

*Firedamp: The Story of the Coalhurst Mine Disaster*

The three-act stage play *Firedamp*, the story of the Coalhurst mine disaster of 1935, is being re-staged by the Nord-bridge Seniors of Lethbridge, in partnership with, the Coalhurst Centennial Committee and Coalhurst High School. Written by teacher, Arlene Purcell, and with an all-student cast, the drama was first staged in 1998, and the story of the play's production and of its significance to the history and culture of the Lethbridge region was published in an article in *Alberta Views* in the spring of 1999. In response to repeated requests over the years the play is being brought back to audiences to coincide with the Coalhurst Centennial celebrations.

*Firedamp* depicts the events of the mid-1930's in the town of Coalhurst, Alberta, where Lethbridge Collieries operated the Imperial Mine at which an underground methane gas (firedamp) explosion occurred killing sixteen men on December 9, 1935. The sixteen men left behind eleven widows and forty-two offspring. The funeral was, to this day, the largest ever held in Lethbridge, and the city's Mayor Elton requested that all Lethbridge businesses close their doors on that day out of respect for the deceased miners. The Coalhurst Mine Disaster was a major tragedy in the Lethbridge area during the tumultuous and challenging times of the Great Depression.

The characters in *Firedamp* are representations of the inhabitants of the town and their lives are dramatized amidst the social, political, and economic context of The Thirties. The play is a culmination of extensive research which included original source documents and interviews of people who grew up in Coalhurst. The story is really the story of the Alberta experience in which people came from every corner of the globe to find peace and prosperity in our province's industries. The story continues to this day.

The production of *Firedamp* and the opportunity for audiences to share in this story of strife, adversity, and renewal through community spirit and persistence is as an invaluable opportunity for our youth to engage with community members of all ages and to share in a celebration of our heritage as Albertans. The Nord-bridge seniors have a particular mission to foster the recognition of the coal-mining history of the Lethbridge region, and so it only makes sense to work together in a shared mission to bring this story to a broader audience.

Produced and directed by Coalhurst High School teachers, Arlene Purcell and Diane Pommen, the cast is made up of twenty-two enthusiastic and committed students from Coalhurst and Lethbridge schools, and crew members include students, teachers, parents, and community members from Coalhurst and Lethbridge. By the time it is performed in the last week of May, well over a hundred people, organizations, and businesses from the area will have been involved in bringing this project to audiences.

By early April, a website devoted to the play and to the history of the Coalhurst Mine Disaster will be up and running and will be called **Firedamp**; advertising will be in full swing. In the meantime, you can connect to Firedamp by liking us and by commenting on the Facebook page **Firedamp 2013**. Also, click on “Firedamp” on the Coalhurst High School website for basic information. The *Alberta Views* article is posted in both sources and it gives a good overview of the '98 production.

Evening performances will be held Saturday, May 25, and on Wednesday, May 29, through to Saturday, June 1. A general audience matinee will be held on Sunday, May 26, with student matinees on Monday and Tuesday, May 27 and 28. Tickets are \$15.00 each and will be available in mid-April through the Yates ticket office.