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THE IMMIGRANT COAL-MINER OF SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA

(A Manuscript Article)

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THE IMMIGRANT COAL-MINER OF SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA.

The early day immigrant to the coal-fields of southeastern Oklahoma was an athlete of labor. He was a cosmopolite. He came from practically every country of Europe and his contribution to Oklahoma was the brawn and muscle, if not so much the mentality and culture, of the hardy peasantry of the land of his emigration.

Wealth and money he did not have, nor was he destined to receive a large share of the wealth created as the fruit of his labors. He was in the main, illiterate or possessing meager education, a simple son of the soil of his fatherland, or a victim of industrial and political oppression in the land of his birth.

He was a true pioneer. He was brave. He had faith and courage, an inherent knowledge of the essentials of life and the physical stamina to endure the hardihood that was the common lot of all pioneers. He left the land of his fathers and braved the Atlantic to come to a pioneer country seeking economic opportunity or civil

and industrial liberty. He came for a home, for a school, and for citizenship in a free republic.

How well he has conducted himself in the land of his adoption, what his material achievements have been, and to show with what motivating force he was imbued, by a close perspective of the home and social life of these peoples is the scope and purpose of this article. Complete biographies of some of the most representative individuals of the various groups or nationalities will be offered.

To accentuate my story the writer wishes to allude to the fact that he is himself a descendant of a branch of such humble pioneer immigrant stock. My mother and my mother's people were early day immigrants, and coal miners. My father was an immigrant and for a time a coal miner himself.

And I would sketch very briefly a short personal story taken from the lips of my own maternal grandmother, who with my grandfather and several of their friends arrived in North McAlester in the year 1889, as being characteristic of the social life and early beginnings of many a pioneer immigrant family of

both an earlier and a later date. My grandmother is living today and though a declining old lady in her late ~~seventies her frame and features are a bodily tribute to the fair old Latin-Piedmont stock of northern Italy~~ from which she came.

She tells me that when she stepped off the train in North McAlester, my mother a babe in her arms at the time, there were no hotel accommodations to be had. There were some "rooming houses" but these quarters had been permanently rented by earlier arrivals; "We were led by lantern light to a shed where two beds had been arranged. I could not tell whether its first service had been that of a stable or a chicken house--it was small, squatty and dirty. There we tried to sleep. I couldn't. I cried most of the time.

"The following day we traveled by horse and buggy to the mining town of Krebs, four miles away, where we had decided to locate. We stayed with friends for several days in terribly over-crowded conditions. Grandpa went right to work in the mines. There he saw four men he had known in the 'old country' and asked them about a house. They told him there was none to be had.

They said they were living in a two room shack and that if he wanted to, they would live in one room and we could have the other and do the cooking and eating in that room. It was the best arrangement we could make so we took it.

"After a few weeks of such living a change had to come. Grandpa went to see a man named Montieu, (questionable spelling of name, pronounced Mon ti u) who operated a lumber yard in connection with a general store. Credit terms were extended for lumber and we were able to buy a lot and build a lean-to style of house with one room upstairs and three rooms downstairs."

This old house, built in 1889, is still standing and is being lived in today by an old coal miner named Joe Otterson, who long ago served out his days of usefulness to the coal-mining industry. It is still owned by my grandmother, Mrs. Steve Silott of Krebs, Oklahoma. The old place has never received a coat of paint on any part of it. Its floors are securely constructed of the earliest type of six-inch width pine board lumber-mill flooring. Its walls and

ceilings are partly covered by wide strips of heavy brown pulp paper which were securely tacked and held in place. A few years before my grandfather's death, which occurred in 1907, he built a larger, better constructed and more modern house on a lot adjoining the old homestead, and it is this place in the town of Krebs that my mother and my aunts and uncles have come to know as home.

In a like or similar manner, many a pioneer immigrant coal-mining family established itself in the coal fields of southeastern Oklahoma. People who were poor folk in their homeland, who were strong of heart in their desire for labor and accomplishment, and who were accustomed to old world culture and civilization, transplanted themselves to a land of wild Indians, black-jack brush and growth, and booming, coal-mining industrialism.

Compassing the outskirts of North and South McAlester and comprising the major portion of the population of the towns of Krebs, Alderson, Bache, Dow, Hartshorne, Haileyville, Savanna, Kiowa and Pittsburg, we find the most important coal mining sections and mining population

of Pittsburg County. McAlester, which includes both North and South, is not dominantly a coal miner's town, but has grown to be a trade center and marketing point for coal mined in the entire area. The smaller places with populations once ranging from one to seven thousand (now reduced to approximately half their numbers with the depression and general waning in importance of the coal industry) are 'coal-miner's towns.' These extend on into Latimer county on the east and into Coal County on the south.

Within this area thousands of honest but under-privileged people of Europe founded new homes throughout the decades immediately preceeding and following the year 1900. People from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales of the British Isles, a few Belgians, Russians from the far North, Frenchmen, Austrians, Poles and large numbers of Italians cast their fortunes and their future under the banner of 'King Coal' in the McAlester mining area of Southeastern Oklahoma. Some Spaniards found their way to this new territory but theirs was an indirect migration by way of Mexico and



Texas, of nomadic railroad building crews and section gang laborers, who finally settled down to the business of mining coal.

Within the hearts of all was faith, and hope, and charity for their neighbors and it was a gracious cosmopolitan spirit which fortified them in the calloused, grimy and hazardous task that was coal-mining.

The hey-day of coal has come and gone but its vestiges linger on. Let us peer into the lives and homes of these immigrants of yesterday and citizens of today who played such an important part in the development of this perilous industry.

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-- The English

-- The Irish

-- The Scotch

-- The Welsh

-- The Belgian

-- The Russian

-- The French

-- The Italian

-- The Austrian

The immigrant coal-miner's day was replete when in the evening he listened to an array of steam whistles sounded by the various mines in his locality. If he heard the whistle of the respective mine at which he was employed he knew that there would be work for him the following day, and the attention of the women folks at once turned to thoughts of preparation of the dinner, or pit bucket, as it is called.

The mine whistle and the dinner or pit bucket, were, and still are, institutions about which the coal-miner's life revolves--the first whistle in the evening and another the following morning--thoughts of what is available for the bucket at night and its preparation early the following morning.

The early-day coal miner and his family listened to the mine whistles with something akin to ceremony. The evening whistle was the first signal for a days work for father, husband and son, on which so much depended. It meant their bread and butter, their very subsistence. It sounded the glory that is found only in hard strife and in their simple call to duty there was no place for fear.

After his day in the mines the immigrant miner might be found tilling the soil in a vegetable garden in his yard or feeding his horse and cow, his flock of chickens or a hog or two which he was raising to fatten and butcher, but always when the family found itself together for a quiet hour before an early retirement, a conversation concerning the mine whistles ensued. -- "Did you hear number Four tonight? -- Has number Six blown yet?" Or maybe someone would state bluntly, -- "Number Two didn't blow." Perhaps some neighbor wishing to assure himself would drop by and ask, "Did you hear number Five?" Always the verdict was the same for though some of the mines were as much as two or three miles from their homes they were proficient in judging the sound and direction of any one whistle. Sometimes two or three of these whistles might blow at once, or with a high wind the tone and direction of a single whistle had blown there was seldom a doubt about it. If it did not blow, then they doubted their perceptive powers and sought assurance one from the other.

A coal mine is known by its number, sometimes followed by the name of the town near which it is located or the name of the coal company which operates it.

There were evenings when some of the whistles did not blow. There might be no demand for additional supplies of coal that day, or being a demand, there might not be empty railroad cars available on the sidings at the mine to haul the coal away. The hoisting machinery would sometimes break down. The fans and ventilating system which supplied fresh air at the bottom of the mine and removed dangerous natural gas seepage might not be operating properly. A cave-in or large rock-fall could cause a delay for removal, or for propping and casing of that section of the mine with logs or heavy lumber for the sake of safety and forestalling further mishap, danger and damage. Water seepage was a negligible factor compared with other hazards. Any of these things, however, might cause a delay in operations, and if it was trouble in the mine, a select and limited crew worked on off days to make repairs and put things in readiness to resume general operations.

Within the mine on regular working days the immigrant coal miner performed some specialized duty which was his regular job. He worked in a room at the bottom of the mine digging coal with pick, shovel and drill, and in this task he was usually paid according to the tonnage

he produced. He might be a 'Driver' who with a small pit mule, which was stabled and kept within the mine for weeks at a time, hauled the coal in cars over tracks from the rooms and through the smaller galleries, to the main channels of the mine where power-driven machinery pulled it on in its course to the top. He could be a switchman whose duties were to make necessary couplings and uncouplings of cars, and to throw the track switches at the junctions within the mine, in directing the coal cars on the downward or upward course. Or he could be a 'Rope Rider' who rode or followed a string of cars attached to power-driven steel cables. A 'Rope Rider' might assist the switchman in making couplings and uncouplings at the junctions, or as they were sometimes called--cardons. But his principal duty was to stay with a string of cars and act as a signal-man to the engineer at the top who controlled the power-driven machinery of the mine. If a car jumped the track the 'Rope Rider' touched a steel rod to two electric wires, directly above his head and following the track, and so completed a current which rang a bell as a signal for the engineer to stop the tugging cable to which the

car was attached. When the cars were loaded or unloaded the 'Rope-Rider' gave the bell signal to the engineer to start them up or down as the case might be.

A 'Shot Fire' and 'Gas-Man' held jobs of virtual confidence among their fellows for upon them depended very largely with what degree of safety and dispatch the men could operate. With a gas lamp, (one which did not have a flame exposed) and an ingenious ability for discovering gas pockets, the gas-man ran the mine at intervals and especially just before a crew entered the mine on a working shift. The 'Shot-Fire,' who placed and fired charges of dynamite within the rooms of the mine to blast away rock and coal and facilitate digging had to have the qualifications of a gas-man himself. His work was done at intervals between shifts or at such a time when the entire crew was out of the mine and in this task it was his own life that was at stake. With proper air ventilation there was little danger of a gas explosion within a mine, and to the account of an incompetent or careless Gas-Man or Shot-Fire, can be charged practically every explosion with its attendant damage and sorrow.

During the boom days of the immigrant coal miner the mines often worked double shifts, night and day, for long periods of time without mishap. It was then that the coal miner was busy and happy. He heard regularly his whistle in the evening and he listened again to another at five or six o'clock in the morning which told him that everything had gone well at the mine and to come on to work. An hour later and at a short blast of the mine whistle he entered the mine for his day's work.

His dinner bucket was well stocked with wholesome food. There were always plenty of meats and vegetables and seldom any sweets, his limit in this direction being an occasional piece of fruit pie. There was never any cake in the early-day coal miner's dinner bucket. His favorite drink was plain tea or unsweetened black coffee which he carried in the upper or liquid section of his dinner bucket.

At three-thirty or four o'clock in the afternoon he left the mine and returned to his home in much the same manner in which he had come--usually driving a fast-trotting pony hitched to a light buggy or spring hack. On his trip to the mine that morning his pit lamp

in his cap might have been burning to show him the way in the darkness or as a signal to a passer-by on the road. That afternoon, gleaming in the wind above a blackened and smudgy face, it might still be burning to exhaust the last portion of carbide gas he had set to generating in it at its last refill with water and carbide within the mine.

Once home he retired to his wash house, or shanty, as it was commonly called. Beneath his stiff canvas trousers and jumper, which along with a pair of heavy hob-nailed shoes made up the miner's outer garments, he removed a heavy sweat shirt and a pair of trunks, or a heavy suit of underwear of the old union-suit variety, and proceeded in a common wash tub filled with well or cistern water, with a coarse cloth and strong soap, to remove the coal-dust and grime from his body. The miner's bath was in truth a part of his daily task. In the winter the water was warmed in a tub on the top of a coal range by the women folks in advance of his coming and in less severe weather placed in the sun to warm and break the chill of the water.



The home life of the early-day immigrant coal-miner of Southeastern Oklahoma was in many respects as diverse as that of the various nationalities or countries from which he came. Only the English or those of British descent could understand and read the English language. He naturally sought the company and society of those of his own nationality and descent and with whom he could converse. It was not an easy task for him to acclimate himself to a new country and a new job.

At his work he made out very well by association and interpretation by his fellows, and there were some warnings and bulletin announcements at the mine which were not made in writing but by signs drawn with chalk on a blackboard or on a piece of timber within the mine.

In his social life he adhered to his old world customs and traditions for a period of time. He was an American pioneer striving to live an American life, yet forced to accept his old world culture of which he was still a part and parcel. The games that he played, the dances and meetings that were held and the food and meals that were prepared and served in his home were dominantly and markedly European.

Just what was the home life of these people? And what did the future hold in store for them? We may glean these things from a study of the home life of these pioneer immigrant people themselves--from their sons who have followed the paths of their fathers, and from those who through fate and fortune, elemental luck, and application have qualified themselves and risen to better things.

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If we talk with the old-timers they will tell us that the early-day coal-miner received from a dollar and a half to three dollars a day for his services. A little later his average pay was two to four dollars a day. Now it is five dollars and twenty-one cents. During the World War and pre-war days the coal-miner earned seven to eight dollars a day and his cost of living was proportionately high.

Several days ago the writer had the opportunity of talking with a young man whose father has been actively engaged in coal-mining operations in Pittsburg County for a long long time. The son himself is now an operator. I asked him what his pay-roll showed the average miner to be receiving today. He told me one hundred and thirty-five dollars a month. This amount seemed mis-leading to me and after some reflection I asked him further. "Do you mean that were the mines to operate without interruption for a full month's time, and if you averaged the salaries of the men who dig the coal, along with those paid to engineers, skilled labor, and supervision, that the average figure on each pay-check would be one hundred

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and thirty-five dollars?" He told me this was what he meant.

But the miner does not work every day. The union wage-scale calls for pay at the rate of five dollars and twenty-one cents a day and for a five day week. On some days and for some miners there may be over-time work in deviation from the present seven-hour working-day. But if the present day coal-miner in this area works two hundred and sixty days out of the three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, he is indeed a lucky coal-miner. Two hundred working days a year is generally considered above the average for the few mines that are still in operation here.

Even if the man who digs the coal worked full time throughout the year, at the prevailing wage-scale, he would receive about one hundred dollars a month for that year. But he does not work full time, and a small amount of over-time at time-and-one-half pay received during the rush periods of the fall and winter months does not compensate for the long lay-offs which occur during the spring and summer. Eight or nine hundred dollars a year is about the best annual

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pay which the coal-miner receives, and many who have tenaciously held to their task must content themselves with an annual earning power of little better than six hundred dollars.

We have traveled a long way from the days of the immigrant coal-miner. My grand-father dug coal with the old-timers, operated on a tonnage or percentage basis and earned from two dollars and seventy-five cents to four dollars a day. The pay of the average man in the mine at this time averaged less than this amount, about two dollars a day, and there were some few who worked on top, at less-skilled, less laborious, and less-hazardous jobs, who received as little as a dollar and a quarter a day.

Today the right of labor to organize and carry on collective bargaining through their organization in matters of wages and general working conditions is definitely conceded.

My grand-father was once branded as a "Red-Card Socialist" by unscrupulous operators and law enforcement agencies.

Along with several hundred others he was placed on board a string of cattle cars and shipped into Arkansas and released there in the wilderness, simply because he belonged

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to a miner's union which upheld the rights and privileges of the laboring man. This was during the year 1898 which all of the old-timers refer to as "the year of the Big Strike". My grand-father returned immediately and went to work again.

Many a discreet and discerning old Scot and Welshman in this area will tell you that during the scene of this labor trouble he was misled by propaganda which was not exactly what it should have been, and lured from the coal-fields of the Virginias and the Carolinas to settle here. He came in a rush in a cattle car. His wife and family, if he had one, soon followed. He found himself made a disgruntled and dis-satisfied strike-breaker, against his own conscience. He did not want to "scab" against the men and under the conditions as he actually found them here. Many of the men either had to work or go hungry. They chose the sensible way out, but to this day the miner who was imported from the east still bears the stigma as having once been revolting scab labor.

The story of the coal-miner has been an essential part of the story of labor, depicting in itself a rise from long

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working hours and labor under killing sweat-house conditions to shorter hours, better working conditions, better pay and an opportunity for some of the luxuries and better things of life which the evolution of our national development has made it possible to obtain. But, now, at an obvious pinnacle of our industrial and economic achievement, the coal miner finds himself engaged in an industry fast receding in importance, from its once exalted position. Cheap water power, electricity, the development of natural gas resources, an abundance of oil fuel for power and heating purposes, all have meant luxury and progress, but they have brought chaos and ruin to the coal-miner and the coal-mining industry.

The coal-miner rose only to fall. Most of what he was able to save when times were good, he was forced to spend when times were bad. And through prosperity, boom, depression and recovery, his pay-check has been the gauge of his material achievement and personal well-being.

As we look back from a vantage-point of sixty years we are well able to discern just what the fate of the coal-miner



has been. Through days and years of labor and an humble and frugal home life, few indeed are the numbers of the old-timers who through their mining activities alone have been able to provide even a common measure of security in their declining years. Most of them as was the custom in the old days, reared a large family, and many of their children have prospered and proven a blessing to them. In the smaller towns of this once active mining district we find some of the old-timers and their sons operating feed and seed houses, grocery stores and filling stations.

Some of their sons and daughters have found their way into lucrative positions with local corporations and into the government service. Many of the second and third generations have scattered about the nation and are engaged in commerce and industry. Some have remained, only to accept the fate of a vacillating and tottering industry which they thought could become no worse. Among them we find the intermittently employed coal-miner of today, a few relief workers and those who are basically and inherently poor.

During the years immediately following the World War when times were bad, industrial conditions strained, and a period

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of attempted readjustment was in progress, many coal-miners and their families left the Southeastern Oklahoma area to take up farming in the Rio Grand Valley of Texas and Mexico. Some went to California to allocate themselves and considerable numbers to Michigan and Ohio to take part in the automobile and rubber-tire industries in those states.

During the old days some few of the immigrant coal-miners, during periods of lull or depression in the industry, went back to their homelands and never returned. The great majority stayed and some of them regularly remitted money to relatives still in their homelands who were dependent upon them for support. Quite commonly the early-day coal-miner financed the trip of a brother or sister to come to America, or of a sweetheart who was to become his wife. Some fortunate few who had saved a little money, returned to their homelands with the intention of spending the ripening years of their lives there, found their old-world ties and connections broken or outgrown, and again returned to America with a renewed effort to adjust themselves to changed conditions.

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Every immigrant coal-miner's life which has culminated either in America or abroad and every dollar that has been earned and spent either in America or Europe represents a contribution to the upbuilding of industrial America.

Some flagrant stories have circulated in their time and have created a false impression concerning the earnings of the average coal-miner. What the operators have earned is beyond the scope of this article. But in keeping with the facts and from casual observation we know that when times became economically tense, eastern capital deserted this field of exploitation, and the mines which are runing today are comparatively small and are being operated by individuals who were one time day-laborers and by smaller less-significant coal-marketing concerns. Transcending the average miner's wage which has already been shown to have fluctuated between two and five dollars a day for regular working days, the Shot-Firer in a mine has always received higher pay --- twelve to fourteen dollars a day for lighting fuses to dynamite charges, any one of which in an unguarded moment might snuff out his life! When times

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were good and lack of operations meant less in profits new entries were commonly opened up in the mines to increase production. It was claimed that entry-digging required more skill and as much as fifteen to eighteen dollars a day was paid for this limited volume of work. But it is the impression of the writer that this was simply a publicized trick on the part of the operators to create an illusion of general high wages being paid in the industry. Many an unsuspecting buyer of coal has had such an impression but such a sample of things is unfair both to the miner and even to the operator himself.

Labor in the coal-fields is not and has never been overpaid. A candid truth for the writer to admit would be to state that my grand-father on my mother's side killed himself from working too hard in the mines. I have an uncle on my father's side who returned to Italy in total blindness in the early days because of a mishap as a Shot-fire in a local coal mine. I have an uncle through marriage to my mother's sister who rose to the office of state mine inspector at one time, only to have both legs severed above the knees, a little later, in an accident in the operation of his own mine.

