

Mucking in the mines

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By Tim Willoughby

Each additional foot of snow logarithmically lengthens long hours of shoveling. Recent storms remind me of what not long ago was a noble profession: mucking.

To appreciate the life of a mucker, it is not necessary to remove a snowbank as tall as you are from a driveway using only a shovel. But my biceps, sore from shoveling a few hours a day, remind me that my challenges cannot be compared to mucking minerals underground, eight to 10 hours a day.

"Mucking" was the mining term for shoveling broken rock into tramming cars. In mining operations large enough to divide up the work, the men who earned their living shoveling were called muckers. Digging ditches or shoveling cement did not compare with mucking underground and was not rewarded accordingly. Muckers were well-paid, 50 cents a day less than the miners who did the drilling and blasting. They made between \$3 and \$4 a day, good wages from 1860 to 1910. Muckers were often apprentice miners, younger and more able to match the rigorous routine.

My father's first mine training came from unloading boxcars of coal for Koch Lumber as a high school student in the 1920s. It would take him about eight hours to unload one car and he was paid \$4. He would start as soon as school was over and work into the night using a miner's carbide lamp to see when it got dark. That work provided good conditioning for the mucking jobs he found, and was glad to have, in the Depression years. Although coal is lighter than the rock in a mineral mine, the total weight of a railroad car of coal was equivalent to a day's mucking. You might remember the old

Tennessee Ernie Ford song, "Sixteen Tons."

In the 1890s, a mucker's daily quota was 16 mine cars of ore per shift. The small ore cars used in hardrock mining are about the size of a bale of hay and haul 1 ton. Muckers did more than shovel ore and waste into the car; they also sorted the valuable ore that went to the mill from the waste that went to the tailings dump. In addition, muckers broke up the larger rocks. Sometimes they called in a miner to blast large rocks into smaller pieces. They hand-lifted some of the rock into the ore cars and shoveled the rest.

The job was made easier by laying down boilerplate sheets on the tunnel floor before blasting. That smooth surface allowed muckers to easily roll and turn the ore cars where they were working. It also provided surface that prevented snagging a flat-point shovel when scooping material from the floor.

A routine mine shift began when miners drilled holes for blasting, then set and exploded their charges. The muckers entered at the beginning of the next shift, checked that rock above wouldn't tumble onto them, and started mucking. Residual fumes from the blasting made the mucker's life miserable. It wasn't a job you could dedicate your life to, unless you wanted a short life. Still, the compensation lured miners back to mucking when pneumatic drills replaced time-honored hand drilling and replaced many miners.

In smaller operations everyone took on all tasks. Mucking was the least favorite, except when high-grade ore was found. A number of Aspen mines were one-man operations even into the 1930s. Some found great satisfaction combining the work of prospecting, mining, geologist and teamster. There was also excitement for muckers, full or part time, when shoveling silver.

I'm sure that was much more satisfying than shoveling snow.