town doctor was expected to be. He worked whenever needed and was good to everyone. Many remember Horsefeathers, an old Indian who used to splash himself with cologne every morning before going to work "and if you don't think that perfumey stuff didn't stink something fierce when it got hot deep down in the mines..."

Today only ruins are left to remind old timers of the Main Street that once flurished here.

In the Fall herds of elk used to migrate over the top of Mt. Harris. Some old timers say the animals had worn a path over a foot deep into the ground. In the early nineteen hundreds the need for coal brought people and businesses to the side of that hill, and the elk disappeared. For more than forty years tunnel mining companies prospered and men worked to feed their families. The women kept house and the children played. Life was fast, the work hard, and the play vigorous. But tunnel mining soon became costly and dangerous; the Mt. Harris companies could no longer compete with modern strip mining. In almost a single day, a town that had once housed 1500 people was left abandoned. Today elk have returned to roam what was always their home.

Special thanks go to many who donated their memories and time so that Mt. Harris could be remembered. Among those who helped: Sidro and Al Arroyo, Martha Baierl, Mr. and Mrs. Ed Bugay, Bud Cary, Mr. and Mrs. James Clifton, Glen Cox, Stinky Davis, Edythe Johnston, Ann Rich, and Alice Skufka.