

University of Illinois at Springfield

Norris L. Brookens Library

Archives/Special Collections

Ada Miller Memoir

M611. Miller, Ada (1910-1999)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 90 mins., 16 pp.

ILLINOIS COAL: THE LEGACY OF AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Ada Miller, resident of Christian County, discusses her family's grocery store in Langleyville during the mine wars of the 1930's; impact of mine layoffs and strikes on the community; Progressive Miners Women's Auxiliary and the PMA leaders. Also discusses the Depression.

Interview by Kevin Corley, 1986

OPEN

See collateral file

Archives/Special Collections LIB 144
University of Illinois at Springfield
One University Plaza, MS BRK 140
Springfield IL 62703-5407

Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Kevin Corley for a special project, "Illinois Coal: The Legacy of an Industrial Society." The project was sponsored by the Illinois State Historical Society and funded in part by the Illinois Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional support came from the Oral History Office of Sangamon State University. Elsebeth Buckley transcribed the tapes and Susan Jones edited the transcript.

Ada Miller and her family ran a grocery store in Langleyville during the mine wars of the 1930's. In this memoir, she discusses the Progressive women's auxiliary and the activities they sponsored. She also discusses the shootings in Langleyville and some of the Progressive leaders.

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 and the Illinois State Historical Library are not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

The manuscript may be read, quoted and cited freely. It may not be reproduced in whole or in part by any means, electronic or mechanical, without permission in writing from the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois, 62708.

Ada Miller, Taylorville, June 11, 1986.

Kevin Corley, Interviewer.

A: I had an older brother, he was fifteen years old when my father died in 1913. He was born in Italy, my older brother was born in Italy. And he was two years old then when they came to the States, to America. He was fifteen years old when my father died and you know he was an extraordinary person. He took over like a father. We were living in Riverton at the time and it was during the First World War. He came to Kincaid to work at the cooperative store, and it was rumored that they were sinking this mine at Langleyville which turned out to be mine Number Nine. Mr. Langley owned a lot of land over there and at that time it was all timber. I guess he was wanting to get rid of that place, so he started clearing the land. Of course he had to have a grocery store to entice the people to come there. So he started my brother up in business, sort of, you know. Bought a building for him, moved it from Sharpsburg. It still stands, if you have been there. They moved that from Sharpsburg. So he was quite successful, my brother was quite successful.

Q: Why did Mr. Langley help your brother out that way, do you think?

A: Well, that was his way of getting somebody in there to start the store and this way families would move in. It was just good psychology on his part, you know, and he started clearing the land. He built some homes and the families started to move in.

Q: Did Mr. Langley have anything to do with the mines?

A: No, no, he had nothing to do with the mines at all.

Q: So he was just into the buying and selling of the land and . . .

A: Yes, because he owned all this land. It was just all timber land in those days.

Q: I see. How did your father die?

A: My father had gone hunting, and he caught pneumonia. And he died at St. John's Hospital in Springfield within ten days. Now I used to tell my mother later on, when they discovered penicillin, I used to tell her, "Well, Ma, if Pappa was alive today we'd save his life." But in those days there was nothing like that, so within ten days he was dead. And my mother was six months pregnant with my younger brother, so we really had it rough, my mother really had it rough. I don't remember ever seeing my mother of a morning when I would get up because she had already been out washing clothes in people's homes, in those days. Scrubbing on the board.

Q: How old was your brother? Your brother was two years older than you, did you say?

A: My younger brother?

Q: Your older brother.

A: Oh, my older brother. He was born in 1898 and I was born in 1910 so he was twelve years older than I was. He was twelve years older than I was.

Q: What was his name?

A: Orlando.

Q: Orlando. What was your younger brother's name?

A: Well, he was named after my father, John B. Fabri, his name was John B. Fabri.

Q: So you had two brothers? And no sisters?

A: And three sisters.

Q: Oh, and three sisters.

A: Well, yes, with myself. There were two boys and three girls.

Q: Oh, my. What were your sister's names?

A: Well, Rose was my older sister, and then Mary is my middle sister and then me. And then my brother, we always called him Jack, you know. My father died in February, and then he was born in May.

Q: So your mother had to support five children?

A: Yes, absolutely, yes, yes. In those days, you know, there was no state aid for widows or anything like that, you know, she just had to hussle.

Q: So what type of jobs did you say she did at that time?

A: Washed clothes, she just washed clothes. Went to the people's homes and washed clothes.

Q: Did she ever have any other regular job besides that?

A: No, that was all. Then my brother in 1918 started, like I said, Mr. Langley got him kind of started in the grocery business. Then my brother started a business up in 1918 and we were in school. So in June when school was out then we moved to Langley, and I lived there until I was married.

(Parts of the transcription omitted.)

Q: We were talking a little bit about the coal mining and things in Langleyville. Let's turn it now to the depression years. What can you tell me about what it was like?

A: Black Friday. We used to have four banks in Taylorville. We had the John B. Colegrove Bank. Then we had the First National Bank, and the Taylorville National Bank, and then the Farmer's National Bank. This was in October, you know, the 29th of October. My sister and I went to town, because I had money from the store. My brother and I, we always had a savings account together. My younger brother and I. The Friday before that the John B. Coldrin Bank failed to open. We didn't think anything of it. My sister, my older sister and I (she is the one that was married, Rose) we were going to town to take out our money out of the banks. So when we got to Taylorville, the First National and the Taylorville National didn't open their doors. But later on we did get 80 percent of our deposits, so that wasn't so bad. But it took time to get that back.

Q: How much do you think you had in it at that time?

A: Oh, not a whole lot. I really don't even remember.

Q: Would it be over a thousand?

A: I don't think so, no.

Q: Tell me more.

A: Well, then the first lady I saw when we came to Taylorville in the truck, (that's the only means of transportation we had was the truck), and I met one of my dearest friends, Thelma Gardner. I guess she came to town with the same purpose that we did, because she said they banked at the Edinburg Bank also. She told us that the Edinburg Bank had failed to open its doors too that morning so that was a terrible thing. Then of course, you know, things got worse. They didn't get better, things got worse. The Farmers National Bank stayed open for about a year or two yet, but then it finally went under also. We had banks in Owanico and Stonington, Kincaid, Bulpitt, they all went under.

Q: What did you do with your money then when the banks went under?

A: Just saved it at home.

Q: Kept it in the store?

A: Yes, and paid the bills in cash, you know.

Q: Did you have a safe for your money?

A: Yes. Oh, sure.

Q: The depression, how much did it hurt you?

A: Oh, it hurt an awful lot. Finally in 1932, then that is when it was really bad, when the mines came out on strike. We closed our store and we had it closed until I reopened it in 1936.

Q: So from 1932 to 1936 it was closed?

A: Yes. But then there were another grocery store in Langley.

Q: How far did you extend credit to the miners, before the depression?

A: Until the mines went back to work.

Q: So you extended credit to them until the mines went back to work?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you loose money often?

A: Plenty.

Q: Plenty of money.

A: Yes.

Q: Lots of miners just couldn't pay. Would they have paid if they could have, do you think?

A: I think some would. There were a lot of families that moved to Detroit. The factories were working up there. This is how it was, you know. One heard about a job there. I don't know how many families moved to Detroit from Langleyville that were coal miners. One of the fellows, his wife would come back to see us all the time. She would say that her husband wouldn't give her the money to pay the bill because he thinks we made enough money off them that he didn't have to pay the bill. I wanted to tell him, I wonder if that's how they feel about all the money they spend in the chain stores today? If they should be able to go in there and get groceries for nothing.

Q: All right, once the depression came and like you said a strike came about, you did extend credit to people?

A: Not so much then, not in 1932, not so much then. But before that. The mines would go down the first of April and then they would renew their contract and they would have problems. Sometimes, like in 1927, the mines went down the first of April. We had Number Nine, we had Number Seven, Number Eight and Number Fifty-eight. And they all went back to work in the fall, but Number Nine. Number Nine was down for two years. So these other fellows, some of them moved out of town, like I say. A lot of them went to Detroit, and a lot of the fellows were just transferred to the different mines. At Fifty-eight, which is Hewittville, Seven and Eight, and then Number Nine opened up again, it reopened then in May of 1929. At that time, it was all hand work. Then of course they put in loading machines. Number Nine was the first mine that went into that along the Midland, later on they all went to that you know.

Q: So how did the mechanization affect the . . .

A: Well, it affected them, it affected because they didn't need as many men.

Q: How did the men feel about that?

A: I don't know really. I guess they had no choice because that was the coming thing anyway, you know.

Q: How did they decide who to lay off?

A: I don't know, really. You mean when the fellows got transferred?

Q: When a new machine would come in and it would replace workers?

A: Well, see Number Nine opened with all these loading machines and cutting machines, you know. A lot of the fellows that didn't go to Detroit moved to other places and there just weren't that many coal miners that claimed their jobs. All I know is that they just didn't employ as many men after that.

End of Side One, Tape One

Q: Can you tell me about how the mine wars got started in Christian County?

A: That is in that history book.

Q: What do you remember about the affect it had on the community?

A: It was terrible, it was terrible.

Q: How did the people in Langleyville react? Were there a lot of shootings?

A: Not really in Langleyville but there was lots of shootings and lots of bombings in Taylorville.

Q: Did you play any sort of a role during the mine wars? Did you get active?

A: Yes, the miners, they formed a new union which was called the Progressive Miners of America. Their intentions were to get rid of John L. Lewis. Since I was in the grocery store, why, you felt like you had to go along with the rest of them. I joined the auxiliary. The women had their auxiliary and they had their first meeting in Springfield at the K.C. Hall. I was one of the delegates to go that.

Q: What years was that, 1932?

A: Yes, in the fall of 1932. We would go and load up on the truck and go on these picket lines, you know, I would do that too. Get up and be there by five o'clock, trying to stop the miners from going to work.

Q: What inspired you to do that?

A: I felt like I owed it to the people who used to trade in my store.

Q: Because most of them were miners?

A: They were all miners and if you didn't get involved they just thought maybe you didn't care. To show them that I did care I got involved. Because there was no reason for me to get involved, I didn't have anybody in our immediate family that coal was a miner.

Q: Did most of the other women of the community get involved?

A: Oh, yes. Sure.

Q: How did the men feel about that?

A: They didn't think nothing of it, they just went along with it. We had a lady from, what town was it? I think she was from Belleville. Agnes Wickes, she was the first, have you heard of her?

Q: Yes, did you meet her before?

A: No, I just met her then.

Q: Did you ever hear her speak then?

A: Yes.

Q: Was she a good speaker?

A: Oh yes, she was a nice speaker. The only thing that I remember about her, although I didn't do anything about it, was that she was a communist.

Q: I didn't know that.

A: Yes, she was a communist. She was a school teacher I remember. She got up and said that she was a second grade teacher. You know how you had to line up, you didn't just rush into school, you lined up, and went in there orderly, in the morning? You always had to pledge allegiance to the flag? She would never her children pledge allegiance to the flag. So wasn't she a communist?

Q: Was that the reason why you thought she was a communist?

A: I think she made that remark. That's where I got it, because she made that remark.

Q: Do you think there was certain communist ideals she was for?

A: I really don't know about that.

Q: Socialism, job sharing, and that type of thing.

A: I don't know about that. I don't know. I just never got that impression of it, you know. I just never felt that way about her.

Q: Did you hear that story about her as a school teacher?

A: She would tell it.

Q: She would tell it.

A: She would tell it.

Q: And she would say she would not allow people to say the pledge of allegiance.

A: She would not let her pupils.

Q: Did she give a reason for it? Or just insinuated that she was a communist?

A: She was a communist, she said she was a communist. And she just would not let her children pledge allegiance to the flag.

Q. But she never said why she was for . . .

A: If she did I never got the gist of that, you know.

Q: Did you socialize with her at all?

A: No, no, she was from Belleville, and I would just be among the crowd. But I heard that.

Q: Where did you hear her speak?

A: Different places where they would have, what do I want to call it? They would have the gatherings, you know, then everybody would get up. It sort of encouraged the people to stay on strike. Some of the officers, they would get up and give a speech and give them something to make it worth their while for staying out. But it finally got the best of them. They finally had to go back to the mines. I think they were lucky to get their jobs back. We had quite an infiltration of people from southern Illinois that came over and took their jobs.

Q: The strike breakers?

A: Yes, that was what we called them. The strike breakers and also scabs and swampies. The people that came from southern Illinois they were called swampies.

Q: Where did those people live that came from there?

A: Wherever they could find a house, you know.

Q: Did they live in Langleyville?

A: No, not so much in Langleyville, most of them in Taylorville and along the Midland. No, not in Langleyville. All the people in Langleyville owned their own homes. No, they didn't come to Langleyville.

Q: So most of the people in Langleyville went Progressive?

A: Oh, yes, they were all Progressive. They were all Progressives.

Q: Why did they all go Progressive?

A: It was a known fact that they wanted to get rid of John L. Lewis. There is always a few leaders, and then the rest of them are followers.

Q: Do you think some people went along with it that didn't really want to?

A: Well, they went along with it because they didn't have the choice, I think.

Q: Isn't that interesting that a whole community would become Progressive in a situation like that?

A: Especially there in Langleyville. Langleyville wasn't as big as it is today. They were all Progressive, all of them were.

Q: What do you think was in the community that might have caused that cohesiveness?

A. (pause) I really don't know. I was only 22 years old, and, just like I say, I just went along. I felt like I had to let the people know that I was behind them 100 percent, you know. I say to this day I think I am still a Progressive. I think that it was a good thing that they started but I guess that they just weren't strong enough. The strike just went on for weeks and months and years and it finally broke their backs, I guess. And we were under militia law then for about 18 months. I remember sitting in front of my store and there were these militiamen on horse back, and I was sitting in the front of the store, just sitting in the front of the store of an evening and he ordered me inside. I don't know why, I just did it. (laughs) He was on horse back and he just said, "You go inside where you belong." And that was just what I did. But I wasn't hurting anybody, or doing anything, I was just sitting out on the steps in front of our store.

Q: Did the militia seem to show any sort of favoritism?

A: Sure. They were for Peabody, you know, they were for Peabody. Sure.

Q: Were a lot of the main wheels in Taylorville for Peabody, the sheriff say for instance and the mayor?

A: I really don't know. There was an awful lot of bombings of homes that happened especially up in the north end of Taylorville. Some of the fellows were Peabody stooges too you know. They would bomb their own homes to show that they were on their side. And all the time they were just Peabody stooges was what they were.

Q: Did you hear that they did that or . . .

A: Oh, sure it would make the papers.

Q: That people were bombing their own homes?

A: No, no, but we just came to that conclusion. You found out later on, after it was all over with and it was settled. That this one fellow in particular, he just went along with them, and would go to all the meetings and things and just be real aggressive, get up and make speeches and all of that. He was a Peabody man all the time, and they found it out later.

Q: Who were some of the Progressive leaders?

A: Well, Raymond Tombazzi for one, Joe Gherardini in Langleyville. You know I don't really know who they all were.

Q: So they helped to rally the people around the cause.

A: Sure.

Q: Who were some of the women's auxiliary leaders? Besides Agnes Wickes?

A: Well, she was our first president. But we had several, there was several. I know of a lady in Kincaid, she would get up and make speeches. And a lady from Stonington, she would get up and and make speeches at these rallies.

Q: Who were they?

A: Well, Jennie Ariana, she lived in Kincaid and then there was a Mrs. Bessen from Stonington, I don't know.

Q: All right. Do you think the women's auxiliary recieved any credit for any of the things that they did?

A: Yes, because they would, we would hold dances. The women would bake pies and cakes and different things, you know, to sell and make money, make a little bit if money.

Q: Did they help to feed the workers that were out on strike?

A: Well, then not so much that, because I think the Red Cross stepped in too, and would give flour and beans and things like that. But like if the children needed a pair of shoes or something, you would give your order in and they would buy shoes for the school children.

Q: Were the people of Langleyville angry at all at your family for closing your store?

A: No, not really.

Q: So they understood.

A: Oh, sure. By that time there was another store anyway. We just couldn't afford, we just couldn't afford to give credit anymore.

Q: Who ran the other store?

A: A fellow by the name of Pichioni ran the other store.

Q: Why was he able to, did he continue to give credit?

A: Yes, he was a man, and I think that made the difference.

Q: The fact that he was a man.

A: Absolutely. Sure.

Q: How does that make a difference? I mean did he suffer financially the same as you would have or . . .

A: Oh, I don't think so, I don't think that. He just had different ways, he just had different ways about him, you know.

Q: Did he go out of business then later?

A: Well, then he was electrocuted about 1940, I think, and then his wife kept the store for a couple of months, but then they finally had to close. They sold it to different people and then they all went out of business. And our store remained yet, and it still is today. But of course it is not much of a store anymore. You know what it is like, don't you?

Q: Yes.

A: My sister Mary Fabri operates the store today. She just has a few canned goods, and she sells a lot of candy to the kids, and ice cream, and potato chips. They just worship her.

Q: I know, I have heard of her.

A: You know that. Yes. They just worship her, they don't call her Mary, they call her Mary Fabri. Oh, yes, those kids they just all love her. They really do.

Q: That is nice. Okay, what more can you tell me about the mine wars from your experiences? What was it like walking the picket line?

A: Well, we really didn't walk. A bunch of the people would get on these trucks you know, and then we would go to these different mines and just stand there. Of course, we didn't stop anybody from going to work because they could go to work just the same as we did. Didn't stop any of the coal miners, I don't think, I guess we were just trying to shame them or something. But I don't think we were very successful.

Q: How did you try to shame them? Just by standing there?

A: Oh, yes, by just standing, you know how picket lines are. A lot of people won't cross a picket line. Lot of good union men just will not cross a picket line.

Q: Did they get verbal?

A: Oh, yes, and fights, yes.

Q: Would the women take part in the fights?

A: No.

Q: Step aside then.

A: Oh, there would be brothers who wouldn't talk to each other because one was a Progressive, and the other one belonged to the United Mine Workers. There was a lot of hard feelings, just an awful lot of hard feelings, in those days.

Q: You mentioned Ray Tombazzi, did you ever meet him?

A: Oh, sure.

Q: What type of man was he?

A: Well, I guess he made a good leader.

Q: He was from Taylorville?

A: He was from Taylorville. He lived with his father and his step-mother and his half sister.

Q: And he was well liked?

A: Oh, yes, he was quite a leader.

Q: You mentioned before some things about communism. Were there other people that the people of Taylorville and Kincaid thought were communists?

A: No, I don't think so. I never heard that. I don't know. All I remember was Agnes Wickes. And I told that to a friend of mine and she says, "Well, I wouldn't have liked Agnes Wickes had I known she was a communist," she says, "I don't believe she was a communist." I heard her tell me, I am not making it up. I heard her, that came out of her own mouth. (tape stopped)

Well, I was going to tell you about Thelma Gardner, how she would take me up to this here historical library in Springfield. I would run this paper and this is where I got all my information. Towards the end I thought, how is this ever going to end. I will get my history book and read that part, do you want me to?

Q: All right, you are talking about the history of Christian County that you helped to write some of the things for back in 1968.

A: About the mine war.

Q: And you helped to write some of that you say.

A: Yes, I wrote it all. I am the only one that wrote about the mine war in this book. This here Charles Percy, he was the president of the United Mine Workers, and he finally admitted defeat. And I was so glad when it came to that. I thought, now this is going to be the end of it

and my job is finished. By that time I was getting really tired of it all.

Q: Well, clarify now what you were saying about Charles Percy?

A: Well, let me get my history book.

Q: Okay.

Q: One of the things I wanted to ask you was, there were a lot of shootings and things in Langleyville.

A: No, there was just two, and they were just about a couple of months apart. The same year. It was in the spring of 1932. This one couple, they sent their money to Italy, through the Italian consulate, he lived in Springfield. They gave him their bank book and it was getting close to the first of April. They would go up there, and find out where was their bank book. He couldn't show them where the bank book was at, so they had no proof, and that is when he sent three fellows. They came down here, and they shot this man right off and the woman. She was running down the basement. In those days everybody burnt coal, they had a coal furnace. She was even going out through the coal bin because she wanted to escape through the window there, and they just followed her with some machine gun or whatever. They just filled her full of holes, they just shot her to pieces, almost. Then there was another old man there, and I think they just kind of knocked him out, they didn't shoot him because he lived to tell it.

Q: What about Art Cioni?

A: Art Cioni. See, these people lived at this corner, well the lady that I was talking to, this Ada Vidmar I was talking to on the telephone just a few minutes ago, see they live in the house where the first shooting took place. A block west of that was where Art Cioni and his wife lived. I guess he was demanding money, this fellow from Springfield, was demanding a certain amount of money.

Q: For what?

A: Just demanding money, not for nothing that I know of. He knew they had money cause they were bootleggers, and he just wanted money from these people.

Q: Sort of protection money maybe?

A: I would not think so. I really don't know if it was protection money or not. You mean protect him from the law or something like that?

Q: Yes.

A: No, I don't think it was nothing like that. They used to do a lot of that in those days if anybody had a lot of money why, they would always write ransom notes to them or something like that, you know, and this man demanded a certain amount of money. When they didn't come across why then they went there to have a shoot out. But he wasn't there he sent

his stooges and there was one old man in there and my mother told him, "Well, what do you want to go there for?" He says, "I want to protect them." She says, "Well, you are going to get shot and get killed, that's what you're going to do." And sure enough the first shot that was fired in the front door this old man was there with his gun and he got it and he was killed instantly. Where Art Cioni and his wife, they lived to tell it and Art Cioni's still alive.

Q: Did Art Cioni do any shooting back?

A: I don't think there was much shooting back. So then this Italian counsul--you know what happened to him? Well, I think this was in May then, the fellows that he had sent down here to do the job for him, he didn't pay them off. So one Sunday morning, just as he was coming out of the front door, he had his little son by the hand, well, a car came by with a machine gun and just killed him outright.

Q: Killed the counsul?

A: Yes, not the boy. The boy was all right. But they killed him, because I guess he didn't pay off. Now this was what we thought. We don't know it to be a fact.

Q: And no one knew any names of the people that were in the counsul?

A: Well, they did. I never heard the names of these fellows that were doing the shooting. But I don't think the two were together, had any connection, because this guy that was demanding money from Art Cioni was altogether a different fellow.

Q: How popular was bootlegging at that time?

A: Very popular. There was an awful lot of bootlegging joints.

Q: Why didn't the law do anything about it?

A: Well, if they didn't catch them, they didn't catch them, they just didn't.

Q: They let them go.

A: They let them go. And if they caught them, why they'd go out and empty all their wine barrels and things like that, you know. And bust bottles of liquor and wine and beer.

Q: What about gambling? Was there a lot of gambling?

A: I don't think so, not in Langley.

Q: Any slot machines?

A: I don't think there were slot machines in those days yet, in 1932. If there were they weren't around here that I know of.

End of Side Two, Tape One