

# Mining Coal During the Depression

“As far as I was concerned it was nuts. It really was not the safest job in the world.” - Roy Dow

*For some years in the 1980s and '90s Bob Caldwell had his students at Deloraine Collegiate interview an elder and record the conversation on tape. From these interviews came dozens of stories—ranging in theme and character. We accessed two of these recordings and are using the words of Roy Dow and John Lischka to paint a picture of what it was like to mine for coal on Turtle Mountain . . .*

Mining is not usually the business we associate with small town prairie economies. Goodlands and Deloraine, however, were fortunate to be located near some of the most accessible coal seams on Turtle Mountain. Beginning in the 1880s and revived again in the 1930s, coal mining contributed to the economy in Deloraine, Goodlands, and surrounding communities. Homes and businesses got cheap coal and young men were able to put food on the table during the 30's and 40's when work was scarce. Some of the 15 mines that operated on the mountain existed for only a year or two. The Henderson mine operated for the longest – a solid 11 years. The Henderson and neighbouring Salter mine produced 95% of Manitoba's coal.

However, it was not a business of sunshine and roses. “Down under, there was just a pick and shovel. Nothing was motorized, it was all just manual labour: manual labour of the hardest kind.” Roy Dow worked in the Salter Mine which was managed by John Nestibo. He worked for the mine right at the end of its operation in the fall of 1939. The mine was only operating part time, which made the shaft very unstable.

When the mine was left for three or four days at a time the timbers they had put in days before to strengthen the mine shaft would be rotten from water leakage and the roof could cave in. When the men starting blowing powder the roof started falling down. “I nearly got

trapped a couple of times. My nerves went to pieces and I got out of there quick.” He quit in January of 1940.

John Lischka started working in the mines the fall after Roy Dow quit, and he lasted for about two years. John worked at the neighbouring Henderson mine which by then had been sold by George Cain and

was being managed by Mr. Kishnerush of the Goodlands Mining Company. Conditions in the neighbouring mines were very similar; both struggled with water leakage and both were unstable working environments.

Roy's job in the mine was “shooting for coal.” He used black powder instead of dynamite. “I put in 3 charges before I went out for noon and then we blasted. I came back in after dinner – there was very, very poor ventilation

down there and we would have to give it time for the smoke to get out. One time, when I came in after dinner, I went in too soon and had to be carried out of there. A co-worker carried me to the main shaft which would be about 65 feet and then got me up for



▲ Miners in front of a heap of coal. Salter mine, 1933.

air and I was all right. But I didn't work anymore that day. The next day I came back and the roof had fallen in.” Another time Roy had a closer call: “The roof would get so rotten that you couldn't depend on it. It would give you very little warning before three tonnes of fireclay\* would come down. The black powder came in kegs, and when I emptied a keg I would use it down there for sitting on when I was picking at the fireclay. I don't know what warned me but I sprung backwards and turned over as I did and landed on my hands and knees and only my feet were buried. That's how close I came to being caught

under 2-3 tonnes of fireclay. This fireclay was extremely heavy, heavier than coal.” Many men were hurt badly during mining operations, mostly due to cave-ins and accidents, though mercifully no one was killed.

John Lischka was also familiar with the process of shooting for coal. “You bought powder and a roll of paper as well as a fuse to light this powder. You would use the powder after you had your undermining done—your first job was to pick the clay out. Then you drilled 3 holes with a 2 inch bit back to as far as you had undermined. You would roll up your paper, put your black powder in and a fuse and then pack this all in the holes in the fireclay; light your fuse and get out of the way.

\* Fireclay is a type of sedimentary mudstone that underlies coal seams.

You had anywhere from 4 or 5 minutes to get back out of your shaft."

The men were paid piecework. The going rate was \$1.00 per tonne of coal, but the workers had to pay for their own equipment and black powder. Roy Dow reported that "if you worked extremely hard and had very good luck you made \$15 a week which was extremely good money in those days, but awfully hard. Long hours and hard work. It was just a matter of survival and we had to do something. At that time there was so very little employment. Whatever opportunity presented itself to make a dollar, we would take it. And there were only a few and we couldn't be choosy.

"We would start work usually before 8:00. We'd get up probably at 6:30, get in to breakfast around 7:00. We were all piece-workers. We could go to work as early as we wanted to, although the men running the machines had their regular hours. We had to more-or-less follow their schedule as it was no use going down there when the machines weren't running to pull the coal up. They were pulled up in half-tonne cars that were hooked 3 or 4 together with a chain. They would go up the incline by steam power. And if we went to work late, if we did that too often, they'd find someone else because the boss would want that shaft producing. So it was usually from 8:00 until about 6:00."

The tunnels at the Henderson mine were deep. John Lischka estimated that the mine ran anywhere from a

quarter to a third of a mile. "It might even have been farther because we did have a direct shaft that ran due west and we would have some main entries that would run off of that, just like the artery system in the human body." The tunnels were low, too, not much higher than four feet. "You never walked straight when you were underground."

The Salter Mine and next-door Henderson mine were located only a couple hundred

meters from each other. The managers of these mines had a bitter rivalry that was partly based on competitive pricing. The manager of the Salter mine sometimes sold his coal for \$2.50/\$2.75 a tonne, whereas George Cain of the Henderson Mine never went below \$3.00. Most of the coal was sold locally, straight from the mine site.

Row Dow described the quality of the coal they brought out of Turtle Mountain clay as "a real good grade of soft coal. It wasn't in any way to be classified with the Alberta hard coal, but for here it was a day-time coal. It didn't do too well to hold a fire overnight although many did use it in their furnaces."

Despite the differences between their managers, the workers of the neighbouring mines got along just fine. There wasn't much time for socialising or recreation in the work camp,

though. A few people played guitar and sang in the evenings. And of course there was booze: "About three miles east of us there was a place where home brew was made." said Roy Dow. "I never had any inclination to use it at that time. But one fellow would go up there with a gunny sack and come back with a bunch of it on

his back. It was home brew and it was bottled in ketchup bottles. It was very cheap, about a dollar a bottle." John Lischka remembered that "the big thing was on Saturday afternoon

after dinner. If you were going to town, everybody would have a bath. A great big metal washtub got hauled in and everybody brought his own water that he had to heat on a little heater, and that was your bath for the week."

By the early 1940's the Henderson mine was the only one in operation on Turtle Mountain. Salter closed down due to reduced economic viability while the Henderson mine struggled for a few years before closing in 1943. By this time labour was beginning to be difficult to find. Roy Dow attributed that to the war: "People that would have found it necessary to go into the mines for a buck were in the army, and they were doing far better in the army than they could do in that rat-hole."

Outstanding in the memory of John Lischka is the strong friendships that grew between men working in the mines; men who had each other's lives in their hands. "There were really strong friendships; very good fellowships among the workers. There almost had to have been because there were different jobs as a coal digger that you couldn't do alone. You always had to ask one of your workmates to come along side of you to help. I liked the fellowship down in the mines."

**Sources:**  
British Geological Survey. "Fireclay: Mineral Planning Fact-sheet." (2006). Retrieved 17 Jan 2013.  
<[www.mineralsUK.com](http://www.mineralsUK.com)>

Dow, Roy. Interview.

Lischka, John. Interview conducted by Tracy Janssens. 30 October 1985.

Photos: Archives of Manitoba.

**"You never walked straight when you were underground."**

▼ *A gang of miners at the Salter mine circa 1933.*

