



The company town of Cameo, circa 1907. Loyd Files Research Library Museum of Western Colorado photo

### Present-Day Cameo No Reflection of Past Era

By Kathy Jordan

Cameo pioneer Isabel McCall Thomas described the company coal-mining hamlet across the Colorado River in the DeBeque Canyon as being a “a vast nothingness” when she stepped off the Midland train on a hot summer’s day in 1907.

She remembered the scene as an old store and a small two-story boarding house that perhaps housed six men. There were also 10 or so three-room frame houses, all exactly alike, one of which the McCall family lived in that summer.

Down the railroad track by the mine entrance, “was a machine shop, a barn for the mine’s mules, and the small triple, a device for separating ore or coal from waste material by agitation, which dumped the coal in to the railroad cars”.

An abandoned log building made up of three side-by-side rooms with the stable in the middle was “the most interesting structure in town.” The building had been the Halfway House stage station between De Beque and Grand Junction.

The information on Isabel McCall Thomas comes from an interview in 1972 by longtime Sentinel reporter Alice Wright. I have used Alice's interview as the basis for my story on Cameo's past.

George Smith discovered the vein of coal that would become the Cameo mine and put the company town of Cameo on the map in 1899.

According to Isabel, her father Tom McCall Sr. was sent to the site by John McNeil Sr., who began the expansion of Cameo. McNeil was president of the Grand Junction Mining and Fuel Company and had purchased the mine from Smith. Isabel said that McNeil knew her father had been trained in their native Scotland and would be a reliable contractor.

McCall began the expansion by building homes for three of the McNeil sons, John, David and George. John McNeil Jr., was the superintendent, and lived in the "Big House". McCall built two smaller "equally comfortable" homes for David and George. David was a mechanic and responsible for the machinery. George managed the general store before succeeding his brother as superintendent.

Other additions during the expansion brought a two-room schoolhouse and later a teacherage and a couple of boarding houses accommodating 25 to 30 men each. The schoolhouse served as the social center for dances, box suppers and programs of all kinds. Cameo never had a church or minister.

Ultimately McCall built at least 30 houses at Cameo, perhaps 40. No two were alike, and most of them had five rooms.

For the first several years, the only way for a Cameo resident to get anywhere was to catch the train, because there wasn't a bridge across the river. Then a cable was strung and attached to a boat which enabled passengers to propel the craft across by pulling on a rope. By 1915, a hanging bridge replaced the cable tow. It wasn't a new bridge but was moved to its new location from Palisade. Sometime in the 1950s Cameo got a new bridge, and the hanging bridge went to Bridgeport on the Gunnison River.

The early Cameo had neither a depot nor a post office. The mail was placed in a bag, hung on a pole and picked up by a device that hooked the bag from the pole. In 1913 Cameo got a post office in the general store.

According to Isabel "Water was pumped from the river and distributed through pipes going to the houses. The housewives or their children carried it in buckets from hydrant to kitchen. Eventually, water was piped into the kitchens, but the workmen's houses never did have bathrooms".

Isabel said electricity was provided by a powerhouse that produced a 220-volt charge for the mine. This was considerably stronger than the normal domestic circuits, so residents

purchased their washing machines and irons to handle it. They could use all the water and power they needed at no cost.

Residents had an unlimited supply of boiling water condensed from the plant's steam. Hot water for laundry and bath was transported from the bathhouse to the homes in a barrel on a two-wheeled cart.

Connie Vincent added to the 1972 story, that Wilford Kerr Sr. began working at Cameo as a master mechanic in 1921, and leased the mine in 1934. His son, Wilford "Nibs" Jr., bought the mine in 1956. That same year, part of the land was sold to Public Service Co. for a power plant. It stands today on the site of the Big House.

In January 1969 the general store and post office at Cameo, named for the rock formation that looks like the classic profile of a woman, closed. A part of Western Colorado's mining history had come to an end.