

ELIZABETH W. STRANNIGAN

BY: VICKI A. JACKSON

The year was 1911 when Elizabeth W. Wilson Strannigan, along with her mother and brother came to Gardiner, New Mexico from Scotland. They were joining her father who had found work as a machinist in the new land of opportunity.

Elizabeth (Bess) was born February 1, 1907, and had three brothers, one older and two younger. She attended grade school in Gardiner, New Mexico and High School in Dawson, New Mexico. On September 26, 1923, she married Andrew Strannigan in Raton, New Mexico and moved to Winton, Wyoming (formerly McGath which was named after one of the mine superintendents at the time) in July, 1929. They came to Winton to find work in the underground coal mines of the Union Pacific Coal Company. Most of their possessions had been brought with them in their then new Nash car which was a Sports model with wire wheels. Some possessions however, had to be shipped by train like the three year old player piano which still stands in the foyer of the Strannigan home. It was shipped to Hay Junction, at the bottom of the hill which was seven miles from Winton. It was then brought to the house by truck. Even though the train tracks came through Winton, they were used only for the coal trains. The freight and passenger trains stopped at Hay Junction to unload the freight and passengers.

The winters were cold in Wyoming to the Strannigans, having come from a much warmer climate, but soon they were to acclimate themselves as did all the residents here. Andrew and Bess bore two more children while in Winton, first a son and then a daughter. The children were born at home and the hospital and doctor were only called in case of an emergency. When giving birth, the other children in the household were sent to a neighbor's house unless they were old enough to help.

Winton, Wyoming was made up of approximately 125 homes which were all owned by the Union Pacific Coal Company. These were mostly four and five room homes that rented for \$14.00 to \$18.00 per month. The Strannigan family lived in a comfortable four room home. Each home contained only the bare necessities, such as a coal stove for heat and cooking. There were no sinks, cupboards or indoor plumbing but water was piped into the kitchen. The flat rate of \$2.50 was charged for water (regardless of how much was used) and electricity was also charged by a flat rate. The residents of the camp bought their own coal at the rate of \$13.50 per load (ton). This would last approximately one month, barring some of the colder winter months in which case two loads were needed. Telephones were only placed in the Company Store, the Mine Superintendent's home, the Mine Office and the Doctor's Office. After World War II, party lines were installed which had as many as six families on one line.

The water buckets were placed on the table and used in the pitchers and wash basins when needed. Before 1929, water hydrants had been placed between homes and water brought into the house in buckets. Even though the homes were company owned, most everyone improved and remodeled as they saw fit. Bess's husband had built cupboards for her and made it as convenient as possible for the family. The homes in this area have always been expensive because there were never enough houses to accommodate all of the miners and their families. In 1939, houses sold for \$5,000, which at that time was unaffordable to many.

The Winton Camp consisted of six rows of houses and the Strannigan's was the end home. There was also Dr. Krueger's office, a pool hall, the Union Pacific Store, the Show Hall or Amusement Hall, the Catholic Church and the Mormon Church (which doubled as the Library). All were owned by the Union Pacific Coal Company and were made of either brick, stucco or wood.

The Show or Amusement Hall was used for dances, basketball, children's Christmas plays and family gatherings. It was also used for the "Union Sunday School" which consisted of religious services for all of the Protestant denominations.

Since there were no refrigerators at that time, Bess bought her food daily or every other day and made a lot of her own goods such as breads, pastries, etc. She kept the food in cellars (now basements) where spoilage was rare. She would wet newspaper, wrap items such as butter, etc. in them and keep in the cool and dark cellar. If she chose not to walk to the store, the Company sent an employee by horse and wagon to each home early in the day. He would take her order and return the items to her by mid afternoon. The miners and their families could charge these items or pay cash. Most charged and then payments were taken out of their payroll checks. There was also another method called Script. This was a tin-like coin and when given to the store, was also taken to the Mine Office for a payroll deduction. No payments could be made directly to the Store on an account. The Store contained food, furniture, shoes, clothing and anything that was needed for the basic day to day life. Every 30 days, a man from Chicago would come with his suitcase containing suit samples. He would take the measurements of the prospective buyer. The buyer would pick out the material wanted from the samples and the suit would be delivered on the next trip or sent when it was finished.

Bess recalls that the people of the camps were a very close knit group. They had a hard life as things were not as convenient as they are now, but it was a good life. Friends were really friends and people were trusted. They all had basically the same income - none were rich and none were considered poor. They all had the same occupations - coal miners. People in the camps were concerned about each other. If someone had a problem, everyone helped, unlike today where people don't really know each other or trust one another. She states that when one gets older,

they cannot get out as much to meet people, but it is soothing to visit with old friends and meditate on the way things were.

Bess and her husband provided their children, as did most families at this time, with toys and necessities. Their son had trucks and cars, the two daughters had beautiful porcelain faced dolls and they all had bicycles. The parents of the Coal Camps pushed for their children to be well educated and insisted that they get a college degree. They wanted a better life for their children and many from the Winton Mine became teachers, lawyers, doctors, bishops and coaches. Very few camp kids did not go to college. The school in Winton was located on the hill and went to 8th grade. The students liked school and found it exciting to ride the bus to Reliance for their High School years.

Mr. and Mrs. Strannigan never went to town (Rock Springs, which was 15 miles away), with an empty car. They would load up the car with kids that wanted to go to the Talkies (Movies) and pick them up on the way home at the Western Cafe which was a gathering place for all who needed a ride back to the camp. The Talkies were held at the Rialto Theatre (which is now the site of the Rock Springs National Bank) and was owned by Tom Berta. The cost for adults was fifty cents, students with cards, twenty-five cents, children six to ten years of age, ten cents and under six were let in free. Popcorn, pop and candy bars were sold at a minimal cost. Another theatre was built later by Mayor West's father and is now called the Rock Theatre.

In the winters, children from Reliance and Rock Springs would go to Winton to ice skate on what was called Dry Lake. This was an area free of weeds, Bess states and may have been the pond for mine water, but in the summertime she says, it was also used as the baseball field. There were many champion basketball teams and the game of football was played with a six man team. Also, the now known Expedition Island in Green River had a roller rink and on Sunday afternoons, Bess and Andrew would pile six to eight kids in the car and drive them <sup>to</sup> Green River. The children of

the camp had other activities such as Job's Daughters, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Bess would send her children by bus to Scout Camp in the summers for two weeks. It was held at Newfork Lake and the Union Pacific Coal Company provided the truck to haul the tents, bedding and luggage to the camp. High School students were allowed to go to the Playmore (now Hruska's Hardware Store), every Saturday night for a dance. Ike's Orchestra played and if they did not care to dance, there was a bowling alley in the basement. Bess stated over and over that these were hard times, but good times - it was a different kind of life. It was a Community with a lot of family entertainment.

The miners were paid \$5.42 per day, \$6.72 per day, and \$9.00 per day. They usually worked four days per week, eight hours per day and rotated all three shifts. During the depression, the shifts were cut to one to two per week, but layoff was unheard of. On the other hand, during the War Years (World War II), miners worked seven days per week. When a fatality happened at the mine, that shift would go home early, but the next shift went in as scheduled. As was true with everyone in the United States, the War Years brought hard times. Rationing took place in the camps and it was not easy. Unlike in days past where everyone knew everyone else, Bess said that many new people were being brought in to work the mines. The gas rations lead to less town activity and buses were used to drive the children to Sunday School which was then held in Rock Springs. After the war ended, many people moved out, but the few that stayed were excepted into the Community as though they had lived there all their lives.

The Scottish people, like Bess and her husband, had a very close relationship with each other. There were many Scots in the area. They celebrated Robert Burns' (a famous Scottish poet), birthday in January. This consisted of a dance and many other festive activities. The Union Pacific Coal Company also had a Service Awards Banquet called the Old Timer's Day. Miners had to have at least twenty years of

service with the mines to be recognized. It was a two day celebration held around June 15 and 16 and mines from Winton, Rock Springs, Superior, Dines and Hanna were represented. The younger girls from the churches served a full meal consisting of turkey and all the trimmings to as many as 800 miners and their wives. Bess and Andrew went most every year.

Each year, more and more people in Winton made beautiful yards. Trees were planted, flowers were blooming and the residents cared about its appearance. Bess said that it was disheartening to these hard working miners to see the mines close in 1953 and 1954. People moved out, houses and buildings were moved out and for one year Bess and her family stayed because of Andrew's work. He was a foreman and had to stay to move the machinery out. They sadly watched as everyone left. The Community Hall had been moved to Fort Bridger, Wyoming and is now known as the American Legion Hall there. Houses were moved into Rock Springs, Reliance and Green River. Bess's first home in Winton was bought by Ernie Knott and moved by the Court house in Green River.

Some of the miners were out of work, but some found jobs in the newly opened FMC Corporation, which was a Trona Mine west of Green River. Bess and her family moved to Reliance and found a home there to rent while looking for one to buy. When they were told shortly after they moved there, that they would have to buy the home or find somewhere else to live, they decided to purchase the house. It is a small, but a very nice, well kept home and Bess and her daughter live there now. She does not know what she will do in the future as with the rapid pace of today's life, there are less and less conveniences for her. She does not drive and it is hard for her to get around to the places she needs to go. She is a happy and much loved woman who has enjoyed a good life and is a walking volume of historical information. I commend this strong and vivacious lady, and would like to thank her for the pleasant and most enjoyable evening I spent with her.

After my interview was conducted and my report written, Mrs. Strannigan called me at home and stated that I could use the tape, but that she would rather not have me use the Biographical Form which was filled out before the interview. She also stated that she did not want any names or dates of birth, other than her own used. Therefore, when I rewrote this report, all names and dates of birth were left out other than the ones she agreed upon.

*Vicki A. Jackson*