

**Knight Hawk Coal employees/contractors who attended the 2008 company “Steak Fry”**



They were the original band of brothers; 17 men lured to a 3,000 acre field overgrown by brush with the promise that one day it would be a viable coal mine. Some never questioned Steve Carter when he said his plan would work even at a time the coal industry in Southern Illinois was a mere shadow of itself. Others were desperate to return to mining, no matter how tenuous the offer seemed, while the remainder just wanted to get back to the region they loved.

Seventeen men, 3,000 acres and one vision: that was a fledgling company by the numbers in May 1998 when Knight Hawk struck coal and set a course to help revive an industry in Southern Illinois.

Most of the men at the Creek Paum mine 10 years ago still work at Knight Hawk, although they are scattered throughout the company's operations. They are Marc Lauzon, Larry Fuhrhop, Rodney Kribs, Jim Stearns, George Tepovich, Steve Ward, JJ Seals, Brad Doerner, Larry Reiman, Vern Cross, Brian Jewell, Tim Ward and Bob Wunderlich. A few have retired including Gerald Little, Fred Walton, Don Secrist and Neil Bradley. Menzo Morse passed away. All remember those early days like it was yesterday.

"I had never been to the Sato area so my wife and I drove out there one day," Neil Bradley, who was working at Arch's Captain mine through Manpower after 17 years on the company payroll, recalls. "I noticed a little building in a field but I kept driving. Then I realized that was what we would affectionately refer to as the 'International Office' of Knight Hawk Coal.

"My wife looked at me and asked, 'Are you sure there is going to be a coal mine out here?'" Bradley adds.

Mechanic Larry Reiman was working at Vergennes Equipment when he got wind that a mine was opening in the area. Despite the coal industry's downturn, Reiman was convinced he'd find a future at a mine.

"Everything makes a circle," he said. "Mining was down a long time I knew it had to come back."

Marc Lauzon shared Reiman's optimism. He'd spent 10 years as a mine inspector after 8 years in the mines and was itching to get back to the action. He jumped at the opportunity when he was offered a job even though it would be a year before he'd started.

"I met him at a coal show and wanted to get back into mining," Lauzon said. "I knew of his reputation and had complete confidence in what he was doing. I knew a small mine could make it."

That's not how Vern Cross saw it. After being laid off from the mines he opted to join Gilster-Mary Lee rather than relocate east or west like so many other area miners had.

"When I was hired at Captain mine they said I'd have a job for life. That didn't work out and I never thought I'd mine coal again," Cross said. "I remember the first thing I asked Steve when I started was, 'I hope you are a patient man.'"

Patience, however, was not something the newly-assembled team could afford to have. Contracts were already signed and coal needed to be delivered. Pounding, incessant rains hampered progress.

"When I got here the pit was already started but the muddy conditions were trouble," Bob Wunderlich said. "We didn't know how this plan would do. Using bulldozers was an untried method and it was a real gamble. Bad weather added to the worry."

Don Secrist was one of the worrisome. He returned to the area from West Virginia to what he thought was an "iffy" proposition.

"I was skeptical about coming back but I thought that if Brad (Doerner) and Junior (Menzo Morris) had enough guts to do it, I would too," Secrist said.

"Looking back, I couldn't have been happier. I wished I'd work there 20 years," Secrist added.

Jim Stearns also rolled the dice. He was still with Arch's Captain mine when he heard of the plans for the mine. He was more than eager to jump ship.

“I could see the end was coming over here and when I met with Steve he sounded confident and easy to talk to,” Stearns said. “He told us the mine should go for 5 to 10 years and possibly longer.

“The rains made everyone nervous. We’d work five or six days and then have to stop,” Stearns adds. “Everyone started feeling better when all that equipment came in.”

The first “accident” at the mine happened early and involved Stearns, or at least his property.

“Marc Lauzon ran over my lunch box,” he said. “I was just divorced and only had two spoons and two forks. All I was worried about was a spoon.”

Such frugality was not uncommon. Bradley and Stearns both remember the safety training session that took place under a shade tree.

“Chicken (Little) set up a screen and ran an old movie projector. “We weren’t supposed to ask him where he got the film,” Bradley said.

“Ticks were crawling on us and the screen,” Stearns said.

Larry Fuhrhop remembers that sunny, 85 degree day too but what really brightened it for him was when the D-8 dozer was unloaded while they watched the film.

“We were all nervous hoping the dozing method would work. We wanted it to work,” he said.

When Carter told the men it wasn’t going to be a big operation he wasn’t downplaying anything. Fuhrhop said the first pit was tight.

“We could barely turn around in it,” he said.

Secrist recalls it too.

“You wouldn’t believe the little hole we had. It was so small and narrow it got to the point we couldn’t swing around,” he said. “I was on a dozer and had to push coal to the loader.”

Brad Doerner said conditions might not have been ideal but everyone worked through them.

“I had a full head of hair and it was jet black,” Doerner jokes as he removes his hard hat to reveal a barren pate.

Before they had buses to take crews to the pits, Doerner was recruited to provide the service.

“When I came here from West Virginia I had a 1987 Taurus station wagon. We called it the “pit cruiser” because we used it to take people in and out of the pits,” he said.

The men mined 260,000 tons in that abbreviated production year and in 1999 Knight Hawk was ready to expand. Carter wanted more control over transporting coal. The solution was found at the former Ford Dock south of Chester. The company purchased it and converted it from a rail to truck load-out facility. Rodney Kribs was chosen to lead the team refurbishing of the facility that had been mothballed for 10 years. By October the site was reborn as the Lone Eagle Dock.

“When we first contacted them about the dock they told us there was nothing left; it had all been torn down,” Kribs said. “That

wasn't true. We shoveled out the (loading) pit, pumped water out of the basement and rewired it because thieves had stolen all the copper. There wasn't much else wrong with it. It's been 'yahoo and hold on' from the get go."

The original crew shared many memories but the one most prevalent is the promise Carter made then broke in order to keep the company moving forward.

"He told us we'd grow to about 30-35 people" Fuhrhop said.

"He wanted to mine about 50,000 tons a month," Secrist said.

"I never thought he'd stop at 25-35 people," Wunderlich said. "Companies that sit still stagnate."

"He always said he'd keep it a small, family deal but he kept selling coal and the contracts kept getting bigger," Reiman said.

"The famous conversation was when Steve stood up one evening and said, "Boys, the contracts are starting to come in. We've got this customer and expect another one. I'll tell you we won't get much bigger than this,"" Bradley said.

"Carter stood up at a meeting and said he wanted a family operation," Seals said. "He said, 'You fellows mine the coal and leave everything else up to me.'"

They also all agree that Carter leads by example. He wouldn't ask a person to do a job he wouldn't do himself.

"We all had the attitude of whatever it takes to get the job done," George Tepovich said. "That included Carter who'd be out there with us pumping water and picking out rocks."

"One time we were building a sediment pond south of the tipple and Steve got out in dress clothes and boots and jumped right in," Fuhrhop said. "Stearns looked at me and said, "Can you believe it?""

Jewell says he shares a "badge of honor" with his hands-on boss.

"I was filling a fuel truck and tired of waiting so I put the nozzle in and went on to something else. Well, 2,000 gallons of fuel spilled on the ground," Jewell said. "I didn't feel so bad because Carter did the same thing a week later."

Company growth has been steady and snuck up on the original crew.

"I once went to a safety meeting and didn't know anyone there," Kribs said. "I thought I was in the wrong place.

"But the company's growth has provided opportunities for many more people get good jobs and support their families comfortably," he added.