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Last of the Rope Riders Mark Common Thread

By John Fannin

Hurling a mile a minute below the Earth's surface may sound like inspiration for an extreme roller-coaster ride, but it was all in a day's work for the Rope Riders who toiled in upper county's coal mines.

A Rope Rider balanced precariously on the hitch between two coal cars winding through miles of darkened mines. When the cars were full he would signal on a wire that it was time to come back up. All the while he would balance himself between the two cars, each carrying a ton-and-a-half of coal when full.

'Nobody Wanted That Job'

Rope Riders on the #3 mine went 6,000 feet down an 18 degree slope in just one minute. The even more dangerous #9 mine, which claimed the life of one Rope Rider, actually had a slope of 35 degrees.

"It was exciting, let me put it that way," laughed Jim Barich, an extra or back-up Rope Rider for the #3 in 1953. "I have a pace-maker now but if I would have been wearing it then it'd be going 130."

Barich was introduced to Rope Riding by #3 Supervisor Art Pasa following a work shift one day. When co-workers asked why he was still on shift when others were going home, Barich replied, "I'm on the big rope." He also recalled, "Nobody wanted that job."

Rope Riders' Reunion

Ah, but there were brave souls who worked the "big rope" for years up, down and through the

mines which – in the case of the #3 – stretched 56 miles all underground.

On Thursday, Dec. 30, the area's last living Rope Riders – Barich, John Ferro, John Martin, Joe Melos and Jim Larrigan – gathered for a reunion and to relive their common thread.

Suncadia Community Relations Manager Nick Henderson brought the group together at the Roslyn Museum.

The occasion, Henderson explained, was Suncadia Resort's recent announcement naming its third golf course "Rope Rider" in honor of the miners.

"I got to thinking that we should get the last of the rope riders together," Henderson said. "I thought it would be good to have them photographed for background on the golf course and that it could be a neat story for the *Tribune*, too."

'Young and Fast'

All five reunited Rope Riders made it through the job without serious injury. John Ferro rode the big rope the longest at 33 years. Ferro worked all of the upper county mines and when they closed in the 1960's he closed out his career at Black Diamond.

"You never stopped," Ferro recalled of a Rope Rider's typical work day.

The non-stop pace meant no lunch breaks. "We ate on the run," said Ferro who carried food instead of water to keep his energy up. "I would tuck my sandwich under my overalls and keep going."

Though the job would appear

to be an L&I nightmare, the local mines ran a relatively good safety record. The banners of regional safety awards still hang in the Roslyn Museum today.

Still, there were attributes every Rope Rider needed to get by. "I was young, fast and worked hard," said Joe Melos who worked the #3 Mine from 1953-54. "I still have all my fingers and toes."

Mining Memories

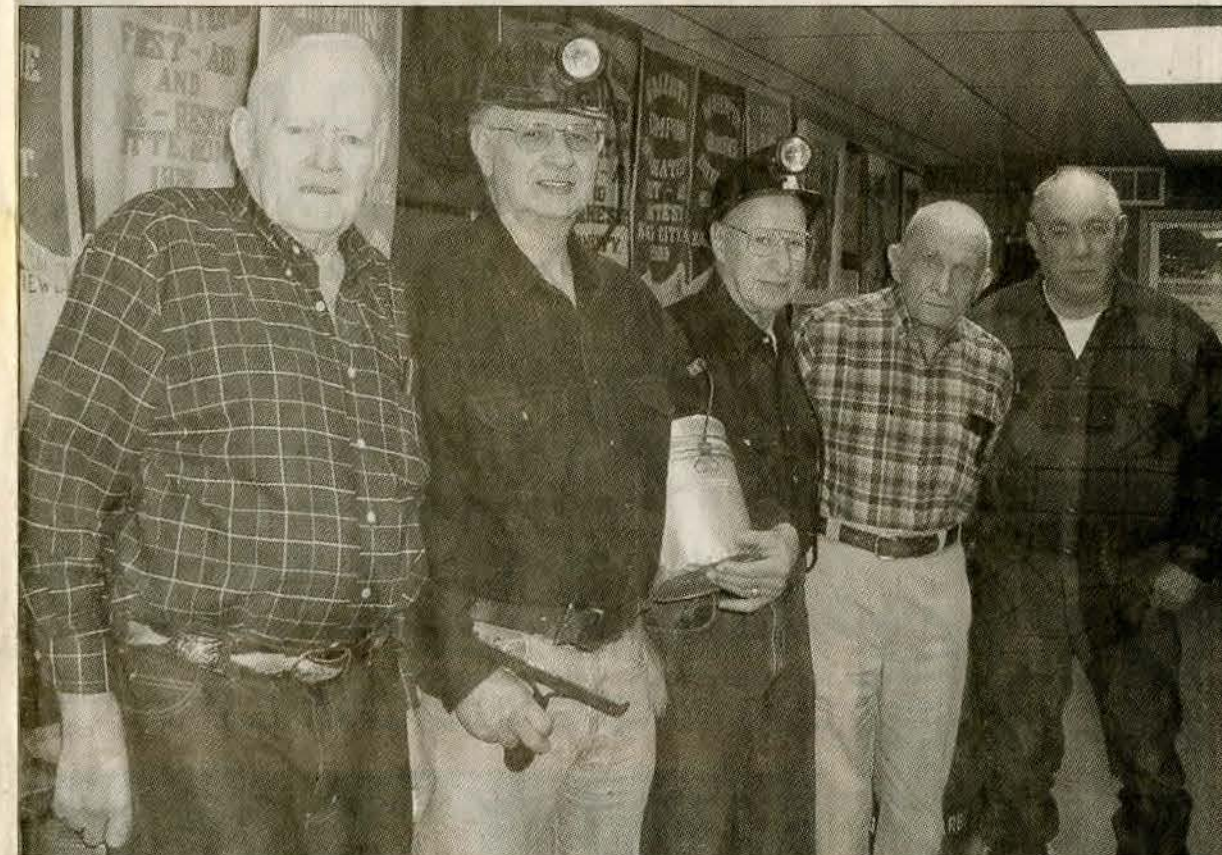
Even now 40 and 50 years after they worked the big rope the last Rope Riders didn't miss a beat in last Thursday's reunion at the Roslyn Museum.

"Hey Blackie!" said John Martin – #9 Rope Rider from 1957-63 – when greeting Ferro. The mining-era nickname, likely due to Ferro's years at Black Diamond, as well as shared laughter were typical of the kinship rekindled between the Rope Riders.

Martin and Jim Larrigan, Rope Rider from 1958-59 for #3, 5, and 9 mines, gazed around the Roslyn Museum's collection, handling water buckets and tools of the trade which now sit as museum displays.

The Rope Rider's central role in the mining industry – catalogued by the Museum and celebrated by Suncadia's latest golf course – was not lost on the five now remaining.

"Everything branched off from there," Larrigan recalled of the miles of mine shafts which all led to and from the Rope Rider's uneasy run. Added Ferro, "If you ever stopped, the coal wouldn't get out."



ROPE RIDER ROUNDUP. The last surviving coal mining Rope Riders gathered last week at the Roslyn Museum. Pictured from left are: Jim Larrigan, Jim Barich, John Ferro, Joe Melos and John Martin.

John Fannin photo

KC Grooming Council Meets

The Kittitas County Grooming Council will meet 7:00 p.m., Monday, Jan. 10, at the Tom L. Craven Meeting Room, U.S. Forest Service, in Cle Elum.

The Grooming Council works on issues of snowmobile trail grooming and sno-park operations in Kittitas County. All interested persons are welcome

Winter Parking Ordinance in Effect

Snow on the ground and more on the way serves as a reminder that vehicle owners in Cle Elum are subject to a 24-hour parking ordinance for the snow season.

During the winter it is illegal

starts downtown on First, Second, Third and Fourth Streets.

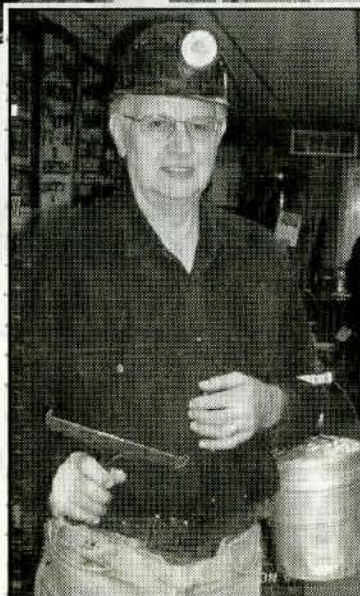
At the same time, two front-end loaders go to work clearing the alleys along the route that the garbage truck will be following

UPPER KITTITAS COUNTY 7-DAY FORECAST

| Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday | Monday | Tuesday |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mostly Cloudy | Snow | Snow Shower | Snow Shower | Light Snow | Snow |
| Lo 24° Hi 29° | Lo 22° Hi 31° | Lo 22° Hi 30° | Lo 19° Hi 31° | Lo 17° Hi 31° | Lo ... Hi ... |
| Chance of precipitation: 20% | Chance of precipitation: 60% | Chance of precipitation: 60% | Chance of precipitation: 30% | Chance of precipitation: 30% | Chance of precipitation: ... |



ROSLYN NATIVE Jim Barich demonstrates with a Roslyn Museum display how a Rope Rider signalled for coal cars to be brought back to the surface. While straddling two coal cars, each weighing over a ton, the Rope Rider would hold a metal plate to a charged wire which rang a bell above ground. John Fannin photo



READY ROPE RIDER. Jim Barich wears some of the tools of the trade, including water bucket and helmet, that a Rope Rider would employ before careening down into the mines at a mile a minute.



REMEMBER WHEN? Rope Riders John Ferro, center left, and Joe Melos, center right, roll back the years as they leaf through a coal mining photo album. Pictured at left is Ferro's wife Agnes and at right is Melos' grandson Jeff Adams. See full Rope Riders story on page one. John Fannin photo