Rose Koniak Memoir

University of Illinois at Springfield
Norris L Brookens Library
Archives/Special Collections

Rose Koniak Memoir

K837. Koniak, Rose (1907-1994)
Interview and memoir
1 tape, 45 mins (Koniak segment 13 mins.), 6 pp.

Koniak recalls her involvement with the Progressive Miners Women’s Auxiliary in Benld, Illinois. She also recalls the Depression, washhouses, and miner’s lunch buckets. See J9/5/24 History Program, Oral History “Coal Mining in Illinois” Project, Subject File 1909-1977. University of Illinois at Springfield Archives/Special Collection.

Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974
OPEN
See collateral file: interviewer's notes

© 1974, University of Illinois Board of Trustees
This is an oral history interview with Mrs. Rose Koniak and we're sitting here in Rose's living room in Benld, Illinois. The date is October 22, 1974.

Q: Rose, I'll do the same thing to you I did to them. Can you start out by telling me when you were born and where you were born?

A: I was born October 4, 1907 in London, Kentucky.

Q: And when did you happen to come up to this area?

A: I came to Girard, Illinois when I was three years old and I lived in Girard until I was married, which was 1930.

Q: Why did your family move to Girard?

A: Well, poor times, nothing to do there. My father was a coal miner and he worked here at the mines in Girard. And they had an explosion at one time and I don’t remember too much about it, but I had a cousin that had part of his ear cut off, and he died several years ago of cancer. And my husband has been a coal miner since 1916. He worked at #1 mine, the Superior Coal Company, and then later he worked at #2 and #3 coal mines until the Superior Coal mines closed down. In 1953 I think they closed down. And I have a brother, Alfred Glur, from London, Kentucky that went to work in the mines when he was 11 years old. And I have a brother, Ernest Glur, that went in the mines when he was 9 years old in Kentucky.

Q: Are they still mining?

A: No. They’re both dead, deceased now but they worked all their life in the coal mine. Most of their life.

Q: Did they start out as trapper boy?

A: No, my father did, I think. He did when I was real young, I remember. No, they loaded coal, they done everything.

Q: Has Benld always been your husband’s home?

A: Yes, no, he was born in Colorado in 1899, December 23rd. He moved here, when they moved here they came to Benld. They made their home here in Benld.

Q: And his father was a miner?

A: His father was a coal miner. And his brothers were coal miners.

Q: What part of Colorado, do you know?

A: No.

Q: What was your first association with the Progressive Miners?

A: Well I can’t remember too much but it probably was, we were married about 43 years I guess. I remember going to the meetings. My children were quite young so I didn’t take care of the pickets and that other stuff. I was active in the later years.
I've been president many, many times and vice president and secretary/treasurer at times, and I have worked in all other jobs, social worker in Benld.

Q: Explain to me exactly what you were doing as a social worker in Benld.

A: Well, I took care of the cancer drive for the last 15-20 years and have done real good on that. And I have been cancer, the chairman of the surgical things for 15 years. I have been board member for the TB association for years. I associated for cancer, I was board member there. I have worked in the St. Joseph Catholic Church, I held several offices there. I did an article on laborers. At the American Legion, I held an office in Benld. At the association we make ravioli, worked real hard there. And we had big dinners and bring out the money.

Q: When did you join the Women’s Auxiliary for the Progressive Miners?

A: I just don't remember but it was probably a year after the Progressives were formed. I would say that. Because I lived on a farm with my mother-in-law for the first year I was married and I remember going to meetings but I had children and couldn’t go.

Q: Do you remember where you were inducted into the organization?

A: I just don't remember.

Q: Can you remember how you got your first uniform?

A: Well, I probably just had a cotton white dress, probably somebody made it, I just don’t remember. Or I might have sewed it. At that time I used to sew. I used to sew and make my children’s clothes. Now I wouldn't know how to do any of that. And I raised chickens. We raised chickens up until about 10 years ago. We raised our own chickens and butchered them, sold them, cleaned them, ate them.

Q: Didn't operate on them?

A: No, I didn’t operate on them, no. I didn’t get that. We had some rough times. I remember one time I drove into the -- we used to have to go to the drug store, good thing we had a good drug store man and grocery man, they’d give us credit at that time because it was hard going when our children were born. I remember going one time, my daughter went to school and she went and bought seven cents worth of candy on the bill because I had to buy medicine on the bill, but she never did do that anymore. One time was enough.

Q: Now it was the Depression time when the Progressives were formed.

A: Yes it was. Times were rough.

Q: Can you remember what difference the advent of the washhouse made in your life?

A: Oh yes. He used to come home and wash in a big round tub and their clothes was always so greasy and dirty. Of course I still wash pit clothes for my son lots of time but he doesn't get as dirty as he used to. And the buckets you used to have to fix, of course I never had boarders, but--
Q: How would you fix the buckets?
A: Well, what size sandwich they could take in a jar, you know.
Q: You mean put the food in the bucket?
A: Yes, food in the bucket.
Q: I’m sorry, I had you mending the bucket.
A: No. Well, they had been mended. Mended with welding tape, taped up with black tape and stuff like that, yes.
Q: What would a typical lunch be that you would put in a bucket?
A: Well, sandwiches and I don’t know, one time my husband had ulcers and he got a couple of soft boiled eggs and toast and he’s always ate toast ever since then. And some kind of fruit, apples, fruit or something like that.
Q: Fairly substantial lunch?
A: Oh yeah. My son right now, he takes a bucket full. He takes three or four sandwiches, fruit, and cookies and cake, and bananas and apples and everything.
Q: You told me a little bit about your first offices in the Women’s Auxiliary, which was your very first office?
A: I image I was board member at the time.
Q: What exactly is a board member?
A: Well, a board member is, she attends all these meetings that we used to have, we’d have meetings quite often which we don’t now, but we’d have five or six board members from like Collinsville board member, Gillespie board member and I was in Gillespie.
Q: Were these districts within the state?
A: Yes. We have 18 chapters right now at this time and at one time we had...
Q: 18 chapters or 18 districts?
A: 18 chapters.
Q: How many districts were there?
A: Well, I don’t think we went off of districts at that time. We just had the chapters. Right now we have 18 that still belong. Benld has 112 members which is the largest organization yet. We had at one time over 750 board members if I remember correctly. And at one time I guess we had about over 3000 members from all over.
Q: Do you have any idea what the dues were? In the early years?
A: I don’t remember but I could really find out because I have a little book up there but right now we pay $3.60 a year. That goes in the state issue, $50, and when a person dies the local chapter gives you $25 now, but we gave $50. In Benld we have lost 175 members, we have now 112 members in the Women’s Auxiliary at this time.

Q: So if someone dies, the local chapter gives $25, is that correct?

A: That’s right. We used to give $50 up until a year ago.

Q: And then the state...

A: Gives $50 from the state.

Q: Did the Women’s Auxiliary have anything to do with the union funeral home?

A: No. The Progressive Miners do have a funeral home down here and it’s still known that the Progressives runs it. This union funeral home in Benld and union funeral home in Gillespie. But the Auxiliary, we had nothing to do with that.

Q: The men run that?

A: The men run it. And then the women, when we have a death in there, we always go, we try to have six honorable pall bearers and then the president and vice president of our chapter reads at the cemetery or at the funeral home, whichever respects.

Q: Do you have wakes?

A: Oh yes. We attend the wakes often. We go the night before lots of times.

Q: Stay all night?

A: Oh no, we just go down there for an hour or two hours for that. But the Wilsonville chapter, they go over there and they stay, they go in at five o’clock and stay until nine o’clock when they close, and then they come back the next day and they have the service. Wilsonville has very good attendance at the funeral home. We have so many old members that can’t get around and we have a lot of members in distant states and that pay their dues, but they never get to come to a meeting.

Q: Rose, did you go to Springfield for that big march that the Women’s Auxiliary participated in?

A: No, I don’t think I went to that Springfield march. I was there to the men’s convention many times and we have invited by an officer of the state and served us dinners and I have spoken here in the park at least three times. We had our Labor Day picnic on Labor Day, as state president, and I have spoken Mother Jones’ three times, on occasions on October 12th when we had a memorial service.

Q: Too bad they stopped those.

A: When we went there about three years ago, we went in the car, we didn’t march, we used to march from town out to the cemetery and then we’d come back and eat.
They would fix us eats when we would come back to the Holiday Inn. But we do get flowers, all the chapters go together to send a basket of flowers down to the grave on October 12th for Mother Jones.

Q: Do you recall the sit down strike at Wilsonville?

A: No, but my husband remembers it.

Q: He was involved in it?

A: No he wasn’t there but he was involved. He knew about it. He remembers it.

End of Segment