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Drawing the Personal Narrative into the Landscape of Iowa's Coal History

by Dorothy Schwieder

FROM 1880 to 1930, coal mining ranked as the second major industry in Iowa, second only to agriculture. Beginning in a limited way in the mid-nineteenth century, the Iowa industry reached its peak during World War I when around 18,000 men and boys worked in the mines. Iowa coal provided fuel for the state's many railroads as well as for heating homes and businesses, and provided an energy source for the state's limited number of manufacturing firms. Large mines, known as shipping mines, provided coal for railroads, while small mines, such as Number 30 near Centerville, provided fuel for area residents.

Edith Gallo Widmer Blake (the author of the preceding memoir) was born in 1910 in the mining camp known as Number 30. She spent her formative years in an environment created by the coal industry. The daughter of a first-generation Italian-American miner, Blake would later move with her parents and six siblings to a twelve-acre farm. There her father combined the occupations of mining and farming, a practice not uncommon among coal min-

ers, and one that provided greater economic security for the family. This coupling of occupations was made possible because of the seasonal nature of most Iowa's mines. Because much of Iowa's coal was used for heating purposes, mines closed down during warmer weather, often remaining closed for four or five months. Blake's remembrances of her growing-up years both in a coal camp and on a nearby farm, provide a warm, loving testimony to her parents, her Italian culture, and the area she called home.

Although surrounded by other Italian-Americans, Blake experienced some cultural diversity in Number 30 Coal Camp. Iowa coal communities included people born in the British Isles as well as Sweden and Germany, many who arrived before 1900. Most immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, including people from Italy, Croatia, and Russia, began coming to Iowa mostly after 1900. Mining populations also included large numbers of native-born people, particularly from Illinois and Missouri. From 1880 on, Iowa's mining industry included a growing number of African-Americans.

In most camps, people of different nationalities and races lived side by side with few ethnic or racial difficulties.

In a myriad of ways, Blake's early life typified the lives of other Italian-Americans. Blake was born at home, surrounded by relatives and friends and perhaps attended by a midwife. Italian-American women usually preferred a midwife, even though physicians were present in most camps. In this respect the women maintained an Italian tradition in which women seldom went into a hospital. Blake's family also carried on other ethnic traditions such as making wine and maintaining close kinship ties.

BLAKE'S CHILDHOOD remembrances personalize the day-to-day activities in an Iowa coal camp. The camps themselves were often small, containing around fifty houses, much like Number 30 where Blake was born. At each camp the coal operator constructed houses, typically consisting of four rooms. Operators determined rent based on two dollars per room. In other words, a four-room house rented

for eight dollars. Houses built before the 1920s had no electricity and no indoor plumbing. Each was typically placed on four blocks or stones. Mining families complained frequently that houses were flimsily built and that the company did not provide maintenance.

Pictures of camps reveal rather barren, bleak images with houses placed close together and little or no room for lawns or other landscaping. Since most coal seams were mined out within ten years, operators viewed the camps as temporary and therefore made little effort to upgrade, maintain, or beautify them.

Blake referred to taking in boarders, a practice common

among most coal-mining families, both foreign- and native-born. Low wages and seasonal layoffs necessitated the practice. In 1914, for example, studies in three coal-mining communities show that miners averaged only \$420 a year. Moreover, with mines often closed at least four months each year, there were periods without mining income. This meant many coal miners' wives searched for ways to earn additional money; some women sold garden produce or dairy products, but the majority took in boarders. Each woman usually received two dollars per week from each boarder and provided the boarder with a bed, food, and laundry service. Since many women had anywhere from

two to six boarders, this money was often crucial to the family's survival.

LIFE IN IOWA'S coal camps, although remembered fondly by Blake, was often isolated and lacking in social institutions. Coal camps rarely contained high schools; churches were usually non-existent. Sometimes priests from neighboring communities held mass in the camps, but this practice was sporadic at best. Like Number 30, camps typically included a company store, a pool hall, and a miners' hall. Sometimes the latter was on the second floor of the company store.

Blake's account also touches on



Hocking 1st Aid Team.
Winners of Iowa St. Meet, June, 1915.

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the dangers involved in coal mining, considered the most dangerous occupation nationwide in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Iowa, men were injured or killed most often by falling slate but also from runaway coal cars and misplaced blasting powder shots. Accidents also resulted from the unevenness of the coal seam. According to one mining engineer, the coal seams "roll and pitch to such a degree" that the average haulageways resemble "a roller coaster speedway." Miners therefore found it hard to keep coal cars under control, and a runaway car meant great danger to the men, boys, and mules in the mine. Blake's remembrances make clear that accidents

Hocking's mine rescue team and mock "victim" pose with a sizable trophy won in a 1915 state contest for coal miners. Hocking, Iowa, was a large coal camp of 1,500, located three miles from Albia in Monroe County. Ironically, the team's success underscores the dangers and tragedies common to turn-of-the-century coal miners. Concerned with safety, the United Mine Workers and coal operators trained groups of miners in coal camps as on-site rescue teams. Yearly contests sponsored by the union became major events on state, regional, and even international levels, and were often set on Miners' Day (April 1) or Labor Day. Competing teams were given a situation (for example, "slate has fallen on this miner and broken his back"), and were judged on their speed and care in rescuing the "injured" miner.

could result from human error.

Blake's account did not touch on discrimination experienced by Italian-Americans, but other Iowans have. Lola Nizzi, born and raised in an Iowa coal camp, remembered that her family had three strikes against them: they were Italian, Catholic, and coal miners. In effect, Nizzi pointed to discrimination stemming from three factors: nationality, religion, and occupation. Nationwide, xenophobia reached its peak shortly after World War I, and the fear or hatred of foreigners extended into the 1920s. This period coincided with the immigration of many Italian-Americans into Iowa.

As Blake indicates, however, her life in an Italian-American family had many wonderful compensations, regardless of drawbacks associated with coal mining. Blake's positive feelings have been reinforced by the accounts of other Italian-American women who grew up in Iowa in the teens and twenties. While hard work and economic deprivation were often facts of life, kinship and ethnic solidarity provided a loving environment and a strong buffer from outside influences. As Blake has written, families enjoyed many social activities both inside and outside the home. Families attended dances at the miners' hall, participated in school functions, and anticipated friends and relatives coming to visit on "company day" each Sunday. On a more personal level, Blake recalls sharing her love of music with her family.

THE FAMILY'S MOVE from Number 30 to their own home on a nearby farm brought a major change for the Gallos, although much of their lives still revolved around the coal industry. Moving from a home with four rooms to one with eight had to provide greater comfort and privacy for all family mem-

bers. Once there, Blake's life was probably not much different from that of other farm children as she helped with regular farm chores such as gardening and butchering.

In the late 1920s, Mine Number 30 closed down, forcing many families to relocate. This experience was repeated many times across central and southern Iowa as the demand for Iowa coal—particularly by railroads—continued to diminish. Like Blake's relatives and friends, other mining families moved out of state, often to industrial cities in the Middle West and Northeast. Some families purchased their homes in the coal camps, and then commuted to work in nearby cities like Centerville or Des Moines. For many Italian-Americans, coal mining had been a two-generation occupation.

There is a tendency to emphasize the hardships experienced in coal camps. Yet as Blake's memoirs imply, former residents also remember the positive experiences. In 1978, in an oral history project, six second-generation Italian-American women recalled what life was like in various Iowa coal camps for themselves and their mothers (all born in Italy). After reading the research paper based on the interviews, one woman responded that although the paper accurately covered the details of the women's lives, their experiences had been portrayed too negatively. "Our mothers were happy," Mary Battani Sertich explained, noting that even though the first-generation women worked excessively hard, they had found great pleasure in caring for their families and viewed their lives in America as positive. Blake's views seem to parallel that experience. Among the many harsh realities, life for the Gallo family had many happy, even joyous times. Blake's warm, positive remembrances stand as testimony to that fact. □