

*The Town That Mined Coal and Launched Dreams*  
by Homer Hickam September 2001

Since the publication of *Rocket Boys* (aka *October Sky*), the first memoir of my "Coalwood" series, I have been humbled by the heartfelt messages sent to me from all over the world. Thousands of people have written to say that my stories of growing up in a small West Virginia mining town have given them hope, inspiration, and the realization that dreams can be turned into reality. In a hardworking, dirty little place that perhaps had no right to dream, that existed for the sole purpose of sending its men into a deep and dangerous underground coal mine, a special people were forged who dared to teach their children to fearlessly launch their dreams into the sky. Between 1957 and 1960, six boys, inspired by the sight of the world's first earth satellite flying over Coalwood, did just that by building sophisticated rockets that, against all odds, captured a gold medal in the National Science Fair. Although the "Rocket Boys" were to become the most famous of Coalwood's citizens, fans of the books have come to admire all the people of the little town deep in the mountains. It is their wit and wisdom, I'm so often told, that give readers special insight on life, love, and the value of perseverance to triumph over adversity.

That these stories ever got told at all is a miracle. In 1994, pressed to come up with a short article for a magazine under a tight deadline, I quickly wrote 2,000 words about building rockets as a West Virginia teenager. I didn't much expect the article to be published and even if it did, I thought that would be the end of it. But as soon as the article came out, letters and phone calls began to pour in with people saying they wanted more, more of those feisty rocket boys, more of my parents and their heartrending war on how they would raise their sons, more of the little town and its preachers, teachers, miners, and characters too grand and peculiar to be anything but real. Encouraged and inspired, I began to write the first book.

As the book took form, I began to see Coalwood suddenly come alive again. Its miners, helmets perched on their heads, trudged up the old path to the mine, their lunch pails clunking against their legs. People bustled in and out of the Company store and gathered on the church steps after Sunday services to talk about high school football, to chew over events in the mine, to ponder the nature of the outside world. My father, a man who loved Coalwood more than life itself, was once more leading his men in their daily assault against the deep coal. My mother was in her kitchen, in her refuge in front of the big painted picture of the beach and the ocean that represented her dreams for the future. My dog waited in my basement laboratory, his stubby tail wagging at the sight

of me. In my room, there was my old desk and the book our teacher Miss Riley had given us, the one with all the answers on how to build a rocket written in a mathematical script no one believed we could learn but we had, against all odds. The church bell was ringing as we boys stood on the roof of the old Club House and peered through the telescope a junior engineer had loaned us, to see once more the bands of Jupiter, the rings of Saturn, the craters of the moon. The old high school was there, the halls ringing with the excitement of youth, the classrooms echoing with our lessons, the awareness slowly dawning on us that we were the designated refugees of our town and our school. After the success of *Rocket Boys*, I went even deeper in the follow-on *The Coalwood Way* to tell of the special rituals of the little town, of the strengths and resolve that kept it going, and of the wisdom of the old ways. And now there's the third memoir, *Sky of Stone*, which brings me back to Coalwood after the era of the *Rocket Boys*, at a time when there was trouble but, as always, hopes and dreams bursting to come true. Perhaps that is the key as to why these stories are so loved by so many. Coalwood is not just a place of stone and coal and mountains. It is wherever a people might yet dare to dream.