

His memories have filled in N.W. history

By Don Carter

Two years ago Ernest Moore signed up for a senior citizen's writing class at the Langston Hughes Cultural Center.

"They asked me what I wanted to write about, and I had to think about it," he recalls. "Then I thought about my grandfather and the mines."

The retired city employee wrote a little off the top of his head, then plunged into the major research and writing job. Now he's completed a 200-page manuscript that fills in some of the gaps in the Northwest's history; his *The Coal Miner Who Came West* is about the blacks who came here to work in the mines.

Little is left of the town of Franklin, near Black Diamond, where Ernest was born in 1912. During his research Ernest returned to the site of the former coal boom-town. "It had all grown over...I could tell where the saloons, the store, the houses were, but there are only bits of timber."

Ernest's grandfather, born a slave in Tennessee in 1846, share-cropped for several years after the Civil War. He began coal-mining in 1869, during a labor dispute at one of the Tennessee mines. About his grandfather's strike breaking activities, Ernest urges understanding about the different times; "Blacks had just come out of bondage, and here they had a chance to get a dollar a day in their pockets."

Railroad pamphlet

It was a different story when his grandfather came west to work in the mines of Franklin. Ernest says, "I'm not going to tell you the whites told the blacks a lie - I don't like to use those kind of words. They just didn't tell the blacks the whole truth."

He explains that the railroad, which owned the mines, circulated pamphlets in the Midwest offering free transportation to 1,000 men because the mine had just opened a new "slope" (a slanted tunnel leading to a new coal vein). When they arrived at Franklin they found "a barbed-wire fence separating the strikers from the miners...the black's didn't know there was a strike until they got there."

Working conditions were tough for the early black miners, Ernest says. "They were always the last hired and the first fired...They always got the jobs nobody else wanted. Nobody wanted to drive the mules, so the blacks did. But the motormen and loaders were all white."

Portion published

Ernest himself was a mule-skinner at the Franklin mine in 1935-36. Explaining how his brief mining career was ended by a knee injury, Moore tells how the mule-pulled coal carts were towed out of the mine: "You came out, threw the tail chain over the mule's back, and yelled 'Gee!'" The mule was supposed to step out of the way, and you'd go down and dump the cart." One day the mule didn't move fast enough, Ernest's timing was thrown out of whack, and a hook hit his knee when the cart dumped.

Other information came from Ernest's research at the University of Washington library, and from back files of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

A small portion of Ernest's book was published in *The Crystal Set*, an anthology compiled from the work of the senior citizen's writing class by Marconi Press. But he hopes eventually to have his book published in its entirety.

Ernest says he's made the rounds of local publishers, "but they say it's not a good time because of the depression." He grumbles: "But I see all those guys in Watergate are still writing books and getting them published."

Foster Children

During World War II Ernest worked for the Army's Quartermaster division, and after the war he worked at a foundry. He found the job "safer but dirtier than coal-mining...but also not healthy for you. In both jobs you inhale alot of dust. But a man does it because you have to earn a living." He eventually landed a job working on a Seattle engineering department asphalt-paving crew and retired 12 years ago.

While he was working for the city Ernest and his wife, Theresa, worked with the Children's Home Society and spent 17 years taking foster children into their home. They had two children of their own; their son died in 1971 and their daughter now lives in Astoria, Ore., with the couple's three grandchildren.

Preserving the history for his grandchildren was on of his motivations, says Ernest.

Much of this book came directly from his memory. "I've got a good remembrance," he says, "and when you start writing, it freshens up." He remembers many of the old stories told by his grandfather, who died in Franklin when Ernest was 9 years old.

Another resource was a great-aunt who had re-told some of the old stories more recently; she died in 1965 at the age of 107 and, Ernest laughs, attributed her longevity to smoking cheroots and drinking rum.