

It was because of the dirty 30s that we started. Due to the prolonged drought, crops didn't grow. Without roots to hold it, the soil blew to kingdom come. Dust was everywhere. It muscled its way through every crack. With poor crops, we farmers had to find paying work. My brother, Ole and I, were lucky. We found work right here, digging wells.

I'm John Nestibo. Sophia and I farmed near Deloraine. One day the well digging business took us to the Henderson ravine, south of Goodlands. It was fall '31. As we dug we noticed chunks of black coal coming up with the auger. Immediately Ole and I decided to open a mine right there. Most everyone on the prairies used either coal or wood to heat their homes. We'd get rich for sure.

We struck a deal with the Hendersons and I became the first manager of operations at the Henderson Mine. There wasn't much money at first, due to all the equipment, buildings and hiring that we needed, so when Mr Henderson demanded higher royalties, we jumped over the pasture fence and made a deal with the Salters. I became Manager of the Salter mine!

These two mines, Salter and Henderson, became the most successful in Manitoba. They produced 95% of Manitoba's coal for 8 years, and were separated by a barbed-wire fence.

It wasn't easy digging! We had to run steam engines to pump out water. The heat and humidity were smothering. Miners worked in pairs, spending their days crouched inside a muddy 4-foot-high shaft, with water dripping all around. They became soaked with water and sweat, within minutes! At meal breaks, during winter, our workers ran very quickly from the mine to the dining hall, to keep their pants from freezing!

We used dynamite to open and deepen seams of coal. It got a bit hair-raising. It's a wonder there weren't more injuries. The possibility of a

cave-in was always on our minds. We certainly didn't have money for safety precautions! Everyone had to look after themselves and their partners. Somehow, we all lived through it.



Miners on the job (Nestibo Collection)

My wife Sophia handled first aid, cooking, laundry and cleaning. She, along with the kids, sure had their hands full! Each week it took over 150 loaves of bread and half a beef to feed all 40 miners!

By the end of the 30s, rain fell again. Farmers didn't need mining jobs. WW2 broke out, taking away more labour. And, coal became easy to bring in from Saskatchewan on the train. But, we at least helped a lot of families get through the depression!

Those mines were a big deal. Really! Agh, you'll need to take my word for it. There's nothing much to see in that ravine these days though. Dust to mud, and mud to dust I guess.

Betty Sawatzky and David Neufeld adapted "Mining the Mountain" from a story written for Vantage Points 3.