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### Oral History Interview: Ted Miller

Ted Miller

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ORAL HISTORY

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Date 8/4/73

Ted Miller  
(Signature - Interviewee)

Oak Hill  
Address

Date 8/4/73

West Virginia  
Anne Berry  
(Signature - Witness)



TM: I'm Ted Miller talking, I went to work in the coal mines in 1926 at Jamoka West Virginia. At that time I mined coal with a pick and shovel with mules for haulage and later we got cutting machines and then electric locomotives for hauling the coal. As I begin work as a boy I started trapping then I went to driving a mule to helping on a machine and then later on switched to operating locomotives and that was my occupation for 10 or 11 years then I begin as an electrician's helper in 1935 and I worked as an electrician from then until January 1973 at which time I retired.

AB: Can you just explain what trapping is and all that other stuff that you talked about.

TM: Well that is just opening doors for mules and cars to go thru and the purpose of the trap door was to block the air on one entry to keep it going to the other entry in order to keep air in the mine. I ain't much of a talker, am I?

AB: That's alright. I know that you have had some experiences in the mines.

TM: Well there weren't any very pleasant ones; seen lots of people injured and lots of people killed. Well not lots people killed but several and there just isn't anything pleasant in a coal mine that I have found.

AB: Did you like being a coal miner?

TM: I guess I did that's all I ever knew so I guess that I had to like it, it's not that bad you don't get much air or much sunshine but I guess if I had to do it over again I would. Cause when I was young that was the only industry in this section of the country there just wasn't anything else, no chemical plants at that time.

AB: What about the area you grew up in?

TM: I grew up on the Gauley River in a coal camp. The

company owned all the houses and the store, the only store to go to there was no road just a railroad, any traveling you either walked the railroad or most of the time we caught a freight. A coal freight and passenger train combined came by once a day, the house weren't too good. Jenny Lynn Houses not well built pretty cool in the wintertime and used coal for heat and we had to buy that from the company to heat the houses and there was no such thing as water in the house, we had to carry water and no such thing as gas and for a long time no such thing as electricity, and you used oil burning lights lamps and you couldn't read by them worth a nickel but I guess we had it just about as good as the rest of them, wasn't nothing too bad about it. Had a one room school house taught from first grade through the eight, just one teacher there sure has been a good improvement in schools since then.

AB: You talked about Jenny Lynn Houses, what's a Jenny Lynn House?

TM: Well that is a house that you put the boards straight up and just hang them lengthways and cover the cracks, there's no ceiling in them. There was no studding in them, just in the corners, wasn't any ceiling on the inside of the house. We always papered ours which helped an awful lot and you see any Jenny Lynn Houses now there are only weatherboarded and sealed inside and studded and quite different than it was then. Had a few log houses, three I can remember log houses built along the river. Like I said there was no road just a walk path beside the railroad and delivered groceries on a handcar on the way home. I suppose now days people they were rough life we enjoyed it, had alot of fun wrecked the handcar a few times put it in the river once. But as far as entertainment was concerned we had to manufacture our own.

AB: What did you do for entertainment?

TM: In the wintertime we would sleigh ride, and in the summer we would play "Go Sheep Go."

AB: "Go Sheep Go" what's that?

TM: Well it's something similar to hide and seek, get a group and go off together and another group hunting for us and the whole idea would be for them to find you without you getting back to home base and, uh, one was about to get caught another would holler, "Go Sheep Go," I guess it was a called to "Go Sheep Go". It was alot of fun and lots of times our parents would go out and sleigh ride with us and those who could still run would play "Go Sheep Go" with us.

AB: What did you use for sleds?

TM: We made them, we didn't have any sleigh, take a piece of hickory and bark it and curve it in the front of the sled the way that they do sleigh runners and when they were slick as any sleigh runner. I guess any sleigh runners was and they would fly and we had a pretty steep grade that went up one side of the holler that was about 1000 foot up the side of the grade and cleared part of the way up the other side for a landing to stop on. We went across the holler which was usually frozen up, there was a little creek that went down the center of the holler and that was usually froze over, and we'd cross it and turn up the other back and use it for a stopping place. No one got seriously hurt, we were pretty careful I guess. We would sleigh ride up into way in the night. But there's been a big difference in this country since I was a kid even in people because people aren't as close as back then. People back then were real close together and looked out for one another back then, if you got sick or if the woman got sick the people in the camp they would take care of the woman and, and her children. That way I guess it was pretty a better, much better than what we have now, were close to one another now and don't know one another. There's a heap of difference in people back then than now. People back then were considerate of one another but they sure aren't now. There's alot of change took place in this country since I was a kid. In coal mining now they have loading machines, very little hard labor to it. Cause back then you had to dig it

with a pick and load it into the car. Now they have a machine that loads it and the car takes to a dumping point and that's all to it, most mines today have a belt that goes right into a cleaning plant you don't have the haulage expense that they had at that time, makes a great deal of difference in mining (pause). I tell you, Bertha, I am just not much of a talker.

AB: That's okay, just tell me how you picked and shoveled mined.

TM: Well you had a pick and you had to lay down on your shoulder and dig a hole under the coal maybe six, eight, ten inches high and reach back as far as you can reach and the pick handle was about three feet long, and then had to drill with a breast loader, that's what we called it a breast loader and drill. We used black powder for blasting, we didn't have a long drill like now and squibs you had to light the squibs and run to a break thru until you were around the corner before the shot went off because when the squib went off it fired the shot and you could make a half a cut a day in hard coal. Hard coal seem to be where I worked, it was hard black after you made your cut with shot coal, you had your white slate bottom and was good shoveling and the shovel would slide real good on it unless you got into a real wet place, why the slate would soften up and that made bad work all around. You get wet when you laid down to make the cuts you get wet when shoveling coal into the car and we didn't have any pumps into the faces at that time. Once in a while we had to use a waterbox and dip it with a bucket and send for the driver after you had the waterbox full, there was nothing easy about it, it was real hard work at that time nothing was easy about it unless I guess you could say driving a mule was about the easiest job at that time.

AB: How many hours a day did you have to work back then?

TM: You supposed to work eight hours a day, but lots of days we worked ten, twelve hours.

AB: Did you get paid overtime?

TM: Not if you were loading coal, but if you were working for the company you would be paid overtime, if you were loading coal you didn't get paid no overtime. You got paid forty seven cents a ton for loading the coal, got three cents on the ton for cleaning it. That's when you take the gob out, that's what we called it and niggerheads, one streak in it we called niggerheads and another streak in it we called bone, but it was commonly called gob. Bone was real hard funny stuff that wouldn't burn in a furnace. The coal loaders, those who just put it in the, the cars they didn't get overtime, they just got straight fifty cents a ton, forty seven cents for loading and three cents for the cleaning, it would take fifteen, twenty minutes in cleaning a ton of coal at that time and without much gob in it and if they check your car and found as much as ten pounds of gob they dock you, you'd loose about for a two ton car they would pay you for thirty seven hundred pounds and was supposed to be two ton cars. And if you would crib them up, get some blocks and crib them up around sides and ends you could get up to forty seven hundred pounds on a car if they didn't dock you and went around and for a dock which was, which was around three hundred pounds at that time which didn't seem like a whole lot but for a man who put in all that it, it was a whole lot. To pick it with a pick then shoot it and we had to buy our own powder that we shot with, we had to buy the carbide for our lights or oil for our lights whichever we used, course some people used oil lamps and others used carbide. I used carbide myself because I could see better by it than oil lamps. It was a pretty rough life, a pretty good life too, I really don't have any regrets I'm getting along pretty good, the Lord's been awful good to us. Can't say that I enjoyed the houses though they go awful cold in the wintertime, awful nice in the summertime. Wasn't a bit good in the wintertime. We used these Burnside heaters and open fireplaces, the house we lived in had two burnside heaters and open fireplaces and we'd get them red hot and still freeze, they wasn't very good houses.

AB: You said you were a mule driver?

TM: After a length of time I was a mule driver then I went from to helping on a cutting machine at that time it paid \$4.15 for an eight hours and if you worked overtime you just got the regular wage, there wasn't any half pay or time and a half, just regular wages. I drove one mule an old gray mule, after we make the first trip around in the morning he was on the turn the rest of the day. I didn't have to tell him which place to go into or anything, if a cutting machine was in a place he knew it was in there just like a man, he knew it and would pass that place up and go onto the next place. At quitting time every driver would haul his crew in and out and they would flash the lights three times to let you know the power was off and when it flashed the third time the mule was gone and if you weren't in the car you just walked in cause he was headed for the barn and he would go. There was one mule there when we run our of emptys and wait for a moter to come into the siding of the break thru where we keep the mules in he'd go in and lay down and rest until the moter come in, he lay down and really rested, you would be really surprised how smart he was. In that mine about any of them would run the turn, but that old gray one was extra good, he was a real pet. He could run pretty fast, a good runner. I've seen them walk the railroad ties and not step off a one. Even walk across a treasle on those ties.

AB: Were you a machine operator, when did the machines come in?

TM: First machines came in that mine in 1927, the summer of 1927, an old CE6 had a big chain and drag it across the face and across the bottom and back to the track. They had what they called a cricket sort of a governor with a crank and a latch. You have to crank slack out of the chain as it was going across the front, the chain go through some gears and slack in the machine, someone in the back would have to keep slack jacked out of the chain with that cricket they called it. To hold the machine would make a run through and the cricket bar would fly up and hit you, it was awfully dangerous, lots of boys got hurt on it. A few months later or maybe a year got what they call a rope machine, had



two ropes, one live rope and one dead rope called a tail rope. Had friction bands on it, this is sorta like brake bands that comes on an automobile. You tighten the tail with the friction band to keep the back end of machines straight with the front. If you wanted to cut around just tie the tail rope down and let the live rope keep going on around, you cut a corner that way. Then nowadays they are rubber tires and seen two of them, cars on rubber tires are the best and easiest to maneuver around with, had all kinds of jacks if you want to move the machine just raise them on jacks then where you want to go and go. Type of machine we had what they call a front wall machine, you had two sometimes, lots of times take the live rope and pull it back down and then tie the tail rope and hold it straight cause cutting was pretty hard, it was real hard, it cut a place with one set of bits and have to change bits. What we called setting bits, had to reset them, then went to blacksmiths' shop and he'd sharpen them then pretty much of a work in this pick point. The blacksmith made lots of tools, picks, tapping bar, and needles, which was a long iron bar you had to put into the hole to tap your powder and tap with clay or some sort of mud hard enough to hold up and not fall down so that it would not block the squibs. Nowadays they have electric caps and electric wires in and out the hole and tap right on the wire which is an improvement over what it use to be.