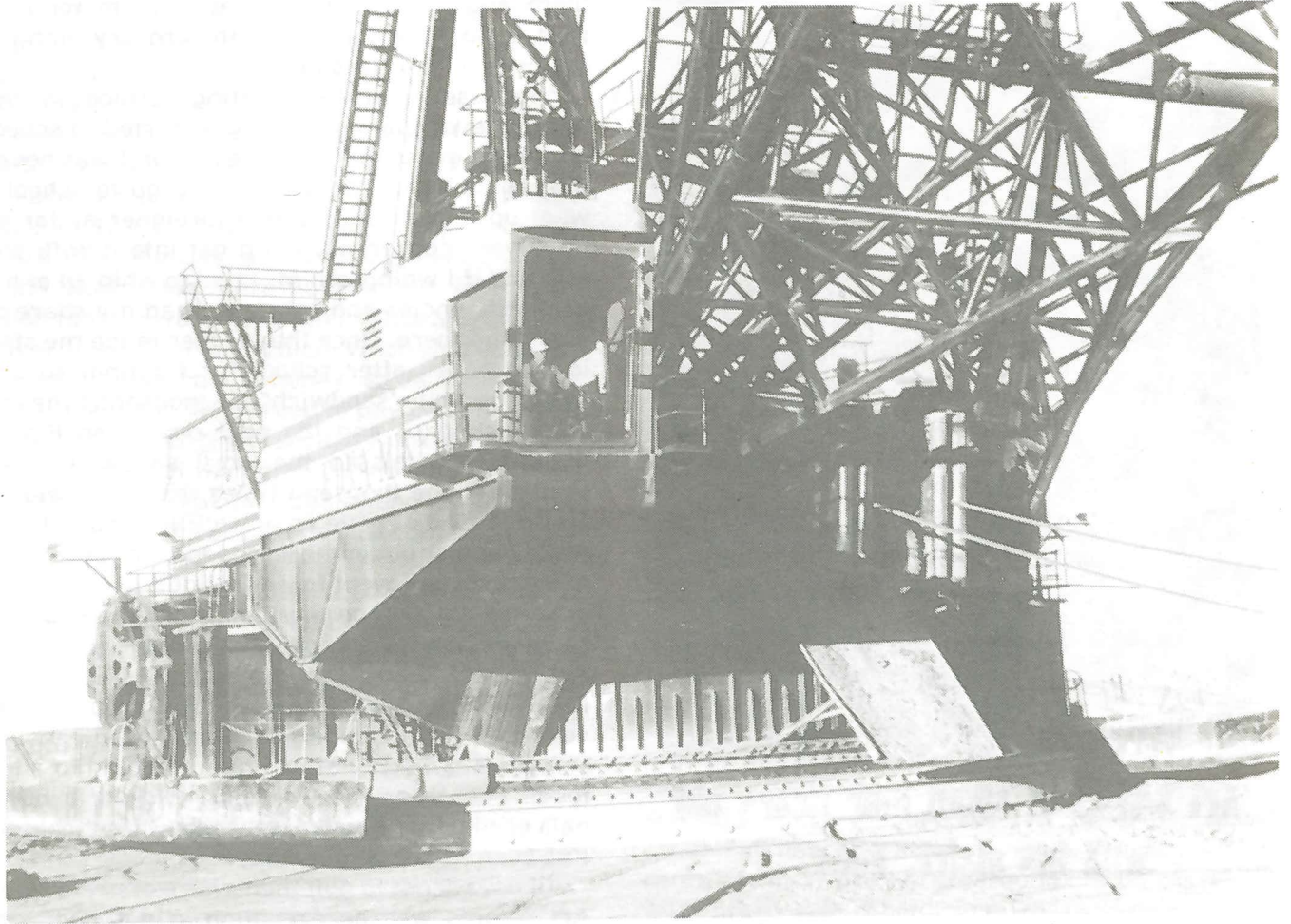


# “It was all elbows and grease then”

**Art Adams**



**By J.D. Adams**

Art Adams, a coal miner in the Steamboat Springs area for over thirty years, was born September 29, 1918, in Hayesville, Kansas. When Art was four years old, he and his family moved to Pueblo, Colorado, in an old Model T Ford. After a few months Art's family moved to Florence, Colorado, and then onto Yampa, Colorado in 1927. "Here we lived in Moore Park. While we were there, my dad put in a lettuce crop. My sister and I watched him thin the lettuce and we begged him to let us try it. So we tried it a little bit and then we got to where we could beat him at it, so we had a job from then on thinning lettuce. During the Depression in the early Thirties, I was contracting lettuce at six dollars an acre. I could thin an acre a day or so.

It depended on the ground and what it was like. I usually made five to seven dollars a day or a little better during the growing season. Then I would help cut it in the fall.

"Once in the lettuce fields there was this guy that would pick on me 'cause I was a kid and I was getting paid as much money as he was. I was doing as much work as him too. We were packing lettuce and I couldn't carry my crates so I had to run like the devil to pick up my heads and bring them in. He dumped my lettuce on me, picked me up and rubbed my face in the ground, and got my mouth full of dirt. I got back up on my feet and as I was doing that, there was a rock laying there about three inches square. Well I picked it up and threw it at him and hit him right on the



**Art Adams at about four years old  
with his sister, Faye.**

point of the chin and slit his chin for him. Dad had to take him to the doctor and get it sewed up. He wanted Dad to take care of me and Dad said, 'Well you been picking on him,' and he said, 'You got everything that you deserved.' He was twenty two years old and I was eleven. I got even with him anyway and he left me alone from then on."

It was the Depression and jobs were scarce. "We'd live good in the summer and go on a diet in the winter. A lot of people were out of work and Dad worked for a lettuce company raising crops for them in Toponas, nine miles from Yampa. He had over a hundred people working for him and he probably turned away about that many every day looking for a job. People were contracting thinning lettuce by the acre and that's where I made my money in the summer. I was a good hand with a hoe and I could make good money at it. Then one year, I believe it was in 1933 or '34, we put in a big crop up there in Wheeler Basin.

Dad was working on the railroad and he laid off to help put in the crop, then I took care of it. We had a beautiful crop. We put in five acres of peas, three acres of spuds and I cut five truck loads of lettuce. We couldn't get nothing for it here, so we sent it into Denver and the load lacked thirty five cents of bringing enough to pay for the freight. We just turned the cows into it. Then I was getting ready to pick the peas and the hail hit them and ruined them. I raked them for cow feed. I gave the potatoes to the grocery man for our grub bill for the summer.

"Because I worked cutting lettuce in the harvest every fall, I didn't get started in school on time. I guess that was one reason I was never interested in school. When I did go to school I went up in Yampa. I was a foreigner as far as they were concerned. If I'd get into it with one kid, and if I whipped him, I had to whip all of his brothers, uncles and cousins. I had my share of scraps up there. Once the teacher made me stay in two hours after school for fighting, so she made me write 'sandwich' one thousand times on the blackboard and the next day in spelling I missed it. I missed the word sandwich after spelling it one thousand times the night before! So I just kind of gave up on stuff in school. I was more happier out in the woods than in school, so I quit school and went to work. I quit in the eighth grade. I got up one day and started out of the room and the teacher said, 'Where are you going Art?' I said, 'Lady, I couldn't tell you!' and that's the last day of school I ever put in. I couldn't see very well and I couldn't read very good because of that. Right away after I quit school I got a job feeding cows and the first thing I did was to buy a pair of glasses. I never went back to school and I've been working ever since."

All boys seem to pull their share of pranks and Art Adams was no exception. "In school Jim Kauffman and I were friends with the Pitcock boys. We used to run a trap line in the fall to catch muskrats, but we'd be tickled to death if we caught a skunk in the trap. We would get the skunk smell on us, then go to school and get chased out. We thought that was pretty good 'til the teacher got wise to us and then we'd have to



**Art's mother, father and sister**



## Art with a team of horses and a few girlfriends

go home and get the smell off. She made us come back to school and stay after too, making up time we missed.

"When I was about ten years old, Dad had a Model T Ford and I always wanted to drive it, but he wouldn't let me. One Sunday my Mom and Dad was taking a nap, so I took out the Ford and got it started and took out across the meadow with it. That's the way I learned to drive that car, but I really paid for it when I got it stopped back at the house. I ran it in a ditch and the old man proceeded to educate me for stealing the Ford. I had a blister or two on me for about a week.

"Another time Dad was going down to some people's place to hunt porcupines. He had a dog that liked to hunt them. Well I wanted to go with him so I could play with their kids and he wouldn't let me. While he was in the house getting ready to go, I got a couple of boards with nails in them and put those under his wheels so that when he started out he'd get a flat tire. He was pretty sharp eyed and he seen the boards. Well he proceeded to take one of those boards and educate me again. It had the nails in it and he used that as a paddle on me. I decided that wasn't the way to get things done when I wanted to go somewhere. After Dad worked you over, you didn't want seconds very quick. He flat well knew how to do it -- it would probably help a lot of kids now a days if they got the same thing.

"Another time when I was young, there was this bully about three years older than me and he was pretty tough. He was a working me over about everyday. I got tired of it, so I got me a piece of half-inch pipe about two feet long and I knowed how far I could outrun him. I laid this pipe down along the sidewalk. Well I outran him to the pipe and I got it and swatted him alongside the head, and after that he left me alone. I darn near killed him when I hit him with that thing, but I was real tired of being beat up.

"One time years back I was out thinning lettuce. I came in for dinner and nobody was home because Dad and me were batching and he

wasn't home yet. The only thing I could find to eat was some dried apricots. There was three pounds of them and I was hungry so I ate them all and drank a quart of milk. Along toward evening them dry apricots went to swelling and I was miserable. You take about a cup full of them and that makes about a half gallon and here I'd eaten three pounds of them. I learned a lesson, but I still like apricots. Another time we were having a birthday party for Mom. Us kids was playing hide and seek, and I came running through the house to get a drink. The adults were having iced tea so I just grabbed a glass and took a big swallow. It was vinegar and it really made me sick. I still can't stand vinegar today and just the smell of it turns me. It took me about ten minutes to get my breath and that broke the party up.



**Art Adams**

"When I was young, I loved animals and I had two favorite pets. In 1930 I rode over to Toponas on my horse that I paid ten dollars for. I had an old saddle with no horn to use on her. When I came into town I saw some people who had some puppies that were a German Shepherd and wolf mixture. I traded my old saddle for one of those pups and took him home in my pocket. I had to feed him on a bottle. As he got bigger, I broke him to work and he'd pull me on skis or a sled. Whenever I was with my dog, the horse was always pretty close too. I kept the horse until I was twenty years old and finally sold her and her colt. The dog lived to be about sixteen or seventeen but I finally had to get rid of him because I was afraid to trust him around anyone else but me."

Before Mr. Adams settled in mining as a permanent career, he had various jobs. "I've worked on ranches, in sawmills, out cutting timber, working in the mines and on the railroad. I've had lots of in and outs and I didn't make much money. When I worked on a ranch I only got a buck a day and my board. I did general farm work haying, irrigating and what nots. Then I went to work for a dairy guy. When I first went to work for him, why I hadn't ever milked over two or three cows at a time. He gave me thirty-four to milk! After about a month I got to where I could handle them when the soreness from milking left my hands. Boy milking is hard on your hands. I quit milking and went on the haying crew. We used horse equipment in those days, and I raked at first and then started mowing. Stacking the hay paid fifty cents more a day, so I started working that job to get more money. I used to hay a little every summer even after I started working in the mines. Usually mining slacked off in the summer so there was time to work another job.

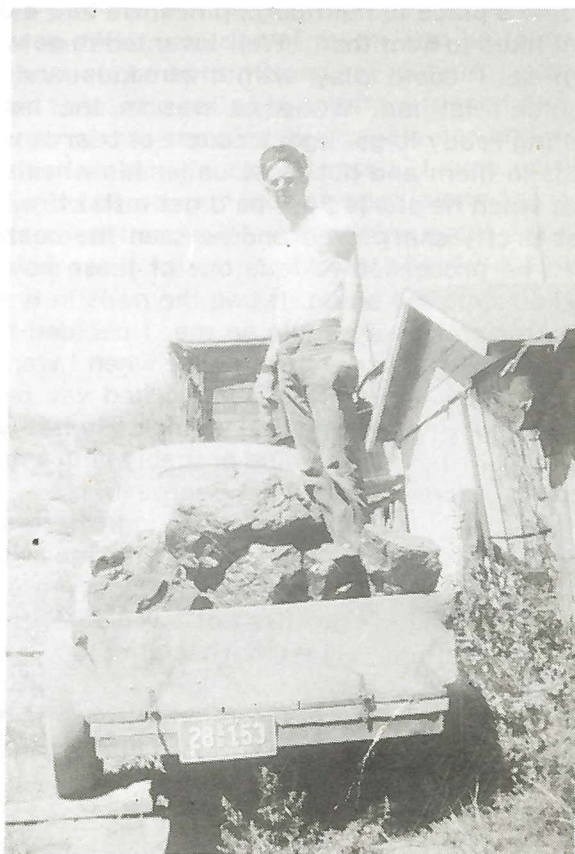
"I helped build the road between Oak Creek and Yampa and worked up in Wyoming on a road crew. I worked up on Rabbit Ears Pass on a road job running a jack hammer. I did that 'til one day the cook went to town and got drunk and didn't come back. They didn't have nobody to fix dinner and the boss came out and wanted to know if anybody knew how to cook and I spoke up and said 'Yeah, I do'..Well he told me to go down and cook dinner for the eighty five men on the crew. I ended up cooking there and got paid the same as I did when I ran the jackhammer.

"The hardest job I ever had was working on the section crew for the railroad. I was too young. You was supposed to be twenty one and I was only eighteen, but I got the job anyway. That was the worst job I ever worked on and I just couldn't tamp cinders under the ties for anything. I didn't know how to use the shovel and work them cinders under so I worked myself to death. I was glad when the foreman seen me and the problems I was having with the work. He took me off the job after three weeks when he saw what kind of work I was doing and found out I was too young. That was in 1936, but I worked again for the railroad during World War II. I had gone to work in the mines, but the government wanted me to come back as a brakeman on the railroad. I told them to give me a gun. They said, 'Go back to work, or go to jail!' I didn't want to go to jail, so I went back on the railroad from 1943 to 1946. I worked as a brakeman, being on the crew everyday and never missing work. After they lifted the government order, I went back to work in the mines and I've been there ever since.

"My family were farmers all of their lives, but ranching paid so little I didn't think it was

enough to live on. I decided I would be a miner. I was just eighteen when I got my first mining job up at the Moffat Mine near Oak Creek. I worked on the tippie where you dump bed cars full of coal to be run down and put in railroad cars. It was a different kind of work than I had ever done. It was dirty and dusty: cold in the winter and hot in the summer. I worked dumping at the tippie for about three years and then went underground to work. It was all elbows and grease then. Now a days everything is done by machine, but then we did it all by hand. It was scoop shovels, picks and dynamite.

"On my first shift underground, I had a bad experience. This old boy who thought he was my boss left me way back in the main tunnel to clean a rock fall up where there had been a cave-in. I worked all night a shoveling rock. Didn't even eat my lunch the night went so fast, cause I was scared to death. I was by myself and I could hear the rumbling back in the mine, but I had never been in there and I didn't know how far it was back. Next morning when I came out, the mine foreman he asked me how I made out. Well I said, 'I thought I was going to dig coal, but the boss put me to work on the rock fall.' He said, 'Rock fall, whereabouts?' I told him I guessed in the main tunnel. Boy he got mad and chewed out the old fellow 'cause he put me in there to clean up, which caused more of the rock to fall. This



**Art loading some coal**



## **Art and his wife, son, and grandson, the author**

"I was twenty-six or twenty-seven when I started at the Edna Mine and I've been there thirty-three years. There were about thirty people employed there when I started. Now there are eighty or ninety working there. I've just stayed at the Edna Mine because I couldn't see where I was going to better myself by going someplace else.

"I started driving trucks at the Edna Mine hauling from the loading shovel down to the tippel. There was this one time when I was getting my first truck driving job. Well I didn't know how to drive, but I went and asked this old boy for a job. He'd asked me if I knew how to drive and I'd said yes. He gave me a job, but my first load was pretty shakey, so he got in and told me to scoot over. He made three or four trips with me and showed me how to do it. Most guys would have run me clear out of the county, but they gave me a chance and I learned how to drive that truck.

"The trucks were just small then, only a ton and a half. Then they got some bigger trucks and they just kept getting bigger until we were hauling about eight to ten tons in a load. They went to some fifteen ton trucks and now they've got trucks that haul fifty to sixty tons. Sometimes those old trucks would fail and then you'd have trouble. One time I was coming up out of the pit and I couldn't steer it. To keep from going over the high wall, I pulled it into neutral so I could steer it and cut to the inside bank. Just as I hit the bank I bailed out. Well it right near lit in my britches, but I got out of the way. In one week once, I had five runaways. I'd touch the brakes and there wasn't any. Five times in one week with no brakes kind of got to me, and I just quit driving trucks up there.

"After I quit hauling, I helped with everything that was going on up there. Finally I ended up working on the dragline. Machines were smaller then. The dragline I started on had a two and a half yard shovel to strip with, then they got a five yard shovel, then a seven yard one, and now they

had been my first time underground, and I really got an education."

"Then I started working loading coal up the face. I ran the cutting machine, joy loader, arc welder and what all. I done about everything underground. I got paid five dollars a shift, and a shift was seven hours and fifteen minutes. Now I make \$89 a shift. People had a hard time making a living back then, but it seemed like everybody was more happier then. Maybe it's because they worked everyday. I don't know how other people were making it: about all I got done was work, eat, and sleep. Working seven days a week got old.

"I worked underground for the Moffat Mine for several years, then I left there and went to Superior, Wyoming, to another mine. I worked underground there for awhile and moved on to a mine in Ohio. I didn't stay there long before I decided to come back to Wyoming. I got my hands burnt pretty bad when I came back. A machine cable burnt up in my hands, so I came back home and went to raising spinach and lettuce again, in Yampa.

"It wasn't long until I went back to mining, this time at the Edna Mine near Oak Creek. It was during this time I met Veronica Clan. We were both in the roller skating rink in Oak Creek. She fell down and I tried to pick her up but couldn't. In 1940 we were married in Vernal, Utah by the Justice of the Peace--he was the first guy I could catch! We came back home and I went to work the next day. That was our honeymoon. We moved to Oak Creek and lived there thirteen years before moving over to Steamboat.



**Art and his wife Veronica**



## The Dragline's forty yard bucket

got a forty yard one. That's because mines have to produce more now."

Art Adams operates the big dragline for the Edna Mine now. I wondered how it felt to be in control of that monstrous machine. "I just sit there and run it. It won't work unless you make it, but it's got a head of its own. I mean if you turn that big bucket loose you've got to control it. It's an easy job, but it's tiring just sitting there. Your old britches get pretty worn out. It's just like a car, you've got to be there when things happen. At first I had my hands full, but after three or four tries I got used to it. I always know what I want to do, but I have to be sure the machine does it.

"It may take two or three shifts to dig a trench moving 300 to 450 buckets a day. It all depends on the kind of digging. After the rock is stripped off of the coal, they use another machine to load it into the trucks. Then they haul the coal up and dump it into the hopper where they crush it and put it in railroad cars. On the day that they load, we can pull four or five thousand tons a day out of the Edna Mine. It's a challenge to run that machine, learning to handle the bucket, making it dig and load the rock. Besides, it's a lot more comfortable working and operating the machine



## The dragline when it almost went in the trench four years ago.

than being outside all of the time. It just don't look possible that a piece of equipment can take that kind of abuse, but it does.

"I've worked all of the shifts at the mine. There's day from 8:00 to 4:00, swing from 4:00 to midnight, and graveyard from midnight until 8:00 a.m. I've worked the graveyard for several months now, but I like the day shift best."

I asked Mr. Adams if he ever had any close calls during his days at the mine. "I can't say I really had any close calls around the mine, but there's always danger and you have to be careful. I got bumped a few times, so I've learned to watch what I was doing. You need to be really careful when you get on and off of the machine. When you're repairing a machine, you're probably working with someone so you have to watch him and yourself both to keep from getting hurt. Before I started as a machine operator, I was an oiler. I'd have to climb the 325 foot boom to oil it. There was one time it really worried me, because it was covered with ice. I couldn't get a hand hold or stand up. I finally made it up the boom, but I couldn't hardly hang on to get back down. I just kept sliding. Boy was that slick!

"Another time the bank caved out from under the big machine and I thought that was it. If the operator on duty hadn't got the bucket down when he did, it would have went in the pit. I thought it was going anyway and I was right in front of it and couldn't get out of the way. I would have been pretty well pulverized when they found me. It was about 80 feet straight off, but the machine didn't go in."

Since so many people wonder about strikes and unions, I questioned Mr. Adams about his recollections. "I went through two or three strikes in my mining days. The worst one was in '48 or '49 along in there. We was out of work for ninety-seven days and nobody had any money so it got real rough. I was the only one that had any extra coal on hand. I had about fifteen ton on hand, and everybody came to get the coal off me. I either had to let them have it or they would have taken it anyway. There was only one feller that brought any coal back to me. Nobody was looking for the strike; it just hit them overnight. When we got back to work, this guy had delivered two ton of coal to me, and the rest of them never did bring anything back.

"The union guys were stronger then and everybody stuck together. Back then one wouldn't go to work unless they all went, but now they got it so it is not that way, and we're kind of out on a limb. After the strike in the late forties, the coal business began to go downhill. There was a lot of outfits changing over to gas, but now they got those big powerplants and they use all the coal they can get. A lot of the guys left the mines when they shut down and they scattered



### **The dragline at work**

all over the country. When the mines shut down they thought they'd starve to death because that's all they knew how to do. They found jobs though and some are better off than ever.

"I've made a decent living in mining along with all of the benefits. Since we moved to Steamboat Springs in 1953, I've driven back and forth first in my car and later in a Jeep to make winter driving easier. That's fifty four miles a day and over 500,000 miles total over the years. When I'm going to retire is a 64 dollar question. Mining has been okay. Like I said I couldn't make no money on the railroad back then and you were always away from home, and ranching didn't pay enough either, so I just quit them and



### **Art operating the dragline.**

went to work in the mines. I've been there ever since. I ought to be a millionaire now, but I guess that's where education comes in hand."



### **Art Adams today**

**I would like to thank Mrs. Hill for the help she gave me.**