

“You Got to Go Ahead and Get Killed”

Lost Creek Remembered



BY HARRY BOOTH



Editor's note: As a child, Harry Booth lived at the Lost Creek coal camp, site of the 1902 disaster. He worked as a miner in various Iowa coal camps and later moved to Des Moines and was active in the union movement in the 1930s. In April 1978 he was interviewed by Paul Kelso as part of the Iowa Labor History Oral Project. These edited excerpts, prepared for publication by Merle Davis, are from a much longer interview. We thank Mark Smith, Secretary-Treasurer of the Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, for permission to publish this interview.

I was born in 1892. My first memories about anything would be about five years later. I remember us moving to Lost Creek. Then I remember that I didn't see my dad. He worked such long hours in the mine that he'd be gone before daylight and he'd come home after dark. I would look out the window at dark when they was quitting their jobs and see pit lamps coming from the mines like walking lights.

I remember one time when my dad had his leg broke. It was from a cave-in in the mine. There was no insurance like the people have today who work under unions, where they're covered, and the company is responsible for their safety. We didn't have nothing like that. No insurance at all. I know we got some help. I never noticed us ever being hungry. I don't recall where the doctor come from or who paid him. Later on I do know that the company doctors become the thing. The company checked a dollar a month out of your paycheck. The company doctor then took care of you. That was the medical service you had. He took care of you from his home. He lived in a little better place than the rest of us. Supervisors

Mule drivers at the Lockman Coal Camp in the late nineteenth century.

would live in pretty nice houses. They had three or four nice houses for the people who run the company store.

I recall when I got big enough to go to the company store for groceries for my mother. You took a check that was issued by the company. It worked like credit at the company store. It was a punch card. You could get a five dollar check or ones in different denominations, all issued by the company. They were really extending credit to you on what you would make. You was eating ahead of your paycheck. If young guys would come to the camp looking for work, they wouldn't have anything. There'd also be men who would come there and bring their wives and kids with them. They'd go to the company store, and they'd outfit them on credit. The company store furnished everything. They could sell you a suit of

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clothes. They'd measure you and send away for it. They sold pit pants, tools, everything.

The normal thing would be for most of the miners to get their statements of their earnings at the end of a two-week period. It would tell how much coal you dug, what you got for it, how much stuff you bought from the company store, and how much was deducted. The whole thing would be deducted, including these checks for your food and other stuff. You'd get what they called a snake. You'd get a little wiggly worm down at the bottom where it says what you was to draw, because you didn't have anything. You was living without money, just the store check.

There was that struggle all the time to try to get ahead. You're living in a company house, and your rent was checked out of that too. They didn't have to do anything to these houses. Most of them were just barely four rooms.

Some of them were set on the hillsides, and they'd put a horse under the house, like a little barn. When we moved to Lost Creek, the house we moved into didn't have steps to the backyard. When we had to go to the bathroom, which would be out in the back end of the lot, I remember my parents letting me down by taking hold of my armpits. As we got more stove

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ashes, they built up so that you could walk out and step on the ashes and then go down. My dad built some steps after that. I remember that much. That to me was just normal. My folks made things comfortable. I remember when our furniture, the cupboards and things like that, was made out of store boxes. Everything was kind of a homemade deal. We didn't have furniture like we've had in later years. That was before the unions.

I remember very well when they put the calendar up, and it was 1900. It was around 1899 or 1900 that I think the union movement

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began to pick up in that area. The first I can remember of the union would be before 1899. That's when the miners used to have to sneak out to go to the union meetings. We moved over to Pekay, which was another coal mining camp.

Then, when a miner worked, he would shoot



Children in an Iowa coal mining camp, 1900-1910. Dangerous working conditions in the mines too often led to such children becoming fatherless. By age twelve, the boys would be allowed to work in the mines.



his own shots, and he'd shoot twice a day. Once in the evening before they went home, they'd light their shots. And then at noon the next day, they would light shots and shoot while all the men were in the mine. If you was digging coal there, you'd drill your hole and fire your shot at noon. Then you'd eat your lunch and get back to work. One of the biggest gripes of the guys at that time was that they had to work in

A miners' hall at Brazil, Iowa. Used for social and union gatherings, such halls were often the only buildings that were not company-owned in coal camps.

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this smoke. A lot of them would get sick. Black lung disease was probably a minimal thing then, because it takes so long getting a guy. These guys would get sick right off the job, right there. Guys would get worried about if their shots had produced enough coal or not, and they'd go back to take a look after they'd

had supper. That meant that they was half the time in the mine, or more than half. And they'd go back on Sunday. There was no extra pay for it, because you worked by the ton. That's what my dad was doing. When they started to get a union and got a contract, then they began to get things done.

IT WASN'T ALL a dreary situation. After they built the union hall, they'd have a dance, I'd say, at least once or twice a month. There'd be a drummer and a violinist or something for the music, and they'd have these square dances. Normally, you couldn't buy ice cream in that town. But when they had a dance, they would get a great big freezer full of ice cream from Eddyville or some of those smaller little country towns, and they would sell ice cream. They'd celebrate the holidays. We used to go to Oskaloosa for the circus. The mines sometimes would shut down, and everybody would go to the circus. I saw my first electric light when my dad took us to Oska-

loosa. It was in a drugstore. They had them fans in the ceiling. And that was great.

The camp had a baseball team. The company was real liberal. They bought the uniforms for the ball team. I was the mascot for the team. They'd get something like a bus pulled by horses, and we'd go. They'd have teams in Avery and Lockman and Coalfield. Pekay'd have a ball team. They'd have ball games on Sunday. They even had a band at Pekay.

We had a literary society where we'd have performances on the stage. They'd act things out. The school kids would have programs, and they'd go to the union hall and march and get up on the stage and recite poetry and all that kind of stuff. My mother and father sang at programs they had there. The community was pretty active.

I WAS SIXTEEN years old when I started in the mines. Even then the companies didn't furnish you powder. They didn't furnish you dynamite. They didn't furnish you fuse. You had to buy your own tools. You had to have crowbars and drilling machines. You had to pay a fee for the company blacksmith to sharpen your picks and stuff. They didn't furnish you light. You bought your wick. You bought your lard oil for your lamp, which was what the wick went down into. You bought your own clothes, and it took a tremendous

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amount of work clothes. Rough work. It was dirty work. What would a guy think of going in a factory today if he had to pay for the lights? Or if he had to pay for the heat? The company sold all this stuff and made a profit off it.

Sometimes you couldn't get your lamps to stay lit because there was no air in the mine. The union would call for the mine inspectors.

They would decide that we ought to have a mine inspector come out to find out what's going on. The company knew about it. The company'd start to work on the problem that night. They'd get everything worked out. They'd put some curtains up to the breakthroughs to bring the air closer to the face. When the mine inspector got there, he'd find better air there than they had anyplace else in the mine. The company'd never get caught. That's one of the things that still goes on, even where there are unions. Even after John L. Lewis got in, a lot of these things still never got handled. You had mine inspectors that was

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pretty foxy with going to the boss's house when he'd come to the coal camp. It was quite a while before you got away from the company having all the favors. You'd have to take and pry slate off a guy's body in order to say that the place hadn't been timbered properly. If you'd notify the company, they'd say, "Yeah, we'll get that down on the list, and we'll get around to it." You got to go ahead and get killed before you get anything done.

I RECALL we were living in the last house we lived in in Lost Creek when the explosion happened. The mine engineer blew the whistle that there was something wrong. He just kept blowing it. The explosion was January 24, 1902. My brother was working there, and my dad was working there, and I was going to school. The mine was real close to the house.

A dust explosion caused it. People were coming over that didn't know how to dig coal. If you drill a hole on the solid and light it, instead of working and bringing the coal over, the shot

may blow out a place three or four inches wide. It wouldn't bring no coal out at all. They had a name for it. They call it a squealer. It would create a hot wind and would raise the dust in the mine. And then the dust exploded. This was the scientific way they figured out what caused the explosion. Everything was wrecked, the mine shaft and the wheels on the top. The mine cage couldn't go up and down. Of course, the fan was blown out and couldn't operate.

There was a phone between the company office and the mine, and that's what started people to going there. Miners from all the other places, they went over there. They just left home and came over there. Everybody was helping. It was all voluntary. They worked for nothing. They went in and helped them get this mine straightened out, and get the bodies out of there. As soon as the word spread, miners come from all over. Our house was full. Our barn was full. The yard was full during all this excitement. My dad went down, along with so many, many other guys, hunting these guys up after the explosion.

I remember standing on top watching them fix the thing on the cage to lay the bodies on and go down and get them. My dad found where a father had his arm around his son's neck and his coat around him, and all bundled up, both of

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them. They found some of them sitting in the mine. They'd be sitting there with bread in their hands, and it was toasted. They was eating their lunch. They was the ones that got the blaze part of it. There was other guys that wasn't burned at all. Most of the guys smothered. They died of what they called "afterdamp." A light couldn't even burn in it. There was no oxygen there.

My brother got burned, because he was on the bottom of the mine when it blowed up. The guys on the bottom of the shaft that my brother was with used to come up for their lunch. All the young mule drivers were at the bottom. They'd come up for lunch, and they'd eat on

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top, and go back down again. But they hadn't got up. They was waiting for the cage to bring them up. They all got burned. We didn't even know them. I didn't even know my neighbor when he stopped at the gate with my brother. Drivers wore a pad on their back like a blacksmith would wear a leather apron, only it was in reverse, because their back was against the coal cars. They had one of them over my brother's head. When they got my brother in the house, they was putting goose grease on his arms. Women come from all over. There was women there helping us with him when they was notified that both their husband and their son was killed.

COME HOME for lunch at noon that day, and my mother was cooking what would really be my dad's breakfast, because he was working nights driving entries. They would work four men in two shifts, a night shift and a day shift. The guys working together in the same entry or in the same places were called buddies. My dad had been working on the day shift. But the wife of one of the guys was expecting a baby. He come to my dad and said, "Would you change shifts with me, because we're expecting this week, and I want to be



COURTESY RON ROBERTS

The miner and his buddy were responsible for certain safety measures, including placing the timber props.

home." He didn't want to be away at night. So my dad said, "Okay." My dad's buddy was standing there with him, and he said, "Well, if you're going to switch with him, I'll just stay

They drew straws to see who got to be in the hearses and who didn't. They had to carry some of them on beer trucks.

with you. We'll just change, both of us." This is what saved my dad from getting killed. The two buddies that went on the day shift, the one that was expecting the child and his buddy, they were both killed.

They brought the guys out of the mine, and they set them in the company store on a plat-

form that had previously been set up for the winter with stoves and stuff that you could buy from the company. They took this stuff off, and they laid these bodies there so they could come and make identifications. It was like a mortuary. All these bodies were laid out in the company store, and then the wives were brought down to pick out their sons or fathers or brothers.

When they had the funeral, they couldn't get fifteen or twenty hearses. I think there was about two, maybe three, hearses. They drew straws to see who got to be in the hearses and who didn't. They had to carry some of them on beer trucks. Drays they called them. Horse drawn. I know there was one father and son who was buried in Oskaloosa. But most of them were buried in the cemetery at Eddyville. Their graves are marked. I remember watching the funeral go by. I didn't get to go to the funeral, but I remember standing and looking. It got so cold that your breath would freeze on the window. □