



MCGREGOR, ONLY MEMORIES LEFT.

BY KERRY KEENA

In December of 1980 the Three Wire Winter staff received a letter from Mrs. Marian M. Leonard, a former resident of Steamboat Springs. Mrs. Leonard graduated from Steamboat Springs High School in 1949. In the letter she told us that she would like to read in our magazine more about Milner, Coalview, Mt. Harris, and McGregor. These were all old coal mining towns that operated in the early part of the 1900's. I chose to write about McGregor which is a landfill and dumping area now. I interviewed Doc Utterback, Maude Compenstine and Dale Bostok, all of whom used to live in McGregor. These three men helped me relive the past in McGregor and, perhaps, even know something of the future.

Doc Utterback began the tale. "McGregor was on the south side of the Yampa River. As people began to dig around over there in 1907, they found some coal outcroppings. John McNeil, Sr., acquired that coal land about 1910 and created a coal mining camp. This was known as the McGregor Coal Company. About 1912, a tower was built, and they went into mining quite extensively. There were pit mines, underground mines, and two mines that faced the river. They had two openings to get the coal out. In 1910, the railroad went down from Steamboat Springs to Craig. It went across the river, so it was easier to get their coal out. The present bridge that is there now is a remnant of the old railroad bridge."

Dale added to this story, "I remember when we used to have troubles in the spring with the bridge. There were beams that held the bridge

up, and they were so close together that during the spring run-off the ice brought trees and debris down with it. It would then pile up against the beams, and it was nip and tuck sometimes wondering if those bridges would hold up. I remember my dad spending 'upteen' hours pulling the trees from the bridge, so that the coal company could use dynamite to break up the ice.

"McGregor, especially when my family got there, was a small operation. They didn't hire as many people as Mount Harris and the Wadge Mine and probably didn't work as many hours year round. Most of the miners would work five days a week during the winter, and during the summer they'd be lucky to work one, two, or



DOC UTTERBACK

three days a week. So they weren't really doing too well.

"The coal miners would get paid a certain amount of cash and a certain amount of script, a special type of coin that only had value at the company store. Every season my dad would hire a few miners to harvest hay and work in the grain field. It was kind of a poor-boy mine. It used to be a pretty big mine but when we were there, it was smaller than most of the mines.

"They used to have a shaft there that was 800 feet straight down. They worked it for a while, but it flooded, and they couldn't keep the water out of it. They closed that part of it down, and that took a lot of the crew out. They kept mining on this gentle slope and kept it open for years. They had to sell coal to the power plant, and in the winter they had a market for lump coal that they shipped out.

"The power plant was owned by Douglas Grand, and he furnished power all over the valley. The mine had a trading area 300 yards or so down from the power plant, and it would take a certain amount of coal boilers to operate the plant. So they had a year round deal.

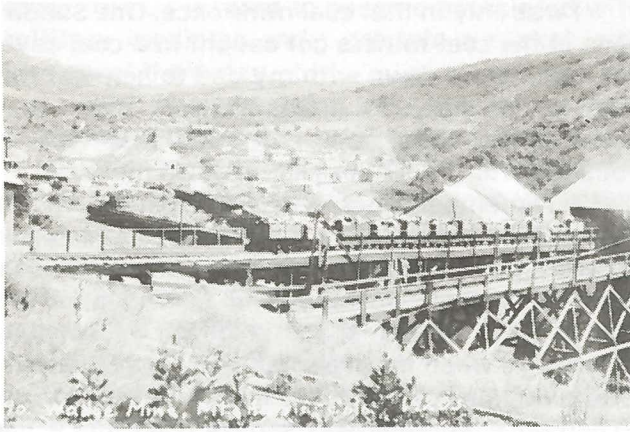
"I was only in that coal mine once. One Sunday one of the coal miners got caught in a coal cave-in, and I went down with my dad to help get this guy out of there. That was the only time I was ever down there, and I decided that was no business for me. I didn't like it down there.

"I remember Jack Allen got caught in the mine when the ceiling fell in. He used to go down there on Saturdays and Sundays when the coal miners weren't working, and he will drill this face. They would shoot it down on Monday mornings when the crew came in. They wouldn't have as much work to do then if it was set up. Then once when he was setting it up this whole face and part of the coal just popped off, which I guess it often does. I don't know that much about the coal industry, but I guess that stuff down there moves, pops and snaps. That scares one half to death, if they're not used to it. I don't know how many tons of coal came down, but seemed to me it must have been 12 to 15 feet high. His partner was down there with him and saw it happen, so they were able to get out of there. They had to go down there and get all of the coal off him. He got busted up something terrible. It took him a year to recuperate, but he was as good as new last time I saw him.

I also remember the Mount Harris disaster. Actually it wasn't the Mount Harris Mine; it was the Wadge mine. It was right across the highway from Mount Harris. There was a family that lived in McGregor and worked at the Wadge mine. There was a man who was killed in the explosion by the name of Searle. My dad and I went down there. I don't really now how I got involved, but I watched them pull all the bodies out. I helped to put them in the old theater at



ONE OF THE ONLY SHACKS LEFT TODAY



THE WADGE MINE

Mount Harris. That was made into a morgue.

As I recall there were 34 people killed in that explosion. I think it wiped out the whole shaft. There were one or two that lived. One of them lived in McGregor for a long time after that. There was an air shaft that scraped down into the pits to circulate air, and as I recall they got out. I was pretty small then, and as I recall they were about the only ones that got out that were down in the sloop itself."

Doc Utterback told me of how McGregor used to be when he lived there. "My parents had a ranch across the river. We used to sell milk and eggs and butter and chickens to the coal miners, and to the store. Down at the base of the hill there were some tar paper shacks where some of the Mexican and Greek people lived. The foreign people always paid in cash. They were the best customers, because they could come over every weekend for chickens and butter and cottage cheese. My mom sold those things, and they always had the money. They had no credit so when they saw how much it was they would just fork it out.

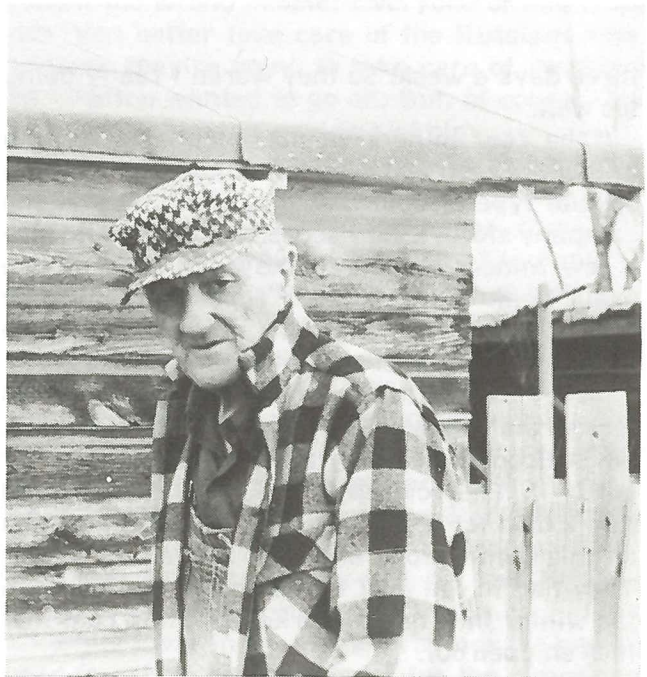
"I remember every so often like the Fourth of July, Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year's we had a big celebration at McGregor. We always had a big dance especially on Christmas and/or New Year's. We'd have a lot of people come from everywhere and pull up with their hot jugs of water and blankets and horses. We'd all go in and dance. They played good old Western music not this rock and roll squalling ball that they call music nowadays. You know it's good dance music when it had melody and rhythm and tempo. And dancing is an art, not a hop scotch kangaroo skip like they have now, which they call a dance. Someone would bring along the old kickapoo juice and white mule, and that was good stuff. It was better than some of the stuff you buy now.

There was also gambling in those towns; they always had it down in the basements. People from Craig, Oak Creek, and Mount Harris came up to McGregor and drank in the bar booths and

played poker primarily. There was always a little group. One would win one time and another one the other. In other words the good ones kept the poor broke, that's the way it was. There were always two or three prosperous ones that never did work much, but they ran the gambling halls. They ran the house and always took the percentages."

Dale Bostock talked about law enforcement. "Back then there wasn't much law enforcement. I'm sure there was a sheriff of Routt County, but as far as McGregor was concerned there was no police force. When we got to McGregor there was a big building that was used as the theatre, and they had dances there. The other theatre had been shut down for a while, and the camp was pretty downgrade. They used to have dances there in Milner at what they called the Midway Tavern. Old Maude Compestine owned it. It used to get a little wild over there. They get boozed up, and if they decided to battle they'd slug it out, and that was the end of it. No jails and no court, just the theatre.

Maude Compestine was the third person I interviewed. Maude's father-in-law, Mr. Joseph Micheletti, owned and operated the store at Milner. He used to own a store at Coalview, and at one time he owned three stores catering to miners and other customers. Most old country Italians came to the United States as laborers or farmers, but Mr. Micheletti was a merchant who dressed his part. He wore black suits with vests and a large watch fob. After Joseph's death Maude took over the store.



MAUDE COMPENSTINE

Maude Compestine was born in Lost Creek, Iowa, in 1905. He lived there for 18 years and decided to move to Colorado in 1923. He has

worked at the Milner Mercantile ever since. He told me of his memories of McGregor. "I quit the coal mine in 1937. That was when my wife's dad passed away, so we came up and helped her mother at the store. The store came from Coalview in 1923. That's also when the new highway went in.

"In those days there were a lot of people, lots of good camps, lots of good times, and lots of good, well, everything. When I started working at the Mt. Harris mine I was getting \$4.28 a day. When I quit in 1937 I was getting \$7.25 a day.

"We meant business in them days. Before the unions the bosses would breathe down your necks and tell you what to do. If you didn't do what they said they would fire you. So we kept on working and worked like hell. We couldn't stand around and do like these guys do now, or we would have been down the road in a minute.

"Some time in the thirties the Pitkin, Mr. Harris, Bear River, McGregor, and Milner mines all got together and had a big meeting here at the Milner Dance Hall. They organized the union. Then when they got organized here they went to Oak Creek and helped organize Oak Creek and all the mines in that area organize. We had a strong union not like they have now. They let them get away with a lot of things now that they should fight but don't. Of course, they have different laws now than they used to.

"When the railroad was running down there they had two locomotives and two coaches. That was what brought the men to work. We would meet the train at the bridge, and it would bring us to and from work. When the weather was bad they would have plows on the trains about ten feet high. They would plow snow all the time.

"I remember when my wife's dad had the coal mine over here across the river. There was a

THE OLD TIPPLE STILL STANDING IN MCGREGOR.



team of horses carrying 6-8 tons of coal over to Steamboat, and sometimes the wagons would run off the road and flip over. They had to straighten up the sled and carry the coal back up

and load it. I don't remember what year they stopped hauling coal with sleds, but they did it for many years.

"They put the highway in with a team of horses, and then they went on down to Mt. Harris. All the roads were very narrow, you know. These roads from Mt. Harris to McGregor were so narrow that every so often you had a place to pull out if you saw a car coming. You pulled over and waited for the other to pass because he had the right of way.

"I remember when a bunch of us used to rent a sled and go to town and on a Saturday night and come back on Sunday. We would put a canvas down with a load of straw and take off 15 or 20 of us.



DALE BOSTOCK

Dale told me more about the schools. "There was a school in McGregor, first through the eighth grade. It had two rooms and two teachers. First through fourth was in part of it, and fifth through eighth was in the other part. They had a good school for a small one. They probably didn't have over twenty people in the whole eight grades, maybe 25, when I was there. We and the Milner school would get together, but not too often because of transportation. We were either on foot or horseback or bicycle. We really didn't get to Milner too often. Most of the time they would come over here to McGregor with sleds since there was better sledding over here.

McGregor is now a memory. The only things that are left there now are four broken down shacks, some forgotten foundations and a big black coal tipple. People traveling by might never imagine that at one time there was a thriving town of over a hundred houses, a mine that excavated tons of coal and hundreds of people who used to live in the country way. Today we want to know and understand how this community of McGregor lived and thrived in the early days of mining in the Yampa Valley. These three people's recollections have helped us once again to relive the past.