



Our Times

Volume 2 Issue 3

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Fall 1997

When Coal Was King

The enormous shale pile on North Kickapoo Street is long gone, but Henry Gaydosh still remembers how portions of it used to glow at night. Betty Burns Verderber says that mothers warned their children not to climb on the pile, but "if you were real daring, you did anyway." Certainly it was worth the climb just for the view of Lincoln.

Dorothy Jacobs Norris remembers sliding down the huge pile on an old car fender, steering with her feet. Dorothy also recalls that during the Depression, people sometimes heated their homes with pieces of coal they picked out of the pile and hauled away in two-wheeled carts.

The shale pile was a byproduct of the north mine. After the mine closed in 1934, the pile was bought by Mike and Matt Verban and gradually hauled away to be used for driveways and roadways throughout the county. Gradually, the largest remnant from Lincoln's coal mining days disappeared.

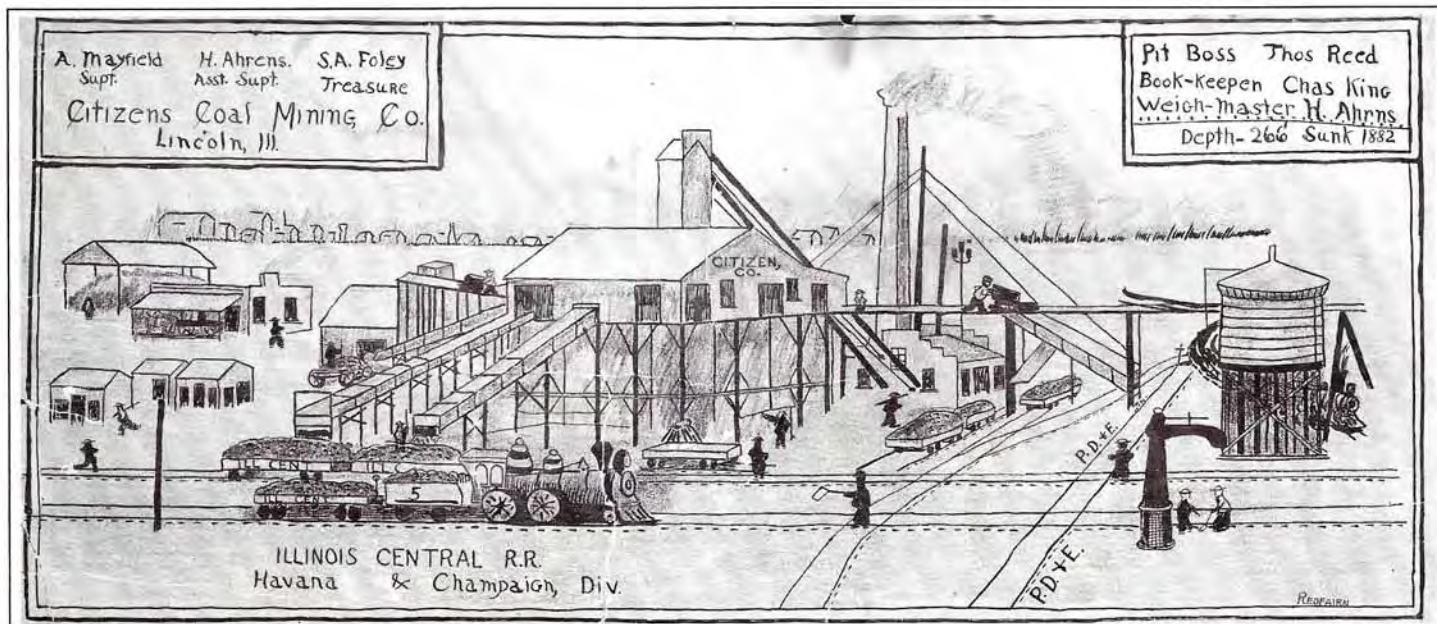
Coal had been discovered in Logan County when James Braucher struck a vein 7 feet thick and 240 feet deep about three miles south of Lincoln in 1867. In those days, coal had to be hauled long distances; so finding it locally created a lot of excitement.

By 1869, the shaft for what became the Lincoln Coal Mining Co., also called the **SOUTH MINE**, had been sunk near the Chicago and Alton Railroad (behind

where the Armour plant was later located). The company made good use of the clay that was another byproduct of mining by opening a field tile company in the same location in 1878.

Two hundred miners were thrown out of work on October 21, 1917, when a fierce fire broke out in the fan-room and spread through the heavily-timbered shaft. Firemen tried to snuff out the fire by sealing the bottom of the shaft and walling the top of the shaft with boards, straw, clay, and wet sand. After the fire, however, the south mine was never worked again.

Due to the presence of coal dust and gases in the air, the possibility of fire (Continued on page 2, *Coal...*)



Drawing of east mine by Hugh Redfairn. Courtesy of the Janet family.

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The People, History, and Culture of
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PUBLISHER
Sam Redding

WRITER/EDITOR
Nancy Lawrence Gehlbach

MANAGING EDITOR
Darla Hamilton

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Publisher's Notes

My knowledge of coal mining is limited to a 6th grade field trip to the mock mine at the Museum of Science and Industry and impressions drawn from Tennessee Ernie Ford: "Ya load sixteen tons and whadaya get, another day older and deeper in debt." Coal mining was never a lifestyle that appealed to me. I have always wondered why anyone would choose to work below ground, but then my wondering reflects a modern sense of choosing. Men chose to work in the coal mines because they were capable of immense personal sacrifice for the sake of their families. Coal mining was available to them, they could do it, and it paid. So off to work they would go, subjecting themselves to dirt, gloom, disease, weariness, discouragement, and danger so that their sons and daughters might rise. If there was little glory in their work, there was nobility in their motives.

We burned coal to heat our home when I was a child, as did everyone in our town. I am sure the chimneys billowed with coal smoke and the sooty air settled on

Mom's linens, but I don't remember it that way. I remember floor registers pumping hot air, the clang of clinkers, banking the coal in the furnace at night, and the coal man shoveling our ton from his truck into the basement bin. Now there is a bygone day.

Of course I also remember that the Wager family had an electric stoker, a wonderful machine that fed the furnace a steady stream of coal so that no one need worry that the fire would go out in the night. I envied the Wagers their stoker, because to own one meant they were surely more technologically advanced than we. Like the family today with the new computer. **SR**

(Continued from page 1, *Coal...*)

had always been a great worry in the mines. Back in October of 1889, two mine whistles five minutes apart had notified the community that fire had struck at the Citizens' mine. (Sunk in 1883 and known as the **EAST MINE**, it was located at the end of Citizens' Avenue near the CILCO building.)

Fortunately, the fire had not spread to the escape shaft; so two miners volunteered to go down to bring up the unsuspecting men who were working below. Fighting to keep even a torch lighted in the draft that descended into the shaft, the 18 men climbed to the surface, where their wives and mothers anxiously waited.

The east mine was reopened after the fire; bought by Brewerton Coal Company in 1923; and worked until 1926, when it was closed down after an eight-month strike.

The shaft for the **NORTH MINE** was sunk by Latham Coal Company in 1901 on North Kickapoo Street, south of the ice plant. In 1908, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this mine had the second largest output of any coal mine in the state, producing almost 200,000 tons of coal. The north mine was bought by Brewerton Coal Company in 1923 and operated until 1934.

MIDDLETOWN COAL COMPANY, which operated a railroad mine from 1903 until 1915, was the only company in this area to build a row of company houses. When the mine failed, many miners moved out of

town, leading to a surplus of houses in Middletown until World War II.

The **JOHNSON VALLEY COAL COMPANY** operated southwest of Middletown. Since the mine wasn't on a railroad, coal was hauled out by team and wagon to places like Greenview and Fancy Prairie.

MT.PULASKI MINING CO. operated from 1883 to 1910. At one time, it employed 34 men and had an annual output of 12,452 tons.

In Lincoln, mining was the main industry—almost the only industry—for many years. In 1917, between 550 and 640 men were employed in the three Lincoln mines. In 1923, the *Courier* declared that "there is scarcely a line of business in the city not dependent to a greater or lesser degree upon steady operation of the mines" (Sept. 28, 1923).

When in 1934 the last of the Lincoln mines, the north mine, was closed, 300 miners lost work in the midst of the Depression. To remedy this situation, A. B. Bliss, a Lincoln photographer who had worked in the mines out west, opened a mine 1 mile west of Route 66 on Route 10.

Mining engineers from other states came to see the **BLISS MINE**'s revolutionary new shaft that sealed out the water from above, but Bliss had difficulty obtaining coal rights; and the mine never became fully operational.

A more successful venture was the Deer Creek or **BENNIS MINE**, begun 1 mile southeast of Lincoln on Route 121 by Steve Bennis and a group of investors in 1937. The *Courier* announced that reaching coal was "one of the best pieces of news that has come out of Lincoln in a long time" (Jan. 12, 1937), since it would both mean work for unemployed local miners and keep the money spent for coal at home. The Deer Creek Mine operated until 1968.

Coal mining returned to Logan County in 1982, with the opening of the **ELKHART MINE**. Owned by Turriss Coal Co., the mine supplies coal to Springfield's City Water, Light and Power and other Central Illinois industrial customers. Yearly production stands at over 2 million tons. ■

Coal Jobs Lost in Depression

The north mine closes in 1934.

"On March 10 one of the Union officers, speaking of the mine said, 'Let her flood.' I have been authorized to say that his desire will be fulfilled unless the mine is in operation Thursday morning." J. A. Burke, mine manager (*Lincoln Evening Courier*, Mar. 14, 1933)

The flooding didn't actually happen until a year later. But in April of 1934, fourteen months after the miners' final strike began, the management of Brewerton Coal Co. shut off the electricity running the pumps and allowed the north mine to be flooded, never to be worked again.

Strikes over working conditions and pay in the mines had occurred over the years, of course. Miner John Verderber has left a notebook with an entry for a payment from the strike fund as early as 1906, and the closing of the east mine in 1926 occurred after a lengthy strike. But somehow Brewerton and the miners had managed to keep the north mine open.

Differences over back pay, the checkoff of union dues, and possibly even recognition of the Progressive Miners of America: all figured into the closing of the last of the Lincoln mines.

Those last months of the mine had moments of drama that must have been excruciating for those involved: the blowing of the whistle every hour in March of 1933, in part to "repeat that the mine management has no quarrel with its workmen" (*Lincoln Evening Courier*, Mar. 3, 1933); the impassioned letters to the newspaper; the injunction to restrain Brewerton from turning off the pumps; the last-ditch request that miners who were willing to go back to work mail in a postcard, even as the mine was being flooded.

Even the *Chicago Tribune* got into the act, printing a letter in "The Voice of the People," which criticized Lincoln miners for accepting government food rations while on strike—much to the fury of the *Courier's* editor.

A modern observer wonders if the differences between miners and management were great enough to justify losing the largest payroll in Lincoln and denying work to 300 men during the Depression.

Especially when management and miners alike had tried so hard to reopen the mine: borrowing money from Gullett & Sons, meeting with a judge in Danville, asking the Na-

tional Recovery Administration to help settle the dispute.

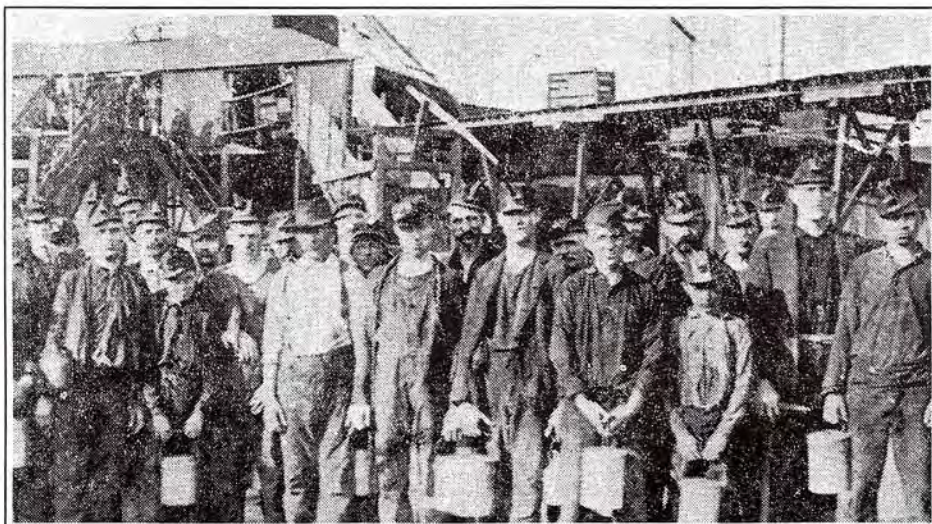
But who can second-guess the past? And it was true that forces were operating which had great influence over the final outcome.

A large part of the problem was economic. The mine had been placed in receivership in 1929, the Depression was in full force, and Illinois coal was under pressure from non-union coal from Kentucky and Appalachia.

Another problem was the struggle between the United Mine Workers and the Progressive Miners for control of the unions in Illinois. Those were the days of the mine wars, when a 14-year-old DuQuoin girl was killed in her home by a shot fired from a passing automobile. Her father, a UMW member, was one of a squad of deputies preventing picketing of a mine by the Progressives.

Lincoln was a long way from Southern Illinois; but the question of which union would represent the miners was a major issue here, as well.

Whatever the reason, the last Lincoln mine was closed; it would be a long time before coal was mined on such a scale again in Logan County. ■



Miners at Lincoln's old south mine, before 1917. From Lincoln Courier, 1953 Lincoln centennial issue.

Material for this issue came from: The *Lincoln Courier* under its various names; *History of Logan County, Illinois*, 1911 and 1982; *Directory of Coal Mines in Illinois: 7.5 minute quadrangle series*, Illinois State Geological Survey, 1993: 1) *Lincoln west quadrangle*, 2) *Lincoln east quadrangle*; brochure from Turris Coal Company; *Mt. Pulaski, 1836-1986*; and the "wonderful stories" of our wonderful friends.

Who Worked the Mines?

Henry Gaydosh tells his story.

"I know wonderful stories, but people don't want to hear them," says Henry Gaydosh. "They go so far back," he explains, "that people don't think anything happened."



The Gaydosh family, Henry sitting, taken in Hungary before departure for America.

Certainly nothing could be further from the truth. Not only has plenty happened to Henry in his 95 years, but his family's history gives us an insight into the people who came to work the mines in Logan County.

Henry was born June 10th, 1902, in Petroschen, Austria-Hungary. His father, Andrew, had gone to work in the mines at the age of 10. Andrew's father had died in the cholera epidemic, and the children had to help support the family.

When Henry was a child, his family enjoyed more privileges than most. His father had taken an important official hunting and brought him home for a delicious dinner. In gratitude, the man got Andrew a job on a timber crew. He was also allowed to have a gun for hunting, an unusual privilege.

Not that life was ever easy. Henry's mother, Rosa, was often in Budapest and saw how the wealthy treated the poor. They owned the factories, the stores—even the houses the workers lived in. If a poor person met a rich person on the sidewalk, he would have to get off and walk in the street.

Poor she may have been, but Rosa spoke seven languages and had plenty of self-respect. An excellent cook, she was once hired by a wealthy family. Upon meeting her, the lady of the house put out her hand for Rosa to kiss. Without a word, Rosa picked up her bags and turned to leave. "No, no, no! You don't have to do that," said the woman hastily. She may have been haughty, but she wasn't about to lose a fine cook over the incident.

Given the conditions in Hungary, it's not hard to imagine how the Gaydosh family responded to news from America. Frank Lengyel, a cousin of Henry's mother, had moved to Lincoln. His family wrote back to Hungary, raving about the freedom they had found here. They could say whatever they liked,

and they didn't have to bow down to someone who was better. "That was what they were after," says Henry, so his father left for America to get a job and find a home for his family.

Six months later, in 1908, Henry's mother had earned enough by cooking for the timber crews to bring the rest of the family over. On their way to the depot, they stopped at the factory where Henry's grandfather worked as a night watchman. The older man "cried like a baby." He knew it was goodbye forever.

The two-week trip to America "was a headache" for Henry's mother, who had five children to care for, the youngest just two years old. In the middle of the Atlantic, the ship ran into a terrific storm; for three days the travelers had to be locked on the lower deck so they would not be swept overboard.

Only coffee was available, because the kitchen was closed—not that anyone could eat anyway. The long narrow room, lined with beds and trunks, was also filled with sick people. The Gaydoshes didn't get sick, however. Quite the contrary.

Rosa had packed a woven basket with food for the trip, and six-year-old Henry and his brother climbed on top of it. As the ship tossed back and forth, they "rode it from one end of the room to the other," until they ran into a bunk bed; and "that was the end of that," laughs Henry.

Once docked in Baltimore, the family was issued large identification tags to wear. Rosa panicked when the oldest girl's tag was blown away by the wind, but immigration officials assured her no real harm had been done.

The last part of the trip was by train to Lincoln, where they were met by their father and taken to the Lengyels' home. Henry guesses it must have been Easter Sunday, because "they were giving us Easter eggs, and we didn't know what they were." After settling into their rented home on Davenport Street, the Gaydoshes were ready to take on America.

Henry says his story sounds "more interesting now than when we came over." He couldn't speak a word of English, only high German; so his

teacher at Monroe School “had her hands full.” In addition, Rosa had made green corduroy suits for Henry and his brother. She thought her little boys looked “up-to-date,” but the other children called them “green pants.”

Even with all the hurt feelings and adjustments, however, the Gaydoshes were happy to be in the United States. Henry’s father found work in the mines and became an American citizen in 1917, thus making the rest of the family citizens as well. They were especially lucky to leave Hungary when they did; Henry’s grandmother was killed in her bed by the Rumanians in World War I.

Other Miners

Henry Gaydosh’s father was just one of many immigrants to work in the Logan County mines. North Lincoln, the area off of North Kickapoo Street, was full of immigrants: Hungarians, Rumanians, Germans, Poles, and Croatians. The Lincoln public library even boasted a Croatian-English dictionary, one of a group of seven foreign-language dictionaries given by a patron in 1915.

Some German churches had parochial schools up until World War I. In the public schools, however, Henry says, “Kids couldn’t get anyplace unless they learned English”—so they did. Most North Lincoln children learned their ABC’s at Van Buren School on North Kickapoo, where the former Assembly of God Church is located. Their parents gathered there in the evenings for Americanization classes and the English lessons Mike Verban had helped to establish.

After W.A. Brewerton bought the north and east mines in 1923, he lived for a while in the grand house on Pekin Street that is now Holland and Barry funeral home. Mildred Rhoads Holland remembers that her sister, Josephine Rhoads Langellier, attended a slumber party there held by Brewerton’s daughter, Helen. Art Larson remembers going to school with Brewerton’s son, Bob, who had “been everywhere,” according to Art.

But Brewerton didn’t forget the miners and their children. Frances Verban Kendrick remembers that the park he built near the north mine boasted an elaborate playground with teeter totters,

a huge slide, a carousel with enormous horses, and a skating rink that was flooded by the fire department every winter.

On a vacant section of the Gullett greenhouse property, Brewerton also built an athletic field where the “Caskets,” the “Brewertons,” the “Florists,” the “Potters,” and other teams of the Industrial League played pretty serious baseball. In fact, North Lincoln produced two great athletes: Emil Verban, who played with the Cardinals, Cubs, and Phillies, and Frank Froschauer, all-American football player at the University of Illinois.

North Lincoln housewives shopped at Mike Verban’s grocery store at 1200 North Kickapoo or at the Mayers’ store, where Krotz’s is now located. Grocers extended credit during the summer, when the mines weren’t working much, and took their payments in the fall, when the checks began to come in.

Paul Verderber remembers that the people of North Lincoln were hard workers: the Pangerl boys, for example, raised fruits and vegetables that they sold all over town. When the north mine was in danger of closing in 1915, the *Courier-Herald* noted that the 150-200 North Lincoln families who were affected nearly all owned their own homes.

Miners, of course, lived all over the city, usually near the mines where they worked. Some lived on Broadway and worked at the east mine. The Gaydoshes eventually settled in the country.

Not everyone who worked in the mines was a first-generation American. Although Paul Verderber’s grandfather had come from Hungary, his father, John, was born in this country.

When his boss suggested he study for the test to become a mining inspector, John said, “I can’t. I only have a sixth-grade education.” Grabbing him by the front of his shirt, his boss said, “Don’t you tell me you can’t do anything!” So John went to Springfield in 1905 to take the test, and was one of the two applicants out of 30 to pass.

The old mines are long gone, as are most of the men who worked them. Their names live on, however, in the colorful mix of nationalities represented in Logan County today. The coal they mined warmed the homes and ran the farms and factories of the county, and the men who so laboriously chipped it out of the earth deserve not to be forgotten. ■



Latham Coal Mine baseball team (north mine), 1919. Courtesy of Dorothy Jacobs Norris.

A Day in the Life of a Coal Miner

Dark, dirty and dangerous.

A miner's day really began at about 6:00 the evening before, when he hushed the family so he could step outside and listen for the mine whistle. Three blasts meant the mines would be working the next day.

Mine work was somewhat erratic. Although work was plentiful in the winter, when coal was needed for heating, miners often had to find other work during the summer. Many local miners spent the off-season working for Decatur Bridge Company, at Gullett's greenhouse, the casket factory, or on local farms.

Once satisfied he would be working, a miner set off in the morning carrying a round metal lunch bucket that held water or coffee in the bottom and a sandwich and piece of pie in the top.

Each miner worked his own "room"; and in the early days, he did practically everything himself: propped up the shale roof with timbers of white oak, set the charges that knocked the coal loose, picked out the coal, and loaded it into the mine car that ran on a railroad track into his room.

Make no mistake: mining was hard, dangerous work. Many Logan County families lost their husbands and brothers in the mines. For example, Walt Lehner's grandfather and uncle were both killed in the north mine: one by a fall of shale and the other by an explosion.

Despite the danger, children were allowed in the mines in the early days; and Henry Gaydosh remembers helping his father turn the grinder to drill a hole in the face rock at the front of the room. Next his father wrapped the explosive pellets in a paper cone, which he shoved into the hole with a copper ramrod 5-6 feet long. After pushing some coal grindings and clay in behind the charges, he went to the entry to light the fuse.

Because the smoke and dust from the resulting explosion gave many miners headaches, the unions eventually forced the owners to hire shot-firers to do this job while everyone else was out of the mine.

The job was always dangerous. James Harrison was killed at the Middletown mine when the wall between the room where he stood and the room where the shot was fired proved thinner than anticipated. A co-worker found him partially covered with coal, and he died on the way to Lincoln (*Lincoln Times-Courier*, May 17, 1906).

Once the dust cleared, the miner chipped out the coal with his pickax, loaded it into the mine car, and attached a brass coin with his number on it. Mules brought the car to the surface, where the coal was weighed. The miner was paid by the amount of coal he took out of his room; Henry claims that when the unions got their own check weighmen, the weights of coal increased dramatically.

Of course, not everyone in the mine was paid according to the coal they produced. John Verderber was paid \$.32 per

hour at the north mine in 1904, where he put in 124 hours from September 16th to October 1st, earning \$39.70. After he passed the mine examiner's test in 1905, his pay increased to \$.38 1/8 per hour.

A mine examiner worked at night, using a safety lantern to check the rooms for gas. If a room was unsafe, it would be shut down until the problem could be corrected. Part of the examiner's job was to make sure there was enough air movement in the mine. Raising and lowering the gates in the air shaft let in the right amount of air.

Coal miners learned their trade by working alongside another miner, very often a father or uncle. Henry Gaydosh's brother Rudolph worked in his dad's room for about six months when he was 16. In the mine where he was working, the coal was hauled out by electric carts. When Rudolph raised to his full adolescent height, his head hit the electric wire, which "knocked him down and scared the tar out of him," according to Henry.

After a second accident, in which the carbide lamp on his cap set off a gas fire which shut down all the lights in the area, his brief career in the mines came to an abrupt halt.

Miners started work early and went home about 4:30 p.m. Henry remembers that his father, Andrew, drove a two-wheeled cart behind a horse to his home on Primm Road. After a day working in the humid mine, lifting heavy coal into the boxcars, Andrew was pretty sweaty. By the time he drove the 5-6 miles home in the winter, "it wasn't funny. He looked just like Santa Claus." No wonder the unions insisted that the companies build wash houses!

Walt Lehner remembers his dad's arriving home with a piece of raisin pie that he'd saved from his lunch to give to his six-year-old son. Although the pie tasted like sulphur from the mines, Walt was glad enough to eat it and remembers his father's sacrifice with love. ■



The Lincoln south mine. Courtesy of Dan Lee.

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Betcha Didn't Know . . .

- ◆ That the mules that pulled the railroad cars in the mines not only had their own names, but their own personalities, as well.
- ◆ That mules in the mines never saw daylight all winter; so when the miners brought the animals up in the spring, they put sacks over their heads until they adjusted to the light.
- ◆ That when the air from the escape shaft was shut off for ½ hour while making repairs on the east mine in 1889, two of the ten mules left below died.
- ◆ That "the whole city of Lincoln" is not undermined, as rumored, but that Mayfair and the airport surely are.
- ◆ That farmers and miners got into an argument about which wagons should be filled first during a cold snap in October of 1917. The miners argued that city coal bins should be filled first; the farmers argued that the teamsters should have hauled coal in the summer, when the farmers were busy in the fields.
- ◆ That the mines had escape shafts with steps to the surface in case of fire.
- ◆ That in digging the main shaft and the escape shaft of the north mine, it was necessary to go through underground lakes, so water had to be pumped out 24 hours a day.
- ◆ That one of the perks of working in the mines was being able to pay less than the going rate for house coal.
- ◆ That the coal which underlies Logan County is not anthracite, but bituminous.

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