

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 401: THE MCCORMICK FAMILY

PERINS MINING CAMP

Excerpts from 'Perins Peak The Mining Camp That Was' by Lillian A. McCormick

The Rio Grande Southern Railroad ran from Durango to Ridgeway by way of Porter, Hesperus, Mancos, Dolores, Rico, Telluride, Placerville, and Dallas Divide. In 1891, a man by the name of Franklin had located an outcropping of coal west of Perins Peak. It proved to have a seam of coal about 7 feet thick, and was worth developing. He filed on the land, and with eastern capital - The Boston Fuel Company - arranged to develop the mine and build a railroad up the mountain.' This was the beginning of the coal mining town named Perins.

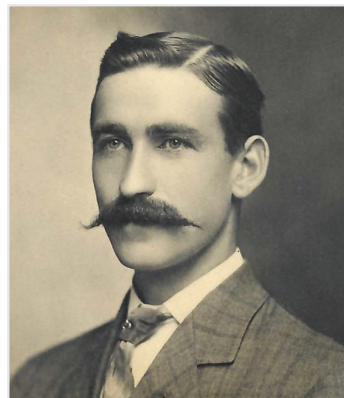


Miners at Perins Mining Camp

Leo McCormick 1880-1931

Leo was born in Burntisland, Scotland, the youngest of 28 children. He had a 4th grade education, but loved to read and never stopped learning. He started working in the coal mines under the North Sea when he was 10 years old. His first job was harnessing the mules. He had to stand on a box to reach the mules. When he was 25, he emigrated to British Columbia, Canada. He settled on some land and built a cabin with another fellow. He wanted to travel, so he left his trunk of belongings and went to Butte, Montana to work in the mines. Not sure where he went from there, but ended up at Perins.

The manager of the mine was W.C. Ferguson and he noticed that Leo had leadership qualities, so he appointed him



Leo McCormick



Vivian Thompson McCormick

superintendent of Perins Peak Mine. Leo was a practical coal mining expert so he was sent to different isolated mines in Colorado to settle disputes, troubleshoot problems, take care of accidents and anything else that was needed. Among these camps were; Turner Mine near Walsenburg (1915-1916), Jackson Mine, and Ojo near La Veta. After 1918 when the 1st World War was over, they moved to Somerset near Paonia, Colorado.

Leo and Vivian had 4 children; Hugh Leo 1909-1939, Lillian Ann 1911-1991, William Edward 1913-1962, and Kenneth James 1918-2006. They mostly grew up in Perins until the family, including William and Lillian Thompson moved to Animas City in 1922. Leo was out of work for awhile because of the Depression, but eventually became the superintendent of a mine southwest of Durango named the Champion. It was a very small mine using 1 mule to haul cars and 4 miners. By then he wasn't well. He had been in a mine explosion that burned his face, hand and chest badly, and he had developed rheumatism. He died at age 51.

William Edward, "Billie or Bill", was born during a very severe snowstorm that fell over southwest Colorado in February of 1913. The family Doctor refused to come to Perins to deliver Billie, so they found Dr. Huthchins to come. The snow was up to the horses belly. He must have had a cutter (sled) as a buggy would have been harder to drive through the snow. Billie was born either a minute before midnight on the 22nd

or a minute after on the 23rd. His birthday was always celebrated on the 22nd until he joined the service and found that his birth certificate was filed in Durango on the 23rd. Bill finished 8th grade in Animas City and graduated Durango High School in 1932. Although his father was superintendent of the mines, his family was somewhat poor. His father was a very generous man and helped people in need, and of course the Great Depression was a factor. Bill couldn't afford a class ring, so somehow his father borrowed money to pay for it. Bill was a good football player and earned the nickname 'Bull'. He went to Adam's State in Alamosa, Colorado for a year but didn't really like school.

He quit college and went back to Durango. This was during the depression and jobs were hard to come by. Some of his jobs were; part time on the railroad, construction with the Power and Telephone Company, Sunnyside Mine in Silverton, and Bell hop at the Strater Hotel. While employed by the Strater he 'hopped' for Will Roger's and Wiley Post when they were on their world tour. They died in a plane crash on the north slope in Alaska on August 15, 1935, soon after their stay in Durango. Bill was a cook in the Civilian Conservation Corps for 1 year in Oklahoma and Creede, Colorado. He also was on a construction crew near Bondad for \$3 a day, which wasn't bad in those days.

War clouds were looming in 1940, so Bill joined the Army Engineers as an explosive expert. He spent 3 years in Puerto Rico, then came back to the states to Boise, Idaho for training. There he met Fern Anderson, who he had met previously in Durango when she was teaching school here. She was in Boise working in an airplane factory putting planes together for the war effort. They decided to marry



William Edward "Bill" McCormick



Bill prospecting in La Plata Canyon in deep snow with only a stove pipe.

and did so on July 13, 1943. After their marriage, Bill was sent to Iceland for 1 1/2 years.

After the war ended in 1945, Bill came back to live in Animas City. He and his new wife, Fern, lived in a 'wee house' in an alley near 32nd and Main Avenue. Bill worked for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad for many years until he broke his heel adjusting a faulty brake. He was on crutches for a long time recovering from the accident. During this time he and Fern

had two children; Leo Martin, born April 25, 1947, and Kathleen Ann, born April 29, 1949. They were very poor and had to charge on credit at the grocery store. During this time he was also instrumental in starting AA meetings and he and Fern spent much of their time helping recovering alcoholics.

After Bill recovered from his heel injury, he prospected at the Bessie G mine in La Plata Canyon. He even mined in the dead of winter when the snow was so deep all you could

see was the stove pipe above the depth of the snow. Although he didn't prosper, gold and silver at that time weren't worth much, but he learned a lot about mining and geology and promoting money for mining ventures.

Then luck turned for Bill when in 1955 Charles Steen made a rich strike in uranium near Moab, Utah. Bill moved his family to Moab and there he was able to utilize his knowledge of geology and promoting. It was 'uranium fever', much like the Gold Rush in the 1840's. There was a claim staking frenzy but the men didn't know how to develop them. Bill got the men with the money and prospectors together, taking a royalty for his part in the transaction, and in due time he went from 'rags to riches'. In the summer of 1954 he speculated he had assets of 1.25 million dollars.

A little history of the Uranium Boom

The US government bought uranium, in the early 1940's but kept it's use a secret, until the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in the summer of 1945. The government continued to keep the use of uranium a secret since they continued to develop nuclear weapons well into the 50's and beyond. Bill then was recognized in 'Who's Who in the West, Volume 7'. This is the excerpt from this volume "McCORMICK,

MICK, William Edward, mining exec; b. Durango, Colo., Feb. 23, 1913; s. Leo and Vivian (Thompson) McC; student Adam's Tehrs. Coll. 1931-1932; m. Fern Anderson, July 13, 1943: children Leo, Kathleen. Brake-man, condor. D. & R. G. W. R.R Co., pres. Rimledge Uranium and Mining Corp., Glenwood Springs, Colo., 1955. Active Boy Scouts Am., various philanthropic orgns., particularly rehabilitate alcoholics. Served from pvt. to cpl. AUS 1940-45. Co-developer uranium ore deposits Big Indian Mining District., nr. Moab, Utah, 1953-1955. Home; 1427 Blake St. Office: First National Bank Bldg, Glenwood Springs, Colo."

