



## LEGENDS + ELDERS MYTHOLOGY

*“We are the Old People, we are the new People,  
We are the same People, deeper than before.”*

There would be no legends on Earth if they did not begin with the truth. The truth of our Ancestors and Valley founders can often seem like a fabulous legend. The lives that the Ute First Nation Peoples and the homesteaders who followed them read like stories of the fabulous and mighty tall-tales when retold in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The stories of contemporary skiers, runners, cyclists, snowboarders and the jobs that keep our communities running are certainly also legendary.

People who love living in the Rockies, at the end of the road, two miles high, are unique.

Just about everything to do with mountains and mountain people has a dose of the legendary in it!

I was not there to live these original stories of courage, simple heroism, trial and triumph. But I was fortunate and privileged to be there to hear and collect stories from the generous, tenacious men and women born before or just at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. When I arrived, the many coal mines had been closed for almost 25 years. The Big Mine, a major Colorado Fuel and Iron Company project located just above the town of Crested Butte, produced bituminous, coking coal from 1881 to the final days in 1952. In its heyday, the Big Mine employed 120 miners working around the clock, every day and night.

Men like Frank Orazem, who helped to create our week-long Vinotok celebrations, went into the mines as 11- and 12-year-old boys in order to earn scrip, a form of credit to feed and clothe their families. This tenuous exchange process created the phrase, “I owe my soul to the Company Store.” Add to this that the Crested Butte mines were *never* unionized and some of the most dangerous conditions in the country--and you have the raw materials for what creates and sustains legends.

Many of the men talked about the days of “Baching it” at far-flung mines, in what is now called the back country. They would be snowed in, all bachelors, basically stranded together to continue mining operations until May when the 12 or more feet of snow would have melted enough, hopefully allowing a risky ski back to town through avalanche areas.

Johnny Somrak, who also helped to bring the Stories of the Old Timers into Vinotok storytelling events spoke of how the miners kept up culture and recreation. When someone heard about a good fiddler or Polka squeezebox musician over in Somerset, 30 miles over Kebler Pass, they would tell everyone. The young men would strap their 10-foot handmade wooden skis to their work boots, and off they would go, skiing 30 miles over to dance the night away and then, returning in the morning in time to make it to the early shift at the mine.

The women were equally legendary. Although they rarely spoke about themselves, Polly Spann of the Spann Ranches told me that in the spring, when calving was in full swing, she would be in

the fields through the night, out in the sleety, spring snows, helping the cows who were having difficulty birthing. Then she would get to the home ranch kitchen in time to bake 20 loaves of homemade bread, piles of biscuits, rashers of bacon, sausages, dozens of eggs, and buckets of black coffee for the many hands who arrived at 5 AM. After this she would feed the horses, run-up a dress for her daughter on her Singer, check with the mother cows and calves and start preparing dinner for the same army of family and hired hands. Hats off to Polly and the amazing women who held, not only the families and ranches together, but kept the men well fed, warmly dressed and confident enough to head out into the teeth of every kind of storm that came over the mountains!

by Marcie Telander, Vinotok Godmother and Founder

