

## **THE LIFE OF A COALMINER- JAMES W. MOONEY**

By Barbara Mooney Myers

I recall that many of the years from the middle forties through to the late fifties were booming with coal mining. Local towns nearby such as Tracy City, Coalmont, Palmer and Whitwell all were filled with coalmines. Seventy five percent of our men in the area were coal miners. My father James W. Mooney, known to many as "Bill", was born on May 8, 1902, in Sewanee, TN, to William and Martha Cook Mooney.

Dad started at the early age of 15 working in the logging business along with his father and two brothers, Joe & John Mooney. By the age of 17, Dad began his life as a miner. By 1919, he was forking coal or coke into railroad cars. Dad spoke of his first bosses in the mining work. One was Eli Bennett. Another was Close Parsons. Mr. Parsons was over the coal washer. Dad had different jobs as a miner. He ran a steam drum where he was paid \$1.50 a day. By 1920, his job pay changed to \$3.50 a day for an 8-hour shift.

Around Tracy City there were many small mines with names such as Reed Hill, Lick Point, Pryor Ridge, Big Hill and Little Hill.

In days of few types of entertainment, miners would go to see a silent movie in a little theatre in Coalmont. If they had a horse and buggy, they would take long buggy rides with their favorite girl. Horseshoes and listening to battery operated radios or Victrolas were popular pastimes. The Grand Ole Opry on WSM was a favorite spot on the radio when Saturday night rolled around. Singers such as Roy Acuff, Little Jimmy Dickens, String Bean, Uncle Dave Macon and Jimmie Rogers were popular at the time.

Dad's closest friend during these years was Jasper Hargis, the son of Abe and Barbara Headrick Hargis of Gruetli. Jasper was a man of about 5' 10" weighing 175-180 lbs. He and his family lived there in the Swiss Colony community. He wore suits and neatly ironed long sleeved shirts to match and often, colorful pullover sweaters. Stylish dress oxfords of either brown or black with white were his shoe choices. My dad admired Jasper's style. Dad said that he and other miners were lucky to have a change of clothes! Jasper had many sisters and brothers, but at this time dad spoke highly of his younger sisters at home. They were Josie and Rosa Lee Hargis. Later on Dad met a first cousin of Jasper, Josie and Rosa Lee's. Her name was Josephine Dove, daughter of David & Mary Headrick Dove. Mary Headrick was a sister to Jasper's mother, Barbara Hargis.

By the latter part of 1921, Dad had made up his mind to marry Josephine. At that time he was working around Coalmont and Palmer in dog hole mines. These mines were dug out holes barely big enough for a man to crawl into to work at digging coal. At the time he was friends with Garvin Morgan of Coalmont. Garvin had married Dad's father's sister, Flora Mooney. She was my grandfather William Mooney's sister.

James W. Mooney & Josephine Dove married September 15, 1922. They first lived at Coalmont. Other families there were the Phippses, Holts, Davises, Kings, Burroughs, Hargises and Morgans. At the time most of the miners in Coalmont worked at mines managed by Lawrence Phipps. Also in Coalmont was a store owned by the Creightons. Almost everyone traded there. The Creightons offered credit to most of the miners. On payday at the mines you could bet your eye-teeth that the store would be the coal miners' first stop. There they would pay their bills and buy a batch of groceries which usually included flour, meal, coffee, lard, sugar, salt and a slab of fat back if they hadn't killed a hog during the winter. On weekends there were always chores such as chopping wood then splitting it. Then, of course, there was gardening in the summer.

By late 1922 many of the miners went on strike. Some left Coalmont, Palmer and nearby areas by train in 1923 for Morganfield, KY, to work there where mining was booming. Miners could rent a room at a big boarding house there, so Dad was among those who went to KY to work. He spent three months there, but soon was lonesome for his wife and family. He boarded a train and rode back to Sewanee, TN.

Coming back home meant looking for another home for the family. Eventually he found the old Phipps place in Gruetli. The place had been built in the early 1840's and had many warped boards, both inside and out. It had been empty for some time, but was once owned by Mother's grandfather, Tom Headrick. The family set in to do the needed repairs of replacing broken windows, repairing doors, scalding and cleaning the floors and scrubbing down the walls. Since it was a very large house, some of the rooms were just closed off. The closest neighbors were the Abe & Barbara Hargis family, but they were a good way down a sandy road.

Dad found work at the John Powell Mine in Coalmont. He gathered his old mining pick, auger and his worn, dull shovel that had been handed down from his father. Abe Hargis was "the best" handyman, so he sharpened the shovel as well as all our other tools. Dad made his first trip to the mine, 5 miles away, carrying a 25 - pound keg of black powder on his shoulder plus the auger, pick, shove, carbide lamp, his lunch & a water pail. A day's work was loading 3 to 4 tons of coal, which paid \$1.50 per ton.

Our family left Coalmont in 1923 for Alabama after my brother William Carl died around Christmastime. My maternal grandmother and her husband lived there as well as Mom's brothers Henry & Arnold. They were all miners, so Dad began mining with them.

By 1925 our family moved back to Sewanee to a place called "Potts Knob", once called the old Dotson place. By this time another daughter Dorthy Elizabeth had been born. Another son, Buford Ray, had come along, but he died from colitis when he was only 4-years-old. In 1932, Joe Thomas, who was named after Dad's brother Joe, was born.

In 1935 Gloria Lou was born and died on the same day. August 28, 1937, I was born in Coalmont near Pine City. Dad spoke of these days as hard times, "Hoover Days".

We lived at many different places following Dad's work. There was a place in Hoot Hollow in Tracy that is the Griswold homeplace today, then, we moved to a little place owned by John Throneberry, which we later bought. A little while later Dad traded the place to Walter & Byrtle Cagle for a home in the country. Another brother was born in 1943 at our home in Lankford Town, a section of Tracy City.

Mining was still going strong in the 1940's and Dad was really into his work. His working companions were Waldo & Herschel Myers, Dave & Harve Nolan, Amos & Ed Layne; Pascal, Barney, Roy & Chuck Johnson, Dolph Hargis and several Shrum fellows. At this time he was working at "Lick Point" Mine in Pryor Ridge. That was his last mining job.

My Dad lived to be 86-years-old and died from cancer on April 18, 1988. Mom was killed in a car accident on March 21, 1966. Both parents are buried at Bonny Oak Cemetery in Coalmont, TN. I moved away from the mountain for a time, but a voice kept calling me to "come back home", so I returned in 1986. Home is where the heart is.

I am proud to be a coalminer's daughter.