"We set up a tent, unloaded the truck and started building. There's no place like home!"

SAM McBRIDE

BY KEN BANGS AND ROGER MUHME

Sam McBride can always be depended upon for an accurate account of mining in Routt County. With his past experiences in mining and ranching he tells an historic story. We asked him about his mine work and how Routt County has developed and changed. His 38 years experience in mining covers the use of mules in the mines, to working on a drag line.

"I was born right here in Routt County in 1915 at the foot of Yellow Jacket Pass at my grand-dad's ranch. I was never in the hospital till I was 52 years old, wasn't even born in a hospital. My mother came to Routt County in the early 1900s and my dad came in 1908. They were married in Hahn's Peak in 1910. My dad was a rancher at that time. About the time the world war ended he sold the ranch. We wished then we were still ranching.

"I remember we used to run our cattle on Buffalo Pass. That was a job, taking 'em out to pasture and bringing 'em back in the fall to the ranch. My dad had an old saddle horse called Sally. I had a smaller saddle horse I called Babe. Times were pretty good until we got into the depression. Then they got real bad. If you had a job you worked for a dollar a day. I worked one year haying, me and a team of horses that my dad and I had. We got a dollar a day and the two of my horses got a dollar a day. We worked 13 days, put up 110 tons of hay. That was when we lived north of Steamboat, in Strawberry Park.

"When I couldn't go riding I used to help my dad on the ranch and we picked strawberries. We picked strawberries by the box and it didn't pay very much. I know Mr. Norris always paid me for driving his team and he always had something for the team to do on the ranch. He preferred me to drive his team 'cause I ate all the strawberries.

"I started school at the lower Oak Creek school house and I finished my school, what I got, at Steamboat. It was very strict, and you had to walk the chow line. If you got caught fighting you had to stay after school and that was really hard on me 'cause the cows needed milked at home. When I came to Steamboat I didn't know how to fight, so everybody in Steamboat took turns whipping me. They done it so much that I got to like it, so I would go out after them. I didn't go out for sports. I got all the sport I wanted, helping my dad pitch hay. That was my sport.

"I met my wife at a dance at lower Oak Creek

school house in '35 and was married in '37. They chivvied us three times. After that I would take my wife to the picture show and to the country dances that were ten miles away. I had an old Model A Ford that I started driving at 11 'cause I didn't need a license back then. Outside that there wasn't much going on."

THE NEWLYWEDS, MR. AND MRS. SAM MCBRIDE

We then asked Sam about how he got started in the mines. "It wasn't a steady job. You only got to work at the mine during winter time. From August on, you could figure three to six days a week. Through the summer if you got one day a week you was doing good, because there wasn't any sale for coal. It was shipped out and these outfits would stockpile it. When the miners asked for a new agreement they had what they called a runoff.

"If I couldn't work for the mine I would work for W.P.A. Outside of that I would go find some rancher and help him put up hay and make a little bit of money. When I worked for the W.P.A. we dug toilet holes in the parks and forests, and around ranches and schoolhouses, up at Phippsburg.

"When I could get work at the mine almost everything was by the ton, but a commodity man, laying track, or a cleaning truck got $3.50 a day for a 10 hour shift. The number of shifts we worked depended on how much coal they could sell. We maybe got four or five days in the wintertime and then in the summer we were lucky if we got one day. One year, when our oldest girl was born, for Christmas pay I had wages of $6.65. Now you try to buy food and Christmas presents with that. Today, you wouldn't even get out of the store."

Sam told us about Oak Creek when he was mining there. "They always claimed at that time that Oak Creek was the worst town this side of the Mississippi. They averaged a killing once a month. Most of the time the fights were over women. I tried to stay out of there, because it was rough, and then there were the strikes too.

"I've been on many a strike. I can tell you about that. In the first place while my dad was working in the mine, why, he had to pay board and room at the mine whether he ate there or not. That was something that had to be stopped. The union stopped it because it was rough on a family man because the family wanted to eat together. If the man had to pay board at the mine then that made it awful hard.

"I came home every night after work. We lived at Arrowhead and did most of our work at Moffat in Oak Creek. The Moffat Mine owned Arrowhead and I lived at Arrowhead for seventeen years before I was married and after. Arrowhead is located six miles this side of Oak Creek and it was the first mine going up to Oak Creek. I got a house up there for four dollars a month. Then if I didn't work there they wouldn't charge board. I got the house there just the same. It was just a shack and we would have to rustle through the stock piles to get enough coal to keep warm.

"Anyway, we had several strikes over wages because they had always worked the miners for nothing. The mine owners would ship in people from the old country and they often didn't even know how to sneeze in English. So they paid them whatever they wanted to. The first time we went on strike was pretty rough and lasted for about a month, but I don't remember much about that one.

"Other times there sure was reason to strike and I've been on lots of walkouts. We would go to work and something would come up about somebody being cheated on their wages or their card. We finally had to put on a check weighman and pay him through the union. We were paid so much a ton so he had to check the weights against the company to see that the miners didn't get cheated. Of course, the company had a check weighman too. He figured on stealing

SAM AND BESSIE THE COW

enough to make his wages. After we in the union had our own checker there was not any more stealing going on. Sometimes in the bathhouse someone would tell about getting cheated and everybody would know so we would change our clothes and go home till it was settled and our weights would be brought up to date. Then we would go back to work.

"When I was just a little kid they had search lights put up at the old Moffat mine, four or five of them. When there was a strike these searchlights would look over it all and we thought they had machine guns, like the militia. They hired thugs to protect their property and I think they could have done without that.

"The hardest thing about working at the mine was shoveling coal. After they took it off contract for so much a ton, they put us on company wages. Then they wanted us to shovel coal the whole shift, for eight hours. The union cut it down to seven hours and fifteen minutes with a paid lunch. I think that it's still that way. We finally got it through the union to have a paid lunch. Before the union we had to work ten hours a day and the wages were $3.50 for the day. When I started at the mine we worked ten hour shifts, face to face.

"I retired in 1972. I worked 38 years mining coal, the first 16 years underground. Through World War II, I was underground. We used electric motors then but before I worked there they had to work about 150 head of mules to get all the coal out."

Sam told us about the different machines used at the mine during World War II. "I was working in the mine underground with a cutting machine. It was just like a big saw. It sawed six inch trenches underneath the coal. There was also a walling machine, but I never did run one of them. They cut underneath and across the sides and up the top. If the coal didn't come down they would put in a shot and lightly break it so we could get lump coal. They wanted lump coal, not the bug dust the cutting machine made. They didn't want the dust because there was no sale for it.

"During World War II we worked pretty good, but it sure slacked off after that. When I worked at Moffat we had one Japanese man working there who was fired because the bosses were afraid of trouble, but I don't know if he would have made any trouble. A lot of people there thought another guy was Japanese but he was Korean and had served in WWI for the U.S. and had worked at the Moffat mine for years. When I first started working at Keystone the Japanese would pay people who were riding oak every pay day for pullin' the coal out for them. They would have lots of carts to load by the ton and respectable people wouldn't be caught dead doing that lowly job. However, they never suf-

SAM TELLS HIS TALES

SAM, AGE 11, WITH MODEL "T"

fered much for cigarettes or whiskey."

Sam continued his story, "In my time there were three men killed by rock cave-ins which were pretty frequent. They didn't put in enough timbers; they were just too far apart. And when the inspector came he saw they were too far apart, but he overlooked it on purpose. In other words, he got paid for overlooking. That's something they don't do now 'cause they use roof bolts in place of timbers. We have government and state inspectors. Of course, back at that time, we only had state inspectors. They would call the mine and tell them when they were going to be there, so they could have everything up to nut, and they did. They kept everything up when the inspectors was coming.

"On the mine where I started it worked pretty close to two hundred men. They pulled out of the two Moffat mines a double header, two train loads of coal a day. That was during WWII, but they only had a hundred men working there then. I worked for sixteen years at the Moffat mine and was never off the payroll. Then I worked for twenty-three years for P & M Coal company, the strip mines.

"We stripped coal down at McGreggor and then P & M bought the Edna mine and moved the dragline in and I went across the country greasing cams. I think out of being stuck in a creek or two, it only took four days to move the dragline. If the dragline was on good footing it could go a mile in eight hours, but during the time we moved it, it was in the fall and it was rainy and slick. Sometimes we would step ahead eight feet and slide back and maybe only make six inches a step.

"It took three people to run a dragline; a dragline operator, an oiler and I was greasing cams on the graveyard shift. There was three men to move it, and we was working around the clock. I had the graveyard shift 'cause I was one of the newer men and they already had their oiler, so since I was a welder they put me on at night. Then when I got up to Edna, I welded for 11 years, never stopped you might say. I was welding on a dragline bucket then.

"When the draglines are pulling the bucket through the rocks it wears the steel down real fast. The welders are busy building up the steel and putting on new parts, so I had a real steady job of welding. There was no use for me to ask to get on a caterpillar because I was a welder and didn't have the experience on a caterpillar, and they wasn't about to learn me. So I just welded.

"Then I got my shotfire papers in '38. I was shooting shots in the mine, drillin' holes and shootin' shots. They paid me 29 cents a shift more for doing that.

"After a while 29 cents adds up. We had to test for gas before we could shoot shots. You see the only gas I saw shot was in the Moffat mine. I got a big scare out of that. I tell you what, it was hard for me to let the lamp out of the gas slowly because I wanted to drop it and run.

"You had to use a safety light and you had to know how to put it together and take it apart before you got your shotfire papers. And sometimes right outside the mine office you had to clean the lamp, all the parts, and assemble it back together. They had a box that you put it in to test it. It had cardboard over the top, and you hung the lamp inside. Then they put some carbide in a can with a little water on it and set it in the box. Then, like in the mine, if it blowed up the cardboard would come off the top.

"The lamp had two pieces of gauze inside. That was the only way it got its air or gave off fumes. There were two real fine screens — one

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fit inside of the other. When you got into a place to check for gas, you held your lamp down low, then raised it up. If there was a blue Christmas tree glowing over the top of the lamp, you let it down slowly and moved out to fresh air. If you let it down quick you was apt to jump the fire out of the gauze and explode it. The gas was all methane. It always laid high on the level, like if you have a slanting place and filled it with water and it comes level. Upside down it was on level at the top. You raised the lamp when it started burning, then let it down slowly not to let it burn too long. If you did, the screen would get hot and the fire would get outside the lamp and would blow up. Then they would pick up the pieces.

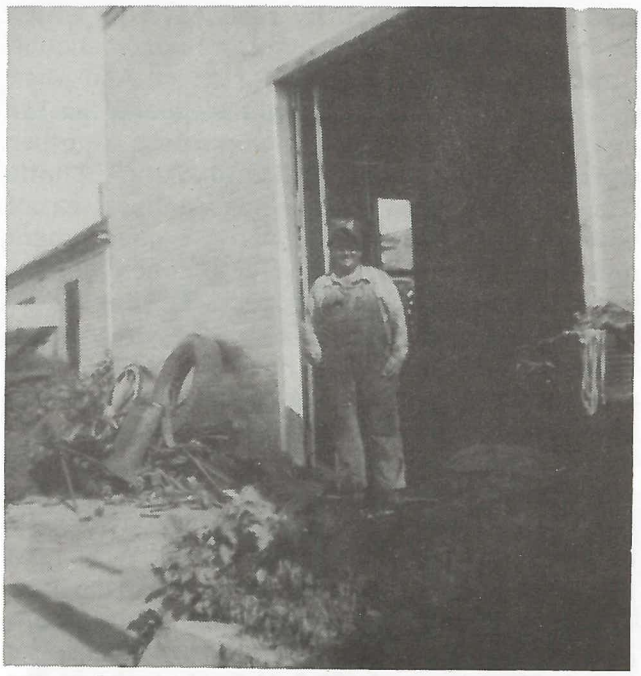
"There were never any people hurt in the mine from gas explosions. In the Moffat mine I only seen gas in the lamp once. The boss was hobblin' from being on crutches and a cane and he sent me to check for gas. So I went to check and sure enough there was some gas in there. If you found gas you'd have to turn the air so it'd move the gas out. You always put a sign up on the entrance when you found gas.

"You took chalk and a box or a piece of coal to write the sign so nobody would walk into it. The air is branched off with a cloth nailed to the timbers so aid couldn't cut across and go through the entries and out to the airway. There was a big fan pushing air into the mine. That was the coldest place in the world many a time. I often came out of the mine with my hard hat froze to my hair from sweating and being in that cold breeze.

"I also remember when I worked underground I'd get to where I couldn't stand the winter outside. If I was doing anything sweating and shoveling coal and sat down to eat lunch in the airway, I'd have to put my coat on to eat or freeze to death from being hot and sweaty. The airways froze you all the quicker.

"I think the worst thing about working in the mine was the widowmakers. It was the sand that had been wet in the rock where the dinosaur track was. A lot of times we would go into a room and follow where one of these dinosaurs had walked with the pot holes falling out. These pots had to be timbered good because they would be solid one minute and the next they would fall out. The reason there were called widowmakers was they looked like a pot hole except they were upside down. They would just fall out with no notice. When you found one you had to get a timber under it right away. That pot hole bottom was often slick as glass.

"I lived here and at the Arrowhead place. My dad and I worked the Moffat mine in Oak Creek and drove our old Model A up and down the road. Then I moved to Steamboat in '43 and Marie and I bought the Riverside development area. The house and the chunk of ground we sold in '36 when we moved to Akron, Colorado. I and another fella bought a general repair shop there, but later sold it to him and moved back here.



SAM AT THE SHOP IN AKRON, LOOKING TOWARD MOUNTAINS

"While we lived in Akron I wasn't as busy. If I could I looked to the West, to the mountains. Finally we moved back to Marie's dad and brother-in-law's place. We set up a tent out here in the yard. There was no place to buy then. We set up the tent and unloaded the truck. I went to the sawmill and got a load of lumber and brought it in here and started building these three rooms of the house. I knew when we were in Akron I wanted to return to the mountains 'cause there's no place like home."