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### Oral History Interview: Joseph Anderson Kovich

Joseph Anderson Kovich

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ORAL HISTORY

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Date May 18, 1976

J. A. Kovich  
(Signature - Interviewee)

2912 Staunton Rd.  
Address

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Date 5/18/76

R. J. Cunniff  
(Signature - Witness)

Joseph Anderson Kovich was born in Mercer County April 1, 1911. He grew up in Lorado on Buffalo Creek in Logan County. His father, Joe Kovick, immigrated to the United States from Croatia in the early 1900's. His mother, Anna Stern, was from Serbia and came to America about the same time. They met and were married in Baltimore. They had ten children, and Mr. Kovich was the second oldest.

At this time Lorado was a busy coal mining area. Many of the people were also immigrants, mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe. Mrs. Kovick's father was a night watchman for the coal company and also had a boarding house for miners.

His parents remained in Lorado until his father's retirement. They then moved to Hollywood, California where his mother still lives. His father died in 1958.

Mr. Kovich graduated from Man High School and attended Marshall College for one semester. He then transferred to West Virginia University and received a degree in civil engineering. He returned to Logan and started working for Appalachian Power Company.

During World War II, he served as a Second Lieutenant in the Navy in Europe. After the war he returned to Logan and in 1950 married Virginia Lucas, a school teacher in Logan. They

had two daughters, Anna Laura and Jenni Jo.

After working in Roanoke for four years, he was transferred to Huntington by Appalachian Power Company and is a Senior Electrical Engineer.

INTERVIEWER: Anna Laura Kovich

ALK: I'm Anna Laura Kovich and I'm talking with my father, Joe Kovich at our home in Huntington. He was born April 1, 1911 and grew up in Lorado on Buffalo Creek in Logan County. His parents were Serbian and were from Serbia and Croatia, now Yugoslavia, and were part of a large group of immigrants that worked in the coal mines of West Virginia. Exactly where were your parents from and when did they first come over here?

JAK: They were from two sections of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Croatia. They came over here in the early 1900's. They migrated to the Southern parts of West Virginia in the coal mining areas where most all the immigrants came. They felt that these areas were opportunities for that type of a people because they were illiterate and had no other means of livelihood except a very hard and sturdy type of work.

ALK: Did they come over, were they married when they first came over here?

JAK: No, they met over here. They were probably around sixteen or seventeen years old when they were married. My parents gave birth to ten children, six boys and four girls. They were very hard and sturdy people. They worked hard.

ALK: Did they ever make plans or think about going back to Yugoslavia?

JAK: If they did it was in their own minds but they never did discuss going back because from all indications I felt that they were satisfied there and it would be a better future for them and their children in the coal field. Because at that time they did have some livelihood and income but of course miners in those days, their incomes were meager and small and during the days of the depression it would probably work one or two days a week was just enough to survive. But of course they did always have some means. Some of them would have a garden of their own and others would provide enough for the two or three days a week

that they would work.

ALK: Exactly what did Papaw do for a living?

JAK: Well, when we first moved to the coal camp areas, my father worked in the mines and then when he was in Lorado at Buffalo Creek in Logan County he worked in the mines for a few years and then was in an accident, a mining accident, and later on was given a job as a night watchman which was a pretty good job at that time in a coal camp. It didn't require too much physical work and he was just a night watchman which would look after the offices, the stores and the drugstores and the mining shops and so forth. For additional income my father had a boarding house at Lorado. Now most of the time we had anywhere from fifteen to twenty five boarders which was pretty good additional income at that time for us and all these boarders we had were foreign elements. They were Hungarians, Polish, Yugoslavians and a few Italians and perhaps a Spaniard or Mexican. There was sort of a good variety of immigrants.

ALK: Did most of these people work in the mines?

JAK: All these people worked in the mines and they were all single men. At that time the men, the foreign element, outnumbered the women quite a bit in the coal camp. Most all the women were married at that time except for the smaller children.

ALK: Did these men ever send back to like their home country to get wives?

JAK: No, not any of them that lived with us at the boarding house. But these men would send back money quite often to their parents and to their relatives in Europe.

ALK: What were, what kind of work was done in the mines? How was it operated then?

JAK: The mining methods then were very crude and hard.

The men would have to load the coal into the small mining cars by hand and use by the use of a pick and shovel and then they would shoot the coal by what they call a black powder method. They would auger a hole into the mine bank or the seams of coal by hand and in that they would place this charge of black powder in a paper or a brown manilla paper type to hold it in and then with that they would set off a fuse which would blow out the coal and then from that they would pick and shovel it into the mining car. This was a very hard means of doing it especially when the coal was in a lower seam and the height of coal was probably two and a half to three feet and they would mostly have to be on their hands and knees to load this coal in mine car.

ALK: Did the mine companies pay them by how much they mined a day?

JAK: They were paid by the, then the tonnage they would load in a car. You had a little check. It was a circular disk about the size of a fifty cent piece and you would place that inside the car on a nail and when it was dumped at the tippel it would be put on a board and it would be sent to the office indicating that you had mined or loaded so much coal and usually the coal was not screened too good. There was alot of impurities in what they call slate. If you had too much you were docked, perhaps maybe a half of a car. But normally the coal companies would go ahead and place all of this coal and dump it into the railroad car and sell it for the total amount that was in the mine car.

ALK: What about the mine companies? Did they provide any housing?

JAK: Most all of the houses were owned by the coal company. They were their own houses. They were just plain inside, probably four, six, and eight rooms. They had no inside toilets, no inside water, just plain four walls in every room. All the toilets

were outside, privy-type toilets and the water was from an outside pump, handle-type pump.

ALK: What about the stores? Were they owned by the company too?

JAK: All the stores were owned by companies and you had to make all your purchases by scrip. Now coal companies would issue this scrip to you as each day as you needed it and you had to spend this scrip only at their stores. It was not honored at anyother store except the coal company where the scrip was made and in that way they had control over all the money that the miners made except on paydays they would be paid in cash which was a very small amount and could not provide much in clothing or groceries from anyother store.

ALK: Did they make any attempts to try to save any money?

JAK: Most people of that type that were hardy and worked hard for the money would try to save but it wasn't very much to be saved. It required practically all they made for their livelihood and the people in those areas and especially the foreign elements had large families as my father and mother did and it took quite a bit to provide for those large families.

ALK: What about the churches of the area?

JAK: They usually in most coal campsites coal companies would build and provide churches for the community. There would be possibly one church for the whites and one church for the blacks and if possible maybe one for the Catholics or the foreign people. Recreation facilities were very small, usually most of that would be a playground at the school sites. Other than that there was no recreation areas in a coal camp.

ALK: What about the schools? Were they owned by the coal mines too?

JAK: The coal mines or coal companies usually built the



buildings but the schools were on a county basis. At that time the teachers were paid by the county. The school system then was you usually went to the eighth grade in each coal company or community.

ALK: What about the teachers? Were they from that area?

JAK: Not, not too many. They were back at that time school teachers were not college graduates. They probably went two years to college with a teaching certificate which would qualify them to teach in the grade schools.

ALK: How long, what happened to most of the kids when they finished school?

JAK: Usually kids back then would go to the eighth grade. I believe that the law required that they would go to the eighth grade or sixteen years of age whichever came first. And usually whenever they became sixteen years old they would go to work in the mines or work somewhere in the coal camp. At that time the child labor law was sixteen years old and lots of the children would start to work at the age of sixteen.

ALK: What were their jobs in the mines?

JAK: Well there weren't, well there were sand boys, boys that would work in what you call the sand house, which was required for the cars as a breaking element and a trapper where they would open doors at various locations in the mines to provide proper ventilation from one area to another. They were paid a very, very low wage too at that time for that work.

ALK: What about, did very much of their pay not just the children but the older people, did it go toward liquor and gambling? Was that very popular back then?

JAK: Well, it was to a certain extent but mostly among the men that were not married such as in our boarding house. There was quite a bit of gambling in our house on paydays and they were, there was whiskey around too. Most of it was what you call moonshine or whiskey

made right there. And the men as I say on weekends and on paydays they would gamble and drink whiskey.

ALK: What about farmers? Did any of them come down and work in the mines during the week?

JAK: There was alot of foreign farmers that would come to Lorado and the Logan County area to work in the mines. They would work there during the week and then on weekends go to their homes on farms and most of them came from Wyoming and Lincoln County. Quite a few of the American people were from those areas and were farmers.

ALK: Were the different nationalities of the foreign people, were they divided up into groups like say the Italians lived near each other?

JAK: In this particular camp where we lived the Italians lived in one area and in another area you had a large number of Hungarian people and in another area you had a large group of Polish people. It was sort of like a little country with several states with their own nationalities occupying those areas.

ALK: Was there any particular reason for this?

JAK: Well usually people back then since they were immigrants and just over here from what they call the old country, they would more or less stick together because their English speaking wasn't too good. At that time in the early years and they more or less stayed close to each other and due to their customs and their language and so forth.

ALK: Did the coal companies ever place them this way?

JAK: Not particularly. It just happened probably but they would try to. There wasn't any particular preference where they lived but it just came as a natural way of doing it.

ALK: How large was the boarding house where you all lived?

JAK: Well, we lived in a large house. It was a eight room house and in addition to that we had a small four room house on each side of the large house which gave us sixteen rooms and in these rooms we would have two beds. There would be four men who would sleep in one room. So you can see it was a small house you could have alot of boarders. At that time there wasn't no separation or privacy among the men. It was just a place for them to stay and live and eat and sleep. At that time as I say there was no re-creation. The men would work hard. Usually they would get up at five o'clock in the morning and probably start to work at six o'clock and usually work to five thirty or six o'clock that night. In most of the seasons of the year where you did not have too much daylight it was working from darkness to dark at night. We seldom saw daylight because they were under or in the mines and very seldom saw daylight. Of the summer seasons when you had longer daylights periods, they would see about a couple of hours of daylight. Usually the men after they are, they would probably sit around and talk for awhile and maybe play peanuckle or some friendly game of cards and go to bed possibly at eight o'clock at night. They were tired and had to get up at four thirty or five o'clock in the morning to get started on the next day's work.

ALK: Who fixed all the meals for them?

JAK: My mother did. She would fix all the meals. She would wash all the clothes and take care of all the children. At the time she would have probably a woman that would help her with part of the work but she would do most of the work, and of course as the kids grew older I, we would help her. It was quite a hard job to provide for that many men. She would have to prepare their lunches, put it in the buckets. At that time they had what you call a lunch bucket and in that they would have to have their water and all the sandwiches and so forth. For twenty five men that would be quite a job to do and you'd probably have to get up at four o'clock in the morning to get all that ready and besides make breakfast and they

would eat a large breakfast. It wouldn't be a little bowl of cereal. They would eat probably pork chops and eggs and bacon and three or four cups of coffee, because they worked hard and it would require alot of food and nourishment and energy for them to sustain all that hard work.

ALK: What about the dinners? What kind of food did they have for this time of day?

JAK: Well dinners they would have mostly potatoes and beans and alot of meat. That was one thing we always had. We ate two or three kinds of meat at each meal. Probably pork chops and maybe steak and ham. No fancy food because it took too much time. You just had to cook what was easiest to cook and in large quantities and you had to cook on a cook stove which also took alot of time. We didn't do too much baking because we didn't have the time and also the facilities. It was easier and cheaper to buy bread at the store rather than do any baking at that time.

ALK: What kind of stove did she cook on?

JAK: It was a large wood and coal burning stove and also that stove would heat the water which was very little amount. Now for the water for the men we would bail out their water, you know, and put it in their washtub and that's how they bathed too and in the washtub. We have what we call the wash house where the men kept their mining clothes and we had probably four or five washtubs and as they would come in they would take their turns to bathe in the washtub and that water had to be heated over a stove and they would bail out as much water as they would need for each bath.

ALK: Did you have any particular job that was yours to do to help out?

JAK: Well in the early years one of my jobs was to provide and bank the fires at night and get a stock or load of wood and coal to be used in

preparing the fires for the next morning. Now all the heat was on what we call a coal stove or a morning glory and you would have to have wood and then coal to start a fire each morning. And that was one of my jobs was to do that. Of course as I grew older I helped with the dishes and the housework and the chores around the house such as the yard cleaning and on the weekends clean out the wash house and scrubbing the floors and mopping and so forth.

ALK: What was the job of the girls, your sisters?

JAK: They usually worked, took care of the dishes and probably helped the washing and the ironing. All the ironing had to be done by hand and we had to wash and iron all the men's clothes too. That was part of their boarding bill that was charged them.

ALK: You mentioned that you bought the bread instead of baking it. How did you get the rest of the food?

JAK: Well we bought most of the canned food and the vegetables except for what we grew in our own garden and from the company store. Now we did have a large garden and that was one of the chores that was required of the boys. My father was, since he was a night watchman, as soon as he was off duty which was daybreak he would wake us boys up and we'd go to the garden and work till about ten or eleven o'clock and then he would go to bed and sleep till about four or five in the afternoon and then he would get up. Then we'd go back to the garden and work till probably six or seven. Now besides the vegetables that we grew in our garden we usually had a couple of cows, several hogs and pigs that would provide our meat and milk and also during the summer my father would buy possibly eight or ten calves from farmers that would come through. At that time they were very cheap and we would kill the calves and that would be our meat for possibly a couple of weeks. He would probably kill a calf a week. That would provide the meat

and also the hogs that we'd kill during the fall and winter months would provide the ham and lard and other meats that would be derived from hogs.

ALK: Did you try to preserve any of this meat or did you eat it fresh?

JAK: Well we would try to preserve some of it. We would in the hams and so forth but with a large family and that many boarders we couldn't keep it very long. We would consume it about as fast as we would slaughter. We would do alot of pickling and canning from the garden, such as tomatoes. We would make our own sauerkraut, our own beets and various other vegetables that could be canned and pickled. Now we did have a cellar which was usually full of vegetables and possibly bacon and hams which was another means of providing food.

ALK: In the boarding house were there any men, did they stay very long or were there any of them that were kind of interesting characters?

JAK: No, not particularly. Usually they would stay with us possibly two or three years but there were some that stayed with us for several years, ten or fifteen. These men were single. They had no obligations or nothing to look forward to. And at that early time there was no girls or women that were available especially in the foreign elements for marriage. These men would migrate to another mine possibly ten, fifteen, twenty miles from there and seek other employment, not for any particular reason but just to be moving along. In our particular boarding house we had no characters of which you might say. One man was from Rumania. He was a very intelligent man and I remember one man who was from Spain. He was a Spaniard and he had a beautiful horse that he brought there with him and kept in our stable. Now I don't know why he had a horse but the horse was a beautiful horse and I remember at night it would just kick all night long on the sides of the barn which kept us awake. During those periods of the Depression the

men couldn't make quite enough money at times to pay their board bill and some of them would have jewelry such as watches and rings and other items of value and in order to pay for their board they would give that to my father. Over a period of years he had accumulated several watches, rings and knives and jewelry of various types and in later years he sort of doled these out to various children and at one time I remember distinctly my father accumulated several gold pieces of money, five and ten dollar gold pieces from these men and it came to the point where we were not entirely broke but we had to spend that money to buy groceries at times and wasn't anything to go to the grocery store. It was two or three pieces of gold to pay for the groceries. As I pointed out before we would have several heads of calves and cattle and hogs there to provide for our meat and usually every Saturday my father would kill a calf or hog for the meat for the following week and we had one particular man who stayed with us that would drink, consume possibly a whole glass of blood from one of the animals that we would kill. At that time you would kill an animal and hang it up. The blood would drain down and he would collect that blood in a glass and drink it immediately. I don't know for what reason but it was something unusual and peculiar at the time for us, especially the kids.

ALK: What did, did you all have any particular things you did for recreation?

JAK: Well the kids at that time would play in large groups. It wasn't anything such as they have now, you might say football or basketball, no swimming pools. It would be games where they would go back in the mountains, possibly play what they call "Run Sheep Run" or "Hide and Seek" and usually in the early dusk or dawn time of the day when you just could see someone. They would be, hide or go back in the mountains and do most of their playing. It wasn't any type of recreation that we had now.

ALK: When you all went to school did most of the children

know English when they started first grade?

JAK: Well, not too much. They weren't, they could speak English and understand it and, and in their own language which in my case I could understand my parents talk in their language and I could converse with them and also I could talk in the English language which I could speak in and carry on conversation in either language at that time. Of course it was hard for those kids to learn English and the other subjects that were taught in the American schools but they did. It was easy for them for certain parts. Possibly math would be hard but to learn some of the words to speak English wasn't extremely hard. But the kids in the early, in the early years of that period spoke both languages, their own native tongue and the English language.

ALK: What about, like your father did he know more than just his native language?

JAK: My father was, he would speak fluently several languages. I said in the beginning we had boarders staying with us that were Italians, Hungarians, Polish, Rumanians. He would speak practically all those languages. So I would say that he could speak and understand possibly eight or ten languages. Russian he could speak fluently with Russians and Hungarians. Of course alot of those languages were of the Slavic type or the Baltic states which wasn't too hard to understand the other.

ALK: Since many of the children quit school about the eighth grade, why did you go on to high school?

JAK: The school system back in those days was eighth grade grade school and a four year high school at Lorado. After completing your eighth grade there was no high school you could go to except if you went to Mann and boarded there. When I graduated from the grade school in the eighth grade, the following year was the first year that they ran



a bus to Mann High School, so I completed my high school education. After completing my high school education I was very fortunate that my parents were able to send me to college. Of course it was very hard for them cause I went to college in the early '30's which was the Depression years and I would go to school with barely enough clothes to carry me through for the one period or one semester. It didn't require as much money back then. I think the first year I went to college I went to school the complete cost was probably \$400 to \$450 for a whole year's education which included board and room and tuition and everything that was required.

ALK: Where were you going to school?

JAK: I attended Marshall University, at that time it was Marshall College for the first year and then I completed my education at West Virginia University having a degree in civil engineering.

ALK: Did very many of the other immigrants children go on through school or college?

JAK: Not at that time. Now they began to go to high school due to the fact that the bus provided transportation at that time the high school had possibly one or two buses for the whole district which was the Tridelphia District and which took care of several hundred children and as the enrollment grew the number of buses was added. Possibly several years later on Buffalo Creek there was possibly four or five buses each day and that would provide means for transportation and education that most of these kids would not have been able to maintain.

ALK: What about when, about when going to college? Did very many of them go on?

JAK: Not too many. As I pointed out at that time money was scarce. People didn't have too much to provide. A few of them would work their way through college but very few from Lorado at that time. I would say it was no, not more than eight or ten students that

after completing high school education that went to college.

ALK: But if they didn't work in the mines what other jobs would they get?

JAK: There weren't too many other jobs available in a coal camp because the coal company controlled the whole camp. There were probably jobs say in the store, grocery store and they had a little, what they called a drug store confectionary there that probably had three or four people working in it. Other than that there were no other jobs except what you would do for the coal company. Of course there was alot of jobs around the coal company other than what was in the mines but it was all for the coal company.

ALK: Are very many of these immigrant's children, did they stay up in these areas like up in Buffalo Creek or did they move away?

JAK: Well the, I'd say possibly fifty percent would move away after eighteen or nineteen years of age and of course alot would stay there. They weren't the type that would leave home. They were the home type of people, except for a few that would leave home possibly for some other reason, being a home type, possibly a death of some of their parents or going to live with some of their relatives in the other areas.

ALK: Did many of them go onto the larger cities, say Detroit or Columbus, Cleveland?

JAK: No, not in those days. One thing transportation wasn't too available and it was just a venture to some of them that they were afraid to try. And one reason that the children or kids in those days didn't leave home at a early age was because of their parents were very strict on them. They wouldn't permit them leave the house. I know in our particular family I would practically ask to stay inside the yard when I was going to high school my father let me, any of us children leave the area where he couldn't see them.