

## FIRST DRAFT

# Small coal mines were a mainstay of 20th century Mesa County community

During the Depression, George Pickens' father used to leave coal in the open chute that fed coal into wagons and trucks. That way, people who desperately needed coal could come and take small amounts for their home use.

As a young man, George Pickens, now 93 years old and a resident of Fruita, began working in various coal mines, some owned by his father and some that were owned by others.

"I liked mining," Pickens said recently. "I worked at several mines when I was in my 20s." By then, most of the mines were partially mechanized. "All we did was shovel coal into coal cars."

That was a far cry from work in the earlier small mines, which Pickens referred to as "pick mines." He explained, "You had to lay on your back and pick at the coal seam."

Mesa County has had a few large mines, such as the Book Cliff Coal Mine, the Cameo Mine and Powderhorn Coal. But it didn't develop a massive coal industry like other parts of Colorado.

What it did have, beginning in the late 1800s and continuing through the 1950s, were dozens of small mines that produced coal mainly for local consumption. And those coal mines were part of the fabric of the community.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, advertisements such as these frequently appeared in The Daily Sentinel:

"Hidden Treasure Coal. From mine to your bin. Call 0518R2."

"Two good coal mine mules ... Ph. 729, Orchard Co."

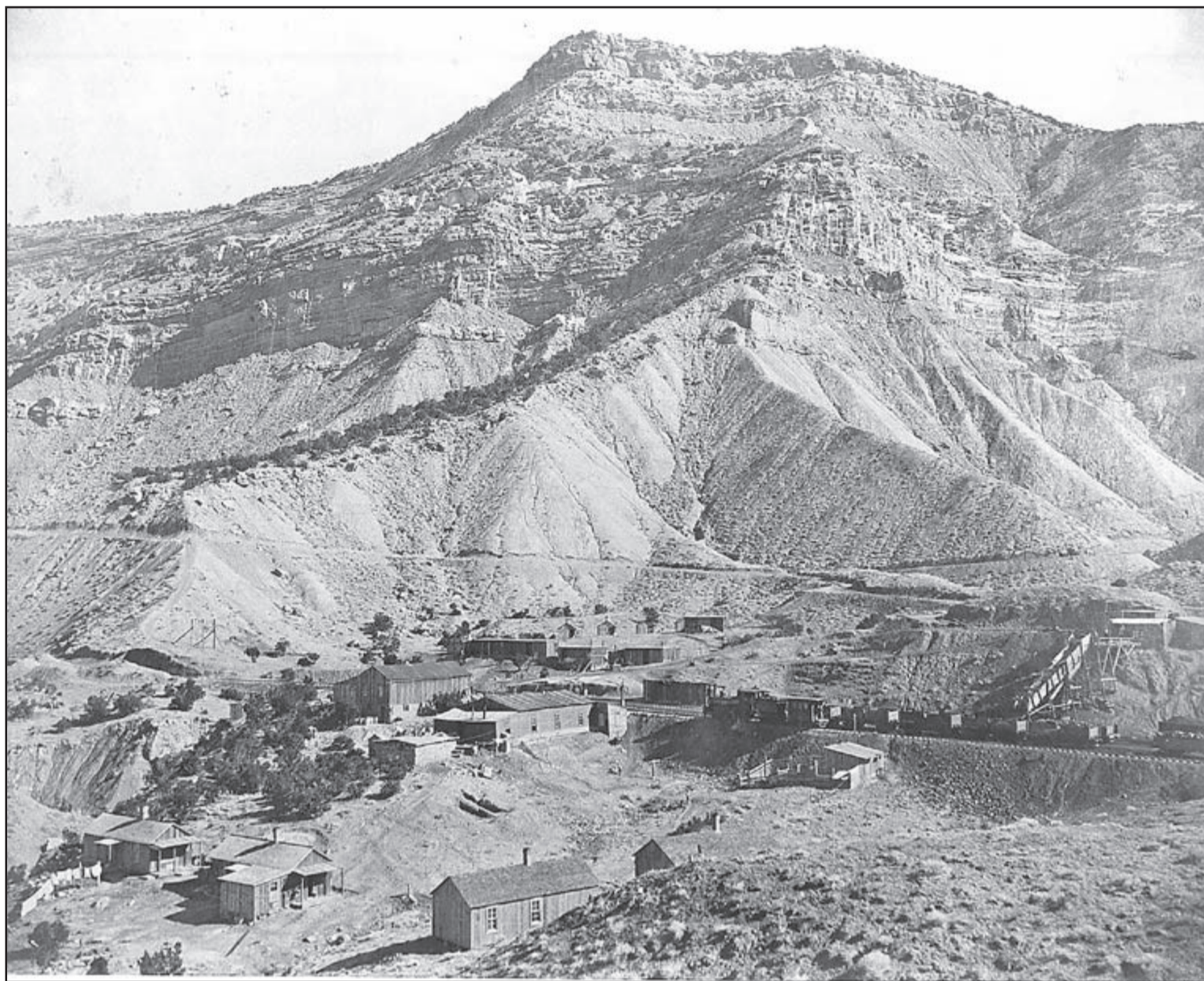
"Coal mine for sale. A good coal mine with plenty of coal about 23 miles from Grand Junction."

"Wanted - Girl for general house work at coal mine ... Inquire 238 South Ave."

There were even social outings, as when the Sentinel reported in 1939, "Mr. and Mrs. Frank Youngman entertained a group of their friends at a wiener roast at the Stove Canyon mine last Friday evening."

Unfortunately, there were also plenty of stories highlighting the dangers of working in coal mines. For instance, two men were killed at the Hidden Treasure mine north of Grand Junction, which George Pickens' father had once owned, from a rock fall in 1950. It was their first day of working in the mine, the Sentinel said.

Coal was an important commodity in early Grand Junction. During settlers' first winter here in 1881-82, residents dug what coal they could from small surface deposits.



SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

The town of Carpenter as it appeared in 1895, when two coal mines were operating on the left and right edges of this photo. The Little Book Cliff Railway, in the center, hauled coal from the mines to Grand Junction, 11 miles to the south.

By the second winter, however, demand for coal was growing, and a few people began seeking commercial-grade coal deposits.

Several small coal mines were located along the Gunnison and Grand rivers near Grand Junction. There were larger mines near Rapid Creek east of Palisade and another at Salt Wash, but transportation from either was difficult.

In August 1884, a man named George Smith trekked to the Bookcliffs north of Grand Junction, a few miles west of Mount Garfield. There, he discovered a large vein of coal that, the Grand Junction News said, was large enough to supply several trainloads a day.

By September, Smith and two others had formed the Book Cliff Coal Company. Within a year, the mine was producing and coal was being hauled to Grand Junction by wagon.

But it would take another man, W.T. Carpenter to fully develop the Book Cliff Coal Company.

Carpenter had established the Mesa County Bank soon



MESA COUNTY GIS MAP

The Hidden Treasure Mine, once owned by George Pickens' father, was located in the Bookcliffs due north of downtown Grand Junction. Dozens of other small coal mines were sprinkled through the Bookcliffs from Salt Wash to Cameo.

after he arrived in the valley in 1883. In 1888, he purchased Smith's Book Cliff Mine and the nearby Grand Valley Mine, and with local investors, he created the Grand Valley Fuel Co.

He also saw the need for a better means to get the coal to markets. In May 1891, the 11-mile-long Little Book Cliff Railway began hauling his coal to Grand Junction.

In addition to transporting coal, the railroad ferried passengers to the mining community and to a resort that Carpenter was building at a spring at the edge of the Bookcliffs. It would become known as the town of Carpenter.

But W.T. Carpenter's fortunes soon began to decline. In 1897, he sold the mines, the railroad and the town of Carpenter to Isaac Wyman from Massachusetts.

When he died in 1910, Wyman willed all of the facilities to Princeton University. The Ivy League School kept everything operating until 1923, when an underground fire forced it to seal the Book Cliff Mine. In 1927, it closed the mines, abandoned the town and sold off the rails and rolling stock of the Little Book Cliff Railway.

But other mines continued to operate. Online records at the Mesa County Assessor's Office show more than 50 mines were located along the Bookcliffs from Cameo to Salt Wash. Most were small op-

erations whose coal was sold primarily for residential use.

Pickens' father, George Sr., had been a miner in Ludlow in 1914, when striking miners and their families were massacred by state militia. He arrived in the Grand Valley in 1922, when local demand for coal was near its peak and at least 18 mines were operating.

Statewide production was also high. More than 10 million tons of coal were mined in Colorado in 1922, an increase of almost 9 percent over 1921, even though nationwide coal strikes temporarily closed some mines.

Roughly half of the state's 1922 production came from small mines where the coal was picked out by hand, rather than by machine, according to a state mining report.

The elder Pickens came to Mesa County to work at the Anchor Mine, and he subsequently oversaw its closing. Later, he worked at the Farmers Mine, the Hicks Mine and the Coal Gulch Mine. He also opened the Garvey Mine, and owned the Hunter Mine and Hidden Treasure Mine. All were small mines in the Bookcliffs north of the Grand Valley.

Eventually, he bought the Stove Canyon Mine, which was just north of the Mesa County border in Garfield County. "It was big during the war years (World War II)," his son recalled.

But after World War II, with

electricity and gas becoming more prominent in homes in Mesa County, coal demand tapered off considerably. By 1949, production statewide was less than half of what it had been in 1922, about 4.5 million tons.

Small mines were closing, and there were frequent local advertisements for the sale of coal mines, such as this 1950 ad: "A coal mine. Deeded land. Equipment and home. Close to surfaced road."

Soon, the younger George Pickens moved on. He worked at the New Jersey Zinc Mine in Gilman both before and after he served in the U.S. Army. Then he attended Brigham Young University, where he obtained a degree in accounting. After working as an accountant for an oil company in Rangely, he returned to Fruita, and opened a body shop that he still owns.

Sources: Historic editions of The Daily Sentinel at www.newspapers.com; "The Little Bookcliff Railway," by Lyndon J. Lampert and Robert W. McLeod; "Coal Mining in Palisade, Colorado," Palisade Historical Society; Mesa County Assessor's Office online records; "Remembering Grand Junction' History: The Daily Sentinel Columns of Kathy Jordan," by Kathy Jordan; "Tenth Annual Report of the State Inspector of Coal Mines, Colorado 1922."

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George Pickens of Fruita reminisced recently about his and his father's involvement in small coal mines in Mesa County.