From Storyboard to Story

Rough Draft — Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine

By Alan M. Murray

ASHLAND, PA — Howard Smith knows all about mining. The lines in his face show years of hard labor. With his shaggy beard, faded blue jeans, and yellow mining hat, Smith looks like classic miners featured in old black and white movies.

But for him, mining is the real thing, a family tradition that goes back 150 years. At 16, he began his career loading coal cars at a mine operated by his family in the small Pennsylvania mining community of Locustdale.

Family mines back in the 1960s had no hired help, so young "Howie" soon learned every job - drilling holes, setting explosives, loading and breaking coal. By the time he was 18 he was a full partner with his father and two uncles. While the family mine went out of business, Smith continued his career and has no regrets.

"If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing," he said. The 53-year-old is now foreman of Pioneer Tunnel Coal mine in Ashland, Pennsylvania, just a mile from where his family's mine used to be.

Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine became a tourist attraction In the early 1960s when an ex-miner and a lawyer were looking for ways to make money for their struggling town. They took a useless, shutdown mine and opened it for tours.

"Most everybody told them that they were crazy and that it wasn't gonna work," said Smith. "But they went ahead and did it anyway."

Now each year over 40,000 people from around the world take the 35-minute tour that begins by boarding coal cars pulled by a battery-powered mine motor. The cars slowly enter the dark tunnel and then pick up speed as children scream.

Christy Curtis, who grew up in nearby Pottsville, brought her husband and two children to see the mine.

"It reminded me of an amusement park ride, but the stuff was real and you could learn so much from the tour," she said.

Even the wheels and axles on the cars are
authentic, the same that were used by miners back when Pioneer Tunnel was called the Bancroft Mine and the cars pulled by mules carried cargo and an occasional miner taking a nap.

According to Smith, mules were treated like kings. As company property, they were the mine's most valuable resource. There were even veterinary stations scattered throughout the mine to make sure these animals, known for their strength and endurance, were in top shape.

"If someone was caught hurting a mule," said Smith as he pointed to a large wooden cutout of a mule, "he was promptly fired."

The tour goes one quarter mile below the surface of the nine-mile deep mine. Brad Homer of Sayre, Pennsylvania was looking for something to do with his wife and 19-month-old son when they stumbled onto a billboard pointing to the mine.

"I thought it was really interesting. I didn't realize there were mine tours. You just don't see this anywhere else," he said.

Smith leads the group into a dark cavern lit by a single bulb. Water drips from the ceiling and runs down the walls glimmering with patches of red caused by accumulated surfer-oxide.

The lights go out, leaving only a small moon-like disc of light coming from Smith's headlamp. He then turns it off and for a few minutes and talks to the group about what it was like for miners to work in such dreary conditions for so little pay.

Walking past an emergency phone nearly 100 years old, prompting Smith to share about the dangerous gases that sometimes fill mine shafts and how miners knew when it was time to head to the surface.

"If you see the rats leavin' the mine," Smith say as he points at a large plastic replica of a rodent, "it would be a good idea to leave yourself," he said.

Aside from warning miners of impending danger by their mass flight upwards, Smith says it was common for rats to walk up to a miner at lunch hour hoping to be fed.

Above sits the Henry Clary, steam puffing out of its stack as students from D.H.H. Lengel Middle School wait for a ride. "I have never seen a real steam locomotive before except in the movies," said seventh grader Chad McKenzie. "I had no idea this place even existed. The tour was so fun."

In the distance, stands the Mammoth Vein, a thick segment of coal that can be seen on its surface. When coal was a major source of fuel, the Henry Clay hauled millions of tons from this area, leaving a wall of rock 150 feet high and several miles long.

Looking eastward across the valley sits the nearby borough of Centralia where an enormous underground mine fire has been burning beneath the town since 1962. This unstoppable subterranean fire, with some residents refusing to vacate their homes, has even inspired a television show.

Nearby people enter and exit the gift shop that sells artwork by local artists, jewelry made from coal, railroad hats, miners lamps, and Christmas stocking filled with lumps of coal for naughty children. Or if you just want a lump of coal for a souvenir, you can buy coal rocks sitting just outside for between $5 and $10 each depending on the size.

And there's coal candy, a locally made licorice-like hard sweet that resembles lumps of coal packaged with a miniature coal hammer.

As the tour exits the mine, Howard Smith remembers where he came from and is grateful for a way to pass on his life experience to the next generation.

"So we're just fortunate enough to have
this old abandoned mine where we can take people in and educate them on it and show them all about it," he said. "We have somethin really nobody else had, you know."