

THE OLD TIMERS OF HANNA

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HANNA'S OLD TIMERS

They are of many national origins and of two colors. They are deeply proud that they have lived together amicably. They are united by a common mining tradition and most of them share a common sorrow... the memory of loved ones who died in the dreadful explosion in 1903 which took 169 lives at Hanna's No. 1 mine

"At 10:25 this morning an explosion of gas in the No. 1 mine of the Union Pacific Coal Company at Hanna completely wrecked the workings and killed 234 men (Ed. note: later checks showed it to be 169) within thirty minutes of the accident." The Wyoming Tribune, Cheyenne, July 1, 1903.

WHEN the Union Pacific shifted to diesel locomotives in 1954 and coal mining operations in Hanna came to a halt, those least affected among its population were the old timers who had long since retired. The younger people moved away to find new jobs; those who were too young to retire and too old to find new work easily were gradually absorbed in occupations in the surrounding country. The very elderly remained, symbols of an ancient mining tradition that is bitter with anguished memories and full of the pride of a people who have worked hard at a dangerous job.

Wyoming Magazine presents eleven of Hanna's elderly people on the following pages. Their average age is 72: the youngest is 62, and the oldest 87. Most of them are either first or second generation Americans. For all their years, they are in general good health, alert, and strong. Five of them lost a husband, or a father, or a brother, or a combination of two in the explosion of Hanna's No. 1 mine in 1903, a catastrophe that took 169 lives.

The memory of 1903, June 30th, 10:25 a.m., is burned ineradicably into the memories of these people. The visitor

knows this, not because he finds self-pity in the folk of Hanna, but because in subtle ways, that date is a reference point for them, a moment to which they refer when they seek a frame of reference against which to review their lives.

This might be the most cosmopolitan town in Wyoming, this array of sand blasted cottages, clay shard streets, with the vector of the Union Pacific tracks slicing through the foreland. It is different, its atmosphere is different. Its people are different from the ranchers of the north and the business men of Cheyenne and Casper, and the workers of the oil fields. They and their parents have come from the mines of Finland and Wales and Scotland—and a few from such familiar places as Colorado and Oklahoma — people of different languages and skin colors, and made their homes in Hanna. They have united over the barriers that divide men elsewhere, have drawn together in a shared, prideful, tradition—and in a common sorrow whose origins reach back to that summer morning in 1903 when 88 widows and 134 orphans were created in a cataclysm wrought by Methane gas and coal dust.



MR. AND MRS. THOMAS MELLOR

THE people of Hanna are not given to talk. If a stranger asks them why they have stayed there so many years working at a dangerous occupation they fall silent. When they finally speak, it is to say simply that Hanna has always been home to them. If you ask them why they did not leave after retiring, they add that their feelings about Hanna have not changed.

Both Thomas Mellor, 71, and his wife, Rose, 77, were born in England. Mrs. Mellor's first husband was one of the victims of the 1903 explosion. Thomas Mellor arrived in Hanna on Oct. 3rd, 1905—he remembers the date exactly. They were married in 1908. Three of their eight children are still living in Hanna.

Thomas Mellor is more articulate than some of his neighbors. Why did he stay in Hanna?

“This is home. Though the town of Hanna at the present time looks desolate and some people call it a ghost town, we old timers don't think so. Memories just won't let us forget that at one time Hanna was a flourishing town and though composed of a dozen different nationalities, it was notably a town of peaceful people. Hanna is known for its generosity in donating to fund raising drives . . . and usually outdoes in contributions towns of more population. Hanna has always been generous.

“We would be lonely and out of place elsewhere. Life would not be the same because no matter what earthly possessions you might have, you don't just live without friends. That is why we remain in Hanna with our old friends and memories of the past.”



JULIAN CHOATE

JULIAN Choate is 80 years old. On June 30, 1903, he was ordered, as usual, to work in No. 1 mine. At the last minute, his work orders were changed and he was assigned to work outside. That is the reason he is around today.

He came from Shelbyville, Kentucky, a circus man suffering lung trouble. It is remembered in Hanna that he weighed a mere 90 pounds when he arrived. He did not work in the mines

many years but wound up in the power house and became its chief electrician.

You ask him if he is married and he smiles at you with his keen old man's eyes and says, "No, still looking." You ask him then why he stayed so long in Hanna and the eyes twinkle again when he tells you that he never had enough money to get out. Then he adds quickly, "I always liked Hanna. Still like it."

"At midnight no searching party is in the mine and none will go down until morning. But three bodies have been recovered, those of John Boney, John Jones, and John A. Sarri." *The Wyoming Tribune*, July 2, 1903.



HENRY JONES

THE John Jones referred to in the above quote from the *Wyoming Tribune* was the father of Henry Jones, 62, the present mayor of Hanna, who was born in Carbon, 12 miles away, a community that died suddenly when its coal gave out.

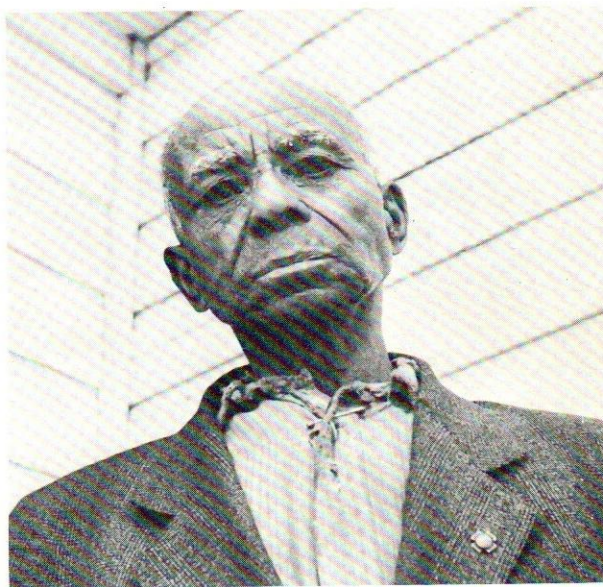
The stranger walking into his office at the Union Pacific Coal Company is informed about certain things concerning Hanna that Henry Jones thinks he should know: that Hanna's people do not feel sorry for themselves for the tragedy that has been part of the town's history;



EVAN JONES

that the people of Hanna are proud of their town and of its mining traditions; that they take satisfaction in being more varied in origin than any other Wyoming community.

One of the few of Hanna's elderly residents today who bears no memories of the 1903 disaster is Eli Johnson, a Hanna miner for 44 years. He is a veteran of the Spanish-American War. He came to Hanna in 1905 and worked there continuously until 1949 when he retired. Now he is 75 and lives alone and travels whenever the impulse strikes him, which is often. When he says that "Hanna has been home for me nearly as long as I can remember, and it will



ELI JOHNSON

always be home," he is saying something that each aged Hanna resident will tell you in one way or another. It is not a specific statement because there is no way to tell a stranger exactly why one stayed in Hanna to mine coal so many years. Just: "Hanna is home."

Evan Jones, 68, deputy sheriff of Hanna, says no more than most about why he stayed in Hanna. "Liked the people and the work," is his terse comment. He was born in Colorado and came to Hanna in 1901, and like many others, his parents were miners . . . from Wales. A brother died in the 1903 explosion.

"Early this morning wagons loaded with coffins jolted through the little streets of the town, on their way to the Finnish hall where the bodies are to be taken as they come from the mine."

"Of all the nationalities represented by Hanna's population, and English is the rarest language spoken here, the Finns suffered most severely in the holocaust."
Wyoming Tribune, Cheyenne, July 2, 1903.



MICHAEL AND SARAH CUMMINGS
MATT AND LOUISE WAKKURI

LIKE others in Hanna, Michael Robert Cummings—shown above with his wife Sarah—falls silent when asked why he has lived 64 of his 67 years there. It is, perhaps, a question he has never been asked before nor paused to ask himself. He remembers Hanna as the place where he made his living. But behind his few words lie the memories of his years in the mines, years spent in a tradition as well as an occupation. It is the complexity and even the richness of the tradition that make it difficult for a man to find the words to describe it.

He was born in Dana, six miles away, a coal town that came suddenly and went as fast. Sarah Cummings was born in Hanna. Two of her uncles died in the explosion. Later, in a cave-in, Michael Cummings' father and brother perished.

Unlike the Cummings, Mr. and Mrs. Matt Wakkuri journeyed countless miles to come to Hanna. Many of their countrymen had already come to Hanna from Finland. Louise Wakkuri arrived in 1893—her father was a miner in Finland and was to die in the 1903 disaster. Matt Wakkuri came 14 years later, having stopped in Michigan for a short time, only to move west again upon learning that working conditions were better in Hanna.

Once settled, they never felt like leaving. They became part of the Hanna tradition which still flourishes today: out of diversity, unity.

"Even the women, whose strong faith held out so long, have given up hope now . . . the town has sunken (sic) into the lethargy of despair." Wyoming Tribune, Cheyenne, July 4, 1903.



JEANE RAITE MASSEY

The story of Hanna is etched softly into the features of a lady who is 86 years old. No one can stand for Hanna better than she. She is, for one thing, the oldest living inhabitant. For another, the vigor and alertness that characterize Hanna's elderly people is found here also, a freshness that is almost youthful, an acceptance and a refutation of the years.

What might Jeane Raite Massey remember? Coming from Motherwell, Scotland, perhaps, with her family when she was 14 and settling in Whatcheer, Iowa. Moving on again five years later to travel to the great coal mining boom when experienced miners like her father were needed in both Hanna and Rock Springs.

This and more. Hanna at first with only seventy houses and those without a house living in tents until construction caught up with the need. The office of Dr. Soldier in one of the completed homes. The two large rooms of the first school in Hanna. The small hotel, the saloon, and a company store operated by the Beckwith Co.

The Union Pacific Depot used on Saturday night for dances and on Sunday evening for church. Carrying water from a spring near the No. 2 mine. Later, having water delivered to her home in barrels until finally it was piped in. Her wedding day in March, 1891, when she married James Massey who had also come from Scotland. There was no minister in Hanna and they were married by the mine superintendent who was also a justice of the peace and family friend.

James Massey was Fire Boss for the Hanna Mine, later receiving his mine foreman papers. Five children were born to them. And then in 1903 the man who had come all the way from

Scotland to marry a woman who had come from Scotland also—and to work at a task that was old in the memories of both their families—went into the mines one morning to a place where for five long months his body would lie out of reach of those who mourned him above ground. And a companion in death was Jeane Massey's brother.

* * *

Find it, if you can, a place where there has been as great a coming together of the peoples of the earth. Hanna is drab and the stranger coming there wonders what life can be in such a place. He does not see until he looks—or has been shown—that here is something peculiarly, vitally, American, a tradition that is a compound of feelings as old as mining and as young and fresh as the thought that mankind is a family.

Find another such place if you can. It will not be easy. The conditions for it are stern ones. The nations of the earth do not join hands easily. Sometimes it is left to their peoples to travel far before they join each other's company. Sometimes it is left to people in a lonely prairie to seek and find the things that make the earth's population a commonality.

Behind the drabness of Hanna's unpaved streets and weatherbeaten homes lies this gleaming knowledge. END

