Frank Fries Memoir

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Frank Fries Memoir

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This is an interview with Mr. Frank Fries and the date is March 10, 1975. We are sitting at Frank’s home in Gillespie, Illinois. This interview is being made for Historical Researchers, Incorporated.

Q: Frank, I’m particularly interested in your mining experience at this time. So could I take you back just a little bit and ask you when you worked in the mines?

A: Oh, I started in the mines very early. I worked in the mines after I came back from the service and I was injured in the mine by being a good fellow helping the management. They were short a trip rider and that meant a great deal of trips for the boss of our territory and we was backing into a room with three loads and the motor, and I told the motorman who was Noisy Newman, brother of Art Newman that there was a dip there and the bumper of this car that was sitting there was in bad condition and I’d have to come back slow. So he backed real slow and I was holding that pin and the couplings, they had two links there you know, to couple the cars you have to drop that, so I was holding it up there and I was in between the two cars. So he come back real slow and all of a sudden when it hit that hump it caught me in between there and broke my collarbone and several ribs. They took me out to the bottom, which is what they call it where the cage is at, and they took me on top and took me to the doctors, never went to the hospital, but he took a lance of some kind and cut my throat and there was a clot of blood gathered there and it was just like a chunk of, oh I don’t know what you would call it, it was terrible. He took that out and stitched my throat back. He did nothing with the ribs except put that tape around them and when you take it off it took skin and all. And I suffered the agonies of hell for a long time before those ribs healed. I never did go back to the mines again.

Q: What a grizzly story to start me on. How old were you when you started mining?

A: I was 16 years old when I first started in the mine. I started as a grocery clerk when I was about 14. I never went to school above the seventh grade. I had two different courses, the International Correspondence School, and I finished one of them. It served me well as an arbitrator. After I became an arbitrator and also in my political life.

Q: Was your father a coal miner?

A: He was a coal miner and when he came from Germany he loaded coal, but he was a trained engineer in Germany, a hoisting engineer. So anyway, as I remember him, he never worked in the mines, he was an engineer in those days. They had two unions, a hoisting engineers’ union and the coal miners’ union. So they had trouble at all times. And my dad, he was quite an advocate of cooperation between the management and the men, and the men especially among themselves. So at the convention that they hand in Springfield, Springfield was the only place they had at that time that was organized completely.

Q: For the hoisting engineers?

A: For all the coal miners. There was only one at that time. And I think that, I don’t think I can remember who was the President of the United Mine Workers at that time. So anyway, the engineers agreed that they would join the United Mine Workers union and make it one union. And it was a union that covered the entire group, from the construction of the mine to the date of hoisting coal and producing coal and continue as United Mine Workers. And after that they had the Virden Riots, you’ve...
heard of that. Mt. Olive lost quite a few men in that fight and I don’t know this to be a fact but I heard many miners that were there, I had three brothers that were there at that fight and my dad tried to persuade them not to go but they went with the gang, they were lucky to come back alive, and they said that the different fellows I talked to that they brought in carloads of people from the south, the railroad companies did, and some of them were black and some were white. They had a pitched battle there. They claimed that when that train pulled out of there with those people in it, there we so many dead in there and bleeding that the blood trickled along the track where the calls were pulling out of the side track. And they never did get to unload any of those scabs there at the Virden mine. And that’s only a few miles from here, you know where Virden’s at.

Q: Were your brothers injured at all?

A: No. They didn’t get a scratch any one of them. Dad didn’t want them to go. I don’t know whether we lost anybody from Gillespie or not. We didn’t lose any from Clyde Patch because there’s only a handful worked there.

Q: How many people in your family were there?

A: Thirteen. Three girls and ten boys, a little girl died when she was four years old, all the rest of them are men and women with their own families. God only knows how many nieces and nephews it is now. But anyway one of the most important things is my dad was quite a union advocate and he attended practically every convention held at that time and everyone had to pay their own way because there was no money there to pay the coal miners. They made very little money. And I can remember this when they hoisted coal. They had coal cars that carried maybe 1800 pounds to a ton, 2,000 pounds, of coal, you know that was about the limit, and they had no one to weigh the coal and they had trapezes when two men would pull this car off the cage and had track up to the tipple there, and they had trapeze and the coal would have to touch the trapeze or they’d be docked for that entire, they didn’t get one penny for the coal they loaded in those cars. So sometimes those poor devils would load those cars too high and then that driver who was making the mule go as fast as he could, coal would hit the crossbars of the entry and it would just rake the whole top off. Then they’d lose that car of coal. Sometimes they would load 35-40 cars of coal a day, which was a lot of coal to load, but they worked 12, 14, 16 hours until the job was done. As a rule, most of them on average would lose ten percent of the coal they mined. They never was paid the full amount of what they did. And it run that way until the union became strong enough that they put in what they call the check weigh man and they would weigh the coal as it came off of the cage. Then the miner was paid according to how much coal was in there.

Q: You’re talking about the trapeze, the coal car loaded with coal would pass under this apparatus?

A: And the coal would have to touch it. It looked like a trapeze, two ropes and like a broomstick stuck in there and a car would pass underneath that and if the coal didn’t touch the crosspiece, believe me, they didn’t get anything for it.

Q: And some of the trapeze would swing?

A: No it would be standing there temporary until, no it didn’t swing, they’d just push the cars.
Q: The came under it?
A: Yes. They didn’t load very much coal.

Q: I’ve never heard that before.
A: That’s what they did. And of course the miners had to pay for their tools that they worked with. They had so much taken off of their pay for blacksmith work, you know, and they never received one penny about a day’s work and a day’s work was from daylight to dark and many of those people came home and didn’t get to see their kids, they were in bed and they were in bed when they left. And some of them would work 14 or 16 hours a day. That’s before they had unions.

Q: Now is this your father’s workday you’re describing?
A: As I remember, when he was a hoisting engineer, his shift was 12 hours. And I don’t know how many years he was a hoisting engineer, he never had one accident. But one time he was hoisting materials and there was a fellow by the name of Joe Castelluber, an Italian, was down there working and he belled the cage away. My dad has told this story many times. When he belled the cage away, by some nook or crook he stepped on the cage and the cage took him and he got caught between the cage and the cribbing of the shaft and my dad could tell by the feel of the engine that it was pulling something that was wrong, and stopped immediately and checked. They had to take part of that cage apart to get that fellow out and he lived many years after that. No hospital though. Doubt very much if they had a doctor now at that time.

Q: Where was this?
A: That’s Clyde Patch where that slag pile is down there.

Q: Here in the Gillespie area?
A: Yes.

Q: Was that the only mine your dad worked in?
A: No. When it shut down he worked here at the Gillespie mine and when it shut down he worked at the Staunton mine and it shut down. Then we kids were old enough to work and make a living a few hours a week and we decided that we could feed him and take care of him without him working.

Q: How old was he then when he retired?
A: He was killed by a train accident.

Q: How old was he when he retired from the mine?
A: Oh I guess when he quit the mines he was about 64 years old or 65.

Q: By this time were all of you boys mining?
A: No. When he was killed, I was a policeman here in Gillespie. And a nephew was playing with some kids and they said your grandpa has just got killed. So he come right home and told my sister. She was keeping house for us, so she told me and sure enough it was him.

Q: It was your father though, not your grandfather?

A: Yes. Grandfather of that nephew. Of course that’s going back a long ways but that was the beginning of organized labor. Before that the only real union they had in this part of the country was the cigar makers union. And I think they had half a million cigar makers in America at that time and Gompers was quite a labor leader. I don’t know whether he organized the miners or who really did that. But I remember Frank Farrington and the different ones that were there. John L. Lewis and I worked together for many, many years.

Q: The first union you joined, Frank, was that the United Mine Workers?

A: No, the first union...

Q: You were talking about the first miners’ union here.

A: The first miners’ union was when they had the two unions, one for the hoisting engineers and one for the miners. That’s the first union they had here.

Q: After that time, your father joined United Mine Workers?

A: Yes with the other engineers. At their convention they agreed to become members of the United Mine Workers. When I started in the grocery store there was no clerks union either and so we kids, we naturally felt, being in a union town, we should be union clerks. We organized the clerks’ union here. We was 14, 15 years old. We got $15 a month for being clerk at that time.

Q: Were you one of the organizers?

A: Oh sure. We struck at one store for about two weeks and then we finally got the help of the barbers and the coal miners around here, so they finally settled. The only thing we was asking for and I think we got it was $1 a month more that we was making and it went to $16.

Q: You went to $16?

A: A month.

Q: Did you all manage to keep your jobs through your strike?

A: Oh they wouldn’t dare fire us, wouldn’t happen, it’d be crazy because it was all union you know. But I guess that’s enough of that stuff.

Q: No that’s interesting. You’ve been on all sides of the union question. You’ve been a coal miner, you’ve also been a mine owner.
A: Yes that’s correct and I think I have a record that’s unequalled in the country. One day with 12 men we produced 126 tons of coal that was shot on solid. You know what shooting on the solid is?

Q: Yes.

A: As a rule, I understand at the present time in Britain where they still have shooting on the solid, that an average of four tons per man a day is the average. So you can see what we accomplished. We generally run around seven or eight ton. Those people at that time in what they call “dinky mines” they produced about a ton and a half per man and they paid them $2 a day for 8-10 hours work. When I operated this mine the wages was $8 a day for and that’s what I paid them. I had the best miners in this part of the country over there. I had 12 of them when I finally got rid of the mine.

Q: Where exactly was your mine?

A: You know where Chesterfield is? It was about three miles northwest of Chesterfield. It’s abandoned now completely. After it was there a while, my brother’s father-in-law, who is a bridge builder, he came over there and stayed with us, he and another fellow built a tipple, like the regular mines. We’d take the coal up in the tipple and it was automatic dump there and those cars would dump in there and we’d have a blind horse, his name was Tom, he was the most faithful thing that ever drew breath I believe. On Sundays I’d go down there and work by myself and Tom didn’t mind, sometimes he’d have to wait three or four hours before I’d come up again and I’d holler at him. When the cage would come up and see this was a shaft, there’s a trip there that holds the cage from going back down, you know, and old Tom would take a step forward to release that trip and then he’d turn around and he’d pull me up. That’s unbelievable, but it’s true. If my wife was here she could tell you, she used to come over, scared to death that something was going to happen. And many a time I worked there until sometime Monday morning. And we’d have trucks lined up there from Sunday afternoon until Monday morning waiting for coal.

Q: Did you own this mine by yourself?

A: Yes. My brother and another fellow leant me the money, but I paid them back in a very short time. $3800 is what it was and that was a lot of money those days.

Q: What days are we talking, what year?

A: I have to figure now. 1918 I was in the service in World War I and then second year I was married, and we were married in 1920, so it would be 1921. And that’s when I started the mine. When it started my brother he had four men working at this Standard Oil mine at Carlinville, Illinois of which he was superintendent of. And he took those fellows out there to shoot enough coal and to show me how to shoot on the solid and I wouldn’t have to worry about coal. And that was on the 4th of July in 1921. And so the next day I went down in the mine there was enough coal down there to heat a heating stove. Mine was full of slips and they didn’t know a darn thing about shooting coal. Slips is the formation of the coal, it rests on certain ledges and you may find it anywhere. You hit that spot and it’s just as slick as any glass and the coal would just slide off of it and that’s all you’d get. So anyway I didn’t let it discourage me. I got a fellow there, and I believe his name was Blevins, I’m not positive, and he was supposed to be the best shooter around in the country and I
told him if he'd come with me and work at the mine I'd pay him whatever he thought he should be paid. Well, he said, "We don't make very much money. Would $6 be too much?" I said, "Hell no, if we can do the job we'll make some money and you will too." So finally wound up we paid him union scale, which was $8 a day then for 8 hours work. And they really did a job. I got to the place where I did all the regulating of the shots and that. You see, you can blow your mine up if you don't shoot that right, when the shot goes off, that's what they call the black powder.

Q: Who taught you to shoot?

A: Well I guess you might say this fellow and just my determination to learn how to shoot. Shooting at the wall is just like this here except you got your ribs on the side and you have to put extra shot on an angle so you can cut the next one in and you keep going that way and finally you get your powder in there and you know where to place those shots. Some rooms you have to place the shots higher than others. The main thing those days, people wanted lump coal, they didn't want slack like they use today, and you had to be careful with your shots so you didn't blow the mine up. You get too much powder or not enough, so I hired a fellow and his son and he said they were good miners so I had them work with a couple of other fellows that were good shooters so they wanted to go together and do their own shooting. So I didn't go near it for a day or two. I watched them and they did pretty good. And I think it was on a Saturday, we always worked Saturdays same as every other day except Sunday, that was the only day we didn't work, and they were down there in this one territory by themselves and it was shooting time. Everybody leaves you know at a certain time, you got to get out of there and thank God they did because it blew every door off we had there and most timbers out. It blew a chunk of coal out as big as my refrigerator and went down about 100 feet in the entry and everything that was in its way it blew out, we were cleaning it up for about two days.

Q: Did you have miner's papers?

A: Oh yeah, I had miner's papers at that time. That was after I'd worked in the mines here and was injured. And then I took the job with the sheriff because I was killing myself working.

Q: Before we get to your job with the sheriff though, before we leave the mine, how did you get your papers? Can you remember? Describe it for me.

A: Yeah. At that time, to get your papers you had to be able to answer certain questions. How much powder you put in to a certain shot. How deep the shot should be. What you use to tamp the hole with, which a lot of people would use this fine ground up coal to put in there.

Q: Ground up what?

A: No, from shooting, loading you know. There was always a lot of waste coal there you know. And that's strictly against the law because it can cause an explosion. And I guess it's more serious now than it was then. So, anyway, I was well trained on that and we always had plenty of clay and this clay would fill the dummies up. And there was certain kinds of paper you could use at that time and you couldn't use every kind.

Q: What kind did you use?
A: Well, it was a shot firer’s paper and I think it was manufactured by DuPont and there was a little store in Chesterfield where we bought the powder and the paper.

Q: Do you remember taking the exam?

A: Yes. I took the examination.

Q: Where?

A: At Carlinville. And the questions they asked me, which I have proof by affidavit, about the time I worked with a practical coal miner at the face, and that had to be four years. You couldn’t get your papers then unless you served four years apprenticeship. Those four years were very valuable to me because the fellow that was the boss at that time was a good friend of mine and whenever he needed extra help, people didn’t show up for work, he’d come get me and I never did turn him down. I learned to timber, to lay track, to drill, and all these different things that I never would have learned otherwise. And also, another thing they were very strict about on the examination was the safety qualification of your ability to be able to set timbers and test the roof and how to test it. They allowed us to test the roofs in those days with a pick. You had a pick with the handle well set in the pick, you can take that and bounce it against the ceiling and you can tell if there is anything loose in there. You can tell it by the sound of it or the feel of it.

Q: You bounced the handle on the timbers?

A: And let’s see what else. Shooting of course. The measurement of the hole, what you was trying to get out of there, how much powder you could use, if you used more powder than you should, you was subject to being tried in court, which of course is out there, they’re just beginning to realize that now.

Q: Where in Carlinville did you take your test?

A: At the courthouse if I remember right. I remember it was in the basement of the courthouse.

Q: Was this an oral examination?

A: Yes, oral. It was all oral. Of course they had, I guess what you’d call a secretary and wrote everything down, the questions and the answers and then of course you had to sign your name to it.

Q: Did you go in by yourself to take the exam?

A: Oh yes. You had to be able to answer these questions or you wasn’t qualified to be a miner.

Q: So you were the only one at the time being questioned?

A: Oh yes. There was an examiner there, and this secretary or stenographer, and another fellow who I guess was the representative from the Coal Operators Association.
Q: So there were two men plus a stenographer?

A: Yes. And then he would notify, you know, oh, and another thing, you had to bring a certified statement from the company when you started work at the face, to get your papers.

Q: Were you an apprentice to an older man when you started working?

A: No. I was with a brother of mine. As soon as the four years was up, I took the test. I had three brothers, they didn’t go to school very much, but they took their courses in mining and they received their certificates for mining and for mine management and for superintendents and each one of the three held those jobs until the day that they died. Bill, he was only two years older than me, which was 38 years old, and he worked for the Standard Oil Company in Carlinville and he’s the one that helped me get started in this mine. So he usually did such an excellent job there, there’s this fellow from Gillespie here who was the assistant to the head man of these four mines here in and around Gillespie and he took Bill to West Virginia with him. He was superintendent of a mine at, names on my tongue but I can’t recall.

Q: That’s okay. We can get it some other time.

A: Well anyway, that was the gaseous mine, supposed to be the gaseous mine in the entire United States and the day my wife and I went to visit my brother and his wife, he took me down to the mine and it was nonunion there in West Virginia. And he had three guards over him, evidently they killed someone over there, shoot ’em, and we passed one crew after another when we drove over to that place that had been caught with union cards on them and they were sentenced to so many days or years on the road with chains on their legs and big iron balls tied to those chains and riflemen on each end of that road where they were working.

Q: How did he feel as a union person working for a company that was breaking union?

A: Well, anyway there was person who was a United States Senator, I believe he was from Ohio, and I’m not positive what his name was that actually owned those mines, several of them. So Bill told him that he thought his neck of the operation with those nonunion miners was a disgrace to civilization and he said, “One coal miner from Illinois that belongs to the union can do more work, good work, than three of your scabs here.” And he didn’t like that statement Bill said. So Bill stuck with it and he saw that Bill was a good Bible man, but he was in charge of eight mines before he died.

Q: But were they all nonunion?

A: All nonunion. There wasn’t any union then.

Q: About what year is this, Frank?

A: Well, let me see, Bill was 38 years old when he died.

Q: He was 38 when he died?
A: Yes and he was two years older than me and I’ll be 82 first of May now, so he’d be 84. So what would that be? 38 from 84, that’d be 42, 1942 I guess, wouldn’t it? That’s when he died over there. That must have been it because he was a little older than two years. Tomorrow would be his birthday. He’s the only one in the family I remember what day is their birthday, 11th of March.

Q: To get back to Illinois, why did you close your mine?

A: Because the whole family raised so much hell with me. They thought I was going to kill myself. I wanted to get that debt paid off, of which I did. And then the circuit judge of this district here and Truman Snell, who was a lawyer, and Jim Murphy, who was a lawyer, and an ex-sheriff Elmo Etter, they came out to the mine and they talked to me and I told them, “No I was going to stay at the mine.” And they said no we want you to come in here and be chief deputy. They elected a fellow, John Russell, he was a prince of a fellow but he was awful scared all the time. And so they wanted me to take that job and I talked to Grace and she didn’t know which was the worst, the mine or being the sheriff. She said, “You just suit yourself.” And then John, he came out there the next day.

Q: This is John Russell?

A: Yes. He was going to take office the first Monday in December. So I told him that I didn’t want to do it. So he said, “You can be the boss.” They pay the sheriff $2500 a year and they pay the chief deputy $1800 and of course the difference in the money was terrible. And so anyway, I knew if I stayed on that job and worked like I did that I would kill myself. I lost either 60 pounds in 50 days or 50 pounds in 60 days, I don’t remember.

Q: This is when you were mining?

A: Yes. But anyway, I had two buyers for the mine and I sold the mine to a fellow who didn’t know anything. So I come out as deputy sheriff...

Q: What did you sell it for? Do you remember?

A: Yes, I sold it for, let’s see...

Q: You bought it for $3800?

A: Yes, and I think I sold it for $4200 I believe it was. But anyway, I had a cow at that time too, so I threw the cow in with the mine.

Q: So Mr. Russell at this time was the sheriff? Is that correct?

A: Yes he was the sheriff.

Q: And you went in planning to be his deputy but with the understanding that you could run the show?

A: Yes. That’s right. Which we did. We did a good job of it. John was a good fellow to work for, too. Whatever we did was all right with him because he knew that he wasn’t sheriff quality. He was too darned scared. He’d order about 10 men to protect him when he’d pick up one guy.
Q: I want to come back again to get some of your experiences as sheriff but today I’d like to have you try to set the stage for me of events leading into the so called miners’ war. Now when you became deputy, this is about what year? Just approximately, Frank.

A: Well it would have to be, I guess, 1922. I believe that’s the year it was, 1922.

Q: When were you elected sheriff?

A: The first time around for sheriff I was defeated and I went into the produce business, that’s neither here nor there for what you are interested in, just skip that.

Q: I’ll come back to that sometime. You were elected sheriff in what year?

A: I was elected sheriff in 1928, no, I ran for sheriff the first time in 1922, no I went in there in 1922 as deputy. I ran for sheriff in 1926 and was defeated. In 1930 I ran for sheriff and was elected by a big majority. And during that time, John L. Lewis was a great man in my estimation but he ruled with an iron hand. Whatever John L. said, he had a group around him, Tony Boyle and that gang that would do anything he told them to do and that’s the kind of people he liked to have work for him. But of course, he never did, at any time, ask me to write a phony decision in favor of the miners. He said, “Comply with the contract where we are concerned or the company is concerned. Pay no attention to them or me or anyone else.” Made it pretty easy to work for someone like that.

Q: Now you’re speaking of your life later, though.

A: Yes.

Q: I’m trying to keep you in 1930.

A: So I can’t tell you the exact date. I took office the first Monday in December.

Q: That’s close enough. Was there dissention building up here in Gillespie at that time in the miners’ union?

A: Yes and they had a meeting here at Gillespie and the miners were opposed to that 8 hour, $8 a day wage, and John L. Lewis was for it. And he said that with the scab fields throughout the United States it was impossible for this company to operate their mines and pay that wage, so they had a meeting here at Gillespie and people from all around here came and it was a terrific meeting. Several drunks were there and they just raised particular hell. We had to put them in jail to keep order.

Q: About how many people were at this meeting?

A: Oh I’d say around 2,500 to 3,000.

Q: That’s quite a bit. That almost equals the population of the town?

A: No, at one time we was about 8,000 here in Gillespie. At that meeting they wanted to have a vote on whether to accept this here 8 hours and $8 a day, so they did have a vote and up there in Springfield is a fellow, they called him Fox Hughes
was his name, and when the men voted, the vote came in so strong for the 8 hours and $8...

Q: What you’re saying is, they voted the contract down? The men did, the rank and file?

A: Yes. Anyway, Fox Hughes is supposed to have stolen those ballots and they took them over and tore them up and then there was a big meeting down at Benld.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Q: Frank would you tell me a little more about this Gillespie meeting that you mentioned? When did that take place?

A: Well, that took place when the recommendation was made that they work for $6 and something, I don’t remember the pennies, for 8 hours by John L. Lewis. So the meeting they had in Gillespie was in protest to this here recommendation of John L. Lewis. And there was quite a few people in the county from different parts of the county and several of them here with ulterior motives and a lot of them was here for a real genuine union motives. I think Pat Ansboury had ulterior motives and I think that Gerry Allard had genuine, honest to God, true unionism.

Q: Did you attend this meeting?

A: I sure did and all my deputies did too. We expected more hell than what we encountered.

Q: How big a force did law and order take for that meeting?

A: Oh about six of us I guess.

Q: Did you arrive with your guns strapped on?

A: Oh we always carried our guns. It wasn’t on account of the unionism though. It was because of some bad guys that was in Benld around those days. It was a rough, tough, southern place.

Q: What all took place at this meeting that you watched?

A: Well, the main topic was to whether the men wanted to work for $6 or strike against this contract that they had for $6 a day, $6 something, whatever it was, refused to give them the chance to vote whether it would be an 8 hour day and $8 a day. So anyway the men overwhelmingly, everyone I talked to was for that 8 hour day and $8 pay.

Q: How many people did you get to lock up that night?

A: Oh I think it was six or seven at the most. It wasn’t them, it was the booze talking. They wasn’t there with malice, they was trying to force their influence on the other fellows. So anyway, we got by fine with that meeting. And then they have the votes you know, give them the right to vote, and Fox Hughes stole the ballot box and God knows what was in there. But people that was supposed to know said it was overwhelmingly against that $6 day.
Q: Do you remember after they stole the ballot box, they decided to organize a march to the southern part of Illinois.

A: Yes. And that’s when the Benld meeting and that was the main subject, about getting miners together all over the state of Illinois, not only the south. But there wasn’t any mines in the north at that time compared with what used to be up there. I think there was a mine at Virden, the Dowell mine was shut down, and Virden at one time had seven mines working there, not all big mines, but they were big for that day and age.

Q: You were involved in events leading up to the March at Mulkeytown. Will you tell me about those?

A: Oh yes definitely. Well, when they sort of picked the March to Mulkeytown, I called Browning Robinson, who is the sheriff down there, and told him, “These men would like to come down there and I can give you my word of honor and guarantee that there’ll be no guns and no drunks or no booze in this group that’s coming down.” He said, “You tell them to stay away from here or we’re going to kill every son-of-a-bitching one of them that comes down here.”

Q: You were speaking to him as a fellow sheriff?

A: Yeah, that sheriff down there.

Q: And you were sheriff here?

A: Yes, I was sheriff here, too. So he was being governed lock, stock and barrel by the coal companies down there, I knew that for sure because different members of the coal company told me that he’d been in the office when they were there talking with the owners of those coal companies. So he surely had some interest there or he wouldn’t have been so determined. Anyway Bill Brown...

Q: Who is Bill Brown?

A: He was mayor of Gillespie. And, let’s see, I think Gerry Allard... Anyway, there was a carload of them and they came to Carlinville to see me and talk with me about going down there. I wasn’t at the jail, I was at the golf course playing golf and they came out there. I told them about the conversation with Browning Robinson and the truth of the matter is, I called him first, you know, about these people wanting to come down there, which I thought was the decent thing to do, so when he talked the way he did, why Browning and his group were anxious to know what had transpired. I told him, “It’s none of my business, but I think you’re making a hell of a mistake. They’re are killers down there and if you go there, they’re going to kill somebody.”

Q: You told?

A: I told Bill Brown and the committee. I said, “Why don’t you send a couple of carloads of fellows down there and see what the people think of it and find out what you’re going to run into?” So anyway, they paid no attention to that recommendation and they organized themselves, there’s all different estimations made as to how big this March was, it was tremendous, and the thing was they had kids there with rifles and shotguns and stuff, they was either doped up or drunk, 14, 15, 16 years old,
scattered along that road and Big Moody [Walter L. Moody], he led them ride right into Mulkeytown. And then when they got shot my nephew got shot, John Williams, and they wouldn’t even allow his father to pick him up, they threatened to kill him too. They shot him in the side of the head.

Q: What did the state police say to him when his father tried to pick him up?

A: Oh, it was those kids there, you know.

Q: Tell me.

A: If I remember the words correctly, I may get them misplaced a little bit. “You old son-of-a-bitch, don’t you touch him or we’ll blow your head off too.” His own father. So they got turned around and they went over to DuQuoin and they couldn’t get one doctor to look at that kid. He was a man of course. They had to drive all the way from over there to Litchfield with him bleeding, no medical care or anything, with that bullet in his head. And Doc Siler is a hell of a good friend of mine and he took care of him. My gosh, and I told them at the hospital that I’d pay the bill whatever it was, which I did. When the union found it out, they sent me a check for the amount that I paid, the leaders of the Progressive Miners. Which I thought was pretty good of them. They meant right you know, they wanted to protect their men. And I believe there was six of them that got hurt, you know.

Q: You said your nephew’s name was Lefty, was that his nickname?

A: Lefty Williams, he died of cancer about two years ago.

Q: Were you here when the miners congregated to begin the March?

A: Oh yes, definitely.

Q: Can you describe that scene for me?

A: Well, over there at Kincaid, that was a stronghold of Progressive Miner sentiment, and they loaded up over there.

Q: Were you there?

A: No I wasn’t there. We went over there one night and the militia was in Taylorville. I’ll be damned if they didn’t stick his bayonet in my hind end and told us to get the hell out of town.

Q: Isn’t Kincaid in your county?

A: No. That’s over there in Christian County and they was tough. I don’t remember whether Grace was along, but I had two or three deputies with me and I was glad to get out of there. We got out in a hurry. And that added more fuel to the fire.

Q: Were you unusual as a sheriff in this part of the country to support the Progressives? Were most of the other sheriffs on the United Mine Workers side?

A: Oh yeah. Over there in Montgomery County I’m pretty sure their sheriff was with United Mine Workers. They didn’t have so many mines as what we had.
Q: Were the Progressive Miners after they got formed, safe here in your county?

A: Well that was one big mistake that we allowed to happen. They gathered here by the thousands. One time it was estimated that we had about 14,000 surplus people here in this town and Benld and some radical business going on. I can’t describe all the details because it’s not just the facts aren’t as clear as they could be in my mind but down there in Benld there was a woman, she was an anarchist, I guess. I believe her name was [Agnes Burns Wieck] Wicks. She came from Staunton. She came from Belleville? Good for you. Anyway, she was a bad actor. And there was another woman, I think she came out of Chicago and she just loved this here trouble that we were having, you know. So I told the police in Benld if she showed up to be sure and lock her up. So sure enough, she showed up and they put her in the clink and they gathered to take her away from the police, so they called up right away for help. So Don Peebles, who was a lawyer, and Doctor Bell, who was a doctor at that time, and we was kind of celebrating a little bit, the three of us and Doc [Clarence] Rasor, who was a policeman over there and so anyway, we went down to Benld and oh, there was a big gathering in front of the jail there, and there was one great big woman there and she had two or three sons, and she was taking the lead in all this stuff. And she called me all the names and everything and I gave her a bust and a push and a kick in the hind end. I don’t know what I called her but the one that was in front, I said, “I’m going to shoot every god damned one of you.” They jumped over fences and run down the road to the street. In ten minutes time, everything was clear. I wish you could hear Don Peebles, he exaggerates a little bit on that. He just died recently and he had a big write-up in the Chicago Tribune as one of the best lawyers they had in Chicago. I don’t know whether you saw that. He used to love to tell that story. He said he was so God damned scared he couldn’t hardly sit [unintelligible]. Those were balmy days, I tell you, couldn’t show a yellow streak.

Q: After Mulkeytown there was a move to go to another county in Southern Illinois, Coulterville. And this time the miners said they would go down with guns in an armed camp. It seems to me that you told me once that you went down?

A: Yes. Claude Pearcy, I can remember that real well. That was a dangerous night we come down there and getting the hell shot out of us. We went into DuQuoin, well what happened after the shooting down there, a lot of those women came crying for help. They didn’t know where their husbands were, killed or what happened.

Q: You mean after Mulkeytown?

A: When they were ambushed in Mulkeytown, right. And this was after that. And we went down there. This group of miners, they rented seven acres or nine acres, or eleven acres of land and they organized a group of them. There were three sheriffs of counties that were against Progressive. They gathered in the hotel at DuQuoin and when we got there, there wasn’t anybody on the streets at all. And we went into the hotel and there was a great big sheriff there by the name of Knotts and he had two .45 pistols on him. He was reading the riot act to me, and he was so damn stupid he didn’t even know yes or no, and he said, “Those people want to work for $6 a day, that’s their business and by God, I worked for $8 a month when I was younger.” And Johnny Koval, a little devil, he said, “I guess that’s all you was worth.” That sheriff pulled his two guns and I said, “Johnny shut up.” I knew that was a green light for war, right there. We was going to get killed or have to kill three sheriffs. They had
four airplanes hired and I don’t know how much dynamite and powder and they were going to go raid and blow the place out of existence the next day.

Q: You mean where the miners were camped?

A: Yes. And I tried to argue with them that they’d paid their rent on that and this fellow rented it and they didn’t give a damn. They were going to run them out. So anyway we came out of the sheriff’s office there and you should have seen the streets, they’re jammed. There was shotguns, rifles, pick handles, picks, hoes, and rakes and every damned kind of tool they could get. We had a machine gun in the back of the car and we wished to Christ we didn’t have it. If they’d caught us with that we would have been killed. So they didn’t allow us to go out where they was at and I told the fellows what happened there. Some of them had shotguns but no shells.

Q: You went out to the miners’ camp?

A: Yes. We went out, a bunch of us, five of us, and so in those days I couldn’t make a very good speech, but I was so damned scared and cold I was shivering to beat hell. I got up on a truck and I told them what they was up against and I said, “Those bloodthirsty slave herders are going to sure as hell bomb you because they mean business and if you stay here that’s what you’re going to get and if you stay here you’re going to be a corpse and accomplish nothing. Let’s get out of here.” They almost unanimously hollered, “Frank please stay here with us until we get out of here.”

Q: Unanimous vote for Frank.

A: Yeah. And so I said, “Okay, we’ll stay.” So when we got to this here junction that leads to Mulkeytown, I don’t know if you’ve ever been down there, know where it’s at.

Q: Now this is coming back from Coulterville?

A: Yeah. So anyway when they got there, oh, there was I guess 400-500, 600, maybe 1,000 of them there with guns and all that. There was two cars back of me and all the rest of them was in the front and then they started shooting up in the air. They didn’t at us. Those two cars back of me damn near ran over us getting out. They was in a hurry to get out. They didn’t want them to shoot us. They didn’t have time to get drunk or we would have got shot I guess. But that was the first time I ever went through that kind of experience. I can still remember what I was doing.

Q: How could they dare, the sheriff’s forces shooting at another sheriff?

A: Down there? Oh they were the boss. They didn’t give a damn what the courts said or anybody else said. They had the protection of Moody who was a big ham of a policeman if there ever was one.

Q: He was head of the state police?

A: Yes. He controlled the state police. And they were in with him, the sheriffs, you know. I guess if we hadn’t gone down there and got them out of there, they’ve have
been slaughtered just like in war. But it was the most pitiful thing, some of the poor devils here had old rusty guns and no shells for it.

Q: These are the miners in the encampment?

A: It was an awful way to organize. Then they tried to say that the miners that came down there was all drunk, when the Mulkeytown Massacre was on. There wasn’t a man had a drink that I heard. I can vouch for that because everyone had orders. I think the last time I told you about it, my brother was in that march down there. He’s the one I worked with in the mine. Of course, you had to go if you lived in Wilsonville or Benld.

Q: Why?

A: Because they was against this thing and wanted to organize their own union. John L. Lewis wasn’t going to lead them, they were going to lead themselves.

Q: You mean the people were under pressure to go on the march?

A: Oh God yes. Use pressure, I should say they did. Sometimes they’d load them up in trucks and then the militia and those guys protecting those roads against them coming in there, they’d search the trucks. And when they started shooting these fellows and some of them abandoned their cars and some of them went down the road aways and turned around. My brother and his son-in-law and a couple of other fellows that was in the car, they found a spot where they could turn around, and there was about 100 they said on their car, on the running boards, on the hood, on top of the car and all, and my brother, he was trying to be a big hero and he said, “You dirty cowards, why don’t you get off my car and get your own car, not break our car?” And he was as scared as any of those guys. But anyway they come out of there all right.

Q: Did you see them leave Gillespie to go on the march?

A: No, I didn’t come over here that night.

Q: You were in Carlinville?

A: Yes, but after that March, those women that came down to the house. Oh, some of them was carrying on terrible, almost hysterical. They thought the men had all been killed from the reports that they got. And that was getting dark, I’d say around 9 or 10 o’clock before we got the report at that time.

Q: What report did you get?

A: Well, they stopped them and shot the hell out of them. That was the report we got. Of course, I couldn’t get ahold of that sheriff to find out. But I did meet him later down at the St. Nick Hotel in Springfield in the barroom. He had three or four of those gunmen with him that he always had with him. When I saw it was him I had four guys with me too and they were damn good ones. There was Johnny Koval, and Earl Fanning who was a banker, and Bill Homer who was a deputy, and Doc Razor [Clarence Rasor] who was chief of police at Carlinville. I went up to that Browning Robinson and called him every name and grabbed him by the neck and shook him. Those four guys that he had with him, they stationed around, and then the
bartenders and everyone crawled under a table or back of the bar to get out of the way of the shooting and then these four guys I had with me all pulled their pistols and looked like Burr, shooting was going to happen. But anyway, we got out of there. There was a detective there in Springfield and he heard about what was going on over there so he come down and asked me to get the hell out of there. He said, “You’re going to be killed here, Frank. You don’t want to be killed. I don’t want to see you get killed. Those guys are liable to kill anybody.” So we took his advice and we got out of there.

Q: You sound like Matt Dillon.

A: It was just about as bad, I’ll say. It was terrific. I always had confidence in those fellows with me. Johnny Koval’s only about this high. He’s still living. The rest of them are all dead. We were talking about it the other day.

Q: You were saying earlier that there were about 14,000 people that came into this town. Why?

A: Because they were sympathetic to the Progressive Miners movement and if they were caught in some of these other counties they were subject to being killed, shot or beaten to death, or something. So they knew that they were safe in this county and they all behaved like gentlemen. And I told them they could do whatever they wanted to but we didn’t want any trouble. I think we had 16 people in this town that was listed as enemies of the Progressive Miners and I don’t remember all of their names. They had a list there of the ones no one should trust. Those fellows couldn’t even come to town. They were scared to come to town, except three or four of them. When they come up, they were prepared for battle. And I went to their homes and asked them if they would cut that out because the town was overwhelmingly Progressive and they were going to get themselves killed, and then it would be me and some of the others too. Which they would have if they’d have kept coming up. So we prevented a fight.

Q: Did they join the Progressives then?

A: Well they had to, to keep their jobs.

Q: You sound like Browning Robinson on the opposite side.

A: Well, I didn’t have anything to do with that. If they didn’t want to work, that was their business. But if they had company. The first one to sign up, I’m sorry to say, was a brother of mine who was a superintendent of the mine there at Nokomis, John Fries. He told me that he didn’t want to do it but the boss put the heat on him and he told the boss their word was no good. There was Barney Flaherty, Pat Ansboury and... Gerry Allard wasn’t over there on that one. Anyway, he was president for a while.

Q: When you say your brother signed up, with which union?

A: He was a United Mine Worker but he was forced by the coal company to accept a contract from the Progressive Miners, and that’s what he did. And there he was, between hell and high water. Another brother of mine who was 100% Progressive, Dave was his name, we called him Divvy, he was working for John and he caused
him more damn hell than anybody under the sun. So I had a gang fight in my own family and it wasn’t very pleasant situation to be in.

Q: You mean because some of them were United and some were Progressive?

A: Yes. It was like the old Civil War, brothers, you know, killing each other, some for the South and some for the North. That’s the way it was around here.

Q: How did the coal companies get your brother to sign with the Progressives?

A: Because Barney Flaherty and Pan Ansboury, I think there was five of them, told them that they would live up to all conditions and everything that the rest of them had and they’d see that the men worked jobs there. He told the boss, “That’s a damn lie, you know damn well they won’t do that.” Barney Flaherty spoke up and said, “Johnny, you know me better than that.” And he said, “You’re the biggest lying Irish son-of-a-bitch that I ever knew.” So anyway, they signed up and he was a sick man for a while. It went until the Depression came on the mine. It lasted quite a while.

Q: You mean it lasted through up until the ‘40s that that contract stood?

A: Yes. Those was rough days.

Q: Did the miners make your job as sheriff rougher?

A: I don’t know whether they did or not. Anyway them seemed to try to make it better for me, you know, because there was a lot of people, sensible people involved. Pat Ansboury, he was a phony if there ever was one, in my books. Gerry Allard, I think from the bottom of his heart he was a friend of labor.

Q: And how about your friend Jack Battuello?

A: Oh, Christ, he was one of the outstanding leaders of that war. He liked it, but he didn’t go down there and parade with them either.

Q: Oh yes, he did.

A: What?

Q: He went to Mulkeytown.

A: You sure of that? I don’t believe he did.

Q: And Coulterville.

A: If he did, I don’t know about it. I don’t remember seeing him. At Coulterville anyway.

Q: You just said he liked it.

A: Oh yeah, he did.

Q: I still have the feeling even though you’re talking a little law and order type today that you were an unusual sheriff of all these sheriffs of the mine war counties.
A: Well none of them stood up for what they stood for. They was one way on time and whatever group they talked to, that’s who they was for. They’d always tell me they’d go along with me, but they didn’t. There wasn’t a damn one of them that did. And those poor devils in some of those counties, it wasn’t safe to walk down the street. You’d get beat up or shot or something.

Q: Were they safe here?

A: Yes, as long as they behaved themselves. But I’ll tell you what they did and this has got nothing to do with what we’re talking about now. But there was a gang that came in here from all over the United States and they put out circulars that they demanded immediate overthrow of this government by bloody revolution. And I don’t like to say this because I like Jack Battuello, I’d like to skip that if you don’t mind.

Q: Just tell me without naming names about this program.

A: But anyway, there was 18 of them that we arrested and I told Bill Brown that was going to come over and stop the meeting, I said to him, “Why did you allow them to say they were going to have a meeting out at the park?” And he said, “Well I believe in freedom of speech.” I said, “I do too but this is demanding overthrow of our own government. As long as I’m sheriff, they’re not going to pull that in this county.” And he said, “Well we’ll see whether they do or not.” So he let them have the park and as soon as they got there we arrested them, all 18. And the next day we took them to court and there were seven lawyers there to defend them and they were from Denver, Colorado, from Chicago, Cleveland, Ohio.

Q: The men were or the lawyers?

A: The lawyers were and the different troublemakers, they were from different places. It was a move to overthrow this government. Jack, I regret to say was pretty much involved.