

She recalls growing up at Zookspur mining camp

By MARYANN SMITH

Maryann Smith is a freelance writer from Des Moines.

Zookspur mining camp comes to life in the words of Mrs. Kathryn McClelland as you drive along the dusty country road south of Madrid.

Home to miners and their families who worked in Scandia Mine Number 2, Zookspur was one of several mining towns in the Madrid area from the 1800s into the 1940s. In those days, coal was a major Iowa industry.

Company houses

As you turn west off Iowa Highway 17 a mile and a half south of Madrid, rows of company houses, community pumps, the school, churches, the pool hall, a baseball diamond and the company store momentarily come back to life as Mrs. McClelland recalls what were for her happy days.

Mrs. McClelland was nine when her family moved there in 1915 from the mining community of Hamilton, Ia. "We followed the mines," she says.

"Zookspur was like a crossroads of the world," she says. "There were Croats, Italians, Irish, Germans, Negroes — almost any ethnic group you can name. We were integrated," she says as she looks at a photo taken in February, 1927, outside the schoolhouse.

Many of the parents spoke their native tongue, but in school the children spoke English.

Only a few houses and what used to be the Zook Spur bakery on Iowa Highway 17 remain. Even the Boone branch of the Milwaukee Railroad that hauled coal from mines in the area has been taken up. Most of the coal was used in the state.

A slag pile and debris dumped in to close the shaft are all that remain of the mine.

Mrs. McClelland recalls riding the train to Des Moines for



Kathryn McClelland stands with her friend John Kolenz near a pile of debris that now fills the Zookspur mine shaft.

shopping and to Madrid to high school. "It cost 10 cents to ride. Sometimes we would walk to school to save the money so we could go to a 25-cent movie on the weekend," she says.

Special treat

Most families made their own bread, but on Sunday as a special treat "we would walk down to Zook Spur bakery to get bread and stop at Grandma Latta's farm on the way back to get milk and eggs," she recalls.

In the other direction is the Des Moines River. "Twenty to 30 of us would go down to an old pier that used to be there and go swimming," she says.

"The company store handled about anything you could possibly want," she recalls. "The men bought their mining tools there. Part of it was a butcher shop and, of course, groceries. You could order clothes out of a catalogue."

The song, "16 Tons," popularized by "Tennessee" Ernie Ford in the mid-1950s is true, she says. The chorus goes: "16 tons, what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt.

St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go — I owe my soul to the company store."

"It took about all one man earned to keep a family going," she says. "He would work all winter to pay off the bill he ran up at the company store during the summer. The next winter it was the same thing all over again."

There were no Social Security, unemployment compensation or pensions in those days.

Three incomes

"We had three incomes in our household when I was growing up and I didn't realize how much that meant until recently when we were reminiscing about good old Zookspur," she says. "A friend said, 'You kids had anything you wanted. You had a nice home.' I realized then that we did have more."

Mrs. McClelland's mother died at the age of 27 during the influenza epidemic of 1919. Mrs. McClelland, the former Kathryn Timmens, married Thomas McClelland in 1930, a year after she was graduated

from high school. He had gone into the mines when he was 16.

The camp was still a prosperous place in the 1930s. "You still had to put your name on a list to get a company house," she says. "Luckily someone moved to Madrid about that time and we were able to get a four-room house." The rent was about \$8 a month.

"We papered and painted and went into debt \$500 for three rooms of furniture," she says. She still has the bedroom set which barely has a scratch on it.

The McClellands moved to Madrid Oct. 13, 1933, three months after Thomas' father was killed in a mine accident. "And," she says, "we knew the time was coming when the mines would run out."

Thomas worked as a miner until the Scandia Mine Number 4 one-half mile south of Madrid closed in 1943. He died in 1970.

Her brother, James, helps Mrs. McClelland maintain her home in Madrid now and she reminisces with friends and relatives about the "good old days in Zookspur."