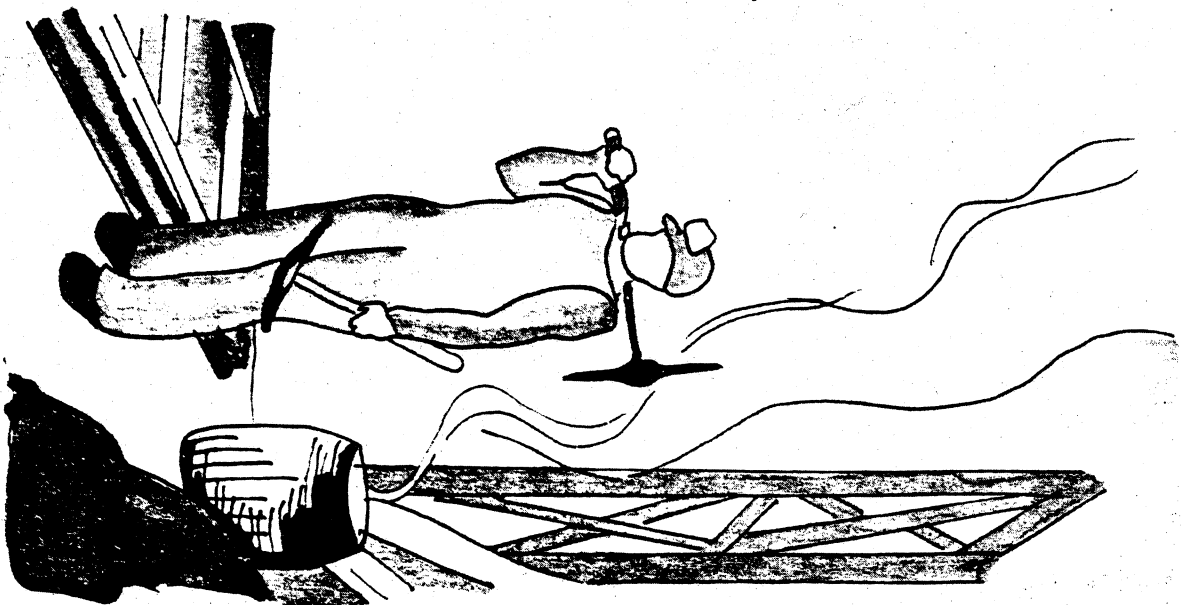


TRELL ME A STORY:

Memories of
early life
around
the coal fields
of Illinois



Coal Research Center
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Honorable Mention

"It took three days to get all the miners out. Of the 119 men killed in the explosion, I knew 100 of them personally. I was a fresh air man—the one that carried the bodies out."

A LIFETIME OF COAL MINING: THE CHANGE OF DAYTON McREAKEN

by
DAYTON McREAKEN
West Frankfort, Illinois

When Dayton "Wormy" McReaken retired from coal mining in 1987, he not only closed a chapter on his own 46-year-long career, but he also finished a family tradition of mining that began with his own grandfather in the mines of Ireland, moved to the mines of Illinois with his grandfathers, his father, and uncles, and flourished there with the careers of his brothers and himself. It is a tradition that covers the spectrum of mining responsibilities represented by both labor and management, and, while neither his son nor grandsons work in the mining industry today, the tradition continues in the colorful memories and anecdotes that he has shared with children and grandchildren alike.

McReaken was employed eleven years as a U.M.W. of A. miner working in several different classifications, eight years as a federal and state mine inspector, and twenty-seven years in management. He worked as a laborer, a face boss, mine manager, safety director, superintendent, and general superintendent. He was also on the Illinois State Mine Rescue Team for several years working on mine fires and explosions. In 1972 he was appointed Director of Mines and Minerals by then-Governor Richard Ogilvie, and he served for two years in that capacity.

As a young boy, McReaken slipped off with buddies to the sand pile at the West Mine in West Frankfort, Illinois. There he would watch miners bring the mules up at the end of a shift and dream of the day he could join the men as a miner himself. He also enjoyed the tales that the men spun. "You could get black lung just listening to the old timers' stories," he recalls.

A great role model for a young boy, Dayton's father, Arthur E. McReaken, had received the Carnegie Medal for Heroism while working at a mine in Panama, Illinois. After escaping a mine fire, Arthur reentered the mine to

attempt to rescue two other men. During his recovery attempt, Dayton's father was himself trapped, but luckily was rescued by a friend, Howard Lewis, brother of John L. Lewis. Dayton McReaken still has his father's medal and has made plans for his son to have it someday.

In 1942, at the age of seventeen, he began working in the Orient No. 2 Mine in West Frankfort. Since he lived only ten blocks from the mine, McReaken walked to work, collecting other miners as he went, and by the time he reached the mine there would be seven or eight other miners with him. All of the men carried aluminum lunch buckets, a familiar sight to mining families.

When McReaken and his wife Dorothy were expecting a child in 1947, McReaken still worked at the Orient No. 2 Mine. Since there were no medical benefits at the time, McReaken would work double shifts in order to save extra money for the impending doctor and hospital charges. He would work a six-day week and do a second shift every other night, thus putting in a total of nine shifts for the week. Sleep was a real premium at the time, so McReaken would skip his shower at the end of his double shift day, walk home in his pit clothes, and lie on a quilt behind the heating stove to sleep until it was time to get up the next morning. This way he would have an extra hour of sleep.

McReaken had already left the Orient No. 2 Mine when the explosion occurred there in 1951. "It was the worst I've ever seen," McReaken recalls. "It took three days to get all the miners out. Of the 119 men killed in the explosion, I knew 100 of them personally. I was a fresh air man—the one that carries the bodies out."

"Since the explosion was on December 21, the holiday was dubbed Black Christmas," McReaken remembers. "It was, too. It was pitiful. There were seven or eight funerals in the morning, and seven or eight funerals in the evening. Men were running from place to place to be pallbearers."

McReaken continued, "Anytime you work fires and explosions and recover men that are dead, the notes they leave behind almost always pertain to God. They know they are going to die, and their last thoughts are always of God and their wives."

McReaken began work at the Orient No. 3 Mine in Waltonville in 1950, and it was while he worked there that he was given the nickname "Wormy" by his co-workers. He already had a reputation for being able to "worm" through tight places in the mines when one day he showed up with large pink tablets in his lunch pail. One of the other miners asked what the pills were for, and McReaken responded, "My kids have worms, and Doc Barkdull says we all have to take these." That cinched it. He has been called Wormy ever since.

While still at Orient No. 3, McReaken had a close call that showed how much miners depend on one another and how close they become. "Noah Kelly, myself, and two other fellows were covered up by a rock fall. Noah hollered 'runt' just as the fall came. He was about fifty at the time, and since I was younger, I was able to dig myself free. I had been buried to the waist, but Noah was buried deep and I could just see his neck. I ran to him and told him, 'I can't help you. I'll get help.' I ran about four hundred feet and was able to catch the mantrip. It was quitting time, so I was lucky to catch them. The men came back with me and started to dig Noah free. He told them, 'Check for Wormy, He's behind me.'" McReaken recalls, "He didn't care about himself, he didn't remember me running past him for help. Even though

Noah was buried to the neck, his only concern was for them to save me. Miners just don't do it. They feel it."

Some of McReaken's memories of mining are of the "horsing around" and practical jokes that the miners used to relieve the stress brought about by their hazardous work. "Sometimes some of the men would steal pie from other miners' work buckets. There was this one man who was real bad about it, and another miner who had had his pie taken one time too many and decided to get back at him. He put liquid laxative all over a piece of pie and then left his bucket where he knew the thief would find it. He even stayed where he could watch it happen. Sure enough, before long, the pie-stealer came and ate the pie, but the rest of the day the miner who had his pie stolen had the pleasure of watching this guy make trip after trip to the air course."

"Another time there was this fella who was deathly afraid of frogs. Well, one day when he was showering in the wash house, some of the others brought in this frog. They tied a string to one of its legs, and hung it down the leg of the man's long underwear, which was hanging in the wash house. It was still there when he went to put the underwear on. He had got one leg in and was putting the other through when he noticed the frog. Boy, we all had a good laugh while he jiggled around trying to get that frog out of his underwear."

Dayton McReaken retired as general superintendent for the Zeigler Coal Company in 1987. He has seen a lot of changes in his days as a coal miner. When he started in 1942, he made \$5.95 a day. Today, such a miner would make \$125 a day. At Orient No. 2, the year he started work as a miner, 960 men could mine 10,000 tons of coal in a day. Today, it would take only 430 men to mine 18,000 tons of coal. When he started there was no water on the machinery, and a miner could hardly see his hand in front of his face due to the coal dust. Now, water is used on the machinery to keep the dust down, and ventilation has been improved dramatically. Black lung is no longer the serious threat it once was. "The best thing that ever happened in mining," McReaken says, "is that in 1981 Illinois mined 51 million tons of coal with no fatalities."

McReaken says, "The coal mine has blessed me, and I thank God for the privilege of working. Many times I was in the right place at the right time. I got lots of breaks, lots of good jobs, but mostly, I was allowed to work alongside some really good people." ■