

Morley, the Town That Was

By Kristen Spinning

Most ranch owners think of it as our little ghost town with its crumbling foundations and picturesque church. Quaint, quiet, cattle grazing among the ruins. Gone are the tragedies, the hardships, the daily drudgery of hard manual labor. Silent are the giggles of children at the school yard, the clatter of pins scattered in a strike at the bowling alley. Faded are the voices singing in unison at the church on the hill. The Past is washed away and sanitized by seasons of rain and snow. Gone too are most of the memories of Morley.

When the mine finally closed in 1958, the people scattered. Some remained in the area; others traveled to the far reaches of the world. Many by now have passed away.

I had the pleasure of meeting one former resident, and his stories of his childhood there in the 1930s brought the town back to life for me. As we rambled through his memories, my mind built houses on those foundations and populated the streets with a cast of characters. So I would like to share with you the spirit that makes Morley more than a collection of weed entangled, cut-stone foundations.

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Matthew Krumpotik was born in Morley in 1925 and was baptized in the church at the age of 3. His father worked as a miner, hand digging and loading ore carts. Matt describes his father

According to the Colorado Census office: The 1930 census listed Morley as a precinct, not a town, and a population of 917 residents.

as “a drunk who was barely bright enough to come in out of the rain.” Despite contracting black lung disease, his father lived into his nineties. Matt was the youngest of three children. His sister worked as a near-slave for families in “Silk Stockings.” His brother was conscripted to the mines at the age of 17. Matt spent his boyhood roaming the nearby hills, hiking up Gallinas Canyon, peddling newspapers and delivering moonshine. In our conversations he chuckled from one fond memory to the next. I got the sense that, although it was a period of poverty and hardship and a lifestyle he vowed to escape, it was a childhood he remembers happily.

“Oh,..my God, it was quite a town. You know, in other words nobody had anything. A lot of people didn’t have clothes enough so that they could go out of the house,” Matt began, shaking his head slowly. “I remember we used to get two pair of overalls and that was to get us through the school year. When we got home from school we would take the good ones off and put the old ones on with the patches and all. You didn’t wear the torn things like kids do today. No, they were all patches, and the patches were neatly sewn on. If one side got a patch the other side got one exactly like it so you wouldn’t look so bad.”

It's hard to picture the Morley of the past. Nearly half of the town was buried under I-25. Fisher's Peak Parkway re-contoured the road through town. I showed Matt pictures of ruins to identify, but with some landmarks gone it was a difficult process. We ambled on a virtual walk through the town, often detoured by an anecdote of some amusing



Miners awaiting the start of their shift, Morley, 1929
from National Geographic Magazine, Aug, 1929

resident. With some sketches he made, and vivid descriptions, the town was pieced back together.

As we started our tour using the slag pile for reference and heading down the road, to the right were the ruins of the DC electrical generator station. Because of the extremely high methane levels in the mines, DC power was a safer choice for the lights and ventilation. Also to the right was the change house where workers would change their clothes and get their tag off the board. Each man was assigned a tag number, and this system kept track of who was in the mine. The ruin that is somewhat a "Y" shape was probably the ventilation building, pumping stagnant, explosive gas-laden air out of the tunnels and pumping fresh air in. The small shaft with iron grating over it that we can see on the hillside was never a mine entrance. At some point the slag pile caught fire and was burning underground. In an attempt to contain it and prevent it from burning into the mines, a separate shaft was dug with tunnels encircling the fire. Water was pumped into this network of tunnels, keeping the fire from spreading.

Off to the left, where today's road curves right toward the church, stood the YMCA. It was a two story structure with a two-lane bowling alley on the first floor and a bocce court on the side. Matt added, "I used to set pins for a nickel a line there." Sunday school classes were held at the Y, too. Only about ten families in town were not Catholic, so the church was a big part of community life. The road in and out of town proceeded through what is now the locked gate and over the tracks and creek. There were houses along there, too. Matt gestured to his sketch and said, "Down here lived Piggy Joe. He was a really big fat man who raised corn. I remember he had two little girls that were just as round as he."

On the other side of the tracks was the area of town referred to as "Mexico City." Morley was racially segregated with all the ethnic groups pretty much living in their own sections. (At the time, mine management throughout the region capitalized on ethnic and language differences as a way to keep the people disjointed and to prevent unionization). Also on that side of the tracks, but more towards the north, was the mule barn. Because of the methane, the mine was never mechanized. The ore carts were hauled out on rails by mule teams. Old Man Simpson ran the mule barn. When a mule died, it was carted up a side drainage from the mine to be disposed of, hence giving it the name Dead Mule Canyon (now proudly part of the Cannon's Lot, G4).

As the road passes the church, we see foundations on the hillside. This area was known as "Silk Stockings," or the part of town where managers lived. Just past that was Capitol Hill, the foreman's residence. The long foundation that is perpendicular to the road was the mercantile. Matt recalled of the store, "The store manager, Mr. Hudson, he was also the butcher. He'd always put his thumb on the scale when he sold you meat. I'd always tell him to take his thumb off the scale and, oh, he'd get so mad at me. I'd be sent to get a pound and a half or so. It was 15 or 20 cents a pound in those days. But he'd always try to get a little more out of you."

A little past the store, and set back about a block from the present road, was the grade school. The school had ball fields and a basketball court. The kids went to grade school in Morley, but were bussed to Trinidad for high school. A few more homes spread out in the valley beyond the school, defining the edge of town. Matt paused from sketching the layout of the school and said, "Mr. Mott was this old fellow who lived alone here at the end of town. He'd been a slave, freed by the Civil War. I remember him saying "You get as old as me and all you can do is sit and read the paper and just wonder. Nowadays I live for my one shot a day." Mr. Mott was over 100 when he died."

Morley was comprised of four major groups. There were people of Slavic decent, Italians, Mexicans and English. Many workers were first generation immigrants. One's ethnicity determined what type of job you could get. The English had the best jobs: managerial. They lived in the neighborhood known as "Silk Stockings." The Italians had the jobs that kept things working, like running the schoolhouse, the YMCA, the boiler room, the operation and maintenance of mine equipment and buildings. The Slavs and Mexicans held the manual labor jobs, like digging & loading coal and fixing of roads, "honeydipping," and maintaining the tracks. Along the railroad, every 6 miles or so was a section hand building. Section hands, primarily Mexican workers, were responsible for maintaining the track. As the ties would settle, they would have to jack up sections, backfill and tamp it down to keep everything level. They also greased the switches, and, on tight turns, would grease the tracks so as not to wear out the train's wheels.

In the mines, men worked in two-man teams and were paid 43 cents a ton of coal, which was one ore cart. Teams were expected to produce one cart per hour. Being paid for only what you produced meant you were not paid for getting there, and a miner could walk as much as 2 miles underground from the entrance to his work site.

By 1937 the union finally gained some ground and wages were increased to 56 cents a ton, and the men were paid portal to portal. A maintenance man might make \$4.50 a day, and that was considered good wages. During the Depression though, everything slowed to a crawl. Most of the men got only 4-5 days of work a month. Morley's coal deposits were extensive, but not particularly thick seams. The mine's entrance was called an adit, a fairly horizontal broad tunnel dug into the hill. From this, primary haulage tunnels split off. To mine a particular area, two parallel tunnels called drifts were dug perpendicular to the haulage tunnel. They would then work back and forth between the drifts to remove all the material. Some columns would be left to support the ceiling, but eventually even these would be removed, generally collapsing the "room" they had created. Material would be loaded into the carts, transported to the main haulage tunnel, and hauled by mule to the surface.

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Water was collected from an area on the other side of the highway, and pumped to a cistern on a hill above town. Morley Creek (aka Raton Creek) was fouled by waste and debris, so though it flowed pretty well year round, it could not be used as a water source. Most homes only had outhouses, and wash water drained out of pipes into yards or to the creek. Garbage was hauled up the canyon past the mine and dumped. Still today one can see plate shards and broken bottles poking out of the curious mounds along the little creek.

For entertainment, there was a dance hall at the Wooten Ranch, and folks would often go up there to whoop it up. Unfortunately, the road to Wooten went through a narrow tunnel on a sharp curve (still visible at exit 2). That curve saw a lot of accidents over the years and a number of people died there, prompting a cross to be carved into the asphalt.

Partly from European tradition, and partly due to poverty, many people brewed their own beer. Typically they would brew it on Monday, and drink it by the next weekend. There were also sources of hard liquor. "There was this one old gal. She was a bootlegger," Matt recalled. "She'd sell a pint of booze for a dollar and ten cents. It was Sunnybrook Whiskey, and I used to have to get it for a lot of these guys. They sent me for it, they didn't want anyone to know. I was a paperboy you see. I delivered The Morning Light, the paper from Trinidad. It was a nickel a week. So I was always going 'round to everybody, and I knew everybody, so these guys would give me money to get their booze. No one would be the wiser. Oh, that lady, she was married and all," he continued, "but her husband, he was pistol-whipped you know. He didn't say nothing. She ran the show. She was a little Eye-Talian woman, and by God she had a strong will. Her kids, why she'd holler, and that's it. They were in line."

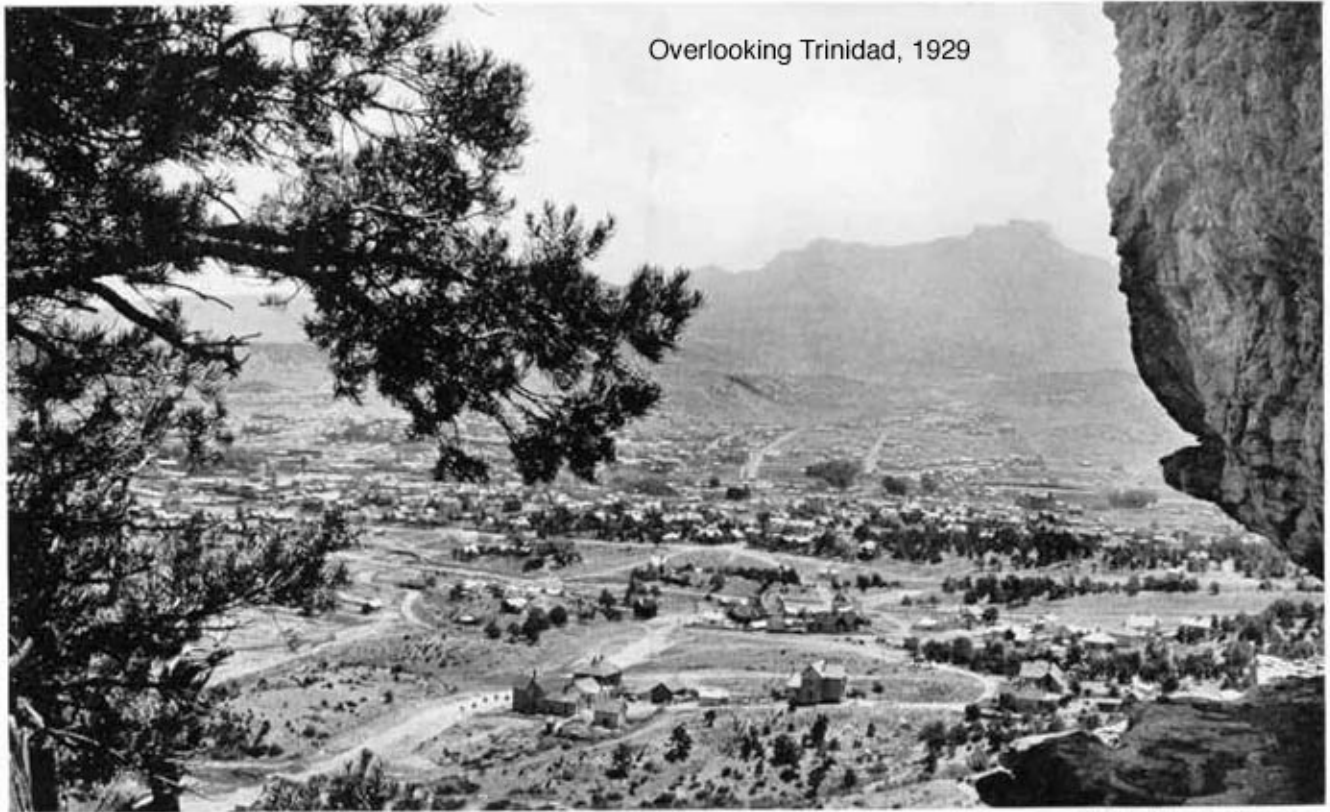
With drinking a popular pastime, fights erupted frequently. There was no fighting on company property, i.e. the whole town. Therefore the fights were taken down to the railroad tracks. Many an argument or drunken brawl was settled on the tracks. Matt had a friend named George whose father had been a boxer. "George's father made him and his brothers learn to box. He wanted them to be able to take care of themselves. Oh, he trained them hard. One brother, he liked it, but George didn't. They trained practically every day. I don't think anyone picked a fight with any of those boys. Years later George was in the War, and he ended up a hero at Normandy."

"I remember there was the Sopris Eye-Talian," Matt began, out of context. Turns out he was neither from the town of Sopris nor Italian. He just dubbed himself that. Filbert Gonzales was his real name. He was a tall, lanky fellow who Matt said, "just seemed to float along as he walked." And walk he did, all over the hills and canyons of SFTR, and on to other towns. He was an itinerant plumber and handyman who would work for home brews just as well as a dollar. Matt continued, "You could say to him, 'so I have this pump I need fixed, what'll it cost?' and the Sopris Eye-talian would look at it and say, 'Oh, that'll be a two bottle job.' Folks would give him food, too, and he would be on his way. He'd often be found snoozing under a tree somewhere." I suspect the home brews had something to do with that.

The afternoon had faded into night and Matt was winding down. I knew there were many more stories, and I was sure he'd gladly share them on another occasion. I packed up my notes and his sketches, and left with a whole band of characters to populate "our little ghost town." Gone may be Mr. Simpson with his mule teams, Piggy Joe, the bootleggers, and the brawlers. But I suspect if you stand real quiet some day in Morley and close your eyes, when you reopen them, you may catch just a fleeting glimpse of kids playing baseball or old men playing boccie. And some day when you are splitting firewood, and the wind carries the faint hint of stale beer, you may turn and catch the Sopris Italian napping under a tree. So give a nod to those who were here before us, and think about the stories we will pass on to those to come.

A final note: One might get the wrong impression about Matt as his speech reverts to that of the time period he is describing. He left Morley at the age of 16, determined to get out of the pattern of following one's father into the mines. He served in WWII and fought at Iwo Jima. After the war, he got an education and went on to build bridges and tunnels around the world, including his last project, the Chunnel from England to France. He now lives on his daughter's ranch in Benson, Arizona.

About the author: Kristen Spinning currently lives in Tucson, AZ, where she is a graphic artist and film scenic artist (or set painter). She and her mother bought their lot about 5 years ago when visiting Trinidad with some friends. They to this day joke "never travel with your check book, you don't know what you'll come home with!" True flat lander greenhorns to start, it has taken a few seasons to learn about chain saws, western water rights, bark beetle life cycles, what kind of tires spew mud from their treads, and countless other things that make for fascinating conversation around an office water cooler. (You all know how "cityfolk" look at you like you are absolutely nuts when you talk about your Ranch property.) At least a dozen plan drawings and 3 scale models later, their final plans were filed at Thanksgiving, and permit pulled. So when you hear sawing, grinding, hammering and/or a whole lot of laughter coming from G-1 on Old Mission Ridge (big rock at the end of the drive) come on down and visit a while. Kristen looks forward to being a part of the community, and promoting the arts in the Trinidad area and is happy to take questions via e-mail (KrisSpin@aol.com) about this article.



Overlooking Trinidad, 1929



Photograph by R. L. Campbell

LIKE THE TRACK OF A GIANT SNAKE, THE OLD TRAIL TURNS AND TWISTS OVER EATON PASS

From a high point on this mesa, one with good eyesight may see into five different States: Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. At the foot of the hill, in New Mexico, lies the clean, friendly town of Raton (see, also, text, page 242).

National Geographic, Aug., 1929