

FIRE DAMP

HOW THE CREATION OF A PLAY ABOUT
A DISASTER REKINDLED COMMUNITY IN COALHURST

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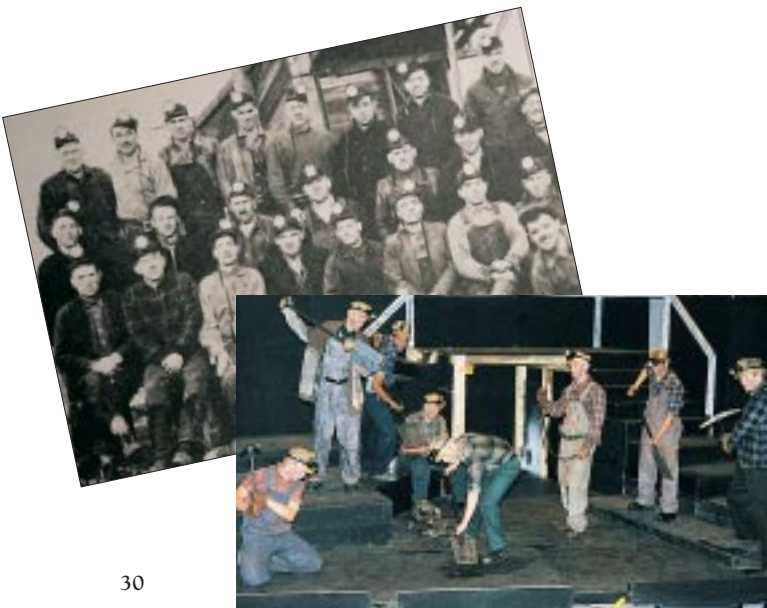
In the coal towns of the old country she'd be called the slag heap, in the Coalhurst of today she's the shale pile, but in 1935, when the last carload of waste coal, too full of shale to be marketed, was added to her prodigious and smouldering mass, she was irreverently known as just "The Dump." A brick-red mound of rubble, shrunken with age, she slumbers at the east end of the town on a five-acre bed, tugging her weedy green blanket up a little higher with each passing summer. Town mothers forbid their children to play within her barbed enclosure, but, of course, they scamper over her tired bulk every chance they get.

For the more than fifteen years that I have been a teacher at Coalhurst High School, the "Dump" has always been in view. This unique landmark is the only

surviving remnant of the Coalhurst Imperial Mine where, over 60 years ago, in the most devastating mine disaster ever to strike the Lethbridge coalfields, 16 Albertans lost their lives.

Coalhurst, with a population of around 2,000, mostly commuters, lies five miles west of Lethbridge. An irrigation canal divides residential streets and cul-de-sacs of moderately priced homes, trailer courts, and a sprinkling of service businesses and small industries. The only reminders of the Coalhurst that once was are a few well-preserved older homes, a vacant brick building, once the office of the Standard Bank of Canada (the last bank Coalhurst ever had), the quaint white clapboard of St. Joseph's Church, and, of course, the looming shale pile. Like most suburban settlements located near large cities, the town struggles for a sense of identity and purpose as a community. The youth gaze longingly at the ready-made advantages of the nearby city and find their bedroom community lacking. A lot of teens—too old to play in the back yard and too young to drive—feel the town holds little for them. Coalhurst has a reputation as a "tough" town. Fear and a lack of understanding between the generations and perceptions of inferiority undermine the real achievements and efforts of young and old alike. The advantages of the small town with its opportunities for participation and leadership often go unrecognized, unappreciated, and unexplored.

Looking out at the "Dump" made me realize that her stories should be told to a new generation before she succumbed completely to the earth which was her first home. It was the story of the Coalhurst Mine Disaster, and of the people who lived it, that inspired Firedamp.



On December 9, 1935, while Coalhurst residents were busily preparing for Christmas, a tragedy occurred that echoed throughout the land. Late in the afternoon, during the shift change, an explosion of methane gas, “firedamp,” blasted deep in the underground workings. The men making their way out escaped with injuries, but the 16 who had gone below to begin their shift were trapped. A heroic rescue operation began and continued through the night. The women, children, and neighbours gathered at the pithead to await the news—and to pray. The escaped miners ignored personal safety and went back into the ravaged and gaseous workings to search for their comrades. Rescue crews assembled from all the area mines. By the early hours of the morning all 16 men had been found. None had survived.

The funeral was held in Lethbridge with an assemblage of 5,000 mourners. Mayor Dave Elton arranged for a train and automobiles to bring the residents of Coalhurst to the city. All businesses closed out of respect. Three services were held: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. Miners’ unions from all over Western Canada were represented in the procession as it wended its way through city streets. The 11 widows and 42 children of the deceased miners were clothed in black provided by the mine company from the Hudson’s Bay. One family had lost three brothers, the fourth escaping only to return later and find their bodies. In keeping with the military customs of a miner’s funeral, the Coalhurst men wore black armbands and posted a 24 hour honour guard following the playing of *The Last Post*. To this day it is the largest memorial to ever be held in the city.

An official inquiry was conducted in Lethbridge. The men of Coalhurst, supported by letters to the government from Mine Workers’ Union locals all across Canada, called for representation by miners on the Board of Inquiry, but to no avail. Justice Lunney was appointed to independently head the investigation. Thirteen-hundred pages of testimony revealed multiple safety violations. Broken timbering had been neglected. Sparking had occurred in the newly installed telephone lines. Electrical circuits were overloaded. The most serious discovery was that important doors had been propped open regularly, short-circuiting the air required to ventilate the tunnels and rooms deeper in the mine. The Coalhurst miners had

frequently “kicked” about gas in parts of the mine, but their complaints had been ignored. Sometimes compressed air had been used to clear the gas, a forbidden practice. One man was accused of just being too old to load coal when he complained of dizziness and nausea. When colliery officials denied receiving complaints, the local’s secretary produced dated records to prove otherwise. In spite of the extent of the inquiry, the results were inconclusive. The most likely cause of the explosion was a broken headlamp which may have sparked and ignited gas that had seeped from old workings. There were controversial accusations that the colliery, intending to close the Imperial Mine in favour of the new Galt No. 8, had been “retreating” rapidly—that is, caving in used sections of the mine and getting out as much cheap coal as possible, and that proper procedure had not been followed, thereby allowing the accumulation of volatile gasses.



As if the mine disaster had not been enough to bear, long-circulating rumours about the closure of the Imperial Mine in Coalhurst became reality, and by April of 1936, the last load of coal was brought to the surface. Lethbridge Collieries was closing Coalhurst in order to transfer operations to the new Galt No. 8 Mine in Lethbridge where they would no longer be

required to provide housing and services for employees’ families. The town fought the closure, even showing that the mine was still a viable operation, but the matter had been concluded. The surviving workers were laid off. Some got hired on with other local mines, but many had to leave the area entirely. A few remained and took up farming. For the remainder of 1936, 40 houses a month were being moved out of the town, and property became next to worthless. Relief payments, a municipal responsibility, bankrupted the council, and no wonder. The number of families requiring assistance had mushroomed from 11 in December to over 200 by May. The mayor and council were forced to call in the government for help and Coalhurst ceased to be a town.

Since I teach drama, it seemed logical to tell the story of Coalhurst’s mining heritage through a play produced at the high school. In 1997 I worked with a very special group of high school students on the spring drama production, and I knew they could form the core of this project of a



lifetime. I felt ill-equipped for the job ahead since I had never written even so much as a short story. But I had a vision. I wanted to capture the essence of the town that had existed here—before the war and 30 years before man landed on the moon. I wanted to appeal to the old, who remembered the past, and to the young, who needed to know their history.

I began that summer. I contacted old-timers who had grown up in Coalhurst in the thirties, and our principal, Wayne Tate, arranged for a student and the use of the school video camera to record interviews. Jerrad Kubik and I visited people in their homes and taped their remarkably clear and vivid recollections—people like Johnny Walker, who, as a boy, had careened down the smoking “Dump,” then over a hundred feet high, curled up inside the discarded tire of a Model T. They soon forgot about the camera as they were transported back to the Southern Alberta of the Dirty Thirties. Netti Fabbi (nee Locatelli) relived her days of baseball glory as a star player on the Red Aces (the team name was slightly altered by the local boys when teasing the girls). Johnny Boychuk, a worker in the Galt No. 8 Mine, told what life was like for a miner, and his wife, Oral, recalled the daily worry of being a miner’s wife. These people welcomed our project with warmth and generosity—so grateful that someone was taking an interest. Through Johnny Walker I was welcomed into the Coalhurst Historical Society, a group of Coalhurst natives who had lovingly collected family histories, documentation, and photographs into a local history book which became my primary reference. A Coalhurst resident, Katie Nestoruk, who had been a member of the school board in the thirties had kept the notes and minutes and had donated them to the school. The mildewed pages showed the harsh and real effect of boom and bust economies. Through the Lethbridge Public Library and their transfer service I was able to access books and documents including

a Coalhurst newspaper from the late twenties, which gave weekly accounts of the meetings of ladies’ clubs where “dainty sandwiches were served.” A school librarian, Madeline Brown, had carefully preserved the original newspaper clippings from 1935. Penny Stone and Kevin Maclean at the Sir Alexander Galt Museum provided local documentation, such as mine-accident reports, and access to their collections where we could photograph artifacts (miners’ lamps, hats, tools, etc.) for reproduction. I spent two days at the Provincial Archives in Edmonton reading the surviving 750 pages of the official transcript of the inquiry into the disaster. It contained the voices of the miners themselves, and, with a court clerk’s precision, it recorded the speech patterns of the Ukrainian, Italian, and Scots miners.

Local personal history, although essential, wasn’t enough. I had to understand the context of the time—what they talked about at the supper table. I read about the politics, both national and international, world events, the labour movement, coal mining, chemistry, geology, immigration, music, dance, clothing, fads and fashions, the Great Depression, the economy, architecture, literature.

On December 9, 1997, the 62nd anniversary of the disaster, a readers’ theatre presentation with slides served to educate the students in both schools about Coalhurst’s past, and to let everyone know about the coming play. The “old-timers” came out and spent the afternoon visiting with students who got out of classes to take turns in the library. Johnny Walker showed pictures and told of the exploits of his youth and of some of the colourful characters he knew, like the fellow who had cycled across the rails of the High Level Bridge. Netti showed girls how to do the Charleston, and Oscar Odney, long-time Coalhurst entertainer and encyclopedia of popular music, sang old-time songs and had the kids join in. Someone walked in at one point and said, “Wow! There’s a party going on here!” The groundwork had been laid.

The evolution of the play was really quite remarkable. The 22 actors were cast and rehearsals began in February 1998. Every student willing to make the commitment received a role because, at this point, the play consisted of several drafts going in various directions with a multitude of possible characters. Only the first two scenes were finished. I explained to the actors and to my fellow directors that the scenes would be doled out as they were completed. In the later stages they were not even coming out in order. A common question became, “Do I get to live, or are you going to kill me off?” As it turned out this unorthodox process was the magical formula because as rehearsals

progressed, each character was molded to the actor playing the role. Steven Dalton became Harry, the fireboss, and Harry became Steve. As the students' understanding grew, their characters developed richness and depth and began to speak on their own. The final scene was completed two weeks before the first performance.

The play chronicled the period from the fall of 1934 through to the spring of 1936. The characters were composite representations. Mary (Missy Klima), Teresa (Bella Plant), and Anna (Sherese Ambler), who open the play, represent all the immigrant women of Coalhurst; Tom (Jeff Hamilton) stands for all the young men of the time. A drama of this variety was a blockbuster for a school our size, and, as we have no real theatrical facility, very little equipment, and not much of a budget (the students' council underwrote the project), everything had to be rented, donated, or scrounged. Like a snowball the project gathered followers as it rolled.

More and more people joined us and lent their support. Businesses gave their services: Jim Munro at Charlton & Hill Ltd. crafted miners' lunch pails, Lethbridge Custom Canvas made the caps for the miners, Casey Denhoed of Casey's Woodwork in Coalhurst framed the set, and the Walker family of Coalhurst's Walkers' Transport donated a trailer, truck, and driver to move our massive set from venue to venue. The Coalhurst High School staff was fully involved, such as fellow teacher and assistant director, Diane Pommen; Wayne Youngward, who took charge of all the technical responsibilities, including his favourite task—blowing the mine; and Deb Woodcock, stage manager. Rose Roth, our secretary, as hair stylist deftly finger-waved the women, and her husband, Mel, our custodian, lent his tools and patiently kept up with our burgeoning mess. Joanne Siljak, our librarian, and Jill Carley handled promotions and program, Wayne Tate contributed his photography and video skills, and Sterling Paiha gave constant support. Carolyn Templeton, who had taught with us the previous year, came back to do the make-up, and student teacher, Christie Czech, stayed on after her round was over to help direct. Others sold tickets, T-shirts, pop, pins, and programs. Mike Hornberger gave up his gymnasium and helped with the artistic design.



Community members and parents came out to share their expertise and to provide their labour: King Cole gave us the use of his recording studio and his skills as a musician; Gerry Bjerke made picks and battery packs out of wood; I consulted Oscar Odney about the old songs we needed and he taught Louis (Riley McKinnon) to play them on the guitar; Nella Sjogren helped with the costume design and alterations; parents brought treats for the cast and made donations; Blaine Pontarolo, chief of the Coalhurst Volunteer Fire Department, found a massive old fire hose for us—in fact, it could have been the one used in the fire of '34. People with no connection to Coalhurst came out to help: Wendy Hoff turned the eight rowdy miners into a male-voice choir, Charlene Dyck taught the slam-dancing generation the old-time waltz, members of the Galt No. 8 Historical Society helped to spread the word, Jeremy Youngward ran the lights, and my entire family did their bit (it was my only chance to see them, after all). Everyone lent costume pieces. By the time we reached completion, well over a hundred people could say they had helped to make it all work. In fact, it was the only way it could work. The story had captured them too.

Students took on lots of jobs, from painting to ticket cutting. Mike Bedster and John Betts were stage crew, Scott Soenen, a grade twelve audiophile, ran the sound, and, of course, there were the dressers. A real challenge were the costume and make-up changes. Each character of the 22-member cast had at least three changes, but there were a few that were phenomenal. Andy (Tim Sandham) enacted Johnny Walker's famous ride down the Dump in a tire (we actually had one from a Model A), and had to appear in a duplicate costume, ripped and torn and covered in chicken feathers. But the worst were the miners. Eight coal miners had to be changed repeatedly from dirty to clean and back to dirty again. This required dressers backstage, and students Angie Sheppard and Kim Walker headed that department. They could completely transform any miner from blackened pit condition to Dapper Dan in under thirty seconds by the time we reached performance.

The change in the students was, for me, the most rewarding of all. Somehow through the drudgery of rehearsal and the constant discussion about what we were

all trying to say, they came to understand better than anyone the lives and times of the people they were portraying. Long before their performances gained an impressive professionalism and polish, they had heart. No one who heard Louis (Riley McKinnon) sing “Dark as a Dungeon” will ever forget it and after the first time we ran the funeral scene no one felt much like talking for a while.

One day in late April, a lady stopped at the local restaurant and asked if there was anyone in town who could tell her about the Coalhurst Mining Disaster. She had come from Vancouver Island to lay flowers on the grave of the father she had never known. He had been killed in the blast when she was only two. Thankfully she found me and consented to come and speak to my cast. While she sat on the set surrounded by the students, she told them how the only thing her mother could bear to speak of was that night standing at the mouth of the mine with her baby in her arms, waiting to see if she was a widow before the age of twenty-five. The timing was uncanny. We had rehearsed the pithead scene for the first time two days earlier.

We opened in our gymnasium in Coalhurst. The audience response overwhelmed us. It became apparent the first night that we had, in fact, done something truly special. We had done something more than just create a high school play. Like the characters we were depicting, we had come together with a common vision, and now our audience had joined us. As one lady from Lethbridge said, “To see those people in the lobby with their chests puffed out—it made you want to be from Coalhurst.”

Students in the school began asking their parents about their great-grandparents. An amazing number were descended from the very kind of people we had brought to life on stage. After the encore the cast would introduce special people whom we knew were in the audience—Johnny Walker, of course, whose twinkle in the eye still shows that he’d probably make that Dump ride again in a flash. And one night Helen Forenz stood up. She was born on the day of the disaster, and her father had cancelled his shift that day in order to attend her birth. She had been referred to in the play as “the miracle baby.” Through their comments, both spoken and written, the sons and daughters of coal miners made known to us how they felt. Some came three or four times.

Firedamp ran eight performances to full houses at three separate venues in May and June. When the performances had concluded, one parent commented: “You know, this has made me realize that, as parents, we’re not alone—that a child is raised by a community.” After one performance, when the actors had taken their bows, they called me up to the stage and kindly presented me with a bouquet of yellow roses. Jeff, who played Tom, nodded toward the roses and whispered, “They’re symbolic, you know.” I looked puzzled, but understood when he said, “Count them. Count the roses. There’s 16 of them.”

Arlene Purcell has been a teacher for 21 years in Southern Alberta where she and her husband, Leighton, have raised two sons. She currently lives in Lethbridge and teaches language arts and drama at Coalhurst High School.

FIREDAMP CAST

Men:

Jeff Hamilton (Tom), Gibson Cole (Angus), Riley McKinnon (Louis), Jerrad Kubik (Leo), Larin Witsel (Will), Steve Dalton (Harry), Justin Sjogren (Ronny), Shaun Gibson (Mike), Tim Sandham (Andy).

Women:

Missy Klima (Mary), Bella Plant (Teresa), Shereese Ambler (Anna), Jessica Sjogren (Peg), Amy Soenen (Ginny), Stephanie Mainzer (Iris), Christine Odney (Hazel), Sheila Wandler (Edie), Christi Betts (Mrs. Fleming), Michelle Moch (Mabel), Megan Jerke (Anita), Cheyenne Fletcher (Edna), Cassidy Klima (Helen).



EXCERPTS FROM FIREDAMP

Act One: Scene One – The Arrival of the Women

Mary: Canada...1922. I was here, and this was it. I'd never seen anything like this...never imagined in all my dreams. John's face...it was beamin'...he was that glad to have us here with him at last. But me...oh, I took one look and I just sat down and.... They called it a shack...huh!...shack! —good word for it I thought!

Anna: I still smell dat coal. Da vind...it blow from da vest ven I come. Uncle Emil...he stop da vagon. I say to him...in Ukrainian, "Uncle! Vat dis stink? It make da vater come out my eyes!" He laugh at me. He say, "You get used to it. Not happen all da time...just da vind...she blow from da vest. It come over da slag heap...da dump...a whoo! Da smoke...da dust...it go in your eyes and nose. Da vind...she stop and so da smell." But dat smell...it in me all da time after dat.

Mary: I knew something was wrong when John's mates came to the house in the middle of shift—and in their pit clothes. They were talking and I stopped hearing them somehow...rock fall they said. Killed instantly, so he didn't suffer they said. Strange words—killed instantly. No one is really killed instantly. John will take my whole lifetime, and then some, to die for me.

Act One: Scene Two – The Mine

Louis: Wife's bin naggin' me 'bout changin' jobs. Change jobs I says...with half the country out o' work! Who's she kiddin'?

Harry: You've only been married a year. She'll get used to it.

Louis: Hubka breakin' his leg didn't help. She's friendly with his missus. Told Anna how bad it looked... says he coulda' bin killed. Well, I says...guy's get killed steppin' in front o' streetcars...big deal!

Act One: Scene Four – Main Street

Edna: Easy to keep?

Edie: Oh, I'll say. Said it's good for at least three months.

Edna: So you just comb it out and it stays?

Edie: Oh, yes! So much less bother.

Edna: Well, it really suits you. Expensive?

Edie: Not too bad...two dollars altogether, but I thought what the heck. I said to Leo, I said, Look! I'm taking some of that egg money and I'm getting a permanent wave and if you don't like it, you can go and lay the eggs yourself! Didn't say a word!

Edna: Well, every once in a while a girl's got to treat herself, I always say.

Act One: Scene Seven – The End of Shift

Angus: Need another route is part of the problem. Too much traffic through there. It's open all the time.

Ronny: I've seen it propped. Driver told me to leave it.

Angus: Close it! It's short-circuitin' the air from the fan!

Tom: Nothin' beyond that point's gettin' air.

Leo: Yeah, sure...report it! Bosses goin' by dere all da time. I see dere lamps.

Angus: That's another thing! No safety lamps for the men...just these electric things.

Will: You really should kick about that blackdamp, Leo.

Leo: Ha! I kick lots! You know what dey tell me? Dey say you coming too old to load coal, Leo.

Will: Hey, Harry. You mind if I ask you a question?

Harry: Sure, Will. What is it?

Will: You ever find much gas? You know...when you check the rooms with your safety lamp?

Harry: No need for you to worry, Will. Anyone'll tell ya—this ain't a gassy mine.

Act Two: Scene One – The Picnic

Angus: You know where I stand on it, Harry. The man's a fraud—just like those that gone before 'im.

Harry: Well, I don't know about that, Angus. I say give the man a chance.

Mabel: That's right, Mr. Crandall. He's a wonderful, decent man and I'll not hear you saying awful things about him.

Angus: Very, well, Mrs. Barnes. It's a lovely day for a picnic even if the fish won't bite, but I will say this, and you can mark my words. It won't last. Social Credit is just another flash in the pan!

Helen: If the mine closes...like they say it might...have you thought about what you'd want to do?

Tom: What does *want* have to do with it, Helen? A man's got to work and that's all there is to it.

Helen: But there's lots of other things you could do, Tom.

Tom: I'm not scared of work, Helen, but there's lots like me out there. The country's full of men who want to work, and if this mine shuts down like they're talking, I'll be one of them.

Helen: But they keep saying in the newspapers that things are going to change.

Tom: Helen...how...what's going to change? And who's going to change it? Country's going to hell in a handbasket and we all sit around like a bunch of sheep being led to the slaughter...waiting for some prophet to lead us to the promised land. Angus says we need a good war. Maybe he's right. It's one way of getting rid of your unemployed.