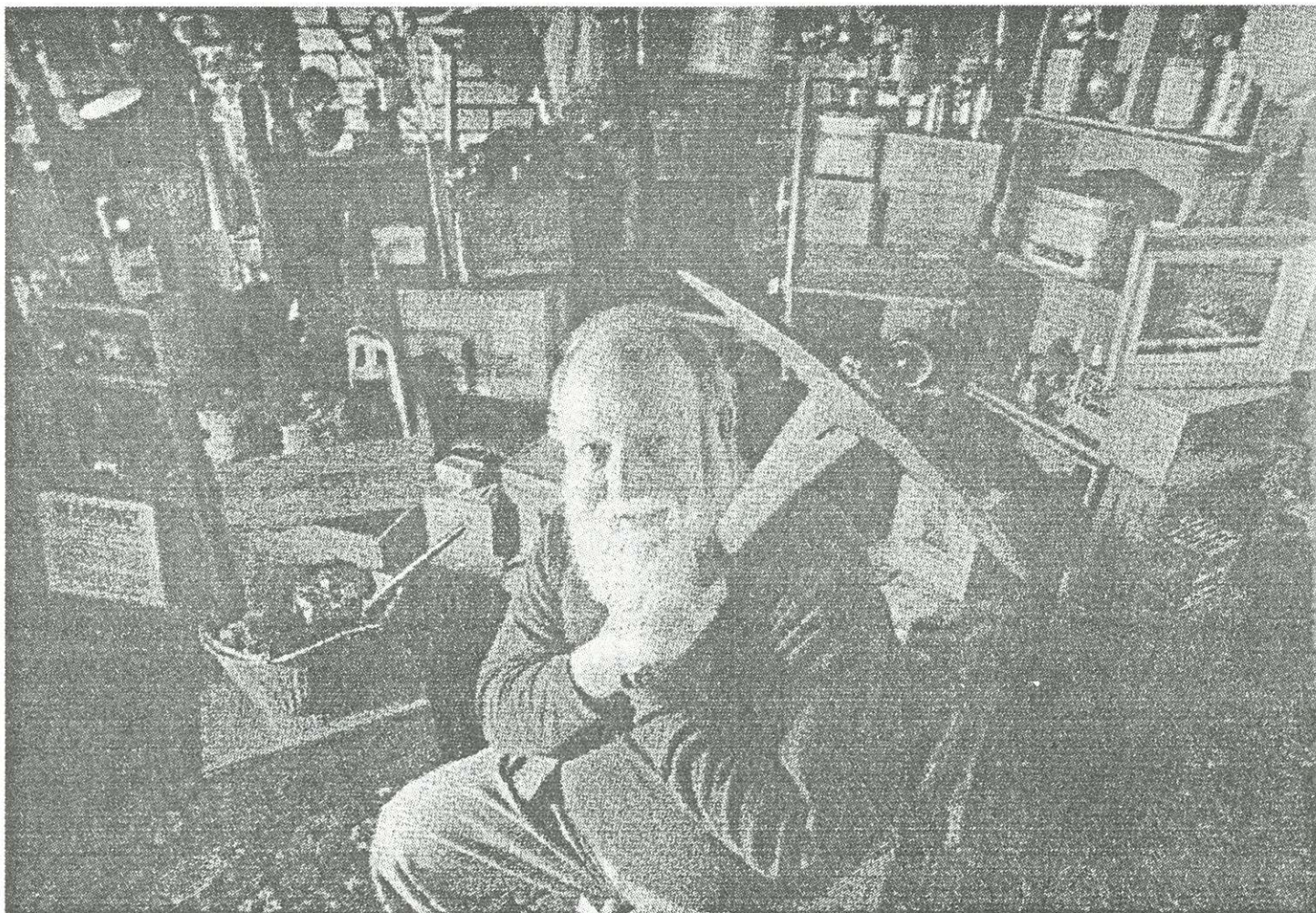


Childhood Nostalgia Spurs Mine Research

by Joe Popper

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Donald Rogers grew up in a house very different from the large and comfortable one he currently occupies in Overland Park.

Rogers, 66, spent his childhood in a tiny frame house in a now-vanished mining town known as Coal Camp No. 2, near Camden in Ray County, Mo.

"My father was a miner," said Rogers, a retired corporate

executive. "I grew up among coal miners."

And that is important. For it is not his own accomplishments that Rogers dwells on now but rather the lost world of his childhood, a world he has painstakingly re-created in the finished basement. He has filled that space with mining tools and artifacts, carefully chosen and researched, and in the process he has made fascinating discoveries

about local history. His unusual collection also has brought back old memories and with them the small mysteries that haunt every childhood.

When he was very young, for example, his father, Roy, went off to the mine every morning carrying an aluminum dinner pail. And every evening, when he returned, he gave Rogers a small bit of food he had saved.

"It was always dessert," Rogers said, "always a little piece of left-over pie, soggy and gooey. I loved that pie. It wasn't until I was much older that I asked myself why my father always did that. Why didn't he eat his entire dinner?"

As a child Rogers didn't ask, because he took the pie for granted and looked forward to it the same way he took his life for granted and enjoyed it.

"It was a wonderful childhood," he said, "with two railroads by the front door home-made toys to play with and me with a dirty face all day long."

It was wonderful, he said, despite his growing knowledge that each day his father and almost every other man he knew went to work in a "rough and killing business."

That danger, though, was a subject never much talked about, not by his father nor by his mother whose name was Jewell. But toward the end of her life, Jewell Rogers poured out her memories in a reminiscent journal.

1933, Don 3 months old. A fire in No. 2 mine. Roy and Ernest (her brother) and Papa were all in the mine at the time....What a terrible feeling knowing your loved one was inside. (And though they were not hurt) it was then I started to hope and pray that my son would never have to make a living going

down under the ground in a coal mine.

And he didn't.

After four years in the Navy, he entered the Navy, he entered the University of Kansas City (now University of Missouri-Kansas City), became an accountant and worked first for a chemical company and then for Farmland Industries Inc. He rose quickly, became a high-level financial executive, and hated it.

"I spent 40 years of misery in the corporate world," Rogers said last week. "I never felt at home there. It was lucrative, but if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't."

Return to childhood

Six years ago Rogers retired early, and the first thing he did was grow a long, white beard. The second was to begin collecting old-time mining artifacts, starting with carbide lamps like the one his father always wore on his mining cap.

"I think it all stems from feelings Don didn't have time to dwell on in the past," said his wife, Jeanne. "But his childhood was always somewhere in his mind. And now it's like he's going home."

Rogers began haunting auctions and antique shops and estate sales, looking for mining paraphernalia. His hobby eventually prompted his to do

some highly detailed research in the history of the coal mines that once thrived in this region. And that led to an unusual find, one that came about as Rogers investigated a photograph taken in 1900.

The picture showed a group of young miners gathered around a United Mine Workers union banner. A note on the picture said it was taken after the men had marched in Kansas City's Labor Day Parade.

"I first saw that picture 20 years ago," said Rogers, "but it wasn't until after I retired that I really started to think about it. Why were they in Kansas city? Was there a coal mine here that nobody knew about anymore?"

To find the answer, Rogers began digging through libraries and museums. He went to the limestone caves where old city records are stored. "And I finally found it," he said. "There was a working coal mine here in the early 1900's."

It was called the Brush Creek Mine, and it was on East 43rd Street near what is now Vineyard Park.

500-year supply

The story of Kansas City's coal mine began in the early 1880's when a geologist named John A. Gallaher went exploring along the Blue River. Near the

mouth of Brush Creek he found traces of a coal bed.

With the help of local investors, Gallaher soon sank a mine shaft at what is now 43rd and Brighton Avenue. Gallaher, tough and enthusiastic, and perhaps something of a con man, struck a significant coal seam.

In 1894 he wrote a letter to The Kansas City Star extolling the virtues of his find.

The people of Kansas City, Gallaher wrote, "are living on the edge of a vast coal mine, sufficient to supply the local demand of the city for 500 years."

Despite his self-proclaimed success, Gallaher soon began to lose money and missed a Saturday payroll. To the 100 deep-shaft miners he employed, men who had worked all week amid coal gas and creaking timbers, that was unforgivable.

In 1927 a man named Emmett Murphy, who witnessed the ensuing event, told this story to a reporter:

"the miners were wrought up over missing a payday. They congregated around the mine office Saturday night...and pretty soon they had Gallaher under a tree with a rope around his neck. They were bold enough to hang him, too.

"'Up with him,' somebody yelled, and the rope tightened. And back Gallaher came coolly with, 'Say, any of you fellers got a chaw of tobacco?'

"It took them by surprise. Somebody gave him a chew. Somebody else took the rope from his neck and they all walked off together."

Gallaher may have been tough and savvy enough to save his neck, but his mine failed. By 1900, however, it was operating again under new management. The shaft was 320 feet deep.

Kansas City Southern Railroad ran a spur to the main head. A miniboom town mushroomed at what is now 43rd and Indiana Avenue with the requisite saloon, a three-story hotel, a mercantile store and other amenities.

But deadly coal gas deep in the mine was an ongoing problem, and so was the management. The mine closed forever in the early 1900s, victim of an apparent swindle. Gradually, all visible signs of its existence disappeared, though a nearby street is still called Coal Mine Road.

The Pit

"That mine right here in Kansas City just fascinates me," Rogers said last week as he walked down the steps to his basement. "What a different kind of place this town was then."

He calls his basement "the pit." And it is a place literally crammed full with hundreds of artifacts: miner's lamps and caps, picks and shovels, wooden cartons that once held dynamite and blasting caps, mine baskets, miner's identity discs, hundreds of photographs, and maps and mine surveys.

And all of it as beautifully arrayed as if in a museum - - the very kind of place, according to Rogers, where some of his mining gear belongs.

To that end he has made numerous phone calls to various local museums, both existing and planned.

"I just want to talk to them about a display," he said, "something to show what a vital part mining played in our history. But no one has responded to my messages. I don't understand that."

What Rogers does now understand, though, is the reason for that mysterious piece of pie his father brought back to him every day.

"I've learned that it was common among miners to set aside a small bit of their lunch," he said. "It was kind of ritual, a belief that saving a piece of dessert for their kids guaranteed they would make it home again."