

A Childhood in Cambria, 1918-1928

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Caroline Flaim was born in 1918 in Cambria, Wyoming. Her mother had come to Cambria with her family from Pottersville, Pennsylvania, at the age of two in 1897. Caroline's mother spent her childhood in Cambria too. She grew up and met Caroline's father soon after he arrived to work in the mine from Austria in 1917. They were married in Cambria and lived there until 1928 when the mine closed. Caroline loved her life there. Although she was an only child, she had a wonderful family life. She had lots of friends and a good school to attend. The school she attended was just next door to the house she lived in with her mother and father. She attended school from September through May. The school had grades one through eight, with a teacher for each grade. During her first grade year her teacher gave each girl student a tiny cup and saucer for being such good students. The kindness of the teachers, her happy childhood, and beauty of the Wyoming Black Hills made Caroline's life in Cambria a good time to remember.

Cambria was a mining community of about 1500 people at its peak. Caroline remembers their groceries being brought into town from the outlying farms in a horsedrawn wagon. The wagon brought all kinds of vegetables and liquor into town to be sold to individuals at their homes. The liquor was neatly concealed in the back of the wagon underneath the vegetables. There were no saloons, even prior to Prohibition because the company would not allow them. So the liquor came into town via the farmer. Caroline remembers she and her friends getting into the back of the wagon to steal some vegetables and his getting mad because he didn't want them to uncover or damage the liquor.

The town of Cambria was owned by the mine company, Cambria Fuel. The business area of town consisted of a drug store, a mercantile store,

and a showhouse. In the mercantile store they sold clothing, hardware and groceries. There was a butcher shop in the mercantile store as well. The showhouse was the local theater every night but Saturday. On Saturday night it became the dancehall where all the miners and their families came to enjoy each others company. Caroline was taken to her first dance on a pillow by her mother and father. They placed her in the corner and let her sleep while they danced. When Caroline got big enough to dance she joined in the fun with everyone else. She said, "I remember I was five years old, maybe four . . . getting out and dancing and having as much fun as my folks had." At these dances they played a lot of cotillion music and they enjoyed all the dances brought from Europe. Everyone danced all the dances. They even danced the Charleston in Cambria.

Caroline remembers her mother telling about the only black man that her mother remembers in Cambria. The black man was called "Nigger Dick." The story went that he had saved one of the Kilpatricks, the former owners of the mine in Cambria, from death after being hung by some men from Cambria Fuel, the new mine owners. "Nigger Dick" never worked after that. The Kilpatricks were a well-to-do family and they took care of "Nigger Dick." From that day on he could go into the store and get anything he wanted. He was a kind and generous man so he would get things for other people in town who needed help.

Caroline remembers a gentleman named Mr. Hoyle. He helped the miners and their families too. Mr. Hoyle was thought to be a lawyer from New York who had gotten into trouble and moved West to get away from it. Mr. Hoyle would help the miners with any legal problems they might have. He always walked into town and he did not have a house or

place to stay in town. Caroline asked him once, "Mr. Hoyle, where do you live?" And he would always reply, "In the right hand corner of the moon."

The neighborhoods in Cambria were mixed, with different nationalities living together in peace. Caroline said that her neighbors could have been from anywhere in the world. The house she lived in had four rooms. In the winter she slept in the living room with the heater. The house had running water, which was good for Caroline since one of her chores was washing the beer bottles for her dad's homemade beer. The beer always sat behind the stove a couple of days to ferment before Caroline carried the bottles of beer to the cellar.

Helping in her father's huge garden was one of Caroline's chores too. She pulled weeds daily in the garden. She remembers her dad telling her mother each morning as he left for the mine, "Send that kid out there to pull up those weeds," and when he came home in the afternoon he would say as he walked past the garden, "Not very many weeds pulled today." The Flaims grew all kinds of vegetables in their garden. There was squash, watermelon, pumpkin, lettuce, and much more.

Caroline's mother was an excellent homemaker. She made all their bread, canned all the vegetables from the garden, made jams from the many wild berries growing in the surrounding hills. Caroline's favorite was chokecherry jam. Once during a nine month strike at the mine, the Flaim's lived entirely on what they had grown, saved, and put away. Her father did not go to the bank once to get money and they paid their rent each month too.

Life was not all school and chores for Caroline. She had many friends of all ages. Caroline said that they took care of each other. They played games such as hide-and-go-seek, kick the can, and Andy Over. Caroline loved her friends. She was happy that she was not treated any differently from the others because she was an only child. She remembers,

"I was an only child and should have had more than anybody else, but I never had anything more than anybody else. My folks saw to it that I was treated in all ways like the other kids, like the kids with eight or nine in the family."

The family unit was very important in Cambria. Caroline's, along with other families did things together. There were the Labor Day picnics and the Oddfellow dances once a year. The entire family participated in these celebrations. Of course the whole family went to the weekly dance at the showhouse and Caroline remembers going to the movies on Sunday nights with her folks. The families always went to the various church affairs. There were three churches in Cambria when Caroline lived there. Although she cannot recall what the other denominations were, her family attended the Catholic church. Caroline remembers going on a picnic one beautiful day down in the valley. Several families went along driving their cars. The skies suddenly clouded up and it began to rain. The cars could not make it up the steep road out of the valley, so they all spent the night in an old barn that leaked. The next day they (children too) took branches and bushes and placed them under the tires of the cars and one by one, drove the cars out.

Childhood memories are not all happy ones. Caroline remembers the day her father was brought home from the mine.

I remember it was a nice, beautiful, warm, sunshiny day and I was playing and they came with this car. They took this dirty man out of this car with these black clothes on with his head all bandaged up and his eyes all covered and they took him into my house. I went in and my mother was making donuts. It was my dad.

Caroline's father did not suffer serious injuries. He was not blinded and most of the coal fragments were removed from his face.

Caroline Flaim and her family left Cambria when she was ten years old. Her family was almost the last to leave. Caroline had to say goodbye many times during those last days in 1928. When each family left, a farewell party was given in the departing family's honor. A good time was had at these parties as they tried to forget that they would be leaving the next day, never to see their dear friends again. Caroline's family moved to Nebraska for a brief time, only to return to the coalfield in Superior, Wyoming. Life there was not as happy as in Cambria. The people were not as trusting and friendly. The mine conditions were not as safe and there was no garden in Superior. Caroline's father missed the garden very much. He loved the lush green hills of northeastern Wyoming and would always miss them.

Caroline and her family moved their house from Superior to Rock Springs in 1963, the day after President Kennedy was killed. Caroline and her 93 year old mother live there today.