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Henson Purcell Memoir

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Interview and memoir

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COAL MINING AND UNION ACTIVITIES PROJECT

Purcell discusses coal mining and unions in Franklin County, Illinois: the Mulkeytown march, conflict between the UMW and PMA, and the mine disaster in West Frankfort. Also discusses Charlie Birger and Shelton gangs, prohibition, the Ku Klux Klan, and the 1925 tornado.

Interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Rex Rhodes for the Oral History Office on November 24, 1972.

Mr. Purcell is a retired editor of the West Frankfort, Illinois Daily American newspaper. In this interview, he focuses on the war between the United Mine Workers of America and the Progressive Union over who would have control in Franklin County. He discusses the Battle of Mulkeytown and forays into Franklin County by the Progressives. Also included are his remembrances concerning the colorful history of this area. He talks of the Birger and Shelton Gangs, the Herrin Massacre, and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan during prohibition, and on a more somber note, the tornado of 1925 and the mine disaster and resulting loss of lives.

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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Henson Purcell, November 24, 1972, West Frankfort, Illinois.

Rex Rhodes, Interviewer.

Q: Could you give us a brief background sketch of yourself before we get down to the specifics of the mine war?

A: Of course. I've been in this racket most of my life. I grew up over at Carrier Mills in Saline County. Way back when I was a youngster, my dad had what was known in those days as a general store where you handled everything from groceries to dry goods, furniture, shoes, barrel salt, fence wire, and the works. Rather early in this experience, my dad and another fellow bought the Carrier Mills Mail which was a hand set weekly newspaper in this little town of Carrier Mills. He told me one morning, "Henson, I want you to go down and work at the Carrier Mills Mail." I'd always thought that of all the things in the world that I wouldn't want to do, it was that, because I'd seen these guys hand packing this type. But I went down there and worked a little while with a printer by the name of Guy Newman. Before I'd been there long enough to hardly know which way was up, or anything about the operation at all. Guy told me one day that he had a job and was leaving, so I was left with the mechanical part of the thing. In an operation like that you get involved in a little bit of all of it, the news end as well as the rest of it. So I was there for a year and a half or two years, I guess.

Then I went to Johnston City with the Williamson County News, and was down there about a year and a half. Then the Williamson County News folded. Incidentally, it was owned by a former State Senator from down there, Guy Crisenbery. I don't know if you ever knew about him or not, but he was known all over the area. He was quite active in the support of Southern Illinois University, and that kind of thing, after he got into the senate. So then, at about that time I came to West Frankfort. The people who owned the American were operating a weekly newspaper known as the Frankfort American. They had decided to start a daily and did start it on September 1, 1916. They needed additional help so I came up to West Frankfort as a printer. I've been here ever since. (laughs)

Yes, about fifty-four years of it. I worked in just about every department they had. I worked as a printer, foreman, advertising manager, business manager, city editor, managing editor, general manager--the works, one time or another--finally editor and general manager when the place changed hands back about four years ago.

Q: So you came right through the ranks?

A: Right, right, right.

Q: Well, as you know, I'm pursuing the union war between the United Mine Workers and the Progressive Miners of America. Looking back, one could say the real thrust of the war began at the battle of Mulkeytown in

August, 1932. Would you recall some of the background of the battle of Mulkeytown? What led up to it, and then the battle itself?

A: Well, this was quite a thrilling experience. This was really not the beginning; it was at the heart of the thing. It all started with dissatisfaction on the part of a lot of the coal miners with the United Mine Workers of America operation and John L. Lewis' operation of the union. There were a lot of people involved. In our county, we had a lot of people who were Progressive at heart, but under the system under which the coal mines operate, a man can work at the coal mine only if he has membership in the union with which they [the mine operators] have a contract. The mines in this county, as well as all over the state, were under contract with the United Mine Workers of America. So when this thing started and got pretty active in Franklin County, the coal operators decided, for some reason or other, that in spite of the fact that they had found John L. Lewis and his people great antagonists. They elected to go along with him, to recognize, and continue to operate under the United Mine Workers of America contract, instead of playing along with the Progressives. Well, this didn't stop coal miners from going Progressive, shall we say. A lot of them were Progressives at heart and a lot of them affiliated with the Progressive Union, but as they indentified themselves, of course, they lost their jobs.

The law in this county consisted of the States Attorney, the Sheriff and his staff, the police forces in the various communities, and, at that time, we had Justices of the Peace and Constables. The Law, shall we say, in Franklin County explained their position by saying they were not taking any sides in the union controversy, but they were going to respect the right of any man to work, who wished to work. That meant they were going to support the United Mine Workers, and they did that consistently during the process of the thing. There were quite a lot of people deputized as special deputies and, of course, they were members of the United Mine Workers. They were the people who were involved and they were citizens. There got to be quite a staff of law enforcement people enforcing the right of a man to work if he was working under contract.

Of course, there were efforts to picket these mines, but they placed police and deputies. In every case, so far as I know, the pickets were driven off the premises, so that the law very effectively enforced the right of a man to work. It was not long until there were a lot of miners in Franklin County out of work because they had affiliated with the Progressives, [they] could not continue to work because the Progressives had no contract with our operators. So, this is where the thing was when we got into this battle of Mulkeytown.

[The Progressive] organization was centered up around Gillespie and Benld, as I remember it. The word got out that they hadn't been able to do anything with local people down here in Franklin County by way of picketing and stopping production of coal at these United Mine Workers of America mines. The word was out that they were going to stage a march on Franklin County. The Progressive miners from up around the Benld and Gillespie area were going to march into Franklin County en masse, picket the mines, and shut them down. There was no date set at first, but, as the word got around, the Franklin County law took steps to make preparations

to cope with it. The word went out for coal miners, or anybody who was willing to serve as a special deputy sheriff in dealing with this situation, to report to the hall in their respective towns or to the sheriff's office in Benton. They were to indicate that they were willing to serve as a deputy sheriff, sign up in other words. They were issued tin stars. It wasn't long until there were a lot of these people in the county who were committed to help enforce the law concerning the right of people to work.

Of course, there was much publicity about this march. As the date got closer in West Frankfort, these people who had indicated that they were willing to serve in this capacity, that if, as and when they were needed, the fire department siren would be sounded as a signal for them to report to the city hall for service. The date was finally set. As the time rolled around, early on the morning that the march was supposed to be staged, the sirens started sounding. Because the siren couldn't be heard all over town, in addition to the siren at the fire house, the fire truck ran up and down the whole length of Main Street, which is a two mile street with the fire truck siren on. You could imagine what kind of chills this thing sent up and down your back when you heard it. Whatever you were doing when you heard it--in my case, I was at the newspaper office--you realized that this was calling men to service that might result in death for a lot of people. Because they were going out to do this kind of thing if necessary. Well, these men reported in great numbers to the city hall and were taken to Benton. I assume that the same kind of thing happened in all the other towns in the county, because there was quite a crowd of people around the city jail at Benton.

I went to Benton and spent the day there. I was in contact with my office throughout the day as to what was going on up there. The first word early in the morning was that the march was on and according to reports, it was twelve miles long. The way it turned out, that was about right; just a long caravan of automobiles and trucks moving toward Franklin County. Throughout the day the States Attorney--who was Marion Hart--and the Sheriff, Browning Robinson, were in constant conference with some of the leaders in the industry. I think there were at least a couple of United Press International reporters with the march, and every time they would come to a little town that had a telegraph office they would file a report. We got it in the office then by teletype, and they would call me, and then I gave the officials what information the news service had concerning the progress of the march. So, we were in pretty close touch with it all day.

They had not outlined any definite program. They had just prepared to cope with it by whatever means they had. Either two or three times during the day, the Sheriff and the States Attorney held conferences and selected a group of four or five men--I don't remember how many, shall we say a squad--to go out and go up the highway and meet this caravan. They threw machine gun barricades across the highway and stopped them to try to talk them out of coming on, trying to tell them that there would be trouble. They didn't listen to this at all; they insisted that they were coming ahead, and did. After the emissaries for peace failed to accomplish their purpose, they'd just pick up their machine gun barricade and come back and report. It happened two or three times.

The people had continued to move slowly throughout the day. Late in the day, they held another conference to try to decide whether to let them come into the county at Mulkeytown or to turn them into, I believe its Jackson County. There's a Y there; they'd either come straight on into Franklin County, or if they blocked the Franklin County highway, they could force them to go into the other county. The question was, "What shall we do? Shall we block the Jackson County highway and force them to come into Franklin County or shall we block the Franklin County highway and force them to go the other way?" They decided that, if they let them get into the other county, they probably would establish a headquarters, or a camp, out there in a wooded area somewhere, and they would be there for days operating in and out of the county. They would have really no control over them because their headquarters would not be in the county. They decided they could best deal with the situation if the whole operation was forced into Franklin County.

They called the people together--they'd been milling around the jail house all day long, and they were all pretty well armed--and took these people out to Mulkeytown and blocked the other highway and forced them [the caravan] to come on into the Franklin County. They lined people up for about two miles inside Franklin County, from the division on into Franklin County, on each side of the highway. The officers had told these people that there was to be no firing unless the officers fired first; that they would set the pace on that kind of thing, if, as, and when, it became necessary. They didn't want it to happen.

When these people got there they let them come on in past the division point and come on into the county. As I remember it, it must have been about two miles with these people on each side of the highway. Of course, they had running boards on automobiles in those days. At a given signal, they mounted the running boards and started beating out the windshields and the car door glass, there was just pandemonium everywhere. A lot of the people who had come along with the caravan had just been told that they must, and they did without really knowing what they were going into; they were frightened, of course. It was sort of an elevated highway and the cars ran off the highway, into the fields, ditches, and just all over the place.

The whole thing stopped there. The highway was soon blocked with automobiles that were no longer under their own power. Somewhere along the line, somebody accidentally fired a shot. Quite a few of the people thought this was the signal from the officers for them to start firing, so there was quite a bit of firing. Miraculously there was never a report of anybody having been shot. I think there was one man who was shot through the mouth, through the cheeks, but nobody was seriously hurt, and nobody of course, was killed. Everybody always considered that this was only through a miracle, because there was this kind of thing and nobody really got hurt or killed.

This ended the thing so far as the invasion was concerned, and there was no mass picketing of Franklin County mines. Of course, the next morning, the problem (laughs) was to get these people together, get them out, and get them started home again. Some of these people were in a state of confusion, I think. I didn't hear this man say this, but somebody reported

the next morning about talking to one person who was in the caravan. He said he really hadn't known what to do, "You get hell if you do, and you get hell if you don't." (laughs) So, that's about the story of the Battle Mulkeytown.

Q: That really shows the great generaling going on there. My gosh, the group seemed to be organized pretty well. Now, Browning Robinson, what's his background? Was he in the army before?

A: I really don't know what Browning did. I would just hazard a guess that perhaps he was either on a farm, or maybe in a coal mine--I don't know. I think he had grown up around the county and had always been around here, but I never knew anything about him before he was elected.

One of the things that has always stood out in my mind in connection with that thing, is the thing that you mentioned, the matter of generaling this thing. These men, the State's Attorney and the Sheriff, and particularly the States Attorney, had a great responsibility on them that day. The decision that they made--were to make--might have caused untold number of deaths because they didn't know what it would amount to. They didn't know where it would end. They only knew what they were going to try to do. They were going to try to handle it without violence, of course, if they could. But they were prepared for whatever happened. Then when they made this decision, they had no way of knowing whether these people would accept it or whether they would be defiant. So they had a great responsibility on their shoulders, and I've thought an awful lot about it since then.

Marion Hart was a small person physically. Very big mentally, I think, and very alert mentally, but he was a small person. Of course, Robinson was a little bit the opposite. He was tall and this kind of person. But Marion Hart was a little guy, and it was a big decision for a little guy--or a big guy.

There were two or three things involved in trying to keep it in Franklin County. One thing was that they realized that the law would have to deal with it if it was within their own jurisdiction.

Q: There were several forays down here after that.

A: Oh, any number, just constantly. But these were minor things. This was the only real big thing. For instance, there were troubles several times at mass meetings. You see, both sides at the outset would hold mass meetings. They would hold big meetings and have speakers to come in and proclaim their theories and their beliefs, and condemn the other side. In other words, they were trying to sell their program. Any time either group staged a big mass meeting, there were some of the other folks out there who would try to put a damper on it, or to interfere with it. Sometimes they tried to break it up and did. Especially (laughs) if the Progressives were holding the meetings, then there were usually several United Mine Workers and the Law there. Of course, they operated with the idea that there might be bad trouble grow out of the meeting, not just to stop the meeting. This happened in any number of cases, and there was quite a lot of violence. As a matter of fact, there were a few

killings. I don't remember how many now, but there were some. It was a very, very hectic time.

Q: How did the people in the community react to this, the people who weren't directly connected with coal mining? That might just be a small portion of this community here because most everyone is, I think.

A: You can imagine about what kind of position people were in when the people involved in both sides of the this thing were their neighbors and, in some instances, their friends. In other cases, if you met a man on the street that you may have known, maybe he wasn't your friend or your neighbor, but you knew him and you started talking. You didn't know whether he was at heart a United Mine Worker or a Progressive. You didn't know how to talk to him. So, everybody was on the spot.

Q: I recall another incident that happened either in West Frankfort or DuQuoin or somewhere close by. A fourteen year old girl was shot and killed.

A: I don't remember that.

Q: Well, another incident would be a shoot out in Franklin Heights. Do you recall that?

A: I don't remember that there was.

Q: Three men were killed.

A: No.

Q: I heard this from a fellow over in Eldorado this morning. Two fellows from the Eldorado area came over here and there was a shoot out. It was in 1934, I think he said.

A: There was a shoot out in West Frankfort, but it was downtown. It did involve, I think, a couple of fellows from Eldorado. But there was only one man killed. I don't remember any incident where there was anything in the Heights or any three people killed in any kind of a shoot out. But this one man was killed. As a matter of fact, he was killed on the steps of an undertaking establishment right down in the heart of town.

Q: That must have been the one. He mentioned standing in the door of an undertaker's place.

A: Yes. Well, he had gone down the street and the shooting started as he went down the street. He apparently had tried to dive into this undertaker's establishment, not because it was an undertaking establishment, but just because it was available--I'm guessing this is right--to get out of the line of fire. And, there's where he died.

Q: Machine guns were used quite a bit back then. Were they easy to come by? Where did they come from?

A: I don't remember any machine guns being used particularly except on the part of the law. They had some, of course. The sheriff's people, but I don't remember that anybody else did.

Q: Prior to 1932 there was an injunction against the United Mine Workers and Lewis, and there were claims that there were organizers coming from out of state. Do you know anything about that?

A: No, I don't. Of course, this really had nothing to do with the UMW of A and Progressive fight. Now, for a rather lengthy period of time, there was a sort of rebellion within the United Mine Workers. For quite a long while, I don't remember for how long--the state union in Illinois which normally is a department of the federal union--the United Mine Workers of America--operated in defiance of the UMW of A and elected their own officers. I don't particularly remember any claim about outside people coming in, but I'm sure that maybe some of the organizers might have been from out of state because this was not unusual, I think.

Q: No. Recalling another event, the way it would appear from looking back at some of the newspaper articles, the mayor of Zeigler was throwing in with the Progressives. The Sheriff came over and took over the police force. Pretty soon the mayor of Zeigler was charged, and--I don't know--probably convicted for arson for burning down an apartment house. Ray Edmundson had been living there. Now, I'm almost sure that was in Zeigler where that happened.

A: I don't recall that, there were all kinds of things happened (laughs) and it may very well have happened. I don't recall it particularly-- at all, as a matter of fact. Ray, as the sub-district president, was quite actively involved in the whole picture; he was the UMW of A officer in our county. But I don't remember this particular thing.

Q: Oh, he was state provisional president later on, wasn't he?

A: I believe he was. I believe he was. But at this particular time he was the sub-district president.

Q: He was from Cape Girardeau.

A: Oh, I didn't know that. I knew Ray quite well. I think he maybe lives up around Springfield now.

Q: As a matter of fact, I think he even ran against John L. Lewis at one time.

A: Yes, I believe he did.

Q: That was a no-no. Not too many people would try that.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you ever meet Lewis?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: When did you meet him?

A: Oh, I don't know, on more than one occasion. I didn't meet him this time, but I particularly remember that during this period when the United Mine Workers were defiant. There came a time when, I presume, Lewis' people felt that it was maybe time when they could arrive at some kind of an understanding, or maybe that Lewis could move back into the picture, because he came to West Frankfort to make a talk down at the high school auditorium. Of course, the opposition was very, very outspoken at that time, and when he came in to the high school auditorium it was packed--on a Sunday afternoon. He walked up to the speaker's stand and started rapping for order. He had a very deep voice, you know, and was calling for order, "Let's come to order now." He stood there for, oh, I don't know how long, rapping on the speaker's stand and trying to call the place to order. Oh, there were just boos, constant boos. At one point, a fellow walked up and snatched the gavel out of his hand, and just as quick as a wink, brother, he had it back--just like that. But, he never did get to speak, because of this opposition. They just did not grant him an audience on this particular time.

Some time after that--and I don't recall how long it was--he did come back and spoke at the Fairgrounds in Benton. I never will forget how he opened his meeting. He came out and said, "I come again. I shall always come when the interests of the United Mine Workers are at stake. I prefer to come on foot, but when the occasion demands, I shall come as I come today, flanked on either side by loyal friends, carrying a burnished shield, and backed up by the mighty majesty of the law." (Mr. Purcell said this in a deep, drawling voice to imitate John L. Lewis, and then laughs heartily.) And he spoke with a good reception.

Q: He really had an ability. As a matter of fact, I think he read Shakespeare and probably could recite Shakespeare volume by volume.

A: Right. Well, anybody, I think, who knows anything about what happened would have to say that John L. Lewis, regardless of whether or not they agreed with his methods and tactics, John L. Lewis did an awful lot for the coal mines. He did most of it in spite of them instead of because of them. I mean, he didn't get any help from a lot of them a lot of the time. He was fighting them while he was doing things for them.

Q: He was an authoritarian figure. He realized--or he thought--he had to be this, and history shows that no one really made it prior to him, unless they were like this.

A: Right, right. Well, I think one thing, and what you have just said bears this out and it is true. One reason that was very evident in Franklin County was that in spite of the fact that he was a tough bargainer so far as the operators were concerned--a tough guy to deal with--I think they respected him because they realized that once they had a contract with him, they could depend upon it being enforced from his angle. He had this going for him, as well as a lot of other things.

Q: I had an interview with his niece and spoke to her for quite some time. She told some interesting stories about him from the family view point. His ability to tell stories and to keep everyone in awe was native, I guess, something he was born with. Can you put your finger on any event, or events, that seemed to you to have been the turning point of the Union war here in Illinois? Any specific event that maybe changed the course, or turned it around?

A: No, I really can't. I don't know that it was turned around, or that the course was changed, because both unions continue; they still operate. The Progressives are strong apparently in their area still. It seems that they just divided the Illinois territory and some of the coal fields in Illinois continue to operate under the Progressive Union. Of course, others continue to operate under the United Mine Workers. It seems to me that in the case of Franklin County, the operators and the law taking the position that the contract would be respected just meant that the United Mine Workers would continue, and they did continue to operate in this county. And, of course, there was really no turning point. There were a lot of people who were out of jobs because they were no longer in the United Mine Workers. I'm sure some of them were reinstated after this thing--after it was more or less accepted that Franklin County was United Mine Workers territory. And, of course, Saline county was Progressive territory. And some of the territory to the north of us was and still is Progressive territory. So, I don't really think there was a turning point. It seems that each side just got to the place where they decided without any agreement--there was no cease fire--to accept the fact that they were going to maintain the territory they had and move ahead and leave the other guys alone. So far as I know there has been no effort on the part of the United Mine Workers to take over Progressive Territory, and the Progressive no longer bother our people in Franklin County. So apparently they just accepted the thing as it was and decided to go on from there.

Q: What causes brother to fight against brother in a situation like that, and even bear arms against him? I don't think it would happen today.

A: Oh, I think it might very well.

Q: Do you?

A: Yes. Not about this particularly, but people are--I don't know--seems like they're just prone to choose up sides. We say we don't believe in violence, but we don't always prove it, you know. We're inclined to go in that direction, it seems sometimes. I don't know how things could have happened, that happened in this case, on either side. Not being involved, you can't imagine that it could, but it did. I presume, for instance, we have people today who are almost violent because they don't believe in our violence in Viet Nam. And, then there are people who are almost as violent toward the people who are violent, see. So, I don't know. I think it's just human nature for people to have opinions and be prone to back them up with whatever they think it takes to make them stick.

Q: Did some of the union meetings have a flavor of a Chautauqua meeting, or is this just a bad simile?

A: No, no. I don't think any of them had that. I mean, it was a very serious thing from both points of view. Anytime one of these groups called a mass meeting there was no holiday atmosphere. They had speakers to back up their position and to try to sell their program and their ideas. Perhaps they condemned the other side, but I don't think there was any semblance of holiday atmosphere.

Q: West Frankfort is a German name. Is the miner in this area predominantly German, or what is the ethnic mix here?

A: No. West Frankfort has actually been a very definite melting pot town. There was a time back in the early years--this would be the early 1900's and the 1900's--when we had what was known in West Frankfort as patches. A lot of people came to this country, and to Illinois, and to Franklin County from other countries to work in the coal mines. We have, for instance, an Italian patch, a Lituanian patch, a Russian patch, and a Bulgarian patch where the people for some reason or another seemed to settle in specific parts of town. They are countrymen and more or less together. For a good many years a lot of them retained their native customs, spoke their native tongue, and just did not go through the melting pot for a long time.

To me the interesting thing about this has always been [that] the older people lived like this, and they didn't become a part of the community for a long time. But they operated neighborhood stores and prospered. I don't mean all of them, but there was a neighborhood store in every one of these places. In spite of the fact that you could hardly hold a conversation with some of these people, they were able to deal with people on a business basis, make change, and all this stuff, and make money. And they did. Then their kids, of course, weren't through our schools and played on our football teams and our basketball teams and excelled in their classes with the result that we still have them here. The only way you know that they're ethnic people is that they have ethnic names. But, they're just as American as we are.

Q: What was the population in West Frankfort back in the heyday of coal mining?

A: Well, at one time we had about 20,000. When the coal mines started closing, because of coal reserves being worked out and this kind of thing, we lost about twenty percent of our population just almost overnight. A lot of this happened almost overnight, it seemed. It wasn't that fast of course, but a lot of these coal mines started about the same time and they worked out about the same time. So, we hit our hey day with a lot of these mines about the same time.

Q: Where did the people go?

A: I don't know, just everywhere so far as I know--all over.

Q: A couple other incidents took place about this time. Charlie Birger was running through this area just about then. Do you recall any of those incidents?

A: (chuckles) Oh, very definitely, very definitely. There were a lot of things that stood out in this particular thing. Of course, as you know this had to do with a so-called war between two groups of people: one known as the Birger Gang and the other as the Shelton Gang. The Sheltons were centered up around Fairfield, and Birger was from Saline County. Well, this went on for quite a long while. The most of it, so far as we were concerned, was in Williamson County.

One of the things that has always stood out in my mind and, I think, has on the part of some of our people, is that the one murder that was committed in our county was the one for which Charlie was hanged. There were a lot of murders in south of us and in the other area, but only one murder [here]. Now, they operated in and out of our county all the time. For instance, when they were at their heyday some of these guys would come to town wearing their six-guns. A couple of them would--shall we say--patrol the outside of a barbershop while the third one went in and got a shave and a hair cut, maybe. So that they operated openly. They actually bothered no one in West Frankfort, but they were in and out.

Another thing, that is particularly outstanding, I think, is that while it got to the place where people were almost afraid to get out on the highways. There were no instances that I have known of where they ever bothered anybody except their own enemies. But this didn't change the fact that people were afraid to get out, because there was talk about them roaming the highways with armored cars and this kind of thing. Over between Marion and Harrisburg on Highway 13, Birger had a kind of a headquarters there that was known as Shady Rest. The other outfit bombed it from the air one time. It was a pretty big operation. I saw Birger hanged and, well--I don't know. (chuckles) I had two or three experiences concerning Birger that were interesting. I thought they were at that time.

At the time Birger was in jail waiting to be hanged, we had in West Frankfort a giant crusade--a Billy Sunday Crusade. A lot of the churches got together, brought Billy Sunday to town, built a tabernacle on a vacant lot down there north of where the city hall is now, and had this crusade. Of course, Billy Sunday was different than any preacher that anybody ever saw or heard. He just didn't operate like a preacher. But he was very dynamic, and he got results. I was probably more interested or more concerned about what I thought would make a good story than I was in Charlie Birger's soul. But somewhere along the line I decided it would be a good deal to see if I could take Billy Sunday up and let him talk to Charlie Birger while he was in jail waiting to be hanged. So I went over to see him [Sunday] one day. The guy spent most of his day time hours in bed reading, or checking his notes, or what not--he always had a book. So I talked with him and visited with him. Finally I told him what I had in mind and that I wondered if he'd be interested in going up and talking with Charlie Birger. Oh, he just warmed up to it quickly, and said, "Why, yes," he'd be glad to go. We set a time and a day, and I picked him up and took him up to the jail to talk to Charlie Birger. I

could hardly wait because I could just imagine how a guy like Billy Sunday was going to preach to Charlie about how he had wasted his life, and all this stuff. To my great amazement, Billy Sunday hung on the bars of the jail outside the cell, and Charlie did all the talking about his escapades and his run ins with these gangsters and all this kind of thing. And Sunday was the audience. So, I got a kick out of that.

Q: Sunday probably used that in many, many sermons.

A: Oh, I imagine he did, but I didn't get the story I was looking for. Well, it was interesting. Charlie Birger was not even present at the murder for which he was hanged. He was, of course, convicted of having plotted it, planned it and ordered it and this kind of thing, but he wasn't there.

I spent the night in jail just below his cell. The bars were open where you could see him and hear him talking, in what is a little reception room where they take the prisoners in when they book them. It's right below where Charlie's death cell was, and, as I said, the bars were open. I and another fellow or two spent the night there. He didn't sleep a wink all night. There were a few people who came in to see him during the night and went up and visited with him. He, again, spent most of the night talking to the people who came in to see him about his life and escapades in which he had been involved with his rivals and this kind of thing. So, he wasn't apparently upset.

It seems to me in a case of this kind--and I've seen four guys hanged--you'd think that a guy'd go nuts just thinking about it. Well, it seems to me that what takes over in place of that is a determination to go without cracking up, to go bravely. This is what happened in most every [case], all except one. This is what happened in Birger's case. He talked all night and he wasn't sleepy and he wasn't upset apparently. He didn't talk about the fact that he was going to die.

Early the next morning when it came time to take him out--they always hang them at sun up, you know, and everybody in the country was a deputy to be there to see that it was done properly (laughs)--he started out through the jail with his hands handcuffed before him, and he stopped. The sheriff's wife was in the livingroom--he went through the Sheriff's quarters to go outside to the gallows--and he stopped and thanked her for the treatment that he had received while he was in jail. Then he went on out and climbed the thirteen steps.

End of Side One, Tape One

A: He turned around and faced a Jewish rabbi--you know Charlie was Jewish--he faced a Jewish rabbi who was standing on the top step who had come to be present and said something about what he owed to this wonderful rabbi. Then they put the hood on his head, and away he went. But that was the deal so far as Charlie was concerned.

Q: Were you surprised when he reacted that way at that time? Of course, you said you have witnessed several hangings.

A: Well, I really was. I don't know what you expect, but I guess you expect a guy to crack up, just go wild. But he didn't. He was just as calm as he could be, and he didn't plead his innocence. Now, in one or two cases they've done that, claimed that they were innocent right on the very last minute. But Charlie made no claim about being innocent. In fact, he didn't say anything about that angle of it at all. It was just over almost as quickly as you could tell about it.

Q: [He] looked at the sun and said, "Beautiful day."

A: Beautiful world, right.

Q: Beautiful world, oh.

A: Right. Quite a speech.

Q: Yes. Well, do you see any connection, maybe in an abstract way, with the Charlie Birger gang, and the Shelton gang, and the armed fights between the union groups in Illinois?

A: Oh, no. There was no connection whatever.

Q: No connection at all?

A: No, they were just as completely different as Korea and Viet Nam were.

Q: All right. This happened in central Illinois, but was Fred Thomasson a member of the Charlie Birger gang?

A: He lived here, right.

Q: I hadn't seen the name Thomasson before and it described him as being a member of the West Frankfort Lions Club. There was one guy who was also a charter member of the West Frankfort Lions Club, and at one time served as secretary of the West Frankfort Lions Club, who worked with Charlie.

Q: What was Charlie's gang?

A: Well, actually, I don't know. It was just some kind of controversy that he got into with some of these Shelton people and one thing just led to another. I don't know that there was any overall objective. It's just that they turned out to be mortal enemies. It started over some kind of a deal that he claimed--or they claimed--happened, I think, over in Saline County. I don't really know what was involved. It just went from one thing to another. Like I said, there was no overall program of any kind.

Q: Nothing like bootlegging, or anything else?

A: Oh, no. No.

Q: Do you recall the Herrin Massacre?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Were you in the vicinity when that happened?

A: Really, no. I was here [in West Frankfort]. I was down there a short time after it happened. That's one I missed, I wasn't there when it happened. But it was, of course, quite a tragedy. It was a terrible thing, of course. But, no, I was not there when it happened but I heard a lot of stories about it.

Q: Was there a connection between the Birger gang, the Shelton gang, the Herrin Massacre, and the Ku Klux Klan?

A: There was no connection between any of them. No. They happened at different times in history, and they were not related in any way to my knowledge. I'm sure they weren't. The Birger-Shelton thing was just what it was labeled. It was a gang war, two groups of people warring against each other. The massacre had nothing to do with the Progressive and the United Workers. It was just that they had a strike of United Workers at this mine where this thing occurred. The people elected to bring in people to take the jobs, and it didn't work. But there was no relation to the Progressive thing in any way, none to the gang war. And there was no relation between the Ku Klux Klan thing and the gang wars.

Q: I'm not familiar with that at all. What was that about?

A: What happened, of course, in the Ku Klux Klan war, was that this was during the Prohibition Era and there was a lot of dissatisfaction on the part of a lot of people with the way the law concerning liquor was enforced, or not enforced in Williamson County. So the people in Southern Illinois formed the Ku Klux Klan, and it got to be a tremendous organization. The thing that was always surprising to me about it, and still is, was that it got to the place where among the leaders were the outstanding ministers of the area--preachers of various denominations who were among the leaders in this thing. They were the people who went to the big meetings and spoke. Of course, at the height of this Ku Klux Klan thing, they would have huge meetings out in the fields--out in the big open fields. [There were] just thousands of people there. A lot of them were in robes and this kind of thing. There would be people patrolling the highways in the vicinity. The big thing that happened was that the Ku Klux Klan people, because they were unhappy with law enforcement, finally brought in a fellow by the name of Glen Young. You've heard of him?

Q: I think I have.

A: Well, he actually was just a gunman. He was a real personable guy, a nice guy to talk to and a pretty nice looking guy. But he was a hired gunman. Now, they told all kind of stories about him having been, before he came to Southern Illinois, a deputy United States Marshall. I personally don't believe he ever was, but this was one of the stories that they

told. Anyway, what happened was that they brought this guy in to head up the Ku Klux Klan liquor law enforcement--prohibition enforcement--because they claimed that the officials were not doing it. Well, (laughs) there were hundreds of these Ku Klux Klansmen and they got to the point to where they would raid a whole community. In those times we had what were known as Justices of the Peace; they passed a law to outlaw them a few years ago, but they were little courts. These Justices of the Peace had power under the law to issue warrants. So, the Ku Klux Klans people would go to one of their Justices of the Peace, a Justice of the Peace who was a Ku Klux Klansman, and he would issue warrants for them when they needed or wanted to make a raid. And they would pick out maybe a little mining community, for instance, and raid every house in town. They would go to these people [Justices of the Peace] and get John Doe warrants, and they'd go out and raid this whole town. I was in Johnston City one night and they had staged a big raid somewhere, I don't know where. There was no place big enough that they could jail these people down in that part of the country and nobody they could take them before. They had to take them before a United States Commissioner, and there was a United States Commissioner in Benton, but there was none around there. They brought these people to Johnston City and herded them into the Masonic Hall. They kept them there until they could have a chartered train made up to move this whole group--there must have been two hundred and fifty of them, I don't know, there was a lot of them--to Benton to make their appearance before the United States Commissioner. And of course, this finally developed into a kind of a two-way war, too. The Ku Klux on one side, and people who were opposed to what they were doing on the other side. There was a fellow by the name of Ora Thomas who it turned out carried the gun for the other side. The story got around somewhere along the line that if these two guys ever met, there'd be a shoot out. And they met. And there was a shoot out and they were both killed. (laughs)

Q: Where did that happen?

A: It happened in a hotel lobby in Herrin, right on the main street, right down in the heart of town. So, we've had a lot of things happen.

Q: Could you relate what happened in the mine disaster here in West Frankfort?

A: It was just one of those things that happens in coal mines. And nobody today knows exactly what did happen, so far as I know. It was that there was gas in the mine somewhere, somehow, and apparently to a pretty big extent and something touched it. What touched it off, of course, is still a matter of speculation and guess work because nobody knows. It could have been one of any number of things. But it happened and there were, as I recall it now, one hundred and twenty killed. It was a terrible thing, of course. You can imagine it! Most of the town was standing around on a cold wintery night. It happened just a few days before Christmas. You could just see the vapor coming up out of the mine shaft. Of course, they roped it off as quickly as they could to keep the people back so they could work. You can imagine half the town--most of them families, and women and children crying and carrying on--standing up against this rope just as close as they could get all night long, and

wondering what had happened to their people. As the night wore on they [the rescuers] finally began to get to some of them and they'd bring them out. It was . . . oh, I don't know . . . it was . . . it's just, they took the bodies down to the junior high school gymnasium and just laid them out on the floor on stretchers. All night long people [were] coming through, trying to identify, trying to find their people. It was a terrible thing.

Q: One of the side effects of this would be how the people react afterwards. Did things slow down to a lot slower pace in the community after such a tragic event?

A: Well, they did. As I said this was just before Christmas. For two or three days, it just stopped Christmas business. But then just before Christmas--maybe the day before--man, they just covered the places up in town. I suppose a lot of people were here from other places who had come in because of relatives or there were a lot of officials here--a lot of reporters--everbody. Well, at the last minute they suddenly realized, "Here's Christmas." So they were just covered up with business on Christmas Eve night, for instance. Yes, it was a terrible thing and if you can imagine the day before Christmas, and on Christmas, the town was just filled with funeral processions, sometimes half a dozen going at the same time. It was just terrible.

You missed another one of our big tragedies. The torando. I believe there were one hundred and forty killed in that. It wiped out a whole section of town.

Q: When did that happen?

A: I believe it was 1925 that the tornado was, I believe that's right.

I want to tell you one little incident about the tornado. This thing hit about 4:00 in the afternoon, and I mean the noise was just like a big freight train going through town. Nobody realized when they heard it what it was until people began to call in. For instance, they started calling the newspaper office, "What's happened out in the northwest part of town?" Well, of course, we didn't know. The calls kept getting thicker and more of them all the time. Finally somebody suggested that something had happened out there. So I went out there, and that whole part of town was just leveled. Just like you'd taken a lot of big shipping cartons or crates and just flattened them. They spent the night digging people out of their homes. As quickly as they could, they set up emergency hospitals in lodge halls and churches and everywhere. Doctors and nurses came in from surrounding communities to help. They'd take these bodies as they'd get them out of the wreckage of their homes and took them down to the undertakers. There was one undertaking establishment down on West Main Street. Out in back of this place they had a kind of a shed--I guess it was a garage, but it actually was just a shed where they kept their equipment--and on one side of this there was a shelf. I don't know what it was ever there for. Because they didn't have room to take care of these people like they normally would, they just stacked them like cord wood on this big long shelf in this shed. And people just filed through this thing all night long looking for their people. When they

would identify somebody, somebody connected with the undertaking establishment would tie a shipping tag to one of the toes of the body and write the guy's name on it until they could take care of him. Well, I don't know whether you've ever been through a thing like this or not. In a thing of this kind where there's a lot of death, death kind of loses its horror. It's just a night's work. So you realize, here I'm covering a big story, and you're not shook too much about the fact that here's forty or fifty bodies laying up here. But you know, we had three kids at home, little shavers. I'd been milling around in this thing all night long, like I said, and I was kind of hardened to it all, I guess. But sometime during the early morning, I walked into a front room in this undertaking establishment and there was a bench of a thing on one wall and lying on this bench were the bodies of twenty-two babies. And they were in every description that you could imagine; timbers through their bodies, their faces mutilated, bloody and everything, and some of them were laying there just like they could speak to you. Well, I stopped; this just did something to me. I stopped there and looked at those kids and started putting my kids faces on.

Q: I bet you did.

A: Yes, I did. Yes, because I don't know, you can't imagine what this would do to you. Yes.

Q: Well, West Frankfort sure has had its share of tragedies and the two incidents, the coal mine disaster and the tornado and the mine activities. What do you see as the future for mining--for West Frankfort and the also for mining in general?

A: Well, I think that there has to be a big future for mining in general, now. I think the future for mining in general may be a lot different from what it is for mining in West Frankfort. We have all this talk and have had now for the last two or three years. I don't mean necessarily talk, but comment in the newspaper and on television and in the magazines and one thing and another, about energy shortage. Well, energy can only mean coal . . . so we've got to have coal. And I think we will have and I think this will have to be the answer. Now, they talk about atomic energy plants but they haven't gotten anywhere with it yet; it's apparently too expensive or something. It seems to me that coal is--and will probably for a long time continue to be--the answer to the energy problem. And it is a big problem, I guess, from what people say--the people in positions of authority. So, it seems to me that there is a big future for coal. Now, so far as West Frankfort and the Southern Illinois area is concerned, I don't know. There are a lot more regulations now for strip mining than there used to be. We have never had any in this county, but we have in nearby counties, Perry County, Jackson County, and some in Williamson County, and a little in Saline County, I think.

But, apparently this strip mining is going to be more difficult all the time because of the restrictions that will be placed on them and it will be more expensive, of course. In regard to the future for West Frankfort: in this particular are--we'll say West Frankfort--the #6 vein is what they've mined here largely. The physical features were more adaptable to mining, apparently, with the #6 vein. It was thicker and better coal and

all this kind of thing. It's pretty well exhausted in our area. Now, there's still some here, I think. But as far as any big operations are concerned, as I understand it, this particular deposit of coal is pretty well worked out. There is lots of coal beneath it, but I think that gasification and liquification of coal is the answer. And I believe it will come; I don't know when. We've been told for the last two or three years that they have an experimental plant going in Chicago now with the idea of finding out what they can do and how practical this kind of an operation can be. Now what they're finding out, of course, they only know. But, we've been told for the last two or three years that there is a possibility--a very great possibility--that there will be, in the not too distant future, a plant of this type--a conversion type operation--in Southern Illinois. Now it may not be in West Frankfort. It may be near the river. They've got to have water, too, as I understand it. I'm not sure about how it operates. But anyway, I think this has to be the future of coal in Southern Illinois. Yes, well, they've been talking this for some time, and I think it will happen. Whether it's ever practical or not, they have to do this experimenting before they'll know whether it's practical.

Q: Well, Mr. Purcell, I certainly enjoyed the time and the opportunity to interview you.

A: Well, I've enjoyed talking to you. One of the best things I do is talk. I never say anything worthwhile, but I like to talk. (laughs)

Q: Oh, you're a great story teller, you really are.

A: A lot of things have happened and I'm inclined to think that perhaps I will have lived during the period that has offered people the greatest rewards and opportunities of all times, past or future. I don't think this is true so far as technology is concerned, because I think we're just in the infancy when we talk about technology. We've just stated.

Q: That's true. But you have to have the other first.

A: Yes. Well, thank you very, very much.

End of Side Two, Tape One