GRAYSVILLE
anytown USA?

If traveling north on Rt. 149 in Putnam County, the town of Graysville may seem as though it were a roadside park. But don’t plan on stopping for a bite to eat unless you have brought your own. Over 100 years old, the town is no longer a thriving place of business for its citizens, but a fading reminder of a prosperous era.

Originally Millersburg, the town began in 1867 in the southwest corner of land owned by James Mullenix. In that year, James T. Miller founded a store which marked the beginning of the town, thus giving it the name of Millersburg. No record remains to clarify a transaction by which land was acquired, but it is known that Mullenix did live out the remainder of his life in the town itself.

In the first few years that followed, minor establishments were gradually added including a blacksmith shop and another small store, but the first major step forward was in the founding of the post office in 1875. Due to the fact that another post office in the state was named Millersburg, it took on the name of Graysville after its establisher, E. Gray. As time passed, the more commonly used name of Graysville was slowly accepted as the name of the town itself.

As with many small towns in our country, Graysville had its roots, a life-line so to speak, upon which it survived. From the days when citizens would arise in the morning to wagons rumbling down the road, to the times when large trucks replaced them as transports for coal, mining was that base.

Graysville was indeed a mining town, for today you can talk to its citizens and hear vivid tales of when coal controlled the lives of its people. Yet that control did not always lie in the hands of the miners. In the struggling first years of its existence, the town was kept alive by a resource that is overshadowed in the remembrance of its past. For at least 40 years after the first store was founded by J. T. Miller, timber was that abundant resource which drew people to the area and kept the town alive. Combined with small-time farming, timber was the supplier of jobs and money for Graysville’s people.

Coal, an industry which had yet to be discovered, would prove to be the turning point in its history.

Since its beginning, Graysville had gradually grown, but nothing did, or ever would have such a profound effect on it as the mining boom of the late ’20s. The mines affected the whole way of life as those people knew it. Before, the town was basically close-knit where everyone was acquainted, and in many times related, but as the mining grew, the population also grew. This meant people came from all over the midwest drawn by the jobs which brought money. These people saw the opportunity in many different ways. They saw food for their hungry children, money to spend in a tavern for a good time, or a chance at starting a life for themselves that they couldn’t find elsewhere. Whatever the reason, the people did come, bringing their own ideas and beliefs, causing the town to begin changing. What was a small-time, quiet village, suddenly became a bigger, livelier place of considerable action.

Graysville at no time became big as city-folk know it, but rather big by its own standards. The sudden population explosion happened just as it sounds... very sudden, making the town a place with its own character. New people that came with the mines added spice to the town, giving it distinctions of good and bad, friend and foe, which set the personality of the town. Yet everyone came to accept this change, working side by side in the coal dust from sunup to sundown.

When the boom hit, life changed in Graysville. Rolling countryside quickly became cluttered living space. With the people coming in, it wasn’t long before little shacks and huts were everywhere. In some instances, people even put up a tent and placed a stove in the middle. These people were basically out to survive with the thought of making a little money on the side. Yet the money didn’t come easy. The miners worked long and hard days, usually going and coming from work by the light of their hats. These men, usually 12 to 15 to a mine, were on their own most of the time, working by the ton as long as there was someone to buy coal. As the life long residents Alley Sparks and Herbert Casady put it, “Boys became men awfully quick in those mines.” These boys were nothing more than teenagers, but they found out about life working for 75 cents a ton in dirty shale pits. That was generally a starter’s pay in those days, from that, you worked your way up to the demand.

Mining was no easy job, especially since it was alive only in the winter months. Being strenuous labor already, this only made the job worse and the days longer. “A miner in Graysville was usually a hard worker and not always ready to put down his pick when the day ended,” explained Alley Sparks, “because you knew that when the days grew longer and warmer your income stopped along with the mines.” Luckily, most men found some type of work during the summer which would hold them over till the mines opened again.

Mines were indeed everywhere in the area. In fact, where there was a hilltop there was a mine. Each mine had its differences. In most, the coal was dug by the miners and loaded for a horse to pull out. Yet in a few mines such as the old “steam hoist” in Graysville, steam power provided a means for the coal to be brought out. During those early years, “Lickskillet,” a flat on the Chariton River, was the place where the coal was taken from Graysville in some cases. A small railway connected the two mining centers, by which horses would pull loaded cars the six mile distance. From there coal was shipped by river to its destination. The usual
way was the everyday horse and wagon if the coal was headed elsewhere. That rumbling of horse and wagon gradually converted to the roar of trucks as the years went on, an easier and more practical way of transportation. The era of automation helped mining greatly, producing a "boom" all across the country. Graysville was no exception. The miners were up to three dollars a ton and the town became well known in northern Missouri for such a small place. Even though those times had been hard ones, the lively way of life had appealed to the people. A reminder of those days sparks a gleam in the eye and a smile on the face of most any citizen today. A longing for the Graysville of yesterday comes out in each who can remember those times.

Just as automation had boosted Graysville, it also condemned it. The big machines of modern strip mining and the money hungry businessmen which controlled them, led to the town's down-fall. The shovels and picks were replaced by dynamite while machinery became miners. Farmers and landowners were pressured to sell out in many cases, and Graysville was put under the arm of big business until the coal, which had been the support of the town for so long, finally gave out. When the miners left, the town went with them. Stores no longer had business and thus shut down as did schools and all else that was associated with the people of that era.

The town of Graysville has seen many stores since the first one which marked the town's beginning in 1867. Although as many as five stores have existed at one time during Graysville's past, one store, which still stands, was the town's largest and most important store throughout the coal boom and for years afterward. Faye Haynes and her husband owned and managed that store during that era and although the store is no longer in business, she is still today, the owner of the store and a citizen of Graysville. The store stands on the corner of Graysville's main street where all of the town's businesses have been located. The street incidentally, is dirt, and the whole scene resembles a crossroads through which

*Top photo: Miners during the coal boom. Bottom photo shows the existing remnants they left behind.*
cars pass on their way to better things rather than a place where business exchange once took place. The building is narrow and it’s evident that additions were built on as the demand for more room arose. The front is tall and flat with a small overhang giving it the look typical of buildings of the “Old West”. All of its features combine to give it a unique look all its own.

In contrast to a store of today, Graysville’s stores were in fact, general stores. In the times when trips to a larger town were impractical due to poor means of transportation, it was necessary for the stores to supply its citizens with all the goods which were essential to everyday life. The people of Graysville were able to walk into any store at the time and buy anything from groceries, to shoes, to automotive parts. If any desired product was not carried in stock, ordering it posed no problem. The store owners were willing to acquire any product as long as there was a customer willing to buy it.

Most citizens bought goods on credit and would pay off their bills monthly. In many instances where farmers were involved, the store owners would extend credit throughout the year until farmers could harvest their crops and make a payment. While payment of that type may sound unusual by today’s standards, those people had a special trust in each other and in their friendships which enabled that system to work smoothly.

For those citizens who did own stores or other businesses at the time, life had its luxuries. “There was good money in running a store,” said Mrs. Haynes. This was true particularly in the winter months when the mines were running and the demand for goods was high. In the summer months when the miners left, however, the stores depended on produce for support. Many of the local farmers would sell their eggs and cream to a store or in many instances, trade their produce for clothes or any other needed product the store had. Many of the remaining farmers in Graysville miss the days of being able to sell their extra dairy and vegetable products for a
little extra “chewing tobacco” as Ailey Sparks put it during an interview.

Graysville hasn’t had a store in business since the early 1970’s. From the end of the coal boom in the 1950’s up to that point, a few stores were in business at different times. None, however, had a large enough flow of customers to keep them open. Since then, Graysville’s people have had to travel to Unionville or another neighboring town for their groceries. Most of them wish that another store would open and carry all the supplies they were so used to having near them. Even Mrs. Haynes expressed a wish for someone to open up a place of business in her old store. They feel that way because a store would add much more than convenience to their life. For many farmers, it would mean a place to sell their eggs and cream for a little extra money again. For some of the men, it would be a place to go to on a Saturday afternoon to “see the boys” and waste time. It would give Graysville that spark of life which it has been lacking for the past few years. Graysville would be a town again, and in the minds of many of its remaining citizens, that’s all they want.

Listening to old stories, the Graysville tavern seems no different than any other of its time. It has been around as long as any present citizen can remember and has been closed for about ten years. According to old timers Earl Hogg and Edwin Ray, a man could find just about any kind of entertainment in the rowdy little building. Between the dancing, drinking and just plain having a good time, the tavern served as a place of non-stop excitement for the miners and citizens alike. As with other centers of the little community, much was lost with the fading mining boom and this Graysville “hot spot” was put on a “back burner” to cool.

All the tavern is used for today is private storage and the building itself is not in good shape. Yet, when you listen to the stories about it and look around inside, you can almost begin to see the people dancing and hear the music of those days when the tavern was the only place around where one could really have a little fun.

When walking through Graysville and talking to its people, it is obvious that certain buildings have played a major role in the lives of its citizens. While the stores, tavern and other businesses were centers of trade for many years, such buildings as the church and school house supplied Graysville’s people with the learning experiences which have set them apart. These two places are important in the memories of those few remaining citizens who have lived their lives in the small town.

Although Graysville has no functioning school today, it has had a total of three schools at different times. The first one was built in the early 1900’s and consisted of a small, one room building with only a few students. As Ailey Sparks said, “If there was a seventh grader, there was a seventh grade.” When that building fell into ill repair, it was torn down and replaced by a better building capable of holding more students. That school house, however, burnt to the ground only a few years after its completion and was thus replaced by the third and last school. The third school was a white stucco three room building with a basement. It was closed due to the consolidation of county schools to Unionville in 1965. The building itself was eventually torn down in the early 1970’s leaving nothing but memories of the school and all that it entailed.

Although no material evidence remains of the days when the bell would ring calling the kids to school, many stories are still abound of what it was like to go to school in those times. “The big events of the year were the candy supper and the Christmas program,” said Mary Kay Veach. The candy supper was an annual event where the girls would bring a box of candy to be auctioned off at school. One of the boys would buy the box from his favorite girl and they would sit together and eat the candy. The Christmas program was another annual event where the kids would build a stage, put a curtain around it and have their own play.

These along with other minor events throughout each school year kept the children content and the school running. It gave them a togetherness only experienced in rural life and although the building is gone, the school exists in the minds of the people who attended it and knew what it was really like.

The church was also another interesting place in the history of Graysville. A church, in most places, serves as a place of worship and learning in a community. Then again Graysville was not just any place. The church was established sometime during the 1850’s or 60’s. It was founded by an area pioneer, John Henry Ray with one Civil War pension check of twenty-five dollars according to descendants Thelma and Pearl Casady. Originally a United Brethren or non-denominational church, it prospered, as far as anyone knows, at least up until the mining boom. Gradually a declining congregation became almost non-existent. Rumour even has it that gambling became a favorite pastime in the old white building. Yet the church did manage to recover. Still in the original building, which stands to this day, it made its comeback during the 1950’s as a Baptist church, ready once again to serve the people of Graysville.

The church and school shared responsibility in providing for the town in many ways. They contributed to the towns personality and character and the way of life of the people who live there today.

With all of this, Graysville could be most any town, with the exception of one thing... its people. Although many are gone, a few original citizens still remain, living on the same land that their parents lived on. These people are the base of the town, the ones who keep it alive in its original tradition.

Graysville has been seemingly left behind in the constant forward progression of the times. A page out of history, this town survives in today’s world thanks mainly to its people, who preserve a life known to their ancestors. Being far from any town of considerable size, many things taken for granted by much of the world have overlooked this community. Running water, inside restrooms and cable television are such examples, with the first two being added only in recent years. Yet, families like the Spark’s, Casady’s and Mrs. Haynes overlook such conveniences. Those things are irrelevant to their way of life. These families share with many longtime residents of the town, in taking life as it comes, not worrying about tomorrow.

This is not, by any means, to say that Graysville’s people aren’t caught up with the rest of the world in life, but probably that they have been lucky enough to see it differently.