

Up to this day, Southeastern Colorado keeps a political undertone from the coal mining days at the opening of the century. The mines are closed as far I can tell, yet closed may just mean plugged if the energy market ever changes the demand for coal.

For example, not long ago, a law slipped through the legislature preserving the right-of-way into mines closed many decades ago. Called a *cherry stem*, the thin stem represents the road going across private property to the mine site. The berry, or round portion, is the community, I suppose. *Public domain* might fit better. Landowners who have ever been in a road fight will catch on fast without a diagram.

I didn't have time to go to the courthouse to look up a copy of a mining lease. After I began reading the history in the library, I knew the print on the records was going to be too small for my eyes to see when I learned the owners were northeastern capitalists. Wasn't going to take a drawing of a *cherry stem* to understand the power of the road easements, or a documentary to depict how many puppet shows had been staged in their behalf at the statehouse.

The man running a small bookstore in his home knew a lot about the miners. He said, "In the camps of 800 men, they spoke as many as 40 or 50 different languages." After I was home I called him back to be sure this was right. He confirmed the number by explaining the immigrants were

brought in from the East and the West Coast. He counted more different European countries than my knowledge of geography reached before World War One changed the borders. I knew he was telling the truth. Unlike the coffee house global and universal experts in San Angelo, he didn't blow up when I checked his information a second time.

The library books he recommended centered more on the strikes and strikebreakers in the war years of the 1916's than on the general picture. The miners had to trade at the company store, or the post office wouldn't give them a post box, or provide general delivery. Being so far away from home, of course, letters were mighty important. No need to repeat how charge accounts at the company store always exceeded the miners' paychecks.

However, once the strikes started, the mining companies brought in the Pinkerton men for their goons. I am going to stop my part of the story of the strikebreaking here. Easy to sit in judgement out on a West Texas ranch when you forget what it took to take over the ranch country.

My reference source was a small library in La Vet, Colorado. Accustomed to summer visitors, the library is lenient on its privileges up to the two-week deadline. After two weeks, fines run a dollar a day per book. No excuses are accepted for snowstorms in the mountains, rock slides blocking the roads to town, bears breaking into the cabin and turning over the reading lamp, or bridges washing out from torrents of flood water. I know, because I asked the

librarian. She answered "no" to every excuse, so I chose to read on the premises.

The way I saw it, if an overdue books costs a buck a day at the La Veta Library, illegal or overdue pickup parking at town hall might run into big money. I knew I'd be sunk if I was taken to court; at a Fourth of July barbecue, one of two lawyers in town admitted he only understood half of what Texans said, and wasn't real sure if he scored that high on West Texas folks.

So the Captain of the Queen Mary never took as much care docking his ship as I did parking in La Veta. The only book I checked out was 900 pages long. Every key sentence was underlined in purple crayon. Whoever the perpetrator of that unpardonable offense was ought to have to work out his fine on the county road gang, and like the librarian said, "given no time off for snowstorms or floods."

Outcrops of coal are visible in the cuts along the highways. Over in a valley across Cuchara Pass, a huge smelter stands idle. Weeds grow in the railroad spurs; the long chutes leading from the mine rust and creak in the canyon winds. Offices are closed and the parking lots empty.

Up on a hillside, I stopped at a cemetery similar to the small plots in New Mexico villages. Most likely proof lies in those graves to the horrors of the black lung disease. Didn't take long, however, for me to shut up my notebook and be on my way. The faces peering from the

windows of the small houses close by sent out the message to
go mind my own affairs.