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## Spizz Singer #1 Memoir

**SI64.1. Singer, Spizz #1** (1899-1984)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 44 mins., 12 pp.

### COAL MINING AND UNION ACTIVITIES PROJECT

Singer recalls Italian miners and the company mining store in Riverton, Illinois, John L. Lewis, 1931 miners' march on Taylorville, and Springfield's business district in the late 1920's.

Interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972

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## Preface

Spizz Singer was born at Riddle Hill, west of Springfield, Illinois in 1899. His parents were farmers who moved into Riverton and then Springfield where Spizz completed his education.

Spizz recalls the socialization of the Italian miners in Riverton and the rise to power of John L. Lewis. As a witness to the 1931 march on Taylorville, Spizz recalls his inadvertent participation in the motorcade.

Springfield's business district is recounted as is the company mining store in Riverton, where 25 cents worth of round steak fed five.

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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Spizz Singer, October 18, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

Rex Rhodes, Interviewer.

Q: Spizz, you have participated in Springfield and central Illinois for a good number of years, in public as well as private capacities. During this time you have enjoyed a vantage point in the community that has been paralleled, I think, by only a select few. Would you give a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

A: I was born at Riddle Hill, west of Springfield, on June 27, 1899. I was an only child. My dad and mother were farmer folks and so the first years of my life were spent on the farm. We moved to different places, but we finally moved to a farm about three miles southeast of Riverton. That was when I started the second grade in grade school and this, of course, was a school where all eight grades were taught in one room. We had recitation benches, blackboards, maps that pulled down and that sort of thing. Then we sold out the farm in 1915 and moved into Riverton proper. I went to the ninth grade at the old brick building out at Riverton. We used to commute then the next year, my sophomore year, to the old Springfield High School on the interurban. We finally moved into Springfield and lived out on North Third Street for awhile.

Some sickness occurred in the family, and me being the only child, there wasn't much chance of any income; so I had to go to work. I took up mechanical work. It was July 3, 1919 when we moved to Williamsville and my dad and I opened a garage there. We stayed in the garage business until 1929, but we went broke with everybody else in the depression. In 1928 I entered a contest on old WCBS in Springfield, playing an accordin and it happened that they kept me on. I still didn't have any idea about associating myself for any length of time with radio, but it so happened through the development of things that I did finally sell some radio time and I managed to stay on the air that way. There were those who thought that I didn't belong on the air. That was the days of the Boake Carters and H. V. Kaltenborn--pear shaped tones--and I knew I didn't qualify for that. So I thought maybe there was room for one Spizz Singer, so that's how I got into radio and managed to keep on. It was a rather a paradox, but after a few years, even though I realized that I didn't have the conventional style of enunciation and voice, people come to recognize my voice no matter what time or when. They even recognized it on the street just to hear me talk. So what seemed to be a big stumbling block at first turned out to be a very good asset after all.

Q: When was it, Spizz, that you first came in contact with the miners and mining in central Illinois?

A: Well, it was during the time that we lived on the farm that I spoke of, out southeast of Riverton, and I used to ride my bicycle down to Riverton to the company store to get groceries and so on. There were quite a number of miners in those days in Riverton, Barclay, Spaulding, Bissell and so on. Miners in Riverton were mostly Italian immigrants. One family would move over from Italy, and they'd get a job at the mine and as soon as they were able, they would send for some relative. That's the way it built up until there were possibly, at one time, as many as six hundred miners that worked in the three mines in the vicinity of Riverton. Of course, these folks were used to getting along with very little and they lived very frugally. However, they were clannish because of the language barrier. This was in the days when mules pulled the mine cars. Incidentally, the line was drawn from north central toward the east in the town of Riverton and it was called Italyville.

Of course, mules were used to draw the coal cars at the bottom and at one of the mines they had an accident--happened quite often in those days, by the way. Well the superintendent, the first thing he would ask was whether any of the mules were injured because actually there were more miners available than were mules. That was the first thing that he would ask. As I mentioned, the miners were paid weekly in gold so the company store in downtown Riverton was quite a Saturday evening rendezvous. A lot of these people were crowding into this store and anyone that couldn't understand Italian was lost as to what they were talking about. If they were rolling those ten and twenty dollar gold pieces around and carrying out arm-loads of meat today, you would probably have to put a mortgage on the farm to pay for that much meat as they got at that time. (laughter)

The mines usually, in those days, operated six, seven or eight months, but there was always a period in the summertime that the mines were shut down. These people, not being able to speak English, didn't know anything else to do but mine; so they were sometimes in pretty bad circumstances. Where we lived there was a long stretch of road--straight level stretch--and they used to come out and play bocci ball on that road along there. You'd see them there day after day. They would wind a string around that wooden circle and they would run with it and see who could roll it down the road the most.

Well, there was sort of a humorous thing that developed in a way. They liked to get an old rooster to cook, and us living on the farm--we lived back from the road almost a quarter of a mile--they would come up there and wanted "to roost." That was their way of saying they wanted to buy a rooster. So they would buy an old rooster. We had a lot of chickens there on the farm--quite a hobby. My mother raised chickens and, of course, we needed to do that as we ate quite a few ourselves. We never did eat no roosters, I remember, but that was what they wanted.

We had a shepherd dog. He was bob-tailed shepherd and part bull and the dog was a very intelligent one. Mom would point out the rooster she wanted him to catch and he would catch it and hold it in his paws until she got it. So after two or three trips like that, whenever Shep would see a couple of these Italian fellows coming up the lane to the house, why he would run out into the chicken yard and catch a rooster and hold it in his paws. (laughter) That was a rather unusual thing that happened in that respect.

Q: Do you recall the days when unions were beginning to form in central Illinois and Springfield? Can you recall John L. Lewis?

A: Yes, I remember seeing John L. Lewis. You didn't see him too often, but he lived in Springfield on West Lawrence. The fact of the matter is, that during this time that I was working a short term at the old Ridgely State Bank, at the corner of Fifth and Monroe, they had an election. He was running for state president of the United Mine Workers. Anyway, it must not have come out just the way they wanted it because they had stored the ballots in the alley back of the bank there and about two-thirty or three o'clock in the morning, the ballots disappeared. So that was how John L. Lewis really got started in the first place. This would have been about 1916 or 1917, along in there.

Then he went on and, of course, eventually became the president of the United Mine Workers for the whole nation. But there were a lot of things that happened in some of the earlier days of mining. In 1923, the records show that the Illinois mines employed over 130,000 men. That was the high point of all time. Then there was a steady decrease and by 1932 there were just 51,500 and some that were employed. Then in September of 1933 it got down to where there were a little less than 30,000 in the state. Well, this large scale mechanization of the mines and decreasing employment and serious competition from non-union fields south of the Ohio River and other fields there caused a good deal of internal strife.

John Lewis, he was the International President, declared an emergency existed and put the five-dollar wage scale back. In those days that was in effect of a proclamation in many sections of the state. Well, the men refused to go back to the pits. A large number did in Christian and Franklin counties. Demonstrations in the counties were organized and that was when the widespread rioting, bombings, shootings and picketing occurred in various sections. There were several mines in this area. There was a mine at Taylorville, Jaisyville, Kincaid, Tovey, Langleyville, Hewittville and then, of course, there are some down in the southern part of the state.

So they organized a march on Taylorville and this was, if I remember right, in August of 1931 and there were several thousand who marched into Taylorville. At that time I happened to be calling on the garage trade in Taylorville and on the certain day it happened to coincide with their march into that city. Inadvertently I got into the parade in my car and couldn't get out. (laughter) I was sort of captive. The local people there, the miners, were in force at every intersection. There was no time for me to try to prove that I wasn't a part of the miners' parade. (laughter) This, incidentally, was the Progressive Miners Union.

This particular day that I mention, one thing they did was go to the courthouse and they went up to the section where they kept records on the mines and that sort of thing and they threw the desk drawers and the records and everything out the courthouse window. Over a period of time there was some people injured and some were actually shot and killed--some died later. So it was quite a long affair and it was a pretty bad thing. In September of 1932, that was actually when the Progressive Miners of American [was formed].

Claude Pearcy of Gillespie was temporary president. In his ranks were those who objected to the five-dollar wage scale and opposed John L. Lewis. So this was essentially the lack of employment, the use of mechanization, the miners--some of them--misunderstanding the situation and the United Mine Workers under Lewis. They had their contention of what should be done and the new union--the Progressive Miners--had another view. That's what caused the conflict and that was a very serious thing and a blot on the state.

Q: Going back to that parade in Taylorville, what happened? Did it get out of control or did they intend to go into the courthouse and loot and throw out papers?

A: As far as you could see, it didn't get out of control. I mean it wasn't a mob running loose or anything. It was just that some of the marchers--I suppose it would be comprised of some of the head ones--when they got to the courthouse square, well, they broke loose. They just went up the walk, went up the steps of the courthouse and they did this rather methodically. Of course, the local officials were really afraid to do anything because there were several thousands who had invaded the town of Taylorville for this occasion.

Q: Why Taylorville?

A: I'm not sure other than it just seemed like this was kind of a central point and that they would be able, possibly, to make a better showing for this new union of the Progressive Mine Workers by making their stand at a town the size of Taylorville that had mines all around, rather than to come into Springfield and try to do it here. I think it would have been more complicated. That's my reasoning on it.

Q: Shortly before this, Spizz, I think there was a caravan that went south. I don't know if you recall this or not, but the way I understand it, there was a call that went out from the southern mines, in southern Illinois, Williamson County and so forth. There was a caravan that started up around Streator, Illinois and it started rolling south and it picked up miners in Peoria, Decatur, Springfield, Gillespie and on it went. The papers reported that by the time this caravan reached into southern Illinois, there was somewhere around fifteen thousand people, according to the newspapers. I think there was an ambush down around DuQuoin. Do you recall this?

A: This has been quite some time ago and some of the events have sort of faded from memory because there was no occasion to recall them until now. I remember something about this march that gathered weight as it went until there were twelve or fifteen thousand people. As I recall, it seemed that they went on into either Gillespie or Marion into what they called "Little Egypt" at that time--where they had the confrontation. But I really had no opportunity to observe or be knowledgeable enough to report on that.

Q: Around that time there was a shooting--and I think the newspapers called it a riot--downtown near the Leland Hotel and I think a detective was killed. Do you recall this?

A: Yes, just faintly. Actually, I wasn't present to observe it. If they would have started shooting, I would have aimed to have been someplace else. (laughter) I know there was some sort of confrontation that did happen right down at the corner of the Leland, which of course is at Sixth and Capitol. [It was] rather coincidental that just diagonally across that same block is where the Ridgely Bank used to stand and that's where the first event took place, where John L. Lewis became the president of the state United Mine Workers. By the way, it wasn't known for quite sometime--you know John L. Lewis lived on West Lawrence in a large house out there--him being for a long time the president of the United Mine Workers, he didn't burn coal in his house; he had oil. I think that's rather unusual because he, of course, shouted coal to the high heavens, but he, himself, used oil.

Q: Well, this incident down at the Ridgely Bank, you were there at the time?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: The ballots were stolen?

A: The boxes were taken. I don't remember who the opposition was that was running for the office, but it seemed that Lewis would not have won and so they got some of his right-hand bowers, for lack of a better term, to steal the ballot boxes and the whole ball of wax. No one had any way of ascertaining what the real ballot total was.

Q: Lewis, I understand, was pretty much a self-made man. He didn't have much formal education.

A: It was my understanding that he really didn't have much formal education; he was a self-made man. In a way, he did attain a high degree of literacy without any formal approach. He did a lot of reading on the side and that sort of thing, which together with his indomitable will, made him certainly a force to be reckoned with. This was pretty well recognized back there by reports in the press that even when the President and Congress saw him, Lewis was a force there for quite awhile to be reckoned with.

Q: Looking back now, Spizz, could you roughly describe Springfield as it appeared back in the coal mining days around 1925 or 1930?

A: Or course it has naturally changed tremendously in that period of time. One thing I remember is that Fourth Street was paved with cedar blocks. It was a beautiful ride over those cedar blocks. I forget the length but they were set lengthwise and just as smooth as a carpet to drive over at that time until the rain gradually worked on them. The ground underneath would get soaked here and there and the next thing you know Fourth Street was not the place to drive that it had been. (laughter)

I remember one other case, in speaking of pavement, that happened over on Sixth Street. I just can't remember the year but it was back in the same era. They were laying a new brick pavement on Sixth Street. When I saw them, they were laying the brick between Monroe and Adams on Sixth. It

was quite the news in the paper and they had photographers down there to take pictures. There was a man that was supposed to lay more brick than anybody in the world. He had three hod carriers carrying brick to him and he was laying something like five hundred bricks an hour. He certainly wouldn't be very popular with the business agent now if he presumed to lay that many bricks. I think they are supposed to lay 540 in a day. I'm not criticizing the union, but that just signifies the change in times.

The powerhouse, for instance, was up on North Fourth Street along where the Capital City Paper Company operated for several years more recently and now have quit that endeavor. There was a Betty Stuart Institute at Fourth and Jackson; the building still stands. It used to be the Ford sales offices and the service station and parts department and all that, and now it has been taken over by the state. There were so many things. As I walk along, I try to remember what was here and what was there because it was a much smaller town than it is now.

Myers Brothers was not as tall a building as it is now. The R. F. Herndon Company used to be at the corner of Fourth and Adams on the northeast corner where the downtown K-Mart is now. That was the Ralph Herndon Company. This might be of interest to some. There used to be a Thoma and Company on the south side of the Square. It was about the second or third store on Fifth Street on the south side of the Square. They had the first electric sign that ever came to Springfield. I can see it yet, "Thoma-Ladies-Clothes-Suits," then it would black out. That was the first electrical sign we ever had in Springfield.

There was a time when we were written up in Ripley's Believe It or Not. There were four drugstores at the intersection of Fifth and Monroe; there was a drugstore on every corner. Dodds was the original drugstore there and you used to get a fine bubbly chocolate soda for a nickel. They had the big paddle wheel fan going slowly over your head. It was real good. I don't think you could get much of a soda for a nickel now. (laughter)

There are, of course, a number of things that I could recall with a little soul searching in my rusty memory, but these are some of the few things that happened. In those days there was arches on each corner of the Square. They were metal arches. One went across the intersection from the northeast to the southwest and the other across the other way and they were electrically lighted. In those days when the fair was on, they would have night performances of certain acts in the Square--it was the courthouse then--downtown. My daddy used to hold me up on his shoulders to see some of them. A man would roll a big ball up a circular affair there and it was electrically lighted of course, and then when it started down the other way, the fireworks began to shoot off. So this is just a few of the things that I recall. There was an interurban station down between Eighth and Ninth on Monroe Street. The interurbans that were going to St. Louis would stop at what was then Phillip's Drugstore at Sixth and Monroe across from the post office--it was Mitchell's then. The passengers could get their tickets there and board the St. Louis interurban from that point.

Q: You described Riverton awhile ago as far as the miners were concerned. Were the miners in Springfield predominate as far as the employment was concerned?

A: No, I wouldn't say that. For instance, in the town of Riverton there were more miners. There wasn't very many mercantile establishments or any employment situation where a lot of people could work. Most of the people were working on the farms then, and of course we had a blacksmith shop, a grocery shop, a drugstore and that sort of thing. Actually in Riverton there was never a serious confrontation there. As I said earlier, the miners stayed in their section of Italyville and in those days you might say "ne'er the twain should meet" with the rest of the residents of the town. This has gone into the third generation and it is interesting and rather a nice thing to observe that the members of the board and the fire department, they have a good percentage of Italian people. They are very thrifty and are doing a good job of it.

A lot of the Italian families in Springfield actually came from Italy to Riverton and then, some of them, into Springfield, especially the second and third generation.

Q: You mentioned Italians mining out in Riverton. Was there an influx of Welsh or Germans or any other nationality in the mining area?

A: Not to speak of. I know that in some of the other mining localities that they did have more of an ethnic group. But it just so happened that the large majority in the Riverton area were Italians. Actually I never knew of a Welsh family that lived there and I was around there for many years.

Q: You mentioned the company store awhile ago. Was this company store run by the mining company?

A: They called it a company store and I think that possibly Peabody had a mine out there. Now whether any of the money came from Peabody, I imagine it did. At that time there was a manager of the store; there wasn't an owner of the store. It would be my recollection that this store was set up for the convenience of the miners in the first place with money from the high echelon so that they would have a place to go. They realized that there was the language barrier. When the miners were working and making money, then they bought very well. They had insisted on very, very meager rations.

My father, incidentally, used to be a veterinarian when we lived out on the farm there. There's some of the Italian folks there now that remember when they used to have my dad come down to take care of a horse for them or something like that. He was very successful at that.

There was Tranquilli's Bakery out there. They had a one-horse delivery wagon and if you can imagine, they went around delivering a nickel loaf of bread when most of the women baked. They started at the bottom but it turned out to be a very successful business.

Q: What happened in the stores during the summer months whenever there wasn't work in the mines? Was credit extended or was it pretty much cash on the barrelhead?

A: Yes, there was some credit extended. However, I'm sure that wasn't just an unlimited amount. If there was a hardship case, they would extend them some credit. Other residents from out around the area had got so that in the meantime, they bought at the store. I guess this made the company store self-sustaining in the interim when the mines were closed down.

They carried a pretty good line of groceries and their meats in those days were very reasonable. You could get enough round steak, like we have for now. You got 25 cents worth of round steak to take out to the farm. It was quite a treat because we ate chicken and pork. This was enough for a good meal for all of us, the hired hand, the girl that stayed with us and all of that. You could get 25 or 30 cents worth of steak and then if you would ask for it they would throw in a big chunk of liver or a heart if you wanted some, or a good size soup bone for the dog. The chances were that the dog never saw it until it had been in the soup. (laughter) They didn't trim it as close in those days as they do now to make the hamburger out of it.

Q: I suppose that the mines brought along a lot of subsidiary operations?

A: There were those who went in the tavern business. They didn't aim to set up on a vacant lot somewhere; they found a place where it was very convenient for miners. Sometimes they would forget there was going to be a lean season come summer and the mines would close down. They would get together and drink quite a bit of the "Spirits of Fermenti" and other liquids. It really got to be a little noisy at times. (laughter) And you couldn't answer sometimes what they were being noisy about. Riverton or any mining town that I had occasion to visit, they had their share of taverns.

Q: With the taverns, one gentleman described the scene back in the 1930s where many of the miners carried a pistol under their belt. Maybe you can recall that time. I'm wondering whether it was safe for the average citizen to be out on the street?

A: No. I think that in the overall picture that there wasn't too much to fear unless some citizen had gotten involved in a controversial issue and had expressed himself too strongly. Then he was much more [likely] to be a target. Otherwise, the average citizen didn't have any qualms. They could go wherever they wanted to and in fact in those days, later, when I lived at Williamsville for a number of years, we didn't even have a key to a lock. This is something that at the time you don't appreciate it as much as you should. Later it got to the point where you have to have a Chicago lock and a Yale lock and other devices to feel that you are safe in your own homes. Going back to the mine situation, I never knew of any instance where Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public had any fear of going where they wanted to go on account of the miners.

Q: I do know that sometime during the wars between the unions, the Progressive Miners called an ambush on a caravan of scabs that were going out to the Peerless Mine north of town. Do you recall that?

A: This has just been something that I read about in the news. I didn't have any first-hand knowledge of it and wouldn't be able to give any information from a personal standpoint because at that time I wasn't close to it. You knew this was happening and you read about it, but you didn't actually observe it yourself.

Q: Who was involved in the management of the Peerless Mine? Do you recall off-hand?

A: No, I'm sorry I don't remember and I did know back along with it. Peerless Mine is a well-known mine. I'm sorry I just can't recall it at this time.

Q: I think it was in 1936 that 41 Progressive miners were brought to trial. In 1938 all but a few were sent to the penitentiary. Does that ring bells with you?

A: Just in the way of following the news and reading about it. Since I was at that time in an entirely different endeavor, I had no opportunity to really get some first-hand knowledge of what was going on. I read about it and as we speak about it I remember vaguely that this did happen, but as far as observing it at that time then, I had no opportunity to do this.

Q: Spizz, this has certainly been enjoyable and I would like to thank you.

End of Tape