

Hollins University

Hollins Digital Commons

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Honors Theses

2019

Mamas, Miners, & Movements: Women and Gendered Labor in Central Appalachia During the 20th Century

Devan M. Mullins
Hollins University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/ughonors>



Part of the [Appalachian Studies Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Labor History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mullins, Devan M., "Mamas, Miners, & Movements: Women and Gendered Labor in Central Appalachia During the 20th Century" (2019). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*, Hollins University. 63.
<https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/ughonors/63>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Theses at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lvilelle@hollins.edu, folckil@hollins.edu.

Mamas, Miners, & Movements:

Women and Gendered Labor in Central Appalachia During the 20th Century

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree
of Bachelor of Arts.

Department of History

Hollins University

May 15, 2019

By

Devan M. Mullins

Roanoke, Virginia

Class of 2019

This thesis is dedicated to all the Appalachian women I have known and have not known. Learning from you has been a privilege. I am eternally grateful to the Appalachian women in my life – my mother, grandmother, aunts, and friends. I am proud to be of the same stock.

Table of Contents

| <u>Chapter</u> | <u>Page</u> |
|---|-------------|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | |
| Women in the Coal Camps of Appalachia..... | 6 |
| Chapter 2 | |
| Women in the Coal Mines..... | 18 |
| Chapter 3 | |
| Women’s Resistance & Activism in the Central Appalachian Coal Fields..... | 38 |
| Conclusion..... | 60 |
| | |
| Bibliography | |

Introduction

Linda Ruth Lester steps off the front porch of her home, dinner bucket in hand. It's early in the morning on August 6, 1979. Coal dust and dried mud falls from her work boots as she walks to her car. Linda cranks the car, buckles her seatbelt, and pulls onto the road that will take her to the Consolidated Coal Company's Pocahontas Virginia #6 Mine in Russell County, Virginia. Lester is 18 and it's her first day on the job. Newly divorced and a mother to a young son, Lester is only one of four women in her town to work in the mines.¹

A woman heading off to her shift in the coal mines is not the first thing that comes to mind when someone begins discussing Appalachian women. Instead, people often think of Loretta Lynn's childhood growing up in Butcher Holler as she described in her most popular song "Coal Miner's Daughter." The image of Lynn carrying water from wells and being barefoot in the summertime because her family could not afford shoes year-round² crafted an image of poor, hardworking people. Lynn's description of the life of a coal mining family during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s framed the public's understanding of the region.³ The first line of "Coal Miner's Daughter" proclaims Lynn was born "in a cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler," which also crafted the physical surroundings of the Appalachian woman – in the hollers and mountainsides of Eastern Kentucky, which typified the experience of other Appalachians.⁴ This

¹ Randall Norris. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

² Loretta Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter," recorded October 1 1969, track 1 on *Coal Miner's Daughter*, Decca Records. <https://genius.com/Loretta-lynn-coal-miners-daughter-lyrics>.

³ Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter."

⁴ Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter."

image has solidified in the minds of many Americans – leaving Appalachia, and specifically Appalachian women – in a state of stagnation.⁵

Admittedly, conservative gender norms are deeply woven within the fabric of mountain culture. Religion – namely conservative Christianity – has had a far-reaching influence on the development of gender roles and overall understanding of gender.⁶ Although conservative Christianity is not unique to the region, strict gender roles persist in the region even today. If these attitudes are still present in the area, despite overall social progress on a national level, it calls into question the development of gender roles throughout the previous century. Questions arise about how Appalachian women, throughout the 20th century experienced gender: How did gender norms effect labor within the region, specifically the types of work women could do? Is there a change within social understandings of gendered work during the 20th century? Are there instances where Appalachian women participated in work originally deemed “men’s work”? Later in the 20th Century, how did Appalachian women use their gender and challenge their gender in order to create change? The growing field of Appalachian Studies most recently focuses on the social, economic, and environmental problems of Appalachia and ways to solve it, with special attention paid to the US’s political climate.

Extensive, comprehensive research about women is lacking within the field of Appalachian Studies. Academic analysis of the region, save studies by Barbara Ellen Smith, Mary Anglin, and Suzanne E. Tallichet later discussed in this thesis, is primarily attentive to the men of the region. Historical literature of Appalachia which detail the Scotch-Irish “settling” of the Cumberlands,

⁵ Additionally, Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 visit to Eastern Kentucky during the implementation of the War on Poverty, followed by the vast dissemination of photographs of people living in the region, has helped to further solidify a stereotypical image of people in Central Appalachia.

⁶ Deborah L. Blackwell, “Female stereotypes and the Creation of Appalachia, 1870-1940,” in *Women of the Mountain South: Identity, Work, and Activism*, ed. Connie Park Rice and Marie Todesco (Ohio University Press, 2015), 75.

the development of the coal mining industry, and then ensuing conflict and “bloody wars” between unions and companies focus on the actions of men.⁷ John Alexander Williams’ *Appalachia: A History* is commonly lauded for its discussion of the historic development within the area. Williams chronicles the social, economic, and environmental past of the Appalachians, wholly focusing on the male actors. Likewise, Ronald D. Eller’s *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, mentions women briefly over the course of six pages throughout the work.⁸ Both foundational texts discuss the socioeconomic and cultural realities of the central Appalachian region, and despite the intensive analysis, pays little attention to women’s place in creating its culture. In contrast, the object of this thesis is to examine and analyze the labor contributions of women within Appalachia as ideas of labor evolved through the last century.

Scholars who discuss the coal wars of the early 20th century, the organization of the United Mine Workers of America, and the political landscape of the region, again, similarly exclude women from the conversation. Although Paul F. Taylor’s work, *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky, 1931-1941*, published in 2017, analyzes the issues that motivated conflict between coal companies and striking miners, he only concedes to women’s involvement with unions and striking by the 1970s, something this thesis will later address and refute.⁹ The literature surrounding Appalachian women is relegated to more concentrated studies and thus, is only mentioned in passing in the larger, foundational texts about the region.

⁷ This is further chronicled in John Sayles’s 1987 film *Matewan*. The film focuses on race relations during the early 1920s in West Virginia, as miners work with a visiting labor union organizer to fight a violent coal company supervisor.

⁸ Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground Appalachia since 1945*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 325-326.

⁹ Paul F. Taylor, *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky 1931-1941*. (St. Martin, Ohio: Commonwealth Book Company, 2017), 194.

This thesis will use two oral history projects, one specifically about women in Appalachia and one that compiles a broader oral history of the region as primary source materials. In an oral history project for the Kentucky Historical Society, researcher Randall Norris interviewed 40 women from the region, collecting narratives that highlight the simultaneous diversity and homogeneity of the Appalachian region. Through these oral histories, the joys and heartaches of the region are captured by the voices of women who experienced them. On a larger scale, Italian scholar of American literature and culture, Alessandro Portelli spent nearly three decades visiting Appalachia, speaking with anyone who would talk to him, and compiling an oral history that delved deeper into the culture, exploitation, conflicts, and resilience of the Appalachians. Portelli's work is a collection of experiences of Appalachians from the early 20th century to the present.¹⁰

This thesis, in contrast to the Appalachian studies, seeks to better analyze the contributions and experiences of women within the central Appalachian region through the work they participated in during the 20th century. Chapter one lays the foundational understandings of gender roles that crafted the society of the area. Analysis will then move to examine how the work women did within the home started and evolved as a response to the introduction of the coal industry, their husbands becoming waged laborers and the transition to coal towns and camps. This chapter connects between labor evolution for women within Appalachia and the US as a whole – highlighting similarities and differences. Chapter two will then discuss Appalachian women's move from the household to waged labor within the coal mines. This chapter will analyze women's motivations to enter the male-dominated occupation as well as their experiences after beginning the jobs. Special attention will be paid to the reactions of men and

¹⁰ Alessandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. Oxford: University Press, 2011.

other women to women coal miners to understand what gendered labor means within the region. Chapter three discusses the role of women in traditions of resistance in Appalachia, mainly in the context of labor rights and environmental activism. This chapter will study women's participation in union and nonunion activity as social unrest evolved from labor issues to discussions over the environmental impact of coal mining. This chapter seeks to broadly trace a line of women activists from the turn of the 19th century to more contemporary activists, highlighting the ways in which women used their gender, and worked against gender norms, to create change in the Appalachian region.

While this thesis will contribute to the works of female scholars who have discussed women in Appalachia before, it also seeks to create a deeper understanding of the evolution of gendered labor, women's agency, and their place within the history of Appalachia during the 20th century. Although conservative gender roles existed and persisted throughout the time this thesis analyses, Appalachian women continually negotiated the social constraints of their gender to help themselves, their families, and their communities.

Chapter I: Women in the Coal Camps of Appalachia

Man: [talking about Lynch, KY] “This is a woman’s town, here. You take a town where a woman don’t work, this is a woman’s town.”

His wife: “Can you imagine a woman having thirteen children and not working?”¹

As industrialization of the coal industry in the Appalachian region developed, coal towns – hamlets constructed by coal companies in order to house workers and their families a close distance to the mines² – filled the hollows of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Coal towns were initially constructed in the 1880s and became more prevalent in the 1920s.³ In the beginning stages, coal towns were often populated by temporary structures that eventually gave way to permanent houses, that were divided among two or three families at one time or another.⁴ The quality of these company owned houses depended on company management, profit, and the group of employees – immigrants that worked for smaller coal mining operations tended to live in less developed and harsher conditions.⁵ Still, even though some coal towns may have been more developed than others, coal towns were strikingly male. Because the nature of coal mining was “volatile...and an insecure occupation,” women experienced the transition from agrarian to capitalist structure of work in a unique way – which further contained women in the home, participating in work that would have initially been shared.⁶

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 39.

² Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia 1880-1960*. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 145.

³ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 33.

⁴ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 45.

⁵ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 37.

⁶ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 83.

This new, physical organization of communities in the region forced the transition of ruralized, agrarian based communities into capitalistic, wage earning neighborhoods⁷ which moved male workers from the fields to the mines. However, the transition did not go so deep as to bring in a female, wage-earning labor force from the area. According to historian Crandall Shifflett, “Women did not work beside men in the mines as they had on the farm. Views about work and a woman’s place, together with certain economic and social conditions, excluded women from underground work.”⁸ Although economic processes prevented women from entering the realm of waged-labor, and Appalachian cultural understandings of gender restricted women to the home and defined their roles, women were still able to create a sense of community within the close-knit coal camps.

Understanding the development of the central Appalachians relies on an analysis of the intersections of social and economic development in the region. Generalizations of the Appalachian region and its people, as Ann Oberhauser, a professor of geography at West Virginia University, explained in her 1995 article, have crafted an idea of the region that stemmed from images of “rural poverty, mountainous terrain, isolated communities, coal mining, and subsistence agriculture.”⁹ Oberhauser’s article, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography: Women and Work in Rural Appalachia,” discusses the role of women in the shaping of the region’s economy and looks to critique the common labor history analysis that did not consider the “role of gender in rural Appalachia [and how it] significantly affected its social and economic development.”¹⁰ Coal production powered the economy of the central Appalachians, concentrated in southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwest Virginia. From the

⁷ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 81.

⁸ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 81.

⁹ Ann M. Oberhauser, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography: Women and Work in Rural Appalachia,” *Growth and Change*, vol. 26, Spring 1995, 211.

¹⁰ Oberhauser, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography,” 218.

beginning, coal mining was a male dominated industry, using the region's workforce for back breaking, dangerous work. As time wore on, and mining became ever more lucrative, Appalachian women made their entrance into the mines, but not without difficulty. Oberhauser defined the resistance these new women miners faced as the result of the "gender relations and division of labor" that is imbedded in the culture of the Appalachians.¹¹ Instead of coal industry participation, women's labor focused on the households and child rearing. Moreover, the gendered labor division is unique to Appalachia, due to "particular historical developments in waged production or subsistence activities."¹² Because of the historical domination of coal mining by a male labor force, women had been excluded from the industry for generations.¹³ Essentially, Oberhauser explains, this image of the Appalachian woman, as a housewife and mother, dominated understandings of gendered labor division and culture.

While the economic structure only employed men, the concepts of gendered labor created specific norms and expectations of Appalachian women. What grew out of the coal towns is defined by scholars such as Judith Ivy Fiene, as "traditional mountain values," which went on to reinforce "traditional female role behavior."¹⁴ Ultimately, these "mountain values,"¹⁵ would define women "solely in relation to their position or...functions within the traditional family;"¹⁶ a mother, a wife, a homemaker. These "mountain values" are further illustrated in a 1988 interview of Harlan, Kentucky-born female poet George Ella Lyon. Lyon explained to scholar of American literature and culture, Alessandro Portelli, in his work *They Say in Harlan County* that "growing up in the mountains, it's a very antifemale culture. It's very patriarchal, the culture as a

¹¹ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 224.

¹² Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 223.

¹³ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 223.

¹⁴ Judith Ivy Fiene, "Gender, Class, and Self-Image." in *Appalachia: Social Context* ed. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney (Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2002), 72.

¹⁵ Fiene, "Gender, Class, and Self-Image," 72.

¹⁶ Fiene, "Gender, Class, and Self-Image," 71.

whole.”¹⁷ The “antifemaleness” described by George Ella Lyon derived from the overwhelming “maleness” and masculine nature of the coal camps and company towns.¹⁸ Still, Lyon’s experience, similar to many others that will be documented in this chapter, was thus influenced by the forces of a patriarchal society which often operated by defining women’s roles and their work as the opposite of men’s roles and work.

Women being confined to the home was not a uniquely Appalachian phenomenon, and other studies on women’s roles, show that Appalachia’s understanding of gendered labor somewhat mirrored the rest of the country during the early 20th century. Julie Matthaei, author of *An Economic History of Women in America*, discussed the cult of domesticity and women’s burdens of homemaking in the poor white family, particularly calling to attention the process of “making ends meet.” Matthaei explained that “at the turn of the century, many families were living on extremely limited budgets.”¹⁹ The process of “making ends meet” would translate into “using what we had”²⁰ in Appalachia. Although the company towns that mining families often lived in provided stores and services, the high cost led many Appalachian women to work to provide alternatives for their families, mirroring the effort of many poor women in the rest of the country.²¹ Appalachian women’s work further grew out of this effort to compensate for tight budgets which later became described simply as a way of life.

The characterization of women as homemakers and housewives was bolstered by the patriarchal influences of Appalachia’s culture which flourished in the early 20th century. As Ann

¹⁷ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 39.

¹⁸ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 83.

¹⁹ Julie A. Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America: Women’s Work, the Sexual Division of Labor, and the Development of Capitalism*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 124,

²⁰ Randall Norris, *Interview with Nannie Beatrice Spencer*. An oral history conducted 18 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3klc>.

²¹ Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America*, 121.

M. Oberhauser discussed in “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography,” Appalachia’s historical use and understanding of gender significantly influenced the region’s social and economic development.²² Oberhauser traces the intensifying gender division of labor to “early industrialization...[linking it] to the dominant gender relations...which largely excluded women from formal wage opportunities.”²³ A “family-centered culture” characterized the region for many living there, the culture being played out in societal enforcement of gender roles. The emphasis on family and gendered work was ingrained in the people of Appalachia in a way that maintained the “strong notion of silence, particularly of women.”²⁴

Although restrictive ideas of gender and gender work was not exclusive to Appalachia, it did provide larger obstacles of women seeking work outside of the home or interested in a life outside of finding a husband.²⁵ Existing social structure of gender in the Appalachians was in turn exacerbated by the economic development, specifically the processes of capitalism and the single gender labor pool. The transition from agrarian to a capitalist mode of production helped to strengthen gender-specific roles, ideally, the woman tending to the home, within the private sphere. Later on in George Ella Lyon’s interview, the poet explained the gender divisions forced a “strong notion of silence, particularly for women. Because it’s a family-centered culture, women have to keep the role they have had, simply because it’s harder to make changes.”²⁶ This quote illustrated, quite concisely, the multiple layers of culture and understanding of gender that constructed a role for women. Regardless of the exclusion of formal waged-labor, or a looming force that seemed to silence them in the coal camps and company towns, women experienced a fair share of labor within the confines of the gendered roles.

²² Oberhauser, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography,” 218.

²³ Oberhauser, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography,” 218.

²⁴ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 39.

²⁵ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 44.

²⁶ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 40.

While women were excluded from the mines, they remained within the household, which served as supplementary, non-waged work. As the coal camps expanded into company towns which often housed more and more family units²⁷, coal companies allowed many miners private ownership of their own livestock and a small portion of land for a garden.²⁸ This tending to the home, the garden, and the children became chronicled as women's work. Because of the strict division of labor, many from the region reflected on how "women did *all* the work" in the home, critiquing men for "walk[ing] in and out of a regular job...[men] didn't have any responsibility around the house."²⁹ Mothers would "sew, quilt, work in the garden...plow out a horse, have a garden...do whatever came handy."³⁰ Anne Napier of Cranks Creek, Kentucky described her mother as a workhorse: "from daylight till dark...she worked all day in the cornfield...[then she would] come home...[and] refereed us kids - which was a job."³¹ Napier's description of her mother exhibits the multiple layers of work that women were expected to do. They spent long hours in practical work that would sustain a family, while simultaneously caring for their children. Additionally, children were involved with the day to day running of the house, often times having to miss school in order to "tend to the kids or take clothes to the riverbank and wash 'em on a washboard...or go to the fields and work and raise what [they] eat in the summer."³² Despite the hardships, and the "prodigious amount of labor"³³ Napier like others, also reflected on the sense of community that was found in the coal camps and company towns.

²⁷ Shifflett, "Coal Towns," 47.

²⁸ Shifflett, "Mining Coal," 83.

²⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 39.

³⁰ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 39.

³¹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 39-40.

³² Randall Norris, *Interview with Granny Baldwin*. An oral history conducted 13 November 1993 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt754746sr34>.

³³ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 83.

The physical closeness of coal camps and company towns contributed to a strong sense of community that was characterized by reliable neighbors. Hazel Nunn, of Lee County, Virginia remembered her life as a young wife of a coal miner, “keeping house at Coxton,” Kentucky coal camp as a “happy time.” By the beginning of the Great Depression, Nunn had one child and worried over her husband regularly maintained a job, but observed that despite her neighbors having little, “people helped each other out...there wasn’t any work, but you got by as best as you could.”³⁴ The community of miners wives supported one another, even in illness Nunn recalled: “you didn’t have to ask [for help], they [just] came in and helped...you always had a neighbor with you.”³⁵ In other interviews from the region, Appalachian women, who most often experienced the support of the coal camps and company towns due to their traditional roles, viewed the towns as “one big family...everybody knew each other. If you had a problem, they had it. Everybody went to the same church. Everybody had the same occupation. We all has the same thing in common. Nobody considered themselves better than others because they all made the same. I think everybody got along better.”³⁶ Mossie Johnson of Bell County, Kentucky reminisced with Portelli about feeding hungry children in her neighborhood: “I had my children at home, but I had a lot of neighbors’ kids...I’d cook...and every child come in seem to fall in line and we didn’t see no strangers then.”³⁷ Johnson’s description illustrates ways in which she, as a housewife, confined by gendered labor, took care of those around her. The ability to rely on one another furthered a sense of community that was also acted out in social settings.

³⁴ Randall Norris, *Interview with Hazel Nunn*. An oral history conducted 19 November 1993 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

³⁵ Norris, *Interview with Hazel Nunn*.

³⁶ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 123.

³⁷ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 40.

The company town's cohesion was often experienced not just through work, but through women's social scenes and leisure activities. In interviews conducted by Randall Norris for the Kentucky Historical Society, Appalachian women consistently reflected on life in the coal camps as "a good life [that was simultaneously] a hard life."³⁸ As neighbors helped one another, bean stringing, apple and potato peelings brought them together. Additionally, produce that was not immediately eaten were canned and stored, another all-day event that brought large swaths of the community together. Often, people would "go to one field and hoe it out and get all of one neighbor's field hoed out...til we got 'em all hoed out."³⁹ Neighbors within the coal camps were reliable, turning a hard life into a better one.

For many, religious communities acted as added support. The majority of coal camp churches were Baptist and Pentecostal and held multiple services and events each week.⁴⁰ Granny Baldwin, of Louder's Creek, Kentucky, remembers the church services that moved throughout the coal towns: "they'd come to your house and have church...stay all day and eat dinner."⁴¹ The religious services would end with food and fellowship, a way for the community to connect to one another. Religious social groups also exhibit the ways in which coal town life "was not depressing." Rather, families gathered, children participated in young groups and school activities.⁴² Nannie Beatrice Spencer, a black woman from Etman, West Virginia also reflected on her position as a female preacher in the Baptist church.⁴³ Although women remained

³⁸ Norris, *Interview with Hazel Nunn*.

³⁹ Norris, *Interview with Granny Baldwin*.

⁴⁰ Randall Norris, *Interview with Lula King Davis*. An oral history conducted 16 April 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

⁴¹ Norris, *Interview with Granny Baldwin*.

⁴² Randall Norris, *Interview with Helen K. Carson*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

⁴³ Norris, *Interview with Nannie Beatrice Spencer*.

largely within the home, Spencer reveals that some women may have participated in leadership within the male-centric religion.⁴⁴

Still, the church house was a way for the gender roles of the region to be enforced. Women, even young girls, often met their husbands at church. Lula King Davis reflected on the system of courting, and the notion of men calling on women. Couples would often go to church together on Fridays to extended services, and on Saturdays, the men would “come over and talk” with the young women they were interested in.⁴⁵ Traditionally, throughout the first three decades of the 20th century, Appalachian women married young. The women Randall Norris interviewed stated their ages at marriage, ranging from 14 to 22, with their partners being anywhere from three years to 12 years older than them.⁴⁶ Marrying and bearing children was another essential form of labor for women.

Throughout the beginning of the 20th century, childbirth was one of the first forms of family labor that women participated in, as they were young when they married. Some women of Norris’s research reported having 12 surviving children. Appalachian women were “responsible for the intergenerational reproduction and maintenance,” of those who would then go on to work in the mines.⁴⁷ Most women preferred midwives and their mothers over male doctors, mainly because they distrusted the men that could “come into town and say they was a doctor,” and would receive a job. In three interviews, women reflected on their children and themselves nearly dying at the hands of doctors, motivating them to opt for a midwife with their next child.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ There has been little research done on the experiences of Black women in the Central Appalachians. Although the interview with Spencer hinted at race relations, due to the focus of this thesis and time constraints, those experiences were not included. Should this form of research continue, another chapter could be added to discuss the intersections of race relations and gender.

⁴⁵ Norris, *Interview with Lula King Davis*.

⁴⁶ Norris, *Interview with Lula King Davis*.

⁴⁷ Barbara Ellen Smith, “Walk-Ons in the Third Act: The Role of Women in Appalachian Historiography.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 7.

⁴⁸ Norris, *Interview with Granny Baldwin*.

Midwifery, therefore was another form of labor for women in the coal camps. Women knowledgeable in birthing were called upon to deliver children in response to the distrust of some company doctors. While the birth rate was often high in the region, again with some women bearing 12 children, work did not halt for mothers.

Gender relations maintained women in the household, responsible for children and the daily housework and field work. Mothers would often rise early, before sunup and employ children in the day to day tasks. Granny Baldwin remembers her mother “got up at 3 o'clock during the morning. Us kids, we didn't get to lay in the bed, we had to get up and help clean the house up [so that we] could go up to the cornfield by the time it got daylight.” Field work employed children of all ages: “The ones who weren't big enough to work with a hoe went ahead and picked the weeds. And the others who weren't big enough to use a hoe when they's a planting, would have to go along a droppin' [beans].”⁴⁹ Children's labor, additionally, was necessary to ensure crops survived, food was preserved, and the house was maintained. In this way, children, in addition to women, participated in the labor of the private sphere of the home.

Work for women, though, did not just pertain to field work. Virginia Beavers recollects the times when her mother, pregnant, would “go in with daddy late at night and he would shoot coal and she'd go in an twist the newspapers...and he'd go in the next day and load it.”⁵⁰ The fact that a pregnant woman followed her husband into the mines in order to help him earn more money for the family is an example of the varied types of labor that Appalachian women participated in. While Beavers's mother was not technically working in the household in this instance, she was still there as a helpful wife and did not receive a wage from such work, despite

⁴⁹ Norris, *Interview with Granny Baldwin*.

⁵⁰ Randall Norris, *Interview with Virginia Beavers*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7w3r0psw64>.

participating in such work multiple times. Although women were not being paid for such labor, the ability to survive and make a living in the coal industry, in the early 20th century, depending on how much coal individual workers could mine. The use of miner's wives, although not widespread in the Randall Norris interviews, points to the ways in which women worked outside of the home, but still within their gender constraints, in order to help their families, survive.

Nearing the middle of the 20th century, Appalachian women began to seek work outside of the home within the coal camps that was paid labor. Bertha Mae Lacy of Roderfield, West Virginia described the diverse ways that she brought in an additional income. Similar to the abovementioned neighborly help, Lacy "hoed corn, planted potatoes...house cleaned, washed [clothes], mopped...stood and ironed" for other families in the coal towns – among them, the supervisor's wife and families of the higher paid workers.⁵¹ Diligence was needed in supplementary work in order to keep the income consistent. Lacy reflected on how, despite being pregnant, she continued to work a busy ironing business out of her home: "I put out a big ironing the night my baby son was born. I lacked three pieces of having them ironed when I went into labor. D'you know I stood right there and ironed them before I had him? I told that lady, 'Now I'll have your clothes ready for you in the morning...you come by and pick them up.' I didn't aim to lie to her...I will do what I tell you I will do."⁵² Lacy's story is reflective of Appalachian women's participation in labor, both as mothers and as workers within the home. Although in labor, Lacy continued working to the last possible second, unable to "lie" to a customer but also motivated by economic need.

⁵¹ Randall Norris, *Interview with Bertha Mae Lacy*. An oral history conducted 15 April 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7p2n4zkj97>.

⁵² Norris, *Interview with Bertha Mae Lacy*.

The closeness of the coal camps contributed to a sense of community that Appalachian women found support in, despite the “prodigious” amount of work they undertook.⁵³ Further, these forms of labor were expected of women, due to the cultural understanding of gender and gendered labor. Although women may have had ironing side businesses and went into the mines at night in order to help their husbands, overall, they were relegated to the house where they were relied on to tend to the fields, the children, and the housework. Despite the patriarchal structure of the Appalachian culture which thrived within the coal towns, women were able to find help in their neighbors and community within the church. Still, women’s positions as wage earners were scarce. Nearing the middle of the 20th century, in reflection of federal push towards equality, waged labor opportunities outside of the home began to open to women.

⁵³ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 84.

Chapter II: Women's Entrance into the Coal Mines of Appalachia

“It takes a certain breed of women to go underground.”¹

The patriarchal structure of Appalachia did not provide for an easy transition of women into the coal industry. A “family-centered culture” characterized the region for many living there, the culture being played out in societal enforcement of gender roles. The emphasis on family and gendered work was ingrained in the people of Appalachia in a way that maintained the “strong notion of silence, particularly of women.”² Although restrictive ideas of gender and gender work was not exclusive to Appalachia, it did provide larger obstacles of women seeking work outside of the home or interested in a life outside of finding a husband.³ Generally, in the early 20th century, women were involved in coal as wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters to coal mining men and “were relegated to the household performing domestic tasks,⁴ as discussed in chapter one. From child rearing and maintenance of the home, women maintained the role of the housewife. However, as the 1970's approached women found themselves being more and more independent from their identities relative to men, and “claiming the ability to do a job that had been a man's preserve for all” of Appalachia's coal mining history.⁵ This transition was aided by Lyndon B. Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which barred discrimination based on race and sex. Although Appalachian women entered the coal mines with Federal protections,

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 158.

² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 39.

³ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 44.

⁴ Ann M. Oberhauser, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography: Women and Work in Rural Appalachia,” *Growth and Change*, vol. 26, Spring 1995, 223.

⁵ Nancy Maclean, “The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class.” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 1, Spring 1999, 43.

and were motivated by economic need, they experienced resistance that was derived from the region's understandings of gendered labor.

Women's Historical Involvement in Coal Mining

Women's work was strictly defined within the Appalachian region before mass industrialization of the coal mining industry.⁶ Yet, as found in a study by Marat Moore – a female underground miner, author, and teacher – young teenage girls to adult women were involved in mining before the United States' feminist revolution. Their work was on a much smaller scale and was unwaged as women “toiled alongside their fathers, brothers, and husbands to extract coal for household consumption.” Although women participated in coal mining, it was still work that was done as a wife or daughter, not as a waged worker like male miners. By the beginning of industrialization in the coal mining industry, 17 states in the Appalachian region had outlawed women's participation in mining, citing societal “superstitions about women in the mines bringing disaster and death.”⁷ This further influenced Appalachia's attitudes towards gender and work. These 17 states eventually conceded to temporarily allow women to work in underground mining to supplement the decreased male labor pool, “despite vigorous opposition from...the United Mine Workers of America.”⁸ Still, women across central Appalachia went into the mines to help their families.

Regardless of age, during the early 20th century, the women that were brought into the mines by family members acted as “helpers,” to the male miners. Ethel Day Smith of Pine

⁶ Suzanne E. Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain: Women Coal Miners in Central Appalachia*. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 5.

⁷ Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain*, 5.

⁸ Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain*, 6.

Mountain, Kentucky was 15 when she entered the mines with her father, as the family held a contract with a local coal operator during the Great Depression.⁹ Over the course of four years, Smith and her father and brother supplied coal “to three trains that ran across Pine Mountain.”¹⁰ Smith cites that the worries of neighbors and kinfolk – “old folks believed it was bad luck for women to be anywhere around the mines” – did not dissuade her father having her work in their family mine.¹¹ Smith and her younger brother would auger the wall of coal, plying the wall with dynamite, light the fuse, run out, and return to load coal cars that was pulled to the mouth of the mine entrance.¹² The longest days would see Smith and her brother load up to 25 cars full of coal, yet she “didn’t worry about the danger.” Although Smith married, she remained working in the mines with her father, despite her new husband’s insistence that she “should only work at the house.”¹³ Smith’s husband’s opinion is indicative of the attitudes surrounding women’s labor in the mines at the beginning of the 20th century. Superstition, still, was motivated by the region’s cultural understandings of gender and women’s work and highlights the value of men’s roles as a coal miner. Smith’s experience, dealing with her neighbors and her husband’s opinion is similar to the experiences of other women who coal mined out of a necessity to support their husbands.

During the Second World War, as explained earlier in this section, women were granted temporary acceptance into the mines by the government, but not by other male miners. Ethel Dixon McCuiston, of Cumberland, Kentucky, brought in coal mining boarders in order to make extra money, but quickly became involved in mining herself. She reflected on how she helped her husband in the Benham Company Mines, much to the chagrin of other employed miners:

⁹ Marat Moore, *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 27.

¹⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 28.

¹¹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 29.

¹² Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 28.

¹³ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 30.

“We lived near the mine, and my husband would go out to check the pumps. So, I persuaded him to let me go in one Sunday evening, just to look it over because I’d never been to a mine. I started taking meals into these miners.... I’d go over [to the mines] and find out no one was helping my husband. Finally, I borrowed one of the boarders’ belts, and I stuffed my long hair up under the cap. Then I went to the lamphouse and put that big old battery on my hip. The boarders got a kick out of seeing me dress like that. I’d climb on the deck of the motor and go hunt my husband...The other wives called me a fool. I told them [my husband’s] life was just as sweet and precious to me as it was to him...I thought, well, fiddle, there’s my husband in there making our living, working for our children...I’d go in there and help [him] shoot coal. I’d make the dynamite dummies, and I’d get down on my knees and shovel coal just like a man... That way, he had a buddy.”¹⁴

McCuiston’s description highlights many difficulties women faced going into the mines, even to help their husbands. The coal miner boarders laughing at McCuiston after dressing for the job is suggestive of their attitudes to women working in the mines: particularly believing it was funny to see a woman dressed as a miner, especially in the early 1940s. McCuiston’s experience reveal how, to others in the region, particularly men, it seemed unnatural for a woman to dress in such a way and to participate in such work. McCuiston was unswayed; she was motivated by her husband’s dedication to “making our living,” that she saw her labor as a way to ease his burden. In many ways, she was acting as a housewife and a helper, she was simply working outside of others’ expectations of her to remain in the household. Still, McCuiston worked within the home, save the ten-hour mining shifts three times a week, where she prepared breakfast for her husband and the boarders, worked in the field, washed clothes, grocery shopped, and raised her four children. McCuiston maintained that she “didn’t need much help,” as the “Lord just gave [her] strength.”¹⁵ McCuiston’s life, with the long nights in the mines and the long days in and round the house, is representative of her own understanding of gender – she is a helpful and dutiful wife that works in the coal mines to aid her husband but still maintains the image of a housewife

¹⁴ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 41.

¹⁵ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 41-42.

by cooking, cleaning, and working like the women in the coal camps, as discussed in chapter one.

Although McCuiston still worked in the realm of “women’s work,” she received pushback from other miners when she began working in the mines more frequently in 1941. She claimed some men would find out about her presence and “they’d be a-cursin’ and going on,” until the boss of the mine defended her, saying that without McCuiston’s help, “there wouldn’t be no work today. What would they think if your payday came up small?”¹⁶ While some miners threatened to quit, and some did in fact quit, McCuiston’s contribution was praised by the boss, as “it was a great honor that a woman would come into the mines to work to help them make bread for their families.”¹⁷ While McCuiston’s boss’s sentiments are progressive in supporting her involvement in the mines and helping her husband, it is tinged with an attitude of women not naturally belonging to the type of work required in the mines. The boss’s comment is reflective of the prevailing attitudes on gender and labor at the beginning of the 20th century. It is an “honor,” only because it is surprising and unusual – women’s work is, again, to remain in the home. While women may have worked in the mines to help their fathers or husbands, they were still expected to maintain a household and raise the many children they had.

Women, regardless of their unwaged status as coal miners, were still mothers and housewives. McCuiston reflected on how her work in the mines “had to slow down a bit,” after she gave birth to twins at age 40. Although she “loved” the mines, and thought of applying for a mining job after her husband died, her sons, now coal miners, objected, citing the issues that other men might have with her being there and their own view of her as their mother.¹⁸ Instead, she worked at the local senior citizens’ home, caring for the elderly much in the same way she

¹⁶ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 42.

¹⁷ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 42.

¹⁸ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 42.

cared for her children at home.¹⁹ Day, similar to McCuiston, discussed how she “always worked when [she] was pregnant,” either helping her father in the mines or hoeing corn and working in the field, as she did for an entire day just before she had one of her children.²⁰ Women were expected to, and did, remain housewives and mothers. In many ways, coal mining was merely another task on their long list of daily duties.

In instances where women were involved in coal mining before the 1970s, they worked exclusively as unpaid help to their family members out of necessity. In the cases described above, women were mocked for their work in the mines. Further, cultural superstitions about the dangers of having women in the mines provided motivation for over a dozen states to ban women workers in the mines which was only temporarily lifted in order to supply the war effort. Culturally, coal mining was largely not an accepted form of labor for women during the first half of the 20th century. Still, Appalachia was not so fully disconnected from the rest of the US. The region felt the effects of new civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which would eventually lead to women’s legal and waged participation in the coal mines.

The Women’s Liberation Movement: Appalachia and Feminism in the 1960’s and 1970’s

With Lyndon B. Johnson’s signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the women of Appalachia, theoretically, saw the end of gendered labor discrimination. From the Federal development in laws affording protections, the Act provided legal opportunity for women in Appalachia to enter the region’s coal mining industry. Still, coal mining was traditionally gendered labor, with companies only employing men which further enforced cultural

¹⁹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 42.

²⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 30.

understandings of men's work and women's work. Even in the late 1960s, women were often corralled to minimum wage jobs or remained in the home. Johnson's executive order provided the assurance of workplace equality and rebuffed the many laws prohibiting women working in mines. In states such as West Virginia, a major coal producing state, women had been barred from mining since 1887, a regulation that also included fines that increased in 1890 and 1907. Then, in 1925, the prohibition was done away with, but women involved in coal mining were generally relegated to small family mines.²¹ With Johnson's executive order was far reaching in theory, but not always in practice.

Although the shift in legality, instituted by the Civil Rights Act, provided the vehicle for these women to enter jobs in the coal industry, the transition was not without complications. The translation from policy to practice was not immediate and ultimately required a threat of a lawsuit. After the Civil Right Act of 1965, Johnson issued a successive order which banned workplace sex discrimination in companies that held federal contracts. It was not until 1977 that the Executive Order 11246 was enforced. After Appalachian activists caught wind of discriminatory practices by a Tennessee coal operator, the activists hired attorney Betty Jean Hall to evaluate the case. A year later, Hall had established the Coal Employment Project (CEP) and filed a complaint with the US Labor Department's Office of Federal Contracts Compliance Programs.²² The CEP was founded to help "women miners in their efforts to gain jobs [in the coal industry], combat discrimination, build a support network, and educate themselves and the public."²³ The Coal Employment Project, filed a complaint against 153 coal companies which made up half of the coal producers in the United States. The CEP's landmark complaint claimed

²¹ Carletta Savage, "Re-gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors." *Appalachian Journal* 27, no. 3 (2000), 234.

²² Moore, *Women in the Mines*, xl.

²³ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, xl-xli.

that “the coal industry was ‘one of the most blatantly discriminatory employers’ in the United States, and it targeted... coal companies and mines [that] representing about half of the nation’s coal production.” To address this, the complaint laid out a hiring quota: coal companies had to hire one woman for every three “inexperienced men until women made up 20 percent of the workforce.”²⁴ In essence, Appalachian coal mines would be beholden to affirmative action within the workplace. In December of 1978, Consolidated Coal Company agreed to pay over a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of back payment to women miners and provide benefits to 78 women who were refused jobs between 1972 and 1976 as well as implemented the affirmative action plan.²⁵ Although much of the progress that allowed women into the mines was accomplished by people operating on feminist ideas, there seemed to be a disconnect in understanding feminism within Central Appalachia.

The gender roles which had been embedded in the culture of Appalachia, as reflected in much of the interview used in this thesis, speak to the surprise and confusion many women felt in articulating feminism within the Appalachian context. Hazel King, of Highsplint, Kentucky explained that she “didn’t realize that [women] weren’t liberated already...because [she] was always a rebellious child,” who competed with her brothers.²⁶ In King’s mind, gender was not a constraint in her life and experience growing up in Appalachia. However, others saw the necessity. Cosby Ann Totten, of southwest Virginia, discussed the common misconceptions about the women’s liberation movement saying, “When I heard about feminism, I wasn’t sure what a feminist was...There aren’t any clear-cut answers. If being a feminist means burning your bra, I’m not one.”²⁷ Totten claims that much of her ignorance about the Women’s liberation

²⁴ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, xli.

²⁵ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, xli.

²⁶ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 43.

²⁷ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 187.

movement came from her upbringing, where her father taught his sons and daughters equally.²⁸ Still, Totten recognizes the use of feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement to give women the opportunity to become coal miners outright. She "tried to shake a few of these women around here on the Equal Rights Amendment. They're not for it, but I can't judge them too hard, because I've been on the other side of it, too. [My husband] beat me a couple of times."²⁹

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) acted as the catalyst for much of the social and economic change that benefitted white women during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. As discussed by Sue Bruley and Laurel Foster in their introduction to the *Women's History Review* journal that documented work from a 2014 conference, these three decades saw women who "were frustrated and angry by their continued second-class status in the post war world." This frustration would eventually create "structural and attitudinal change which had a profound impact on the western world in the late 20th century."³⁰ The shifts in structure and attitude, while most frequently seen in urban areas of the US, spilled into the mountains of central Appalachia in a way that inspired the women of the region in seeking waged work outside of the home.³¹ This transformation in women's work within Appalachia had its roots in this outside influence of the larger Women's Liberation Movement. However, opinions of the Women's Liberation Movement and Appalachian women moving into work within the coal mines, is varied and highlights the ways in which women saw their place within Appalachian society.

Many Appalachian women, even those who worked in family mines when they were younger, held conflicting feelings about women's entrance into waged labor in the coal mines.

²⁸ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 186.

²⁹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 187.

³⁰ Sue Bruley and Laurel Forster, "Historicizing the Women's Liberation Movement." *Women's History Review* 25, no. 5 (2016), 697.

³¹ Bruley and Forster, "Historicizing the Women's Liberation Movement," 697.

Ethel Day Smith, whose experience was documented earlier in this chapter said that the idea of women miners “made me feel funny, like the end of times is coming closer...it seemed like the women were trying to take over.”³² This attitude, somewhat negative image of the “women’s lib thing” and “bra burning” is apparent in other perspectives and is a reoccurring theme that will be discussed and explored later on in this chapter.³³ Smith explained that she believed “women have the right to do anything they want to do, but I don’t think it’s nice. I think women ought to be where they can work decent. I just don’t believe in going in them big mines with that blackguarding, bad-talking bunch of men.”³⁴ Smith’s perspective highlighted the differences in men and women’s work: women are supposed to work in a place that is ‘decent’ simply because she is a woman. Further, Smith believed that while women have the right to do “anything they want to do,” the idea of women in the coal mines is not “nice.” These qualifiers reveal how even women who worked in the mines out of necessity ascribe to the values of gendered work, and in a way favor traditional gendered work over women’s new ability to go into the coal mines. Other, women, though, were supportive of this new form of labor. Ethel Dixon McCuiston praised and defended the new women miners, saying: “When women went to working in the mines, it was terrible what people would say. And I’d say, “Girls, back up there. It’s not that way at all. If you have to get out and make a living, I don’t blame them a bit for going where they can make the most.”³⁵ McCuiston, who had experienced mining as an adult, defense of the women is borne out of her understanding the necessity of working in an industry simply for the money.

³² Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 31.

³³ Trish Khale, “A Woman’s Place is in the UMWA”: Women Miners and the Struggle for a Democratic Union in Western Pennsylvania, 1973-1979.” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, vol. 13, no. 1 (March 2016), 47.

³⁴ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 31.

³⁵ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 42.

Unsurprisingly, with economic shifts that America experienced in the 1970s and 1980s, economic necessity was a motivating factor for women who entered the mines.

Motivations

Appalachian women in the late 1960s and early 1970s transitioned into wage work out of their individual economic need. Although many of the women coal miners Randall Norris interviewed were married, they each cited a second, or rather more stable income, as the main motivation for their entrance into the coal mines. Mary Alice Yates of Appalachia, Virginia reflected on her journey to becoming a coal miner, which highlights cultural understandings of gendered labor within the region. Although Yates received her associate degree in mining technology from a regional community college, she was soon married and was expected to remain in the house. She said:

“I hung my degree over the sink, and I washed dishes for a couple years. I’d gotten married and my husband really didn’t want me to work in the mines. Well and then he sorta started coming around - I could work in the engineering department. But we stopped at Clinchfield one day to put my application in the engineering department...and they weren’t accepting applications...so they said ‘we’re taking applications for underground..just [a] union worker.’ ...and I said ‘Well, I’ll fill one out.’ And a week later they called me and wanted to know if I wanted to come to work. And I probably wouldn’t have, except my husband was real bad to quit jobs...he’d work two or three months and he’d quit. He’d just quit one and we’d had a big fight and he told me it wasn’t none of my business where he worked. So when [the company] called me, I told him it wasn’t none of his business where I worked. So I went on to work...But I was so scared, I was scared to death - if he had just came and asked me one time to just quit, I would have quit. But he didn’t ask and so it was, ya know, they’ll just have to carry me out of here dead because I’m not giving up.”³⁶

³⁶ Randall Norris. *Interview with Mary Alice Yates*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

Although Yates had acquired a degree in mining technology, her husband's inability to continue a job pushed her into the mines in order to maintain economic security, especially for her children: "I've got two kids to raise, and I've got to make a living."³⁷ Although Yates experienced the pressures of gendered work and dealing with a husband that did not approve, she saw the mines as the only option to make enough money to support her children. Although she was a woman and experienced pushback from her husband, Yates entered the mines as a wage-earning mother, and expressed her intention to stay, whether it be because of the economic need or a newfound sense of freedom, or both. Yates's experience of being drawn to the mine for economic reasons and a general interest in mining were reflected in accounts from other women in the region in different familial structures.

Many women in Appalachia experienced divorce and a newfound independence that was complicated by economic strain. Divorce helped to loosen the economic restriction that gender norms and labor had placed on women. Still, the rate of poverty for single mothers was much higher than those who were married.³⁸ As Linda Lester, a divorced woman coal miner, explained in her interview with Randall Norris, she was pushed into the mines by economic necessity. "I knew that was going to provide a better living for me and my son than anything I could find," Lester explained, "The best paying jobs were in the mines."³⁹ Opal Geraldine Reynolds of Swords Creek, Virginia entered the mines at the age of 25 "for the money." Her husband fell ill and Reynolds "decided... if I'm gonna work I might as well go somewhere I can make

³⁷ Norris. *Interview with Mary Alice Yates*.

³⁸ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography: Women and Work in Rural Appalachia," 238.

³⁹ Randall Norris. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

money.”⁴⁰ Cosby Ann Totten, of Lebanon, Virginia discussed the eventuality of her divorce from her husband, Clarence and the pressure of becoming a single mother and no income: “I never thought I would be raising six kids alone, because we were raised up to believe there wasn’t no such word as divorce. But sometimes it has to be done, and in my case it was necessary...About the time I was getting ready to leave Clarence, I knew they were having to hire women at the mine. I wanted to put in an application, but Clarence wouldn’t let me.” Later, after she divorced her husband, Totten worked at a factory store before a coworker told her about Consolidation Coal Company, where the pay was nearly five times her current income. She eagerly took the 80-hour course and attended classes for four and a half hours after her work day.⁴¹

During the 1970s, as coal was still a profitable industry, it attracted other women who had originally decided on different professions. Mary Jack Hargis, a miner from Lebanon, Virginia first left the area to become a teacher in Delaware. She remained in the Newcastle County Public School System for 19 years before moving back home. “When I decided to move back home,” she reports, “I knew teaching and coal mining were the only jobs I could get that would pay well.”⁴² Still, Hargis’s abandonment of teaching for life as a coal miner indicates the motivation of some women entering the mines because they were not “satisfied with the role”⁴³ they fulfilled. Still, she recognized the societal view of women in the mines: “If [her grandmother] knew [she] was working in the mines, she’d probably turn over in her grave.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Randall Norris. *Interview with Opal Geraldine Reynolds*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

⁴¹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 188.

⁴² Randall Norris. *Interview with Mary Jack Hargis*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

⁴³ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 158.

⁴⁴ Norris. *Interview with Mary Jack Hargis*.

Hargis knew that her role as a miner was not socially accepted. Because of the single industry of the central Appalachians, women who wanted a more stable income had little option outside of becoming a miner.

Totten, Reynolds, Lester, and Hargis, among other women of the region recognized their limited options in Appalachia, as King Coal was the largest employer and the single industry economy. In order to support their children after divorce and provided with little legal support, they chose the highest paying industry in the region. While women may have had an understanding of the difficult work that coal mining entailed, entering the mines and beginning to do such work would be difficult in and of itself.

Getting In and Staying In: Cultural Barriers in the Coal Mines

The cultural issues that kept women miners out of the coal mines were rooted in understandings of gender and gendered labor which is developed through treatment of strength and promotion as well as sexual harassment in the mines. Women miners experienced widespread discouragement from other miners, their husbands, and their families. Women who started mining were “told...that mining jobs were just too hard for any woman...[and that] generally speaking...women just weren’t strong enough.”⁴⁵ This idea of strength differences between men and women further influenced Appalachia’s understanding of gendered labor. Men worked in the mines because they were strong enough to and strength became a qualifier for “men’s work.” In one such instance, Cosby Ann Totten discussed how Consolidated Coal Company told her that she failed her initial physical for the application but, “wouldn’t give me a

⁴⁵ Oberhauser, “Towards a Gendered Regional Geography: Women and Work in Rural Appalachia,” 65-66.

good reason.” Totten then went to “doctors all around, and nobody found anything wrong.” When she presented the multiple doctors’ letters at the company’s office, “they didn’t go through them,” and instead told her to begin work. Totten has her own theory on her difficulties: “What happens is, since I had no medical records, I think they believed that if they told me I wasn’t physically able that I would accept their opinion and give up.” (188) Whether this is true or not, the company’s refusal to hire Cosby, and claim that she failed her physical is an example of how companies attempted to block hiring women. In addition, it is tied to the cultural understanding of women being weaker than men and therefore not suited to coal mining. Such ideas were reflected in male miners who worked with these new women miners.

Due to their notions of gender norms and how those norms are enforced through labor, especially in the coal mines, men were apprehensive (to say the least) about working with women. As Linda Lester claimed in her interview with Randall Norris, she “knew” that the male miners’ “superiority and ego” was “threatened” by her presence.⁴⁶ Lester, and others, could prove themselves to be productive and successful miners. Since the male dominated coal industry was becoming less homogenous, men became apprehensive and worried for their own positions in the mines. “When [women] first started [in the mines], the men did not like it; they didn’t want it,” said Joyce Jones, a coal miner from Lynch, Kentucky. The objection of men inside the mine was a product of Appalachia’s society and view of gendered work. Linda Lester described the atmosphere of working as tension filled. She knew her presence jeopardized male miners’ ideas of “male superiority and ego,”⁴⁷ as she could do the work just as they did. Women were viewed as threats to men’s jobs and were often the “butt of jokes, with a keener edge...ways of “making a miner out of the women.” “The first week they took bets that I wouldn’t last the

⁴⁶ Norris. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester.*

⁴⁷ Norris. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester.*

first day,” said Mildred Shackleford, a coal miner from New Market, Tennessee. Making bets, fools’ errands, and general jokes were commonplace ways of pushing women out of their positions in the mines. Linda Lester spoke of the “trash detail” she and other women miners were designated to do. Cleaning refuse out of mining areas was a portion of the many “unpleasant jobs”⁴⁸ that Lester experienced, along with the general atmosphere of tension and feeling unwelcome. This unwelcome feeling often precipitated into women not being trained in additional work in the mines.

In addition to ideas of strength and tensions between male miners and new women miners, women had difficulty in receiving training on different equipment in the mines. Rita Miller, of Clay, Kentucky went into the mines in 1978 and observed that most of the women “shoveled belts or sat at the headers. As far as being at the face of the coal, at that time there was not a woman that mined coal at the mine.” (Moore, 169) Miller continued, saying that although she successfully “got underground...if you were a woman, you didn’t mine coal.” (Moore, 171) In addition to the “trash detail” Linda Lester spoke of, mining supervisors were notorious for putting women into work that was in ways demeaning and unhelpful. Cosby Ann Totten repeatedly asked for training on other equipment but she, and a black miner⁴⁹, were made to “carry timbers out of the face in three-foot-high coal instead of letting us get a piece of equipment to carry it.” (Moore, 189) Totten’s comment illustrates attitudes about gender and race in the context of labor. Totten’s supervisor forcing a woman and a Black man to complete back breaking work without using a machine was a tactic to pressure the workers and push them out of the mines. By corralling women into a single type of job, bosses and other miners could

⁴⁸ Norris. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester*.

⁴⁹ Experiences of Black coal miners in the Appalachian region is well documented in multiple books, most notably in Joe William Trotter’s *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932*. The purpose of this study is to focus on the experiences of women entering the mines.

keep the higher paying jobs to themselves. Cosby Ann Totten also reflected on the realities of women she worked with in 1976, saying that while at one time the mine had 25 women working there, “they started getting picked off one at a time,” through strict attendance policies and general misinformation. For example, one female miner missed two shifts of work because her sick children “without knowing that it could get you fired.” Further, management routinely found ways to isolate women miners and “picking off the weakest to fire.”⁵⁰ Placing women into specific jobs often isolated women and left them vulnerable to harassment.

The ideas of gender norms and labor which first made it hard for women to enter the mines, became dangerous once they were there, with many experiencing sexual harassment. Many of the jokes that miners participated in were “games that focus[ed] on the reproductive organs.” “They will pull your pants down and your underwear and they will paint you full of grease,” described Mildred Shackleford, a miner from New Market, Tennessee.⁵¹ Although Shackleford did not elaborate on what “greasing,” means, the mention of forcibly disrobing another miner is enough to capture the often violent means of hazing and harassment in the mines. Further, many women miners attested to the “bathroom peepholes” that were carved out in the women’s bath house by the male miners. Joyce Jones described a similar experience, explaining that the male miners “cut a hole [in the wall of the bath house], trying to watch [the women] undress.”⁵² One of the more infamous instances of the bathroom peepholes resulted in a court case.

Eight female miners from the Consolidation Coal Company’s Shoemaker no. 9 mine in West Virginia found a peep hole in their separate bathroom in 1981. Since 1978, the peephole had been a rumor among the miners and during the trial, it was uncovered that it had been found

⁵⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 189.

⁵¹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 160.

⁵² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 159.

by a maintenance man in 1978 who did not report it.⁵³ The case hinged on whether the coal company was liable for the sexual harassment, under Title VII. During the court proceedings, the eight women miners testified to multiple instances of sexual harassment that included lurid comments, groping, propositioning, sexual advances, and threats of sexual violence.⁵⁴ This was not uncommon in the mines. As documented in Tallichet's book, the multiple women miners she spoke to claimed that "during their first few years on the job, at least half the men miners and bosses engaged in verbal innuendo, sexual body language...sexual propositioning, and sexual bribery."⁵⁵ According to the author, these harassments were rooted in men's domination over women⁵⁶, especially in the mine setting. The harassment, by that account, was a product of the male miners' understanding of gender and gender roles and was sought as a bid to maintain power over the women working with them. While the sexual harassment issue was not unique to Consolidated Coal or the miners Tallichet spoke to, Shoemaker No. 9 case provided for a testing ground of women miners seeking reparations.

Instead of seeking legal motions against other miners for sexual harassment, women miners looked to the United Mine Workers of America for further, institutional change. First, though, women often faced difficulties in being included in union meetings, discussion, and leadership. Three of the women that Tallichet interviewed related a story about a union meeting being held in the men's bathhouse, where women would not feel welcome, or at the very least, awkward. When the women miners approached the UMWA chapter president, he refused to change the meeting place.⁵⁷ Women miners thus excluded from union participation, had yet another obstacle in filing complaints against those they worked with and for. If women miners

⁵³ Savage, "Re-gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors," 240.

⁵⁴ Savage, "Re-gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors," 242.

⁵⁵ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 47.

⁵⁶ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 47.

⁵⁷ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 122.

filed complaints against their bosses, the issue would be investigated and dealt with by the union and the company. However, the process became nearly impossible if the complaint was against a fellow union member miner. Due to the miner's union status, such complaints "violated the union oath of solidarity...[and] most of the women felt that nothing would be done."⁵⁸ Frustrated with a union that would not address the claims, women often "dealt with these situations themselves or threatened their harassers with the company rule,"⁵⁹ which alluded to the sexual harassment policies that developed after the Shoemaker No. 9 Case in 1981. Still, these women, by and large, did not feel supported by the union. Up until the 1970s, women's involvement only extended to their roles as wives and mothers of male coal miners and union member, a relationship that will be further explored in the following chapters.

Women miners cite the connection they feel to the coal industry, despite discouragement that they received from male family members, as another motivating factor. As found in Randall Norris's Oral History Project through the University of Kentucky, many coal mining women came from families of miners. Mining was "in [their] blood,"⁶⁰ a tradition that did not affect just one gender. For many, they couldn't see themselves doing "anything else."⁶¹ The pride that women coal miners felt in their work is a theme throughout Norris's interviews as well as analytical material, despite the hardship many experienced once entering the work.

Still, the issues women experienced stemmed from a society built on gender roles that reinforced gendered labor.⁶² Once women were able to enter the mines, after the government investigations prompted by the complaint, coal companies took to providing training workshops for their male employees. Miners and supervisors alike had to attend programs that would

⁵⁸ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 124.

⁵⁹ Oberhauser, "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography," 124.

⁶⁰ Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain*, 5.

⁶¹ Norris. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester*.

⁶² Tallichet, *Daughters of the Mountain*, 65.

essentially explain to the miners why women would choose coal mining and “address the special problems posed by an integrated workforce.”⁶³ The workshops were a response to the attitudes of gendered labor in the central Appalachians played a large role in discouraging women from entering the male dominated workplace. Before the mandatory workshops, though, women miners were already organizing themselves through the Coal Employment Project and calling for support from the United Mine Workers. It is their experiences, and a discussion of the women activists who came before them, that will be explored in the next chapter.

⁶³ Savage, "Re-gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors," 237.

Chapter III: Women's Resistance and Activism in the Central Appalachian Coal Fields

“And, you see, we had a woman’s local in Cardinal, Kentucky. And their son was manning over the machine guns. And we sent for them. And they came down the road with clubs in their hand singing “Amazing Grace” and all those spiritual songs. And one woman looked up from singing her song and she [said] “What you doing up there?” and he got him off that machine gun that was sitting on that boulder. And that’s when we broke through. She said, “You’re not gonna fight *me*.” We organized that place too.”¹

The economic, social, and environmental issues that have become more apparent in recent years have, in truth, plagued the Central Appalachian region for over 100 years. In a broader sense these issues limited “women’s work outside the home, thus reinforcing the domestic maternal role as the only avenue for adult influence for most women in the region.”² For many, the source of these issues originated with the entrance of small coal companies that quickly industrialized into large coal corporations. As a response the people of the region developed, with increasing intensity, active ways to resist these coal barons. The most well-known and successful activists from the region were women, who, as wives and mothers of coal miners and later as coal miners themselves, participated in some of the longest, bloodiest, and most successful strikes in labor history. Despite the gendered labor expectations placed on them as discussed and extrapolated upon in the previous two chapters, Appalachian women participated heavily in the activist realm. The history of activism in Appalachia exhibits the ways

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 223.

² Adam H. Ackley. *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners: Florence Reece, Molly Jackson and Sarah Ogan Gunning*. ed. Connie Park Rice and Marie Tedesco (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 330.

in which women, from the early 20th century through present day, negotiated the cultural constraints of their gender.

The Firsts: Labor Activists in the Early 20th Century

Mary Harris Jones (1837-1930)³, the most prominent figure – female or otherwise – initiated the work of organizing women in labor struggles of the early 20th century. Jones, who took the title of ‘Mother’ sometime during the beginning of her activism during the early 1870s,⁴ acquired support as a compassionate and combative figure – relying on cultural understanding of womanhood and motherhood. It was from this cultural understanding that Jones crafting an image of a woman who could be trusted and had miners’ best interests at heart. The name, while it connected Jones to her Irish heritage based in part with Irish myth, also created influence in Appalachia when it came to organizing.⁵ By “using traditional Appalachian maternal authority,” through going by “Mother Jones” rather than Mary, the activist “directly...[tied herself to] the common, domesticated view of Appalachian women as passive and confined primarily to the home.”⁶ However, Jones was only passive in name but not in action. Mother Jones, like many of the women that will be explained in this chapter, pushed against the gendered labor and social expectation within Appalachian culture.

³ Jones was born in County Cork, Ireland. Her family immigrated to the US as a part of the Irish Potato Famine. The family moved to many cities in the northern mid-west United States and eventually to Canada. In Toronto, Jones trained as a teacher and dressmaker. Later, while living in Memphis, Tennessee Jones married George Jones, an iron worker and union member, whom she had several children with. Mother Jones lost her family to an outbreak of Yellow Fever. After moving to Chicago to continue dressmaking, Jones lost her house in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Much of her experience radicalized Jones and lead her to work with the Knights of Labor, organizing, giving speeches, and becoming the well-known figure history knows her as. Source: Simon Cordery. *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness*. Women’s Biography Series. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010.

⁴ Per Simon Cordery’s biography, *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness*, it is unconfirmed who exactly began calling Jones ‘Mother.’ Some reports, though, link the moniker to emerging between 1873 and 1877, when Jones was actively helping to organize railroad workers and coal miners in Pennsylvania.

⁵ Simon Cordery. *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness*. Women’s Biography Series. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 33.

⁶ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners*, 327.

Once Mother Jones became involved with the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) at the turn of the 20th century, she delved into her role as labor activist with little regard to her own gender and its perception. Despite Jones's dedication, "the patriarchal structure and dynamics of the UMWA in particular and the labor movement in general prevented Jones from being able to attend meetings in the early years of her interest in labor and from holding office."⁷ Still, in the face of the patriarchal system, Jones persisted to the "front line of the class war," predominately in West Virginia, supporting and organizing striking miners against coal companies.⁸ Jones acknowledged that a number of male union members "didn't want a woman in the field," of activism and picketing.⁹ Regardless of her male counterparts' opinions, Mother Jones remained steadfast, pushing against the gendered expectations, and succeeded in organizing, despite the fact that her position as a paid organizer role was unheard of for women at the time.¹⁰ Mother Jones's objective was community focused, claiming her role was "not to 'do for' people but to empower them to 'do for themselves.'"¹¹ Her visibility and her official role exhibits how her dedication to the cause often violated gender norms within the region. Many women, in fact, viewed Jones and her involvement as an anomaly. Angelene Harmon of Caretta, West Virginia, when asked about women's involvement in picket lines and striking, said, "I think a mother's place is in the home, if possible...women didn't used to [join the strikes]."¹² Cultural understanding of gender, even through the eyes of other women,

⁷ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners*, 331.

⁸ Cordery. *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness*, 64.

⁹ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners*, 332.

¹⁰ Cordery, *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness*, 65.

¹¹ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners*, 331.

¹² Randall Norris. *Interview with Angelene Harmon*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>.

confined women to the home and made open involvement in strikes difficult. Still, Mother Jones continued to advocate for gender inclusion in labor organizing nationally.

In Jones's 1911 speech delivered at the UMWA convention, she described the importance of women being included in organized labor movements and highlighted the success of previous labor struggles that had much to do with women: "There have been some wonderful fights on the industrial field. It has not been alone the miners; it has not been alone the steel workers. For the first time, perhaps, the women in the industrial field have begun to waken to their condition of slavery...Never as long as the women are unorganized, as long as they devote their time to women's clubs and to the ballot, and to a lot of old meow that that don't concern us at all and have no bearing on the industrial battle alone. But the century is here when the woman is going to take a mighty hand in these battles, and then we will fight it out and fight it to the finish."¹³ Women, in Jones's perspective, are essential to the full success of the organized labor. Further, Jones saw the "industrial battle" as the only issue women should be focused on - not the right to vote or any other social reform which had a growing platform at this period in the US. Jones's comments are contradictory - she advocates for women fighting for equality within organized labor but not within the social structure.

In May of 1915, Mother Jones provided testimony before the Commission on Industrial Labor Relations. During the testimony, Jones recounted her history of organizing women in many of the coal strikes of the early 20th century. In 1907, for example, Jones arrived in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania to help organize striking miners. While there, she urged "wives of strikers to take their babies on the picket lines and if arrested and imprisoned, to sing themselves out of jails by making so much noise [the] community would be glad to get rid of

¹³ Mary Harris Jones. *Mother Jones Speaks: Speeches and Writings of a Working-Class Fighter*. ed. by Philip S. Foner. (New York: Pathfinder, 1983), 205-206.

them.”¹⁴ Jones saw the value of women’s positions in the labor struggle to bring about change. In calling for women to be involved with the labor struggle, with their children by their side, is a clear challenge to cultural understandings and expectations of women to remain in the home. Women taking their children to the protests, and then later having them in jail with other women strikers, exhibits the ways in which Mother Jones, consciously or unconsciously, inspired women to break out of the constraints of housewife and homemaker and into a position where they could evoke change. Mother Jones’s advice, to keep their children with them and to sing, make noise, as a show of unity would be used throughout the coal strikes of Appalachia in the following seven decades.

Mother Jones’s radical presence on the picket line later inspired women activists that followed her after she passed in 1930. Mary Magdalene Jackson, dubbed Aunt Molly Jackson, from Clay County, Kentucky became most active in labor activism in the early 1930s. Jackson, like many of the women in Appalachia during this time, experienced personal tragedy in connection to the coal company: the loss of a husband and the blinding of her father and brother in the Clay County mines. Although Jackson remarried, she did not remain in her home as the Appalachian women described in the first chapter. Jackson, instead, mirroring the path of Mother Jones, joined the UMWA in 1931 and began to organize coal miners and their families through song.¹⁵ Jackson’s protest songs began as her first form of resistance against destructive coal companies and acted to unify striking miners on the picket line. By singing, Jackson initially remained within the confines of her gender; her voice allowed her to negotiate her gender within the UMWA and the labor union. Further, the coding of herself as an “Aunt” socially placed her

¹⁴ Jones, *Mother Jones Speaks*, 81.

¹⁵ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners*, 327-328.

as a female activist within a family structure, the wider organization of striker miners and the union, similar to the process of Mother Jones.

Jackson's most well-known protest song, "Hungry Ragged Blues" came out of her position as a woman unable to feed hungry children around her, specifically her sister's starving children. Jackson described her crafting of a song as the product of the reality around her: "I composed a song of the condition of the people which is the only kind of a song that is a folk song."¹⁶ Jackson's activism and soulful music caught the attention of Woody Guthrie and Alan Lomax, who worked with Jackson to create recordings of songs and stories, which are now archived by the Smithsonian in the Folk Ways Recordings. Jackson produced three well known songs that refer to her place as an Appalachian woman and the struggle she faced in helping her communities. Just before Jackson's song "I Am A Union Woman," the first track on the album, is sang my John Greenway, a recording of Jackson plays. She says: "I am so glad that you have come to see me. And I want you now to take down these true stories and have them probably when I am laid to rest. For this reason: That it is my desire for younger people, and younger generations, to know how that I was interested in the little children having something to eat."¹⁷ Jackson, in singing about her region's struggles, intended to bring attention to the poverty, violence, and starvation of her time but to preserve the memory of the hardships for the "younger generations" that would follow her. For Jackson, songs were for unity as much as they were for historical and cultural preservation. Jackson, as a singer and a labor leader within her community, contradicts the stereotype of Appalachian women. She is opinionated, passionate, and loud. Her consistent presence on the picket line, her role as "Aunt" Molly Jackson helped to

¹⁶ Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County*, 237.

¹⁷ Molly Jackson, vocalist, "I Am A Union Woman." In association with John Greenway and Ronald Clyne, recorded 1961. *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*. Folkways Records, 1961. <https://folkways.si.edu/aunt-molly-jackson-and-john-greenway/the-songs-and-stories-of/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian>

craft a “working-class definition of motherhood.”¹⁸ Jackson created an image of maternal power on the picket line and often told stories of her long held dedication to the Central Appalachian labor movement, including being on the picket line at age five with her father and later being temporarily jailed at age ten.¹⁹ Still, Jackson’s activism was not confined to passive singing and often resulted in the violence that happened on the picket line.

In many respects, the violence of the labor movement within Central Appalachia was often carried out by men - whether it be striking miners, company employed Baldwin-Felts agents, the town police, or the national guard. This gendered understanding of resistance excluded women as they were often “portrayed...as exerting influence primarily, or even exclusively, within the domestic sphere - particularly in the role of mother or grandmother. This perception of Appalachian women continued to be promoted in recent contemporary popular culture...”²⁰ Aunt Molly Jackson, however, moved outside of the domestic sphere into the violent picket lines, often taking part in the fight against coal company supported or employed aggressors. Jackson was “known for guerilla-style public political aggression not usually considered domestic or maternal, as demonstrated by her shoving the barrel of a pistol into the rectum of a mining company “gun thug” who dared to try to cross a coal miner’s picket line set up by local women, who has stripped him naked and held him down.”²¹ Jackson was said to carry two pistols, “one for each hand,” and perceived “herself as a front-line warrior until her death.”²² Aunt Molly Jackson, as an activist, evolved from a mourning mother and wife, to a labor protest singer, to an exiled communist sympathizer who “served the cause of the working class...[and] learned to use her visibility to be heard and recognized as a creative artist,” and

¹⁸ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 335.

¹⁹ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 339.

²⁰ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 337.

²¹ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 340.

²² Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 340.

mountain activist.²³ Jackson's life, like that of Jones, was not "the model of motherhood" often associated with Appalachian gender norms during the early 20th century and was in no way a passive "true motherhood,"²⁴ based on Appalachian cultural and gender norms.

Molly Jackson's activism in the 1931 Harlan County Strike was not an anomaly as Mother Jones's initial participation was, and instead, Jackson had many singing contemporaries who worked within their gender to garner support and publicity for the strikes. Florence Reece, a native of Tennessee, experienced the tensions and violence of Harlan in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These experiences, in the same way as Aunt Molly Jackson, precipitated in protest songs - the most famous of them being "Which Side Are You On?" from 1931. Reece spoke with Alessandro Portelli in Harlan County years later, explaining how her perspective as a mother and wife experiencing poverty and the violence from the coal company employed enforcers who "came into [her] house several times at Mollus while [her husband] Sam was run off [for organizing]." Out of anger, Reece explained, "I felt like I had to do something to help. The little children they'd have little legs and a big stomach. Some men staggered when they walked, they were so hungry. We were getting real low on everything. We didn't even have paper, so...I just jerked the calendar off the wall and sat down and wrote the words [of Which Side Are You On?] on the back."²⁵ The song gained wide recognition from Woody Guthrie and helped to spread knowledge about life in Central Appalachia during the strikes.²⁶ Further, "Florence Reece and other elderly women [among them Molly Jackson] who had lived long through the bloody Harland strikes of the thirties encouraged these younger women... to join the men on the picket

²³ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 237.

²⁴ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 335-336.

²⁵ Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County*, 187.

²⁶ Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County*, 189.

line and in union rallies.”²⁷ One of the younger women in the labor movement in Bloody Harlan was Molly Jackson’s half-sister and fellow protest singer, Sarah Ogan Gunning.

Sarah Ogan Gunning was among the last of the women activists involved in the labor movement through crafting protest songs. Gunning’s contribution was as realistic as her contemporaries, Jackson and Reece, as they were “outspoken and radical but never ideological: when she sings about capitalism, she sings about her lived experience of the system, not a political abstraction: “I am a coal miner’s wife, I’m sure I wish you well. Let’s sink the capitalist system in the darkest pits of hell.”²⁸ Gunning’s passionate lyrics reflect the harsh reality of Harlan County at this time, and were crafted in an effort to educate others.²⁹ Gunning is frank about her place in the labor movement system as a wife of a coal miner, but her visibility within the movement and her dedication to advocating for those around her forced her to come up against the patriarchal structure of the unions in Central Appalachia.

Women activists from Central Appalachia at the turn of the century shared the issues of navigating their gender through one medium or another: Mother Jones through direct activism and Jackson, Reece, and Gunning through crafting protest songs as a way into the picket lines. The four women all shared the familial and spousal loss that many experienced in the region, pain that “drove all four of these particular widows...out of the home to speak publicly on behalf of other local workers and their families...challenging the usual limitations placed on women not only in their culture but also, in particular, of their time.”³⁰ The women who directly followed Mother Jones and worked to further unify the UMWA and striking miners after her death in 1930, “brought mountain values and issues to national attention and...transgressed the traditional

²⁷ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 338.

²⁸ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 238.

²⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 238.

³⁰ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 330-331.

perception that Appalachian women's influence was usually assumed to be confined to the home, family, and church."³¹ Working against the cultural understandings and treatment of their gender Jones, Jackson, Reece, and Gunning laid the foundation for a tradition of gendered resistance that flourished and inspired women in the 1970s and beyond to address labor and then environmental issues in the Central Appalachian Region.

Heating Up: Brookside and the 1970s

The legacy of Jones, Jackson, Reece, and Gunning inspired, some 40 years later, the women organizers in the 1973 Brookside Strike in Harlan. Conflict began when Duke Power Company refused to accept the Brookside mine employee supported UMWA standard contract. By the end of June 1973, the Brookside miners were on strike. Picket lines formed at the entrance of the coal town, preventing miners who had agreed to still work – called scabs by the picketers – from entering the mines easily.³² By September, Duke Power Company was granted restraining orders and injunctions that limited the number of strikers in the picket line, a decision handed down by a coal businessman-turned-judge, F. Byrd Hogg. In the wake of this decision, striking miners and their families felt that they would not be treated fairly in the courts and instead, turned to violence.³³ Until January 1974, when the injunctions were lifted, the court orders applied only to the striking mine workers – not the women of the community, and by the end of September, women began to organize and plan for stronger picket lines.

The women strikers of Brookside began as a grassroots effort first among themselves.

Bessie Lou Cornett remembered the process to Alessandro Portelli years later: “We kind of

³¹ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 346.

³² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 310-311.

³³ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 312.

organized ourselves and got to talking to each other about how these scabs were crossing the picket line. We wanted to be able to help the men stop the scabs and get a contract without all the violence. We had a march and said, “Why don’t we just go down to the picket line ourselves. We can stop the scabs. The court don’t have an injunction against us.”³⁴ Recognizing the loophole, the women of Brookside organized resistance to help the depleted population of miners on the picket lines. Although Cornett recalled the initial commitment to passive resistance, the reality of the picket line, despite their gender occasionally ended up with several women arrested due to violence.³⁵ Additionally, the exclusion of women strikers from the first Duke Power injunction reveals the understandings of gender in the Appalachian culture: no one assumed that women would take part in a picket line, especially one that tended to be violent. In the same way as Mother Jones, Aunt Molly, Florence Reece, and Sarah Ogan Gunning, the Brookside women were expected to remain home with their striking and banned husbands. Instead, like Jones, Jackson, Reece and Gunning, the women contradicted the domesticated view of their roles as women.³⁶ In October, seven women were arrested because of their picketing, and Alessandro Portelli notes that at the time of being arrested, many of the women had children with them.³⁷

Although Harlan County sheriffs arrested multiple women who picketed in place of men, there was a deeper theme of tensions in gender relation within the strike. Alessandro Portelli observes that the “Brookside women weren’t everyone’s idea of ladylike behavior.” Normal Yarborough, the coal operator of the Brookside mine lamented that during the strike there had been “some conduct that I would hope that US women wouldn’t have to resort to;” a comment which illustrated the general cultural understanding of gender, gender roles, and the expectations

³⁴ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 313.

³⁵ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 313.

³⁶ Ackley, *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones*, 327.

³⁷ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 313.

of women even within a hostile striking period.³⁸ In response to Yarborough, albeit not directly, Lois Scott, union activist, stated: “Yarborough says he wouldn’t let his wife go on a picket line. Well naturally, because he owns her. Because she is not a woman on her own.”³⁹ Scott’s comment further delved into the contentious relations between men and women and the understanding of women’s place and women’s work held by each. In essence, by striking, the women of Brookside challenged much more than the coal company – they challenged perceptions of gender. It required and strengthened a sense of agency that was, as discussed before, linked to the gendered understanding of women in the Appalachian culture.

The transition from passive activism to defensive activism in the Brookside strikes exhibited further how the cultural understanding of gender and treatment of women were deeply embedded in Central Appalachia. Junior Deaton spoke of the different ways in which women were treated as a response to the picketing, which often gave the picketers an upper hand: “Women are able to do the things that men can’t do and get by with. State police are reluctant to use their weapons, their sticks and things on women.”⁴⁰ This distinction was echoed by State police captain James Cromer, saying that “the women are a problem. You just don’t hit a woman in Harlan County.”⁴¹ While Portelli concedes that this attitude may have been linked to perceptions of women as the “weaker sex...there was no weakness in these ladies.” Instead, women were known to fashion weapons out of boards driven with nails, hammers, sticks, and rocks in order to defend themselves from scabs attempting to cross the picket line.⁴² The gendered perception of women as fragile often allowed the picket line to remain in place longer

³⁸ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 313.

³⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 313.

⁴⁰ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 314

⁴¹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 313.

⁴² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 314.

and was only possible because the women of Brookside stepped outside of the cultural expectations of their gender in order to advocate for change for their families.

Making Room for Themselves: Affirmative Action and The Coal Employment Project

Although Brookside exhibited Appalachian women involved in labor disputes still as supportive family members, coal mining women faced different challenges in advocating for their rights. Detailed in the previous chapter, women coal miners faced sexual harassment and discrimination on the job, among other things. Much of the widespread discrimination went unnoticed until 1977, when two women were barred from entering a mine during a tour in Tennessee. Later, “activists...dug through federal affirmative action policies until they found Executive Order 11246, a 1965 Johnson administration directive that barred sex discrimination by companies holding federal contracts.”⁴³ Attorney Betty Jean Hall took the case, and eventually founded the Coal Employment Project (CEP) in order to support “women miners in their efforts to gain jobs, combat discrimination, build a support network, and educate themselves and the public.”⁴⁴ A year later, the CEP filed a landmark sex discrimination complaint with the US Labor Department’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs. The complaint claimed that “the coal industry was ‘one of the most blatantly discriminatory employers’ in the United States, and it targeted 153 coal companies and mines, representing about half of the nation’s coal production.” To address this, the complaint laid out a quota: hiring one woman for every three “inexperienced men until women made up 20 percent of the workforce.” In December of 1978, Consolidated Coal Company agreed to pay over a quarter of

⁴³ Marat Moore. *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), xl.

⁴⁴ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, xl- xli.

a million dollars' worth of back payment to women miners and provide benefits to 78 women who were refused jobs between 1972 and 1976 as well as implemented the affirmative action plan.⁴⁵

Historical analysis of affirmative action on labor history and progress is sparse. Specifically, in Appalachia, Coal mining women's struggle is an example of "the larger story of women and affirmative action, which involved remaking "women's jobs" as well as braving male bastions."⁴⁶ By deconstructing the binaries of what is considered men's work and women's work, women coal miners pushed against the constraints of gender expectations in a culture that placed value not just on labor, but the *type* of labor someone did. In the region, mining help prestige, along with comparably much more income than other jobs. "To women who had grown up in the area, coal was "part of our heritage," it was "part of who we are." Women go into mining for the money...they stay, they say, because they like it."⁴⁷ "By performing old work in new ways and by breaking into jobs formerly closed to them, the women involved in these efforts began, in effect, to reconstitute gender, and with it class, permanently destabilizing the once-hegemonic distinction between "women's work" and "men's work".⁴⁸ In an effort to provide support to one another, coal mining women began to join the CEP.

Although the CEP was successful in highlighting the biased gender workforce of coal companies, and pushing for affirmative action, they did not stop there. Cosby Ann Totten, discussed in chapter two, attended the first national conference in 1979. There, women miners crafted a community of support, airing grievances, and making plans for change. One of the most talked about issues, aside from sexual harassment, was the topic of family leave. Totten

⁴⁵ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, xli.

⁴⁶ Nancy Maclean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class." *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 44.

⁴⁷ Maclean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action," 61.

⁴⁸ Maclean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action," 46.

remembers the long battle: “Women miners led the fight for family leave, but it took from 1979 to 1992 to get it passed. We took it to the [UMWA’s] convention after going to all the local unions [chapters], and more resolutions were sent in on the issue than almost anything else. We kept pushing and worked with women’s groups to get language in the bill that would include time off for taking care of seriously ill children.”⁴⁹ Totten, in her conversations with Marat Moore, discussed how women’s lives as mothers often effected their ability to work, many having to take time off work for family emergencies. In this way, women miners struggled with navigating the intersections of gender expectations and financial need: some women miners provided the only income, but they were also expected to care for sick children. Further, difficult economic situations called for them to deal with family emergencies on their own, not employing a doctor. As discussed in chapter two, women who were unaware of attendance policies were quickly fired. In events of firings or being laid off, Cosby Ann Totten observed that “there is a higher percentage of laid-off women who stay active in the union than men. Women put their time and energy into building our ideals and hoping for a better union to help everybody. With some men it seems like, if there isn’t an instant return on their activity, they don’t want to do it.”⁵⁰ The success of the CEP had motivated women to become more involved in advocating for themselves, turning to the UMWA, what many of them called “their union” for help, but women coal miners had a long road for full acceptance and integration within the union.

Expanding: Women in the Pittston Coal Strike

⁴⁹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 191.

⁵⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 191.

When the United Miner Workers Journal announced in May 1973 that women had become employed in mines and were active members of the union, “initial response from male union members and their wives were extremely hostile.” Much of the discussion revolved around the “women’s lib thing,” reflective of the attitudes about gendered labor divisions, specifically push back against women entering the mines.⁵¹ The development of the CEP and affirmative action cases resulted in a “sense of possibility across the 1970s was shaped by the long rise of labor feminism.” Women’s involvement in the union increased, despite the pushback as changes in the broader US economic, social, and political shifts.⁵² Cosby Ann Totten recalled that despite initial issues, she remained a dues-paying member of the UMWA, and intended to stay, “because I love my union. I stay active for my mental health, although sometimes being active makes me think I’m crazy. I stay involved because I want to make life better for my children. We need to work for good-paying jobs for them, even if we never get good-paying jobs again ourselves.”⁵³ Totten, along with other women, saw the value in unionizing and cooperating for the greater good. It would not be until the Pittston Coal Company strike that women were able to stretch against the resistance that they faced in the UMWA.

Women involved in the 14-month long UMWA strike of the Pittston Coal Company in Lebanon, Virginia provided support to the striking male coal miners. The dispute broke out after Pittston breached agreements on medical benefits for retired miners and widows. After 215 bargaining sessions between the company and the union from April 1987 to January 1988, the

⁵¹ Trish Khale, “A Woman’s Place is in the UMWA”: Women Miners and the Struggle for a Democratic Union in Western Pennsylvania, 1973-1979.” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, vol. 13, no. 1 (March 2016), 47.

⁵² Khale, “A Woman’s Place is in the UMWA,” 42.

⁵³ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 191-192.

UMWA called for miners to strike Pittston's Lebanon mine on February 1, 1989.⁵⁴ In February 1988, after the Pittston Coal Company officially canceled health benefits for disabled and retired miners and their families, the UMWA hired Cosby to help organize strikers in Lebanon, VA. Cosby established "auxiliaries" made up of women. Before this, "women miners and the coal miners' wives mostly did not associate with each other. And if they did, it was never in the context of what the union was, or the job...To learn what a union is, you need to go to the meetings and watch or help with the grievances and arbitrations. Wives aren't allowed to do that, although some of the [local union] officers' wives understood more because they did a lot of the work for their husbands."⁵⁵ The auxiliaries were a way for women miners and housewives and homemakers to come together to organize. Still, bringing women miners into the auxiliaries was easier: "We knew by experience that the company was our common enemy. Just trying to get hired taught you that. So it was easier for women miners to identify what was important than for the wives."⁵⁶ Apart from the difficulties of bringing women miners and male miners wives together, Totten discussed the fact that the union's membership were "most[ly] macho men...sometimes...a few people will end up running a local [union], and it's not always the best people...the union needs to be more democratic, with chances for people to have input."⁵⁷ Totten's comment reflects the need the women felt in forging democracy within the union and creating an equal voice for themselves in leadership.

Women miners "had no representation in union leadership at the local, district, or national level," before 1970. Because of this, women viewed their participation in working for democratic unions as a means to an end of ensuring they achieved respect in the mines and the

⁵⁴ Adrienne M. Birecree, "The Importance and Implications of Women's Participation in the 1989-1990 Pittston Coal Strike." *Journal of Economic Issues* 30, no. 1 (March 1996), 189.

⁵⁵ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 192.

⁵⁶ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 192.

⁵⁷ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 192.

protest process.⁵⁸ As such, Cosby and fellow women organizers tried to promote involvement in the auxiliary group for women, asking male miners to bring their wives to meetings. Many men objected to their wives' involvement, one man telling Cosby that "he was the boss in his family, and the union was not going to tell him to put his wife on that picket line." This was yet another example of gendered labor and gender roles preventing women from becoming involved in union activities. These "macho men" were not just the union leaders but the members as well, viewing striking as dangerous work that was not suited for a woman. Further, this quote highlights ideas of power within the union structure - where men, and their view of their own masculinity, rejected the idea of Cosby, a woman, "telling him what to do."⁵⁹ Regardless of the inner conflicts with the other male union members, the women began the first set of picket lines for the strike.

Throughout 1988, Cosby and the women's auxiliary group, with other striking miners, picketed in front of the Consolidated Coal Company's offices in Lebanon, Virginia. During the year, the picketers organized cook outs, Christmas parties, and maintained a steadfast attitude to remain on the picket "come hell or high water."⁶⁰ After over a year without an agreement on a contract, the UMWA called for miners to strike Pittston. The union leaders, all men, began to take over the picketing of the coal company from the women's auxiliary group. "That hurt," reflected Cosby, "That was a place where we had met for over a year, and we felt like it was our second home. The picket line was a place where the women who had been active was used to have a say in things. That stopped, too."⁶¹ The male union leaders taking over the picket line is a glaring example of the prevailing attitudes on the work of women in the union. What little control women had over the first picket lines, through their auxiliary group, began to vanish in

⁵⁸ Khale, "A Woman's Place is in the UMWA," 42.

⁵⁹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 193.

⁶⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 194.

⁶¹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 194.

favor of male-dominated leadership. Essentially, the auxiliary group had acted as forerunners and placeholders, though they had essentially paved the way for the union in this instance. Then, with the entrance of male leadership, women lost their “say in things.”⁶²

Forced out of leadership in the picket lines, the women’s auxiliary group made a drastic decision: a full, women-led occupation of the coal company’s offices. Once the women had entered Pittston Coal’s offices in Lebanon, Virginia, they began to sing “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Totten told Marat Moore: “We thought that within 15 minutes the state police would be there and read us our rights, or maybe just come tearing in to arrest us.”⁶³ The state police, or the local police, never showed up to arrest them. Instead, what followed was a two-day occupation of the office that brought nationwide attention to the UMWA cause. First, families of other striking miners and husbands of the women inside sent food, cigarette, blankets, and love notes.⁶⁴ This sense of community gave birth to the Daughters of Mother Jones. Each woman was assigned a number and remained anonymous for the majority of the sit-in, in hopes of protecting their striking husbands on the outside. “It helped to give us more of a group feeling - that we’re not individual, we are a group, and we’re in this together.”⁶⁵

When the media arrived and began to ask questions of the women’s auxiliary group, now dubbed the Daughters of Mother Jones, news agencies were forced to explain who Mother Jones was. This aided in bringing awareness to the women’s sit-in. After two days of occupying the coal company’s offices, the women decided to leave the building, as they “felt that we had achieved about all that we could have. I would have like to have stayed in there and made them arrest us, but we brought media attention to it. We backed Pittston down. We took it over and

⁶² Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 194.

⁶³ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 195.

⁶⁴ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 196.

⁶⁵ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 195.

stayed for two days and a night. We left in a glorious fashion. We went down the hill, a-singing and a-whooping and hollering.”⁶⁶ The Daughter of Mother Jones’s occupation was the first act of civil disobedience against Pittston and, possibly the most successful at drawing media attention.

Though the women were successful in remaining in the sit in as long as they wanted and calling national media attention to the miners’ issues, the UMWA’s treatment of their organizing is a glaring example of gender relations during the strikes. “After it was all over [the strike leader] said that he had wanted the occupation carried out so that the women could show up the men.”⁶⁷ Strike leaders, sent from the UMWA, intended to use the Daughters of Mother Jones to shame men into participating more heavily in the strikes. “It seemed like most of the men in the decision-making part of the union would use the women when they needed them, and when they didn’t, they wanted them to get back out of the way. But if they called you at two o’clock in the morning, you were [supposed to be] Johnny-on-the-sport.”⁶⁸ Women’s involvement was welcomed so long as it was useful to the union and provided motivation for the men. Further, the UMWA’s attitude towards the Daughters reflects gender roles within the region: women were to be at the beck and call of the union and do what was instructed, otherwise they were to remain “out of the way.”⁶⁹

After the Daughter of Mother Jones’s occupation, mass picketing began across southwest Virginia, where Totten’s women’s auxiliary groups were involved just as much as the men. Women prepared food and organized “Camp Solidarity,” to host vigils outside of jails that held striking miners.⁷⁰ Still, by June 1989, Totten claims that the UMWA international offices “was getting a little afraid of the Daughters of Mother Jones,” because of the multiple women that

⁶⁶ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 196.

⁶⁷ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 196

⁶⁸ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 197.

⁶⁹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 197.

⁷⁰ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 197-198.

came out to support the activities in Camp Solidarity. Additionally, the women's experiences of striking were much more intimate than the men. "The women were closer and got to know each other better and traveled more. It was frustrating, because the women found a voice in the strike and then were kept from using it. If you're going to take part in a strike, you should have a voice."⁷¹ Totten observed that the attitudes within the union did not change after the Daughter of Mother Jones occupation: "When we first got started with CEP it was easy to see that our enemy was the coal company. We figured that out real quick. Now it's harder to identify where our enemies are. Sometimes it seems like the union leadership comes out against us."⁷² Totten, among other women in the strike and those that eventually joined the union as miners felt the uneasy tensions of their position as women entering the male dominated coal industry. Still, Totten was hopeful acknowledging that "women went in the mines and showed the companies we could do the work, and we opened doors to truck driving and other jobs.... women miners were so high-profile. I think the boundaries were pushed further for men and women."⁷³ Totten, and other women miners did in fact pave the way for increasing choice jobs and labor for women in the Central Appalachia region.

Through their dedication to striking and providing support to a union that did not always support them, Appalachian women involved in the Pittston Coal strike shared much of the same motivations of those who came before them. Women in the late 1970s and 1980s fought for their rights, the future of their region and their children, and for their communities. Through song and organizing, forebearers like Mother Jones, Jackson, Reece, and Gunning provided inspiration to women strikers and activists in the Brookside mine, and more notably, in the Pittston Coal Strike. Simply put: coal mining women activists of the latter half of the 20th century drew upon

⁷¹ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 199.

⁷² Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 199.

⁷³ Moore, *Women in the Mines*, 200.

the legacy, practices, and traditions of women activists in Appalachia from the first half of the century.

Conclusion

Academic analysis of unionizing, especially within Appalachia, excludes women. The male focus of such research and examination represents the US's broader understanding of history and who writes it. Paul F. Taylor's *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky 1931-1941*, exhibits this narrow approach to academic investigation and its focus on men. In the epilogue of the book, Taylor addresses women and specifically their roles in strikes within the Appalachian region spanning the 19th century: "In the 1930's only the miners became embroiled in the controversy. In 1973-1974, the wives, mothers, sweethearts, and sisters of the miners, armed with "switches," vocally and effectively picketed in support of the strikers."¹ Taylor's statement is the embodiment of the academic exclusion and lack of consideration of women within movements.

The analysis of Taylor, and other academics that implies Appalachian women were uninvolved is only half supported – and is not exhibited in the oral histories from Portelli and Norris. Specifically, each chapter of this thesis refutes Taylor's claim of Appalachian women being uninvolved in labor organization until the 1970s. Although, as Chapter I demonstrates, women were often relegated to the household, there are extenuating, outside forces that made this exclusion possible. As shown through the work of Mother Jones and Aunt Molly Jackson, women participated in the activism alongside men. They were in the picket lines with switches, with stones, standing firm. In some cases, they used their position as women to create change. In others, they pushed against gender roles to advocate for their communities.

¹ Taylor, Paul F. *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky 1931-1941* (St. Martin, Ohio: Commonwealth Book Company, 2017), 194.

Today, the Appalachian region has gained attention due to the massive economic downturn as a result of the widespread closure of coal mines. However, activism has moved to center on environmental justice for the area, with a focus on clean water and equitable access to resources. Such efforts are often led by women, mirroring the labor and social activism that was discussed previously. Frances Rutherford, dubbed by her friends as “the water woman,” became involved in advocacy for her community of Coalwood and Coretta, West Virginia. In the early 1990s, a local mining company went bankrupt, the Public Service Commission paid little attention to correct procedures to control environmental effects of run off and general health requirements. As a result, residents turned on their faucets to black water. The water which gushed into streams and rivers, the communities’ water sources, was bacterially contaminated. Rutherford remarked that “finally things just got so bad in this community of Coretta and Coalwood that the people banded together and just *made* the agencies and the people responsible place the private utility.”²

Rutherford, and many others from her community sued Thomas Blair III, a wealth community member who owned rights to the water and the land which held a broken sanitation pipeline. A legal aid representative helped Rutherford and others bring the case, stating that Blair’s neglect – not holding board meetings with the community – paired with the fact that he was an individual and not a corporation, was a criminal offense. Rutherford and twelve other women from Coretta sat in on every day of the trial: “There was always ten or twelve of us that would sit there and smile at him all through the court case.”³ Rutherford characterized the trial as a moment of standing up on behalf of the community: the women lead the way in not only suing Blair, but ensuring that they were present in the court room to show solidarity in defeating him.

² Randall Norris, *Interview with Frances Rutherford*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7pk06wxq8b>.

³ Norris, *Interview with Frances Rutherford*.

Blair eventually received jail time and Rutherford went on to help found the McDowell County Public Service Commission.⁴ As housewives and working women, Rutherford and other women of her community fought back for the health and security of their two towns, a recurring theme in other studies that chronicle women activists.⁵ Rutherford's experience highlights the ways in which women continue to lead activists movements in Appalachia, the focus has only shifted from labor issues to environmental justice.

Broader academic analysis of women in Appalachia, throughout the 20th century, continually negotiating societal and cultural expectations of their gender, is sparse. In an article which focused on women's militancy in the 1930s factories of Elizabethton, Tennessee author Jacquelyn Dowd Hall discusses the ways in which women in labor history are "seen and not seen."⁶ Because women's involvement in labor struggles, militant or not, contradicts "conventional wisdom" and knowledge of labor history, they were "easily dismissed" by historians.⁷ This overarching affect, of taking women out of the narrative of labor history, only provides half the story of progress in the United States. By contextualizing the "private world traditionally pushed to the margins of labor history" within the larger study of organized labor struggles, academics are able to construct a narrative that is not only more inclusive, but more truthful.

By incorporating the public and the private spheres, with special attention paid to the cultural influences of each, Appalachia is no longer a land void of modernity, a place where "time stood

⁴ Norris, *Interview with Frances Rutherford*.

⁵ Wren Kruse and Michelle Morrone. "Housewives from Hell: Perspectives on Environmental Justice and Facility Siting." in *Mountains of Injustice: Social and Environmental Justice in Appalachia* ed. Michelle Morrone and Geoffrey I. Buckley. (Ohio University Press, 2011), 146.

⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (1986), 355.

⁷ Hall, "Disorderly Women," 355.

still,” only the site of advantageous investment in raw materials.⁸ Additionally, this practice combats the stereotypical image of an Appalachian woman, the ultimate object of this thesis. She is no longer *just* standing barefoot on the porch of a mountainside cabin. Rather, she is seeing her husband off to his shift, or picketing during a strike to support her community; all while raising a daughter that would later go into the mines herself.

In the oral histories conducted by Randall Norris, he ended the interview asking the women what they see in the future of Appalachia. Many women described a continuation of the economic decline that began in the 1990s. And in truth, as this author is from Appalachia herself, these women were not wrong. Others though, held great hope and inspiration for the future of the region – citing education, technological innovation, and a drive to encourage young people. It is important to note here that many of the women who appeared to have hope worked with children, held jobs in the education sector, in nonprofit or pseudo-activist organizations, or some combination. Interestingly, they were of a younger generation. Nearly of the women interviewed by Norris documented the number of children they had, their gender, their occupation, and their current residence. While multiple children were grown and had moved away from the region – there was an interesting trend within gender and occupation: the women mentioned often held college degrees and there was a diverse range of occupations. What I glean from such information is that the labor that Appalachian women has changed dramatically from even forty years ago. Higher education and access to technological resources has allowed the current generation to seek and live a life completely different from their mothers and grandmothers.

In a recorded interview conducted with my grandmother, Petrina Amburgey, in early May of 2019, we discussed her experience growing up in the late 1940s and 1950s. She lived just outside

⁸ Hall, “Disorderly Women,” 357.

one of the local company coal camps in Norton, Virginia. She recounted the “prodigious amount of work,”⁹ that the mother engaged in – and that often employed her and her sisters. She also spoke of the arrival of the United Mine Workers during a strike in her early childhood. Her father stood on the picket line, gun in hand – while her mother worked to run a garden, wash clothes, and feed and raise four children. She married just out of high school and had four children – her sons entered the coal industry and her daughters worked in office jobs and early childhood education. The labor which my grandmother, mother and aunt participated in, and the labor I now expect to participate in after earning a degree – mirrors the progression of gendered labor that Appalachian women engaged in throughout the 20th century.

⁹ Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 83.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Jackson, Molly. vocalist, "I Am A Union Woman." In association with John Greenway and Ronald Clyne, recorded 1961. *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*. Folkways Records, 1961. <https://folkways.si.edu/aunt-molly-jackson-and-john-greenway/the-songs-and-stories-of/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

Jones, Mary Harris. *Mother Jones Speaks: Speeches and Writings of a Working-Class Fighter*. ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: Pathfinder, 1983.

Lynn, Loretta. "Coal Miner's Daughter," recorded October 1, 1969, track 1 on *Coal Miner's Daughter*, Decca Records. <https://genius.com/Loretta-lynn-coal-miners-daughter-lyrics>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

Moore, Marat. *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

Norris, Randall. *Interview with Angelene Harmon*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

- . *Interview with Bertha Mae Lacy*. An oral history conducted 15 April 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7p2n4zkj97>. Accessed 15 May 2019.
- . *Interview with Daisy Murphy*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.
- . *Interview with Frances Rutherford*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7pk06wxq8b>. Accessed 15 May 2019.
- . *Interview with Granny Baldwin*. An oral history conducted 13 November 1993 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.
- . *Interview with Hazel Nunn*. An oral history conducted 19 November 1993 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History,

University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Helen K. Carson*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Linda Ruth Lester*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Lula King Davis*. An oral history conducted 16 April 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Mary Alice Yates*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Mary Jack Hargis*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Nannie Beatrice Spencer*. An oral history conducted 18 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Opal Geraldine Reynolds*. An oral history conducted 28 May 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/catalog/xt7jdf6k3k1c>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

———. *Interview with Virginia Beavers*. An oral history conducted 19 March 1994 by Randall Norris, Appalachian Oral History Collection, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7w3r0psw64>. Accessed 15 May 2019.

Portelli, Alessandro. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. Oxford: University Press, 2011.

Sayles, John, dir. *Matewan*. 1987; United States: Cinecom Pictures.

Secondary Sources

Ackley, H. Adam. *In the Footsteps of Mother Jones, Mothers of the Miners: Florence Reece, Molly Jackson and Sarah Ogan Gunning*, ed. Connie Park Rice and Marie Tedesco, 327-349. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015.

Blackwell, Deborah L. "Female stereotypes and the Creation of Appalachia, 1870-1940," in *Women of the Mountain South: Identity, Work, and Activism*, ed. Connie Park Rice and Marie Todesco, 74-94. Ohio University Press, 2015.

Beckwith, Karen. "Collective Identities of Class and Gender: Working-Class Women in the Pittston Coal Strike." *Political Psychology* 19, no. 1 (1998): 147-68. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/3792119?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Birecree, Adrienne M. "The Importance and Implications of Women's Participation in the 1989-1990 Pittston Coal Strike." *Journal of Economic Issues* 30, no. 1 (March 1996): 187-210. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Google Scholar.

<https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=%E2%80%9CThe%20Importance%20and%20Implications%20of%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Participation%20in%20the%201989-1990%20Pittston%20Coal%20Strike.%E2%80%9D>

Bruley, Sue, and Laurel Forster. "Historicizing the Women's Liberation Movement." *Women's History Review* 25, no. 5 (2016): 697-700. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Google Scholar. https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C47&q=%E2%80%9CHistoricizing+the+Women%E2%80%99s+Liberation+Movement.%E2%80%9D+&btnG=

Cordery, Simon. *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness*. Women's Biography Series. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=f9b8d7a1-2906-490c-8d08-a77765f08a57%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtG1ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=518520&db=nlebk>.

Eller, Ronald D. *Uneven Ground Appalachia since 1945*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library. https://hollins-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=01HOLLINS_ALMA5197960890003751&context=L&vid=01HOLLINS&lang=en_US&search_scope=default_scope&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,Uneven%20Ground%20Appalachia%20since%201945&offset=0

Farr, Sidney Saylor. *Appalachian Women: An Annotated Bibliography*. Lexington, Ky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981.

Fiene, Judith Ivy. "Gender, Class, and Self-Image." in *Appalachia: Social Context* ed. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2002.

Garland, Anne Witte. *Women Activists: Challenging the Abuse of Power*. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1988.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (1986), 354-382. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=881d1f84-c023-4004-b55c-f8e9a079cda8%40sessionmgr102&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=15579483&db=ehh>

Isserman, Andrew M., and Terance J. Rephann. 1993. "Geographical and Gender Differences in Labor Force Participation: Is There an Appalachian Effect?" *Growth & Change* 24 (4): 539-578. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=6a0c7c1c-4e23-463c-9b3a-db719fb59345%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=9405053115&db=bth>

Khale, Trish. "A Woman's Place is in the UMWA": Women Miners and the Struggle for a Democratic Union in Western Pennsylvania, 1973-1979." *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, vol. 13, no. 1 (March 2016): 41-63. Accessed 15 May

2019 via Google Scholar.

<https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=A%20Woman%E2%80%99s%20Place%20is%20in%20the%20UMWA%E2%80%9D:%20Women%20Miners%20and%20the%20Struggle%20for%20a%20Democratic%20Union%20in%20Western%20Pennsylvania%20%201973-1979.%E2%80%9D%20;>

Kruse, Wren and Michelle Morrone. “Housewives from Hell: Perspectives on Environmental Justice and Facility Siting.” in *Mountains of Injustice: Social and Environmental Justice in Appalachia* ed. Michelle Morrone and Geoffrey I. Buckley, 145-160. Ohio University Press, 2011.

Maclean, Nancy. “The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women’s Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class.” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 43-78.

Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

[http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=2459a4f6-186c-424e-8aa7-23b156afd32d%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=321673&db=nlebk.](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=2459a4f6-186c-424e-8aa7-23b156afd32d%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=321673&db=nlebk)

Matthaei, Julie A. *An Economic History of Women in America: Women’s Work, the Sexual Division of Labor, and the Development of Capitalism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.

Oberhauser, Ann M. "Towards a Gendered Regional Geography: Women and Work in Rural Appalachia." *Growth and Change* vol. 26 (Spring 1995): 217-244. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=00429cd7-e998-46c0-a397-c0a0a8d2f9d8%40sdc-v-sessmgr04&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=9508170724&db=bth>

Savage, Carletta. "Re-gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors." *Appalachian Journal* 27, no. 3 (2000): 232-48. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/41057390?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

Shifflett, Crandall A. *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960*. 1st ed. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

Shifflett, Crandall. "Coal Towns: The Company Town and Southern Appalachian History." in *Reshaping the Image of Appalachia* ed. Loyal Jones (Berea, KY: The Berea College Appalachian Center, 1986), 47-53.

Smith, Barbara Ellen. "Walk-Ons in the Third Act: The Role of Women in Appalachian Historiography." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 5-28. Accessed 15 May 2019 via Hollins University Library.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/41446364?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Tallichet, Suzanne E. *Daughters of the Mountain: Women Coal Miners in Central Appalachia.*

University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.

Taylor, Paul F. *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County,*

Kentucky 1931-1941. St. Martin, Ohio: Commonwealth Book Company, 2017.