

Frank Truitt's Novinger

By Annette Greer

Frank Truitt, native of Novinger, was born in 1900. His father was a wagon maker in Novinger and also built the building in which he worked. The building is still standing and the sign, H. C. Truitt, Blacksmith and Wagonmaker, is still visible. Truitt wagons were used all over the western part of Adair County. Frank's father died when he was young and he and his brothers helped his mother make a living by selling milk for five cents a quart, delivered. "I carried enough milk in my two hands and syrup buckets to float the courthouse!" Frank said.

Frank started working as a weigh boss in the coal mines at the age of 19. It was Frank's job as weigh boss to weigh the coal as it came out of the mine in cars and mark the numbers down. The miners were paid by the tons of coal that they sent up in the cars and each car had a number that corresponded with the miner's number. It was said that Frank was the youngest ever to hold this position. Frank worked eight hours a day for a salary of \$7.50 per day.

When asked how much money a miner could make, Frank stated that during World War I, a good miner could make forty to fifty dollars a week.

At one time there were twenty-seven mines in the Novinger area. All these mines were shaft mines with a depth that averaged one hundred to a hundred and twenty feet.

Coal mining around Novinger did not prove profitable. Frank cites two reasons for this:

First of all, the coal vein was not thick or pure enough. Only during World War I (1914-1919) did mines make a profit. At this time, there was a great demand for coal and no ceiling price. The mines produced 2,000 to 2,500 tons of coal per day.

Secondly, in spite of the improved working conditions that the unions brought to the mines, they also led to the downfall of the mines. Frank stated that the unions imposed many unfair restrictions and that the Novinger mine operators had much trouble with unauthorized strikes. If one man didn't want to work, all he had to do was tell the others,

"Let's go home." Then he would throw his water bucket down and they would all go home for the day. This kind of striking was expensive for the operators, for it could cost 400-500 dollars a day to pay the office help and the day workers.

The original settlers of Novinger were the Germans or the Pennsylvania Dutch. They settled on the best farming areas up and down the creeks and rivers.

When coal mining began, there was a great flux of Italians, Croations, Irish, Scotch, English, and French.

*"Novinger was just as wild as
these towns that you see on
television stories . . ."*

The Germans and the southern Europeans did not mix well; as a matter of fact, they did not even intermarry during Mr. Truitt's childhood. The Scotch, Irish, and French did get along well with the original settlers.

"Novinger was just as wild as these towns that you see on television stories, like Gunsmoke. However, instead of using guns to fight, they used knives and clubs. The fights they had over there were terrific. There was little law enforcement. I've seen fights in the streets of Novinger last for four or five hours at a time with no interference whatsoever. They fought until they were totally exhausted or until someone got completely whipped.

"Novinger had a town marshal but the sheriff was located in Kirksville. However, the dirt roads connecting Novinger and Kirksville were so poor that it might take the sheriff several hours to answer a call from Novinger.

"There were lots of killings and few people were ever prosecuted for the crimes. In fact, there were few attempts to find out who did it. You were pretty much on your own and had to protect yourself.

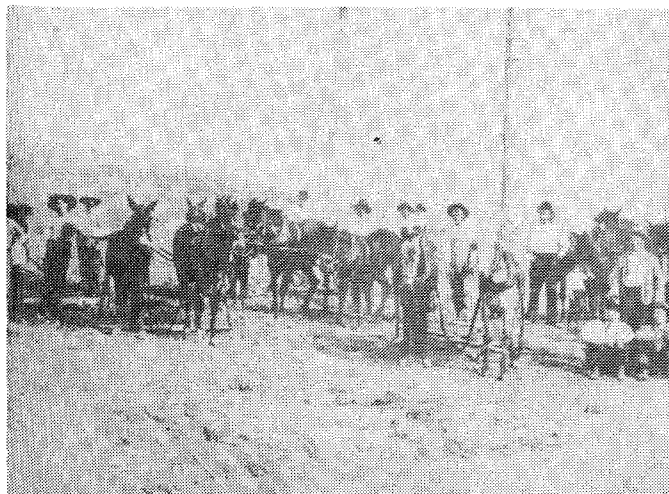
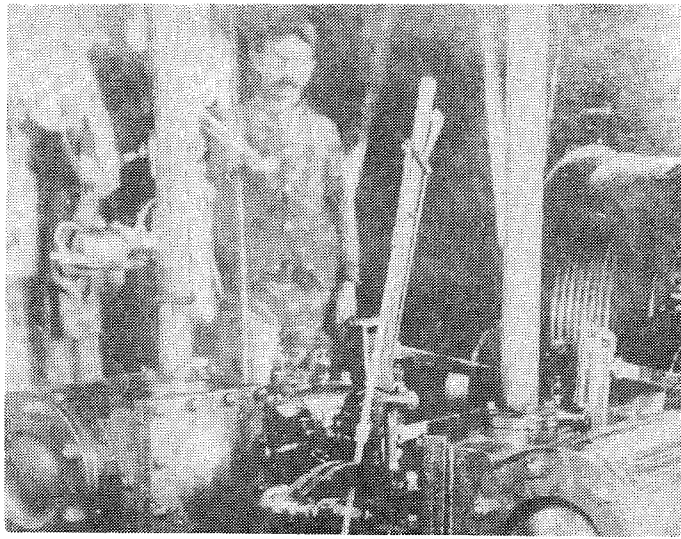
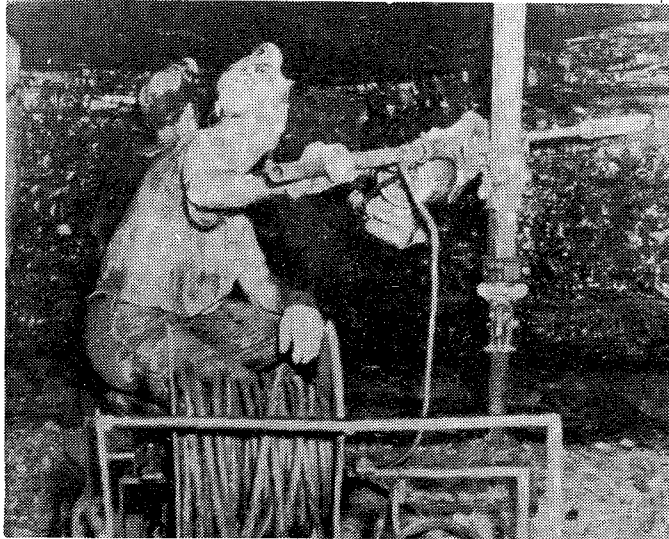
"The drinking and gambling were just as prolific as anything seen in the western towns on television. There were a half a dozen saloons in Novinger at one time, but most of them burned down.

"Fires almost obliterated Novinger because of the lack of fire-fighting equipment. If a merchant became financially strapped and needed to collect his insurance money, he just burned his building down and burned a half a block along with it.

"Some of the same people who helped burn down Connelville moved down to Novinger and helped burn it down. It finally got to the point where you couldn't buy insurance because the insurance companies wouldn't insure anyone.

"It was a pretty rough town and life was rough, but there were many good people—sincere religious Christians.

"Coal mining in the Novinger area was a good source of making a living for the immigrants. Conditions were not perfect, but they were not perfect in any job."



Top left, the electric drill at the "Face" in Billy Creek Mine in 1959. The miners used an electric drill in preparing the coal for blasting. It drilled a hole in the upper part of the seam of the coal. After it was undercut the hole was charged with powder, and set off to blast the coal loose so it could be loaded by hand on the cars for transporting out of the mine. The cars held a ton each and were drawn by mules. (Photo by William Baiotto.) **Top Right**, the hoisting engine and engineer Billy Kelso, about 1910 at Rambauer Coal Company Mine No. 2. This engine held the record for tons hoisted in one day for several years. It was an Eagle Engine, geared type. (Photo by Cyrus Floyd, 1959.) **Center left**, the best trained official rescue team ever operating in the Novinger coal field was composed of local men who were trained under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Mine Inspection and Safety, and was on stand-by basis in case of a disaster. Luckily its services were never needed, thanks to the efficient operation of the local mines. (Photo by Roy Williams, 1959.) **Center Right**, Workers at Ronbauer Mine No. 2 about 1912-1914: left to right, Arley Bradshaw, top man; John Barron, mine foreman; (seated) Jack Warwick, face boss; O.M. Perry, face boss; Emery Jones, weigh boss; Mina Truitt, top man; Cy Floyd, engineer; Henry Jones, top man. (Photo by William Drakes, 1959.) **Bottom left**, Construction gang working on grading for tracks and mine for Mine No. 2 at Kansas City—Midland Coal Co., 1909. **All Photographs Courtesy of Cyrus Truitt.**