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Edris Mabie, Jr. Memoir

M113. Mabie, Edris (Jr.) b. 1923

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 50 mins., 12 pp.

ILLINOIS COAL: THE LEGACY OF AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Mabie discusses his father's work as a coal miner and organizer for the Progressive Miners of America. He also discusses the mine wars and his role in them, Springfield mines, the Progressives' hatred of the United Mine Workers and police authorities, the National Labor Relations Board and the assassination of his father and friends. Also mentions family life after his father's death, his mother's role, his siblings, and his education.

Interview by Georgia Rountree, 1972

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Tape also includes Jane Wands interview

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Georgia Rountree for the Oral History Office on October 15, 1972 in Springfield, Illinois. Chris Skoczynski transcribed the tape and Barb Dewhurst edited the transcript.

Edris Mabie was born in Iowa on November 17, 1923. When Mr. Mabie was 2 years old, his family moved to Springfield. His father worked as miner and was an organizer for the Progressive Mine Workers. This memoir is a discussion of Mr. Mabie's childhood and the death of his father.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Edris Mable, October 15, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

Georgia Rountree, Interviewer.

A: I am the first child in a family of seven children. I have four brothers and two sisters of which two brothers are deceased and my father is deceased. My ancestry is of English and Welsh stock, thus coal mining as a natural avocation for my father. My grandparents, from both sides, were from Wales and England. They settled in Iowa during the early 1900s. I was born in a small mining town in LaVilla, Iowa. My father worked in the mines--he went in the mines at the age of 17. My family moved to Springfield when I was two years old and my father started working in the mines here in Springfield. I might mention that of course in any mining family in a small town there are many mining catastrophies and tragedies. One that was related to me was when my sister was born. My father was called from the pits and at this time he was what they called a shooter. In other words, he'd put the dynamite in the holes and shoot the seam. The day that he was called there was a mine explosion and many of the miners lost their lives. Of course he was saved because he was called from the pits. In a small town, when the mine whistle blew during the middle of the day, all the people ran to the pits. They knew that there was an explosion and that there was death in the pits and of course a tragedy had occurred. As I said before, my family arrived here in Springfield in the year 1925 and my father found work in the mines. I might mention that Springfield, although it seems to be a service town now and one that deals in government, was a mining community back in the 1920s and 1930s--there were ten to twelve mines working at that time. I might mention that the union movement, especially during the last part of the 19th century, the mines and the miners were very aggressive in this movement and again, as you know, the oppression of management and big money dominated legislature and many laws were passed against the formation of many unions. The use of federal troops and the use of local law officers backed them. I might go back a little bit in history and mention the riots in Philadelphia in the 1870s and in the Pittsburgh coal fields in the early 1900s and of course, the Haymarket Riot in Chicago, just to name a few. The United Mine Workers, an organization that was formed late in the 1800s, I would say that most all of the miners belonged to this one union, the United Mine workers of America. This was the one to which my father belonged and was a member. This union was very instrumental in the early labor movements in getting fair wages and hours laws passed, provided collective bargaining, laws against child labor, just to name a few. In 1935, the NLRB was formed and the induction of many labor movements began.

Q: Mr. Mable, would you please explain what the NLRB means?

A: The National Labor Relations Board was set up to help unions in collective bargaining to hear both sides of arbitration on the union's

and the management's side whereas before maybe one side was just being heard. Of course, this usually was big business and management so this was formed to give the working man a decent wage and hours and working conditions and I think it was one of the biggest breakthroughs that we had. Of course that was in 1935. As I said before, I came through this time in the mine wars and I was about ten to twelve years of age. My life, being the son of a miner, was not much different than many of the others in this community but I happened to be the son of a union organizer of a rival union of the UMW. I could say that this was quite interesting. I might mention what conditions gave rise to the union split. First of all, we were engrossed in the big depression during the early 1930s. There were cutbacks in salaries and there were cutbacks in employment and most all industries were taking it. Now, the miners under John L. Lewis had also agreed to take the cut but many of the miners, through maybe lack of communications or other leaders telling them not to accept that, they didn't have to accept it, they didn't have to sell out to government and big business and they decided to form a rival union. One of these was the Progressive Mine Workers of America. Now this was formed not only because of the cutbacks in jobs and in salaries, but other little things happened such as ballot boxes being stolen when they voted for union leaders. So I believe that the conception of the Progressive Mine Workers of America was around 1932 or 1933 or thereabouts. This organization confined itself to the coal fields of Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and very strong in Illinois, especially southern and central Illinois, areas of Taylorville, Pana, Nokomis, Gillespie and Springfield.

Q: Would you please tell me what part your father played in the organizing of these unions?

A: The mine union itself, when a new mine is opened, the mine labor organizers would contact these mine owners and try to get the personnel in these mines to sign a contract with the Progressive Mine Workers or the UMW. Now if and when these mines were being contacted by the two different rival unions, of course, fighting would break out, not only in those mines that would not sign but also in those mines that were already signed. Usually by voting they could choose the union that they wanted to join. But it didn't stop there. Usually the rival mines were bombed, rival miners were shot and killed, trains were bombed and many times riots would take place.

Q: What part did your father play in this?

A: He, as I mentioned before, was an organizer and he worked with the PMW--the Progressive Mine Workers of America. Again, I'll have to bring out the role that big business would play here. John L. Lewis being the head of a very large and very financially secure union, could use federal troops if needed, the national guard and the local police if needed. Some of the riots in southern Illinois turned out that way. One of the celebrations of the great labor leaders, Mother Jones---there was a riot in southern Illinois when a troop of PM of A were moving in that direction for a celebration. The cars were searched by the state troopers and by the national guard as these men were traveling through a certain area and all guns removed. When they reached their destination

they were open fired upon from both sides of the road by these rival unions and of course many were injured and killed.

Q: Did your father carry a gun?

A: I think that at times he would have a gun, whether for his own protection, probably, but not often. I know guns were present in the house but of course, I can remember a search of the house for weapons. But as an arsenal, no. I think a gun was something, in those days, that was almost automatic to carry. I can remember some of the things that did take place with reference to my position in the family. For instance, if we'd watch a parade in the middle in town--and parades were very much a part of society in those early days--and the national guard would ride their horses by. Now we were instructed to throw rocks or apples or whatever we had at the national guard's horses and to holler at them "Scabbies" and "Scab Herders".

Q: Did you throw rocks or apples at the national guard?

A: Definitely. In fact we thought it was great fun. It wasn't only myself but other sons and daughters of many of the other miners. Let's face it. This hatred was great. These troops, it wasn't anything for them to break in your door and come into your house. They were supposed to have a search warrant but I can remember early one morning there was a pounding on the door and the national guard pushed their way into the house with their bayonets on their guns.

Q: Where did you live?

A: I lived on 16th and Brown at this time. Of course, my father being a union organizer and a laborer, he would be high on their list in searching for weapons and that type of thing. They had a reason for coming. In other words, if there'd been a bombing or if there had been a killing, they would search out these people right away and try to locate evidence of some kind. I might mention that--of course I'll get to the point where my father was killed--even my mother was subjected to a certain amount of harassment, such as the FBI taking her in and keeping her until 2:00 in the morning, questioning her and then releasing her to get home any way that she could. Such things as this kind of make you wonder about the movement at that time.

Q: You mentioned hatred. How did you learn to hate?

A: I would say that it was fairly easy because it was parent-oriented. I could not play with any child that belonged to the rival union. If I played with any child of the rival union, I was punished. I might mention that my father, not being a very mean type of individual, would get fairly strict if I were to play with a UMW child, I knew that I would be punished and I would be punished severely for it. If I would play with any son or daughter of a national guardsman, I would be punished. This type of thing would build up in you a hatred for the opposite side. Now what I knew about them was the fact that they were scabs and that they caused us harm by working when our parents would not work. We did not have the things that these other people had because they were working

in the pits and we were on strike, trying to build up higher wages for the men and better working conditions. Again, argumentation would be presented here because, would it be better to take this cut and lower the prices so much as to see the people working? Well, here again the idea of communicating to these people was lost and actually maybe the rival union was not the greatest thing that could be formed at this time. Maybe it was best to go along with John L. Lewis and his ideas. But once this was formed and once sides were chosen, then the objectives were changed, so to speak. Now this hatred came up, I would say that it was definitely parent-oriented as such. I know that I have, as I stated before, called people names, thrown rocks, knocked on doors, of anyone that was in the rival group. It seems so strange in that fact that I grew up that I could run across this again. My first teaching job was in Nokomis, Illinois, which is a mining community and I talked to one of the board members and he had been a member of the UMW--the United Mine Workers. And he said that he'd heard of my father, in fact many areas where I had worked ball games in southern Illinois, knew my father and they said, of course, great things about him because he was a union organizer for their group. One man happened to be a UMW and his son-in-law, of all things, was a PMW--a Progressive Mine Worker--and he went out on strike and his father kept working. The father ordered him off of his land with a shotgun. When the son-in-law approached and the father told him never to come back--the son-in-law had a shotgun also of course, and he was very angry and was calling him names because he was working and the father said he had a family to support and he was going to keep on working. To this day he said, and this is twenty-five or thirty years later, when he meets his own daughter on the street in Taylorville, that they will cross the street and they won't even speak to each other--his own grandchildren, twenty-five years later. You really get the feeling of hatred here. This was a trying time and some people were hungry. A trying time when they spent all of their time looking for jobs and upholding the cause that they felt was true. I asked him if this went on even today and he said, "That's right, as if I am dead. They won't speak to me." So you see this feeling here of hatred, as such. Again, I might mention that it seems that the women and the wives of the miners suffered a great deal with this, thinking of my mother's side of it, keeping a large family going. We never wanted for food--of course we used a lot out of the garden and they did have some mine welfare that they did give to the people.

Q: Did your father allow your mother to stand in the lines to receive the free food?

A: Most of this he would bring home and this was given out at the local union miner's hall. Of course, there was also state aid and you could get milk stamps and get milk and flour. Many days I pulled a wagon up to the feed store and got the flour to take home so my mother could bake bread. Of course we always ate well and she was a good cook and a good mother and took care of the family and stayed home. So we never wanted as far as food and clothing and a home life was concerned. Of course, the father being out of the home a great deal with his union work. I don't know, to go on with this, I might mention that my father was killed on Easter morning. I was at Washington Park hunting Easter eggs and they had a union meeting at the PM of A hall on 6th and Washington and Ray

Edmonson, who was a very good friend of my father's at one time and who was also president of the UMW for the state of Illinois, and my father was in the rival union and I might mention that they did offer him any job to get him out of the rival union, on the police force, on the fire department. But once he had joined the group and said that he was in this, there was no getting out as such. Of course, these people, and I'd met them before when I was a very little boy--he'd take me up to the mine hall with him once in a while to the meetings and these men, some of them were ex-convicts, the Thompson brothers were in the car at the time. They were driving around the headquarters and my father and a few of the other fellows were out on the street and they saw them and acknowledged them and they ran towards the car--my father did--and as he did they opened fire with sub-machine guns. Now the other miners drew their guns and there was firing back and forth. Many were hit but I think my father was the only one killed. Art Gramlich was shot at least two or three times. Vic Ghent was another one that was shot. Danny Mataza was there at the time, John Schneider was another. But after the tragedy--they called it a riot--the four men in the car, three brothers and Ray Edmonson were taken to the police station and of course they said it was self-defense and they were moved from this city jail to another area for their safety. Again, when I returned home and of course, the wife takes the brunt of the attack. My mother had to be strong enough to pull herself together and rear five children, which is not an easy job to do. That didn't end it though, there was still mine trouble after that. The Progressive Mine Workers were very interested in my mother because of my father's activities and about what information she might have and the FBI was very interested in my mother for what information she might have because they would like to get a conviction of some of these miners for the bombing of trains and that type of thing. So, it was nothing for cars to sit out in front of our house--we lived on East Cedar at the time--maybe one hour there might be a federal car, a big, black limousine and another hour, two, three or four in the morning, would be another one sitting there which would be the PMW. As I said before, when they questioned my mother at the courthouse, when they were through she said, "How am I going to get home?" And they said, "You find anyway you can." Usually a PM of A car would be sitting outside to take her. I might mention that they handed her a blank check and said, "You write the amount on it that you want. All you have to do is sign the paper stating that these men were in the bombing or your husband was in on this."

Q: When you say they handed her a blank check, who do you mean?

A: Well, it would have to be the FBI and the federal authorities who were questioning her. They were the ones that wanted the prosecution. I might mention that she knew nothing, really, because I think my father pretty much kept the activities to himself on this and even if she knew nothing, if she still signed it, she could have gotten something from this but I doubt that she could have enjoyed it. I think that she would be marked as such. But, again I might state that my mother was a very strong person and the monetary reimbursements didn't mean that much to her. I think she also had some feeling for the movement, she'd have to. Of course, some people did cash in on this, they would question people from the neighborhood and then they'd find out that they couldn't back up what they were saying, they were just trying to get some of the money,

too, from the federal government's office because, just like anything else, they offer a certain amount of money for certain information.

Q: What happened to the children? How were you able to get your education? Where did you go to school?

A: I went to the local public school and I graduated and again as I stated, my mother was such a strong person and we went to school. There was no getting out of school unless you were sick and stayed in bed. She didn't hesitate in using a stick and she controlled us fairly well. I graduated from Isles and from there I graduated and entered the service at three years and then took my college training on the G.I. Bill which I think many did after the service.

Q: How many of your brothers and sisters are college graduates?

A: I have another brother who is a college graduate. I have another sister who is a state worker and she graduated from high school and then went to work for the state. I have another sister who is a high school graduate who works at the hospital. I have another brother who did not graduate from high school but who works for a local manufacturing concern. I might mention that he has all the money. (laughter)

Q: I really asked this question because thinking back to how strong your mother was and what an incentive she was, as merely wanting to point out to these boys and girls for whom we are doing this interview, that education was the key to success.

A: Right. Of course, you've got to have something to help you along. While in the navy, I had a chance to see what education could do for a person and I found out that was possible even though I was from an area where education was here for me, I really didn't take real advantage of it. I'd never thought too much about college until one of the officers mentioned the fact that I could obtain an education and then I started thinking seriously about it.

Q: Mr. Mabie, with all of your background in mining, and I know that you are a social studies teacher, when you are teaching about coal mining, do you feel any of this feeling of hatred coming through?

A: I did before I got into the studies a little bit more and I found that maybe the PM of A movement wasn't quite what I believed it was as a child. In other words, they were wrong, too, as much as the other side, but even now if you tell some of the organizers that, maybe my father would turn over in his grave, I don't know. When I started getting a little bit more education on the problem, it was really greater than the movement really was at that time. I know it's hard to follow that but that's that way I kind of feel about it and yet I can still feel this resentment come back because it was implanted when I was very young. But yet, I can recall my father saying how this UMW man was a pretty good man so I got the feeling that there wasn't a hatred for the UMW but maybe for some of the men in the movement and what they stood for and what they could get out of the movement maybe. I remember one Harry Young, who lives on South Grand now, and he worked in the Woodside Mine or in the

Capitol Mine over on Capitol Street. And he said, "Now this fellow is a nice guy, he's got a family and he's working for this reason." Now here he tells me this UMW man was a good person and yet he would have me go up to the steps of the tavern and shout obscene names into the tavern and call the other ones "Dirty Scabbies!" Now, to me it didn't make much sense at that time but I wasn't questioned. These were the crooks and the bad guys and that's what I called them.

Q: Mr. Mabie, I think I'll just let you tell the rest of the story about your father the way that you would like to do it.

A: Well, maybe first I'd like to ask just a few provocative questions. I don't know--it's sort of difficult. I have tried to reason the labor chaos between the UMW and the PMA and of course many questions went unanswered. Some of the questions: why would men who were friends one day become deadly enemies the next? I can remember my father taking me to the UMW hall--I guess I was six or seven and I'd just had a tooth pulled--and some of the men I remember gave me nickels and dimes and quarters and these same men that gave me the nickels and dimes, it wasn't very shortly after that that they were enemies. I'm thinking of one--Ray Edmonson--who was the United Mine Worker president for the state of Illinois who was a very good friend of my father's and by the way, who was in the car when my father was shot down. Of course, there again, why would a great labor leader like John Lewis become a hated name in our family and also by the PMW because he was a great leader in the union movement. I might ask this question: why were ex-convicts in the labor movement? Again, here with Ray Edmonson in the car were two ex-convicts who were brothers who opened fire that Easter morning and killed my father and wounded many other people.

Q: Mr. Mabie, do you think this car was there at the curb just watching the mine leaders go in and out of the hall, or do you think they were actually waiting for your father and the other organizers to kill them?

A: Well, I think some were by accident, but I can remember my father telling me one evening--I think he'd had one or two beers--but he wasn't under the influence--and he mentioned the fact to me that he was going to rely on me since I was the oldest boy in the family to take care of my mother because he kind of felt uncomfortable in the situation he was in. He thought his time was numbered. Of course I, as a kid, tried to shake it off and talk about something else but he wouldn't listen to it. He said, "Listen to me. I'm talking to you." I don't know whether it was premeditated out and out, it's hard to say but here they were driving past the PMW headquarters on Easter morning services, where they were having Easter morning services, and there they are with tommy guns in the car--it seems kind of strange that they just happened by. And of course, I can recall that some of the men spotted them and my father ran towards that car and of course, that's when he was shot down. I don't know whether he had a gun or not, of course there is a possibility. They said that these men shot in self-defense but who opened fire first, there again, I don't know. Of course, these questions will come up and I don't know if they'll ever be answered. I might even ask why as I now in the company of past UMW affiliates? Some of the federal government, their fathers were in the UMW and I still have that feeling of this PMWA

affiliation that this is something that you belong to and the UMW were the bad guys. Of course, I can reason this out now and I know that it's silly but yet there's a little twinge there. Well, I know what happened not too long ago. I officiated a few games in an area where the PMW is very strong and this is some thirty years later and I would stop by one of the local taverns and have a beer after the game and I'd run into some of these old miners that remembered my father and they'd say, "Are you Ed Mabie's son?" And I'd say, "Yes." And they'd say, "I remember your father well. He was a real person. If you're just half the man your father was, you'll be one hell of a person." I question myself as to what he means by this, character-wise, that he had guts to stand up to another man? It's hard to say, according to what you put masculinity on, I guess. My father's devotion to the laboring cause, of course, was kind of hard to understand. Usually you think the family would come first. He was a good worker and he provided for the family and he was good to my mother and he was good to us kids and of course, he was fairly strict--it was a way of life then. But I was wondering, was this cause so great that the family came second? I've wondered about this. He had a chance to take a job on the fire department or the police department and get out of that movement but he wouldn't and I'm just wondering if this came maybe a personal vendetta with him against some of his personal friends and cohorts because many of his friends, of course, were killed.

Q: Can you name some of the friends that were killed?

A: I can remember Glenn Stufflebeam. He was with Danny McGill when they were shot out on 66. Of course, that was a little after my father was killed. Then of course, Vic Ghent was shot, I think that was near the PMA headquarters at another time. Art Gramlich, I think I mentioned him. This is just a few of the names. Of course you have to go back thirty-five years to hunt them out. I always wondered, too, with reference to this, once my father was in this movement, could he have gotten out because I think there was sort of a closed situation at that time.

Q: Mr. Mabie, can you go back and tell me what happened after your father was killed because I understand that they were taken to the hospital and some of the people were not dead that were loaded into the wagon.

A: I think the one that was most seriously wounded was Art. Gramlich. My father was killed, of course. I recall from people telling me that they gave him my father and they said he was dead and they said, "Get the other people to the hospital." That's about all I know with reference to that. Then of course, I think I did mention that when I came home--I was just hunting Easter eggs in Washington Park--and I saw a crowd of cars at the house and my sister told me that my father had been killed. My mother was just sitting in the rocking chair and she was sort of in a state of shock. There were five children in the family and the PMA sort of helped us along through these times but I can recall the funeral fairly well. I know that there were quite a congregation of laboring people here. I wouldn't say for sure but I think it was the second largest funeral, whether in the state of Illinois but I know it was in Springfield, because I think over 12,000 to 15,000 people assembled and

of course, they had the regular floats and the banners for the auxiliaries and I think there were out of state auxiliaries here for the funeral when they paraded to the cemetery at Oak Ridge. Of course, it's pretty hard to forget those. On Easter, Sunday morning for many years they would have memorial services for many of the men that were killed in the movement. I don't know. There's a few other questions with reference to the movement and of course, I can commend my father politically, I remember he always backed the Socialist movement. Of course most of the union members, Norman Thomas, Lemke, I can remember those more liberal-minded people and I can see why he would, most of the working men at this time being out and through the depression and going back into history, in the Communist movement, in reference to the United States, were very strong in the early 1930s here, before it was outlawed and of course, it's back in again now. I can see why the union man would back some of these people because of the liberal laws they wanted to pass in reference to the working man.

Q: Thank you Mr. Mabie.

End of Tape