

James & Josephine Dove Mooney's Early Years

By Barbara Mooney Myers

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

Dad started working at the age of fifteen in the logging business along with his father and two brothers, Joe and John Mooney. By the age of seventeen he began working as a coal miner. By 1919 he was forking coal and coke into railroad cars. He spoke of his first bosses, Mr. Eli Bennett and Mr. Close Parsons, who oversaw the coal washing. My dad worked various jobs as a miner. He ran a steam drum where the pay was \$1.50 per day. By 1920 his job paid \$3.50 a day for an 8 hour shift.

There were many little mines that surrounded the nearby area of Tracy City with names like Reid Hill, Lick Point, Pryor Ridge, Big Hill, and Little Hill.

There was little entertainment for the hard working miners. Often they would gather together to see a silent movie in a little theater in Coalmont. If they had a horse and buggy, they would take long buggy rides with their favorite girl or with close friends. Some would take walks to the nearest town, sit around talking and sharing their day, while others played horseshoes. Some families had battery operated radios or Victrolas on which they could play recorded music. Dad often spoke of listening to the Grand Ole Opry on station WSM out of Nashville to singers like Roy Acuff, Little Jimmy Dickens, String Bean, Uncle Dave Macon, Jimmie Rogers, and lots of older, now deceased, Grand Ole Opry performers.

My dad's closest friend in the earlier years was Jasper Hargis, the son of Abe and Barbara Headrick Hargis, of Gruetli, TN. They lived there in a community called the Swiss Colony. Dad commented that Jasper dressed in neatly pressed clothing with long sleeved shirts, colorful sweaters, and oxford shoes in either brown, black or white colors to match his outfit. In the summertime, Jasper swapped his sweaters for vests. It was not uncommon to see him in a full suit. This man of 5'10" and 175-180 lbs. was a snappy dresser. Dad, on the other hand, wore whatever he had to wear and stated that, "Us fellows were lucky to even have a change of clothes".

Josie and Rosa Lee Hargis were Jasper's younger sisters. Their first cousin was Josephine Dove, daughter of David and Mary Headrick Dove. Mary Headrick was a sister to Jasper's mother Barbara Hargis. Dad said that by the latter part of 1921 he had made up his mind to marry

Josephine. She would later become my mother. They married Sept 15, 1922, and started out living in the small community of Coalmont with the Phipps, Holt, Davis, King Burroughs, Hargis, & Morgan families as neighbors.

Dad spoke highly of Mr. Gavin Morgan of Coalmont. Gavin had married Dad's father, William Mooney's, sister, Flora Mooney of Sewanee.

Dad was working around Coalmont and Palmer at some of the small dog hole mines. These were dug out holes barely big enough for a man to crawl in to dig coal. Most miners in the area were working at mines managed by Mr. Lawrence Phipps of Coalmont.

There was a store in the center of Coalmont owned by the Creightons. Most everyone in the area traded there. Creightons offered credit to the miners, so on payday, you could bet that the first stop would be at Creighton's Store to pay their bills and to get groceries such as flour, meal, coffee, lard, sugar, salt, dried beans, and a slab of fat back if they hadn't killed a hog for winter. Coal oil was also a needed supply. After the staples, then came anything extra that they could afford.

Weekends for the men were filled with wood chopping, splitting, & making kindling. Then there was hunting for food that had to be done. In the summertime there were extra hours of planting and gardening. Gardens were a helpful provider for a lot of families. Without one, families almost starved to death. There was a lot of work to be done before a man could seek the shade of a large tree and sit down to rest.

By late 1922 many of the mines went on strike. Some men left Coalmont, Palmer, and other mining towns to look for work elsewhere. Some left for Morganfield, KY, where coalmining was booming. Catching the passenger train to Morganfield, it carried my dad over the rails for many long miles to the large boarding house where he and other miners stayed while working there. Dad hated leaving his new wife, but they needed the money to provide for a home and food. This new work put many of them doing jobs like handling black powder for blasting the coal. Some were handling the coal tipple, or loading coal onto the cars, or running the mining cars in and out of the mines where those mining the black rock were taking it from the ground. These cars were pulled by two big mules.

My dad spent three months there working in Morganfield, and he was homesick for his wife and family back in Tennessee. He was ready to buy a train ticket back home. He did just that. He bought a ticket that took him from the Illinois Central Railroad in Evansville, Indiana, to the L&N Railroad into Nashville, then into Cowan, TN, then he caught a ride on to his folks' home in Sewanee, TN.

William Mooney, my grandfather, made a lot of wicker or rattan furniture and sold a lot of it around Sewanee to the folks considered the “uptown folks”. A lot of the folks in the Monteagle Assembly Grounds also bought Granddad’s rattan furniture. In the 1990’s I was working in the Monteagle Assembly when I ran across a family with a four-piece-set of rattan furniture. The lady said that her grandmother bought it in the early twenties. It was over seventy years old and still in excellent condition. I had to wonder if it was my granddad’s work.

Coming back home meant having to find a place to live. Dad and Mom went looking for a place and found the old Louisa Phipps homeplace in Gruetli-Laager. It had been empty for years and needed a lot of repairs. It had been built in the early 1840’s and was a large old home with many warped boards outside as well as inside. It, coincidentally, was once owned by Mom’s grandfather Tom Headrick.

Dad found work at the John Powell Mines in Coalmont. He set out to do the repairs on the old homeplace, replacing broken windows, repairing doors, or whatever needed fixing. Mom started boiling hot water to scald and clean the floors and to scrub down the walls. They finally got the place livable and little by little moved their little fit of furniture in. It being such a large house, they closed up some rooms to keep only what they use to make it look more like a home. Their closest neighbors were the Abe and Barbara Hargis family. They were a good walk down the sandy road from Dad & Mom’s place. Dad told of getting together his mining tools for the new job he was taking. He had an old mining pick, auger, a worn and bean up shovel his father had given him. It was as dull as could be. He and Mom headed for the Abe Hargis place to get the toolssharpened on Uncle Abe’s hand turned whet rock that sat upon a big stand. Dad always referred to Uncle Abe as the best handyman or best “jack of all trades”. Abe sharpened all kinds of tools, knives, axes and blades. He was a great helper to both family and friends far and near. His wife, Barbara, was the finest cook around, too.

Dad made his first trip into the mines carrying a 25 pound keg of black powder on his shoulder, the auger, pick, shove, a carbide lamp, a lunch and water pail. He said that it must have been at least 5 miles into the mines. On his way he’d stop and rest a few minutes before going on. With no transportation, Dad had to do a lot of walking.

He said that many times he was worn out even before a day at the mines had started. Even though the long walk had men worn out, there was still a job waiting to be done. It was common to load up to three or four tons of coal a day at \$1.50 per ton. After a day’s shift at the mines everybody was worn out, but the pay was fair, and the miners made a living for their families. The job was dangerous, and dirty. A man had to either choose timber work or mining in those days, and both were hard & dangerous work.

On July 12, 1923, Mom & Dad had their first child, a son named William Carl, born there at the old Louisa Phipps or Tom Headrick place in Gruetli. On Dec 23 of the same year their son died from pneumonia. Dad said it was one of the saddest days of their lives. Christmas wasn't enjoyable that year. Dad started thinking of moving and finally settled on a place in "Dog Town" in the backwoods of Coalmont. They didn't stay there long. They packed up, for their son's death had discouraged them so much, and they moved to Alabama. There Mom's mother and stepdad lived as well as her brothers Henry & Arnold. Dad went back to mining again. He worked there with Mom's brothers and stepfather.

Dad owned several cars through the years. One was a 1917 Studebaker that went up to 60 mph on the speedometer. Later he traded it for a 1924 Chevrolet sedan, a beautiful light beige tan and cream color. The Studebaker had curtains on the windows, a lot of chrome, and whitewall tires. Dad said it seemed like a toy.

The Chevrolet was a much better built car, for it had glass windows and nice big seats to sit on. Later he had a 1925 Whippet that he traded his Chevrolet and \$210 for.

By then both Dad and Mom got the urge to move again. Dad's family, Granddad and Grandma Mooney, had moved to Sewanee, TN, to a place called Potts Knob. It was once the old Dotson place. There the family had fruit trees of every kind, berries, and it was such a beautiful place to live. The closest neighbor there was not a nest of rattlesnakes or a den of howling wolves.

Dad said that many times his mother would go out in the woods as she searched for wild herbs and flowers, scaly bark hickory nuts, and walnuts. Grandma was a lover of wild flowers. She'd sell them for 10 cents a bunch on the streets of Sewanee to the "Big Folks" as the poorer people called them.

By this time Mom and Dad had another child, a daughter they named Dorothy Elizabeth. She was close to six years old at this time. Another son had also come along and had been named Buford Ray Mooney. Buford died of colitis, only living 4 years. Illnesses that are easily controlled now were deadly in those days because there were no effective medications and few doctors were available.

In 1932 Joe Thomas, a son was born. He was named after Dad's brother, Joe. Then in 1935 another daughter came. She was named Gloria Lou, but she died on the same day she was born. On August 28, 1937, I was born there in Coalmont near Pine City. Dad spoke of these WPA days as hard times "Hoover Days".

The Mooneys then bought a homeplace in "Hoot Hollow" in Tracy City. It is the Griswold homeplace today. Granny Kate Headrick once owned it in the earlier years. Kate married a man surnamed King and lived to be 104 years old. An argument between the Headricks started, however, and they waited until their garden was gone there, and they moved to a little place owned by John Thronberry and lived there a little while. Eventually Dad bought that place from Mr. Thronberry, later trading it "even" to Walter and Byrtle Cagle for a home in the country. It became our home that we grew to love, and we settled down there.