Down below St. Mary's Cemetery off the West Peoria bluff, the land curves in a horseshoe away from the Kickapoo Creek.

Less than 80 years ago, Horseshoe Bottoms was coal mining country, and the coal dust rose high over nearby hills which swallowed up the miner at dawn and released him, black-faced at dusk.

The Kickapoo Creek still meanders near the Bottoms, but the miners' children who caught tadpoles by its banks are gone with the mine tipples and mules.

Peoria historian C. Ballance wrote about the area in 1870: "Coal is so abundant in this neighborhood that there is no danger of the supply failing in a thousand years."

Little is left there except a few miners' cottages that are reminders of the mines that stretched from Pottstown to Bartonville where some of the best coal in Illinois was produced the cheapest.

Gopher holes, or dog holes as some called them, were the small mines, mined possibly by a single prospector or a farmer with the aid of a few other men.

The coal is still there—enough to last 800 years some say—and far in the belly of the hills above Horseshoe Bottoms and the Creek, the corridors of miles of mine tunnels remain sealed. The early miners, mostly from England, have died and their sons have gone elsewhere in the state, possibly to work in the strip mines—others have retired on mining pensions, finding only the darkness of the coal mine suitable to their tastes.

CHARLEY DENNEY of East Peoria, a retired miner and former city employe, said he found the life of a coal digger, as they often call themselves, back-breaking work. He himself had been crushed under falling coal more than once.

If the rats didn't enter the mine, neither did the coal miner because it might mean "black damps", the deadly gas that often escapes from inside the earth's layers pouring carbon dioxide or "dead air" into mining corridors. Instinctively, the miner listened for the roar of the Banche to warn him of gas coming out of cracks in the rock or for the movement of rock layers around coal balls overhead capable of falling with only a moment's notice.

The roar of the Banche, a term brought from Ireland, meant the Ghost of Death—a low "swish" sound like air seeping slowly out of a narrow crack.

Denney, who worked in a number of mines in the area including the Groveland Mine, southeast of Peoria and the Starr Mine in 1922, located under the present site of the Bellevue Theater, said it took years for the miner to accustom himself to the strange sounds in the mine that were warnings — a slight movement overhead, a shifting of rock — and a huge coal ball could fall.

"This was so common we didn't pay much attention to it when it happened," Denney said. "We'd be sitting there eating dinner in the mine and just as quick as you can imagine, my Dad would call 'Son, move!' and one of those balls would drop clean from the ceiling."

"I have been in 'black damps'," Denney said. "You're in there before you know it. Your light goes out and you try to light it again, but it won't work, and then you gasp for air.

An explosion in a mine was no small thing. Bad air and air courses, not distributing air sufficiently around the mine, caused stale air to develop into black damps and accumulate in passageways. With faulty ventilation, coal gas could form and remain in the tunnels instead of riding to the surface in the current going up the air shaft.

When coal dust accumulated and clung to stationary objects in the mines, such as the wooden timbers supporting the mine's roof, it became a combustible chemical. With gas hanging in roof pockets and rooms, one spark and the dust could catch fire causing the mine to blow up.

"If a man is killed inside a mine, all work is over for the day, even if you been only working an hour, but if he dies outside the mine, that's different, and work goes on," Denney said.

"I wanted to work in the mines when I was 16 because my father and brother did. They had jobs, so I had to have one, but I quit six times the first day it was so tough."

"WE USED TO get fined 50 cents if we forgot to turn in our helmets and belts with our number on them because that's the only way they knew we were out of the mine and safe. If our number wasn't in, the company's mine examiner would go in looking for one of us.

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Section C Nov. 24, 1968
General News. Obituaries

CHARLES DENNEY (left) and Henry (Bud) Tippett sit at the entrance to one of the old Crescent Coal Company mines, long since deserted in the Kickapoo Creek area. Denney, left, holds the belt he once wore as a coal miner and wears his old carbide lantern cap. Tippett, also a former miner, who worked at the Crescent, holds a miner's pail.

Horseshoe Bottoms

By Jean Comerford
Staff Writer

"Shaft mines have given in to strip mining because no coal is wasted in strip mines. Shaft mines leave four foot pillars between loading rooms," Denney added.

Denney described the old shaft mines, such as the Starr, as mines containing a honeycomb network of rooms and corridors separated by pillars of coal, employing between 200 and 300 men. The mines had a face boss who worked under a superintendent. The face boss keeps the mule drivers going removing car loads of coal from the mine rooms. Keg powder was used to blast the coal lose. Mules were kept in stables usually outside the mine entrance.

The track layer was a company man, paid by the day, to lay the tracks for the coal cars running throughout the mines. The timber man looked for weak places in the mine's roof and the mine examiner inspected rooms and safety conditions.

"A miner got so much a ton. I remember getting as low as 58 cents a ton in the Depression," Denney added.

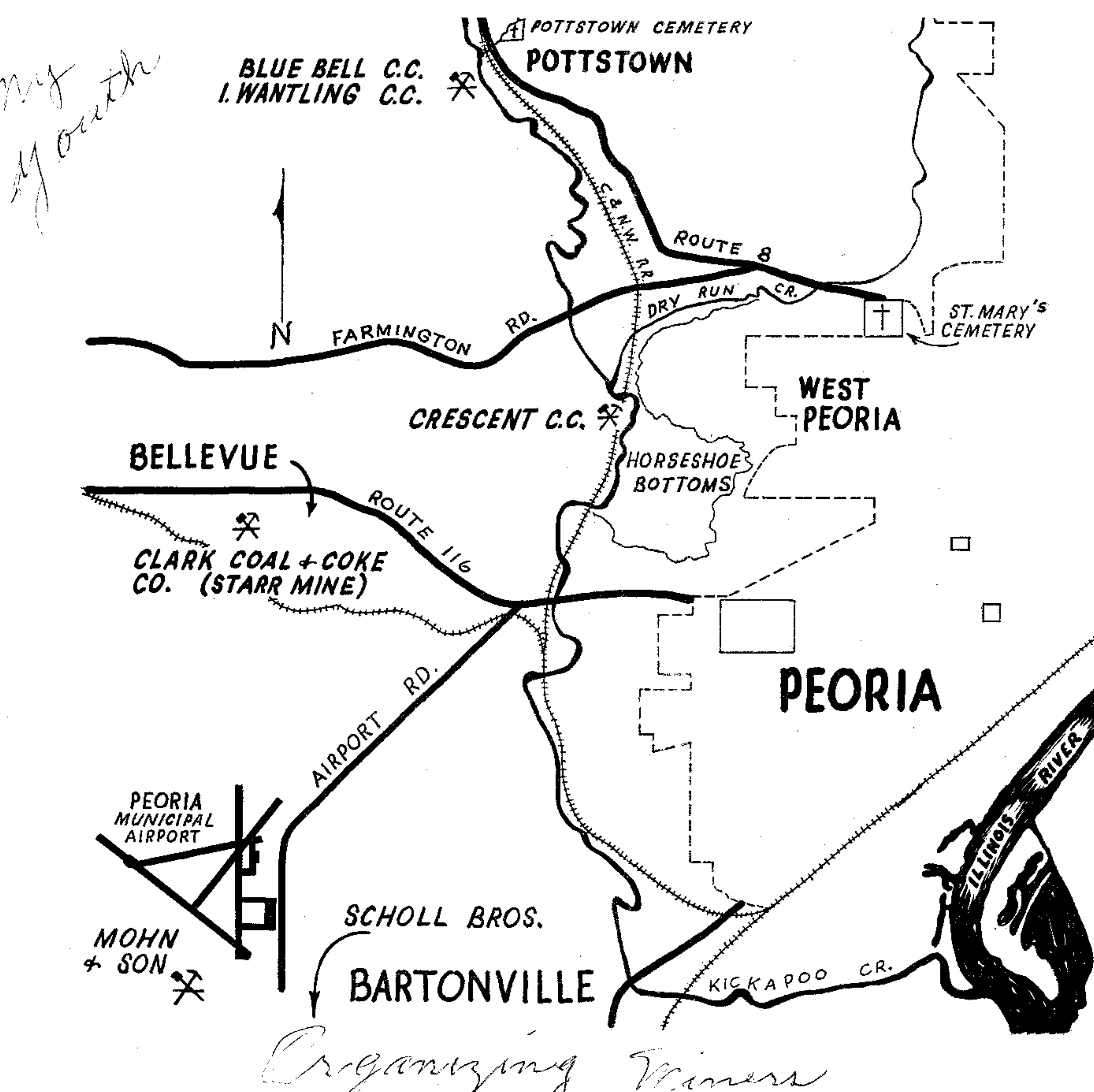
Denney said the mines probably operated similarly in the 1920's to those operating when some of the early English coal miners arrived in this country.

Ballance wrote in 1870: "The coal veins are usually four feet thick, and there is generally slate or stone on top of it. (Horseshoe Bottoms' mines were capped with Limestone which covers a large part of the area.) The coal of the vein is generally very hard and has a hill pressing upon it, and the usual way of getting it out is to pick out a little of the coal at the bottom of the stratum, and put in a blast of powder on top. This will so break it down that crowbars and picks will easily do the rest.

"When it happens that there is not more than eight or ten feet of earth on the coal, the practice is to strip it: that is to take the earth off a portion of the coal, and then make a row of holes about two or three feet back from the edge, drop a plug of wood into each, and then drive an iron wedge alternately, until all are driven fully down. By this time, it will be seen that there is a small crack running from one wedge to another. Two men with sharp-pointed crowbars can, in a few minutes, pry all that strip off, and then repeat the process.

"AT PRESENT," Ballance wrote, "the amount of coal in Peoria, to warm our houses, cook our victuals, run our mills, distilleries and other numerous kinds of machinery, including the locomotives on all our railroads, is very considerable."

In fact, as John Leonard Conger of the history department of Knox College, wrote in 1932, that as early as 1851 coal was used extensively in Peoria in the following industries: foundries, casting shops, steam hay presses, and it came into use for street lighting in 1853; it was used to produce the gas used for the lighting.



The distilling industry began in Peoria in 1840. In 1864 there were 12 distilleries within the city and several others in the vicinity using 5,250 bushels of coal a day. By 1870, 360 tons of coal was consumed in the foundries daily.

Col. James M. Rice wrote in 1912 in his "Peoria City and County Illinois," "At no place in Illinois, or perhaps the world, can coal be mined or brought to market so cheaply as in this city."

A book called "Horseshoe Bottoms," written in 1935 and published by Harper Brothers Publishing Co., is not well known here today.

Tom Tippett, a former Pottstown coal miner and member of a Peoria area family whose father, also a coal miner, arrived in Pottstown from Cornwall, England, about 100 years ago, wrote his fictional account of "Horseshoe Bottoms" while at the same time working to promote labor unions through education.

Although ahead of its times in terms of the labor movement, Tippett's book remains one of the few records Peorians have of a coal mining era gone by.

Tippett, now 78 and living in Seattle, Wash., worked as a coal miner, a reporter for labor publications, a lecturer on the labor movement in educational circles and as educational director for the International Association of Machinists and other organizations.

His book works to capture the story of a coal mining community, whose miners, newly arrived from England, accepted poor working conditions because they knew nothing else. Years of strife and attempts to unite workers to strike for their rights unfold what could be the story of many coal mining camps in Illinois.

Tippett picked Horseshoe Bottoms because it was home and he had worked there. Though named for old Pottstown families Tippett knew, his characters are fictional, and many of the episodes he describes are collected from other areas of the state, especially southern Illinois.

Names such as Wantling, Dodd, Stafford, and Evans, that are the chief characters, can be found on the tombstones in the old Pottstown cemetery, high on the hill overlooking the town. The Tippetts own house still stands on the outskirts of town.

THE AUTHOR'S brother, Henry Tippett, a retired Caterpillar employe and former employe of the Crescent Coal Mine opposite the Bottoms, lives at 726 LaSalle St. in Peoria. One brother Jack, who also worked in the mines, died last year.

Tippett pointed out in his book that miners like those near Horseshoe Bottoms who worked for low wages and whose companies profited by cheap labor, harmed miners as far away as Ohio—as all were in competition for markets. Here is where union and organized labor which Tippett spent a life time working for began to have its seeds, and strikes were in the offing.

In his fictional novel of the area, he wrote: "There's no use for us to buck these coal companies single handed." He continued in the words of his hero Stafford: "They pit one field against another. That was made plain. Unless we stand together, all of us are lost. The operators are going into corporations; they've got mines in many fields. One camp can strike till doomsday and orders are filled at another.

"One principle in coal was clear; miners could win concessions for coal miners only if they shut the tipples down and stopped the operator's pay," he wrote. "The country's in a fix. A real panic, they call it. There's trouble coming. Wages are going down and strikes a coming up. A lot of folks are hungry in America."

Across the nation on April 21, 1894, approximately 125,000 miners began one of the greatest strikes in our history. Those who stayed on the job were called company "sucks" and were usually located in isolated pockets, satisfied with their work and pay conditions.

One of the areas that still had mines operating was central Illinois. Although highly organized, this region was the Peoria Sub-district of the union, with almost all the men on strike. Schools below Bartonville and the Starr Mine were two near the Bottoms. But by the end of May, by very strenuous but peaceful means, almost all mines, employing some 500 men, had agreed to join the strike.

Only the mines with electric drills and undercutting machines, and electric lighting to reduce fire from open flame lamps common at that time, and the hoisting machinery which efficiently moved 47,807

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They Call It Horseshoe Bottoms

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tons of coal to the surface, didn't stop operation.

One such mine was the Edward Little and Brother Company mine, located in the narrow valley on the river bluff, southeast of Wesley City in the south part of modern Creve Coeur. This was the most modern mine in the state. This factor of higher, efficient production was a major thorn in the strategy of the striking miners.

The miners met at Bartonville on the morning of June 6, 1894, and decided that the Little brothers must be shut down at any cost.

The newspapers had been full of violence in the Illinois minefields. The area miners knew of the success that force had brought in the region from LaSalle to Minonk and from Carterville to Staunton to Danville. The Littles' mine, they reasoned, was one reason why the coal mine owners were able to defy labor.

THEY CROSSED the Illinois River in skiffs and rowboats, formed a crowd of about 500, and marched up the river bluff. Led by their district president, John L. Gehr, of Edwards, they halted briefly to tell Sheriff J. C. Friederich and his 30 unarmed deputies to "Stand aside, sir!" and rushed toward the tipple.

A shot rang out. There was a ragged fusilade from both sides. One man died before the white flag waved from the tipple. The rioters rushed forward, forcing the wounded defenders out, using kerosene, set fire to the mine. When told that men were still working below ground in the mine, the strikers swore that they should burn and smother. But the miners were able to leave safely by a mine escapement shaft. Arrests went on for days, and the trial of four defendants was the longest to that time in the legal history of the county.

It took another decade and another strike before conditions began improving.

Early Peoria newspapers gave a colorful picture of the miner and his life. The Peoria Daily Record on Dec. 12, 1869 stated: "Safe in the arms of Satan, the inhabitants of Dogtown, that little Peoria county mining village later dignified by the title of Bartonville, are enjoying a relapse into their former status of gin and sin these days after taking a fling at religion and righteousness induced by an enthusiastic evangelist."

Of Dogtown, the "Daily Transcript" later wrote: "The settlement is composed principally of coal miners, most of whom vote the Democratic ticket, break the Sabbath, drink unlimited quantities of benzine, fight and engage in almost numberless lawsuits. The inhabitants spend about one fifth of their earnings in bread and meat, two-fifths in paying lawyers. A free fight can be got at the drop of a hat."

Tippett wrote more generously of the coal miner concentrating on the honest, hard working miner found among the ruffians who cared more that his family ate and that his working conditions improve through conscientious efforts than for going further in debt. Though many company stores were honest there were a number that never let the miner out of debt.

A late folk song, described this dilemma with the words: "Sixteen tons and what do you get—another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't come—I owe my soul to the company store."

National figures state that today's miner in Horseshoe Bottoms, if he still existed, would average around $30 a day, or $8,000 per year. A new contract providing wage increases over a three-year period for soft coal in the country was signed last month and was termed the best contract ever negotiated by W. A. Boyle, president of the United Mine Workers Union.

This is a contrast to what Tippett wrote of the miner of his own father's day: "Men weren't talked to about company plans. A notice went up, short and direct on the tipple signed by the boss."

But he also wrote of the hope these early men undoubtedly had for their sons: "We are all Englishmen, all miners, and we are now in a new country. In these Bottoms, laid out by God for us in the form of a lucky horseshoe is coal. This country is young and growing."