Louise Brown Memoir

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Mrs. George (Louise) Brown Memoir

**B815. Brown, Mrs. George (Louise)** (1910-1995)
Interview and memoir
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Interview by Nick Cherniavsky, 1977
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This is an oral history interview for Historical Researchers, Incorporated. We are interviewing Mrs. George Brown at her home in Canton, Illinois. The date today is December 20, 1977.

Q: Mrs. Brown, will you please tell me when and where you were born.

A: I was born in Fulton County on a farm about four miles southwest of Canton on the 1st day of May in 1910.

Q: You father, then, was a farmer?

A: My father was a farmer all his life.

Q: For how long did you live on that farm?

A: I lived there until I was 19 years old and he sold his property to a strip mining company and we moved to Canton, where I’ve lived most of the time ever since.

Q: So you attended school then while you were still on the farm?

A: I attended the country school, Buckhart School, in Buckhart Township and later then, high school here in Canton.

Q: You graduated from high school in Canton?

A: I did not graduate. I dropped out in my third year. There was too much work to do on the farm.

Q: Well that was my next question. I would like to ask you at this point, to describe for us your life when you were a young girl on the farm.

A: This is something that I look back on and wonder how we did it, you know. We didn’t have television, we didn’t even have radio until the last year or two we were on the farm. I’ve wondered lots of time, how we occupied our time, but mostly it was work. There were five kids in the family. For a few years, we had a grandmother there, which we had a total of eight people in the family. So I suppose that’s how we occupied our time. Chasing each other around the table mostly. But as we got older, of course, there was plenty of work to do. We had a big orchard. We had 140 acres and in those days it was all done with horses and wagons. Tractors were a thing that was acquired later. Of course that made a lot of work. I spent a good many hours in the field with a hoe. I know what it is. When I was 19, then he had sold the farm to the strip company and we moved into Canton.

Q: Was that your first contact with mining then, when your father sold his farm?

A: Well, not actually because the Big Creek Mine was only about three quarters of a mile to the south of us and we knew coal miners. But our personal lives were not involved with coal mining at all at that time, except for the fact that there was a big mine in the vicinity.

Q: How old were you when you married George?

A: I was 24.
Q: Where did you meet George?
A: I met George here in town after we’d moved to town.

Q: What were you doing at that time?
A: Working at the overall factory here in town.

Q: What was George doing at the time?
A: George, at that time, this was during the Depression, see we were married in 1934, and we went together three years before that, and it was through the Depression and jobs were, well, they weren’t to be found, that’s all. He worked at odd jobs. I think, if I remember right, he was working at a gasoline filling station when we met. For quite a while before that, he’d worked for a lumber outfit here in town, Sutton and Moore. But he started at that Big Creek Mine that I mentioned before when he was 13 years old, because his dad, Charles H. Brown, was top boss down there for 25 years. Now he was born September 30, 1904 of German parentage that had come to this country in the middle 1800s. My family got here long before that. He was born and raised about three quarters of a mile from where I lived, but I never knew him except by name until after we both had moved to Canton and strip companies had bought all the land and we moved into town.

Q: How old did you say, I think I heard you say a while back, about how old George was, when he started working in the mine?
A: He was 13 when he started working under his dad. He was top boss down there. He started working there as a water boy and finally go inside the mines and I believe it was 1926 that that mine closed. So that put an end to all their jobs. Then when the strip mine started up they were quarrelling among themselves, it was a hassle and they didn’t either one get jobs in the strip mine. His dad went to work for another deep mine north of town, Drakes, and he lived in Milwaukee for a while. He worked for his uncle up there at an ice plant. I think he was up there about four years. Okay, broke an arm and come home and he decided not to go back. From them on he worked for Sutton and Moore and had several different jobs around town here, until after we were married and he went to work for the Buckhart Mine then in 1940. And like I say, we still weren’t over the Depression and anything that you could do, any job you could get, was a welcome change. Yeah, his first check was $50 for two weeks, two five day weeks, and boy, we thought that was a big on. It was really. Now I had a job throughout the Depression, ’cause I worked in that overall factory and people had to have clothes and the only thing they could buy was overalls, so they bought them.

Q: You continued working after you were married?
A: I continued working after I married George.

Q: How many children did you and George have?
A: We had two. We had a boy in 1941. He lived until he was 25 and then he was killed in an automobile accident, left two little kids. And we had this one in 1944.
Q: I need to identify for the purpose of the tape who is this one.

A: Our daughter, Nancy. I’ve forgotten what I was going to say now.

Q: Well, let’s go back to George who started working in the Buckhart Mine in 1940. Would you describe for us what kind of mine it was, what kind of a job George was doing there.

A: Well, three years before 1940, it had opened up here. It had just been started. This was over in Banner Township, about three or four miles to the southeast of Canton. They had the tipple built and they were still under construction largely. They had done some excavating, but they were still under construction. The job he got there was shoveling gravel. They were building roads. And that was one of them that he had.

Q: Was this at deep mine or the strip mine?

A: This was the strip mine. The deep mines, most of them by that time had disappeared from this county. There were some, but not many. When the Progressives were having their trouble here, George was not working at the mine, at any mine. So he got clear of that.

Q: You must be a mind reader because I was just getting ready to ask that question.

A: He had belonged to the United Mine Workers when he worked down there at Big Creek. But during the draft when he wasn’t in the mine was when they had the trouble with the Progressives and I can remember, well several friends of mine, didn’t leave their houses at all without guns. And I know where there’s a house in St. David that still got bullet holes in it.

Q: At this point, let’s leave George where he’s now working in Buckhart Mines in 1940. But let’s go back to your own recollections getting what you remember, your own words, about the problems between the Progressives and the United.

A: I wasn’t involved in it, not directly. But of course it was all around us. And St. David was a little town about four miles south of Canton, it was strictly a mining town. There just wasn’t any other people who lived there and many of them were immigrants. So many of them couldn’t even talk straight English. And of course they’d been fired that time by John L. and there were a few radical Progressives. And it got to the point that nobody could go out their own door and feel safe. And our dad forbade us kids to go anywhere near St. David or Dunfermline, which was another little town to the east of us that wasn’t much different, really. We were threatened with whatever if we even looked like we wanted to go to either one of those towns because it was actually dangerous.

Q: Now the Progressives were organized late in 1932. Actually the thing that caused this new union to be formed was called Mulkeytown ambush.

A: Oh, surely they were organized before that weren’t they?

Q: No, there were different groups, called the Reorganized Mine Workers, and there was the so-called White Cards, but the Progressives were organized in 1932. So that was two years before you were married.
A: Well all this trouble and fighting down there at St. David was before that.

Q: Before that. It must have been the Reorganized then.

A: It must have been the Reorganization or trying to organize them that caused the trouble.

Q: Does the name Ray Edmondson mean anything to you?

A: Wasn’t he the state, well what do they call it?

Q: At one point he was president of Sub-District #9 and then he was president of District #12. And at one point he was a very trusted lieutenant of John L. Lewis. But he also was with the Reorganized coal miners. So he was challenging Lewis at one point and he was very supportive of John L. Lewis.

A: Who organized the Progressives?

Q: The first president was a person by the name of Keck.

A: Keck, that rings a bell too but I was not deeply involved in it. I didn’t have anyone close to me that worked in it, so I really don’t know too much. But I thought the Progressives were much earlier than 1932.

Q: Well, there were similar movements to the Progressives. It was a movement first for more local autonomy as compared to John L. Lewis and more dictatorial policy from the national...

A: Well, I suppose the arguments and quarrels stretched into several years before organization anyway.

Q: Right, but the dates aren’t really important, Mrs. Brown. If you’ll just go on with your recollection of these problems between the United, Reorganized, and the Progressives in this area.

A: This what I said, we weren’t that closely involved in it and of course the famers were contemptuous of the miners because it was a different occupation and it did have a lot of trouble and the farmers just didn’t want anything to do with them. And that was all there was to it. And really, I don’t know too much about it, except what I heard later. So I’m not really a good source. I do know that there was a lot of trouble in St. David and Dunfermline.

Q: Would you say that in this area more most stayed with United?

A: Oh, by far. There were a few Progressives. Now George’s dad, when he went up to Drakes after Big Creek closed, had to join the Progressive union and he never did get back into UMWA. They never let him back.

Q: George’s father?

A: Charles.
Q: So he was first with United and then he went Progressive?

A: Well, he went Progressive in order to get a job up here at Drakes after Big Creek closed. And they never did let him back in. He tried, several times. Because he tried to get to work in the strip mines, but he never made it.

Q: How old was Charles when he died?

A: Well, he died in '62 and he was born in '94, that would have made him, not quite 70.

Q: What I was leading to is he lost his pension by going Progressive.

A: Oh yes, he never had a pension. He never would have been entitled to one even if he had lived.

Q: Even if he’d stayed United?

A: Well, if he’d stayed with UMWA he would have. But the last 15 or 16 years of his life he went to Milwaukee and worked at the ice plant there. So, no, he never would have been eligible for one. Never at all.

Q: You mentioned that you remembered when a number of people that were miners in this area in those troublesome years would not go out without a gun. Were there any shootings, anything of that nature around here?

A: Yes. No murders that I know of but there were shootings and threats. One Progressive miner that I know of, this house I spoke about before in St. David, it’s still got the bullet marks in it. They were shooting at him at night. They didn’t hit anybody but that wasn’t because they didn't try.

Q: Have there been any bombings in this area, dynamiting?

A: No. I don’t remember ever hearing of anything like that. It evolved into a kind of personal thing between different miners that did join the Progressive. Of course, they did that to get jobs where they could. And then the UMWA, they got on them, they were scabs.

Q: Let’s go back now to George as he’s working at the Buckhart mine and he was shoveling gravel.

A: Yes, that’s the way he started.

Q: Let’s follow his career from that point on. What was he doing afterwards?

A: That’s a little complicated. He went from that to the tipple and he operated a switchboard in the tipple for two or three years. Then he went to driving a haulage truck. He was on that for five years. Then he was on the electric gang for about five years. He worked in the garage, too, not very long. He did ride cars in the lot for just a short while. He had a lot of different jobs down there. See he worked there from 1940 until 1969. He had 13 years in the deep mine and he had 23 years in the strip mines. He progressed in this strip mine thing from shoveling gravel to operating the wheel. The last five years he was there, he operated a wheel.
Q: Where did he spend 13 years in a deep mine?

A: Big Creek. St. David. He started down there as a water boy, and then he was a mule driver, and then he dug coal as he grew older.

Q: How much time did he spend as a mule driver?

A: I don’t know, I don’t think I ever heard him say how much. But there must have been three or four years or longer because there were a lot of stories connected with it.

Q: I was going to say that many miners we’ve interviewed that were mule drivers had a number of stories to tell us about.

A: One particular funny one.

Q: Would you please?

A: Well, they had a great big water tank and of course these mules didn’t come out from below except in the summertime when they didn’t work.

Q: You anticipated my question, I was just going to ask you that.

A: They had a great big water tank somewhere among the buildings down there and this one old mule he had, I guess he was pretty stubborn, because they couldn’t make him do what they wanted him to do and George got sore at him. Well somebody have him a bottle of what they call “highlife.” I don’t have any idea what it was, but anyway, he said he took the “highlife” and rubbed it on this mule’s rump, rubbed it into his hip pretty good and it started burning and he said that mule’s tail went straight up and started gyrating and he started to run and said he cleared that water tank. Well, I’ve seen that water tank and I expect it was 15 feet across. He said he cleared that water tank and the next thing he crashed into was blacksmith’s shop and he went clear through that and into the office door where George’s dad and boss was. And of course, he got caught red-handed.

Q: Tell me what happened to the mule and what happened to George.

A: Well, the mule, I don’t think it ever did hurt the mule. He said nothing could hurt that mule anyway.

Q: What happened to George?

A: Well, he got disciplined. He got sent home for a couple of weeks with no work and no pay. It made his dad pretty mad and he got to nosing around and wanted to know who gave him that stuff, and they found out who did that, and they sent him home. He’s been dead for years. I laughed so hard when I heard that, I thought it was so funny. And then one other incident. Another man that I know down there was a mule driver with George part of the time. He had a mule he couldn’t handle. He’d balk, he’d just simple stop in his tracks. They were pulling coal out, you know, from the inner rooms of the mine to the entries. And this mule had just got to John Lincoln’s blood so of course they had electricity in the mine, and they had these wires strung underneath the roof, and John just simply got tired of dealing with the mule, so he,
the steel trace chain that they hooked them to the cars with, and one day he got
tired of it and he said, "Well, you so and so I’ll fix you." So he threw this trace chain
over the electric wire and electrocuted the mule right there. That’s another story I’ve
heard told a several times down there.

Q: We have heard stories about mules who were smarter than men, knew their way
around the mine, and some had to be destroyed because they were vicious.

A: Now I’ll have to agree with that. Have you had anybody tell about rats in the mine
and what friends they were to miners?

Q: I don’t recall personally.

A: I heard them tell down here at Big Creek, nobody ever bothered a rat. Nobody
ever disturbed or killed a rat. They were the miner’s friends. If there was bad air,
black damp, anything like that, the rats would start to leave and they were warned.
And those rats were fed and protected and left right there. I’ve heard them tell that
lots of times.

Q: In the mine, that was a signal?

A: If they started to leave a room or an area of the mine, that was pretty big, that
thing went, the entries in it went five and six miles. And if there was a spot in there
where there was black damp or any bad air, the rats would leave it. And George said
if the rats left it, the men would too, because that would put a stop to it, they got
afraid.

Q: You told me that Charles, his father, at one point, joined the Progressives. But
George stayed with United.

A: Well, he dropped his membership. But he did not join the Progressives.

Q: George didn’t.

A: No.

Q: What about the fact that the father was at one point with the Progressives and
son was with United? Did that cause any problems?

A: No, it did not because we all knew that Charlie did that in order to get a job there.
They were just hard to get and there wasn’t any choice.

Q: Were there any instances that you recall where this type of situation also
occurred in some other families where maybe one brother or son and father where
with two different unions?

A: No. I really don’t know of any of those personally. I have heard various talk about
it but not enough really to tell anything on it. I know in the Brown family there was
never anything said. I do know, though, that Charlie and some of his older friends
parted company because of it. I don’t think there was any violence of any kind, but
they got down on him because he joined the Progressives. As far as his family was
concerned, there was no trouble at all.
Q: Where did Charles work at that time he was with the Progressives?
A: Where did he work? At the Drake mine, north of here.

Q: That mine had a contract with the Progressives?
A: Well, supposedly it did because he had to join it in order to get a job.

Q: Which company operated that mine?
A: I think this was an individual.

Q: A small mine then?
A: Yes, I think it was a small mine. Like the Pschirrrers here later, which he worked for as a blacksmith, but they weren’t union, so he didn’t join any union for them.

Q: During what time period, do you recall? In general.
A: It was before I knew George, because he’d gone to Milwaukee by that time. No I don’t think I’d better try to say, but it would have to be after 1926 and before 1930. So in that period of time it had to be. And I would imagine the most of it, he worked up there. Because he quit shortly after I got acquainted with George. Well, they quit, he didn’t.

Q: Now from 1940 to 1969, George worked in a mine and that was all strip mining.
A: Yes. Buckhart outfit.

Q: What I would like to ask you at this point, as the wife of a miner he lived here in this community, at that time, in a period that was just at the end of the Depression and onto the World War II years and until the time, some eight or nine years back, how was it for a miner’s family? Where did you live? How poor did you live? How much George was making, his wages? What could you afford, what could you not afford? Could you just describe to me your lifestyle at that time?
A: Well, our lifestyle wasn’t anything fancy. It was pretty common, but we did have what we needed, except during the strikes. And we had one or two of those that were pretty bad, like 1949, we were out most of the year. And that’s the only time we had any real difficulty. Now we lived in Bryant for a while, which is another little town to the south of St. David and Dunfermline on Route 100. In fact, we lived there when Nancy was born. And we had a rough time in ’49, but then were out most of the year due to a strike, contract talks. But most of the time, I believe, that we lived as good or better than the general people around us.

Q: Except for the time when George, with the rest of the miners, would be out on a strike such as you said he was in 1949, how steady was his job?
A: His job was always steady except for strikes. He worked five days a week while he was on the truck. But the rest of the time, the other jobs he had down there, he got quite a bit of overtime, and the last years that he worked down there, part of the time on a loading shovel and part of the time on the wheel, was seven days a week.
And I assure you that can get just as old as three days a week. I think we lived as well as anyone.

Q: Let’s go way back to 1940. It doesn’t have to be exact, but can you tell me approximately how much George was making per day at that time?

A: Until just about a year ago, I had every one of his pay stubs and I threw them all away. I was wishing this morning that I hadn’t. You and your ideas. Well anyway, the first pay he ever drew was for two five day weeks and it was $50. And that looked big as the sky to us. That was good wages. He made $5 a day. And it’s not too hard to trace it on from there.

Q: That was in what year?

A: 1940. Because with every contract it went up. And of course they had a contract renewal every three years. Let’s see, what was he drawing when he quit? I don’t think I remember offhand. Somewhere in the neighborhood of $50 or $60 a day.

End of Tape 1, Side 1

Q: Mrs. Brown, going back to the time when George was working in the mine, what kind of job was it considered to be in the community? Was it a good job? Was a person who was a miner looked up to or how was it?

A: This is one of the things that always torqued me a little. A miner was considered to be a rat digging in the bowels of the earth. He was looked down on. People sneered at and I think that it was a proud profession. I think my husband had a good job and I think he did a good job at it. And he did like his work up until the last few years that he worked when he was tired and wanted to quit.

Q: Would you have any the reason why people in the community looked down on the miners?

A: Well, I think now, I didn’t know at the time, I guess I didn’t stop to think about it then, but I think now, it was strictly a farming community and any other sort of a profession at all was looked down on. Because the men at the shop down here, the [unintelligible] shop were considered the same way. I think that was the trouble. Anybody that wasn’t a farmer just simply wasn’t contributing to the public good.

A: [Nancy] Excuse me, I’m a 33 year old miner’s daughter and I think it’s a pretty wonderful profession too. My dad did one hell of a job.

Q: Thank you Nancy. That’s very good. So you would say, then, that conflict between the farming community and the miner?

A: That’s only a guess on my part through my analyzation of the matter. That’s all that is. But I think it’s right, I really do.

Q: What about ethnic makeup of the miners? Where the mostly native born people or were there immigrants among them?

A: In the early years when Fulton County was all deep mines they were mostly immigrants and this could have been another contributing factor. But as the years
went on that all disappeared because the second generation went to work, they immediately were not immigrants. So there was really no reason. I suppose that some of it could have been a hangover from the years when the immigrants were sneered at and looked down on. But I think primarily it was because of the occupation itself. This was strictly farming country and anything else was on the outside of the bill, that’s all.

Q: What about the ethnic makeup of the farmers and the miners? Was there any noticeable difference that they come from different stock?

A: Yes. I think probably the farmers were established here much longer and as a general rule, they were not immigrants they were what we called Americans at the time. You know the distinction between a Hunk [Hunky] and American and you heard a lot of this. And anybody that hadn't been here for at least a generation or two was classified as a Hunk and therefore looked down on.

Q: What nationalities, to your knowledge, of the immigrants were predominant among the miners?

A: By far, the most of them were Croats here, some Italians, even some Germans, but by far, the most were from Croatia.

Q: But by the time George was working in the mine that was...

A: No, when he went to work in the mine that was still going hot and heavy.

Q: It was?

A: But by the time he went to work over here at Buckhart in 1940 when he started at the strip mine most of it had disappeared.

Q: When he was a youngster working the deep mine it still was part of the factors?

A: Yes, very pronounced. The company store down there, you know, like Tennessee Ernie’s song, it owned their souls, because many, many, times he said those miners would draw their pay and never see a cent of it.

Q: Are you familiar at all with something that happened much earlier in 1909, the Cherry Mine disaster up by LaSalle, when 259 miners died in a fire in a deep mine?

A: Yes. My uncle's husband was the operator of that elevator.

Q: Is that right?

A: That's right and he lost his job over it. He never did go back to the mine. This was Charles’ brother. Yes, I’ve heard a lot about it, but he never would talk about it. It got to him too much, I suppose.

Q: The reason I ask this question is because yesterday I was at the Freeman Coal Company office and they were showing me some of their magazines, all the issues, dates going back to 1940s. One of the names of the miner who was mentioned for some reason, you know, a certain anniversary date in the summer was a Croatian
name and one of the people who had died in the Cherry Mine disaster had an identical last name. I was wondering if that was...

A: I don’t know anybody who was involved in it except for George’s uncle, it’s not my uncle, and he was that elevator operator and they dismissed him immediately. I don’t know, I never did find out, whether he had anything to do with the malfunction of the elevator. I never did know whether it was negligence or avoidable or what, but I do know that he lost his job over it and never did go back to the mines. And that’s about all I know of it. There was an article not too long ago in one of the papers about that disaster.

Q: Yes, as a matter of fact, I spoke with the person who wrote the article. Mr. Steven Stout.

A: Oh, did you? And I don’t know the area either, the country around there.

Q: Okay, going back to George now. He’s still working in the mine and so you described some of his earnings and lifestyle, etc. What about the relationship, as much as you know, between the miners and the company? What kind of relationship was there?

A: I have always considered the relationship between the company and the miners, down here, now Buckhart’s the only mine I know much about, but I thought they were real good up until 1949, when that long strike was. After that, they were anything but good. And it’s still that way.

Q: For what reason being? How would you explain the change?

A: I would say that because of the way that contract was written, it was quite a win for John L you know, but the companies have been really bitter ever since. I do know that they have tried repeatedly to break the union. They would like nothing better than to have it gone. And I think they’re pretty close to doing it. I think their efforts have bent that way ever since 1949, much more than they ever were before that. I think we got along pretty good up until that time.

Q: Okay, we are now once again in a period of a coal strike and the union has lost some ground now. Now for the first time in many, many years, the union mines coal production is less than nonunion coal mine production. What do you think about this strike that is done today? What are your feelings about it?

A: I expect it to be a long one. And I expect Miller to have to concede considerably. He doesn’t seem to think so, but I do because he just simply doesn’t have the push that was there once. Not with any 200,000 or so miners.

Q: Well, going back then from your point of view again as the wife and widow of a miner, how would you compare Arnold Miller to John L. Lewis or Tony Boyle as the President of United Mine Workers? What is your point of view?

A: Well, I think Miller has done a wonderful job. I don’t think his members are giving him credit for any near what he’s done. I think he’s done a wonderful job. Everything that could be done and more too, with no more power than he’s got. John L. was a wonderful president up until the last 10-15 years of his reign shall we say. But he got like so many others that are in power, it got too good to be able to use that power.
And Tony Boyle was his pupil, of course, I guess, he didn’t want Tony Boyle in there. Tony Boyle is nothing but an out and out criminal and he’s right where he belongs. And this is one thing that I said and thought long, long before anybody else did. I didn’t like the way Tony Boyle conducted the business. And I think the shape of the welfare right now is because of Tony Boyle. I think he’s directly responsible for it. I understand that there’s still people working in the mines that would vote for Tony Boyle if he’d run again, but I just can’t figure out why.

Q: Okay. To continue along this line, what do you think is going to happen to, 1) to the union, the United Mine Workers and 2) to the miners themselves in the near future?

A: Unless, this is what I think, they can wake these people up that are members and get some money out of them so that they’ve got money enough to organize with, pick up their membership, I think it’s going to keep going right on downhill and downhill until they either have to amalgamate with the big union in order to have any power or they disappear from the scene all together. This is what I think. Now this is one of the things I don’t think is fair. I’ve sent money and I don’t have a lot, because I’m under the 1950 plan and I don’t draw what a lot of the new miners, later miners do. But I think every one of them ought to get busy and get some money in there to Miller and give him a little power and a little punch to get on with this organizing and build his membership to where he’s got some punch. That’s what I think it’s going to take. Because if they don’t, it’s their own hide they’ve got to save. That’s all there is to it. If they don’t, they’re going to go down the drain. And surely they can’t get anywhere without a union, because that’s what these companies are looking for and they’ll pounce like a duck on a June bug. Just as soon as they think the unions lost any power to negotiate with, and it’s awful close, they don’t have enough membership, that’s what they need to do, get busy and get more.

Q: Now at the time when you were married to George, most of the coal in this area was produced in strip mines, but in younger days George worked in deep mines. How much do you know, how many people are you acquainted with in this area who had black lung?

A: Well, in this area, if you can find a miner that ever worked in a deep mine, he’s got black lung. My husband had it.

Q: George had black lung?

A: George had black lung. And I don’t believe I know one that doesn’t have it. Many of these strip miners have got it because they are subjected to the same thing. Dust and dirt. I’ve got a friend in Dunfermline that has it and he’s still working. Most of them do.

Q: What do you know about the coal companies that are involved in strip mining in regard to land reclamation project?

A: Oh, I think they’re doing a pretty good job on reclamation, I really do. This is another one of my beefs. You hear so many stories about the destruction and the terrible thing it is to turn this land over, but the farm that I was born and raised on, there was 140 acres of it, and there was a good size creek that ran through the center of it, and the coal came to the surface on both sides of that creek. Of course, they didn’t bother it except that they changed its course in a place or two, but right
today I would like to own that farm. It’s one of the most valuable pieces of property in the county just simply because it’s been there for almost 40 years now and it has evolved into a veritable paradise, lakes, timber, and it could be made into a wonderful recreational area. Now it has not been leveled. But where they’re putting these fields back where they’re contoured, I can’t see where they did a bit of damage. In fact they improved it because they left water supply and all this talk about the ruin they created when they dig this dirt up is just a point for beefing. I don’t think anybody’s got a valid excuse for saying a word about it. I think they do a wonderful job.

Q: Are you talking about this area only?

A: I’m talking about all of Central Illinois that I’ve ever known or seen. I don’t know of any place in Illinois that is bad. In the East, they say there is acid from sulfur and that sort of stuff does so much damage. But we don’t have too much of that here. In any case, what they worked over and abandoned, sold, or gotten through with, in a very few years will just simply grow anything. And it’s been proved time and time again. I don’t think that there’s any valid excuse for all the hollering. I like the way they’re doing that. But you mentioned the coal company, they’re not coal companies anymore, they’re gigantic oil compounds. They’re just parts of bigger companies and they’re big enough to get what they want. But I think they do pretty good about obeying the law on this score. I think they do a good job. I’ve tried to buy some land. I would love to have that old place down there. You only get laughed at, they know what they’ve got, and I can’t blame them to save me. They did sell some. I think it’s probably inaccessible places where they’d have to build roads that they’re trying to sell.

Q: Does anyone, either in your own family or among your own friends or acquaintances in a younger generation, work in the mines in this area today?

A: I have a nephew that works at the bluff out here north, but I’m not in contact with him enough to know too much about it except that he loves his job and he seems to be doing real well in it. He has a company job.

Q: Which mine is he working at?

A: What do that call the one at north? Consolidated I think. Used to be Peabody.

Q: Is that a deep mine or strip?

A: Strip mine. I don’t believe there is a deep mine left in Fulton County. For years there was one south of St. David, but I don’t think there’s any at all now. Pschirriers had the last one and they quit several years back. No more deep mines. There’s not any that I know of.

Q: Now to come back to what we were discussing a little while ago in regard to a community attitude toward the coal miners. What kind of change, if any, has taken place in the community since the days when your husband was a coal miner as compared to present day?

A: I think that probably there’s no looking down on miners anymore. I don’t believe that people regard them the way they used to. Well, my daughter thinks there is a difference, but I can’t see it if there is.
A: [Nancy] They still can’t get unemployment.

A: Well that unemployment thing, strictly is within the law when the miners are out it’s because they’re striking. That’s another thing. Never in George’s life did he ever draw one penny of unemployment.

Q: If he was out on a strike that was it?

A: That was it. They refused. Well in this county and one of the counties to the south of here. One winter we had the river, the coal from Buckhart used to always go up the river, there was no railcar at all. One winter it was cold enough that the river froze over and stayed that way for about three or four weeks. And of course when they got their barges all full, that was it. The mine didn’t work anymore, because all that resulted was just a pile of coal at the tipple. And they wouldn’t let them have unemployment then. Not at all. Now they did down in Schuyler County, they granted them unemployment down there, in the same circumstances and same reason, but they didn’t up here.

Q: You mentioned a little earlier in our conversation about a time when George was working in Big Creek at the deep mine and they had a company store there.

A: In St. David.

Q: Are you familiar at all with how that store operated and how the miners regarded it? Was it positive or negative situation?

A: Oh yes. Its name was Martin and Martin. There were two brothers that owned it. And the building is still there that it was in. They could go to that store whenever they needed anything and it was put on the tab for them. Or they were issued what they called scrip to pay for what they wanted at the store.

Q: Oh they did at that store?

A: Well, both ways were used here to pay for what they wanted at the store. Many of them never saw a bit of their pay because it was all gone by the time it got to them. Yes I knew two of the Martins, there were three of them, and the two younger ones I both knew and remember. That was our closest store, where I lived, only about a half mile north of Big Creek. It was closer for us to go to St. David for supplies than it was to Canton and we went there a lot. Of course, we weren’t on that plan, we paid cash for our groceries same as we did any other time. But I have seen miners in there with their scrip and grumbling about how high things were. And I’ve also heard it said they were charged more than we were, at that time we were farmers, you know.

Q: At the same store?

A: At the same store and they were charged more on that plan than we were. Yeah, I’d heard that talked about.

Q: What kind of store was it? What did they sell?
A: They were a general merchandise store. They sold, well you name it and it was there. Everything from harness to salt.

Q: Did they sell groceries too?

A: Oh yes, they sold groceries, of course that was their main business. As the years went on, after Big Creek quit, then they did turn to groceries all together. But they sold hardware, they sold everything. No matter what it was, you could get it there. Material, dress material, everything.

Q: General Store. No matter what it was they had it?

A: Everything. Yeah, if you wanted a tin bucket, you could get that there. Anything. Washtubs. All that sort of stuff.

Q: But as you recall, the miners were captive customers?

A: Yes, the miners were captive customers and they couldn’t go anyplace else to trade because they didn’t have money through the week, you know.

Q: They had to pay extra for it?

A: They had to go there, they didn’t have a choice. I’ve been in the store myself and I couldn’t understand what they were saying. The Croatians you know talked so brokenly. And I wondered how those boys understood what they were after, but they got along all right.

Q: Now one of the factors that is very important in coal mining that is very controversial is safety. Injuries and fatalities in mine work. What do you know on this subject?

A: I don’t know very much about it except that the mine my husband worked at wasn’t too particular about it. I think, from what I can hear, read, and see that safety laws are ignored to the point, well almost criminality. I think that safety is simply not considered until the law makes them do it. And that is rare. Miller is right in pushing this safety program and putting teeth in it so they can get to them. They’ve got more money that these little guys out here have, you know. They can quiet the courts. Well that’s what it takes.

Q: Do you have any specific recollections of some accidents in the mine, some severe injuries that’s happened to people that you knew?

A: Yes. But I do not know what settlements were made except in my husband’s case. He had several minor accidents and there never was any trouble over that. Several men had been killed down that at the mine while he worked there.

Q: Which one are you talking about now, deep mine?

A: No the strip mine in Buckhart. And I don’t think, at least not to my knowledge, was there ever any trouble in paying for them, but I don’t think they paid past the limit. I know a man in St. David that had a leg taken off, cut off, he was riding loads down there in the yard and he got caught between two railroad cars. This was 20 years ago and he still has many problems with that leg and they’re still paying him.
because he’s never signed a release. They’ve always taken care of it. Now I do know that particular case.

Q: From the days when your husband worked as a miner, to the present time, would you say that the number of people who are working as miners in this community, in this area, has increased, stayed about the same, or decreased?

A: Oh no. It has decreased terribly. When Big Creek quit down there, there were 2600 men working there and there’s never been that many since. Now the strip mine that he worked at, I don’t think employed more than 230 or so and most of the time not quite that many. Of course, they produce a lot more, but there were 2600 men at one time working at Big Creek. Well, all of St. David and Dunfermline, really. And when they quit, things really dropped around here.

Q: What was the reason that Big Creek closed down? Was it worked out?

A: No, I don’t think they worked it out. I think they just couldn’t get any more leases and this company was based, I think, in Chicago and I really don’t know what the reason for quitting was. I don’t know, I’ve heard all kinds of stories, that they went bankrupt, everything, but I don’t know what the reason was. I know it put a lot of men out of work. In that day and age they didn’t have pensions either. Wasn’t anything to do but find some other kind of work.

Q: What happened to most of them? Did they move away or?

A: I think a good many of them went where there were deep mines. A good many of them did. Because St. David itself is only about half the size it used to be. And it decimated immediately afterwards. Dunfermline was the same way. That was a company town. Most of that was company houses along with the deal they had on the company store. And then after ‘26 it went way down and of course now it’s built back up.

End of Tape 1, Side 2