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Struggling Through the Late Thirties and Forties

By Barbara Mooney Myers from notes by my father James Mooney

After seeing the ashes of Tracy City (my wife's hometown), we, along with many others were discouraged. The town had lost the biggest companies along with several beautifully built homes. Many hours of hard labor that day had been done to keep the town in business. The Tidman Hotel and home, the New York Store and other little businesses in between had been burned to the ground.

Later that year (1935), we rented a little house from Lawrence Phipps. Lawrence was boss there at Ross Creek Mines. He let us live in the little house as long as we would "fix it up". So, I took him up on the offer. My wife, daughter Dorthy and I cleaned up the house where it'd be suitable to move into.

We burned a lot of old things that needed burning. Aunt Louiza Phipps once owned the old house. We scrubbed and cleaned it with scalding water that my wife heated in an outside wash pot. There were some odd pieces of furniture left there, so we scrubbed them down real good so they could be used. Since we had very little, I bought a gallon of white paint and painted the table in the kitchen, two old chairs, and we had a kitchen cabinet my wife had kept, so I gave it a touch up.

I ordered two mattresses from the Company Store, got us a few groceries and that night we sat down to a decent meal.

My wife was a workingwoman. Her fingers were never idle. By that coming Monday, my day for starting at Ross Creek Mine, we had quite a lot of work accomplished. By fall that year Dorthy had already started back to school. I told my wife about this little place there nearer town and closer to school. By then we were doing lots better with me working regular hours. The little house needed a lot of repairs, but it was near the land I wanted to buy to build my family a new home on. We decided we'd take it and live there until we could start on the new house. That would be after winter was over. We moved in the house doing as little as we could to fix it up suitable for living in.

The weather outside was at its coldest. My wife's uncle gave us a wood and coal-burning heater to use. We'd had a fireplace at the old Phipps home place, but we now needed a stove. It kept me busy cutting wood for both stoves. The little old house we rented bore thin walls. Even with the cracks stuffed, cold air crept in someplace. Even around the windows and doors you could see through the cracks to the outside. My wife tried filling the holes up with old rags. Often I nailed a board up to help keep the heat inside. Seems it never got as warm as we wanted it to.

We finally made it through the winter of 1935, and started the year of 1936. On February 5, 1936, my grandmother Catherine Mooney of Sewanee, TN, died. A big snow had fallen on the ground, and the weather was so cold outside it prevented me from attending her funeral. Besides, my wife was expecting another baby soon. The mines there at Ross Creek kept me working every day.

I kept as much food on the table as I could for my family. One morning I was at work when a worker there handed me a note. I read the note and went to tell my boss that I was needed at home. My wife was real sick and needed me. I rode outside the mines with a tippel car of coal. It was more bad news for my family. We lost another daughter in just a few hours. We named her Gloria Lou and buried her there in Coalmont at Bonnie Oak Cemetery. After another few months of grieving, feeling poorly was in store for my wife. Even getting headed toward a new home didn't improve her depression at all. Through early 1936 we had started the foundation of our new home there in Pine City, between Gruetli and Coalmont. I'd worked every second I could, adding more onto it. I got it done so a roof could be put on. Then I could work by lamplight or in rain or shine. I put the floors down in two rooms and built a flue so I could put up a stove. This way we could heat the house and my wife had heat to cook on. I put the cook stove up first! We did have a bedroom. At night I'd work by the lamplight putting ceilings and flooring down in the other two rooms that were added to the house. We finally had four rooms to live in and enough room for all the family. Handling the job alone took me longer, but we were one happy family with our new home.

Now springtime had come. It took time to make a garden. My wife did most of this. I plowed it making the digging easier. Often the neighbors came by to visit and sometimes helped. We had a little spring on the land. I leveled it off, making a concrete basin to hold the water and piped it off so it would run off and not just stay there. The spring ran from the mountain side there most of the time, so we always had plenty cool drinking water to use and to cook with. It was a nice quiet place to live.

By early May of 1937, my wife was expecting again. We never knew the exact date, but she expected it was August. It happened by surprise for us both. She woke up one night during really hot weather. Labor pains came about midnight, so I jumped up and ran to our neighbor's house for her help. The little old lady who was living there was a midwife. Right after midnight, we had a new daughter born August 28, 1937. We named her Barbara Jean. The Barbara after my wife's aunt, and Jean from Essie Jean Henderson, another of my wife's kinfolks. This made us two girls and a boy.

Joe was almost ready to start to school himself. He had a little red wagon that Santa Claus had brought him. He kept wanting to ride his baby sister in his new wagon. Neighbor boys came to play instead. Sometime they'd get rough and take his wagon away. He'd come crying, "Daddy". Charlie won't give me my wagon back. I'd go out, talk nice to the boys asking them to give my son the wagon back. I settled the problem by making them share the rides in the wagon.

Our front yard was very pretty with two maple trees in it and flowers planted and set out by my wife. In the back there was a large oak tree and a walnut tree. The old Stage Road at the front was almost the centerline of my place. It had once been the old Delta Fults homelace. They had settled there in this community in early 1812. They were German folks from that country who had come to Tennessee. Our closest neighbor was Wilburn King. He was in front of me on the east side and I lived on the west side.

Edward Sweeton lived just down from us. Paul Henderson and his folks, then Uncle Abe Hargis and Barbara, his wife, my wife's aunt and uncle and their family. We were all one big happy family with all of us close by being good neighbors to each other. At Christmas we'd share a few gifts, mostly baked goods or canned preserves and jellies made in the kitchens of the households next door. We'd have dinner fit for a king, all of us sitting and talking and sharing many hours together. Every year a pig would be fattened up and killed especially for the holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas. We men would all gather around, some carry wood, others cut it, carry water filling the wash pots, keeping the fires blazing around the pot, scalding the hogs, scraping them getting them ready to tie up for a spell. Later we separated the parts: ham hocks, shoulders, and ribs. We made bacon, sausage and whatever else we could use the meat for. It was always a big feast for us. Our wives were at our sides helping render the lard, making cracklings and processing all the other parts of the pig.

I remember our last Christmas there at Gruetli. We spent a quiet Christmas at home. No one visited us that year. Barbara had been sick a lot and we were afraid we were going to lose her. The doctor came pretty often to see her. She was just 10 months old by early 1938. Around June of that year my wife had taken her to visit our neighbor, Wilburn King and family. He owned a little nursery there where they raised flowers with arsenic to kill the insects. His roses were beautiful and they grew everywhere. Being just a baby at the time, Barbara somehow pulled a leaf from one of the rosebushes and got it in her mouth. This happened so fast no one knew what was wrong when she passed out. It kept her very ill. The doctor being a good ways off, I had to find a way to get him there. I was at work when this happened, but I rode back to where I got off near home with my supervisor. My neighbor Ed Sweeton waited there on me. He told me not to get out of the car, but to go on into Coalmont and get a doctor there. We reached Dr. Brown's office. I told him it was our baby daughter and she was real sick. So we changed cars and the doctor and I went back to my house. My wife sat holding the baby. She was crying. He got out his bag, took a needle giving the baby a shot. He took her in his arms a few minutes, turning her one way and then the other. It's gone, he said, "Oh, no," my wife said screaming. "Oh, no," he said, she had a seizure, and it's gone.

The relief that we felt inside was amazing. She may have a few more seizures, he said. She's been poisoned on arsenic from a piece of leaf we found in the roof of her mouth. He wrote her a prescription for some medicine. I rode back to Coalmont with him, got her prescription filled and walked the 3 miles back home. Giving her the medicine every three hours made a difference. Barbara got better. We felt that God was punishing us for some reason. The neighbor by us asked me to sell our place to him. My wife said, "Bill, let's move." They had no money to buy it with. By the time our daughter was two years old, we sold it to a man who admired it so much from the mines where I worked. We regretted selling it, but it was what we needed to do at the time. We talked often of moving back to Dayton, Ohio, but my father got sick. Instead we moved to North Chattanooga to Suck Creek for there was mining to do. We found a home to move into near Suck Creek Mountain School. By February 19, 1939, my father Will Mooney died in Sewanee, TN. We'd made a bad move, a long way from family. We had better luck with our children here, though. I had rather be without a fancy home than have my

children sick. I got my job in the mine there and drove a mule. One day the mule ran away with me. I had three loaded cars of coal and had no way of stopping the mule. I broke my arm in the incident. That left me out of work for a while but we managed to get by. I'd saved very little money up, but I had a 1934 V-8 Ford car to drive. We found a better house to live in. Continuing on with my mining job, I found a friend in Mr. Abel, the owner of the mines who paid the doctor bills and helped me as much as he could. I worked around the mines helping out to help support my family. Dorthy was in the last year of grade school there at Suck Creek. We had many hand-to-mouth situations during these years. We may have lived high on the mountain, but it was for certain that we weren't among the higher living folks. Hardly anyone was in those days. The 1940's seemed to be the hardest years for my family and me.

April 23, on my wife's birthday, another son was born to us. We named him Louis David. We couldn't get a doctor out our way, so we settled with a nurse who lived close by. She worked at a Chattanooga hospital. The baby was delivered healthy and this made my wife even happier. He was a birthday gift God sent her she said.

By the time she got well from having the baby, we decided to visit back on the mountain in Tracy City. Driving up that mountain coming home, the car ran low on oil. It got hot; I burst two pistons. It ruined the motor and the car couldn't be driven any more. For a while we went without a car. Finally working a few months there back home at Suck Creek, I bought an old 1928 Dodge. It hardly ran, smoked all the time for it needed rings. It did take us a few places, though. By then I worked for W.P.A. where I made \$8.00 every two weeks. In between those two weeks seemed like an eternity for a man with a family to support.

Later on in the year Joe Kelley hired me to work at a new mines he had opened. I took the job and worked up until Christmas. It paid \$10 a week. I had only been there a few weeks when Joe Kelly got blown up in his car. The power and contact from the car ignited dynamite powder blowing it up. Clothes were burned off his body. A doctor who lived nearby came and wrapped his body in a quilt. He was lucky to be alive, but it took him months to heal. That put me to trying to find a job again.

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