

Marshall University

Marshall Digital Scholar

0064: Marshall University Oral History
Collection

Digitized Manuscript Collections

1975

Oral History Interview: Wilber A. Henson

Wilber A. Henson

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history

Recommended Citation

Marshall University Special Collections, OH64-179, Huntington, WV.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Manuscript Collections at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in 0064: Marshall University Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.



179

ORAL HISTORY

GIFT AND RELEASE AGREEMENT

I, W. A. Henson, the undersigned, of
Beckley, County of Raleigh State
of West Virginia, grant, convey, and transfer to the James E.
Morrow Library Associates, a division of the Marshall University Foundation, Inc.,
an educational and eleemosynary institution, all my right, title, interest, and
literary property rights in and to my testimony recorded on Sept. 28, 1975,
to be used for scholarly purposes, including study rights to Reproduction.

W A H Open and usable after my review
initial

_____ Closed for a period of _____ years.
initial

_____ Closed for my lifetime.
initial

_____ Closed for my lifetime unless special permission.
initial

Date 9-28-75

W. A. Henson
(Signature - Interviewee)

203 Cook Avenue
Address

Date 9-28-75

Beckley W Va 25801
Elizabeth Ann Smarr
(Signature - Witness)

AN INTERVIEW WITH:

W.A. Henson

CONDUCTED BY:

Elizabeth A. Smarr

PLACE:

Beckley, West Virginia

DATE:

September 28, 1975

TRANSCRIBED BY:

Robert R. Ratcliff

W.A. Henson

EAS: This is an interview with W.A. Henson of 203 Cook Avenue, Beckley, West Virginia. Today's date is September 28, 1975 and my name is Elizabeth Ann Smarr. Uh, what is your full name, sir?

WAH: Wilber Adare Henson.

EAS: Uh, hum, and when and where were you born?

WAH: I was born in Amhurst County, Virginia in 1915.

EAS: Uh, yes and, uh, so, uh, when did you begin in the mines as a coal miner?

WAH: In 1941.

EAS: I see, this was here in Beckley?

WAH: Here in, in, in Sprag.

EAS: In Sprag?

WAH: In Sprag, where we are now.

EAS: Uh, huh, and what mine did you begin in?

WAH: I began, uh, in Sprag mine, New River Company, 19, September 20, 1941.

EAS: Uh, huh, what was your job there?

WAH: Uh, coal loader, hand loader.

EAS: Allright, just, you just put it in the carts.

WAH: You just put it in the car, you just were nothin but brute worker [EAS: Um, hum.]. Well they did cut the coal for you but you had to shovel it in the coal and it was, when I started in there it was, uh, thirty-three inches first started and it was, it was terrible low.

EAS: And uh, . . .

WAH: It, about two inches over top your, over top yer car, you couldn't get a big lump in it if you happen to shoot down, uh, big lumps ya had to take a hammer and beat it up to get over top the car.

EAS: Uh, huh (unidentified voice in background).

WAH: Uh, the rock was known as a little man.

EAS: Um and, uh, how long a day did you work, when you began how . . .

WAH: It was, I believe it was nine hour. I'm not positive (unidentified voice). Well I know when I started and when, when dad started it was daylight till dark.

EAS: Um, hum. . .

WAH: We seen dad on, uh, us, us kids seen dad on, uh, Saturday or a Sunday because he left before we got up and came in after we went to bed as kids.

EAS: Um, what was it like working in the mines when you were there?

WAH: Well it was pretty rough, pretty rough and then we, uh, you had to be careful and, and they didn't have safety equipment like you got today or anything like this, just, and it was just all brute work, hard work [EAS: Um, hum.]. Well it's still hard today but it's not nothing today like it was back then.

EAS: Alright and, um, what, you know, typical day what, how would you spend a day just, uh, what time would you go in and, uh. . .

WAH: In the mine?

EAS: Um, hum in the mines.

WAH: Well lets see, typical day then well, uh, uh, we was cookin' with coal, didn't have coke, and I got up at three thirty, lit the fires in the old cook stove so my wife could get up get biscuits ready for breakfast

[EAS: Um, hum.] (door slamming in the background). Then, uh, I'd leave home, this was when I was on day shift, I'd leave home about seven o'clock, er, six thirty, probably about six thirty because you went in fifteen after seven and it was about five o'clock, maybe when we got out, it was usually about six o'clock when we got home [EAS: Um, hum.]. Just draggin' cause [EAS: Right.] we, wages weren't too big then and you had to, you, you had, had to work or you had to, you didn't have anything.

EAS: Were you paid by how much coal you loaded?

WAH: Paid by what, what coal you furnished your own tools and bought yer own powder. If you loaded as much as five cars a day, four cars a day you was making, uh, average wage, just enough to get by on [EAS: Um, hum.]. If you had a good place, uh, good boss, why you made seven or eight cars a day you was doing extra ordinary good. You was makin' good money. And that they say was about, well when I started it was about sixty cents a ton I think it was when I started. And you know how many tons you had to make to, to make, uh, uh, wage? Cost of livin' wasn't much then as it is now but, uh, it was, uh, . . .

EAS: Uh, how did they know who did what work? How did they check on your work?

WAH: Well, uh, in loadin' coal you had, uh, you had a check, a little brass check with a number on it. Well you hang your check on your car. And lots of times I've had cars stolen, somebody come by and pass where or somethin' where the cars are settin', take your check off and put his on. They wasn't much of that goin' on but they did happen didn't they paw, or didn't it? It happened. But you had a check and they barrelled it out and put it over the scales, they weighed it as it went over the scales, and they had a weight boss and a check weighman and they would call out your number see (inaudible) and they'd put the weight down on your number. Like my, when I first started in the mines my check number was thirty. Every car come out there with, uh, thirty check on it was, uh, credited to my account number.

EAS: Uh, one man I talked to said that, uh, after a while they began putting their checks in the bottom of the, before they loaded the coal so that when they got out there and unloaded and weighed it they'd know whose it was and the checks couldn't be, uh, exchanged at all. Did you do anything like this, just . . .

WAH: Well no, we never, we never did do that only when, uh, log alley yer, uh, company worked out I went to, down Horse Creek and worked in, uh, what they called crunch mine, it was, uh, mine and we had, uh, didn't have checks, we just had our buggy number. And we would write our buggy number on a check list and put it in the, put it in there and then when it went through the tipple well the little screens they'd pick that up and know how many buggies you'd loaded and that way they'd check to see whether we loaded any dirt or rock or anything. And, uh, back when I first started in the mines if you loaded, uh, if you didn't clean your coal good and you got two docks, they called them docks, you got two docks they laid you off a day. Three docks that is, uh, and a half, three docks you got two days, four docks you didn't have any job. You had to pick yer coal, when you shoot it down you had to go through your coal and pick your rock out cause they, uh, checked it over at the screens and then some places they would to set a car over to the side they would unload it by hand and put this rock or this bowl or whatever it is in buckets or pails and then weigh it. And then, uh, that's when they had the, they, they would dock you so much. That's when you could load it all but when, when I started you weren't supposed to load any, they laid you off if you loaded dirty coal, you had to clean and pick through your coal and you shoot it down and if you brought rock down with it you had to go through there and pick it all out.

EAS: Uh, what, what equipment did you use?

WAH: Well we used, uh, hand tools, had to furnish your own hand tools. You had a pick, you usually had two picks and a shovel and a hammer and a slate bar and a auger,

rest auger that ya crank with by hand and, uh, axe, somethin' or other like that there you had to furnish yer own tools. If you got one lost you had to go buy you another one to finish up because they didn't furnish at that time.

EAS: Uh, how were the mines lighted? How would you see, you know, have light to see what you were doing?

WAH: Well you'd have a cap lat, uh, light. Uh, when, when I went in the mines the, uh, cap lamps, electric lights come out. Now my father used carbide lights, but, uh, but I never did have to use carbide lights, uh, I used cap lamps, electric cap lamps and that's all the light you had in your equipment. The motors had lights on them but yer, cuttin' machine, bottom cuttin' machine, they didn't have any lights on them, they just drug them in and out [EAS: Um, hum.]. But, uh, we had cap lamps that we used.

EAS: Okay, lamps. Uh, did you, uh, have to furnish your own powder?

WAH: Had to furnish your own powder, buy your own powder, you went to the company store and got you a powder order, pay fur your powder and next morning they'd, a man at the powder house, usually the truck driver of the company store and you'd give him yer slip and he'd give you what powder you'd bought.

EAS: Um, I see. Uh, uh, what about the mechanization in the mines, did it begin being mechanized about that time?

WAH: Yeah, along about that time we, uh, there at Sprag, we, uh, they set up conveyer. But it was all hand loaded on, on the conveyer you know so they could just, uh, have a chain line to take it out and put it in the cars [EAS: Um, hum.]. They had the cars out on the main line and, uh, that, uh, took it on. They didn't, just set a whole tripple cars under there and they had a boom boy that pulled the cars under and they loaded into that [EAS: Um, hum.]. But they was

still cuttin' with the old machines, the old bottom machine, they didn't have any rubber tired buggies or anything. And now they got rubber tired buggies, they got rubber tired machines and they got continuous miners and everything well we, uh, just cut the coal and, uh, (voice in background) and yeah, they shootin' shot was part of it too and then, uh, uh, when, uh, I was put off of the big mines and couldn't get job in the big mines back, a few years back was hard. Well we shot coal on solid. You had to drill yer coal and shoots on solid, no air and smoke and sometimes, maybe thirty minutes before you get back into where you shot the coal down because you and, uh, then they just have them little ol' drop bottom buggies to pull around, that was pretty rough.

(Voice in background) On solid he means is that the machine hasn't cut under the bottom of it. That's what he said when shootin' on solid, the machine hasn't cut the bottom [EAS: Oh, I see.]. In regular mines the machine cuts the bottom, [EAS: Um.] that's necessary.

WAH: Unless it's goin' into a block of coal and start drilling and shootin' coal out and maybe, maybe use, uh, shoot five or six sticks of powder that you bought yourself, and you know you get, might get a good shot off and maybe get five or six shovel fulls of coal, well you got to shoot again to get you a car and the powder run way up back on a solid [EAS: Um, hum.]. But on, uh, uh, hand loadin' it probably wasn't, wasn't too awful after you knew how to shoot coal and drill yer holes right [EAS: Um, hum, alright.]. Then, uh, we had the conveyors and they started loadin', loadin' coal onto the conveyors and they went from conveyors to this Wilcox and LaNors and continuous miners, you know, and they got the belts and, and uh, but, uh, buggies got everything on rubber tired equipment, uh, all that on rubber tires now. Last place I worked why we, uh, all we used cars for was supplies there was belts all the way. Well they used rubber tired buggies to haul from the face to the belt, the beltin' point then, uh, coal was brought outside on the belt. And where they used motors and cars for was supplies.

EAS: Um, uh, what about, uh, how the roofing how do you use roof bolts or was there steel posts?

WAH: Well now back when I started you used timbers. You used timbers, we haven't had roof bolts too long but you used timbers and I really prefer timbers than roof bolts anyhow. Cause a timber if you got yer self behind a timbers you can break yer, if yer pullin' pillars you can break yer top off and have yer falls behind ya where them roof bolt will hold it. And, uh, a timber will warn ya, well a roof bolt will warn a little bit when you got a lot of pressure cause it'll ping and the hood will fly off it but a timber, if you get timber, two, three row timber, line timber and they start to break and you better go cause its a better warning system but it's not near what the, equipment they got today, timbers, they still use a lot of timbers, but the equipment they got today, uh, timberin' the way we did when we started the mines would just be a disadvantage to 'em cause the equipment couldn't get around. Cause, uh, these big buggies you got have 'bout eighteen foot, sixteen to eighteen foot roadway for these big buggies. Well they have to have headers and roof bolts over that to hold that rock, [EAS: Um, hum.] really hold it. But I've seen the whole entrys of it come down with the roof bolts sticking out of it.

EAS: Alright, uh, how far apart did you put the timbers?

WAH: Four foot.

EAS: Right this, uh, how do . . .

WAH: Placed them four foot apart.

EAS: Um, hum.

WAH: Usually, uh, yer shovel handle was, uh, forty, yer shovel was forty-six inches. And then set a post, they'd shovel down the way, set a post. But back in them days they weren't too particular the way, like they are now. Now they have, uh, timber brand

and ya got to fight with it. But back then, you set yer timbers where you thought they'd do you some good. All but yer safety timbers, you had to have safety timbers, yer face [EAS: Um, hum.]. But, uh, till then you just set them wherever you needed them or [EAS: Right.] usually about a four foot size. Well the bolt aren't four foot centers, then.

EAS: Right, what's the principle behind the roof bolts?

WAH: Well the roof bolts, uh, well it's, uh, (Background voice: Holds the bottom.) well it, let me, uh, it holds, it holds the slate and drill right through it, but to a certain extent. But, uh, if you get enough pressure on it it'll pull them bolts out of there, them roof bolts and, uh, they'll, uh, sometimes now I have seen in my time, but the years you bolt the roof up and, uh, then, uh, bolts 'ill leak off. You can put two hundred pounds pressure on it and go back in thirty minutes and you won't have ten pounds pressure. But they, uh, it's still, it holds it up, it's, uh, better plan, that is for the, uh, equipment they got today than the bolts [EAS: Um, hum.]. It's really the best plan to hold it up [EAS: Allright.]. And of course you can, got so much more room to move in and then this, this equipment they got now, these continuous miners, you still use timbers behind them but they, the operator he runs up in these poles until he gets these last row of bolts, when he has to pull out and set over and while he's settin' over takin' when bolt the other, set a row of timbers and then bolt that up, where if they had timbers he'd always be knocking his timbers and knocking that rock down on him where that bolts will hold it up and, and uh, where timbers, you set a timber under an old horse back where old bad slip and then you knock that timber, rocks comin' down with the bolt they can put that up, uh, under that bad slip or that horse back and draw it up, back up, it can get back down an inch or two and they can take them bolts and pull it back up against the top, make it solid.

EAS: Um, I see, what about, um, kettle bottoms, how would

you protect yourselves from those?

WAH: Well then, back then when, uh, we, uh, had 'em we shot that rock. If they was loose we'd bring 'em down if we could get them down, if we couldn't get them down we'd set a timber under 'em and, uh, they got, was in the way why we'd take part and picks and everything and pry it down where we could get at it, an inch of it to two foot of it.

(Voice in background) And lots of times you don't even see it. A man's working in the coal mine, I don't mean to be buttin' in, but anybody workin' in a coal mine he's not lookin' up all the time, he's lookin' at this coal. He gotta, if he's gotta work, he's gotta get this coal out. So he misses kettle bottom.

WAH: While there be a little thin layer of slate, just like paper, or maybe, quarter of an inch, it'll be slick just like that and you won't know it and all at once it'll just break loose and it's like a stump.

(Voice in background) It's a stump, what it is, its got roots.

WAH: Got roots running out from it. I've seen 'em.

(Voice in background) The ice age, the ice age, when they made the coal, the ice age what made the coal and they had run over a stump sometime or other and the stump still sets there, that is what a kettle bottom is.

WAH: Yeah, it's a petrified tree.

(Voice in background) It's a petrified tree or a kettle bottom.

WAH: And I've seen 'em from six inches to three foot, (Three foot, oh, yes.) three foot around, And they're heavy too. Their, their just like steel.

EAS: Yes, uh, how wide were these seams of coal that . . .

WAH: Well I, I've worked in, uh, worked in twenty-four inches at one time in a punch mine. I worked in twenty-four inches of coal. We had these drag bottom, drag cable bu-, uh, drop bottom buggies and we had fourteen inches wheels on them, automobile wheels, rubber tires, and we had to run them half flat to get them in and out. It was twenty-four inches. Then I had worked in some that was twelve, twelve and a half feet, but that would be beside a road or something other, but, uh, last place I worked we run anywhere from four foot to, to seven foot of coal [EAS: Um.]. But, uh, when I first started it was in, uh, thirty and thirty-three inches. And I've worked as low as twenty-four inches. You, uh, you don't set up and take you a drink of water you laid down and took you a drink of water out of yer bucket, spilt it all over ya, ya face. It was down in your shirt and everything because you couldn't stand up. You never got on your feet from the time you went into the mines, worked eight hours, time you went in there till the time you came out you were either laying out to rest or on yer hands and knees, crawling [EAS: Right.].

EAS: Uh, uh, uh, in each miner, did he have his own little room to . . .

WAH: He had his own place, own place, entry place or rooms, he had his own rooms. He drove it out [EAS: Um, hum.]. Drove his own break throughs and, and uh, they usually you laid your own track when you was hand loadin', you laid yer own jumpers. And you kept, uh, four or five jumpers, would be eight or ten foot line and you run out them jumpers, the track man would come in if he had time and lay yer a rail or two. But if the track man was busy and you needed a rail or two, didn't have enough jumpers, they brought you rails and you laid yer rails yerself and you didn't get compensated for that [EAS: Um, hum.]. But if you had rock if you had four inches of slate, draw slate, commin' you didn't get paid anything. All over four inches you got paid so much a foot for yer rock, but uh, you had to load, uh, you had to have over four inches to get paid for it. You just have four inches of slate commin' you moved that slate

uh, uh, fans that, er, uh, [EAS: Uh, right.] outside you know its, uh, pulls the air through, it don't blow the air through, it pulls the air through.

EAS: Um, hum.

WAH: It pulls in the drift mouth and takes it all over and they have overcast to check one blast to the other and maybe ev, you can have three, four, five splits on one, on, on one air, one intake if you got enough volume at the fan is taken out to pull through there you can have as many, all the splits you want on one intake.

EAS: Um, hum. Uh, how did they, you guard against gas in the mines?

WAH: Well they had, uh, when, when I started in there they had, uh, the machineman when he cut the place he had, uh, uh, flame safety lamp, he'd check for gas and if there was any why he wouldn't cut you a place. And then onced a day the boss, your section boss, he would come around and, uh, check your place see if, when I started if you had gas in your place and they didn't run and you didn't know it, you worked in that gas and took a chance of gettin' blowed up, ya know, but, but uh, now they have, uh, on all equipment at the face, uh, methane detectors now. They use flame safety lamp now and then but, but they got a methane dector now. If they keep regular checks and then these, uh, uh, continuous miners we got a methane dector on it that's a "sniffer" they call it [EAS: Um, hum.]. If it hits, uh, two or three percent, four percent, something like that, anyhow when it hits a certain percent of gas, it turns off the equip, piece of equipment. And it don't start, uh, when he turns off that piece of equipment you go back and pull your power and then you run yer canvas up in there and go check your fly and transceiver, go through there and that piece of equipment won't start until that gas is back down. But it automatically cuts it off, just like that, when it hits that certain percent of gas.

EAS: Um, right.

WAH: But our days you, uh, you didn't know you had it, if you had a pocket of gas in there you didn't know you had it until the boss came around. He come around usually one time a day. He check the places every mornin' and, uh, they's flame safety light, stick it up in the air [EAS: Um.] and if you had to check for gas you got the air, and I have taken pasteboard box, back when I started and go in there fine, check the gas in the place and I'd take the pasteboard box and fan the air, fan the gas out of the place and also smoke, I fan smoke out of the place [EAS: Um, hum.] cause it'd be, uh, the, uh, air onced it gotten out it'd sweep your face and get, get all of that gas out.

EAS: Uh, was there much water in the mines? I've heard some people . . .

WAH: Some, someplaces, someplaces was dry and someplaces you, uh, from the time you got in the mines till you got out you was wet and muddy. And I've seen it commin' out tops that, uh, you wear slicker suits, jackets and pants, and you still ringin' wet, just pourin' out the top. And I've seen drug off the botton and I've worked, it was too dry and dusty, you know, it was dry and dusty as could be, but I've seen plenty of water and, and that's nothin' no worse than, than water runnin' out the top and right down on yer back. And someplaces we took, uh, tin in there and built little sheds over and run the water each way so we could work and pick up a shovel full of coal and you got half water and when you throwed the shovel full towards the car you get about half the coal in the car and the other half on the ground cause the water wash it out of yer shovel.

EAS: Right.

WAH: But they have pumps mine now you see, course I . . .

EAS: Um, right, um allright now, what about, uh, safety.

What safety precautions were taken in the mines?
Say in . . .

WAH: Well back, back when I started you was your own safety man, you looked after yourself. Well they, they, they looked after, uh, your, they come in and checked on your gas but you checked yer own top and had to watch yourself real close (dog barking). Now, now they got, uh, well back when I was in there we didn't have no rock gravel, didn't scatter no rock gravel, only on the main lines did they, the company scattered rock up on the lines. Up in the faces we didn't scatter. Now they have, uh, rock to keep the dust down, they have all kinds of dust controls now. But back when, uh, when I started, they . . . don't let him out Pa (dog barking). Come here Shamp [EAS: It's alright.]. And, uh, back then they didn't have any dust control, uh, nothin' like, uh, if you had a place dusty and you wanted to make a livin' you got into it even if you couldn't see [EAS: Um.] where you had to feel around to find yer tools and everything, but now they have dust control and the like like that and, uh, back then the, got open man trip cars and you just took off in there maybe then you had to pull the winch up, maybe you didn't [EAS: Um, hum.]. The, uh, only thing that they did they, they checked for gas now and then, bout once, bout twice a day, early in the mornin' and, and the boss would come around and check on ya one time through the day. But you took care of yer own top, yer own safety. You watched, you watched yourself real close and if you was careless you knew of a careless man, he got hurt first and the man who was too safety conscience got hurt second, and the man who just, he watched his self but wasn't too conscience of it he, he was the last one to get hurt usually.

EAS: Right. Um, how, how often were the mines inspected?

WAH: Well back then they had, they had a inspector come round but it was probably bout every six months, [EAS: Um, hum.] but they had a state inspector

[EAS: Right.] come around probably, I don't, don't remember, you know, its been a long time, I don't remember but it was probably bout every six months the miners got to come around inspect the mines but they didn't have the laws and the rules that they got now, today.

EAS: Yes then, uh, and these laws and rules have been pushed through by the union have they?

WAH: By the union, yep.

EAS: Right.

WAH: All about safety, new laws about safety precautions then you had back then.

EAS: Right. Then you began in '41. This was right before the Second World War started. Uh, how did the, the war affect the mines at all, um. . .

WAH: Well back then the, then, uh, mi-mines if you was a good worker and, uh, the company wanted you, they would get you deferred. I've got, uh, clip of deferment slips in there they would, uh, uh, put me in one A, I was married and, and had one kid but they would switch me into one A regular for, ready for call. Well the super, Mr. Bowman, he would say "Bill" he saids, "you got another call but" he says, "don't worry about it." Company will get you, got me deferred, I didn't have to go to service [EAS: Um.] cause the com-company kept me out of it cause I reckon, because I was a pretty good worker, worked, didn't lay off [EAS: Um.]. There was some friends of mine that I knew who didn't work half the time, they'd lay off and would, wouldn't work. But when they got deferred they, I mean, when they got their call they had to go but I was deferred all the time and I, uh, got seven, eight, uh, cards in there from one A to three A [EAS: Alright.]. Then they'd, in a month or two they'd put me in, like they was one A they'd be called and then the super would, uh, . . .

EAS: Defer you to the . . .

WAH: Get me deferred, uh, back in. I didn't have to go.

EAS: Uh, how did, um, the government, how did they, did they interfere with the mines, uh, all the . . .

WAH: No, not . . .

EAS: State and Federal governments?

WAH: Not back then that I know of.

EAS: Um.

WAH: Well let's see, one time back during the war we went on strike cause of the contract or something and the government, I think the government took over the mines for just a while [EAS: Um, hum.] until they got things straightened out but, uh, usually it was just up to the miners and the company, you know, to cooperate, [EAS: Um, hum.] settle their grievances [EAS: Um.] but back then, uh, boss come up and, and cuss you out if he want to, there weren't nothin' you could do about it, cause we wasn't strong in the union though. But now, uh, a boss can, um, can, uh, swear over the phone and you can hear him you can report him . . . (break in tape).