

# MEMORY OF A MINER

A True-Life Story from  
Harlan County's Heyday

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 Growth Resources  
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# Contents

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Preface .....	1
Introduction .....	5

## PART ONE WASHBURN TO COXTON

1 To a Thing Born.....	9
2 A Brand Plucked from the Fire.....	11
3 The Boy is Key to the Man .....	17
4 Carl and Della .....	43
5 Struggle and Sacrifice.....	59
6 In Coal Blood.....	85

## PART TWO COXTON TO BLACK MOUNTAIN

7 31 Camp .....	111
8 The War Years .....	151
9 Dadspeak .....	167
10 An Iron-Strong Woman .....	183
11 The Good Times.....	205

PART THREE  
BLACK MOUNTAIN TO HARLAN

12	Mining Takes Its Toll .....	229
13	A Final Calamity .....	235
14	The End of Mining .....	241
15	Was It Worth It? .....	247
	Conclusion .....	253
	Afterward .....	255
	Notes.....	259
	Bibliography .....	279
	Index.....	283

## An excerpt from *Memory of a Miner* :

There were two terms thrown about in those days, and to be called either was about the worst label a man could have. The first has been referenced a number of times already and we have just discussed them as being “deputies.” But that’s not the term. Miners never called these men deputies. To them, to do so was an insult to the concept of true law officers everywhere. To the miners and their families everywhere these men were known by the derisive term “gun thugs.” They were despised men to the miners, their families, and to union organizers. The “gun thugs” were the enemy who, as demonstrated above, were bought and paid for by the coal operators.

The second term belongs on the other side of the fray – on the miners’ side. In many ways, this name was more despicable to the majority of miners than was “gun thug.” To his dying day, just the mention of the term would raise Dad’s ire. The word, of course, is “scab.”

A scab was an ostracized man, a man without a country. The scab didn’t want his life or his family jeopardized (as if any miner did). He didn’t want the struggle and conflict. He wanted to cross the picket line and continue to work. (Though the union men would say of them, “They shore didn’t mind getting the advantages we fought and died for though!”)

The “scab” has been the recipient of derision for as many years as there have been picket lines to cross. One writer dipped his pen in acid and wrote the following:

When a scab comes down the street, men turn their backs, angels weep in heaven, and the Devil shuts the gates of Hell to keep him out...Judas Iscariot was a gentleman compared to a scab. For betraying his master, he had character enough to hang himself. A scab has not.<sup>40</sup>

The tension between the union miners and the scabs was close in intensity to that existing with the operators of nonunion mines and their gun thugs. Dad says, “Lots

of them that wouldn't go on picket lines and support efforts to unionize would get thrown off the nearest bridge and into the river [by union miners]." This wasn't intended to kill or maim any miner, and didn't. It was done to send a message and for humiliation.

The strains in relationships caused among these groups: operators, gun thugs, scabs, union miners and union organizers, lasted for decades, for generations, and even existed within families. To this day, wounds are not totally healed in those hills. And though their numbers grow fewer by the year, people still remember. Scars last a lot longer than the wounds which caused them.

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In the majority, the Coxton years were about working hard to mine coal and working hard to organize nonunion mines. I asked Dad if he could recall the worst picketing experience he ever had:

When we went to Three Point,<sup>41</sup> honey. It's up in a holler off to the right, just before you get to Cawood.

We come out of there that evening, after picketing there that day. You had to come out through a tunnel up there to get out. We had been picketing and the state troopers were up there. It had been a peaceful picket, as pickets go. The troopers let us out but they intended not to let other picketers get in, you see, even though picketing is legal. When we come out of the holler, down through that tunnel, the state troopers was set up there and they intended that nobody else would get in to picket once we got out.

We just doubled back and come up another fork and we crossed one little ol' branch I guess a dozen times a-zigzaggin' around, a-goin' back across that mountain in the night. Man, that was a long haul!

We climbed up to the top of the mountain and crossed over and come down in there til [so] we'd be there the next mornin' when they went to work, you see.

What made it so hairy was that if the gun thugs had been roamin' about they'd of just cut us to pieces. We wouldn't a-stood a chance because we didn't all have guns or nothin'. We was just picketing. And the state troopers were there too and, buddy, they shore wouldn't have helped us!

I said I asked Dad for his worst picketing experience, but that is not quite accurate. In actuality, I was asking him for his second-worst picketing experience. I already knew the worst one. All three of us sitting around the kitchen table that afternoon knew the worst one. We knew instinctively that it wasn't included in the question. Dad called it the saddest day of his life.

(Excerpt from Ch 5, pp. 79-83)