

Coal mining in Sebastian County

Glen McDaniel

In Sebastian County, Arkansas, where I have lived my whole life, coal mines provided jobs to people from 1880 to 1965. But they also caused a lot of problems. These problems did not go away when the coal mines closed.

Almost every family in the district had someone working for the coal company, or supplying goods or services to them or the people that worked for the coal companies. Some boys as young as ten years old started working in the mines.

Although coal mining was a good income for most families, it also had a bad side. Coal mining is a very dangerous occupation. It left a number of

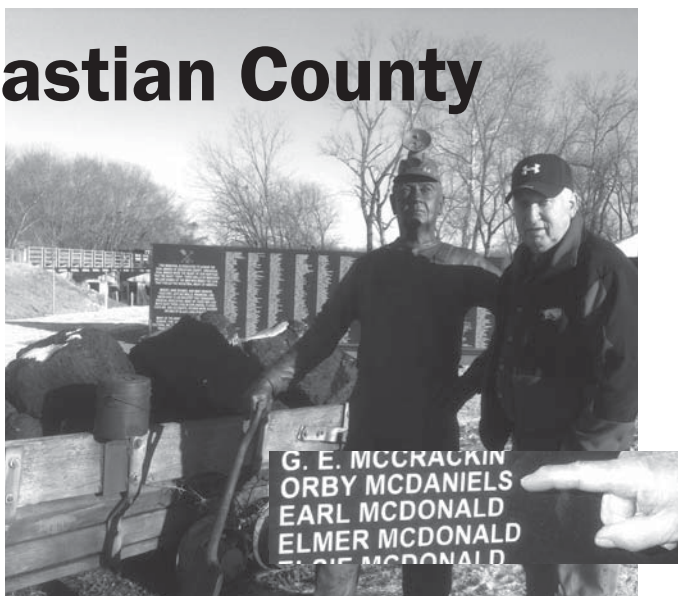
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families, without husbands or sons. In the mines, the roof and walls can collapse, and there can be explosions, fires, and poison gas. Even if you were not killed in a mining accident, you breathed the coal dust. Most miners who live to be older have some

type of respiratory disease such as black lung. New technology and regulations have helped to make mining safer today, but it is still a dangerous job.

In the 1960s, the coal companies moved out of the area. They left all of the machinery to rust and they had destroyed much of the land. The strip pits were up to 80 feet deep and there was dirt piled up 40 or 50 feet high. Some of the land has since been reclaimed.

Burning coal for energy is bad for the environment. It puts out a lot of smoke that is thicker and blacker than other types of smoke. When it rains,



The author stands by a statue honoring the coal miners of Sebastian County. Inset: the author's father, Orby McDaniel is listed on the memorial.

the rain picks up the toxins from the polluted air and carries them down to the ground and the waterways. This rain is called "acid rain." It can sterilize whole areas, leaving them so barren that nothing can grow.

The health of many people as well as the landscape has been destroyed by the burning of coal. Strip mining destroys the land and defaces it so it cannot be used. The underground mines pollute the ground water that runs into our lakes and streams.

Coal mining seemed good for the economy. It put people to work and it provided cheap fuel to industries. But, in the long run, coal mining proved to be costly for the environment and the miners. The government has had to pay disability payments to all the miners suffering from black lung. And the cost of reclaiming the land usually falls on the government as well. A lot of areas that are nowhere near coal mines have had to deal with the effects of acid rain. I hope we find ways to improve mining and the use of coal so that it will be safer.

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