

Thayer was the boom town that coal mining built

Editor's note: This is the last in a series of articles about towns in Sangamon County. The articles were originally written for a feature writing course taught at Sangamon State University by Mary Bohlen.

MARILYN WELKER
CORRESPONDENT

THAYER — Bordered on its northern and western sides by Sugar Creek, Thayer lies 20 miles south of Springfield on Illinois 4 at the southern tip of Sangamon County. The town is now tranquil compared to its booming coal-mine days of the early 1900s, when immigrants from Eastern Europe mined its coal by pick and shovel and raised large families here.

In 1901, the Chicago, Wilmington and Vermilion Coal Co. founded the town and named it in honor of a stockholder, Nathaniel Thayer. Many of its early settlers were immigrants from Slovakia, Italy, England and

Scotland. Miners from Streator and Braidwood, northern Illinois mining towns, also migrated to Thayer for new opportunities.

One resident who can trace his roots to England and a Thayer coal mining family is Jas O'Brien. A lifelong resident, O'Brien served as Thayer's postmaster from 1953 to 1989. Born in 1925, O'Brien traces his village ancestry to Mary Evans, his maternal grandmother of English descent, and a family heritage of Thayer coal miners.

"They came to work in the mine. It was the town's only employment," said O'Brien. Some 600 men daily mined 2,000 tons of coal during the mine's peak production in 1912.

R.D. Fletcher, the first mine manager, owned the company houses where the miners resided with their families. Because of the influx of people, inadequate housing conditions existed. Many times two and three families, each with eight to 10 children, lived together in one house,

said O'Brien.

"They took someone in until they could find a home or one could be built," said O'Brien. Some miners later joined two of these unpainted, weatherboard houses together. Growing up in a cheaply constructed company house, O'Brien knew about their first hand.

Fletcher also owned the town hotel and "the company store." "Coal mines don't like to talk about the company stores," said O'Brien. The miner and his family could buy things on credit, but the store took its money before the miner received his pay. Many times the miner ended up with little or no wages. This system kept the indebted miner tied to the company.

O'Brien knew Fletcher's spinster daughter, Miss Edna, who served as clerk for the coal mine office. Miss Edna made her daily journey to the office long after the mine closed in 1924. Until her death in the 1970s, she could be found in a huge rocker by an

old pot belly stove reviving tales of yesterday, said O'Brien. She died in her early 90s.

After the coal mine closed, people worked in other prospering local mines and continued residing in Thayer, moved on to new mines out of the area, or traveled to Springfield and joined the industrial work force, said O'Brien.

Thayer has undergone many changes since its mining days of the 1920s. "When I first came to the post office, you never had anybody move into town or out of town," O'Brien said. O'Brien, who married a miner's daughter and raised five children here, now admits he doesn't know many of the village's 800-some residents.

Frank Maynerich, a 69-year-old village resident of Slovakian ancestry, never entered the coal mining field. Instead, he spent 35 years at Allis Chalmers, a factory in Springfield. He also married a village girl

and raised six children here.

Maynerich, who peddled papers in Thayer as a lad, can describe the village over the last 60 years, virtually house by house.

The first house built by the mine was at Teak and Roosevelt Streets, he says. In his youth, Maynerich shared a company house with his family of 10 and another mining family, the Hunters.

Thayer acquired a nickname back in those days, and some oldtimers still refer to it as "Pudock." This is attributed to the pigs, chickens and other farm animals the residents raised in the village alleys. "It just plain stunk," said Maynerich.

In 1926, the town's legendary eating establishment opened under the proprietorship of Dominick and Maggie Enrietta. Maggie's (now Mick and Mary's) began as a tavern and expanded into a restaurant by adding another Thayer house onto the original structure. "I helped my father

and brothers build the archways for the restaurant," said Maynerich. The restaurant serves home-style dinners and will spark recognition of Thayer on a city-dweller's face.

Thayer's historic landmark, an 80-year-old smokestack, proudly bore the copper initials of the coal company. Maynerich clearly recalls an eighth-grade school day when lightning struck the top of the 150-foot stack and it had to be repaired with cement.

But in 1983, a mine reclamation project claimed the village's landmark. The mine shaft was filled in with concrete chunks and the stack was dynamited and bulldozed. Maynerich was present the day of the explosion.

"It's a shame. I was standing on the railroad track when it fell and we saw it go down," said Maynerich. He treasures a brick from the stack as a keepsake of days gone by.