Billy Creek Coal Mine

By David Cenedella

Not long ago during the winter months, a black haze hung over the city of Kirksville. This haze, which could be seen for miles, was the smoke created by hundreds of homes and local businesses burning coal as a source of energy. As late as 1959, coal provided most of the energy needed for heating homes and producing electricity. Most of the coal consumed in Kirksville came from the Novinger coal fields. These fields contained over 50 mines and were functional until 1967 when the last mine, the Billy Creek Coal Mine, was closed.

The Billy Creek Mine, a business venture of Marion Baiotto and his son Bill, was sunk in 1949. In April, 1949, a group of men, including Harvey Farr and Marion Baiotto, began sinking the shaft. At that time these men did not realize that they were sinking the last shaft mine in the state of Missouri. The mine was named the Billy Creek because of its location, which was 1 1/2 miles southwest of Novinger on the Adam Hoerrman farm next to Billy Creek. The lack of other mines in close proximity and the low level of the valley which would enable digging a relatively short shaft in order to reach the coal led the Baiottos to choose this site. The coal was a part of the Bevier coal seam, which ran from the Missouri River into Wisconsin.

After the completion of the shaft, approximately 40 miners were hired to excavate the coal, becoming part of the large body employed by the mining industry in Northeast Missouri. At this time coal mining was an important factor to the economy of the area. When the mine closed the salary the miners received was based on the job they did. Company

Photo above: These miners received safety citations from the United States Bureau of Mines. Left to right: Bill Baiotto, Martin Cross, Ebbie Williams, Raymond Mosley, Clarence Truitt, Charlie Allen and Gerald Blacksmith. This award was given to miners who never had a disabling injury.

miners, motormen, mule drivers, track layers, timbermen and hoist men were paid about $15.00 a day. The machine crew was paid on the basis of how many tons of coal mined. On the average the Billy Creek Mine produced 135 to 150 tons of coal daily. The coal, which ranged in price from $4.00 a ton for nut coal to $6.00 a ton for stoker coal and lump coal, was sold to residents for heating their homes and to local businesses including Kirksville Power Company, Kirksville Creamery and the College (NMSU).

One miner who worked at the Billy Creek Mine from the time it was opened in 1950 until it closed in 1967 was Gerald Blacksmith. Mr. Blacksmith started his mining career at the age of 14 in 1920 and retired at the age of 60 in 1967. When Mr. Blacksmith was asked if he liked mining his reply was, "I sure did like mining to stay in it for 45 years!" In 1950 Gerald would awake by 6:00 a.m., arrive at work by 6:45, and return home at 4:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday, sometimes Sunday.

According to Mr. Blacksmith, the responsibility of the night shift, which would start working at 4:00 p.m., was to blast the coal and clay out of the walls of the "rooms" of the mine. This process was called "under cutting." After the night shift finished and left, the day crew, including Mr. Blacksmith,
would go to work at 6:45 a.m. Their job was to load the coal into the coal cars. Then mules would pull the cars down the cross entries to the track in the main entry. Mules were used on the track in the cross entry because these were temporary tracks which could not support the weight of the engines. The electric engines would then pull the coal cars through the main entry to the elevators, where the coal was lifted out of the mine.

A miner's life was not all work and no play. The most popular time filler was hunting. "I love quail hunting and would go just about every time I could," commented Gerald Blacksmith. Mr. Blacksmith and his brothers also hunted ducks and geese every chance they had. Many of the miners went hunting together.

If a person had been walking near the mine, he might not have realized that these miners were the best of friends. As he walked within listening distance, he would probably hear the miners cursing and threatening each other; these curses and threats concealed their loyalty to each other. These men were like a big family. If one miner was sick and needed money, the others would take up a collection for him. This loyalty was especially evident in the way the owner Marion Baiotto referred to his employees. Marion never referred to them as, "The men who worked for me," but rather, "The men I work with." The miners were also a very trustworthy group of men. According to Mr. Harvey Farr, anything except a bar of soap could be left lying around the wash house without fear of theft.

During the summer, when the demand for coal slackened, the mines would take turns closing down; however, the miners that were laid off and wanted to work could find employment for the summer at one of the mines that stayed open. Many miners, however, chose to farm or to just rest during these months.

Although a mining accident never resulted in a death at the Billy Creek Mine, many men were injured by rock falls. The working conditions in the mine were not as bad as are typically depicted. In fact, according to some miners, if a person did not mind the dirt, the job was no worse than farming. Finding the year-round temperature

Photo at top: Bill Baiotto is seen here closing one of several doors that route air to the rooms being worked. Center photo: Vern Robison, mule driver, collected the empty cars and delivered them to the loaders. State law required the mules be brought to the surface each evening. Bottom photo: The end of the bottom is an arrangement of tracks, so that loads could be put on either elevator, called a cage. Lewis Roop was a cage man.
of 68 degrees Fahrenheit pleasant, many miners habitually worked in t-shirts.

These hard working miners enjoyed a good joke. Once when a group of Jaycees had planned a tour of the mine, Harvey Farr, who operated the hoist, went to a bar in Novinger and got an empty whisky bottle. Harvey then filled the bottle with Coke-a-Cola and returned to the mine as if he were drunk. He climbed into the hoist room and told the Jaycees to get into the elevator. By that time the Jaycees were not about to set foot into the elevator, fearing the outcome. After the charade continued for awhile, the Jaycees realized that Mr. Farr was acting, and the tour continued. Any miner could have told the group that they were being conned because alcoholic beverages were forbidden on the mining site by a rule which was rigidly honored by all the workers.

In 1967, due to the decrease in demand for coal, the Billy Creek Coal Mine closed. Many of the men who worked at the mine retired or found work elsewhere. The Baiottos then started working full time at Baiotto Concrete. The closing of this mine marked the end of the coal mining era in Northeast Missouri.

Without these rugged and good humored men and the now abandoned mines they toiled in, the development of Northeast Missouri might have been quite different. Many of the residents of Kirksville and the surrounding communities reside here presently because their ancestors came to Northeast Missouri to mine coal.

*Picture at right: Lee Branel, left, and Otis McVay take their lunch break.*

This was the tipple of the Billy Creek Coal Mine.