Mi Vida Mine M/037/028

A legendary era has ended in Utah's remote Lisbon Valley

From The Times-Independent
Moab, Utah

With completion of reclamation, the famed Mi Vida (My Life) mine is now closed.

Charlie Steen's discovery of uranium at the site of the Mi Vida mine in 1952-53 led to this area's instant fame and subsequent influx of the people who provided the kaleidoscopic character of the "boom days," the like not seen since California's gold rush of 1849.

After years of prospeting, Steen was losing hope when he stumbled across the rich deposit of pitchblende in the variant rolling formations that occur in Lisbon Valley, lying southeast of Moab. Although uranium and vanadium had been mined in various locations around the Four Corners region since the turn of the century, this find was the major factor that lured other prospectors, miners and promoters to the area.

And, with the industry, came a myriad of individuals who would provide first economic growth and wealth, and second, problems with the over-taxing of resources needed for the men, women and children pouring into communities where proper housing, schools and abilities of local law enforcement agencies were limited.

Miners remain a breed apart and the miners who converged on Moab were no exception. Their hard-working, hard-living ways are the basis of legend. Bill Harrison and his crew from Polar Mesa would swing into town after long days and nights on shift to take the town by storm.

Taverns swelled and their walls would echo with the sound of raucus laughter, violent fist fights, and often the admonitions of the sheriff letting them know that it was "time to get back to work, girls."

Jim Butt, also a boss, tells of how the only way to get his crew back to the mines to work was to bail them out of jail, loading them in the back of a pickup truck, nursing hangovers that would have killed an ordinary person.

The promoters also came

Promoters also followed this wave of wealth, moving into the small farming communites. These men could be found in bars and coffee shops practicing the art of the hustle on unsuspecting claim owners. Some had integrity, but more often than not, the trusting and naive were taken advantage of, losing their interest in the mines they had worked so hard to locate.

Big companies could swallow up the smaller independents so quickly that one had to be quite adept at side stepping the scoundrels to make equitable lease agreements and sales. Unfortunately, these shady characters have since made "promoting" a bad name around the Four Corners and in many mining endeavors since then.

There are still residents of Moab, Monticello and Blanding who have prospered and retain the wealth those days made affordable. They live quietly, remembering hard work, tenacity, and the fun they had accumulating that hard-won gain.

But, there are also those who lived for the moment, with "easy come. easy go" as their motto. They made it big, spent it all, but had a hell of a time while it lasted.

Over the years, the uranium market would rise and fall, greatly affecting the economics of the surrounding towns and townspeople. It reached the last peak in 1978-80 when ore buyers were paying $40 to $45 a pound; barrels of yellowcake, concentrated uranium ore, sold for $30,000 a barrel.

Then came the final bust

The Atlas mill in Moab had just implemented its alkaline circuit when the bottom fell out of the market. Foreign ore was being purchased at a discount. The government stepped in to prohibit the purchase of imported ore, but the damage had already been done.

Independent owners and miners felt betrayed by what they felt were special interest groups having more money and influence than they themselves could muster. By the mid-80s, only a few diehard miners remained and the mine inspectors were hard-pressed for work.

The inspectors felt, and rightfully so, that their jobs were in jeopardy and were driven to writing tickets for petty, non-applicable violations just to hold onto their jobs.

Colorful stories are told of the constant battle between the miners and mine inspectors. One independent miner, it's been said, pulled a shotgun on inspectors while mining in Old La Sal, daring them to "cross that line." They didn't.

Another mine owner, having had a few run-ins with the same, put a $100 bounty on the head of any mine inspector caught driving up the posted single-lane grade that ore trucks used to haul ore from White Canyon to the Blanding mill; no bounties were collected.

As the uranium market continued to decline, most independents dropped out of the running, selling out to larger corporations, with some changing vocations, some dying. Unfortunately, the immediate rush for uranium in the early 1950s placed safety last on the list of priorities. Improper ventilation and smoking underground took a disproportionate toll of workers.

The United States government has since passed legislation and has allocated monies for those who can prove a direct correlation between mining underground and lung ailments, but many of those seeking compensation are having difficulty getting past the red tape necessary for payment.

One Moab miner, although suffering with silicosis, emphysema and aspergillosis (fungus in the lungs), has yet to benefit from the Radiation Exposure Act. In spite of this, he and his wife, who suffers from cancer, still haven't lost their sense of humor and laugh to recall a Fourth of July years ago.

One of the first independently operated mines shut down last year when Jim Butt of Monticello closed the Sage mine in San Juan County. With government interference dogging their steps and without benefit of the same government's help in stopping the importation of foreign ore, enthusiasm flagged and uranium mining here has all but ceased. Regrettably, it's not without a degree of bitterness that this celebrated and productive era draws to a close.

Names to be remembered

There are many names that will long be remembered and associated with this remarkable and legendary period. Although Charlie Steen was responsible for the onset of the uranium boom, the late Howard Balsley will always remain the true "Uranium King." Others are Calvin Black, Bob and and Willene Shumway and Jim Butt. It's with a certain irony that Jim Butt was awarded the contract for Mi Vida's reclamation from Energy Fuels Nuclear Inc.

Jim Butt has been recognized by the State of Utah's Mined Land Reclamation Division for his work in the field of reclamation. His career in hardrock uranium mining spans 35 years, opening as well as working most mines from New Mexico, Arizona and back to Utah-Colorado.

His expertise in this sector has been lauded by his peers, and a few weeks ago students from colleges and universities statewide came to view what is considered to be the ideal example of reclamation on mined land. Mi Vida's shaft was collapsed, the portals were filled, drumps hauled and the terrain restored, as nearly as possible, to its former splendor.

One year from now, grass seed will sprout, 5 years from now sagebrush will grab and hold. The spotted owl never left and big-horned sheep still peek shyly from below high canyon rims.

Mountain bikers and hikers will search for old mine roads to conveniently speed them to their destinations, but the demand for wilderness will have made the old ways impassable. The endangered species here are the men and women who followed the mining camps, worked hard for an honest day's wage.

All is quiet in Lisbon Valley

All that remains of the forgotten era can be seen, if one finds the way to this isolated canyon, as 10-ton ore cars exiting a lonely portal. Cars running on rails that seem to be suspended in time over huge, forbidding ore bins standing guard over the hopes and dreams of those who lived during an unforgettable season. This was truly the wild,

Arches visitation was up again during June

109,882 people visited Arches National Park during the month of June, an increase of 6% over June last year. Total visitation for the first half of the year at the popular attraction now stands at 367,629. That represents an increase of 14% over the first half of 1991.

Canyonlands is also showing big increases, both for the month and for the year, with Island in the Sky heading the list of popularity.

Visitation of 33,579 in June represented an increase of 36% for the month. For the year to date, total visitation at the Island is 105,244, up 24% over the first half of last year.

The popular Needles District was almost identical in June with last year's visitation of 17,374, and is down 2% from the first six months of 1991, at 74,000 visitors at Needles so far in 1992.

The Maze District located west of the Green River is showing a 27% increase in visitation in June, and 17% visitation for the first six months, although the numbers are comparatively low, ad 6,629 for the year to date.

Total Canyonlands visitation in all sections was 53,412 in June---up 21% from last June---and 187,878 for the first six months of the year, a jump of 12% for the year to date.

Visitation at Natural Bridges National Monument was also up for the month and for the year. So far, 61,188 people have visited Bridges.

Overnight camping was down slightly in Arches for the first half of the year, but showed major increases in Canyonlands, up 15% for the first half of 1991 in all sections of the park.

Park Service authorities pointed out that a more accurate method of statistic collection has been developed in Washington for Natural Bridges. Due to this change, percentage comparisons will not accurately reflect visitor use trends for the next 12 months, and will not be included in the monthly visitor report.

June banner month at Dead Horse

June proved to be another banner month for visitation at Dead Horse Point State Park. The park hosted 21,726 visitors last month, a 16% increase from the 18,667 visitors of June 1991.

For the year to date, 77,617 people have visited Dead Horse Point. This is a 12% increase from the 69,578 visitors of the same period in 1991. Even though the campground has been filling nightly for the past few years, this year shows a 3% increase in numbers of campers. Those wishing to camp at the park should plan to arrive early in the day to be assured of getting a campsite.

The park's visitor center is open daily from 8 am to 6 pm. Ranger conducted interpretive programs are offered nightly at 8:30 pm in the visitor center amphitheater.

JACK BUCKINGHAM

August 1 at the Civic Center there will be a benefit dinner for Jack Buckingham. There will be dinner and entertainment, come and have fun while giving our support to a worthy cause!

the time of the draft Salt Lake County ordinance . . ."

Campbell enclosed a copy of the revised Salt Lake County ordinance, and made a formal request to be notified of any meeting where possible changes to the ordinance are discussed or considered.

A proposed change to the originally-passed ordinance was presented

ure," said Councilman Sakrison. "Do we need 2 people up there, could we do it with 1, or 1 and a half people? Could be do it any differently than we are?"

"All I can tell you is Dave [Warner] is running it the best way he knows how, and the cheapest way he knows how," responded Commissioner Knutson.

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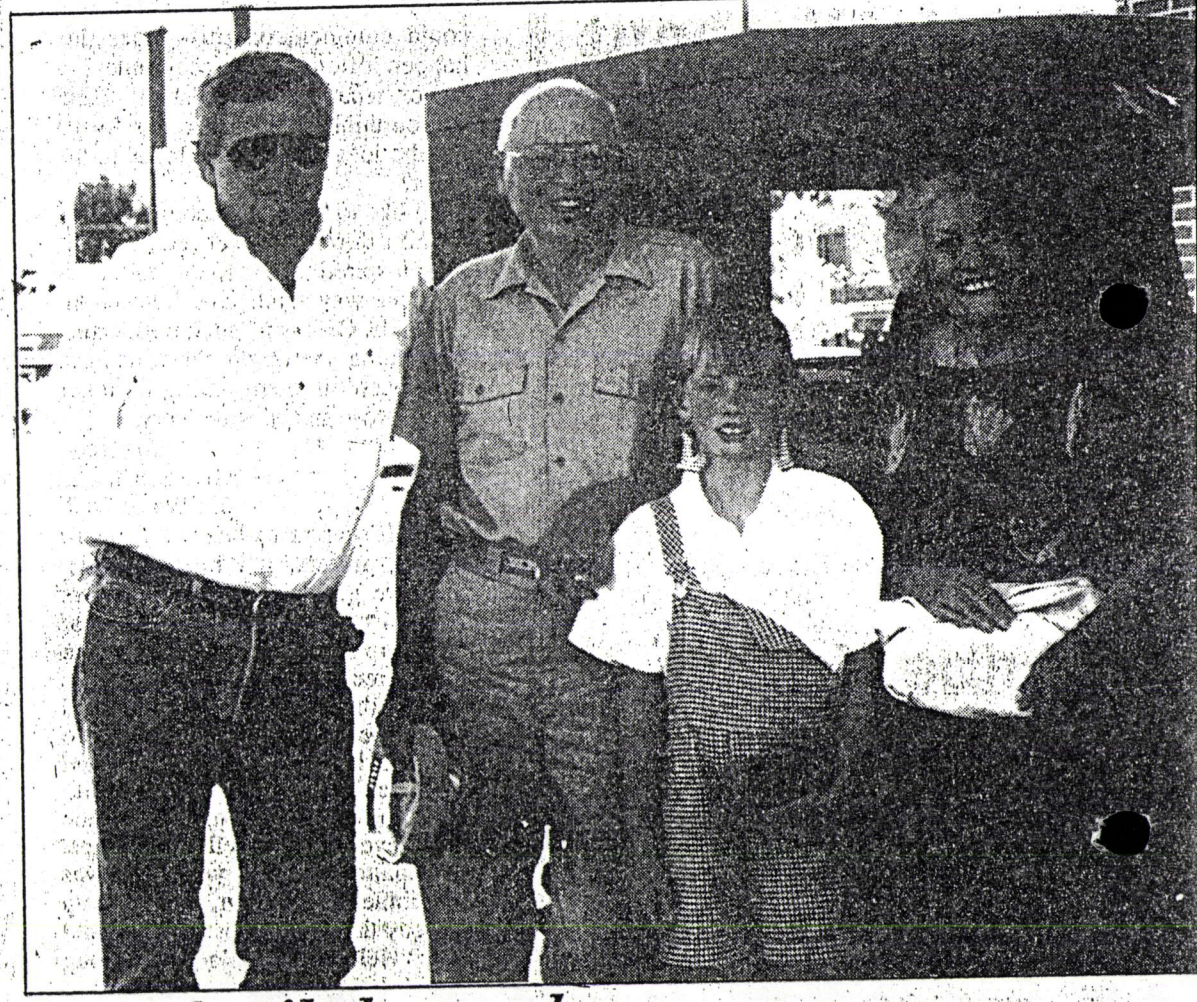
But most Council mem that only waste generate County would be accept businesses and governm including the BLM and would be charged a fee t cility.



Steen family honored . . .

Mark, Charlie, Ashey, and M. L. Steen with "the old red Jeep" used by Charlie in makir discovery of uranium, which shaped all three generations of Steens represented here as development of a sleepy little town called Moab. See story, page B-1.

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Participants in the July 5 tour to the Mi Vida Mine site (recently destroyed by San Juan County mining interests in cooperation with Utah State Division of Mines officials) gave Charlie Steen (in his traditional khakis and pith helmet) rapt attention as he described his life, the Mi Vida discovery, and his efforts to develop and operate a clean, efficient, and safe mine. Family members have said this probably the last time Charlie would return to the obliterated site, making this an historic event for those who participated.

First Discovery Days a huge success

Moab's first annual "Discovery Days" celebration has been a great success, boding well for similar Fourth of July celebrations in the future. The 1992 event featured a luncheon and 1950's fashion show, a banquet, miners' contest, bus tour to the Mi Vida Mine (with Charlie Steen as tour guide), proclamation from the Governor of the State of Utah, parade, fireworks, and fun and games in City Park.

The weekend events offered something both from and for every facet of the community - and that was demonstrated by the record breaking turnout for the parade. The luncheon and banquet were both "sold out' and Tag-A-Long Tours had to add an additional vehicle for the mine tour. Attendance at City Park on the afternoon of the Fourth was not as great as anticipated, but there was a sizable crowd present to hear the reading of the proclamation by Mayor Tom Stocks commemorating the event by naming the new (and not yet completed) pavilion the "Charlie Steen Pavilion".

The celebration began with the noon luncheon at Mi Vida Restaurant, formerly the Steen's private home. Madge Warde and Margaret Rynio organized the presentation of a 1950's fashion show featuring the exquisite dresses and gowns of the bygone era. Ann Poole described the fabrics and fashions modeled by Monica Wiggins, Norma Nunn, Darla Martin, and Kristen Cook. Table favors were donated by Charlotte Jones, Kathy Twitchell, and Olive Avery. Door prizes were donated by about 20 different Moab businesses.

The banquet was held at the Moab Elks Lodge. What is now the Elks Lodge was a private club in the mid-1950s, the Uranium Club, and was the center of a large portion of Moab's social life. It was especially appropriate to hold the banquet in the historic building, and the Elks generosity in making the site available was much appreciated by the Steens. Dave May served as Master of Ceremonies. After-dinner activities included presentation of mementos, reading of a proclamation from Utah Governor Bangerter, testimonials from old friends, and a screening of a 1950's TV program about Steen and his discovery of the Mi Vida.

A major high point of the weekend was the Fourth of July Parade with Charlie and M.L. Steen and Grand Marshals. The Steens rode (with grandchildren Monica and Ashley Steen) in the old red Jeep Charlie had used in the early "50s, the same vehicle he was using when he made the uranium discovery which changed the course of his life - and forever altered the development of Moab. Dave May, who drove the Jeep in the parade, reported that, "as we turned onto Main Street and M.L. saw the throngs of people lining the street for blocks, she said 'I don't cry very often or very easy, but this is...' and then I didn't hear much from her for a while".

Winners of $75 prizes in each of three parade categories were the Travel Council's "Miner's Daughters", the Fallen Arches Square Dance Club's dancers, and the Shriner's "Old Miner's Truck". Special honorable mention nominations were made for the Search and Rescue groups impressive display of equipment and KZMU Radio's infectious enthusiasm.

Saturday afternoon included a delicious barbecue provided by Fat City Smokehouse and the Poplar Place. Also present in the park were games, other refreshments, free swimming, and other activities. It was during the early afternoon events that Dave May read Mayor Stocks' proclamation naming the pavilion for Charlie Steen.

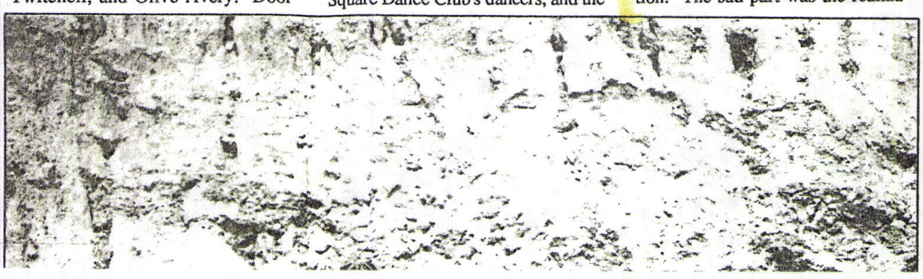
Charlie, family members, and many others proceeded from the park to the miners' contest being held on Steen property just north of town. Nine local miners entered the drilling contest, the results of which are reported elsewhere in this paper.

The Steens enjoyed a "front row, center" position for the fireworks at Ken's Lake. The following night, Mark Steen was overheard congratulating Rick Fullam (pyrotechnician in charge of planning and conducting the display) for an event much superior to those seen in communities of a much larger size than Moab.

The Sunday tour to the Mi Vida Mine, provided by Tag-A-Long Tours at a token cost, was a great success for most of the participants but was also a poignant and saddening event for many. The good part was having Charlie there to talk about his life, his discovery, the historic nature of the mine, and his unending efforts to develop and operate a clean, efficient mining operation. The sad part was the realization that collusion between Monticello mining interests and Utah State officials had resulted in the total obliteration of the original mine site, converting Utah's most valuable historic monument to mining and miners into acres of graded dirt. The fact that State and San Juan county interests destroyed the site only weeks before the Moab celebration was especially discouraging.

Mark Steen commented that he thought it unlikely that family members would ever again wish to visit the site. Charlie's remark was more direct, "There's nothing left. They've destroyed it all."

The tour, and the weekend of celebration, ended with a trip back to Moab viz Big Indian Valley, past many uranium mines that once were productive components of the local economy. Tour participants had many mines pointed out and named, not the least of which is officially named the Lisbon Mine - but which locally is better known as "Rio Algom".



Blue Mountain bike chase scheduled

The 6th Annual Blue Mountain Bike Chase is planned for July 11, 1992 in Monticello. This mountain bike race has become a favorite among four corner fat tire enthusiasts. The mid-summer event offers a chance to enjoy the cool alpine mountains of southeastern Utah. The different surfaces and terrain will challenge even the most experienced of riders. The 25 mile course includes black top, dirt roads, trials, steep climbs, steep descents, plus spectacular overlooks.

NORBA age groups will be used for both men and women. Indian pottery is awarded as prizes and lunch will be served at the finish line. It all starts at 9:00 a.m., Saturday, July 11th, 1992 at Loyd's Lake one mile west of Monticello,