

Sixteen Ton

You load sixteen ton and what do you get?
Another day older, and deeper in debt.
St. Peter, don't you call me, because I can't go.
I owe my soul to the company store.

—Merle Travis

Buddy Blankenship

A West Virginian émigré, living in Chicago. Illness has kept him jobless. Children, ranging wide in age from late adolescence to babyhood, step-children, son-in-law, grandchild and a weary wife are seated or wandering about the apartment; trying to keep cool on this hot, muggy summer afternoon. Hand-me-down furniture is in evidence in all the rooms.

I'VE BEEN in a depression ever since I've been in the world. Still, it's better and worse. '31, '32, that's about the worst we ever been through.

I told my dad I wasn't going to school any more. He said: Why, you just come on and go work with me. I went in the mines, and I went to work. From '31 to about the last of '32. The Depression got so bad, we went to farming, raising our own stuff. He worked in the mines fifty-one years. He was sixty-three when he got killed. A boy shot him.

We lived eight miles from the mine, and we had to ride it horseback. I was riding behind my dad. Many times I'd have to get off and hammer his

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feet out of the stirrups. They'd be froze in the stirrups. It was cold, you know. When you come out of the mines, your feet would be wet of sweat and wet where you're walking on the bottom. And get up on those steel stirrups, while you're riding by eight miles, your feet'd be frozen and you couldn't git 'em out of the stirrups. I'd have to hammer 'em out. His feet were numb, and they wouldn't hurt till they started to get warm, and then they would get to hurtin'.

We got up at five in the mornin', start at six. We got out at ten that night. We'd work about sixteen hours a day, seventeen hours. The boss said we had to clean up. We didn't clean it up, the next morning there'd be another man in the mine to clean it up. The motor man would say: How many cars you got? Five more. Well, hurry up, we want to get out of here.

They was gettin' a dollar seventy-five a day. We'd get sixty to sixty-five ton a day—that is, both us, me and Dad. Then they changed me off and let me get a dollar and a half a day. I was trappin'.

Trappin'? The trap door was shut so the air would circulate through the mine. Then the motor come along, I'd open it up. I had to stay there till everybody quit. Then we'd walk about two miles and a half till we got outside. We walked about a mile before we got to where we could get our horses. We got down to the horses, why we rode about eight miles before we got to home. Summertimes it wasn't too bad. But in wintertime, boy, it was rough. You'd get snowbound and it would get so you couldn't get in and out. Ice'd be so bad . . . an' dangerous. Of course, we had to go to work. We didn't eat if we didn't go.

They had what they called safety devices, but it wasn't real safety. They had an axe and a saw and you cut your own timbers. You brought 'em in, strapped on your back. You went out on the mountain with your one-man saw. You sawed down a bush or whatever size prop you wanted and you tuck 'em in on your back. On Sunday, I packed timbers on my back, about two miles to the place . . . to set 'em on Monday. Company furnished the timber but you had to cut 'em. You had to lay your own track. . . .

I've seen several accidents. I've had to take four out of the mines dead. I didn't think about nothin' like that, though. I packed one for seven miles, and he got up and walked better'n I could. I was gonna give out, and he wasn't hurtin' any bit. There was some rock on him, and I took a jack and lifted it up and pulled 'im out. Just his breath knocked out of 'im. . . .

About '32, it got so they wouldn't let us work but two days a week. We saved \$20 in the office. They laid us off two weeks till we traded that \$20 in the store. We had to trade it out in the store, or we didn't get to work no more. It was a company store. What we made, we had to go next evening and trade it off. If we didn't, they'd lay us off. They didn't let you draw no money at all. It was scrip. They had a man top of the hill who took your

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tonnage down, how many tons you loaded, and it was sent up to the scrip office. If you made \$20 over your expenses—for house, rent, lights and all—why, then they laid you off till you spent that \$20.

This town you lived in . . .

It was a cave, a coal cave. Thirty-two families lived in the caves. It was nice buildings, built up inside, but they was just rough lumber. The company was the landlord, too. They owned it all. They still got company houses yet.

I worked about two years on the mines, then we went back to the farm from '32 to '37. It seemed like you lived a lot better on the farm than today. The works was bad, but you didn't have to pay some big price for the stuff. You raised your own hogs, you could have your own cattle. And you had your own meat, your own bacon, lard. You didn't have to buy nothin' but flour and meal. You raised your own potatoes. You never had money because you didn't make it to have it. It was a pretty bad time. It seemed just like a dream to me, the Depression did. I was young and didn't pay no attention to it. I didn't get the clothes or the underwear or stuff like that, but the eatin' part was good. I'd rather be back on the farm than anything I ever done.

Then we went to camp—minin'—in '37. The same mines. Roosevelt brought the mines arollin' again. Things got to moving, and money got to circulating through. I worked the mine from '37 up to '57. Then it was a lot different. They had the union there and we worked just seven hours and fifteen minutes. We didn't work as hard as when the Depression was on. And they wouldn't let us stay no overtime, 'cause they didn't want to pay the overtime. I guess. We made some good money, me and my dad, both. He worked up to '41 and they cut him out. Age. He never did get a pension. He never worked long enough in the union to get a pension.

I took part in four strikes. They fined us one time for takin' a strike. A wildcat, that's what they called it. I helped organize about six mines. Now the company didn't like this, and they was kickin' on us all at the same time. They'd do anything, they'd kill and everything else. One place in West Virginia, they was shootin' us all to pieces. They had guns of all kinds there.

They had three hundred state troopers there. They was on the labor's side, and they took a lot of smoke bombs out of the men's pockets, the scabs. They said: "If you fellows wants to sign up or not wants to sign up . . . but go to carryin' no guns. You fellas ain't paid to carry 'em and ain't paid to use 'em, we're paid to use 'em. If you want to sign 'em up, you go ahead and sign 'em up." And they signed up.

It surprised everyone that these three hundred state police come—on our side. The captain said: If they don't want to organize, shut 'em down. He walked into the bathhouse and, boy, they had guns hanging out all

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around, the scabs. See, the company furnished 'em guns. They had machine guns and everything. They took the state police in there to take all them guns out. I know the name of the Governor if I could think of it—he was on labor's side.* That was '42.

As he remembers, past and present fuse. . . . "The mines were runnin' out, except this little wagon of a mine, and it didn't have no tracks. You had to get on your knees, coal was so low. Coal was just twenty-eight inches. Panther Creek, West Virginia. We drove tunnels clear through the mountain to the other side. We'd drive up as far as we could go without air, and we'd come back and get a sniff and drive it up again as far as we could again without air. We could get breakthroughs to the other place and get air, you see.

"They cut one tunnel there was twelve miles long one way and twenty-eight miles long the other way, 'cause it was a ridge one way. They took twenty-eight inches of rock from the top, make it high enough for the men to work. I traveled about seven miles a day back and forth on my knees. They'd be knots on 'em big as your double fist. . . ."

I liked the mines till it got so I couldn't work no more. My wind was too short, and there was too much dead air and I just choked up and couldn't do no good. I went to work for a dollar an hour . . . on the roads. Till that run out. And I come to Chicago.

Mary Owsley

Before setting off with his family for Oklahoma in 1929, to follow the oil boom, her husband was a dynamite man in Kentucky mines.

ONE DAY HE NOTICED on the side of the boiler a place as big as a saucer. They call it a breather—it's a weak place on the boiler. He told the boss that had to be fixed, because he didn't want to get killed. Monday mornin', I saw him comin' back home. They hadn't fixed it, hadn't done a thing about it. He told 'em in less than three weeks there'll be an explosion. Sure enough, there was. Killed three men and two mine mules from that very thing. He left.

We lived in a company house. We had to buy every bucket of water we used, 'cause the company undermined things so bad, they ruined all the water wells. I bought my food from the company store, and we bought our furniture from the company store, and we paid three prices on it. I've

* M. M. Neely, Governor of West Virginia, 1941–1945.