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Tell Me A Story: Memories of Early Life Around The Coal Fields of Illinois

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This booklet contains essays written by senior citizens about their experiences with coal mining in southern Illinois from the late 1800s through the 1950s. The essays were finalists in a writing competition held during Coal Awareness Week in October 1990. Coal Awareness Week was held by the Office of Coal Development and Marketing, of the Illinois Department of Energy and Natural Resources, and by the Coal Research Center at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

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early life
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the coal fields
of Illinois

Coal Research Center
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale

SIU



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Memories of early life around
the coal fields of Illinois

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the Illinois Humanities Council, or the National Endowment for the Humanities, or the Illinois General Assembly. Nor do they necessarily represent the views of Southern Illinois University or the Coal Research Center. The views expressed herein are taken solely from the memories of the authors, or from the memories of their families and friends, to present a first-hand view of this era.

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PREFACE

"Coal" is defined by *Webster's* as a "black or brownish-black solid combustible mineral substance formed by the partial decomposition of vegetable matter without free access of air and under the influence of moisture and in many cases increased pressure and temperature, the substance being widely used as a natural fuel and contains carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and sulfur. . . ." After reading the seventeen essays and reminiscences included in this booklet, it is easy to see that the *Webster's* definition is lacking because, for the seventeen writers, "coal" becomes much more. For them, coal becomes, as well, a state of mind, a teacher of values, a way of life.

Nearly all of these writers speak of hard times, but their memories hold a kind of reverence for the rituals followed and the lessons learned. And while they often speak of difficult times they, not too surprisingly, speak of good times—good in the sense that there were rewards and a sense of well-being and accomplishment for those who worked diligently to light and warm a nation.

The goal of this writing project has been to record, in the words of those who witnessed and participated, one of this country's most important—and basic and dangerous and ever-changing—industries. Changes in the industry have been so great that it was feared that knowledge of the individual contributions might be lost or forgotten.

What emerges when these stories and recollections are read as a group is a fascinating composite which stresses the individual, to be sure, but molds them all into a definitely human structure—a structure that served to move this country from a very primitive society to an industrial nation.

Textbooks tell it one way. The contributions to this volume tell it in a different way—in terms of lunch buckets, company stores, and mine whistles that signaled the time of day and times of disaster. They speak of the importance of an individual's job in the mine and of the interdependence of the individuals on one another for survival—where one man's mistake could mean death for many.

And they speak of pride in being part of "coal"—of being a coal miner's daughter; of having a grandfather, father, and four brothers being miners, too; of knowing they helped people to cook their food and to stay warm in the winters.

Rituals emerge from these writings, as well. Most prominent are the mine whistles that spoke an important language understood by all—the miners, their wives, the children. The whistle summoned them to work, told them of idle days, and marked the time of day and changing of shifts. The whistles were the first to signal accidents and disasters, to call forth rescuers and doctors, and to prepare wives and children for the worst. And, in tandem with the church bells, the whistles would count and toll the dead.

Then there was the lunch bucket—always a bucket, never a pail or box—with the food in the top compartment and the water beneath. Water to drink and to energize the carbide lamps. As interesting is that those writing about the lunch bucket invariably mentioned that the miner, their father usually, would return from the mine with a little something to eat still in the bucket—to be shared with the child. What does this symbolize? Miner as provider? Simply a treat for a child living a mostly treatless existence? Or is it every man's attempt to have a little control over his environment—to be able to take something back or away from a job that took such a toll on every individual who went down into the mine. It shows a kind of continuity between life on the surface and life nearly alone underground where one has very little control. It demonstrates a humanizing that is minimized beneath the ground where all that counts is filling the car with coal.

What comes out of these varied and interesting writings is a demonstration of the humanness that does pervade an industry that, for many, seemed quite violent and heartless. The writings tell of human strength, patience, and perseverance. They tell of a belief in the worth of what the miner does. They tell of the dignity the work did provide—dignity to allow them to say they are proud to be a coal miner's daughter and, at age 93, the grandmother of three more.

David Koch

INTRODUCTION

by

David Conrad
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Southern Illinois University at Carbondale



In the early days of coal mining in Illinois, the mine owners did little more than provide the work place and the equipment necessary to haul the coal out of the mines. The miners were essentially independent operators who were assigned a place to work in the mine and paid by the carload. Miners had no status as employees, no guarantees from day to day that there would be work, and no fringe benefits. The mine owners accepted no responsibility for injury or death of a miner while working, mine safety was considered to be primarily the concern of the miners, and state mining laws offered little or no protection.

Considering also that it was one of the most dangerous occupations in the world, coal mining was virtually the last choice among common ways to make a living in America. Even so, there was money to be made and work to be had in the Illinois coal fields if a man had the strength and courage to go down in the mines.

Because so many of them had no other choice, one might say that coal miners were the bottom feeders of the work force in the new industrial age. The first people to turn to mining in Illinois were the local natives, the original settlers in southern Illinois who had immigrated generations earlier from the hill country of the South. A mixture of English, Scotch-Irish, and Irish, they were farmers who had left rocky, unproductive land in Appalachia because they could not compete with slave labor. Other farmers who were more knowledgeable and productive sought better lands farther west and north, but these people were content to settle on the prairie areas of southern and eastern Illinois because the land did not require clearing. Poor farmers on marginal lands, they never prospered. When times got really bad, they turned as their ancestors had to fishing and hunting to feed their families. They were resigned to a bare existence because it was all they had ever known.

After the natives, came the immigrants. The years from 1890 to 1922 were ones of extremely heavy immigration to America from the countries of eastern and southern Europe. For many, because they were unskilled and uneducated and did not speak English, the only job they could hope for was coal mining. As a result, the population of the Illinois coal belt acquired significant Polish, Russian, Austrian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, and Syrian components. From northern Europe came lesser numbers of Lithuanians, Estonians, English, and Irish. Generally more thrifty and industrious than the natives, the immigrants were often prevented from getting ahead by discrimination and exploitation.

The third major population component was the blacks. They began moving into southern Illinois after the Civil War when small numbers of freedmen entered from the South. Later, during the labor strife of the early twentieth

century, larger numbers of blacks came north seeking work in coal mines where workers were on strike. What they found in southern Illinois was not greatly different from what they had left in the South. The dominant natives already held the same racial attitudes as their ancestors, and their prejudices were quickly reinforced when they saw blacks coming into the mines as strike breakers. The result was segregation, Klan terrorism, and even lethal violence.

Intensive coal mining in Illinois began in the 1890s. In the years between 1890 and 1915, there was steady growth but also major fluctuation from good years to bad. From 1915 to 1919, the demand for coal caused by World War I brought prosperity to the coal fields, but after 1919 there was a steady decline. Even so, the number of miners continued to grow in this period.

In southern Illinois, where coal mining was most concentrated, there were counties such as Williamson and Franklin where one in four citizens was a coal miner. The largest city in southern Illinois was the coal town of West Frankfort. Its population in 1930 was 14,683, double what it had been in 1920. But many of the coal miners in 1930 were unemployed and had been so for months.

Since the beginning of intense mining in southern Illinois, mining labor had been highly organized. Nearly all the mines in the area operated under contracts with the United Mine Workers of America or the much smaller Progressive Miners of America. When the 1920s began, the unions had managed to change the way miners were compensated so that instead of being paid by the carload they were guaranteed a minimum of seven dollars per day, a relatively high wage for that time.

Unfortunately, when the southern Illinois coal industry reached its peak of expansion and production in the mid-1920s, the markets for coal began to diminish. Petroleum and natural gas had become serious competitors for both industrial and domestic fuel markets. Also, the greatest single user of bituminous coal, the railroads, had made technological advances that improved the efficiency of their coal burning by one-fourth.

When the national coal markets began to decline, southern Illinois was the first area to feel the effects. Coal companies with decreased orders decided that rather than fight with the unions over reducing labor costs, they would simply close some of their mines and produce coal elsewhere in non-union areas. Another reaction among the operators was to mechanize the mines in order to curtail labor costs. The net effect was widespread layoffs of miners and growing economic distress.

By 1927, the coal industry of Illinois was clearly in a depression of its own. Between that year and 1929, a total of twenty-nine mines closed permanently in Franklin, Williamson, and Saline counties. Five thousand miners, nearly one-fourth of the miners in those counties, were out of work. The 1930 census, taken only a few months after the crash of 1929, showed clearly that the coal counties of Illinois were among the first victims of the Great Depression. Franklin County had the highest unemployment rate of any county in the United States. Franklin, Williamson, and Saline counties had four times the national average of unemployment. As the Great Depression deepened in 1930, 1931, and 1932, things got relatively that much worse in the coal fields.

Bank failures, another indicator of severe depression, were rampant. For extended periods there were no banks open in Williamson County, and virtually every bank in the Coal Belt was closed or in the hands of receivers at least once. The impact of bank closings on a community was devastating. There were the problems of depositors who could not obtain their funds.

These were not only individual depositors, but also the local governments, the school systems, and business concerns. Later there was paralysis of local business caused by the lack of loans and other services provided by banks. In effect, a community that loses its banking facilities has to revert to a near-primitive economic system in which many of the more sophisticated aspects of modern capitalism are not present.

The New Deal of the 1930s changed things for the better for coal miners. New Deal industry recovery programs brought some stability to the coal industry. Labor legislation guaranteed the rights of workers to bargain collectively through unions. Social Security provided unemployment, disability, and old age survivors benefits. State and federal laws in the years that followed made employers responsible for mine safety and liable for injuries and death of workers. The strengthened miners' union began pension and health insurance programs.

The coming of World War II brought a brief revitalization of the coal industry. Coal miners were called upon to make tremendous personal sacrifices in order that the economy and the war effort would be supplied with essential fuel. They responded with record coal production even though price and wage controls kept them from improving their relative economic position.

In the years after World War II, the coal industry reverted to its pattern of decline. By bargaining and strikes, the miners got better pay and working conditions, but every year there were fewer jobs for miners. The coal towns lost population and business, and a general malaise set in. Everyone in the Coal Belt knew that while other industries were booming, theirs was ailing and perhaps dying. All a miner could hope for was to work out his days in a mine that would not be closed before he was ready to retire.

The history of coal mining in Illinois is tied to the history of dozens of Illinois coal towns. In the years immediately after 1900, when the natives were taking up coal mining and immigrants and blacks were arriving, communities developed in the mining areas, especially near the entries to the mines. At first they were little more than camps with harsh living conditions and few amenities, but over the years the camps became coal towns. Actually, they were anomalies—isolated industrial towns scattered through the rural Illinois countryside. Most of the men in these towns were coal miners, and most of the women and children were miners' dependents.

Coal towns had distinct class structures. Skilled miners and a few small merchants, clerks, and artisans were the middle class. Mine owners, supervisors, mine engineers, select merchants, bankers, and other professionals provided a small upper class. Unskilled miners, unskilled workers, irregularly employed persons, and a distinct underclass called the poor whites were the lower class, the poor whites being the lowest of all.

In the early days, coal towns were rip-roaring places with abundant taverns, bawdy houses, and violence. As the years passed, the towns were tamed by the coming of churches, decent women, and, in some cases, managerial paternalism by the mine owners. Towns such as Zeigler were built by one company. Housing was rented from the company, and the only store in town was the company store. Miners were given credit at the company store and many never got out of debt. For them it was a form of debt peonage because they could not quit the mines as long as they owed money to the company.

While mining technology has changed drastically over the years, underground mining remains basically the same operation. The coal lies underground in layers or seams from a few feet to ten or fifteen feet thick. Miners

cut their way horizontally through the coal seam, working at what is called the "face" of the coal. They make a horizontal cut into the coal across the bottom of the face. Then they drill patterns of holes in the face and fill the holes with explosives. When the explosives are detonated simultaneously, the coal fractures into pieces and falls to the floor of the tunnel. Miners then load the coal into cars that carry it to a conveyor belt. The conveyor belt moves the coal out of the mine to an above-ground tippie where it is dumped into trucks or rail cars to be taken for processing.

The dangers of coal mining are obvious. Explosive gases or coal dust in mine shafts and tunnels can be ignited by any fire or spark. An explosion and fire in a mine can turn it into a hell on earth. Mine fires can burn for years—some have never been put out. The most dangerous place to work is near the face of the coal. As mining moves forward, the areas already worked are shored up with heavy timbers or huge bolts that are screwed into the ceiling. Pillars of coal are left unmined to support the overhead. But near the face of the coal there can be few supports and tons of coal can fall on the miners.

Mine injuries and deaths come not only from fires, explosions, and falls, but also from accidents with equipment, tools, and explosives. Then there is the threat of breathing lethal gases or losing air supply. Mine shafts and tunnels that can be several miles long have to be ventilated by huge fans. A fire or cave-in can cut off the air and leave miners trapped with only a few hours to live if they are not rescued.

A coal mine is not only a dangerous place to work, it is also unhealthy. After a shift a miner is so covered with coal dust and dirt that he must take a shower and change clothes immediately. Years of breathing the polluted air of a coal mine cause black lung disease in which the lungs of a coal miner actually turn black and gradually cease to function. The victim becomes too weak to work and eventually dies well before his normal time.

Clearly, people who lived in coal towns were strongly influenced by their origins, by the ups and downs of the coal industry, and by the hardships and dangers of mining. But what kinds of people did these influences produce? What were they really like? The memories of seventeen such people are contained in *Tell Me a Story: Memories of Early Life Around the Coal Fields of Illinois*. These stories give many vivid insights into what the people were like, but they are anecdotal essays, not comprehensive studies. Basic scientific studies are needed for comparison. One such study does exist; however, it must be used carefully and objectively as its accuracy has been questioned.

In 1958, Herman Lantz, a southern Illinois sociologist, published *People of Coal Town*. Patterned after a classic sociological study of a Midwestern industrial town called Middletown, Lantz's work used the cloak of anonymity to get people to speak more frankly in interviews. Interviewees were told that their names would not be used. Even the name of the town was made up.

A team of researchers using a prescribed format and standardized questions went through a wide range of public records and newspapers. They interviewed 250 people at length, many of them several times. Lantz and his assistant, J. S. McCrary, then evaluated the results, using the techniques of social science and the theories of behaviorism. The conclusions they reached are sometimes quite startling.

As Lantz saw them, the people of coal town were a miserable and benighted lot, whether they knew it or not. One has to take into account that Lantz

himself was an educated, successful, and urbane man who grew up in an environment far removed from Coal Town. This may help to explain why his Coal Town seems so different from the coal towns in the memories of the seniors who contributed to *Tell Me a Story*. A key to understanding the difference is in the anonymity. Without it, Lantz and his researchers would have obtained little unguarded information. In fact, they might have had very few interviews because of suspicion of outsiders. Moreover, Lantz, as a professor at Southern Illinois University, might have been in serious trouble had he published such a negative book about real people in a real coal town in southern Illinois.

Although for years Lantz maintained that his Coal Town was a composite of several places, today we know that Coal Town was probably Zeigler, Illinois, in the heart of the richest shaft-mining region of southern Illinois. By inference, we can apply what Lantz had to say about Coal Town to the dozens of other coal towns in southern Illinois.

Lantz was particularly hard on the people he called the natives. He says they were characterized by resignation, violence, and superstition. They were resigned to living in poverty with no hope of ever moving up the economic ladder. Their society lacked political order and social maturity. This bred a situation ripe for violence. Fighting, feuding, heavy drinking, crude and even sadistic practical jokes, and killings were common. In labor disputes, people turned quickly to violence and destruction. Superstition abounded, nourished by lack of education, separation, and isolation from other kinds of people.

The influx of different ethnic groups did little to change the coal towns, according to Lantz. The values of the natives remained dominant, and the new ethnic groups had to accept and adapt or live in complete isolation. In the case of the blacks, they were forced to live in segregation in separate communities. Lantz explains his analysis of the situation with the following statement: "We recognize that isolated people may be so imbued with the essential correctness of their way of life that they simply reject all others."

This statement is a clear indication of behavioral theories at work. It carries with it the idea that rules of behavior can be determined, based largely on environmental conditions. Isolation, by this way of thinking, will always breed rejection of the values of outsiders who are different. Coal towns, being isolated industrial communities, lacked diversity and contacts with outsiders. Therefore, they were more inclined toward intolerance of outsiders than would have been a town where the economy was based on trade, commerce, and diversified industry.

A community that rejected outside values was hard on incoming immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Most of these people spoke little English and followed the Roman Catholic or Orthodox faiths. The first and second generations of the immigrants tended to remain isolated in their own ethnic groups, focused often on their churches or social clubs. Later generations were able to integrate into the local society, but only after they had accepted the values of the natives.

Lantz makes certain generalizations about the collective personality of the people of Coal Town. As has already been suggested, he and his researchers found them suspicious and distrustful of outsiders, especially strangers asking questions. They were even distrustful and suspicious of each other. The Ku Klux Klan was quite active in southern Illinois in the 1920s and there were other matters to hide. Over a period of three or four decades, numerous events occurred involving murder, violence, and the destruction

of property. Many of these involved labor strife, but there was also widespread bootlegging and gangsterism.

Other characteristics of the people of Lantz's Coal Town were that they had little regard for education and no respect for people who worked with their minds and not their hands. The researchers found redeeming qualities in the friendliness of the people, once they got to know them, and they came to admire the self reliance of the people. But because of what the researchers perceived as antagonism, anti-intellectualism, and deception, there is a good possibility that Lantz's analysis of the people of Coal Town was skewed.

Generally speaking, there was little that Lantz found to be positive in Coal Town. The people were self-effacing and hostile toward others, they feared nonconformity, they "viewed social change with suspicion and rejected alternative patterns of conduct as untenable," and they were cynical and anti-social. Their family relations were impersonal and lacked warmth or real understanding. Their society was disorganized, corrupt, crime ridden, and violent.

Certainly, the reader gets a very different picture of life in coal towns from *Tell Me a Story: Memories of Early Life Around the Coal Fields of Illinois*. These memories, written more than forty years after the times remembered, are nostalgic and filled with pride in the way the people of the coal towns met their everyday problems and endured. One theme that runs through the stories is that coal was essential to the national economy and that the miners were doing a job that had to be done, especially in wartime.

Several writers of stories reaffirm a common belief in southern Illinois, often expressed by older people, that coal heat is the best kind of heat for a home. It is supposedly warmer and more comforting. One writer suggests that bread and food cooked on a coal stove taste better. These writers were probably looking for something having to do with coal in which they could take pride.

Family relationships are a big part of the memories of the writers. The children of coal miners remember their fathers very differently than what Lantz suggests. Several daughters remembered how their fathers had saved a special bit of food in their lunch buckets to give them when they ran to meet their daddies coming home from the mines. One daughter writes of the special feeling of security she had when she was with her father.

Many of the characteristics and problems of coal towns described by Lantz are only hinted at by the writers of *Tell Me a Story*. We can discern the class structure of a coal town from one writer who describes how the miners all lived on one side of the tracks while on the other side lived the bankers, merchants, doctors, and mine officials. The immigrants lived near the mine on streets called "Hunkie Row" or "Hi-Mary Row" (probably a corruption of Hail Mary because most of the immigrants were Roman Catholic).

Many of the writers remember the poverty and hardships of life in the coal towns. Most of them were children or young adults in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Times were hard throughout the country, but they were worse in the coal towns. One writer describes with a bit of humor how her clothing was made by her mother from bleached flour sacks. Another remembers evening meals of beans seasoned with bacon rinds and gravy made with only flour and water.

The uncertainty of coal mining and the lack of benefits are poignantly described by one writer. Her father became ill and could not work. The mother sold the gas stove and had the electricity and water turned off in their house. They heated with one coal stove and used a well for water. Some

days their meals were nothing more than flour and water gravy. When the father died, the family was left penniless, but the mother was undaunted. She wrote a relative, "Don't worry about us." She told of how she had planted a garden of vegetables and that there were fruit trees and grape vines that would soon bear fruit. The children could pick up spilled coal along the railroad tracks. The writer of this story characterizes her mother as "in-trepid," and surely no one can quarrel with that.

The hard work and danger of working in the mines are described by many of the writers. Miners had to learn to read the formations to avoid ceiling falls. One writer tells of losing a finger in an accident; another tells of how her father worked on his knees in water in a four-foot seam. He went into the mines at age fourteen and worked in the same mine where his father was killed. A fall crushed him and he never walked again. He died years later of cancer caused, according to his daughter, by black lung. Significantly, those who were miners themselves rarely talked about the hard work and danger. Most miners do not like to talk about such things, except in a slightly humorous way.

Miners' humor, which Lantz thought was cruel and ethnocentric, seems in the stories to be more whimsical than mean spirited. One story tells of a miner crushed by a fall advising his rescuers to take a break on company time. Another is about a young man from a coal town who is stationed in the army in a desolate part of Texas which he found so bad that when he returned home he told his friends the United States was going to fight a war with Mexico to force them to take Texas back.

What we see in the stories written for *Tell Me a Story* is memories from four or even six decades ago which may have mellowed over the years. Hard times may have been partially forgotten. A writer whose family lost their father and was left penniless chooses to remember the goodness of her father and the strength and courage of her mother, rather than the hardships of her own childhood. Perhaps this is because people remember only what they want to.

Throughout the stories there are only glimpses of many of the bad things that Lantz found in Coal Town. The violence is hinted at from time to time and there are clues to the racial and anti-immigrant prejudices. Granted, the basic character of the natives comes through much as Lantz describes it, but there is no talk about the KKK activities, strike violence, massacres, gangsterism, political corruption, and crime about which others have written.

Several of the writers end their stories with the remark that, like Loretta Lynn, they are proud to be a coal miner's daughter. This comes from a popular song recorded by Loretta Lynn and an Oscar-winning movie about her life titled *Coal Miner's Daughter*. The song and the movie are about a coal miner's family that lives in poverty but has a mother and father who provide their children with the bare necessities of life and an abundance of love. The children in turn give their parents love, respect, and admiration for bringing the family through such adversity. We see many of these sentiments in *Tell Me a Story*.

TELL ME A STORY

In October, 1990, the Office of Coal Development and Marketing of the Illinois Department of Energy and Natural Resources and the Coal Research Center at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) launched Coal Awareness Week with an open house and dedication ceremony for the Illinois Coal Development Park located in Carterville, Illinois. Among the scheduled activities for this day was the culmination of a writing contest for senior citizens which requested essays about how coal and coal mining had affected their lives. Out of 51 entries, 17 were selected for acknowledgment, including two first place winners, a second place winner, a third place winner, and thirteen honorable mentions. These essays were selected as outstanding examples for their poignant depiction of early life around the coal fields of Illinois. The original essays will be deposited in the archives of the Special Collections Section of Morris Library at SIUC. To preserve this important part of Illinois history, the 17 essays were printed in this booklet and distributed to schools, libraries, and historical societies in Illinois at no cost, thanks in part to a grant from the Illinois Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly.

The essays cover an approximate period from the late 1800s through the 1950s. They describe early mines, mining equipment, and mining processes, but more importantly, they convey the hopes and fears, highlights and heartaches, dreams and realities of early Illinois coal miners and their families. The stories are intended to make people aware of the importance of coal and the contribution of miners and their families in Illinois.

PART I

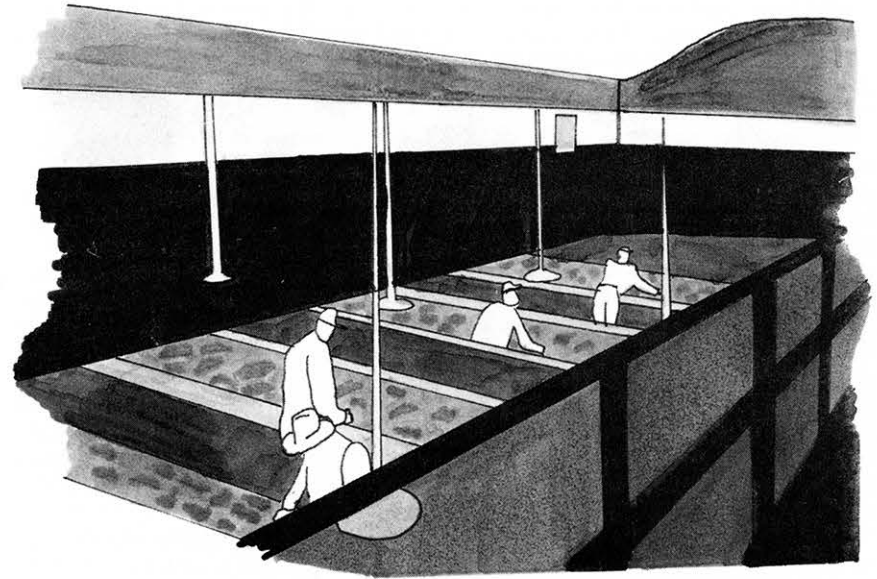
About the Mines and the Miners . . .

. . . "The area at the lower end of the shaft was called the bottom; this was an enlarged area where tools and supplies were stowed and where there was also a repair shop for the equipment that was used. As he entered the room, my father would take his pick and tap it on the roof; he could tell by the sound if any of the rock roof was loose and would be dangerous to walk under. He also studied the color of the rock ceiling, for often loose rock would have a different appearance from solid rock. He always said his life and his buddy's depended on understanding the rock and the danger of coal mining, and using good sense and experience to avoid the danger."

. . . "I was twenty-two years old and at that time had no better way to put food on the table and clothes on our backs than by hauling coal. I paid the mine \$1.50 for each ton and hauled it to Carbondale where I was paid \$2.50. Usually I could get one and one-half tons on my wagon since I had a good team, but many of the men could haul only one ton at a time."

First Place (Tie)

"I was hired on as a rock picker. When the coal car came out of the shaft, it dumped the coal into a shaker. Here the coal was sent through grates that sorted the coal into four sizes. Then the coal was dumped onto four "tables" which were actually steel conveyer belts. The job of the rock picker was to walk these tables to pick the rock out of the coal. Fortunately for me, this job only lasted for three days."



A MINER'S MEMORIES

by

CHESTER S. MILLER
Nokomis, Illinois

My career as a coal miner began in October 1931 at mine 58 in Taylorville, Illinois. I chose this profession for one good reason: it was the only job to be found after I graduated from high school.

I was hired on as a rock picker. When the coal car came out of the shaft, it dumped the coal into a shaker. Here the coal was sent through grates that sorted the coal into four sizes. Then the coal was dumped onto four "tables" which were actually steel conveyer belts. The job of the rock picker was to walk these tables to pick the rock out of the coal. Fortunately for me, this job only lasted for three days.

At that time there was a guy working in the yard who had a bad back and thought he'd be better off picking rock. He asked me if I wanted to trade jobs. Of course, the switch had to be okayed by the boss, John Stamper. John asked me if I'd ever driven a team before. I told him I'd had lots of experience on the farm. He cautioned me that this was "different," but he let us switch. Not only did I like the job as teamster better, but I got a raise. I was making four dollars instead of three dollars per day. My main job as teamster, other than harnessing up the horses, was to load and haul supplies. This included everything from rock dusk to cement. The best part of this job was going to the powder house, which was located about a quarter of a mile from the main gates of the mine. Here I would load up twenty boxes of blasting powder which later would be sent down into the mine. We used all twenty boxes every day. I worked a seven-hour shift, and when I got the powder loaded, I could "take five" on the company. John Stamper was right, though. Getting those horses to pull a coal car when the weather provided icy surfaces was difficult.

I worked as a teamster for four years before I was promoted to blacksmith's helper with a whopping \$5.37 per day salary. Charles Cox, the oldest man in the shop, was the blacksmith, and I remember him as a nice, fatherly fellow to work with. One thing that I remember making during this time was small switches for the track below.

In 1941 I became blacksmith. John Stamper was going on vacation and he gave me the news before he left. The other blacksmith, Clarence Walfard, was promoted to top boss at the same time. My salary was \$7.47 per day. We did everything from making shoes for the horses to making 60-pound switches. We probably spent the most time on door bumpers. These automatically opened and closed the doors down in the shaft when a car of coal went through. These bumpers were pretty important because the flow of air at the wrong time can cause real problems in a shaft mine. Before they invented the door bumpers, 12- or 13-year-old boys would be assigned the day-long task of opening and closing the doors.

The first thing a coal miner wanted to do when his shift was over was to take a shower with Hardwater Castile soap. The wash house had showers on one end and lockers on the other. We wore regular clothes to work and then changed into our work clothes. At night we would leave in the lockers the work clothes which would be worn again the next day. My wife worked awfully hard getting those things clean at the end of the week.

We all carried miners' lunch buckets with us. They were made of aluminum and had a compartment on the bottom for water and a section on the top for the food. The buckets had a lid and a handle. Speaking of lunch, I remember one funny incident that happened to my brother Andy who also worked at 58 as a machinist. Andy dearly loved chocolate pudding—couldn't get enough of it. Mom had been busy and told my sis to fix Andy's lunch. She filled the whole bucket with chocolate pudding. He sure was surprised when he sat down for lunch.

The mine had a lot of safety rules. We couldn't wear gloves with cuffs or pants with cuffs. Jewelry was forbidden, but they would let us keep a pocket watch. Even with precautions, accidents did happen. I remember when Brad Cheney was loading cars under the tipple. We used car puller rope and clamps. Suddenly the steel cable got him from underneath. His leg was pretty mangled and we could tell he was in a lot of pain. As we were trying to get him up to help him to first aid in the office, Brad put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Slow down. You don't very often get a chance to 'take

five' on company time." So we just set him back down and had a break. When we got to the office, I was the only one there that had had the first aid course. I was so nervous that I wrapped his leg without putting the patch on first. Brad recovered and was even drafted by the Army. He was stationed in Texas where it was 114 degrees in the shade, with no shade to be found. After the war he came back to the mines, and the first day back he announced that there was going to be yet another war. He claimed, "Yep, the States is gonna make Mexico take back Texas."

I guess that humor like Brad's is what kept us working some days. For instance, the company paid half of the expense for glasses for anyone who needed them; however, they were not fashion designer eye wear. In fact, in old Charlie's case, they claimed that the glasses were so big that he had to take them off just to pick his nose.

Probably the incident that sticks out as most memorable is about a man whose last name was Gear. His senses were rather dull, maybe because he had been running the spudding machine to dig holes down to the mine. We called him High Gear; I don't think I ever knew his real name. We had been putting in new rails which guided the cages up and down the shaft. We would replace one rail at a time, but the cages had to continue running even though there was only one guide rail. One guy would be on the rope block, and two others would guide the cage. Of course there was a boss there, too. High was on the rope block. The cage was moving fine. The boss yelled, "Is everything okay, High?" When High didn't respond, the boss moved around to the other side. High had gotten his leg tangled in the rope and was dangling about six feet off the bonnet, totally speechless.

Another story shows that miners can really exaggerate. The Peabody Midland Field consisted of mines 7, 8, 9, and 58. Everyone tried to avoid 58 because it was a jen pit (we pulled the coal with mules). But the time came when 7, 8, and 9 were only working three days a week, and we were still getting in five days. The guys from 58 didn't mind rubbing it in. One guy went so far as to be heard bragging to an acquaintance from 8, "Aw gee, my kids are getting so tired of eating steak that they are crying for hot dogs."

I quit the mine in February, 1943. John L. Lewis was still president of the United Mine Workers, which was organized in 1890. I had almost forgotten some of those memories from that twelve years of my life. However, the statement from the preamble to UMWA constitution still impresses me: "There is no truth more obvious than that without coal there could not have been such marvelous social and industrial progress as marks present day civilization." ■

"One of the men would make the undercut, then he would lay on his side and, using a short handled pick, he would start at the bottom of the vein to cut out a step of coal about twenty inches high and extending about half way across the room. The depth of the cut would be about six feet. This would mean that as the man worked his way back, his entire body would be under a bank of coal weighing several tons."



A DAY IN THE MINE WITH MY FATHER, THOMAS MORTON, IN THE YEARS 1900 TO 1929

by

CHESTER L. MORTON
Pana, Illinois

My father started to work in the coal mines of Pana about 1895, before the Pana miners were unionized. He received as pay \$2.75 for mining and loading a car which would hold about eighteen hundred pounds of coal. When a car was loaded, a tag would be attached to the car so that when it arrived above ground and was weighed, the owner of the tag would receive credit for the load. Since two men worked together, each would take a turn putting his tag on the car. Seven to eight cars were considered a very good day's work for two men. Out of this earning, the blasting powder and carbide for the lamp had to be paid, as well as the upkeep of personal tools.

The miner's day began very early in the morning; his lunch was put into a dinner bucket that had two parts; the lower part was for drinking water and the upper part for the food. Some of the water was used for the carbide light. The lamp was worn on a specially made miner's cap.

Arriving at the mine, the miner went into the bath house and changed to his work clothes, and then he went to the mine shaft and waited his turn to get on the cage to be taken seven hundred twenty feet below the surface. During this period of the day, the engineer who operated the cage was notified that this was a man trip so that he would operate the cage with more care than he would when he was hoisting coal. When my father would reach the bottom, he would get into one of the coal cars and would be taken by an electric motor out to his room where he would spend the day working. At one time my father's working place, which was called a room, was a mile and a half from the shaft. The area at the lower end of the shaft was called the bottom; this was an enlarged area where tools and supplies were stowed and where there was also a repair shop for the equipment that was used.

As he entered the room, my father would take his pick and tap it on the roof; he could tell by the sound if any of the rock roof was loose and would be dangerous to walk under. He also studied the color of the rock ceiling, for often loose rock would have a different appearance from solid rock. He always said his life and his buddy's depended on understanding the rock and the danger of coal mining, and using good sense and experience to avoid the danger. The most dangerous part of the day was making the undercut. After the coal that had been shot down was loaded, preparation for the next day was started.

A room was usually about twenty-five feet wide at the face of the coal vein, which at Pana ranged from six to eight feet thick. The room was divided into two sides, one side worked each day. One of the men would make the undercut, then he would lay on his side and, using a short handled pick, he would start at the bottom of the vein to cut out a step of coal about twenty inches high and extending about half way across the room. The depth of the cut would be about six feet. This would mean that as the man worked his way back, his entire body would be under a bank of coal weighing several tons. A few small props were placed under the overhanging coal to help support it. The miner had to depend upon his own experience and skill for his safety. A coal vein is not always as solid as it seems, for sometimes it may have a fault or a soft spot which if cut through might let loose and cause the coal to fall. The most dangerous was called the slick. The miner had to depend upon his eyesight and sense of sound to protect his life, for unexpected situations were always arising; any moment of carelessness could cost his life.

While one miner was making the undercut, his buddy would be getting ready to drill the holes which would be loaded with powder and fuse to blast the coal down into the undermined area. A drill machine was set up next to the face of the coal vein, directly over the undermined area. The drill could be extended to reach from floor level to the roof. A notch was made in the floor and the ceiling. This anchored the drill and held it in place.

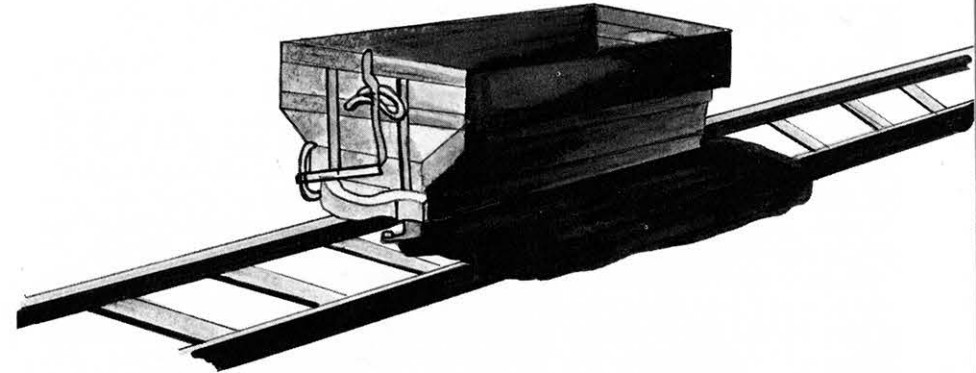
The drilling usually started at the top of the vein; usually six holes, one and one-quarter inch in diameter were drilled to the depth of the undercut. The top holes were drilled at an angle, beginning at the top or near the top of the vein and to the edge of the vein; they were drilled at a slight angle so that the end of the hole would be near the center of the undercut. The reason for this was to give the explosion the advantage of throwing the coal outward. The remaining holes, especially the holes near the outside on the rib shot, were drilled as straight as can be, for this helped to keep the room going straight.

When the holes were ready, a quantity of black powder was wrapped in a sheet of paper to form a cartridge. A fuse was cut into the cartridge, and with the help of a tool called a needle and a tamping rod, the cartridge and the fuse were put back into the hole made in the coal and rock. Dirt was tamped into the hole to make it solid; care had to be used for if the hole was not tamped solid, the shot might backfire and could cause severe damage. The fuses in the angle holes were cut a little shorter than the others so that they would fire just a few seconds before the rest. The purpose was for these shots to crack the coal so that the remaining shots would not be shot against the solid rock, which could damage the roof. Each fuse was a little shorter than the next. This was so the miner could count each shot. Should one fail to explode, he would know it and not enter the room until the next day, for it would be unwise to go back on an unfired shot. At the end of the day, the miners who were working the farthest away from the cage would fire first, and in this way they did not have to breathe the powder smoke. As each fired the shot, he left and went toward the cage. At the cage he would pick up a badge which bore his number; this way they knew when the day shift was all out and accounted for. Then, they would make a trip to the bath house, put on their street clothes, and go on home. Another day in the mine was over.

I asked my dad why he enjoyed working in the mine and he replied that when two men were working in a room together, it was like having your own place. As long as you worked it right, you were almost your own boss. Not many miners could ever have their own farm or business. But as miners in their own room there was a certain amount of independence which helped to overcome some of the dangers of their daily tasks. ■

Honorable Mention

"The loaded cars were pulled to a staging area called the Pardon and then hauled to the bottom where they were let down one by one onto the cage and hoisted to the surface and dumped. The cars were controlled by using a spraging stick and/or a block for letting the cars come down the incline to the cage."



WORKING THE MINES

by

M. J. PUSKAS
Westville, Illinois

My coal mine experience began as a gandy dancer in the switching yard where the railway cars were made up into trains with the different grades of coal (lump, nut, stoker, and mine-run). The railroad ties were raised up to the rails with bars, then spikes were driven in with spike sleds, and the ties were tamped with shovels.

My next move was down into the pits as a trapper, where mules and electric motors were used to gather coal cars from the working room where they had been loaded with shovels by miners. The coal was undercut at the floor level to a depth of about eight feet and the width of the room, and then holes were drilled into the coal, about one and one-half feet from the roof and spaced at various points which were determined to have the best coal fall and least pulverizing of coal.

The explosive used was black powder in pellet form; it was made up into charges of various lengths by using a large tapered stick resembling a ball bat; newspaper was wrapped, and one end was crimped to hold the black powder which was poured into the paper tube. The tube was put into the drilled holes and pushed into the full depth of the hole. The charges were set off by a fuse that was inserted into the black powder charge and extended the length of the drilled hole and about a foot out; a piece of paper was tied to the fuse so that the shot firer could locate the fuse for lighting and early exit.

Miners drilled their holes by hand with the use of an adjustable post, using the roof as a solid base and the floor as an anchoring point. A thread bar and thread box were the driving forces for the drill, which was equipped with a socket for locking the drill and thread bar together. The coal dust was removed from the hole by a scraper, which was a long steel rod with a cone at one end and a brass flange at the other for scraping out the dust. This tool was also used for removing unfired or misfired charges when necessary. The black powder was soon replaced by what was called Permissible, a form of explosive that was easier to handle but required a blasting cap to set it off.

Safety was always stressed in all areas about the mine, above and below. The miner was required to keep his working area safe by having timbers tightly secured between the floor and the roof with the use of cap pieces, similar to a roof shingle only thicker and made of hardwood. Bars were used where necessary—where individual timbers could not be used for support—because of roofing conditions and in areas of frequent use. Some bars were recessed into coal ribs, in holes dug with picks and the other end supported by a timber. Many such variations were used for roof support.

Timbers were brought to the various working areas by the night shift, when no coal was being hauled from the rooms and the roadways were free of any traffic. All mainlines and entries were maintained by timbermen whose sole responsibility was to keep all timbering in safe condition. The miner was responsible for timbering in his working area.

Throughout the mine were many tallow cans that were converted to blackjack grease containers. Tallow lights were the miners' lights for a period until carbide lights came into use. There were no explosive gases in this area, only what was referred to as black damp encountered in worked-out areas where poor or noncirculated air was encountered.

Air was circulated throughout the mine by large squirrel-cage type fans. The air was forced down the airshaft and diverted into entries (underground tunnels). The air was carried by one entry to the working area and then returned by way of the main or haulage entry. As the work progressed, driving the entries inward, a crosscut was made between the two parallel entries to control the route of air circulation. Where coal was dug on both sides of the main entry, three entries were used for air circulation. The air was cut off from worked-out areas by blocking the crosscuts using built up rock, concrete walls, wood frames covered with heavy canvas, and whatever means it took to make an airtight seal between the entries and the worked out areas.

The entries were driven inward by miners working on the solid. Everyone would mark out the route. Two points would be used; a plumbob was suspended and a miners lamp was used to line up the area. Coal was cut into by hand picks on one side of the entry, and then explosives were used in both top and bottom shots and rib shots, which were on the opposite side from where the pick work was done. This work was greatly improved when cutting machines were introduced; driving entries progressed much faster.

The coal was loaded by hand and shoveled into cars with a swinging upward gate and a locking device which held the car when the coal was dumped into the chutes for grading and loading into railway cars.

The coal cars were pulled from the rooms by mules or electric motors, depending on the slopes of the entries. A mule would pull three or four cars and an electric motor would more than double this amount. The mule had a driver where the electric motor had an operator and a triprider. The triprider's

duties were to couple and uncouple the cars, throw switches, and block cars to keep them from going forward or back on inclines. The cars were distributed when empty by both mule and motor.

The loaded cars were pulled to a staging area called the Pardon and then hauled to the bottom where they were let down one by one onto the cage and hoisted to the surface and dumped. The cars were controlled by using a spragging stick and/or a block for letting the cars come down the incline to the cage. The empty cars were pulled off the cage on the back side and put in an area called the runaround, coupled together, and taken back to the working area. There were many different sections where the cars were distributed.

Transportation to the mine was by a miner's train and eventually by bus or private car.

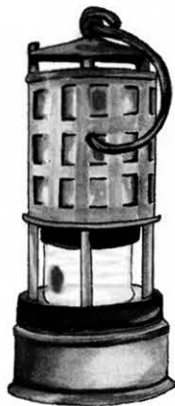
During shutdown of the large mines for various reasons, many of the miners started their own operations of digging coal from the hillsides when a vein of coal was nearer the surface. All work was done by wheelbarrow and homemade cars; in many cases 2x4 lumber was used for rails. The coal was dug on a royalty basis: a small fee for each ton of coal mined. In a few instances coal was strip-mined; the soil and shale were removed by teams of horses or mules pulling slip scrapers.

The mine rats had many stories about their behavior when the screw caps were left off of the tallow cans; the rats would climp atop the cans and lower their tails into the cans and then lick their tails for nourishment.

When reclaiming steel and timbers from old workings, if you heard the rats squeaking and running it was time to get out of the area because a heavy fall of the roof was sure to occur.

If a miner left his dinner pail on the floor it was sure to be empty when he went to eat. It is said that a rat would hook its tail in the bail and jerk the cover off or push it off if the pail was lying on its side. ■

"Birds were kept there to take down into the mine to check for bad air. If the bird did not get drowsy or pass out, the air was considered safe for the miners."



TATE'S BLOCK COAL MINE

by

ELIZABETH TATE SCUPHAM
Roodhouse, Illinois

My father, Dallas Tate, born August 20, 1894, was a native of Saline County, near Galatia, Illinois. There he learned coal mining and farming at an early age. After enlisting in the U.S. Army and serving in World War I, he returned to Illinois and married Gladys Harvey on July 1, 1919, in Scott County. In the early 1920s they moved near Roodhouse in Greene County, Illinois, and opened a mine on property owned by my grandfather, Stephen Harvey, located two and one-half miles east of Roodhouse.

My father always worked underground with his employees in the mine. He was a hard but fair taskmaster, and he never asked anyone to do anything that he was not willing to do himself. My mother worked as bookkeeper and paymaster as well as keeping up with all the farm chores.

My father had equipment and gasoline stolen frequently from the mine. In 1922 a quantity of dynamite was found missing. The sheriff of Greene County required my father to go with him and check other mines nearby for the missing dynamite. The dynamite was not found at that time. A few days later there was an explosion felt that shook the entire county. My father's dynamite had been used by striking railroad workers to blow up a railroad bridge near Drake (Hanks Station), Illinois, a few miles to the southwest of Roodhouse.

The mine began filling with gas that would ignite and burn for long periods of time. When the water table rose in the shaft, it would extinguish the fire and my father would try to reopen the mine. My father came home one night and requested that my mother check the back of the long underwear he had been wearing in the mine. My mother was stunned when she found large holes burned in his underwear. He explained to her that a large wall of coals which had been burning fell down and almost trapped my father and two of his employees. Several more attempts were made to reopen the mine, but

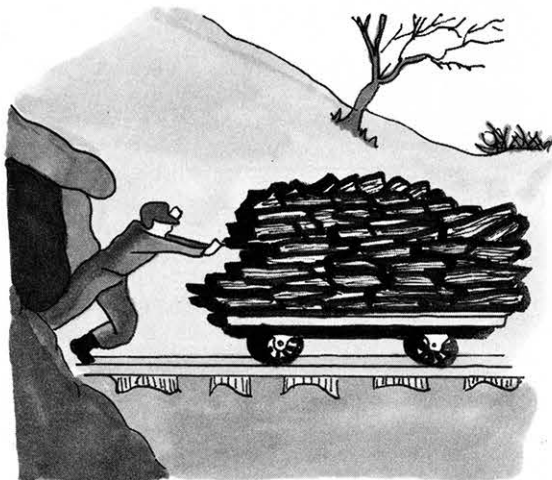
each time the water was pumped from the mine the coal would start burning again. My father decided to close the mine for good and open a new mine at a new location.

The new mine, Tate's Block Coal, consisted of a shaft ninety feet deep, and a coal tippie was used to pull up the blocks of coal. The coal cars were pulled up by a blind horse whose name was Doll. She was a favorite pet of the family. Later, after my father got a gasoline motor to do the work, Doll was retired to the pasture where she continued to walk around in circles until she died at the age of twenty-eight. I have vivid memories of going with my mother to visit my father at the mine. An air vent and shaft could be seen a short distance from the main mine shaft. A shanty, which was off limits to me as a child, stood near the coal mine and served as a place where the miners kept carbide for their miners' lamps on their hats, dynamite, blasting caps, fuses, and gasoline. Birds were kept there to take down into the mine to check for bad air. If the bird did not get drowsy or pass out, the air was considered safe for the miners. The shanty also served as a changing room for the miners to change their clothes. There was also a scale and scale house where the trucks were weighed empty and then weighed again when loaded.

During the Depression, as money was very tight, people would trade things for a load of coal. I remember a player piano my father took in trade for a load of coal. I was never allowed to go down to the mine alone. But during the summer my mother and I would take watermelon that was raised in our garden down to the miners during their afternoon break. I also remember seeing the miners come to the house on paydays to collect their money from my mother, the paymaster.

My father operated the coal mine until 1942 when World War II took all the available young men to serve their country. My father closed down the mine at that time and began farming. Tate's Block Coal Mine has never been reopened. ■

"My career in mining began when I quit my third year of high school to go to work in a small mine near Prairietown, Illinois, in the fall of 1937. There was no electricity or mules at the mine. My first job was to push coal cars."



THE SCANLAN FAMILY IN COAL MINING, OR OVER 100 YEARS IN THE COAL MINES

by

EDWARD WM. SCANLAN
Venedy, Illinois

Time has erased the exact dates of our family's starting in coal mining.

My grandfather, Henry P. Scanlan, came from Ireland about 1850 and worked as a coal miner in Tennessee. He took my dad, Patrick H. Scanlan into the mines at the early age of ten, before child labor laws. Dad spent sixty-one years as a coal miner.

I was born in 1920 while Dad was superintendent at K-D mine in Worden, Illinois. It was owned by the Illinois Traction System, an electrical railroad, part of the Sam Insul financial empire. My earliest recollection of mining is going into this mine at the age of four.

One of my favorite keepsakes is a book given to my dad by Mother Jones. It has her handwritten words inside: "To Pat Scanlan from his Comrade Mother Jones, May 13, 1910." Dad had worked with Mother Jones, doing U.M.W.A. organizing in West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and Illinois, during the U.M.W.A. formative years. Dad's and Mother Jones's philosophy of fair treatment of the rank and file coal miner has been a big influence on my life. I heard the words "rank and file" for the first time at West Frankfort, Illinois, around 1931. My four older brothers were all coal miners. They and dad talked coal mining labor strife at every meal and all day Sunday.

One of my most indelible memories is the event near Mulkeytown, Illinois; I think this was around Labor Day 1932. The coal miners, including my four brothers, were on strike against some of John L. Lewis's decisions.

Dad had been a "face boss" at Old Ben No. 15 near West Frankfort and had been called back to work to restart the mine. In May 1932, our family had moved back to Worden, where Dad still owned a house. My oldest brother, Driscoll, was driving our dad to West Frankfort, and we drove past Mulkeytown. On our way down, near the Perry-Franklin county line, we were stopped by a group of gunmen who checked us out. Our car had my brother, his wife, his mother-in-law, Dad, and his friend Winter Wilson (I think he was city clerk at West Frankfort), and me. We were warned not to come back the same route because they expected trouble.

Driscoll did not heed the gunmen's warning, so we came back the same route and got there just as the "fireworks" started. It looked like a Wild West movie—gunmen firing on unarmed innocent people, men and women. I distinctly recall one woman tearing up her underskirt to bandage a wounded man's head; pretty rough real-life drama for a twelve year old.

This was not a "Pittston type fight of the men against the Company." It was brother against brother, rank and file against hierarchy. The victims were a group of rank and file U.M.W.A. members and their wives who hoped to have a peaceful rally in southern Illinois, but were shot up and turned back by the gunmen.

My career in mining began when I quit my third year of high school to go to work in a small mine near Prairietown, Illinois, in the fall of 1937. There was no electricity or mules at the mine. My first job was to push coal cars. Later I worked at hand loading with an uncle who was a "solid shooter" in one area, then as a shoveler on an air driven "puncher machine" to undercut the coal in an area with compressed air lines.

This mine did not have a local union of its own, but was part of a larger mine union, Local No. 7 at Staunton, Illinois. Klondike was a co-op mine with my dad, brother Wendell, and one uncle as partners with eight more men.

Some from the big local objected to a boy not yet eighteen working underground, so Dad brought me on top to fire the boilers for him. He was the steam hoisting engineer. After Klondike closed I went back to school, graduating from Staunton High in 1940.

At our recent fifty-year high school reunion, I was the only one to stay in the mines, even though most of the others' fathers had been miners.

One of my favorite subjects, described as an obsession by one union official, is pensions.

Nearly all the old classmates went to oil refineries, the steel mills, or the aircraft or auto industries. They have been retired many years (some under a thirty-and-out program), with far better pensions than miners with forty years of service.

It should be remembered that miners started pensions in 1946; but to quote Harry Huger when he was chairman of the U.M.W.A. Health and Retirement Fund in 1973, "I think that the Fund and those that controlled it became too isolated from the beneficiaries. They forgot that their first loyalty was to the coal miner—not a bank or a few other selfish men. The Fund grew weaker, and people who really earned their right to pensions and hospital cards were dropped from the Fund's rolls." I say a loud amen to that! I'm still being victimized by the Funds, and I'll explain by stating a few well-documented facts.

(1) I became a member of the U.M.W.A. on August 30, 1948, when they unionized the Venedy Mine where I was employed as a laborer. They promised "all rights and privileges of the U.M.W.A." That promise was broken the first time in 1960 when they revoked the 85-HS cards of my brother Driscoll and me. This was the period when Harry Huge spoke about the "few selfish men and a bank." Driscoll finally got his 85-HS back and got his full pension in 1969.

(2) I have certifications from Joseph Angleton, secretary-treasurer of District 12 that I had paid all U.M.W.A. dues and assessments, continuously since September 1948.

(3) I have document upon document proving I have done "classified work" for all "signatory employers" since September 1948. All of these employers were bonafide corporations and paid full U.M.W.A. royalty all these past forty-two years.

(4) I have letters from different Fund representatives granting me classified credit for twenty-one and one-fourth years, as of October 7, 1977; then it increased to thirty and one-half years by May 24, 1979; then thirty-one and one-half years credit at age fifty-nine and one-third. This meant \$407.10 per month after the age reduction factor. Since I was a few years short of full Social Security, as well as full U.M.W.A. pension, I decided to work until then, thinking my pension was vested.

(5) I got ready to retire in early 1988, but whammo, Mr. John Lorenzen from the Fund's Evansville office notified me they were taking away twenty-one and one-fourth years credit, which meant a loss of \$460.00 per month. So here I am, still working at age 70, as hosting engineer at Peabody Baldwin Mine, fighting for full pension.

I have spent 40 years as a layman advocate for old miners on pensions, Social Security, and black lung—all as a volunteer, at no charge. We have won all cases except two; one died in 1968 trying to get his U.M.W.A. pension. I have a letter from his sister-in-law thanking me and telling how his own local union officers cheated him after forty-two years classified work. I'm the other one that hasn't won, yet! But I aim to if I live long enough. My wife reminds me that I can help everybody except myself.

There was absolutely no change in my record prior to Mr. Lorenzen's letter revoking twenty-one and one-fourth years credit. He took a new ruling and made it retroactive. I understand it was because one employer did not sell its coal to another coal company. This seems crazy to me. That first company was a legal entity in itself (corporation) and paid all U.M.W.A. royalties.

(6) Besides being an advocate for miners in the 1960s, I renewed my efforts in late 1986–1987 when the "Miners for Better Pensions" movement reached Illinois.

This movement began to open the eyes of the rank and file. They are growing unhappy. One reason is the disparity in pensions. There is too much spread between hierarchy and rank and file pensions. A few years ago we learned of a special retirement opportunity for certain employees of the International Union. I understand the officers have created a thing whereby they give a five-year age plus a five-year service bonus plus some kind of Social Security supplement, making it possible to draw in excess of \$2,400 per month at only age 55, while a miner gets only \$830 per month at age sixty-two and forty years work. Me think it stinks!

If any reader wants more details and proof, please contact the writer.

Also I have a son and son-in-law who are coal miners, with fifteen and nine years, respectively. They and others I talk with are thinking of the pension disparity.

EPILOGUE

Unlike Marie Antoinette's people, miners aren't complaining because of lack of bread; they want an equitable piece of the pie. ■

"Then there was the pit lamp, a small, brass carbide lamp which clamped onto Dad's cap and which provided light underground. Miners declared there was absolutely NO dark like the dark in an underground mine."

ILLINOIS MINING: A FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT

by

KATIE FIENE BIRCHLER
Chester, Illinois

Hurray for modern coal mining methods in Illinois! There are safer working conditions and benefits never dreamed of 50 to 100 years ago. But my memories as a child in Cutler, Illinois (Perry County), where two underground mines were in operation, have to do not so much with methods and the operation of the mines but with related things as seen through the eyes of a coal miner's daughter. The Whippoorwill Mine was at the edge of town, and Wilson's Mine was a mile or so farther east. Dad worked at the latter.

First there was my dad's metal lunch bucket, like the one carried by every coal miner, indigenous only to miners. It held water in the bottom and food in a tray above. Dad always tried to leave a little something in his bucket each day—a bit of fruit, cake, something—because my sisters and I raced to open it when he arrived home. A kind of game. Anything we found didn't taste too good. It was sort of soggy, but we thought it was a treat anyway. The coal miners' metal bucket (no they did not call it a lunch pail) is today considered an antique.

Then there was the pit lamp, a small, brass carbide lamp which clamped onto Dad's cap and which provided light underground. Miners declared there was absolutely NO dark like the dark in an underground mine. A light was essential. Dad worked on his lamp a lot, it seemed. He spent some time every evening scraping flint which ignited the flame by flipping a small wheel. It made a strange sound as he flipped it with his hand. He opened the small lid on the lamp base and spit in it, causing a smoke-like mist as well as a sulphur-like odor to come from the opening. The flame would be adjusted to short or long.

Then there was the mine whistle. I recently checked with several underground mines operating today, and none have a whistle—not like those in Cutler in the early to mid-1900s. The whistle at The Whip, as everyone called the Whippoorwill Mine, blew every day at noon, and everyone depended on it. This was a good sound. It meant the mine was working. Men could provide for their families. All was well. But that wasn't all. There was an unpleasant side. When a mine accident occurred, the whistle blew short blasts—a wailing, horrible sound. Everyone ran into the streets and waited for the awful news. Some even raced to the mine and stood at the shaft. Was someone only hurt? Was there a death? Many deaths?

With this came a day I shall never forget. It was the summer of 1935. One of my classmates, Gail Martin, with whom I had gone through grade school as well as three years of high school (he was smart—helped me with algebra or I maybe wouldn't have made it), was working at the mine to make enough money to further his education. He planned to go to college in the fall. Gail had been employed at The Whip for only a short time when his uncle, the late Otis Martin said, "That boy is going to get killed in there. I'm going to bring him in here to work with me." Otis was working nearby. Then it happened. A fall. A cave-in. Otis sustained a broken back and other injuries, but Gail didn't make it. He was crushed.

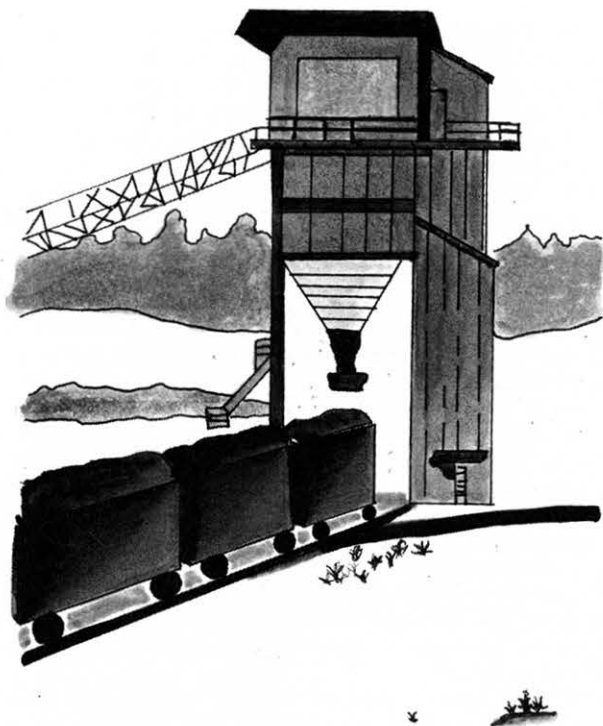
I was standing on the porch at our home. It was mid-afternoon. The whistle began the terrible signal. Short blast followed by short blast. An awful feeling gripped me. Strange. A dread. The news came fast. It was Gail. They thought Otis would make it, but Gail was gone. He would not finish school. Marry. Have children.

I never again heard the whistle without that gnawing feeling. That hurt. And it surely was much worse for Gail's parents and family.

While accidents do sometimes happen in mines today, they are nothing to compare with those of earlier times. But the mine whistle has gone the way of mules pulling coal cars, picks and shovels, water-filled lunch buckets, and pit lamps. All of these remain in my memory. However, the mine whistle left the greatest impression on this daughter of a coal miner.

The Great Depression of the early to mid-1900s took its toll on Cutler's mines, as well as those throughout Illinois. They went from part-time operation to closure. Nothing remains of the above-ground structures in Cutler. But in my living room there is a pencil sketch of The Whip, done by the late Steelevator, Illinois, artist, Carroll Joost, and nearby on a table is a brass pit lamp, holding ivy instead of carbide. These are cherished reminders of an earlier era of coal mining in Illinois. ■

"The miners gauged a car full by placing their elbow on the car; coal could be no higher than the tips of their fingers, for clearance."



THE GOOD LIFE IN A SMALL MINING VILLAGE

by

TONY SCHWEDA
Sandoval, Illinois

My name is Tony Schweda. I am eighty years old, and I was born on August 15, 1910, in a coal mining town named Glenridge, located between Centralia and Sandoval, Illinois. I began work at the mine when I was seventeen years old. I started work in the tippie picking rock (separating coal from rock). There were four different sizes of coal—screening, nut, egg, and lump.

After two years, when I was nineteen years of age, I was transferred to the evening shift of the boiler room where, after the firemen who manned the furnaces pulled the "fires," we "blew out" the ashes; then, back to the tippie, where we checked the motors and oiled the machinery, getting everything in readiness for the next day's work. After this was completed, I again went into the boiler room to unload the coal to fire the furnaces.

In 1929 I was releasing doors on a car of coal for the boilers when I accidentally caught my left hand in the release door, and my left index finger was amputated. My settlement was \$480. Later, returning to work, I was placed in the blacksmith shop as a helper where I learned to weld.

Many of the miners rode bicycles to work from Sandoval, Centralia, and Central City. Bicycles were parked in the old feed supply shed. Many miners would arrive to work thirty to forty-five minutes early, change clothes in the bathhouse, then sit around telling experiences of the previous day's work and swapping jokes. Camaraderie was great between miners, their families, and friends. They were always willing to lend a helping hand to their neighbors or anyone else in need—just one big happy family.

Our mule feeder, Tom, was a jovial fellow, always singing as he rode the cage down into the mine to feed and water the mules. He was always accompanied by his Airedale dog, who went with him each time, three times a day. The mules' main function was to pull the filled coal cars. The miners gauged a car full by placing their elbow on the car; coal could be no higher than the tips of their fingers, for clearance. The mules were brought up the first of April and turned out to pasture until the first of September, when we all went back to work.

In our little village of 350 population, all burned coal. We remember "no heat can equal or be more comfortable than coal heat."

After a week of hard work, miners, their wives, and their friends looked forward to the Saturday night dances held in the Schweda Hall. The music was provided by local musicians. Prizes were awarded to the best waltzing, foxtrotting, and two-stepping couples. A Halloween dance was held, with prizes going to the prettiest, ugliest, and most unusual costumes.

In winter when the "ole mine pond" froze over, skates and sleds made their appearance, and a huge bonfire roared on the side of the frozen pond where one could grab a little heat when the cold took over. Skaters enjoyed the winter sport to the fullest.

We also had a mine-sponsored baseball team. Most all of the players worked at the mine. The Glenridge Miners baseball team was one of the best in the mid-1930s. I was a member of the team and played shortstop, right field, or third base.

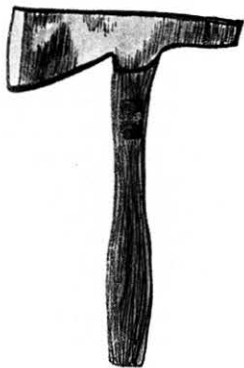
In 1945 a lot of setbacks befell the coal mine, which had started in 1908. Fires, flooding, and accidents saw the mine's finances dwindle. Many young men left to look for better positions, and older miners were no longer able to keep production up. The miners banded together and bought the mine, and for one summer worked for one dollar a day. The mine lasted a few more years, and then closed for good.

The name Glenridge came from a Chicago company that contracted to sell all the miners' coal. In later years, when new machinery was brought in to mine the coal, a lot of jobs were eliminated.

Nothing remains of the old coal mine itself except the old concrete mule barn. It is deteriorating more and more as the years go by.

To sit and reminisce about the "good ole days" brings back pleasant memories of a long ago, bygone era. ■

"It was hard work, long hours, and little money, but it was a way to make a living in southern Illinois in the 1920s, and we were young and healthy and happy and didn't realize that we had a few hardships."



HAULING COAL WITH A TEAM AND A WAGON (A Story that was My Father's—Roy McDaniel)

by

NORMAGENE WARNER
Carbondale, Illinois

Giddap, Dan. Giddap, Doc. I'm in a hurry to get my supper, too. Dan and Doc were the horses my father had given me when I married a year and a half ago. There was not a finer team in the area.

The cold rain that had been falling all afternoon had now changed to sleet, and I shivered as the bits of ice slid down my coat collar. I had not worn gloves—it had seemed warm this morning—and my fingers were red and bitter cold as they held the hard leather reins. Dusk had settled early, and the dark shadows of the woods bordering the narrow muddy road seemed stranger to the gold and scarlet sentinels that had stood there only a month ago. Sleet had formed on the bare branches, and they seemed to be whispering ominous words among themselves as they rubbed together.

The muddy ruts were worn deep, and the empty wagon rattled and the scoop in the back jolted as the horses stepped out smartly. We were only a mile from home where they knew that, following a brisk rubdown with a tow sack to remove the sleet from their fat rumps, there would be a good supper and a snug stable with clean dry bedding.

As I turned into our driveway, my heart was also warmed by the glow of light from the kitchen window and the sight of my pretty young wife holding our baby daughter in her arms. For me, too, there was waiting a warm shelter and a good supper.

It was the winter of 1923, and I hauled coal from the Phillips and the Swafford mines, but mainly from the Wilson Mine. When I would go to one, if I saw eight or ten wagons ahead of me, I'd switch to the other.

I was twenty-two years old and at that time had no better way to put food on the table and clothes on our backs than by hauling coal. I paid the mine \$1.50 for each ton and hauled it to Carbondale where I was paid \$2.50. Usually I could get one and one-half tons on my wagon since I had a good team, but many of the men could haul only one ton at a time.

Winter came early and with it bad weather, so it became hard to get two loads from the mines to my customers in Carbondale in one day. To do this I had to get up at 4:45 a.m., feed my horses, hitch them to the wagon, and get to the mines by 5:30. Already miners were there to load the coal from the chute where it was held after the fine coal had been screened out. I hauled only lump coal. When I had a load I'd come back home, grab a quick breakfast, and head for town.

Usually I'd just do without lunch since I would have had a big breakfast, but once in a while, if I was lucky, I could catch a quick bite at home when I came back for my second load. Once I was so cold after I had unloaded the coal into the coal bin in the basement with a shovel or scoop, a nice lady invited me in to get warm and eat a bite. I'd never had "chitlins" before, but I was so cold and hungry they tasted fine.

Almost always I got home after dark. It was a short night, for at 4:45 the alarm would ring to start me on another day. It was hard work, long hours, and little money, but it was a way to make a living in southern Illinois in the 1920s, and we were young and healthy and happy and didn't realize that we had a few hardships. ■

"Dad heard a rumor that a group of miners were plotting to 'catch him, tar and feather him, and take him out of town on a rail.' The rumors disturbed Dad, but he could understand the resentment they felt towards him. He was working for their enemy, the owner of Clifford Mine."

MINE SHUT-DOWN BRINGS HUNGER AND VIOLENCE

by

BETTY G. MAYHEW
Carbondale, Illinois

This true mine story took place in southern Illinois, near Herrin. It was told to me by my father-in-law, M. Carl Mayhew, Sr., long after it happened.

Coal miners at the Clifford Mine decided to strike for higher wages. The company store charged such high prices for groceries that by the time the miners' purchases were deducted from their paychecks, they received little cash for other necessities.

The strike happened in 1920 (years before Tennessee Ernie Ford sang mournfully of this same situation). Some Clifford miners found work elsewhere, but most stayed in their company-owned houses, unemployed. Their large, well-tended gardens provided them with food in season. Their wives canned great quantities of vegetables and fruits to be used during the winter months.

When the Clifford mine closed, Dad Mayhew was the only worker needed. He had been the bookkeeper for the mine owner; when the strike occurred, Dad was given the job of keeping the fire going under the steam boiler twenty-four hours a day. The steam boiler kept the water pumps running, and they pumped the water out of the mine. Otherwise, the mine would be flooded when the miners went back to work.

After the strike had been going on for months, the unemployed miners and their families suffered grave hardships, the worst of which was little food and no money. One ethnic group added protein to their meals by cooking cats and birds. Cat lovers were horrified that those "furriners" could be so heartless, and they kept their own pets in their homes to protect them.

While most other residents in Clifford were hungry, the Mayhews, with income, had plenty of food. Dad heard a rumor that a group of miners were plotting to "catch him, tar and feather him, and take him out of town on a rail." The rumors disturbed Dad, but he could understand the resentment they felt towards him. He was working for their enemy, the owner of Clifford Mine.

After so long a time, Dad Mayhew chose to heed the threats and to leave Clifford before he suffered grave injuries or death. One bitter-cold winter night, about 9:30 p.m., Dad and Mom and their two small children stood on the front porch, warmly dressed. Their destination: southwest Missouri. If only they could get to the train, they would be out of danger. Dad locked the house doors securely and felt uneasy as they stepped off the porch. They could see shadowy figures in the murky darkness. A guardian angel must have been watching over them; they reached the train without incident. One person who witnessed their departure surmised that the sight of the children stirred compassion in the hearts of the would-be assassins.

There was relief and rejoicing when the Mayhews arrived in southwest Missouri. That night, the whole family slept soundly, with no fear of violence—a secure feeling not felt in some time. Time passed quickly, with all concerned about the Mayhews' future. After five or six days had gone by, Dad called a friend in Clifford. The news was, "All's clear! Come on home! We miss you."

The Mayhews said goodbye to their Missouri relatives and boarded the train for Clifford. When they arrived home, the neighbors welcomed them with open arms. Dad led the way into the house, finding the front door locked, as he had left it. All the house and its contents were intact, until they got to the kitchen. A window had been broken, and every last crumb of their groceries had been stolen. Potatoes, sugar, flour, cornmeal—all in large quantities—were gone. All the vegetables Mom had canned from their large garden, blackberry jam, strawberry preserves, green tomato relish, grape juice from the grape arbor, tomato juice, coffee, tea, etc. were gone. All the shelves were bare!

I have tried to find someone who lived in Clifford who could add to my story the missing details. Since, to date, I have no informant, I'll have to use my imagination. As to what Dad's reaction was on the discovery of the stolen groceries, I think he must have said, "Whoever raided our pantry must have been starving!"

And after that, the neighbor who was most verbally horrified by the "grand theft," invited the Mayhews to a bountiful meal. During that time, Dad may have wondered, "Where did all this food come from? I'll ask Mom about it after we get home."

With this "sour-note" ending, I'm still hopeful of "flushing out" an Oldtimer who will say, "I lived in Clifford during the mine shut-down. Get out your note pad, B.G., and I'll answer your questions." ■

"It took three days to get all the miners out. Of the 119 men killed in the explosion, I knew 100 of them personally. I was a fresh air man—the one that carried the bodies out."

A LIFETIME OF COAL MINING: THE CHANGE OF DAYTON McREAKEN

by

DAYTON McREAKEN
West Frankfort, Illinois

When Dayton "Wormy" McReaken retired from coal mining in 1987, he not only closed a chapter on his own 46-year-long career, but he also finished a family tradition of mining that began with his own grandfather in the mines of Ireland, moved to the mines of Illinois with his grandfathers, his father, and uncles, and flourished there with the careers of his brothers and himself. It is a tradition that covers the spectrum of mining responsibilities represented by both labor and management, and, while neither his son nor grandsons work in the mining industry today, the tradition continues in the colorful memories and anecdotes that he has shared with children and grandchildren alike.

McReaken was employed eleven years as a U.M.W. of A. miner working in several different classifications, eight years as a federal and state mine inspector, and twenty-seven years in management. He worked as a laborer, a face boss, mine manager, safety director, superintendent, and general superintendent. He was also on the Illinois State Mine Rescue Team for several years working on mine fires and explosions. In 1972 he was appointed Director of Mines and Minerals by then-Governor Richard Ogilvie, and he served for two years in that capacity.

As a young boy, McReaken slipped off with buddies to the sand pile at the West Mine in West Frankfort, Illinois. There he would watch miners bring the mules up at the end of a shift and dream of the day he could join the men as a miner himself. He also enjoyed the tales that the men spun. "You could get black lung just listening to the old timers' stories," he recalls.

A great role model for a young boy, Dayton's father, Arthur E. McReaken, had received the Carnegie Medal for Heroism while working at a mine in Panama, Illinois. After escaping a mine fire, Arthur reentered the mine to

attempt to rescue two other men. During his recovery attempt, Dayton's father was himself trapped, but luckily was rescued by a friend, Howard Lewis, brother of John L. Lewis. Dayton McReaken still has his father's medal and has made plans for his son to have it someday.

In 1942, at the age of seventeen, he began working in the Orient No. 2 Mine in West Frankfort. Since he lived only ten blocks from the mine, McReaken walked to work, collecting other miners as he went, and by the time he reached the mine there would be seven or eight other miners with him. All of the men carried aluminum lunch buckets, a familiar sight to mining families.

When McReaken and his wife Dorothy were expecting a child in 1947, McReaken still worked at the Orient No. 2 Mine. Since there were no medical benefits at the time, McReaken would work double shifts in order to save extra money for the impending doctor and hospital charges. He would work a six-day week and do a second shift every other night, thus putting in a total of nine shifts for the week. Sleep was a real premium at the time, so McReaken would skip his shower at the end of his double shift day, walk home in his pit clothes, and lie on a quilt behind the heating stove to sleep until it was time to get up the next morning. This way he would have an extra hour of sleep.

McReaken had already left the Orient No. 2 Mine when the explosion occurred there in 1951. "It was the worst I've ever seen," McReaken recalls. "It took three days to get all the miners out. Of the 119 men killed in the explosion, I knew 100 of them personally. I was a fresh air man—the one that carries the bodies out."

"Since the explosion was on December 21, the holiday was dubbed Black Christmas," McReaken remembers. "It was, too. It was pitiful. There were seven or eight funerals in the morning, and seven or eight funerals in the evening. Men were running from place to place to be pallbearers."

McReaken continued, "Anytime you work fires and explosions and recover men that are dead, the notes they leave behind almost always pertain to God. They know they are going to die, and their last thoughts are always of God and their wives."

McReaken began work at the Orient No. 3 Mine in Waltonville in 1950, and it was while he worked there that he was given the nickname "Wormy" by his co-workers. He already had a reputation for being able to "worm" through tight places in the mines when one day he showed up with large pink tablets in his lunch pail. One of the other miners asked what the pills were for, and McReaken responded, "My kids have worms, and Doc Barkdull says we all have to take these." That cinched it. He has been called Wormy ever since.

While still at Orient No. 3, McReaken had a close call that showed how much miners depend on one another and how close they become. "Noah Kelly, myself, and two other fellows were covered up by a rock fall. Noah hollered 'run!' just as the fall came. He was about fifty at the time, and since I was younger, I was able to dig myself free. I had been buried to the waist, but Noah was buried deep and I could just see his neck. I ran to him and told him, 'I can't help you. I'll get help.' I ran about four hundred feet and was able to catch the mantrip. It was quitting time, so I was lucky to catch them. The men came back with me and started to dig Noah free. He told them, 'Check for Wormy, He's behind me.'" McReaken recalls, "He didn't care about himself, he didn't remember me running past him for help. Even though

Noah was buried to the neck, his only concern was for them to save me. Miners just don't do it. They feel it."

Some of McReaken's memories of mining are of the "horsing around" and practical jokes that the miners used to relieve the stress brought about by their hazardous work. "Sometimes some of the men would steal pie from other miners' work buckets. There was this one man who was real bad about it, and another miner who had had his pie taken one time too many and decided to get back at him. He put liquid laxative all over a piece of pie and then left his bucket where he knew the thief would find it. He even stayed where he could watch it happen. Sure enough, before long, the pie-stealer came and ate the pie, but the rest of the day the miner who had his pie stolen had the pleasure of watching this guy make trip after trip to the air course."

"Another time there was this fella who was deathly afraid of frogs. Well, one day when he was showering in the wash house, some of the others brought in this frog. They tied a string to one of its legs, and hung it down the leg of the man's long underwear, which was hanging in the wash house. It was still there when he went to put the underwear on. He had got one leg in and was putting the other through when he noticed the frog. Boy, we all had a good laugh while he jiggled around trying to get that frog out of his underwear."

Dayton McReaken retired as general superintendent for the Zeigler Coal Company in 1987. He has seen a lot of changes in his days as a coal miner. When he started in 1942, he made \$5.95 a day. Today, such a miner would make \$125 a day. At Orient No. 2, the year he started work as a miner, 960 men could mine 10,000 tons of coal in a day. Today, it would take only 430 men to mine 18,000 tons of coal. When he started there was no water on the machinery, and a miner could hardly see his hand in front of his face due to the coal dust. Now, water is used on the machinery to keep the dust down, and ventilation has been improved dramatically. Black lung is no longer the serious threat it once was. "The best thing that ever happened in mining," McReaken says, "is that in 1981 Illinois mined 51 million tons of coal with no fatalities."

McReaken says, "The coal mine has blessed me, and I thank God for the privilege of working. Many times I was in the right place at the right time. I got lots of breaks, lots of good jobs, but mostly, I was allowed to work alongside some really good people." ■

PART II

About Home Life and the Woman's Role . . .

. . . "In 1932 my Dad was too ill to work, but the tone of my mother's letters was still cheerful. 'We sold our gas stove,' she wrote, 'and are using coal oil. We will have our water turned off and clean out the well to use. We will go back to coal oil lamps if we have to. I paid \$2.76 personal tax for the year. We got a 45-pound hickory smoked ham for 10 cents a pound. I spent a little over a dollar yesterday for groceries—5 loaves of bread, bacon 25 cents, 2 cans pork and beans, onions 5 cents, and some lunch meat. We are doing fine; don't worry about us.'"

. . . "Coal oil was used to remove the lettering from sugar and flour sacks. It was rubbed generously over the lettering and the sacks were left overnight to be laundered. Any good laundress boiled the white clothing with a generous supply of homemade lye soap. When these sacks were washed and bleached, we would soon hear the whir of the treadle sewing machine. That meant one of us would have some new unmentionables."

First Place (Tie)

"My early recollection of the mines was of my dad walking the four or five miles to and from No. 8 (we had no car), carrying his dinner bucket which held his lunch in the top and drinking water in the bottom. We four kids would be waiting for him at the corner of our yard to see who would get the scrap of his lunch he had saved for us."



A NOSTALGIC LOOK AT COAL MINING IN THE DEPRESSION YEARS

by

LOUISE MILLS
West Frankfort, Illinois

When we moved to West Frankfort (then Frankfort Heights) in 1920, my mother declared that would be her last move. It was. During the sixteen previous years of her marriage, she and my dad had moved many times, pursuing the "will-o'-the-wisp" of greener pastures. Now my dad had a job in the mines, and she felt our future was secure.

Security, however, was not a factor in the twelve years of Dad's employment at Old Ben No. 8 and No. 9. (He died of a heart attack in 1932.) The winters were good, but in the summers the mines were "down," and, like his fellow employees, Dad sought jobs elsewhere. Sometimes this was selling insurance or Watkins' goods, guarding a "dig" for a gas line, or even going to Chicago a couple of summers to work on building golf courses. My mother was an excellent seamstress and helped out by taking in sewing. I remember staying with my dad one night while he guarded the machinery being used to dig the gas line. He had a shotgun, which he never used, a makeshift tent, and an old coffee pot in which he made coffee over an open fire. I'll never forget the feeling of security I had with my dad, even when the night noises of hooting owls and prowling creatures penetrated the still, hot summer night. A letter to my sister, from my mother, dated May 18, 1926, stated, "Dad is still camping"; and June 22, 1926, "Daddy stayed out in the bushes today—never comes home"; and again on May 24, 1926, "Daddy is still camping out. He has weenie roasts, marshmallow roasts, and a big time—gets to see the creek, railroad and everything." Reading these letters

recently, my niece asked rather anxiously, "Didn't Dad ever work? Was he camping out all the time?" We had to explain that this was a job and he was not just goofing off.

My early recollection of the mines was of my dad walking the four or five miles to and from No. 8 (we had no car), carrying his dinner bucket which held his lunch in the top and drinking water in the bottom. We four kids would be waiting for him at the corner of our yard to see who would get the scrap of his lunch he had saved for us. Although I am sure he could have eaten every bite, there was always a piece of bread, a bite of apple, a cookie or a small bit of piecrust left for us. Why this was so special I don't know, unless it was because it had been down in the mines all day.

Loading coal by hand was dangerous and exhausting work in a pitch dark hole, lit only by myriads of carbide lamps on the caps of the miners. These lamps had a small wheel that, when spun, would set off a spark from a flint, thus igniting the carbide. They were, of course, dangerous if any leaking gas was present. I remember the shock of seeing my dad come crippling on crutches up our front walk one day after having his leg broken in a coal fall at the mine. A fellow worker had taken him to the hospital and his leg was set and put in a cast.

When my oldest sister died two years ago, she left us an invaluable legacy of letters from our mother to her in Chicago, from 1928 to 1932. Almost every letter contained some reference to the mines. Here are some excerpts: July 10, 1928, "we heard today that No. 8 was working tomorrow, but we'll only know when the whistle blows"; July 16, 1928, "No. 8 still blowing one" (two whistles meant work, one meant the mine would be idle); October 12, 1928, "New Orient has been out all week on 'wild cat' strike"; November 14, 1928, "Dad getting every day, Buckner mine is off today, No. 14 blew over yesterday—no flats"; November 13, 1928, "Dad not working again, can only hope for four days this week"; November 22, 1928, "No. 18 blew over yesterday, had a big fall."

And so it went; good work for awhile and then the lean months when we ran a bill at the local grocer's all summer and paid on it all the next winter. Many miners "stickered" up their pay at the Coal Field company store, but I don't remember my dad ever doing this. As Merle Travis's song "16 Tons" ends with "I owe my soul to the company store," so was the fate of some of the miners. We did, however, accept some "bean orders" of flour and beans from the mining company, although it was much against my dad's principles.

While work was uncertain, prices were very low, as evidenced by my mother's letters. On July 10, 1928, she wrote, "Blackberries are 40 cents a gallon, new apples 25 cents a peck, green beans 3 cents a pound, large cucumbers 1 cent each, early new potatoes 15 cents a peck." On November 14, 1928, her letter contained the following news, "I got some of the best hamburger today I've ever eaten—2 pounds for 25 cents. I bought Louise some blond strap slippers and pair of white sandals, both for \$4.40."

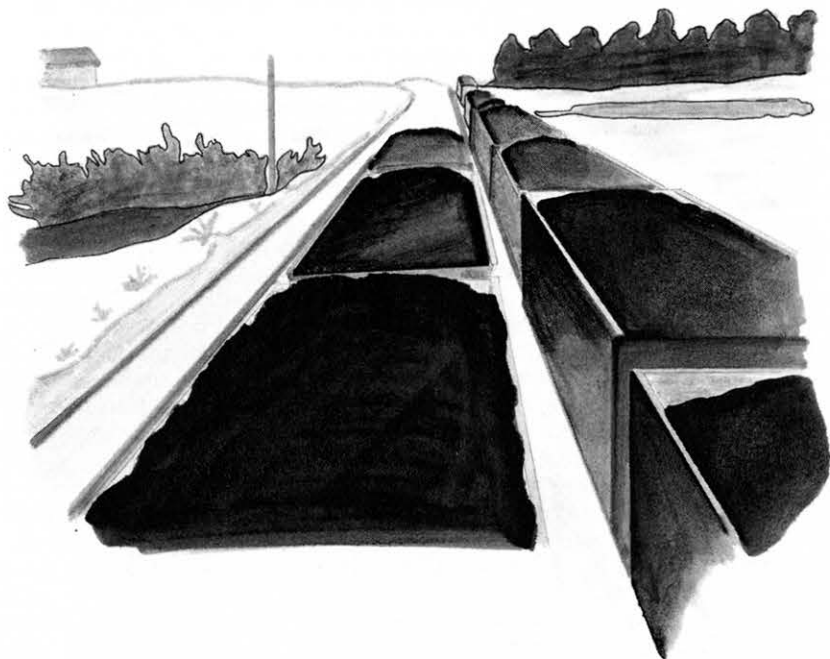
In 1932 my Dad was too ill to work, but the tone of my mother's letters was still cheerful. "We sold our gas stove," she wrote, "and are using coal oil. We will have our water turned off and clean out the well to use. We will go back to coal oil lamps if we have to. I paid \$2.76 personal tax for the year. We got a 45-pound hickory smoked ham for 10 cents a pound. I spent a little over a dollar yesterday for groceries—5 loaves of bread, bacon 25 cents, 2 cans pork and beans, onions 5 cents, and some lunch meat. We are doing fine, don't worry about us."

On April 12, 1932, my Dad's generous heart failed, and he died. My intrepid mother on April 24 told my sister that, although all monies were exhausted, she had planted a garden of tomatoes, peas, beans, beets, carrots, chard, spinach, turnips, radishes, lettuce, and mustard. She had a red plum tree, a cherry tree, raspberry bushes, and grape vines.

And so we overcame. This story is not only about my coal miner dad, but also a tribute to my mother, without whose management we could not have survived our early coal mining years. Times are different now, the mine whistles no longer blow, neighborhood stores are almost nonexistent, working conditions are safer, and the pay is better. Nevertheless, like Loretta Lynn of country and western fame, "I'm proud to be a coal miner's daughter." ■

Honorable Mention

"We loved watching the trains and waving to the engineers, who waved back. We were a happy bunch who didn't mind the smell of coal smoke and the noise of the mines working, or the whistle blowing, three loud shrilling blasts, meaning the mine was working. One long blast and two shorts meant they 'blowed over'—no work that day—and you could set your clock by the noon whistle."



MEMORIES OF A MINER'S DAUGHTER

by

THELMA M. SIMS
Royalton, Illinois

I was nine years old when we moved from Tennessee to Royalton, Illinois, a booming little town of approximately three thousand, with two coal mines, one at each end of town. South Mine wasn't working at that time. Dad got a job running a cutting machine in the North Mine.

Uptown was Main Street, running north and south; and parallel to Main Street was the railroad, which divided the town. We lived on the east side of the tracks, along with most of the miners' families. Farther east and closer

to the North Mine were company houses, called New Camp. Closer to the mine were Hi-Mary Row and Hunkie Row. On the west side of town was where the bankers, merchants, doctors, and mine officials lived. Dad called it Millionaire Street.

When we first moved to town, Dad bought a photographic studio-wagon; later he built his studio onto the front of our house, and he was the town's picture man. I suppose everyone in town has a sample of my dad's work. I think we were middle class, for, besides being a miner, Dad was also a businessman.

There were nine of us kids, six girls and three boys. My stepmother said we were His, Mine, and Ours. Mom made almost all our clothes, just about everything but Dad's and my brother's overalls. We didn't have city water then, no plumbing and no indoor toilets. Laundry was done by hand (wash-board and tub), and clothes were hung on the line to dry. For a while we shared a well which was between our property and our neighbor's. Dad dug us a well. We all helped by carrying buckets of dirt to fill in low places on the north side of the house.

We had a garden and a cow, and we all had our jobs to do. The worst was cleaning the cow stable and washing pictures. Dad mixed the chemicals and did his own developing. The pictures had to be washed free of chemicals to keep them from fading; they were washed in water drawn from the well. We moved the pictures from side to side for five minutes in large square pans, changing the water twelve times (careful not to skin the pictures with your fingernails). Dad didn't have to worry about me; I bit my nails.

We girls helped Mom with the housework and washing and ironing; the boys' jobs were chopping kindling, carrying in coal, and taking out ashes. I had to take turns, after I learned to build a fire. Breakfast was always late on my mornings.

Poor people and those with big families picked up coal daily off the tracks. My oldest sisters didn't have to do this, and I longed to be old enough to quit. I didn't think any job could be worse until a German lady friend told me that it was like that in Germany, but it was picking up horse droppings from the streets.

There were nine churches in town: the Old Pentecost, the New Apostolic, Lutheran, Christian, Church of Christ, Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Russian Orthodox. We went to the Methodist Church, which was just across the street from our house. There were Sunday School class parties, ice cream socials, and pie suppers.

I remember the big old drafty show building where we went to see western movies on Saturday nights, and the ice cream parlor where we could get five-cent ice cream cones. There were dances at the Miner's Hall, but we weren't allowed to go to them. Once two of my sisters and I slipped off and went. That very same night a pretty girl in a pink party dress tried to commit suicide by drinking Lysol. I believe "Father knows best."

Some of the people talked funny, and I couldn't understand them. Dad said they were foreigners from the "old country." He said the town was 60 percent foreign—we were never to call them Hunkies or Dagos or Wops, like the kids down the street did.

Dad built us sleds and a teeter-totter, and he and Mom played Blind Man's Bluff and Tag with us. We looked forward to the evenings when Dad read to us. I remember two of the books; they were *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Seventeen*.

We were one of the first families who had a radio with a throllo cone speaker, and we listened to Fibber McGee and Mollie and the Jack Dempsey fights.

We didn't run a grocery bill at the Company store. Dad paid cash for everything, even our house and car. If he didn't have the cash to pay, we didn't get it until he saved the money for it.

We all went on the miner's vacation. Each July we'd take a trip to Kentucky or Tennessee to visit our relatives. We'd "camp out" and Mom cooked over a bonfire, and once when I was twelve we went to Florida.

Our parents didn't grumble. I never did hear them fuss or argue. If they ever had a spat, it wasn't before us kids. Dad didn't get "black lung," nor a pension. He was seventy-three when he died.

We loved watching the trains and waving to the engineers, who waved back. We were a happy bunch who didn't mind the smell of coal smoke and the noise of the mines working, or the whistle blowing, three loud shrilling blasts, meaning the mine was working. One long blast and two shorts meant they "blowed over"—no work that day—and you could set your clock by the noon whistle.

If the church bell rang any time but on Sunday, it meant someone died, and we'd count the tolls to find out how old the person was.

Illinoisans are able to adjust to anything that is needed to stabilize our economy and for our welfare. Southern Illinois is the center of the world to me. I suppose it's because I've lived here most of my eighty years, although I've visited more than thirty of the fifty states and lived short periods of time in five of them. I agree with my dad who said it is the best working man's state. Maybe this is because he was a coal miner.

Last summer I visited one of our power plants at Newton and learned how important coal is to us—and how much we need to mine and use our coal. I'm sure there are many other like-minded Illinoisans. ■

Honorable Mention

"My dad knew what it was like to work in four-foot high ceilings, on his knees in water. He knew pain from being caught under tons of slate from a cave-in, never to walk right again. He knew about working in the same mine and spot where his own father was killed."



HARD TIMES AND THE COAL MINER

by

WANDA ASHLEY
Sparta, Illinois

When I was a little girl, we lived in Willisville, Illinois. My dad, John Keens, worked at the Whipperwill Mine in Cutler.

We had an old car, but could not afford to put gas in it. My dad walked to Cutler every day, worked eight hours, then walked back to Willisville.

My mother had to wait until he came home from work to fix our supper. My dad was paid every day. Some days he would have maybe fifty cents, or if he was lucky maybe a dollar. Then I was sent to the store to buy ten or twenty cents worth of meat.

Most days our evening meal was beans with a bacon rind cooked in them to flavor them. Some days we ate gravy made with flour and water. No one complained about not liking something. It was either eat it or else.

We had no electricity. Our only light was from two coal oil lamps. Our three-room house was heated by one coal stove. Many mornings there was frost on our bedcovers from our breath. We had to break ice in our water bucket to get water to wash up before breakfast.

My dad knew what it was like to work in four-foot high ceilings, on his knees in water. He knew pain from being caught under tons of slate from a cave-in, never to walk right again. He knew about working in the same mine and spot where his own father was killed. He was only fourteen years old when he went into the mines to work. My dad died thirty-two years ago of cancer, caused from black lung. He was only sixty-six years old. ■

Honorable Mention

"The miners worked many long hard hours but were paid small wages. All work was done by manual labor—pick and shovel. Drillers went in and drilled holes for dynamite. After the blast, the coal came down and the coal diggers and the loaders went in and shoveled the coal into the cars."



OLD KING COAL

by

MARY VERNETTI
Collinsville, Illinois

I'm an eighty-four-year-old senior citizen—a daughter, wife, and sister of coal miners. My father started his first job at age twelve in the pit coal mine when it was more on the surface. When he was older, he worked deeper mines. In 1910, my father and mother and their family of four children came to Illinois to seek work in the coal mines that were opened up in Sawyerville, Illinois. My father got hired. The mine was deep—three hundred feet or so, I believe—and was called No. 2 Superior Coal Company. The men were let down into the mine shaft on an elevator-like "cage" fastened fast to a strong cable and operated by a steam turbine generator. One cage went down and another came up until all the men were on the bottom of the mine to work. Each miner had a tag with a number on it. It hung at the bottom of the shaft to keep track of who was still in the mine. When coal was loaded in the coal cars, the cage was used to haul up coal. The miners worked many long hard hours but were paid small wages. All work was done by manual labor—pick and shovel. Drillers went in and drilled holes for dynamite. After the blast, the coal came down and the coal diggers and the loaders went in and shoveled the coal into the cars. Then came the mule driver. He led the mule out with the coal and opened the doors. The track layer was essential—he had to see that the rails were always in good shape so that loaded cars wouldn't jump the track. All manual labor was hard, backbreaking work. The miners had only carbide lamps to work by, and those were attached on soft caps made especially for miners. Their lunch bucket had two sections—the bottom half had water, the other half had lunch. My father always saved some of his lunch and brought it home to his children. We looked forward to it and were happy, for it came from the mines, even though it smelled and tasted like the dampness of the mine.

We never saw Dad leave for work. We saw him only when he came home late, and he was black as the coal he mined. He would rest, wash up in a big tub of water (I would wash his back), relax, and by then mother had the table set. We ate our supper. Dishes were done. We were all in bed by 9:00 p.m. because Dad had to get up early for work. We were happy on weekends. That's when we had our dad to play with us. But in those hardship days, children had chores to do. There were chickens, geese, pigs, and cows to feed; coal bins to fill; and a garden to tend. We had to buy our coal also; but as youngsters, we used to pick coal that rolled off the coal cars along the railroad tracks, and we filled our coal bins so that we could save some money for a pair of shoes. We had homemade clothes and bedding made from chicken feed sacks. The miners were from ethnic families and had to make do in order to survive. The mine gave work for miners to earn money to pay for essentials. Coal gave us warmth in the winter and was a source of fuel to cook our food. It provided us with security. There were hardships.

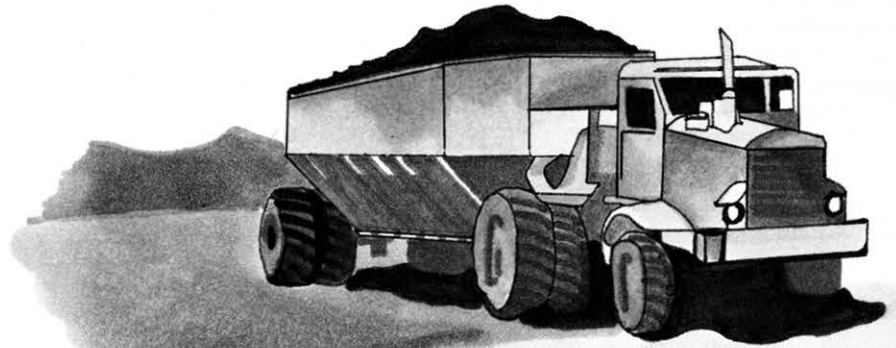
Then, came labor strikes for better wages and better conditions. It paid off. The improvements resulted in less deaths, less bug (coal) dust, and less accidents. They installed a coal gathering machine ("hog") for after the blasting; electric miner lamps; shortened working hours; and established safety rules. Today mines are safer to work in. The miners who came here years and years ago were the ones who made it safer and made conditions better for miners now.

My father worked fifty-five years—all his life—as a coal miner. He was a coal loader. I married a miner, and he worked in coal mines for forty years as a track layer. My brother was a mule driver for over five years, but he decided to go to the city. I had several uncles who also worked in the coal mines, but they died young.

I am proud to be a miner's daughter, wife, and sister. Our men were hardworking men, earning an honest living and doing something for mankind. Coal is needed, and I still love a home heated by coal. In spite of the many hardships and sacrifices we faced, we were proud of our parents, husbands, and relatives. ■

Honorable Mention

"His face and clothing were always covered with coal dust. Nick would back his truck into our driveway and park it in front of our basement window. Before shoveling the coal onto the coal chute where it would tumble down into the basement, he would wash the coal using a garden hose."



BLACK COAL

by

VIRGINIA ROY RHODES
O'Fallon, Illinois

Heating one's home with soft, black coal in winter provides one with warm, comfortable heat. Also, burning soft coal emits smoke, pollution, and dust. It is one of the dirtiest ways to keep warm in winter.

I lived with my grandparents in East St. Louis, Illinois, where countless tons of coal were used daily. Residents used coal for fuel. Factories burned coal. Some factories had tall, impressive, elaborately constructed smoke stacks to release the coal smoke into the atmosphere. Railroad steam engines were powered by coal. Railroads hauled coal on their lines. Poor people went scavenging for coal that fell off the trains to carry home to heat their houses. Sometimes railroad crewmen would throw off some coal from the cars for the indigent folks to pick up. East St. Louis was a thriving, industrial city at that time. Dirt and pollution were part of the landscape and taken for granted.

My grandparents heated their home with soft coal. They had a furnace in the basement of the house. It had one large register, directly above the

furnace. The register was centrally located in between the living and dining rooms. In cold weather, it was a favorite spot to sit and warm one's toes.

Tending the furnace was a dirty, endless job. One had to keep feeding coal into the furnace all day. Large lumps of coal were heavy. Even using gloves, it was impossible to keep one's clothes and body clean. Coal came in all sizes, from dust to very large lumps. Small pieces of coal were shoveled into the furnace, whereas lumps were usually thrown in by hand. In mild weather, only a shovel or two of coal was needed to take the chill out of the house.

It was an art to bank the furnace fire on cold nights so that it wouldn't go out before morning. This was accomplished by placing a large lump of coal over a hot bed of live coals and closing the damper so air from the chimney couldn't keep the fire burning. If one was lucky and the fire was still alive at dawn, one merely had to shake down the fire, open the damper and shovel more coal into the furnace. Of course, there were ashes and clinkers to be carried outdoors. Before long the house would be toasty warm. When the fire was out in the morning, one had to build it again from scratch. One had to use newspaper and kindling wood (that wood had to be chopped), put small pieces of coal into the furnace over the paper and wood, and light it with a match. It took time, work, and patience to get a good fire going again. One had to tend it slowly, feeding small portions of coal on the fire until one could get a deep bed of coals built up. After the fire got a good start, a large lump of coal could be placed on the fire, so that it didn't need attention for awhile.

One had to be careful not to use too much coal and overheat the furnace. When overheated, the grates would get fiery red. One could look down the register and see the fire and smell the extreme heat. At such times, my grandma would open the transoms above the doorways to let out some of the heat, and she would close the damper. Fortunately my grandparents never had a chimney fire, but once the brick chimney fell apart and had to be rebuilt.

Our coal and iceman was Nick Evanoff, our next door neighbor. He was a short, dark-haired man—a Bulgarian who came to America from Europe with his wife in the early 1920s. During the summer, he delivered ice to his many customers. In the winter, he hauled coal, which he bought at the Lumaghi Mine in Collinsville, Illinois, to householders. His face and clothing were always covered with coal dust. Nick would back his truck into our driveway and park it in front of our basement window. Before shoveling the coal onto the coal chute where it would tumble down into the basement, he would wash the coal using a garden hose. In spite of the washing, some coal dust made its way into the basement, and some seeped through the floor into our living quarters. Grandma and I spent an entire month cleaning the house every spring. In spite of the dust, my grandparents were happy and proud to have their coal bin filled every fall before the heating season began.

In addition to heating our house, soft coal was used to heat water for laundry, cooking, and bathing. Grandma had a combination coal and gas cook stove. Sometimes, she used the gas to prepare the meals. Other days, especially on wash days (which consumed most of the day), she made vegetable or bean soup on top of the coal range. The soup would simmer for hours on the back burner. Our supper on wash days usually consisted of soup, crackers, milk, and home-baked apple pie or homemade doughnuts. Our supper was fit for a king. To me food cooked slowly on a coal range is unequalled.

One of the happiest memories of my childhood has to be walking home at dusk on a cold winter evening and being greeted by friendly smoke curling out of my grandparents' chimney. I knew I was welcome in that house. It gave me a sense of well-being. I would soon be safe inside, warmly greeted and receiving a good home-cooked meal.

When my husband and I married, we purchased a coal furnace for our house. It was an improvement over my grandparents' furnace since it had pipes, ducts, and wall registers in every room. However, on our second move, we opted for gas heat.

I guess my grandparents were middle of the roaders. They couldn't afford a stoker to put on their furnace, which would feed small lumps of coal automatically into a furnace, nor could they hire a furnace man to come and tend the fire for them; but neither did they have to have a heating stove in the middle of a room taking up space and making a lot of mess in the house.

Using coal for fuel to heat one's house was dirty, time-consuming work for us, but we just took it in stride along with the many other chores we had to do in those long ago days. ■

"He was given the job of hoisting engineer at a mine west of Marissa. Although he never actually handled the coal, we thought he had the most important job at the mine, as the miners' lives and safety depended on his skill."



COAL AND COAL MINING IN THE STATE OF ILLINOIS: A True Unpublished Story About How Coal and Coal Mining Played an Important Role Throughout My Life

by

ANNA E. REINHARDT
New Athens, Illinois

This was a clever idea to have a writing contest for senior citizens. Naturally we would have more experience than the younger people. Writing my true life story brought back many fond memories of my childhood and married life. I wish to thank you.

I observed my ninety-third birthday on August 30, 1990. I was born and raised in Marissa, Illinois, which has always been considered a coal mining town.

My father, John Schuster's first job was managing a small dairy, or creamery as it was known then. He was fond of engines and machinery, so he got books and studied about stationary engines, used to hoist the miners and coal up and down the shaft. He had to go to Springfield to take a written test, which he passed. He was given the job of hoisting engineer at a mine west of Marissa. Although he never actually handled the coal, we thought he had the most important job at the mine, as the miners' lives and safety depended on his skill. This was a deep underground mine with an entrance known as a shaft. This shaft was wide enough for two cages to go up and down.

The miners loaded the coal on small cars and pushed them onto the cages, then, on a signal, my father would hoist them up, and an empty one went down on the other side of the shaft. This was also how the miners were lowered into the pit in the morning and brought up at end of the workday.

A clock-like gauge on the wall would tell my dad when cages would reach bottom. He must have been good, as he never had an accident.

This mine was about two miles west of Marissa. We called it the Kunze Mine, as it was on or near Kunze farm. It probably had another name; I don't recall.

Our home was on the west outskirts of Marissa, in line with the mine, so my dad would walk across the fields to get there. Most of the miners walked to work; some had horses which were tied in stalls near the mine. This was before the automobile came into use.

Sometime after the coal was mined out of a certain area, the ground would cave in; this created what was known as a sink-hole which soon filled with water and became a good place to catch fish. My brother and I would go fishing sometimes on Saturday during the summer and then go over to the mine to see our dad. He would be there polishing the engine, which he kept spotless. Sometimes he would have a man take us down the shaft to see the coal in the pit. This was really a thrill for us kids. Between 1911 and 1912, the coal vein ran out and the mine closed. A new mine was to open in Mascoutah. My dad applied for the job of hoisting engineer and was accepted. We then had to move to Mascoutah. My dad held that job until about 1940, when he had to retire because of ill health.

Coal has always played an important part in my life. My dad felt that since his livelihood came from coal, we should use it in the home. In our living room in Marissa, we had a large coal heater with an isinglass door, so one could see the coal burning. In the morning we woke to Dad's shaking down ashes and putting in more coal so the house would be warm when we dressed for school. In the kitchen we had a coal-burning range, with a water tank on one side for hot water. My mother did all the cooking and baking on this stove. We had a summer kitchen joined to the house by a small porch. In this was a small coal cook stove with an oven door on each side. Mother cooked our meals and did her baking on this stove to keep the house cool. We kids had a playground, etc., in our back yard. When Mother needed coal she would hold the empty bucket up to the window and rattle the shovel in it. That was the signal for one of us to come and fill it in the coal shed. A man with horse and wagon brought coal when our supply ran low.

In early 1915, I went to stay with my grandmother for some time, as she needed help. She lived on a farm northeast of Lenzburg. I joined a Literary Society and later met Fred. We were married on Fred's twenty-first birthday, June 14, 1919. We just observed our seventy-first anniversary. He has been in a nursing home for over two years. We settled on our farm adjoining Baldwin Power Company Lake. We lived there until 1978, when we retired and moved to New Athens. Our house on the farm was an older brick. We heated it with a Warm Morning coal heater in the dining room, with an open stairway to heat the bedrooms upstairs. I had a coal-burning kitchen stove for cooking and baking.

Before combines took over grain harvests, we had the wheat and oat bundles put in stacks near the barn. We had to have a pile of coal nearby for the coal-burning steam engine thresher machine. We hope the coal supply will never run out, as we have three grandchildren who are coal miners. Our grandson Stephen Reinhardt has worked for Marissa Peabody for fifteen years operating the heavy equipment to level the ground after the coal has been removed. His brother Gary and wife Melody live in New Baden. Gary works for Monterey, near Albers, and his wife works for Marissa underground mine. They are truly coal miners and enjoy the work and good pay and other benefits. ■

"There are still railroad tracks within earshot of my home. When I hear the whistle of the train around midnight I, too, think of 'far away places and strange sounding names.' But I also think of long ago times and gathering coal. Many other happy memories come. It is then I realize how fortunate I am to have a comfortable all-electric apartment. Like Al, I also wonder, 'What would we do without coal?'"

BUCKETS TO BLISS

by

NELLIE FALKENHEIM
Highland, Illinois

Coal has played a very important part in my life. My first memories, at about age six, are of my Mom, Sis, and me picking up coal along the Mobile and Ohio Railroad in Houston, Illinois. We were fortunate to be living close to the tracks.

Nearly every day, each of us armed with a bucket, we left to scrounge for enough coal to heat our home and cook our food. We didn't have shiny new coal buckets, but used whatever was available. Many times a newspaper was folded into several thicknesses and pressed into the bottom of a bucket to cover the holes.

Mom made these excursions both educational and fun. She taught us to watch out for snakes; the names and uses of wild flowers growing along the right of way; and how to put our ear down on the rail to listen for an oncoming train. We had great respect for a train and always stood back close to the barbed wire fence as the train passed by. The long string of heavily loaded coal cars assured us that enough coal would fall off to more than fill our buckets. The fireman contributed too, for many times as he shoveled coal into the firebox he didn't aim too well. Lumps of coal would come tumbling down to the ditch beside the tracks. One time the fireman deliberately threw down a huge lump of coal. We each waved a thank you. It took quite a hassle for Mom to get the big lump up to the track. She somehow managed to lift it high enough to drop it onto a rail. It smashed into pieces small enough to put in our buckets.

On cold winter evenings Mom would bring in a pan of chilled apples from the pit in the garden. When the coals in the living room stove had died down

to a glowing red, with the stove door open, we took turns roasting our apples on long sticks. Mom told us how fortunate we were to have two stoves—and coal. She remembered roasting apples over the wood embers in the fireplace of their log cabin.

Much to our dislike there were other chores we did. One was applying stove polish (was it Black Silk or Black Satin?) and shining both stoves. Even with brushes to apply and polish we invariably ended up with black polish on our hands and arms. The job inspection wasn't fun either.

"Look here, girls," Mom would say, "You missed a place back here." And we would go at it again.

Another thing we disliked doing was buying coal oil. We took turns on this. In one hand a coal oil can, a small potato on the spout to prevent its splashing out, and in the other hand sixteen cents, clutched tightly, off we went down the path to the general store for one gallon of coal oil. That had to be a special trip. Mom took no chances that Mr. Hays might not wash his hands and she certainly didn't want the smell of coal oil on any groceries.

Even worse than going for coal oil was the daily task of filling our one lamp. Then washing and polishing the glass chimney with newspaper wasn't exactly to our liking either.

"You have such nice small hands," Mom would remark, "for you can get your hand in the chimney. That's why it always shines so nice." The flattery helped some.

We also didn't like the various uses of coal oil. It was mixed with lard and used on any "ouchies," especially chigger bites and cuts. But the worst was when we were out of Dr. Jaynes Vermifuge. Mom substituted two or three drops of coal oil on a teaspoon of sugar. We reluctantly opened our mouths, and she pushed it in with her finger. Not one to shirk her responsibility, she stood right there until we swallowed the horrible stuff.

Coal oil was used to remove the lettering from sugar and flour sacks. It was rubbed generously over the lettering and the sacks were left overnight to be laundered. Any good laundress boiled the white clothing with a generous supply of home-made lye soap. When these sacks were washed and bleached, we would soon hear the whir of the treadle sewing machine. That meant one of us would have some new unmentionables.

So coal oil was not all bad. By the shining lamp, Mom read many books to us; she recited poems and stories she had learned from the McGuffey Readers; we studied our school lessons; and we often played guessing games or dominoes.

In school we learned to spell anthracite, bituminous, and petroleum. Possibly we were given their definitions. But it was many years before the origin and uses of these products impressed us.

I now enjoy reading that electric-power utilities use almost half of all the bituminous coal produced in the United States. In the 1970s, Illinois ranked fourth in the nation's output. The first coal mine in America was opened in Virginia in the Appalachian bituminous field during the 1750s. Anthracite mining began in the 1700s.

The first railroad constructed in the Mississippi Valley was built from Illinoistown—now East St. Louis—to the bluff, a distance of about six miles across the American Bottom. Constructed in 1837, it was built expressly to transport coal to the St. Louis market. The cars were driven by horse power and had wooden rails.

The St. Louis and Cairo Railroad was chartered on February 16, 1865, and the entire line was completed and put in operation on March 1, 1875. It

connected the cities of East St. Louis and Cairo and had an entire track of about 160 miles. This is the railroad that ran through Houston, Illinois, where my family and I gathered our supply of coal. The railroad has undergone several changes in its name, being the Mobile and Ohio, the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio, and the Illinois Central Gulf.

While living in East St. Louis in the 1960s, our neighbor Al told and retold of his early years. He was born and raised in East St. Louis's South End, one child of a large family. For many years the family lived next to a railroad track. Periodically several carloads of coal would be set in on the side track for the local coal dealers. Word spread quickly.

By dark the residents from blocks around came with bushel baskets, buckets, and small homemade wagons. Some of the older boys would climb up on the coal cars and shove down chunks of coal. (Like the proverbial umpires, the railroad detectives evidently needed eyeglasses for there were never any arrests made!)

Al's family had never bought a lump of coal. One evening his father came home and announced to the family that they were moving to a larger house across town. Al was devastated, but not because he would be leaving his school and buddies. After a few days of worrying he finally asked, "Ma, when we move what will we do without coal?"

His mother reassured him that his father had received a raise in pay and they could now afford to buy coal.

There are still railroad tracks within earshot of my home. When I hear the whistle of the train around midnight I, too, think of "far away places and strange sounding names." But I also think of long ago times and gathering coal. Many other happy memories come. It is then I realize how fortunate I am to have a comfortable all-electric apartment. Like Al, I also wonder, "What would we do without coal?"

And I drift blissfully off to sleep. ■



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