

University of Illinois at Springfield

Norris L Brookens Library

Archives/Special Collections

Marshall Yoakum Memoir

Y71. Yoakum, Marshall (1912-1992)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 60 mins., 25 pp.

Yoakum, coal miner, recalls his career with the Peabody Coal Company: mining conditions, use of mules, mechanization, wages, ethnicity, the structure of mines, and blasting coal.

Interview by H. Dean Campbell, 1972

OPEN

See collateral file

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

Marshall Yoakum Memoir

COPYRIGHT ©

1986

SANGAMON STATE UNIVERSITY, SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS.

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois 62708.

Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by H. Dean Campbell for the Oral History Office on October 29, 1972.

Mr. Yoakum started his mining career in 1929 with the Peabody Coal Company. He worked for Peabody in several different towns, including Springfield and Pana. In this interview he discusses several aspects of the coal miner's everyday life. He also talks about the working conditions and the environment of the coal mines.

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.

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.

Table of Contents

Coal Mining Background	1
Wages, Hours, and Mining Seasons	2
Blasting the Coal.	3
Machinery in the Mine.	5
Depth of Different Mines	6
Different Types of Mines	7
Mules in the Mines	7
Support Structures in the Mines.	9
Difference in Mine Cages Between 1930 and 1940	10
Environment of the Mines	11
Company Stores and Housing	14
Pay Periods.	15
Fringe Benefits.	16
Superstition Among Miners.	17
The Virden Riot.	18
Nationalities in the Mines	18
Miners and Drinking.	19
Training the Mules	20
Where the Miners Lived	22

Marshall Yoakum, October 29, 1972, Petersurg, Illinois.

H. Dean Campbell, Interviewer.

Q: I believe you said you began working in the mines in the Springfield area about 1929.

A: Yes, I started working for Peabody Coal Company, at Mine No. 51. That was at Andrew, Illinois and from there I went to No. 53 on Ash Street, and from there I went on to Capitol, that's on Capitol Avenue. That was Mine No. 57. Then I went to Mine No. 59, that was out on the by-pass.

Q: Excuse me, Marshall. Was this Ash Street and Capitol Street in what is now Springfield?

A: Yes, and then from No. 59, they transferred me down on the Midland. I worked at Peabody No. 8 and No. 9; that was Langleyville. Then when they closed down, they sent me to Pana. That was Peabody No. 17. I worked there till they closed up.

Q: How old were you when you first started working?

A: About nineteen years old.

Q: And you said your job responsibilities, when you first started mining, consisted of loading the coal onto the coal cars?

A: Yes, by hand. That's a hard way. Yes, we'd load the car by the ton and we got paid by the ton.

Q: Did you have other jobs as years progressed?

A: Yes, I worked on that probably a year and a half, two years and then they put me on as a machine man helper. That's the highest bracket in mining, and then I probably was on there thirty years, about 25 years as a machine man.

Q: And you said you were a member of the United Mine Workers?

A: Yes.

Q: Was that back in 1929 also when you were a member of that union?

A: No, no it wasn't. When I first started out it wasn't union, but along about 1930 they had a split in the union about then. I still stayed with the United Mine Workers; I stayed there the rest of the time.

Q: You mentioned that wildcat mines were mines that were operated not by a company, but by a group of men?

A: Of men, yes that would be wildcat. They would get together and they would all work. That was called wildcat.

Q: You were talking about the differences in pay between 1929 and now. What were you being paid then?

A: Well, along about 1929, if you'd make about \$3.70 [a day], you'd be doing good, but when I quit the coal mine I was making about \$40 a day.

Q: Then things have progressed considerably.

A: Quite a bit.

Q: What was the length of the working day when you first started working?

A: I had to work ten hours a day when I first started, and then they cut it to eight hours a day. Then one period of time, during the war, they had a seven hour day, but they went in with the government and they went back to their eight hour day, which they never regained back. They lost it.

Q: Was that during World War II?

A: Yes.

Q: And you were working usually how many days a week?

A: You'd work five days a week. Of course anything over the fifth day was time and one half, and they kind of stayed shy of that.

Q: Was that true back in 1929?

A: No, there was no such thing as time and a half.

Q: And the season that you worked depended pretty much on the demand for coal.

A: Yes, the first of April would be--you'd be out of work till the first of September. They didn't have very much demand for coal for steel companies and stuff like that then, and the reason they worked mostly in the winter, like that too, is that people burned coal for their heat.

Q: What would a fellow do when they were laid off like that?

A: Well, you just had to go out and find a job.

Q: Were there certain kinds of jobs that miners would usually go to?

A: Well, usually farm work or everything, they would go into anything they could get, because they had to. There wasn't any unemployment compensation at all then, and you had to go out and work. I worked on a hay baler. I ran a hay baler in the summer.

Q: You were mentioning that there were a couple of shifts a day back in the 1930s, is that correct?

A: Yes, that's right. You would take and work your day shift and then the night shift. They'd have a shift for supplies, your props, delivering your powder, because they had keg powder then.

Q: You were mentioning that only one man delivered that.

A: Yes, that's right. They would have a powder car and deliver it with a mule, and take it into the magazines in on the pardons. Then they would go to the other ones--see they might be miles apart from each station--but they had to make each one of them.

Q: Were there different kinds of explosives used from the early days of mining?

A: Yes, we had a blasting powder that came in a keg, it was fine. And then it come to where they had permissable powder and it was 40 percent dynamite. It wouldn't throw fire like your black powder would, and it was less dangerous. You'd have to shoot your shots, then run your fires, and with black powder you normally found two or three fires. That was your problem, getting them out, because they might be in another one hundred ton of coal.

Q: Where you worked and actually dug the coal, that was called the face?

A: The face, yes, and then your walls would be your ribs. Your face and your ribs. Your face is in the front where you're working.

Q: In blasting the coal out, you would drill into the face, is that right?

A: That's right and shoot it. You would set your side ribs, in the rib, dig a hole and wedge it. Then you would put your machine on there and drill. And you had to be careful how you drilled your holes. For if you'd get them too much, they'd be too heavy at the toe, and they would blow out. That's what they called a windy shot. If you happened to be unfortunate enough to get two of those, why then you could have a severe explosion. Because when the first one goes off it kicked up dust, and then when the second one goes off it would ignite the dust. When dust gets to exploding and blowing, it's like a tornado. The farther it goes, the stronger it gets. It keeps rolling and gets strong, that's the reason a dust explosion is so bad, it's worse than powder. It's worse than gas. The gas will burn out, but dust won't.

Q: I see, so it could be a real problem if the shots were not spaced right?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: You mentioned a ratio between the height of the coal?

A: Yes, well, you take now the depth of your hole as the law reads, you're supposed to drill the hole the height of your coal. Like if you got six foot coal, you can't drill over a six foot hole, and every charge, you can't exceed over sixty inches of powder per charge.

Q: In any one hole?

A: In any one hole. That's right.

Q: Now you said the holes were about an inch and a half in diameter?

A: Yes, and sixty inches of powder--a quart can full of powder was equivalent to about sixty inches of powder.

Q: So, if you had several holes, you had quite a bit of powder.

A: Oh, yes, it was nothing to use up a keg of powder a night.

Q: I see. Now you would put the powder in the hole that you had drilled, then what did you do?

A: Well, you would put the fuse into the powder. You'd make that up in a dummy with paper. Your fuse would be in this dummy, and then you would poke that in the back of the hole. You had a copper tamper, with a copper head on it. The idea of that was that if you hit sulphur, it wouldn't create a spark and set that powder off. Then you'd poke that to the back of the hole, and then you'd take fire clay and tamp that tight, so it would take the air off the powder. Then your hole was charged and you could light it. Maybe you would have seven or eight holes in a face.

Q: Then you would light these with a match?

A: No, with your carbide light, then we had carbide lights, open lights. That was another hazard; you were always setting gas off with your lights. If there was a pocket of gas and you walked in, and you had that old light, it would just "bang," it would go right now.

Q: Was that something that happened often?

A: Oh, yes, back then it was. And then, if you'd take a big pocket of gas where it would light, it would go around and it will burn all the oxygen out of the air. And I would, anyone would, fall on their face, fall down to get away from the fire above them. Well, all you have to do is just breathe twice, and you're dead. Your lungs collapse.

Q: The gas is that bad?

A: Well, there is no oxygen. When you breathe in, you're gone. And then in later years, they had a little device they give us, it was called a self-rescuer. You carried it on your belt and in case of an explosion or anything, you'd grab it and hold it over your nose, and it would last thirty seconds. That would give you plenty of time to be into the next air course or maybe where the air was.

Q: When were those first started?

A: That was started along back in the 1950s.

Q: When you drilled these holes, you had kind of a hand-held drill?

A: Yes, it was hand operated. You had to do all the drilling by hand.

Q: And then after you blasted the coal, what kind of tools did you use?

A: You used the pick and the shovel.

Q: There would be different sizes of coal then?

A: Oh, yes, when you got big chunks, you had to break them up. And then on some of the holes where they had these bits, they'd use churn drills.

Q: You were saying you used pick and shovel after the blasting was done. Were those the primary tools you used?

A: That's what we used to load the coal.

Q: Now did some fellows feel as mechanization and bigger machines came in that they were a threat to their work?

A: Yes, they did, and it replaced a lot of men. Because a lot of the men weren't capable of operating the machinery.

Q: What was some of the machinery that first came in to use?

A: Well, the cutting machine was the first one that came in. You'd cut the coal and you had to shoot it down, but you still loaded it by hand. And then they got conveyors, you still had to scoop that [the coal] in the conveyors, but they put it in the car. That went on for several years and then they really got going and they got loading machines. They picked the coal up and they just threw the coal right into the car. One machine could load eleven hundred tons a day.

Q: You mentioned a cutting machine and shooting down. What does that mean?

A: Well, the cutting machine could cut a cut from the rib across the face to the other rib, and it would be from six to nine feet deep. Then they would come and drill holes and snub that coal down.

Q: They'd still blast it and shoot it?

A: Yes, they used powder for years. Then they got where they used air. By using air, they could shoot on shift. You could be working in this place here and over here sixty feet, they could be shooting. They could make a circle plumb around, just keep going around all the places. Maybe they had six places and they would just go round and round, one would follow the other, the load machine, then your cutting machine and your load machine. Then your pinner, they bolted the roof up.

Q: While you were using this black powder then, you could not load and work the mine while you were shooting the black powder?

A: Oh, no, when you shot that black powder, you had to stay out at least eight hours.

Q: The mine had to be empty then, for eight hours?

A: Yes, for eight hours, so it could air out.

Q: Did one fellow do all the shooting all the time?

A: No, at times they would have [one] for each unit, they'd have a shot firer they'd call them. Then it got to where every driller shot his own shots. If I drilled sixty holes and tamped them, I'd have to shoot them. And maybe they'd have four to six drillers in a unit. And then there'd be six men down there shooting shots.

Q: And this was usually done in a separate shift entirely from the work shift?

A: That was after the working shift, when everybody was out of the mine. There could be nobody in the mine, only the shot firer.

Q: You worked in several mines, were the depths of the mines different in different mines?

A: Yes, you take Peabody No. 51, or say we'll take Petersburg. Their coal is fifty foot deep, and at Andrew it was about 165 foot deep. In Springfield it run approximately 240, something along in there, 200 feet to 240. Then you go down to Pawnee, it's around 460 feet. Then Pana was 730 feet deep.

Q: I suppose there would be different troubles then in these mines, the deeper mines?

A: Well, the deeper mine, the more pressure you had on your ribs, on your top, your ribs rash. You take a deep mine, you can just take a machine and let it just hit the coal and it will just keep popping off. Eventually it will just widen it out, way out.

Q: This is caused from the pressure of the overlying rock?

A: Yes, that's right, so much weight.

Q: Was this true of the mines in Petersburg and Springfield?

A: No, it wasn't deep enough, it didn't have that pressure. You take the deeper mines, is where they have squeezes. That's where your bottom comes to your top. I've seen it where they lose a whole section, it would just squeeze together.

Q: Is this something that happens slowly?

A: Well, it would start slowly, but the farther along it goes, the faster it gets. I seen it happen to squeeze within eight hours, to where they couldn't get in.

Q: They'd have a tunnel dug?

A: Yes, and it would squeeze shut.

Q: That's interesting.

A: Well, that was due to the air pressure. Then they'd get a little hoggy on getting the coal and they'd take a little too much coal out too. That don't help a bit either. And it seems like every place that you find where there was rock top, it had a tendency to squeeze.

Q: Now when they talk about a slope mine, what does that mean?

A: That means that it just goes down gradual, on a gradual slope.

Q: And another type of mine would be called what?

A: A shaft mine.

Q: What kinds of mines were there in Springfield?

A: They were shaft mines.

Q: You mentioned the use of the mule awhile ago. Were there any other animals used in the mines?

A: Mules and ponies; they sometimes used Shetland ponies. I seen them being used, but they were in the smaller mines. But you take a big mine and use a good mule, they did have maybe fifty or sixty mules down below in the big mines, and you'd maybe have ten mules in on one pardon. A pardon is where you go in to where you're going to work and there was a passing track in there. There would be a double track, that's where they could put loads on one side and the empties on the other. Then your road motor could come in and bring their empties and drop them in, and pick your loads up and go out. They call them pardons.

Q: Now when the men were out of the mines and blasting was going on, were the animals moved out also or were they left in?

A: The only animal that was inside would be the mule that we came out with, that was our transportation. To drive a mule out, we'd ride out in a car and he'd pull us out. But the rest of the mules would be on the bottom in a barn. They had a big barn built back in there.

Q: Right down under the ground?

A: Oh, yes, yes, they stayed there year round.

Q: What was this barn like, a big one?

A: Well, it was just a big room. It had stalls in it, and it had feed troughs and it had the water and everything there.

Q: Would they keep the animals down there while the mine was in working season?

A: When in season, and then when the time come for the mine to shut down, they brought the animals up and let them go out in pasture. Then they took them back down when they started again.

Q: Did this affect the animals in any way?

A: Well, they were blind a little bit when they'd come out for maybe two or three days. You could notice it that they were kind of blind, but they'd come right out of it.

Q: Well, you know, we hear stories about miners using canaries and birds for gas, were these actually used?

A: Years ago they were, but now, in the last fifty years, they have had a safety light that you detect gas with.

Q: How does that work?

A: Well, it's like a lantern, and when you come into gas, it will blaze or burn. The gas will explode inside that chimney.

Q: It will flare up?

A: Yes, and you can set gas off with it, if you don't know how to use it. You can find out how many feet of gas you've got.

Q: In 1929, when you first started working, did they use canaries then as an indicator?

A: No, not that I ever knew.

Q: When they talk about a dog hole, what does that mean?

A: Well, a dog hole is just a mine that hasn't had any money spent on it. It was on a small scale, it was run down and everything.

Q: But it didn't have anything to do with using dogs?

A: No, that was just an expression.

Q: Did they use any other animals in the mines besides the ponies and mules?

A: No, no.

Q: I've heard people say that in the modern mines today there is equipment available but some miners won't wear it, because it's bulky or because they consider it unmanly. Is there anything to that?

A: No. Well, it's bulky for one reason. And everybody should wear it because it's of benefit to the miner.

Q: I've heard talk about the miners in Springfield during the union days, actually wearing guns on the streets. Is there anything to that?

A: When they had trouble, when there was a division in the unions, that was so. Yes, they carried guns.

Q: Now, the supporting structures in a mine, what are these called?

A: Props and bars.

Q: What's the difference?

A: Well, a prop would be straight up and down, and a bar would be an I-beam across. You have wooden bars, and then they have I-beams, metal bars that are more permanent, but now they use roof bolting. That's where they pin the top up.

Q: How is that done?

A: Well, it's six foot bolts and the end of that bolt has an expansion nut on it, and they have a board probably fourteen inches square below with an iron plate on it. With hydraulics they push that up there and tighten it, and that pulls that up. That's for your speedy mining. It's not permanent but you can take it and it will hold long enough to work out a room. Then after you get the room worked out, you don't care if it falls in or not, because that just takes the pressure off of someplace else. Like if you got a squeeze, like we was talking about awhile ago, sometimes they went in, and they shot part of the mine in, so it would take that pressure off.

Q: Well now, when you were mining, did you have to leave a certain amount of coal?

A: Yes, you turned your rooms every thirty feet, and you left a pillar in there. Usually your rooms would run about 20 feet or 25 feet wide, and maybe 280 feet deep. Your entries would be turned on sixty foot centers, and they tried to hold them to twelve to fourteen feet because normally your bars were twelve feet and fourteen feet bars. Anything over that you couldn't do much with it because there would be too much chance for it to bend.

Q: Well now, when we think of the coal mines in terms of size, were they high enough that you could stand up in them?

A: Oh, yes. I've worked where they've been twelve to fourteen foot high. And that's when it's dangerous, because anything you can't sound with a sounding rod is dangerous. It got to be the habit of a coal miner, a good coal miner, when he walks along, and you will see him with a pick sounding the top. If it's got a ring to it, why it's good top. If it sounds like hitting a pumpkin, why you know it's getting bad; it's getting ready to fall in. Then years ago your mules could tell. They knew where all the bad top was.

Q: How did you know that?

A: Well, like if you was driving a mule and the mule would come to a bad spot, where it was ready to cave in, he either wouldn't go on under it or he would run on under it, so he could get out from under there quick.

Q: Somehow the mule could actually sense?

A: Yes, he knew. You couldn't fool him a bit. He knew it. You always wanted to believe in the mule. That was a good policy of the coal mine.

Q: These animals are interesting. I was in a clay mine at one time, and the miners actually shared a little of their food with the mice in the mine.

A: Oh, yes. They fed the mice and they fed the mules. They would take them apples, maybe sandwiches, and if you weren't careful, they would eat it all.

Q: So, there were actually mice in the mines?

A: Oh, and rats, yes. I've seen birds in the coal mines, oh, five miles back and under the ground.

Q: How would they get there?

A: Well, they'd probably be monkeying around when you're hoisting the coal. You've got a cage going up and one coming down. And one probably got under this cage that was heading down and the downdraft pushed him on down. Then when they get in on the bottom, the motors have headlights, and they would fly ahead of this motor. He'd be going in, and this big headlight shining out, and they would be right ahead of it, they would go right on in.

Q: You mentioned a draft. Is it in the shaft of the mine?

A: Yes, well, you see, normally they hoist three to four cars a minute. Say your mine is four hundred foot deep, they can hoist three or four cars a minute. They can hoist the load faster than the empty will drop.

Q: And this would create a draft?

A: Yes.

Q: And that was pretty strong?

A: On their drums, on their hoisting engine, they have what they call a step-up drum. They had a seal on there, they could hoist that bolt up faster than that empty, when it fill, could go back down the hole. That kept the rope from flopping over.

Q: Was there much difference in mines in terms of the cages, say in the 1930s compared to the 1940s for instance?

A: Oh, yes. You take now in the mines in Springfield, they'd hoist twelve men at a time. That would be a lot of men. At Pana, they hoisted forty at a time. Everything grew, it was better.

Q: How did the lighting differ from the early days to the 1960s?

A: It used to be we had carbide lights, and they were hard to see. Then they got what they called the bug light, electric light. You carried your battery on your belt. It weighed probably six pounds. Then you had a cord that hooked on to your cap, on your hard hat. And then back years ago, there wasn't such a thing as a hard hat. Then they passed these new mining laws where everybody had to wear a hard hat, and hard toed shoes, which was a wonderful thing.

Q: When did that first happen that those requirements were made?

A: Oh, I think it must have been in the 1940s.

Q: Were injuries common? You mentioned hard toed shoes.

A: Oh, yes, there were a lot of injuries of people getting their toes mashed. Or, like in the man trips coming out, if your motor was running a little too fast, somebody would forget to raise their head up, why he was hurt. There a hard hat would protect you, and your hard shoes would. There were so many ways you could get hurt in coal mining, it was different than anybody else. There were two things you had to do. First, you had to learn to take care of yourself, then you learned your job. Because, if you didn't learn to take care of yourself, you didn't need any job, because you weren't going to have any.

Q: So you just didn't walk in a mine and start working?

A: No, you just didn't go in there and start working, because you had to learn to take care of yourself. You could go in there and do it that way, but you wouldn't last too long.

Q: Would you apprentice with someone?

A: Yes, you were supposed to. You were supposed to apprentice for two years. But, along back in that time, they tried to relax the laws and then you got by without it.

Q: What was it like in terms of temperature in the mine?

A: Well, you take a deep mine, it's hot. You could just sit and perspire. You'd be wringing wet; you did not have to do any work, you could just sit and do that.

Q: What depth would it have to be before you would get those conditions?

A: Well, if you get around a little over four hundred feet, you're getting down hot. Your air has to travel so far. See, some of that air, like in these Springfield mines, some of that air travels 20 or 25 miles before it got to you. You would go and go, and that air just keeps

following you. When you work out a section and go to a new section, you still got to air that one section you just moved out of, unless you seal it. And then maybe you're not situated where you can get the air to it. If you seal it, you got to have it going through there. Then when they abandoned works, then they seal that up.

Q: I've heard the term robbing a mine. What does that mean?

A: Well, that's just when they take too much coal out. As we were talking awhile ago, where your rock top is, that's where they have a tenancy to rob. They take it way out.

Q: Because there is a stronger roof?

A: Yes, and then they get their squeezes, that's when it starts squeezing together.

Q: If a mine is going to be closed out, say they are going to cease operations, will they then go back in and pull those pillars out, or is that too dangerous?

A: It's too dangerous. They don't do that. They just pull out. They try to recover some of the material.

Q: But those have to be left?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: What about the more shallow mines, are they cold or damp?

A: Well, they are damp, and they're cooler, a lot cooler. You take 185 feet or 200 feet, it's altogether different than working in the deep mine. It's nice and cool and comfortable down there.

Q: Is there much water in a coal mine?

A: In different mines.

Q: What does that depend on?

A: Well, some mines, you have to have a sump [pump] down there, to pump the water out. Then, I've seen mines that have been tiled, like they tile the terrain here. They laid a tile to get the water out of there. Then some of them go in two or three miles, and they dig a big sump and they drill a hole on out. They go up and drill a hole down to that and then they'd pump water out through there, use that as a drainage system. Then there's other mines that are just as dry as can be.

Q: No water in them?

A: No water in them at all. That's right.

Q: Is there any difference in safety as to a wet mine and a dry mine?

A: I'll take a wet one for safety.

Q: You would?

A: Yes, you may have a little more gas but that's bleeder gas, that isn't too bad.

Q: Bleeder gas, what does that mean?

A: Well, that's when your gas bleeds out of your ribs and out of your top.

Q: It's actually gas coming out of the coal?

A: It's not methane. Methane is the treacherous gas in a coal mine. Bleeder gas, it might pocket just a little, but not enough to hurt anything.

Q: Where does the methane come from?

A: Well, it comes out of the coal too. But it's from the lack of oxygen. When you get where there is no air, or you take a seal off of some old works, you got to go bleed that sometimes, to get the pressure off. The methane and the gas build up in there, and you got to bleed that out.

Q: You can't just seal it off and walk off and leave it?

A: No, because sometimes your seal will leak. You can have your gas leak right there, and that will come out into your A train.

Q: We were talking about eating awhile ago. Was there any particular foods or methods of eating?

A: No, we just took sandwiches and coffee.

Q: Is this pretty much the same today as it was in the 1930s if you were to go into a mine?

A: Yes, yes. Only thing it's more modern now, we used to have a ride in a car, an old car. Now they have cars you can get in, they call them man-trip cars. You get in and they are covered. You sit in them and they are very comfortable. The old pick cars, you can imagine what they were, trying to hang on to the side of them with five men.

Q: Did you eat at the face of the mine where you're working, or were there rooms where you ate?

A: No, usually you'd take your bucket. It used to be you had a box, a powder box, where you kept your powder and your tools. And it would be back in the cross cut. Now, they usually carry their lunches on their jeeps. They have jeeps, like your drill jeeps, your pinning jeep, your cutting machine. And where they have continuous motors, they've got them right there. Then you just step back to the cross cut and eat your dinner. But now you're staggered, where it used to be you weren't. The machine never stops, it just keeps going. They'll have somebody come in there and work for fifteen minutes while you eat your dinner.

Q: I see. You mentioned the cross cut. What's that?

A: Well, that's where you get your air, your cross cut. Every sixty feet you're supposed to have a cross cut, and that's the law. And, if you have a cross cut every sixty feet, it's good and well. But a lot of times, they'll drive sixty foot and turn a cross cut and then run into a little bad top. So they won't bother it, they'll still cut the face of the entry. Well, by the time they get this cross cut through, maybe they're 120 feet with that entry and that's so much head air, that's where you get your black damp and your gas pockets.

Q: Black damp, is that the same as methane?

A: That's carbon monoxide. It won't ignite, it's just lack of oxygen.

Q: When you first started working in 1929, were there company stores?

A: Yes, you could get anything that you wanted there. You could buy room and board. If you wanted furniture, you could get that. Anything you wanted, just like going to the big department store. Then they'd check that off your pay.

Q: So you didn't pay for it in money?

A: No, but you paid for it dear. (laughter)

Q: Can you tell me something about these company stores? What would a company store look like?

A: They were just a regular building and had everything in them, anything you want. And what I mean, anything you wanted you could get through the company store.

Q: Would it be on display?

A: Yes, you could buy clothes.

Q: Just like one of our modern stores?

A: Yes.

Q: You'd go in and pick out what you wanted, and they'd record it and you'd sign your name for it?

A: Sign your name for it, that's right.

Q: Well, how did the prices of the store compare if you were to buy it somewhere else?

A: Oh, it was higher. If there was a coal mine in a town, and they started the coal mine, and it was a big coal mine, the whole town, the rent, all the groceries, and everything would be higher than the next town. Many a time I went and worked in a mine and lived in the town, but I'd go to the next town to buy my groceries, to save money.

Q: Was there any force or pressure by the company?

A: No, they figured the miner was making good money and they could get it. That's how they done it.

Q: You mentioned even room and board. They would furnish a home for you?

A: Yes, a cabin, or rooms.

Q: Was this generally true of most mining communities?

A: Years ago it was. Yes.

Q: When did this sort of thing begin to die out?

A: Well, it really started dying out, I guess, in the 1920s.

Q: Was there a reason for this?

A: Well, I don't know. Everything was too high. The miner got to making more money, and he got to living a little better. He could have better things than your coal camps and stuff like that.

Q: And how were you paid, weekly or what?

A: They paid every ten days. In other words, we got paid every other Friday.

Q: Were you paid by check or were you paid in cash?

A: Well, years ago, they used to pay in cash. Back when we were talking about, when they were having that miners trouble, they got where they wouldn't accept a check, the miners wouldn't, as tender. So they paid cash, and they got that ironed out and eventually came back to check again, that's the way it is.

Q: And how were you paid, by the amount of time or by production or by both?

A: Well, years ago it used to be you got paid by the ton, so much a ton. I have worked where you made ninety cents a ton, shooting coal down.

Q: Now where did they pay you for that, at the face or where?

A: They paid you when they weighed it when it come out. It came on top and they weighed your coal. You'd put a live check on it.

Q: What was that?

A: What they call a live check. They put a check on that. You'd have a number, and you'd put your number on that car. Then they'd weigh it. Then at the end of the two weeks they'd figure that up. And if you loaded dirt in that coal, they'd dock you for that. You'd get docked for dirt. You had to load clean coal or you didn't get paid.

Q: Was there ever a tendency for men to try to put a little shale or something in it?

A: Oh, they tried everything, but it was hard to do. When they weighed it, they'd run it over a scale. See, when it came right up on top, they weighed it. They dumped it in a hopper, and then they weighed it.

Q: What did they try to do? What would be an example of some of the ways the men would do it?

A: Oh, they'd put boulders in there from the top. It was about five times heavier than coal. Oh, there would be a lot of ways to try to do it.

Q: Would the company retaliate against this kind of thing?

A: Oh, yes, they'd hear about it. (laughter)

Q: I've heard of marking coal, what does that mean?

A: Well, that would be like your loading a lot of dirty coal, where you have fault in your coal. There's faults in your coal. Now the Springfield coal has faults in it. It's what they call horse back. It's dirt. All it is is a fault in the coal. And they'd load a lot of that, and that's what they'd mark.

Q: What do you mean by marking?

A: Well, they'd have a man go along, and you could walk along a trip, a motor trip, and you could see it. They'd just put a chalk mark on it, and that indicated that it was bad coal. Instead of dumping it in the coal chutes, they would dump it over in the dirt chute, and you didn't get paid for it. (laughter)

Q: Were you given vacations?

A: Years ago, you weren't. There wasn't no such thing as a vacation. You didn't get nothing. But in the later years, you got your ten days vacation with pay.

Q: Not even Christmas?

A: Well, you got Christmas off, but they wouldn't pay you for it. But here now, they give you ten days and \$200. They'd allow you \$200. It come up now. I've got an idea it's up to \$300 or \$400 now.

Q: What about in the 1930s, in terms of sick provisions?

A: You didn't have too much of that, if you were sick, you were sick. But now they have this welfare program. The United Mine worker has it. The welfare for the United Mine Workers now pays--you can go to the doctor, they'll pay for that. They'll pay all your hospital bills, and it's really about as good of insurance as there is.

Q: It's improved immensely since the early days?

A: It's just a wonderful thing, that's right.

Q: You mentioned organization problems, were these conflicts usually between the company and the miners?

A: No, it was among the men.

Q: What were the difficulties?

A: Well, one wanted to be the big wheel, then there'd be another wanted to be the big wheel, and it didn't pan out. It would come to a conflict, then when they did that and they'd have their troubles, and that went on for two or three years. There were a lot of people hurt on that. They'd kill people and everything else.

Q: Really, here in the Springfield area?

A: Yes, oh yes. I know I was working at Peabody No. 51, and they were picketing there, and they turned our car over. They took and turned the car right over.

Q: I wonder if we could discuss for a minute, the possibility of superstition among miners. Was there such, did they have superstitions?

A: Oh, yes, you found that.

Q: What would be some examples that you might recall?

A: Oh, there were a lot of people wouldn't work Friday, the 13th. They wouldn't think about going into the mine.

Q: Is that right?

A: Oh, that's right. Then there were different other little things.

Q: Were these beliefs related to their nationality or to their religion or was it just an individual thing?

A: Well, it was just more of an individual thing. You take like where a man had been killed, I know of where people wouldn't go in there, wouldn't work in there, in that part of the mine at all.

Q: How did the company view that?

A: Well, they went along with it. They went right along and put them in another section.

Q: Would people wear any particular totems or symbols or anything like that?

A: No, I never saw any of that, no. Usually you were so black when you came out of there, you couldn't see them anyhow, you were so dirty.
(laughter)

Q: Did miners have any particular celebrations, or any days they would celebrate?

A: Well, they had what they called the Virden Days. That's where there was a riot, and there was a bunch of people killed. So some of them celebrated that, but all of them didn't. Of course, that was with this division of the unions, too. One side would do that and the other side wouldn't.

Q: What was the riot about?

A: Well, it was mine trouble. I think it was more than the men got dissatisfied about something, and something started down there. It was more of a race riot than anything in Virden, I think.

Q: Oh, it was. Well, did different people work in the mines? That is, would you find more Germans in a mine or more Italians?

A: Well, I would say, the majority of them were Italians and Germans.

Q: Did blacks work in mines?

A: Oh, yes, I worked with some. Some of the best workers I ever worked with were black people.

Q: So as far as the company was concerned, they didn't discriminate?

A: Oh, no, no. If you did your work, why you were there. You had just as much chance as the other guy.

Q: I've heard that sometimes whole towns would be of a particular nationality around the mines. Is that true?

A: Yes, that's true.

Q: Is there any reason for that?

A: No. It's just that the people came in, and they knew mining, and that's what they followed. That was their livelihood.

Q: Were miners competitive, I mean would they compete with one another for production?

A: Oh, yes. Years ago you saw lots of that, and when they did that, the company would raise the production up. They'd say, well if he did it, everybody can do it, and that kept raising production. The men didn't realize that they were doing that, but that's what they were doing. They'd bet they could load more coal and they would make a bet. I've seen them bet as high as ten dollars.

Q: On a load of coal?

A: Yes, load it quicker and everything. You see just about everything in the coal mine. One thing about it with the coal miners, if you were

in the tight, or if you were licked at something, it was too much for you. You didn't have to say to this fellow, "Will you help me?" He'd come over there and help you. He'd help you. You didn't have to ask him.

Q: You said in the tight.

A: What I mean is where he couldn't do it, somebody would come right there and help you. You wouldn't say, "Will you please come help me," or anything. They'd just jump right in there and help you.

Q: What kind of men were miners as far as drinking? I've heard people say they kind of liked to drink. Is that so?

A: Oh, yes. The majority of them did.

Q: Would they be competitive in that also?

A: Well, yes, they would.

Q: Can you recall any incidences?

A: Well, there was two that I . . . (laughter) I worked with one of our National League umpires, Al Barlick. I worked in the coal mine with him.

Q: He was a miner?

A: He umpired back in 1935-1936, back along in there. He umpired, but they didn't pay the umpires as much money as they do now. They were like we were. They had to get out and get them a job in the off-season. And he'd come and I helped him hang wire many a day in the coal mine.

Q: Hang wire?

A: That's when your machines were coming in. You had to have electricity to the face, and you had to hang two wires, two cables. That's what I would do, help him hang that wire.

Q: When the miners would go out drinking, would there be certain places that they would go to?

A: Oh, yes, they would usually have a place to go to.

Q: Were there any around Springfield?

A: Oh, yes. One place there was that Midway, there on Sixth and Washington. I've seen it where you had to stand--like cashing your check--you'd have to be back a half a block down the street, waiting in line to get there.

Q: Kind of a busy place?

A: It was kind of funny, too, there sometimes, you could get too much to drink and not spend a dime. The guy up there would cash his check, and he'd tell the bartender to send drinks on back so everybody would send a

drink on back. But when your turn came up, it might cost you twenty dollars. They always figured you got your shot at it, too.

Q: So the miners were pretty free among themselves with their money?

A: Oh, yes, yes. If one was tight, conservative, they wouldn't mess with him too much. He wasn't too popular. But then there was a lot of them that needed their money--I always seen to it--they were the smart ones. They were trying to hang on to it, that was hard money to get.

Q: The days when they were using Shetland ponies and mules, and so forth, were these considered by the mine operators as pretty valuable property?

A: Yes, I remember when they said that if there was any trouble or anything where it involved a man and a mule, the operator would ask if the mule was hurt first, before he did the man.

Q: That's actually true?

A: That's actually true. They could get somebody to replace the man, but them mine mules were hard to get.

Q: Were they a special kind?

A: Well, they had to be trained and broken.

Q: Were there men assigned to do that work?

A: Oh, yes, to train them. See, they were trained to command, gee and haw. Then you had to train them to open the doors, your trap doors in the mines.

Q: To open the doors?

A: Oh, yes, they had to open the doors with their nose. Maybe they would be running, dead run, and run up and take their nose and open one of them big doors.

Q: Really?

A: Yes, that's right. A good mule was very valuable.

Q: Was there any other training that they had to go through?

A: No, only to pull.

Q: Was there much problem with keeping them in the mine?

A: Well, good mules, yes. They had a lot of mules that were mean. A mule can kill you, right now. He was intelligent enough to know when he could get you and when he couldn't. If he would catch you when you were in the tights, like if the props were up close to your track, why he'd duck in there. Well, if your load would be running, the tail chain would catch your legs if you weren't careful, if you happen to not be watching.

Q: The tail chain?

A: Yes, that's what you rode on. You would put one foot on the bumper and one foot on this chain, you had one hand on the car, and the other hand on the rump of this mule, that's how you rode. And that mule would run just as hard as he could run at times.

Q: He would actually put on some speed?

A: I've seen them run just a dead run.

Q: Would it be when they knew the day was ended or something?

A: No, they would do it like on a hill. The only way you could hold a load back--maybe you would have ten cars and you were going down a hill--you weren't strong enough to hold it, you had to run that mule to outrun those cars. Your mule had to outrun the cars, and you had to stay right on there with him. Oh, it made you think, I'll tell you. (laughter)

Q: That would be quite an experience.

A: Oh, yes, and that's one reason why everybody got drunk at night.

Q: Did the men usually drink a little each evening, or only on payday?

A: No, I even saw them take wine down in the coal mine and drink it.

Q: Was this legal with the company?

A: No.

Q: But some men would do it?

A: They would do it, yes.

Q: Was that a wise thing to do?

A: No, it was stupid! You shouldn't do it. Your reflexes--it slowed you down and everything.

Q: So it could be dangerous?

A: Oh, yes, yes. Because it dulls your senses and everything, and down there you had to keep on the ball. You had to watch what you were doing and then do your job.

Q: Did miners normally live in a community of their own?

A: No, it used to be that they did, but in later years, they scattered all out. With their cars and everything--I drove seventy miles one way to work. I drove from Athens to Pana. The majority of the people, that's the way they did. I drove that way for probably a year or so, and then I bought a place in Pana. But it gets to you, you don't get any sleep. But a lot of people would take and move and get in surrounding towns around.

Q: Did miners use any nicknames for each other or for the trade or for things that they did?

A: Yes, but we better not tell what they were. (laughter) You were called everything but your right name when you were with a bunch of coal miners and nobody thought anything of it, and when they did that you knew you were getting along with them.

Q: I see. When they got formal with you . . .

A: That's right, when they got what we called nasty nice, you just wondered what they were thinking about.

Q: Are there any other incidents or material that you would like to really to me about your mining experiences?

A: Well, I can't think of too much right now.

End of Tape