

Ross Creek

By Stella Dodson

Grundy County Historical Society

If you follow 20th Avenue South from the old Gruetli post office to Ross Creek Road, you will find yourself in a remote part of Grundy County with a rich history. Four miles beyond where the black-topped road ends, there is still a well-kept cemetery at Burkett's Chapel where William "Little Britches" Layne and his brother Abraham, both miners, were hanged during the Civil War by Union soldiers for their activities in support of the Confederacy.

Descending on down into the nearly inaccessible Bryant's Cove, one finds evidence of a community that once existed there complete with standing rock walls of houses and a Bryant family cemetery. A small church now used for a yearly revival is also located in the cove. The inscription on the sign over the door tells of the number of souls saved there during a revival held by Mutt Lockhart and Cotton Ross in more recent years.

The Ross family came to the plateau long before Grundy County came into being in 1844. They were private people who kept to themselves. John E. Ross, who was from Ross's Landing in Hamilton County, owned 500 acres and later acquired more land going all the way to the head of Collins River. He fought in the Civil War and his wife and children cared for their farm while he was away. The Yankees came and took food, horses and belongings, but Nancy wouldn't let her clock go. It had a favorite picture inside, and she stood her ground. She survived and kept the farm going until John E. came home from the war. Their Confederate money was worthless, and the Rosses lit their pipes with their trunks of useless money.

One of John E. and Nancy Ross's children was Samuel Ross who married Gertrude Nunley. Samuel and Gertrude had Hester and Leon Ross. Leon died at age 19 of whooping cough and pneumonia. Hester grew up and married Oscar Lockhart in 1929. It was through Samuel Ross's business dealings that the mines at Ross Creek came to be.

Under the rich fertile soil of the mountain lay the black diamond know to us as coal. Samuel Ross's sale of his mineral rights made it possible to open the Ross Creek Mine. The entrance in the hillside was oval. Milton Dixie Lockhart, a stonemason, cut stones to beautify it. Flowers were planted on each side of the cured walls. This was the most beautiful opening of any mine.

The seams of coal were small, anywhere from 18" - 24" as opposed to the Palmer mines which had 3' or more, and it was difficult to earn a living with a pick, shovel, and breast auger that you placed against your breast with your legs and feet bent up and pressed against the coal until you got an opening to place the dynamite and fuse. Several holes were drilled at the end of the day, and the shots were lit in hopes of having coal down to load the next day.

The miners, wearing cloth caps with a carbide lamp that was hard to see by at times, would crawl down the track until they found their room. Their knees were padded with ticking, a heavy cloth like feather pillows were made of, to keep the knees from becoming sore. Props or timbers were cut from the mountain to hold up the top. Small mules pulled the loaded cars to the tipple or where the train could transport them to their destination.

Calvin and Howard Caldwell walked from Flat Branch, leaving home before daylight and returning after dark, until they moved to Laager in 1934. Herbert Caldwell was small and says he only saw them on weekends for it was so late, he was in bed when they arrived back home. Hiram Bivens lived nearby. He and Mrs. Bivens would sometimes go back to the mines at night even though it was said it was bad luck for a woman to enter them. Frank Caldwell drove a mule. Alfred Sanders, Ernest Smartt, John Ross, Doug Johnson and Eddie Sitz rode horses to work. John Crabtree was foreman.

Frank Lockhart and Baxter Carrick from Orange Hill, Milton Lockhart and Pascal Johnson from Brown's Hollow were among those who walked the Miner's Path down Bryant's Cove and Johnson Gulf carrying their lunch and tools. Once they arrived, they had to work all day then walk back home after work. Later, camps were set up around the mines where the miners and their families could stay making the long trek to and from work less demanding. Camps 1, 2, and 3 were in Ross Creek. Camp 4 was in Collins Community.

Nyak School was established in the 1920's on the Ross property by the coal company. The coal company built the white weather-boarded school, but Grundy County supplied the teachers. Claude Anderson and Iva Overturff were the first teachers and Rachel Geary was the last. Claude rode the private-line rail car down and back up with John Gould who operated the train that hauled coal out of the gulf. The train only slowed a bit for Mr. Anderson to jump off when he reached the school. After a day of mining and loading, the train returned to the top in the afternoon. A few blasts on the whistle told Anderson that it was time to dismiss classes and get ready to catch the train out. Iva rode a horse most of the time. Sometimes, she would ride or walk through Clifty. Will Caldwell, who admired her, put a log across the creek for her to cross when the water was high. The Nyak School at Clifty closed after the coal company moved from the area in 1935. The closing of the mines led to people moving away to seek work elsewhere such as in the Palmer Mines, the Pocket or Whitwell.