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All You Knew: Twentieth Century
Southern Appalachian Coal Miners and
their Experience with Death and Danger

Steven M. Malachowski 2978994
University of Puget Sound, smalachowski@pugetsound.edu

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**All You Knew: Twentieth Century Southern Appalachian Coal Miners and their
Experience with Death and Danger**

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Steven Michael Malachowski

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After an accident in 1937 in an Eastern Kentucky coal mining community called Barthell, Donald Whalen recounted how Lewis, a fellow coal miner, met his end during a simple daily routine. This daily routine involved placing one of several volatile powdered explosives designed to help collapse a vulnerable coal wall weighing thousands of pounds:

Lewis drilled his place and he put his powder in...he was gonna' shove it back in the hole but he happened to hit that edge of that hole and there was a spark comin' off from it... and Jonce [the foreman] said he was pretty close to the man when it happen...he said he heard him holler because he knew what was gonna' happen... that powder blew off that bar and it went straight through his mouth...Jonce said that was the last time they knew anybody that went on Thanksgiving day.¹

Only the day before, Lewis unwittingly created the instrument of his own destruction when he made the incendiary powder in preparation for his evening work in his coal room.

Southern Appalachian coal miners experienced nearly constant threats to their lives during daily mining practice which threatened to crush hands, maim limbs, or eviscerate them entirely. These dangers included the possibility of explosions which might result in a miner's death such as Lewis'. Coal miners and foreman must have believed explosions were significant because Barthell never opened its shaft again on Thanksgiving Day following the accident in 1937. In his statistical work on fatalities in West Virginia coal mines, Rakes argued that despite the infrequency of explosion compared to other accidents, high annual death tolls averaged from explosions West Virginian coal mines meant most miners knew a friend or family member who perished from an explosion.² In addition, miners also experienced a wide range of subtle underground threats or indirect dangers. Smith, in her aptly titled book, *Digging Our Own*

¹ Donald Whalen, interview by Kim McBride, January 28, 1992, Barthell Coal Company Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

² Paul H. Rakes. "West Virginia Coal Mine Fatalities: The Subculture of Danger and a Statistical Overview of Pre-Enforcement Era," *West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 6. Accessed March 1, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264785>. The average death toll for coal miners in West Virginia calculated to 27 per year.

Graves, argued that the coal miner's struggle with emphysema miner's did not simply express fatalistic views but instead realized common public knowledge for this widespread disease resulted from the coal company's exploitive social control.³ Callan argued that spirituality was the strongest psychological shield for miners to ignore their proximity to death in his book on religion in Kentucky coal fields.⁴ Did the coal miners identify danger as a defining characteristic to their lives and how did their assessment of these dangers reflect their relationship with other miners, foreman, mechanization, labor unions, coal companies, and their job in the mine itself?

Over twenty oral histories from Southern West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and Western Virginia helped answer how the twentieth century Southern Appalachian miner's viewed their world fraught with constant dangers. Instead of analyzing these coal miners' interviews through a chronological lens, I decided to take a non-chronological approach because coal miner's memories did not reflect patterns of continuity or discontinuity. Instead, coal miners expressed their memories through themes which is reflected in the structure of this research project. Initially, I will explain the significance of studying Southern Appalachian miners associated with danger as opposed to the general twentieth century American miner in other regions of the United States. Then in an overall two part structure I will first explain how miners recognized the forces which provided both variety and frequency of danger. Second, I build on Callahan's assertions on the importance of spirituality and then investigated the methods miner's employed to mentally and physically persevere through their exceedingly perilous careers. These methods are integrated with the coal miner's experiences to evaluate the impact of danger on their

³ Barbara Ellen Smith. *Digging Our Own Graves: Coal Miners and the Struggle over Black Lung Disease*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987), 211.

⁴ Callahan, Richard J. *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.

relationships with processes, people, and institutions. **Southern Appalachian coal miners experienced nearly constant dangers and threats to their lives underground which helped shape their relationships between other miners and industry controls. Added to coal miners' occupational hazards, the long term emphysemic effects of coal mining and the physical prevalence of coal dust in the coal miner's life created a life defined by danger. Miners reconciled this dehumanizing lifestyle through readily predictable methods, such as spirituality and camaraderie but also seemingly paradoxical methods, including carelessness and mischief underground.**

The Southern Appalachian coal field's history differed from its western United States and British counterparts thus affecting how coal miners came to view their identity and subsequently, their careers. In the nineteenth century, Southern Appalachian natives almost entirely worked in agriculture or farming. At the turn of the twentieth century, counties such as Harlan, Kentucky, transitioned from this farming lifestyle to employment in the coal industry. In Harlan, coal production skyrocketed from 17,000 tons in 1910 to 14.5 million tons by 1928,⁵ while in West Virginia, agricultural occupations dropped from 64.2% in 1870 to 24.3% in 1920 and less than 2% by 1990.⁶ The ramifications of such a powerful transition were two part.

First, coal companies dominated the economy and consequently, employment within the economy. James Shepard from Van Lear remarked on whether miners wished for their sons to follow in their footsteps, "well that's always been the general talk with all coal miners, they tell their sons [not to be a miner], but they all end up goin' to the coal mines... it was the best thing

⁵ Scott., Shaunna L. *Two Sides to Everything: The Cultural Construction of Class Consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) 11.

⁶ Ronald J. Lewis. "Appalachian Restructuring in Historical Perspective: Coal, Culture, and Social Change in West Virginia", *Urban Studies* 30, no. 2 (Spring, 1993): 299. Accessed February 28.

that could happen to you” because “employment was short.”⁷ Coal mining rendered farming irrelevant and altered the occupational inheritance in Southern Appalachia. These Southern Appalachian natives found little employment outside the coal fields. Linda Underwood, the wife of a miner in Caretta, West Virginia claimed “When I was growin’ up I was taught you would grow up, have a family, and you’d probably marry a miner or something.”⁸ Clearly, employment in the mines became not only the preferred occupation for Southern Appalachian peoples but the expected one for their future generations. Howard Whorley laughed about the possibility of saving money to leave the coal fields, “honey they had nowhere to go! It just stacked up on ‘em.”⁹ The rarity of employment outside the coal towns in Southern Appalachia meant coal miners simply had no choice but to face the fear of injury or death underground. Later generations found “if you was raised a miner you became a miner, if you was raised a farmer you drove a mule.”¹⁰ The inability for miners to leave their employment made a dangerous life an inescapable more so than in coal mining regions with more diversified economies.

Second, the transition from farming to coal mining shaped the Southern Appalachian region’s “rural-industrial heritage”¹¹ of coal miners’ identity. The miners views of their work and more specifically the dangers involved in their work came from this unique “sociotechnical system.”¹² This sociotechnical system meant traditional values remained within an entirely new

⁷ 12 James Ward, interview by Glenna Graves, November 18, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁸ Linda C. Underwood, interview by Randall Norris, March 19, 1994, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁹ Howard Worley, interview by Kim McBride, January 28, 1992, Barthell Coal Company Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

¹⁰ Frank Clifton, interview by Glenna Graves, November 5, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

¹¹ Ronald J. Lewis. “Appalachian Restructuring in Historical Perspective,” 300.

¹² Bryan Pfaffenberger. *Mining Communities: Social Approaches to an Industrial Past: The Archaeology and Anthropology of Mining* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 296.

framework from rural sustenance to life in an urban setting defined by the industry within the coal town. Women continued to tend gardens with vegetables outside their company owned houses which provided a physical manifestation of these preserved values within this new environment.¹³ Unquestioning pride in hard work also proved the most relevant long-held Appalachian value to support the coal miner's struggle against the immense dangers in their daily lives. James Shepard argued "anybody in the mines had to work hard," for if "you didn't work you didn't make nothin'." But James also showed personal pride towards hard labor also motivated coal miners. He proudly claimed miners from other Kentucky coal towns told him "everyone they met from Stearns were good, hard, workers"¹⁴ Southern Appalachian miners worked hard and long hours not just to feed their family but out of their familial tradition towards hard work regardless of the circumstances.

"Appalachian Modified Calvinism"

Coal miners in Southern Appalachia held unique spirituality, both transformed in the coal mining era yet time honored in the Appalachian hills from the Christian revivalism in the eighteenth century. Miners continued to express their Appalachian traditions of spirituality towards their dangerous occupation in the coal mines. Appalachian peoples and more specifically, many coal miners themselves, held the idea that individuals garnered a specific purpose towards their lives explained as a part of God's plan. Childers believed he and other miners "[were] preconditioned being born in a mining family...preconditioned in the mines."¹⁵

¹³ Ronald J. Lewis. "Appalachian Restructuring in Historical Perspective," 302. In 1924, West Virginia Coal Association found a majority of coal miners cultivated gardens.

¹⁴ James Shepard, interview by Kim McBride, January 28, 1992, Barthell Coal Company Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

¹⁵ Clifford Childers, interview by Glenna Graves, July 20, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

Callahan called this religious ideal “the Appalachian modified Calvinism” because it suggested the coal miners were predestined to work in the mines their whole life just as Calvinist Christians considered themselves either predestined to salvation or damnation at the beginning of their life.¹⁶ One miner recalled the “school would always talk about the vocation of their parents and they’d always say about the mine, don’t go in the mine” and yet James became a miner just as his father before him. The educational institution struggled to break through this Appalachian spiritual virtue towards a predetermined vocation. Linda Underwood’s husband lost his job in the mines in the 1960’s and became a janitor but she claimed to “still call him a miner.”¹⁷ Linda expressed the “modified Appalachian Calvinism” towards her husband’s identity and believed her husband’s true vocation remained coal mining regardless of his present work. In this context of Southern Appalachian vocational beliefs and an environment dominated by the coal mining industry, coal miners experienced and understood danger as an integral part of their lives.

Crumbling Ceilings and Runaway Rail Cars

Southern Appalachian coal miners experienced constant dangers to themselves or witnessed the consequences of these dangers to other miners from simply doing their daily work under ground. Miners died far more from routine accidents that caused individual deaths than the horrific explosions often depicted in the public media.¹⁸ These accidents ranged from rail car crashes, mining machinery, electric shock, shale falls, and suffocation from heavy coal dust. James Shepard recalled, “All three of ‘em”, speaking about two brothers and their father, “had

¹⁶ Richard J. Callahan. *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2008).

¹⁷ Linda C. Underwood, interview by Randall Norris, March 19, 1994, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

¹⁸ “West Virginia Coal Mine Fatalities”, 1.

eyes put out in the mines”¹⁹ from various unspecified accidents. Another miner, Alfred West’s, father died in 1927, several years after a “lever used to tighten the chain up” on the tow car “loosened” and caused a severe skull fracture after which doctors told him “he’d be lucky to live five years.”²⁰ Coal miners used heavy industrial instruments with very little safety precautions to prevent accidents like those to the Bradley family or West’s father. Donald Whalen recalled a young miner who died after “one of those steel cars...caught him in both legs. “Course it was the sharp side there...practically cut both legs off there was just a little skin” and “we had an awful time getting him out” of the mines.²¹ Rail cars transported loaded coal from the mazy corridors of the underground mine back to the main shaft and if a miner failed to control the car the results were disastrous to those unfortunate enough to remain in its way. In only one decade inside Coalwood’s Consolidation Coal Company’s mine, twelve men were slain from being run over by mine cars.²²

James Ward fell victim to another very common accident that resulted from the process of mining a coal wall; “I’ve been involved in slate falls”, and “you might say I’ve been hit a few times myself.”²³ Shale falls accounted for twenty-seven deaths between 1922 and 1933 in Coalwood’s mine.²⁴ Miners dug out ‘rooms’ held up by surrounding pillars before heavy mechanization was introduced in the 1950’s. Shale and rock often crumbled from the weakened

¹⁹ James Shepard, interview by Kim McBride, January 28, 1992, Barthell Coal Company Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History. The injuries to these two siblings and their father resulted in the eldest son’s permanent exclusion from the coal mine itself. Instead, he worked for the company at the bathhouse and company store. This speaks to the difficulty for Southern Appalachian miners to find work outside the coal mines.

²⁰ Alfred West, interview by Kim McBride, February 20, 1992. Barthell Coal Company Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

²¹ Donald Whalen, interview by Kim McBride, January 28, 1992, Barthell Coal Company Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

²² A History of Coalwood, Caretta and Mine Six, pg 186.

²³ James Ward, interview by Glenna Graves, November 18, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History

²⁴ Alex P. Schust and David R. Goad. *Coalwood: A History of the West Virginia Mining Communities of Coalwood, Caretta, and Six*. (Marceline, MO: Walsworth Publishing Company, 2006), 186.

ceilings crudely held together by the surrounding pillars and bolted roof above.²⁵ Yet another danger to miners came from the deadly combination of electric trolleys and standing water in the mining caverns. Grant said, “This friend of mine flipped the trip up into the trolley wire and had gotten a terrible shock because his feet were in water. And he said, his words were, he could taste copper for a week after that. And also he quit within a week after that. He didn't go back into the mines anymore; he'd gotten such a shock.”²⁶ James Grant's friend quit from his traumatic experience. Miners experienced constant dangers but not everyone managed to suppress their fears and continue with their work throughout their lifetime. Based off of these testimonies and the countless other experiences left unmentioned in this paper, coal miners knew their lives were constantly in peril from the sheer variety danger might take form and to whom it might affect: their sons, relative, friends, and anyone close to them.

Explosions and the Resulting Psychology in the Aftermath

While relatively infrequent in comparison to dangers that stemmed from routine activities underground, explosions affected coal miners in a given county as a collective group and the nature of such a violent accident presented a different psychological challenge altogether. Ernest Wilder described how an explosion not only affected the Bell County mine itself but the other coal mining communities in Bell County's vicinity. In “1942, they call me out of the mines” because “they had an explosion down in Bell County” with “22 men trapped. We was the first bunch in there, we took the ventilation in there with us...we was getting in there pretty good and workin' pretty fast...we was within 200 feet of those men, if we had another thirty or forty

²⁵The World Book Encyclopedia, s.v. “Coke, Coke Oven Gas”, (Chicago IL: World Book Inc., 1999), 724.

²⁶ John Grant, interview by Glenna Graves, October 26, 1991, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History

minutes we coulda' gotten right to the men” but instead “they had to seal it, leave ‘em in there.” Wilder continued, “we almost, we could, if we had another 30 minutes we coulda’, taken fresh air, taken ventilation out there with us. It was bad. 22 of them, trapped in there. I put in 54 hours in that explosion. First bunch in, last bunch out.”²⁷ Wilder’s account explains why explosions presented a unique danger to the coal miners. First, these large explosions seemed to leave a greater emotional toll on the coal mining community as a whole because often the victims survived the initial explosion of tumbling shale and rock but eventually “had to be sealed in there” and suffocate to death. Wilder’s voice quieted when recalling how he and the other members of the rescue team only needed minutes to save the men trapped inside. Large explosion such as the one Wilder recalled from Bell County, Kentucky, also brought coal miners from surrounding counties into the efforts to save the coal miners victims of the explosion. Therefore, not only did the stress and trauma to save buried coal miners continue for several days but this expanded to multiple coal mines. Wilder worked in Lynch, a coal mine entirely separate from the one in Bell County and yet answered the call to save buried miners.

A native of the Glenn Rodgers coal fields in West Virginia described the surreal aftermath of an explosion at the Glen Rodgers no. 2 mine that would weigh heavily on a coal miner and his community. “The dragon belched his methane gas and a spark got near his nostrils. His burp came at 7:45 on a Tuesday morning, forty five minutes after the men started working.”²⁸ Frank Clifton recalled a fiery explosion in 1935 that caused “the mine” to “blow up, the dust and dirt” and “it [killed] all the men, knocked a lot of rock down, timber down,

²⁷ Ernest W. Wilder, interview by Doug Cantrell, May 5, 1988, Project, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

²⁸ Dillon, Lacey A. *They Died in the Darkness* (Parsons, WV: McClain Printing Company, 1976) 61.

smothered to earth, burned ‘em to death, that’s what it was now.”²⁹ Clifton’s account suggests coal miners not only recognized the change of explosions underground but how this violence made explosions uniquely traumatic within the context of danger to coal miners. He vividly explained how victims were incinerated, buried, and crushed to imply the danger within the coal mine as something more sinister. Frank Clifton’s account and the passage from *They Died in the Darkness* suggest coal miners who experienced explosions or the aftermath of them may have acquired a deepened fear of the mine compared to those coal miners who dealt with trauma that affected individuals only. The coal mine environment produced shale falls and explosions but coal miners also experienced threats to their lives from the instruments that they employed to mine coal.

Mechanization

Mechanization and mining technology in Southern Appalachia improved efficiency significantly in the 1940’s but nevertheless, danger remained a constant adversary of the coal miner. Early coal miners used hand loading techniques with relatively simple instruments compared to the machinery developed in the 1940’s. From the oral histories it appears Southern 1920’s Southern West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky miners used the room-pillar method with “track-mounted cutting machines” to undercut the coal wall base and proceeded to load coal onto tippers and conveyer systems.³⁰ The Joy Coal Loader arrived sometime in the late 1930’s to Southern Appalachian mines which marked a transformation of coal miners’ jobs.³¹ Finally, in the 1940’s, coal companies introduced shuttle cars and larger cars which might hold more coal

²⁹ Frank Clifton, interview by Glenna Graves, November 6, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History

³⁰ Keith Dix. *What’s a Coal Miner to Do? : The Mechanization of Coal Mining*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988) 10-12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

and travel more efficiently on steel rails.³² Coal miners in Southern West Virginia believed the companies who introduced mechanical loading quickly with the automatic Joy Coal Loader not only deemed their skill and experience irrelevant but proved incompatible to mine's designed for hand loading and smaller transport rails.

Coal miners' attitude remained mistrustful and apprehensive towards the new mining technologies because they recognized new techniques meant their previous experience and skill might become irrelevant and subsequently, their inexperience could lead to vulnerability to previously nonexistent dangers. Joseph Phibbs stated "Coal mining is a misunderstood profession by the world at large." He overheard a coal company executive named Ratliff tell a superintendent "All a coal miner needs is a place to eat and sleep" and when "you tell people you're a coal miner and it takes 'em aback, you can see it" because "they've always thought a coal miner crawled out from under a rock." However, Phibbs proudly claimed, "coal miners are a high skilled people" and "the most safety conscious people."³³ Phibbs believed that coal miners did not simply put danger out of mind but instead remained extremely attentive to their threatening environment. According to Phibbs, because of their skill and experience, coal miners remained the most prepared to avoid disasters or accidents.

Therefore, coal miners felt their knowledge and skill reserved their right to criticize new technology in terms of safety. Omar Bradley from Barthell said "they started to use machines" in the 1940's and "they asked if I'd go in and work [operating the new coal wall cutting machine] and I said no way" and I believe" you would do just about anything" to avoid working with the

³² Ibid., 80.

³³ Joseph Phibbs, interview by Doug Cantrell, August 15, 1986, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

new mechanized instruments.³⁴ Omar Bradley worked as an operator or a brake-man for the coal rail cars which meant he worked underground and amongst extremely dangerous moving parts. Nevertheless, Bradley refused to work with the new cutting machines even though he failed to mention whether any miners actually died from operating the automatic coal cutting machine. Howard Whorley also expressed concerns towards “after the tipple³⁵ burnt, they brought ‘em in, three-ton steel cars” but “they were real dangerous, the metal car.” Howard continued: they “had so much more weight, see after the tipple burnt” these steel loading cars “held more coal and there as much repair to them as a wooden car but I’m tellin’ ya’ there was so much danger.”³⁶ Whorley recognized the increased efficiency from the larger loading cars but also criticized the new technology for its inherent danger to the coal miner. These coal miners saw danger from machinery as a product of inexperience and subsequently, distrusted the innovation behind these machines as a form of unknowledgeable external control over their job. To coal miners, the machines represented the efforts of external industrial controls to disregard the coal miner veteran’s years of experience at their job and moreover, disregard their safety.

Coal miners associated new mechanization with the coal company’s failure to empathize with the danger miner’s experienced firsthand underground. “This equipment was a faster way of mining” but the company (U.S. Steel) tried to use a “bus where a dune buggy shoulda’ been.”³⁷ Wilder also criticized Joy Loader systems because “the ‘quipment was a faster way of mining but they didn’t coincide [the machines] with the mine structure itself.” The coal company in

³⁴ Omar Bradley

³⁵ The World Book Encyclopedia, s.v. “West Virginia”, Chicago, IL: World Book Inc., 1999. A tipple was used for preparation to transport coal brought by mine cars but in the 1940’s were brought by conveyer belts from Joy Loaders and other innovations.

³⁶ Howard Worley, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

³⁷ Ernest Wilder, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

Lynch refused “getting a piece of ‘quipment’ that you [the coal miner] can handle.”³⁸ Wilder did not directly criticize the coal company for endangering their lives with new machinery but expressed the concern that the coal company simply did not understand what it was doing. However, another miner pointed direct responsibility at the company and stated “it’s possible they [Coal & Coke Company] were trading men for coal.”³⁹ Coal miners might judge the new machinery as dangerous because of their personal inexperience with the particular instrument but also associated inexperience on the end of the coal company’s innovative efforts. Wilder also faulted the coal company when “they took these boys different places to train ‘em” to work the new machinery but “the center office and them, made a bad judgement” because they put the young and inexperienced miners onto dangerous machinery.

According to coal miners, the coal company failed to provide them with meaningful assistance during crises and instead focused their efforts to dispel their responsibility. Robert E. Looters remembered a negative experience at the Stearns Coal Company in Lynch. The “only trouble I ever had with the company” occurred when “they tried to lay the blame on me” in the aftermath of a rail car accident in “[1943] when they had done that.” Afterwards “they told me you would never run another motor in that mine again... but Looters told them “if you don’t believe me about the conditions about the motor just ask these other two men the dayshift and the evening shift (Looters worked the midnight shift)” because “they said the same thing [as Looters] and that they’d reported it and they hadn’t done anything about it”. Somehow “it got rumored that I might as well have just taken out a gun and shot that man.” Nevertheless, “someone had to take the blame and the Stearns Company didn’t take that blame” instead “they

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Joseph Phibbs, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

agreed to give me that job [as a brakeman- a token in exchange for Looters to not mention the nature of the accident] but “they never mentioned” that “somehow they’d tightened that lever together [which caused the accident]. I’m sure if they did, and the inspectors might’ve done that [looked at the motor car]”⁴⁰

Coal companies would seek to dispel the responsibility for accidents because it “increased their state compensation insurance”; a fact the coal miners knew and resulted in further distrust of the company’s willingness to look out for coal miners. McKenzie remembered “if a man got injured in the mine the only way to get him out of there was a motorcar so the government made ‘em to get an ambulance in there” but “the company was bitterly against” anything that added to their expenses.⁴¹ In Betham’s Coal Company Records, several injury reports demonstrate the company’s disconnect with miner safety.⁴² The injury reports detail questions about the worker’s sobriety or carelessness repeatedly with only a single line dedicated to the condition of the miner or his injuries. For coal miners, they suspected any positive actions from the coal company for their sake because of this notion of dispelling responsibility in the wake of coal mining accidents. The coal company certainly did not present itself as a structure of security for the coal miner in the face of dangers underground.

Southern Appalachian coal miners supported the safety measures unions forced upon the coal companies but nonetheless, company mistreatment of workers and conflict with the labor unions resulted in a generation of future coal miners normalized to violence. Clifford Childers

⁴⁰ Robert Lee Looters, interview by Doug Cantrell, July 22, 1986, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁴¹ Carl Clifford McKenzie, Helen Irene McKenzie, interview by Glenna Graves, June 14, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁴² Betham Coal Company Records 1929, “Item 704”, Kentucky Digital Library, http://kdl.kyvl.org/catalog/xt7kh12v6014_704_2.

responded almost angrily to questions regarding the union's benefit to the coal miner. He said "I wish we had a half dozen more like him [John Lewis]" because "we had people workin' in in the water and mud to your eyes and fine dust went all over the place. You just don't realize what you're talkin' about. You just don't realize how much it does mean to coal miners."⁴³ For Childers, John Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America from 1920 to 1960, represented an external control which not only benefitted the coal miner's safety but acted upon his behalf.⁴⁴ Coal miners also benefitted from the union for their protection from some coal company's iron fisted management. Steve Andriga recalled:

When I was a little fella, before I got to know that in that camp someone was killed every day...if you was actually sick and didn't show up to work on Monday, the gun thugs would show up. They'd beat on your door and if you didn't let 'em in they'd kick in your door and went in and kicked him all the way to the bathhouse and put him in the hole.⁴⁵

Those who grew up in coal towns in the era before unions established a grasp onto coal company policy-making towards their employees could bear witness to this type of violence. Moreover, they may have experienced such a treacherous environment and normalized them to loss of life and violence before their first journey into the coal mine. Coal miners could quite literally become predisposed to death and violence from their early youth.

Emphysema

Coal miners struggled throughout the twentieth century against the quiet but extremely potent long term physiological effects of working underground in the bituminous coal mine,

⁴³ Clifford Childers, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁴⁴ Seltzer, Curtis. *Fire in the hole: miners and managers in the American coal industry*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1985.

⁴⁵ Steve Andriga, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

emphysema. The long hours under the mine caused miners to inhale expelled coal dust from the where “towards quitting time [the air]” became “so foul that the miners’ lamps” ceased to burn.⁴⁶ Steve Andriga complained “I can hardly walk now” because “I’ve got this emphysema or black lung.” The debilitating disease also afflicted Andriga’s father who worked for U.S. steel company and “loaded coal all his life.” “He retired at ‘68 I think...he was in bad health” because “he had black lung.” Andriga recalled, “they doctored him in Lynch” so when he made the short journey “he’d have to rest on his walk about a mile to the hospital.” Andriga lost his father early on; they only “gave him 6 months. They didn’t even tell him to quit smoking” because “they figured he didn’t have much time here.” This presented a sad legacy for miners who surely would have been dismayed for their sons to fall victim to the very same disease.

The lasting effects of inhaling coal dust deeply affected miners’ friends, fellow community members, and family. Hickham Jr. recalled his grandfather “would be hurting so bad he could hardly talk” and his “Dad would agonize over it for days afterwards.”⁴⁷ For coal miners, they were forced to not only reconcile their concern for their endangered father but also the strong possibility for their own demise to result from the black lung pathology. While miners recognized the danger emphysema represented because of their personal experiences with the disease, their view of the disease also reflected on how they saw their employers.

Coal miners viewed emphysema as more complicated than simply an existing danger to their lives but also representative of the coal company’s conscious effort to exchange their safety for capital gains; especially prior to the U.S. Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.⁴⁸ A hundred years prior to the 1969 Safety Act, a physician in Pennsylvania concluded that “daily

⁴⁶ Barbara Ellen Smith. *Digging Our Own Graves*, 39.

⁴⁷ Homer Hickham Jr., *Rocket Boys*, 7.

⁴⁸ Barbara Ellen Smith. *Digging Our Own Graves*, 205.

inhalation of dusts and gases” represented ‘the most serious’ source of occupation hazards in the [coal] industry.”⁴⁹ Yet as late as 1935 physicians considered, “miners asthma” an “ordinary condition that [needed] no worry”⁵⁰ thus rendering a widely acknowledged disease for coal miners purposefully misunderstood in the government. The coal companies hid the nature of emphysema with pocketed physicians paid to designate emphysema as a benign problem during law suits or compensation claims.⁵¹ Clifford Childers recognized that doctors in company towns threw knowledge of the disease under the rug and failed to effectively help miners. Childers spoke how his father “back before anything was known” the doctors did not divulge much and “didn’t call it [black lung] that at the time.” The doctors “didn’t let you do nothin’, you worked till you died.”⁵² A coal miner who experienced this revelation of the company’s purposeful ignorance might consequently associate the coal company with danger itself because they willfully exchanged their safety for capital gains at least in terms of emphysema. The physical lingering danger from emphysema and the disillusionment with the coal company was not the only way the mine left a lasting effect on the miners psyche.

Miners experienced an atmosphere constantly touched with metaphorical danger due in some part to the pervasiveness of visible coal dust in the coal towns. Almost every single interview of a miner or family members of a miner, recalled how coal founds its way into every nook and cranny of the coal community’s life. Carl Clifford recalled cleaning his face and neck on a daily basis but only his whole body once a week because the black coal dust stains proved

⁴⁹ Barbara Ellen Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵² Clifford Childers, interview by Glenna Graves, July 20, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

so difficult to remove.⁵³ One miner and his wife recalled the coal dust would settle on the kitchen table if left for only a few hours because of the proximity of the mine to the company owned residences. The son of a miner from Coalwood, West Virginia, wrote “Clouds of coal dust rose from the open cars invading everything, seeping through windows and creeping through doors. Throughout my childhood when I raised my blanket in the morning I saw a black, sparkling powder float off it. My socks were always black with coal dirt when I took my shoes off at night.”⁵⁴ While the miners did not explicitly associate the ever present coal dust above ground with the dangers they faced in the mine, almost all the interviewed coal miners mentioned the presence of the dust without being prompted. This ceaseless presence of coal dust helped construct an atmosphere for miners where they subconsciously never left behind the depths of the mine when they returned home and consequently, retained a feeling of uneasiness even at home.

Spirituality

Coal miners sometimes believed spiritual intervention prevented accidents and helped explain how they survived near death experiences. Donald Whalen recalled how a rail car in the Barthell coal loosened unexpectedly and smashed into his tow car. Only seconds before the cars collided and surely would have meant the end for Donald, “it seems as if a voice tell me you better watch out Donald.” He continued: “the lord spared my life because he almost audibly spoke to me and told me to get off” within “one hundred or one hundred fifty foot” of the inevitable collision. Donald explained his inconceivably close encounter with death as God’s protection. This belief probably explained why Whalen continued to work under the mountain

⁵³ Carl Clifford McKenzie, Helen Irene McKenzie, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁵⁴ Homer Hickham Jr. *Rocketboys: A Memoir*. (New York, NY: Random House Inc., 1998), 2.

despite such a harrowing experience. James Ward fell victim to a far more common but potentially deadly slate fall. Ward said, “it had me covered up I expected it, the slate, to come on me and kill me...I say it to myself, thinkin’ in my mind, to the good Lord, I need some help here...I wasn’t a Christian then, It got me thinkin’ I should’ve been....I coulda’ easily just been killed.”⁵⁵ Ward did not consider himself a Christian until after that experience and even says “I should’ve been” which implied the importance of having some comfort or security to rest upon in the mines. Nonetheless, his narrative explained why miners often turned to religion.

I was looking for a number, a station number for survey, and I came up to the words, "God is light." And I turned to this fellow, who was with me, and I said, "Gee, it looks like somebody's got religion down here," like an eighteen year-old would say. He said, "Well, son, let me tell you." Then he gave me a five-minute lecture about how miners always work in the dark. In the winter time, they go to work in the dark, in the winter time, they come home in the dark, and that most of their life is spent in the dark. And that when these fellows joined a church that had brilliant lights in it, they really understood what it meant, "God is light".⁵⁶

A veteran coal miner actually scolded John Grant for his comment about a cross-section bolt with the words about God transcribed on it and John clearly felt embarrassed about the memory. “Like an eighteen year-old” implied John felt naïve to not understand the importance of spirituality. John Grant also brings up an interesting thought about coal miners experience with darkness as an integral part of their lives because “they got to work in the dark” and “they come home in the dark.”⁵⁷ Especially for those who worked during the midnight shift this profound realization that miners spent their lives in the dark held true. In Van Lear, Childers remembered “a lot of them worked in the mines too, them preachers.”⁵⁸ Coal miners not only felt a sense of spirituality in the

⁵⁵ James Ward, interview by Glenna Graves, November 18, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History

⁵⁶ John Grant, interview by Glenna Graves, October 26, 1991, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History. John Grant worked as a loader in the midnight shift which would begin in the late evening and end before sunrise.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Clifford Childers, interview by Glenna Graves, July 20, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

mines but self-governed their company town religious institutions. Nevertheless, veterans and young coal miners alike could find solace in another warming presence from the liquor store.

Spirits, Liquor, and Family

Coal miners throughout the twentieth century consumed liquor to combat their anxiety towards working in the mines even through the prohibition era and against the will of the coal company. In early coal towns, saloons were the main recreation for coal miners although the company recognized the negative ramifications of allowing coal miners to drink within such a dangerous occupation.⁵⁹ While the Prohibition era made alcohol illegal, coal companies wanted miners to stay sober not necessarily out of concern for their safety but to protect capital investment especially when new innovations caused miners to hold less value than the machines they operated. Paul Graham said he will “tell everybody that Cumberland’s got more liquor stores and churches than any town.”⁶⁰ Booze and spirituality provided a security net for the coal miner’s sanity. Moreover, coal miners did not drink in moderation. Worley remembered Jonce Holt, the Barthell foreman’s son “liked to drink a lot”⁶¹ or Joseph Phibbs recalled how miners in Lynch, Kentucky often tried to skip work after a night of binge drinking, “I can remember if you didn’t report to work ‘cause you were on a hangover.”⁶² Clifford Childers agreed with the other coal miners: “Oh yeah, you know a bunch of miners they like to drink” and “they might have a little too much sometimes but they went out to work Monday morning.”⁶³ None of the coal

⁵⁹ Crandall A. Shifflett. *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 162.

⁶⁰ Paul Graham, interview by John Klee, December 6, 2006, transcript, History of Kentucky’s Community Colleges Oral History Project, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History. Cumberland is sub-county of Harlan County, KY.

⁶¹ Howard Worley, interview by Kim McBride, January 28, 1992, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁶² Joseph E. Phibbs, interview by Doug Cantrell, August 15, 1986, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁶³ Clifford Childers, July 20, 1988.

miners explicitly admitted to using alcohol to cope with their jobs nor did they recall ever drinking on the job. Therefore, coal miners presumably only used liquor at the end of their shift and on their days off. While drinking on off days or after work is an extremely common past time for any occupation, miners, especially those working during the night shifts, often had very little time to spend with their family. Childers said miners “tried to keep it [booze] hid if they could” from their wives.⁶⁴ Their grueling and dangerous occupation affected them enough to drink heavily away from their family’s presence despite their already limited time spent at home.

The coal miners in Southern Appalachia created complex defense mechanisms to assess and face the danger in their occupation but interestingly, entirely left out the effects of danger on their families. If coal miners worked for the survival and prosperity of their family and happiness of their wives, then they somehow managed to forget in every single oral testimony. Surely, coal miners must have felt concerned for their family’s wellbeing every day they entered the shaft under the mountain where their lives might extinguish in an instant. Even Pete Tiabian, in the presence of his own wife Ann during the interview, failed to acknowledge whether his wife of almost fifty years provided him with moral or psychological support outside of the mines. In Carol Green’s *Coal Miners Wives*, the women interviewed told her “we have something in common, like a bond or something” because “you have to be a miner’s wife to understand a miner’s wife.”⁶⁵ Both coal miners and their wives back home in the coal town repeat a nearly identical mantra of brotherhood and sisterhood respectively. Subsequently, they created a dichotomy between the inside of the coal mines and the outside world. Both groups expressed a concern for the stress of their environment and yet neither could comfort one another due to the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Carol Giesen. *Coal Miners Wives: Portraits of Endurance* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995) 18.

long hours in addition to evening and midnight shifts. The coal miners did not seem to experience their dangerous jobs within the context of their family but rather sought strength from comradeship.

Camaraderie: Foundation of the Coal Miner's Strength

Coal miners gathered the most strength to carry out their work in the deep shafts in Southern Appalachia from the camaraderie they shared between fellow miners. This camaraderie created a social fraternity within the coal mine separate from external controls politics and proved a necessary function to protect one another from the dangers in the coal mine. Russell Rucker said “under the hills it was your lives depended on them and their life depended on you.” The coal miner knew exactly why the bonds between he and the other miners proved so important. James Ward said, “most of the time you got a buddy when you in dangerous places plenty of times you warn each and look out for each other, and somebody’ll holler, look out!” Ward continued, “you automatically look out for each other, it just comes natural to ya’.” Coal miners dealt with such frequent danger that no company or external organization gave them the tools to create their social fraternity, rather, the coal miners introduced it themselves. In a small building called the doghouse “every miner put their number on the wall” at the start of his shift which represented they had entered the mine and “you’d hear from them” if you didn’t put your number back on the wall.⁶⁶ A number’s absence in the doghouse would likely remind the miners not only of their comrade who passed away but how easily their number could be the next one absent.

⁶⁶ Donald Whalen, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

Unlike the military in the United States where army officials induce and encourage camaraderie to combat the enemy in warfare, coal miners arguably held equally powerful bonds and created these bonds independent of the company's will. Coal miners in Southern Appalachia saw the importance of camaraderie in their occupation similarly to the military services which demonstrated how highly these miners rated the danger faced underground. One miner described how the U.S. Steel Company's miners "operated like the army".⁶⁷ The son of a Coalwood foreman, Homer Hickham Jr. wrote that the lines of miners who entered the shaft for the afternoon shift "reminded me of newsreels I'd seen of soldiers slogging off the front."⁶⁸ Moreover, miners often awaited trains to transport them to the coal mine prior to WWII and appeared like "a soldier awaiting combat."⁶⁹ Instead of combat against an enemy army, these men fought to survive against the threats presented by the coal mine. John Grant said, "Myself, I was just another kid who had to prove himself in the mines", echoing the feeling of young soldier attempting to prove their worth in combat to the platoon.⁷⁰ Miners believed so strongly in their camaraderie they created a brotherhood which could actually transcend the society of the outside world.

Coal miners believed their camaraderie to face their daily 'combat' against danger in the mine surpassed the requirements to follow societal norms for race relations. During the coal mining era, Eastern Europeans and African Americans immigrated in large numbers to the coal fields where they were promised employment during the 1910's and 1920's. In 1910, Harlan County in Eastern Kentucky had a total of nine residents who were black or mixed heritage.

⁶⁷ Steve Andriga, interview by Doug Cantrell, August 19, 1986, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History. Seven of the miners served in the military, Navy or Army.

⁶⁸ Hickham Jr., Hickham. *Rocketboys: A Memoir*. (New York, NY: Random House Inc, 1998), 9.

⁶⁹ "West Virginia Coal Mine Fatalities", 2.

⁷⁰ John Grant, interview by Glenna Graves, October 26, 1991, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History

However, in only twenty years the county received over two thousand immigrants which drastically changed the social landscape and forced previously inexperienced Appalachian natives to interact with new people.⁷¹ While schools remained segregated⁷² and foreign born miners recalled the native Appalachians “called you Poles, Ruskys, Waps”⁷³, the coal mines produced an entirely separate environment. “We’d go to a common bathhouse, we’d soak each other’s back,” Russell Rucker laughed when he told one of two black brothers whom he bathed alongside, “Joe I can’t tell if I’m helpin’ you one bit.”⁷⁴ A white and a black man scrubbed each other’s shoulders in a society governed by Jim Crow laws. However, “in town” the black brothers referred to Russell as “still Mr. Rucker. I was never [called Mr. Rucker] in the mines. Cause their lives depended on and my lives depended on them, cause it was dangerous...but when we were out of the community I took my place and we took our place. I never speak to ‘em to the point I’d call ‘em by name/but they’d always acknowledge me as Mr. Rucker.”⁷⁵ Lynch remained a segregated town just as any town in the United States before the civil rights era. However, at the job site the coal miners ignored their differences in race because they felt camaraderie superseded their race or origins. Coal miners showed survival transcended the importance to follow society’s expectations and further exemplified the danger underground. “Under the hills it was your lives depended on them and their life depended on you”; you “completely forgot about it outside.”⁷⁶ Clearly, camaraderie between coal miners themselves

⁷¹ Shaunna L. Scott. *Two Sides to Everything: The Cultural Construction of Class Consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky*. (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) 13.

⁷² Russell Rucker, interview by Glenna Graves, November 19, 1988, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁷³ Ann Tiabian and Pete Tiabian, interview by Doug Cantrell, June 27, 1986, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History. Pete moved to Lynch from Detroit in 1909 but his father and mother were immigrants from Poland while Ann arrived in Lynch, Kentucky in 1916 from Russia.

⁷⁴ Russell Rucker.

⁷⁵ Russell Rucker, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

provided a powerful support system but how did this change with the introduction of the foreman?

The Foreman: Part of the Industrial Machine or Another Comrade?

Mechanization in the 1940's introduced the oversight of coal company foremen who worked closely with coal miners. In the 1940's with the widespread growth of mechanization throughout Appalachia, coal mining companies altered their work patterns and payment methods to match the new efficient machines. Coal miners in the early nineteenth century and into the Depression era usually worked by the amount of coal they could mine per day, however, coal companies introduced shift work to match the automated mechanization of the industry. The coal company required foreman to oversee coal miners operate expensive automatic coal loaders and other forms of machinery.⁷⁷ Moreover, this development may have eroded the strength of social fraternity and father-son relationships for coal miners as miners became valued less than the machines they operated. Previously independent coal miners now experienced the oversight of a foreman.

Coal miners viewed their relationship with the foreman as a form of the camaraderie rather than paternalistic, because of the direct influence the foreman held on their safety in the face of dangers in the mine. Although mechanization may have lessened the social fraternity of the mines the foreman could represent leadership in the form of camaraderie and security to the miners. On the other hand, Frances Rutherford recalled the boss at the mine in Lynch told her "Granddaddy to go past the danger board [marker designating where the wall was weak], he

⁷⁷ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 205.

refused, and they fired him on the spot.”⁷⁸ Rutherford’s grandfather’s refusal to enter an area clearly designated to avoid shows coal miners acknowledged and faced the dangers underground but nonetheless, made educated decisions for their own safety. Coal miners would not blindly follow orders out of a fatalistic way of life. Foreman could also represent a strong leader and confidence for coal miners. Samuel Cassidy immigrated to Southern Appalachia fondly remember “They put me first under big red headed fella [the foreman], he was like so many mountaineers, he would never tell you what to do, he we would say Sam, would you mind doing so and so” and Samuel replied “I’m a greenhorn, if there’s something you want me to do just tell me.”⁷⁹ Ernest Wilder remembered during the crisis at Bell County’s mine a foreman inspector told the miners “I won’t send you anywhere I won’t go.”⁸⁰ The foreman’s competency, according to the coal miner, resulted from his respect towards the coal miners safety and furthermore his own duty in the mine. The coal miners could easily overlook the foreman’s better living conditions or salary since they greatly valued the foreman’s efforts to protect their lives. This meant much more to them than the social class or company hierarchy division. One miner agreed “Oh yeah no doubt about it” the foremen “did live a little better course they made a little more money” but recalled the foreman never behaved pompously towards the coal miners.⁸¹

Paul Graham, a foreman at the coal mine in Lynch, presented the view from the other side: “I tried to be a good foreman” and he told the miners when he became foreman “now you people can make or break me” and “buddy, they just fell in behind me and just-they saw me through the thing. I was so pleased that that bunch of men supported me like that.”⁸² Paul

⁷⁸ Frances Rutherford, interview by Randall Norris, March 19, 1994, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁷⁹ Samuel Cassidy, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸⁰ Ernest Wilder, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸¹ Clifford Childers, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸² Paul Graham, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

Graham's account helps substantiate the idea of camaraderie between the foreman and the coal miner. Although Graham held the upper hand in the power dynamic within the coal company's eyes he described his pleasure when the coal miners listened to him and "supported" him. The pair, foreman and coal miner, supported one another in their work which helps explain why an inspector might tell the coal miners he would never tell them to go where he would not go. Frances' grandfather who refused to enter the danger area where the ceiling was weak worked in the very earliest stages of coal mining when this relationship of mutual respect between the foreman and miner did not exist. Whalen said the foremen "were responsible for mine atmosphere safety" and used an anemometer" to test air quality which prevented explosions. "Jonce, every Friday evening would oil and grease it [the fan for ventilation] and sometimes he would take his wife, Corey with him."⁸³ In this instance, the foreman actually placed himself and his wife in the firing zone because the fan which provided ventilation to preserve the air quality rested in the coal mine itself. The foreman held a role in the coal miner's safety and because coal miners were aware of their dangerous surroundings and made their decisions concerning safety independently they expected the foreman to share an equal concern and sense of camaraderie with them.

Humor and Carelessness

While the constant threat of injury or death from a single mistake would seemingly preserve the miner's constant state of vigilance they also dealt with their dangerous occupation with humor. John Grant remembered the prelude to entering the mines where "very simply it was locker room talk, dirty jokes, jibes about their sex life, all things like that."⁸⁴ While men spoke

⁸³ Donald Whalen, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸⁴ John Grant, Appalachia Oral History Collection

about the job occasionally, it remained “mainly joshing.”⁸⁵ Before the coal miners went under the ground their conversations were humorous and lighthearted rather than business-like. John Grant also recalled a harmless prank miners pulled on each other when the mining technique still consisted of separated rooms where miners performed their work for days at a time: “This isn't very nice, but miners wouldn't go to the bathroom where they were working. If they had to defecate, they'd do it in a separate place. And once in a while, one of these miners would say, ‘You'd better take a shot back in such and such a place,’ and I'd found I had gone to their outhouse.”⁸⁶ In the aftermath of a close-call or heart-stopping moment, the coal miners also tried to find humor in the situation. James Ward suffered a head injury from a shale fall that nearly crushed him and he remembered as soon as the other miners around him realized he survived “they just laugh at my bald head, scraped off the top” from the sharp shale shards.⁸⁷ Coal miners produced laughter out of relief to shrug off the near fatal accident. While coal miners expressed humor that did not directly affect their safety, these occurrences still implied lapses in vigilance and promoted more dangerous humor.

Coal miners admitted to inattention and humor which crossed the line into recklessness during their work in the coal mine. Donald Whalen and Howard Whorley “saw each other every day” in the Barthell Coal Mine and related a humorous story where Donald and Howard jostled to force the rail coal tow car to go to a different exit. Donald held control of the small train of cars and suddenly redirected them to a different exit, to the surprise of Howard: “I see him shakin’ his fist at me...man we used to have some real good times.”⁸⁸ The two men laughed about the joke Donald pulled on Howard to suggest it was a trivial and lighthearted ruse but one

⁸⁵ John Grant, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸⁶ John Grant, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸⁷ James Ward, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁸⁸ Donald Whalen, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

must remember the equipment they were handling and the consequences of a runaway rail car. It was Donald Whalen himself who recalled a rail car cutting the legs of a coal miner clean off. James Grant became the victim of a prank from veteran miners which crossed the line from benign to dangerous:

One time, as I mentioned about the miners being congregated in one place to eat lunch, we also ate lunch with them. And so one of the miners said to me one day, he said, "Boy, where did you put your lunch bucket?" And I said, "Well, I put my lunch bucket up on such and such a place." He said, "You better move it; there's mice and rats down there." And I said, "Well, gee, I don't know." He said, "Boy, I'd go move it right away. I wouldn't let anything stop me." Then I turned to my boss and said, "Is it ok?" And he said, "I guess so." And he said, "Now you want to take this short cut." Normally, I would have gone down to the end of the heading, turned and doubled back to where our lunches were. It would have taken me 10 minutes. The short cut was a matter of two or three minutes. Well, I found out in the short cut, I had to crawl over top of a piece of coal that had been cut out. It's one of the few times I've ever suffered from claustrophobia. Because when I got half way through, my feet wouldn't touch, my hands wouldn't touch, and in panic I just crawled, clawed my way through this opening. So my lunch bucket was alright. It was part of the tricks played on me.⁸⁹

The coal miner veterans surely did not mean any harm to John, however, they goaded him to enter alone into an unfamiliar and very tight corridor not held up with organized bolts.

Consequently, these miners placed him in considerable danger with their mischief. While John Grant laughed about the prank in his interview he recalled becoming claustrophobic and panicking in the cramped crawlspace.

Considering the coal miners' clear recognition of the dangers posed to an isolated miner underground their prank and Donald's mischief with the rail cars seemed to contradict Joseph Phibbs' assertion that coal miners were the most safety-conscious people in the world. Samuel Cassidy from Hellier, Kentucky almost died from a passing train because of his lack of vigilance. "I didn't hear the train and I stepped out of the bathhouse (directly next to the railroad) on the

⁸⁹ John Grant, Appalachia Oral History Project.

railroad right when the train went by” and “that’s about the nearest I come to getting killed” but “if the tippie hadn’t been runnin’ I’d have heard the train.”⁹⁰ In such a dangerous environment the coal miners exhibited a strange degree of carelessness and cavalier attitudes towards close encounters with death. Cassidy’s apparent carelessness reveals the constancy of danger in the coal miner’s career. Even above ground, a lapse of concentration seemed to spell disaster for the miner. Perceived carelessness resulted in the only indication of fatalism in the testimonies from these coal miners.

Conclusion

From childhood to their last wheezing breath, twentieth century Southern Appalachian coal miners witnessed and experienced danger. Donald Whalen’s retelling of his foreman, Jonce Holt’s witness to a miner’s death after accidentally igniting the powdered explosive becomes even more profound with this in mind. That unfortunate coal miner engineered his death before his shift began which substantiates that coal miners lived outside and inside the mine within an environment defined by danger. Some felt reasonably disillusioned; James Shepard said, “I came back here to work in the mines and that was the worst mistake I ever made” because “you get in a rut and it’s hard to get away.”⁹¹

However, another product of this dangerous life proved far more paradoxical and inconceivable. Donald Whalen said, “If I was young and had my health back, I’d rather be in the coal mines than any other place I’ve ever worked in my life and I’ve worked lumber yards and railroads. I’m gonna’ be honest again to tell u the truth, I’d rather live in the coal mines than any

⁹⁰ Samuel Cassidy, interview Henry C. Mayer, April 5, 1989, Appalachia Oral History Collection, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History.

⁹¹ James Shepard, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

place I've ever lived there was something about it that was enticing I just loved to go to the drift mouth and inhale that air there."⁹² These two profound recollections from Shepard and Whalen help convey the complexity of coal miners in a seemingly dehumanizing environment. Somehow this coal miner deemed the mine a desirable home, something usually associated with warmth and security. I call this environment 'dehumanizing' because stress due to consistent heightened awareness towards danger has been shown to cause anxiety and detachment. Yet, Donald explicitly stated, "I'd rather live in the coal mines than any place I've ever lived."⁹³ This research project on coal miners' reflections on danger has shown there was something far more complex at work in the minds and perspectives of Southern Appalachian coal miners. These coal miners were far more than fatalistic in their approach and certainly not dehumanized from their experience.

⁹²Donald Whalen, Appalachia Oral History Collection.

⁹³ Ibid.

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