People of Mercer County: 
Johnny Flemmer

By Kate Johnson

"I've been delivering coal for 60 years," says Johnny Flemmer, standing behind his 16-ton truck as it dumps stoker coal into Beulah High School's storage bin. Johnny's been delivering stoker coal since he was 6 years old — of course, he wasn't the one delivering it back then, but rather riding shotgun next to his father.

"I went with my Dad, in fact, before I went to school," says Johnny, "I wasn't much help but I liked going along." Coal has been in the Flemmer blood for generations — all the way back to Johnny's grandfather who settled on the farm the Flemmers still reside on today, which is just a few miles outside Golden Valley. "My grandpa settled there in 1904 and he had an underground coal mine which is still there on the property," says Johnny.

Johnny's grandfather, William Flemmer, had something not every North Dakotan had, but something all of them needed: coal. Johnny's father — John Flemmer Sr. — grew up playing on the hill where the mine lay underneath. John Sr. told stories to his children about how you couldn't make too wide of a cavity for fear. How they must have known that and yet they would go in there?" says Johnny, shaking his head at the thought. His grandfather would turn and give the coal to the neighbors — which in those days it was used to heat families' homes in the long North Dakota winters.

Over time, erosion covered the doorway into the hill. A doorway John Sr. always wished his son would open.

Indian Head Mine, Zap, was the mine Johnny and his father would pick up coal from and make deliveries. Throwing the reins on the team of horses, hooking up the buggy and heading out — Johnny bombing along the dirt road with his father guiding the team.

"You hear no motor and you can hear the wheels rolling on the gravel," says Johnny, "Boy that took my mind back to those days."

Johnny Flemmer, 66, Golden Valley, has been hauling coal since he was 6 years old.

Johnny smiled at the memories of the time spent with his father hauling coal. "I liked going along with him," Johnny said, "Just think, pop was 10 cents a bottle and we'd share it."

Delivering coal turned out to be a social event, from which the boys would walk away with full bellies. The father and son were not only paid for their deliveries, but also fed as well. We'd get blacheta in those peoples' homes," says Johnny, explaining the pumpkin turnover. "Some of them ladies could do so good." Johnny knew that when he tagged along there would be cookies, hot coffee, and other goodies that "tasted so good." Of course, all the goodies came once the hard work was over. Which, according to Johnny, the work part of hauling stoker coal was much more challenging. "It used to be more physical labor, all shoveled in and out," says Johnny. "Now it's a piece of cake.

Nowadays, with the truck doing the majority of the work, Johnny says it's easy, with the ability to sit in a warm truck, using tolls and hoists.

He still delivers stoker coal to Beulah High School as well as other businesses around town. However, the stops have become fewer and fewer from back in the day. Hauling for the high school for the last 10 years, Johnny bides it every year because he's the man for the job. "It's a dirty job, but it comes off. Being that I was around it all my life I don't know any different," says Johnny. "Somebody's got to do it, and it might as well be me. I just like it. I love it."