Hard Labor: Voices of Women from the Appalachian Coalfields

Marat Moore

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Women were not recognized as full participants in the United States coal industry until late 1973, when a consent decree forced the steel industry to begin hiring women in the coal mines it owned for steel production, called captive mines.

Although it is not widely known, women did mine coal in the first half of the twentieth century, whenever the need for their labor overwhelmed the tradition against it. These workers were largely undocumented; most labored in small contract operations as an invisible component of a family work unit. Some disguised their sex for fear of detection. Very few were publicly acknowledged or accepted by coal operators as part of an established workforce.

In Appalachia, most women who worked during the handloading era came not from established coal communities controlled by the company’s strict social hierarchy, but from small farms scattered throughout the coalfields. During the two world wars, coal bosses did employ women as surface workers, but did not, as a rule, place women underground.

Like their foremothers, women miners in the 1970’s were motivated almost solely by financial need. But unlike them, the modern generation faced rising divorce rates and viewed the mine portal as a threshold of economic independence. These industrial pioneers faced down social pressures and cultural taboos: chief among them, the belief common in many coal communities that the presence of a woman in an underground mine was bad luck and could trigger disaster. They faced other obstacles: community and family resistance to the unsettling of traditional sex roles, social isolation on the job, the possibility of sexual harassment, and the

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difficult adjustment to a stressful and dangerous workplace. Women miners also confronted what was, for many, an inherent contradiction: that in order to sustain the tradition of keeping their extended families intact, they were forced by lack of job opportunities into the most non-traditional of jobs.

But Appalachian women entered the mines with a determination and resilience that reflected generations of social and economic struggle. Coal miners had battled for union recognition in the early twentieth century, and their wives often entered as full partners into that desperate struggle. When their daughters and granddaughters crossed the mine portal, they were bolstered by those survival skills.

Since 1973, a total of 3,940 women have been hired as coal miners in the United States, according to statistics based upon chest x-ray records compiled annually by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). In the early 1970’s, the United States coal industry was in the full flush of an economic boom, but coal operators’ resistance slowed women’s progress in gaining mining jobs. In 1974, more than 45,000 men were hired as new miners, while only seventy one women, or .15 percent, were put on the payroll. The number of women hired grew steadily each year, however, peaking at 830 in 1978, or 4.2 percent.

Meanwhile, legal pressure also was making an impact on recalcitrant coal operators. In 1978, following a company’s refusal to allow a woman to tour an underground mine, a woman lawyer from east Tennessee filed complaints against 153 coal companies. These complaints, channeled through the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCCP), generated wide publicity and further pressured companies to comply with federal law. This effort resulted in the establishment in 1978 of the Coal Employment Project (CEP), a nonprofit organization formed to provide a national network of women miners with legal assistance, leadership training, and annual conferences which are now in their twelfth year.

Ironically, just as women began to gain a foothold as coal miners, new employment plummeted from nearly 20,000 in 1978 to less than 5,000 the following year. Women briefly escaped the impact of the sudden decline. In 1979, the hiring of women held steady, which explains why the percentage of women hired jumped that year to 11.4 percent. But women soon felt the effect of the hiring slump. In 1983, new coal miners hired in the United States barely topped five hundred; of those, forty two were female. The downward trend continued throughout the last half of the 1980’s. Last year, only forty women went on payroll as new miners in the
United States.

The actual number of women coal miners currently working is difficult to determine, since sex-specific statistics on coal industry layoffs are not readily available. But no one disputes the fact that disproportionate numbers of women have suffered from the "last-hired, first-fired" rule followed by most corporations. The women lucky enough to have gained seniority, however, remain on the job. A 1986 study by the United States Bureau of Mines suggested that nearly 1,500 women worked underground that year, or approximately two percent of the national workforce.

In view of the industry's reduction of labor-intensive technology and further cutbacks anticipated as a result of the Clean Air Act, it is possible that the number of women employed as new coal miners may never again reach the levels of the late 1970's.

The following interviews were conducted from 1980 through 1984 as part of an independent oral history and photography project by the author to document the experiences of women coal miners in Appalachia.
She sat at the kitchen table with a pile of yellowed clippings, lost in thought. A summer rain drummed on the roof and the kitchen light haloed her white hair. Minnie Lunsford’s eyesight had dimmed but her vision was clear of the two mine wars, forty years apart, that had had more impact on her life than the two world wars. As a young wife in the 1930’s, she saw babies starve and union organizers face assault by coal company guards. In 1974-75, she fought on the front lines of the bitter thirteen month strike at the Brookside mine, owned by Duke Power. At seventy, she was the oldest woman on the Brookside picket line. “I took my cane and wharped those scabs good,” she said. “They were out there taking our union boys’ jobs.”

Minnie is now eighty six, and keeps house in Dartmont, Kentucky, near her family, which now includes thirty three grandchildren and innumerable great-grandchildren. “It’s hard times again for the union,” she says, “and our young people better not forget how to fight.” The following interview was conducted in August 1983.

The women organized Brookside. I’m not saying that because I’m a woman, or because I was there, but because it’s the truth. The men knew that if it was left up to them, they’d never get a contract, with only three of them allowed out at a time. My husband didn’t like it at first. Willie would say, ‘It’s not for you to carry a gun and go up and down the road. The men folks are out there to look out for the women.’ But the men found out the women folks were out there looking out for them.

The way it happened, the women got to calling up one another on the phone until a big bunch of them got together and went out. Buddy, we had a time! Sometimes it looked awful dangerous, but I never run. We said we’d stay there ‘til Gabriel blew his trumpet, before we’d let them scab. We stayed right there ‘til the contract was signed.

I called up one of the women and said, ‘How we gonna be dressed?’ and she said, ‘Get you some britches if you ain’t got none. Don’t wear the best you’ve got. We’re liable to get drug all over that road.’ So the phones went to ringing and everybody got their pants on and went out there together.

That first day I went out, I was scared to death. I’d never been on a picket line in my life. I didn’t know what was gonna happen. At first, my
husband didn’t want me to go out. He was just skin and bones from where that rock dust had collapsed his lungs, and I said, ‘Willie honey, I will not stay here and let you go stand down there.’ But he stayed on that picket line except to go to the doctor.

Me and my husband would get up and eat a doughnut and drink a cup of coffee and go on down there at five o’clock in the morning. Seems like there was about seventy five women and about three men. But this one morning, there was seventy five state police out there. They said the women could stand out there but they had to stay out of the line of traffic.

The women said, ‘There ain’t no work and there ain’t gonna be no work.’ And over half those women laid down in the road. I couldn’t, but I stood up with a big ball bat and said, ‘If one scab passes and pushes me out of the way, he’ll get it in the back.’

I went out at five o’clock every morning, come rain or whatever. We was on that picket line every day but Saturday and Sunday, from September until that contract was signed in the spring.

I had my hip broke on the picket line. A car backed up and hit me. I didn’t worry too much about it. I said, ‘Well, if it’s for the union, I’ll suffer. Some of the rest of them suffered. I will too.’

We were all running around about to starve. None of us had time to cook, being on that picket line. We had a Woman’s Club, and we’d go to these stores and ask for doughnuts, or get a quarter, or a dime, or whatever anybody wanted to give us. Cars would pass and they’d hand us a dollar, two dollars, five dollars, for the women to go get some pop, or some milk.

On Easter, we went to Middlesboro, Kentucky. We got the children some Easter bunny baskets, and we raised enough money from then to Christmas to get the children some Christmas things.

We joined the Black Lung Association. We’d go out and ask for money, or sell cards for five dollars each, for black lung. We went to Lynch and got a big load of clothes. We had a little place like a store and we would give out big old overcoats to the men, and boots and shoes to the children. It was winter time, and we had to do something.

I’d go around everywhere and stay away from home, and some people said, ‘Don’t you want to stay home and get your house cleaned up?’ And I said, ‘I’ll clean up when they organize. I’ll go home when we get a contract.’

I came here to Harlan County in ’29. That time was even meaner than Brookside in 1974. The miners were making twenty cents a load, about
two dollars a day. Back then, the union was having a time trying to organize. The company thugs had machine guns; it was like a war. I lived at Verda, and we had a terrible time there. The company thugs wouldn’t let nobody come down from the highway to visit. They wouldn’t let no strangers in. They’d knock men down and beat them up.

When there were some union organizers fixing to come in, the gun thugs had their machine guns ready and they went up and down the road, cruising with their machine guns out. The organizers were aimin’ to come down into Verda and go down into the big field to have their meetings, but they didn’t do it because of the thugs. The women had one little picket line back then, but oh honey, it was too dangerous. You didn’t dare go out of your house. I remember having to stay inside from late in the summer until about Christmas time.

We called the gun thugs tin horns, instead of scabs. They would pass my house and peep in the windows to see if anybody strange was there. They told me I couldn’t have any visitors, that if I had any people living off somewhere else, to write them and tell them not to come.

It went on until five men I knew was killed in one bunch. A whole lot of them was put in jail, and some in the pen.

So I know what a union card is worth. It paid for my hipbone, it paid for my eye, and it would have paid for my husband if he’d had to go stay in the hospital. When we got his pension money, we took it and fixed this little old shabby house so it would be warm for me and him. If it hadn’t been for that pension, we couldn’t have saved up nothing. Our children would have been glad to take us in, but I didn’t want to as long as I had this little old hut. My husband worked hard, and we ain’t got much, but what we got is paid for.

Being a widow woman, I don’t draw too much from the union. I draw about half of what my husband did, but without the union, I wouldn’t draw nothing. Bless his heart, he worked forty two years in the mines and he was always two hundred percent union.

At Brookside, we weren’t striking so much over wages as over benefits and safety. And the men wanted equal treatment, to be treated fairly. The way it was, some of the men worked overtime and didn’t get no pay, and others worked eight hours and got overtime.

Some of the men out on the Brookside picket line said, ‘We’ll be here ‘til the morning comes.’ They made up a song. We sang songs on the picket line, and we had a preacher down there who would preach a sunrise service every morning. We’d sing, ‘When the Saints Come Marching In’
and the song about how the tree a-planted by the water shall not be moved.

Down on the picket line, we’d sing gospel songs. Sometimes the women would make up something and rhyme it. We had a good time. But our husbands were watching us real close. They was worried that their wives was gonna get hurt, but there was some of them women, buddy, who wouldn’t have cared if they had to shoot a gun.

Some of them would cuss the scabs, but I didn’t. I said I felt more like praying for those poor scabbin’ boys. When they’d drive up, we’d be fair. We’d ask them, ‘Do you have a daddy or a grandaddy that’s drawing black lung? Is he sick and unable to work? What do you think is gonna happen if you live that long and work at a non-union mine? What are you gonna get out of it? If you’re crippled up in the mines and sitting in a wheelchair, do you think that company is gonna take care of you?’

‘I was the oldest one out on that picket line. The women was eighteen on up to thirty, most of them, and all married. There was one woman pregnant, bless her heart. They put her down by the office, in case anything was to happen. We were all spread out. We didn’t bunch up unless something went wrong.

One time they called and said there was gonna be trouble. We all got switches and tobacco sticks. I tore one of my big pretty bushes down and trimmed off the leaves to make a great big long switch. We whipped them around the neck with the switches. They’d come right back, and then we’d come back with broom sticks and ball bats, anything we could get to whup them with.

One day here come this one boy who wanted to push me right out of the road. He told me if I didn’t move, I was going to hell. He wasn’t able to push me down, but he was trying to get me out of the way. So the women saw me and said, ‘Oh, Minnie’s a-havin it! Let’s go to her.’

He had the window rolled plumb down and he had a T-shirt, so I give him a wharp on the neck with that cane. The women came up, and said, ‘Pull him out of there!’ and he went to rolling that window up fast! He said, ‘If ever I pass by here and see you, you’ll be sorry.’ And I said, ‘Is that a threat?’ and gave him another wharp right across the mouth. Finally, I felt sorry for him, but he left and went on over to the store and told them there was some old woman down there who was about to break his neck. And the store owner said, ‘Buddy, you’d better not fool with them women down there.’ The women was strong.

The women knewed the company was gonna put them out of their houses. The water got turned off. Some of them were real old houses that
didn't have no indoor plumbing. They didn't have nothing, but the company threatened to tear them down with the families living inside. They'd get an old bulldozer and try to push the porch off. They'd say they were going to set the furniture outside.

Some of the women said, 'You do that one time, and we'll gang up and set it all back in the house just as quick as you set it out.'

Sometimes the children would come out on the picket lines, maybe a twelve or thirteen year old. But mostly the older children would take care of the younger ones. Some of the women had seven and eight children, so a lot of them went to school. It was too dangerous for children to be out there.

I never thought I'd get killed, except maybe if the men got so mad at those scabs that they'd go to shooting and hit somebody, not meaning to. We'd all talk about it. The men wouldn't have hurt a hair on our heads but you can never tell. Bullets ain't got eyes to see.

The company got a court order against the men, and some of the women was put in jail. We took them women cigarettes and snuff and cookies, whatever they needed. We'd go over there every day and see them.

I told the sheriff, 'It hurts me to see these women in jail and me not with them. I've done just as much as they done.' And he said, 'You're too old to be on the picket line, and you're too old to be in jail.' I said, 'I'll never be too old to be out on that picket line unless I'm in a wheelchair, and then I'll have somebody to push me.'

After the court orders, it got worse and worse. It got to where some of the men wanted to go back to work, but it would have taken only about six men going back to break the union, and the women weren't going to stand for it. The women got on the phone and called up all the old pensioners, and their wives and children to see whoever could be out on the picket line, to hold it down. And they all come out. There wasn't anybody saying I don't want to, or I'm afraid. We fought and held that picket line down.

We had one boy to get killed. He worked at High Splint. The men and women at Brookside wanted to go up to High Splint. It was also owned by Duke Power, the same company, and just a mile or two on up the road. They wanted the High Splint miners to come down and help with Brookside, but they wouldn't hear to that, and it got mean.

There was a lot of women with too much pride to come out with us. We'd go to the supermarkets and they'd turn their heads and not speak. They thought the men ought to take care of the strike. Some of them would
call me at home after I got off the picket line, and they’d ask me what I
did that day. It was a shame for us to have to stand up for them when they
wouldn’t stand up for themselves. But after the contract was signed, those
same women was all real friendly and called out to us by name.

At Brookside, the union paid the men a hundred dollars a week during
the strike. They could manage on that. But back in the 1930’s, if I’d got
thirty dollars a month, I wouldn’t have known what to do with it. We lived
from hand to mouth, and if anybody had anything, they’d share it. We had
little bags of rice, and about two pounds of meal, and a little piece of
fatback. We didn’t have no flour, and no sugar to sweeten the rice with.
God help me that I never see that again.

But I’ll tell you one thing, it’s a-comin’ back. The 30’s are easin’ back
in. The miners now can’t afford to buy food, and they’re losing their
trailers and their trucks. If they try to break the union here again, these
men will go in the stores and get food before they’ll let their little children
starve. There will be the awfulest battle anybody’s ever seen.

All my life I’ve worried about the coal mines. When I was a little child,
we didn’t live in a coal camp, but there was mines all around. My daddy
worked, and my two brothers worked, and later when we all grewed up
and began to marry off, our husbands worked, and then our sons. There
was nothing but the coal mines. I would have worked in the coal mines if
I could have when I was younger. When I was about thirty five or thirty
six, my two boys started working, I’d have given anything in the world to
have put on a pair of old overalls and gone off to work with them. I’d be
willing to now, but at eighty years old and half-blind, I don’t think they’d
much hire me!

My daddy was one-legged, but he worked in the mine. In the mine he
had a wooden leg to work with, but he used a cork leg outside. They
didn’t make nothing then, but what he did make he used to buy us clothes.
We washed on a washboard until our fingers would bleed, and would go
barefoot as long as we could until he could get us some shoes.

I didn’t really like a coal camp. But for him to get a job, we had to live
there. If we got coal, it was through the company, and our lights came
through the company, and our rent was through the company, and they
didn’t pay us money, but what you call scrip. There was no water in the
houses. Every so many houses had one little spigot. The pay averaged two
dollars a day, depending on how much they loaded.

I worked hard all my life to raise eight children. Back then, it was hard
to feed them. We didn’t have no apple trees, no bushes, nothing, in the
coal camp. Just row after row of houses just alike, and a little bitty yard, and children all around everywhere.

But we didn’t worry about that. All we worried about was maybe that our husbands or our brothers might get killed in the mine. There wasn’t no union. We never heared nothing about no union.

I’ve heard people say, ‘I’ve got coal dust in my veins, and I’m gonna die with it in my veins.’ We tried to get our sons to move away. One of them went off to the city in Michigan to work, and he come home to work in the mines. Another one runs a mine up on the mountain. Then I had two boys in service, and when they got out, they said, ‘Give me the coal mines above all.’

After we won the contract, everybody run up and down the road a-shootin’ and a-hollerin’ like the end of the World War II. The women sat up all night, and the neighbors came in, and some of them had a little something to drink. The organizers had a big to-do across the mountain, and the men wanted all us women to come out to celebrate. But we didn’t go out. We praised the contract right here at the house.

We was all so proud, just tickled to death. There was a big write-up about the women in the paper. We got a lot of credit for what we done.

I was down at this store in Harlan, and this man says to me, ‘Keep up the good work organizing,’ and I said, ‘I can’t no more, but if I really had to, I would.’

I don’t feel old, but I look it. Anybody that went through the 30’s and up to now, that’ll put wrinkles in your face!

But if somebody would come pick me up and take me to the picket line now, I’d be right out there. If I had a stick, with me half-blind, I’d be liable to hit the wrong person. But I’d be out there now even if I couldn’t see at all, to keep the UMWA here in Harlan County.
Rain sifted through the night air as I drove around the last curve to her home, which sits at the very head of a hollow in Letcher County, Kentucky. Inside, a coal and wood fire glowed in the Franklin stove as we stretched out on the carpet and ate steaming bowls of beans and cornbread. She was in her mid-thirties then and employed as the first woman miner hired as a federal inspector by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), which is charged by Congress with enforcing federal safety and health laws.

That was in 1982. After ten years with the agency, she is breaking more new ground for women in coal mining following her selection by MSHA for a one-year management development training program. When the training program ends, forty two year old Barber will be the agency’s first woman field office supervisor. She is now happily remarried, and her four children are grown.

I have been a waitress, a school bus driver, and I’ve worked in a shoe factory and a school lunchroom. There’s very little work here other than the mines. You can find other jobs, but they don’t pay anything at all.

I went into the mines in 1975. Not being from here, I didn’t realize the social stigmas attached to women miners. I didn’t know what a disgrace it was going to be. My kids didn’t realize it either. They learned afterwards when people made fun of them at school. I’d hear comments from them about people saying I was just in the mines to get a man.

Then there was the sermon preached against me in the church. They didn’t use my name, but I was the only woman coal miner in the community. People came up and told me that the preacher said it was sinful, women stepping out of their place, wearing pants and trying to take mens’ jobs. The sermon was meant for me. I was the issue. Pointing at me to tell these other women not to go astray. The fact that my husband and I did finally divorce probably just cemented the idea in their heads, although the job had nothing at all to do with the divorce. I always say coal mining did not cause my divorce, it made it possible.

At first I was afraid of the grueling work, afraid I couldn’t do it, although I’d always felt that I was emotionally and physically strong. But after the first week, I felt pretty confident that I was going to make it.

I was the third woman to work at our mine, but in this part of the
state, I'm one of the only early ones that stayed. That was about six years ago. In the beginning, nobody thought we would fit in with the job. The older women really worked hard to prove they could do it. Not just do it, but excel. I killed myself, proving it. I don't feel that the need to excel, no matter how difficult it is, is there so much with the new women now, because we paved the road for them. That's the way it should be. But when I went in, I felt I had to be better than good.

Attitudes have changed a whole lot in six years. It was a social disgrace when I went in the mines. In some parts of this area it still is. Traditionally, women who would work with men, or associate with them, or even work outside the home, were considered to be doing it just to circulate until they could find a man to support them financially.

Like everybody else, I started out as a belt shoveler. It was very hard. The coal varied from forty four to fifty four inches, and you were working on your knees a whole lot. The worst pain was at the beginning of the shift, crawling into the mantrip when your muscles were tight. Once my muscles got toned up, I kind of liked the hard part of it, but I had to roll myself out of bed the first couple of days. I'd do twenty five sit-ups and some jumping jacks, and the soreness went away. I'd lay on the bathhouse floor, and do my warm-ups before I got dressed.

My bathhouse was three miles away from the portal and the men's was fifty feet. Sometimes I would be all dressed for work and not even know that half of the men were gone home, that they'd called a strike. They'd change back into their street clothes before I even got to work. Being female, you weren't privy to something so simple as information about that. You couldn't just go into the bathhouse and listen to the discussion. You'd have to wait outside. I did go in the bathhouse once when it was raining, when some men went in and made sure everybody was dressed. But, in general, a woman miner would not get to participate.

At that time, I was not thinking about women's issues. But I let them know how I felt, although I never made an issue of it, never caused a strike over it. The men told me many times that they'd strike for me to get a bathhouse. But I never let that happen.

I had always heard about the United Mine Workers being a strong union. So when I knew that I was going to get to join this famous United Mine Workers of America, I was really happy about it, because I knew the benefits they had in the coal industry, and I felt an obligation to at least attend the meetings. I always went to local meetings. I don’t think I missed one for two years.
When I worked in the shoe factory, I was in a union that was a nothing union. Grievances were a joke. Working conditions were a joke. Having a fan would be an unreasonable thing to ask, and there were no optional Saturdays. I worked there when I got married and I asked my foreman if I could have Friday off to get married and he said no. You knew that if you ever spoke up, there was somebody waiting for your job, and they wouldn’t hesitate to replace you.

I stayed on the midnight shift at the mine for five and a half years. That’s the hoot owl shift. I think I was lucky, because I adjusted so well. It’s still the shift I would prefer to work, because it gives you time with your family. At that time, it was important to me to have my children’s meal on the table when they got home from school. I felt that was something a good mother should do. On evening shift, I would already be gone when they got home from school.

The kids were much younger then, and they’d go to bed at 8:30 or 9:00. I’d leave for work at 10:00. I’d get home about a quarter of ten in the morning, take something out of the freezer for supper, go to bed, get up at 3:00 and start supper, and have the evening with the kids.

At first I was so ignorant about the mines that I didn’t know the danger. It took a while, maybe three weeks or a month, and then one night I was sitting there thinking that there were a thousand ways to get killed in a coal mine. Just by touching the trolley wire, just by putting your hand in a belt roller. Just by doing so many things that you had to constantly be on your guard against. I was lucky that people tried to teach me the safe way to do things. I became more and more interested in safety, and I started studying up at home on pamphlets that the federal inspector would leave around.

All coal miners watch out for each other. If you see your buddy sitting under a loose rock, you say, ‘You know, buddy, that rock over your head looks bad.’ That’s just an everyday thing.

I’d see people run through unbolted places sometimes, for short cuts, and I would try to tease them into realizing the seriousness of it. I’d say, ‘You sure did save yourself a lot of steps. We could have been off work tomorrow for your funeral.’

I used to take those very same chances. I really did. And I didn’t realize the seriousness of it until one night when I was running the scoop and went through an unbolted place, and just as I went through it, the whole place fell in.

When a man quit the safety committee to become a federal inspector, he suggested to the local union president that I be appointed to fill his
unexpired term. The president was leery of such a radical move, and he asked the membership to speak up if they had feelings against it. No one spoke up. It was carried by the majority.

Being on the safety committee is really frustrating, because you have all kinds of responsibility and no authority. You have no authority to enforce the law. You have to convince people to do what you would like to be done. Sometimes I felt I was in the middle with everybody against me, but it was a good education.

I figured that over the last five and a half years, I’ve worked with over five hundred different men, and out of that number there have only been two who have told me to my face that I shouldn’t be there. The first one was early on, and he said, ‘What kind of husband do you have that he’d let you do this?’

This man just kept on saying, ‘What kind of woman are you? Don’t you care about your children?’ Knowing his wife was pregnant, I told him if he wanted to keep his wife barefoot and pregnant, that was his business, but I would live my life the way I wanted. That stopped it, and some of the men spoke up for me then. They knew this guy was just wanting a confrontation.

A lot of men would make comments like, ‘You could make more on your back.’ My only answer to that was, ‘Anytime you’ll give me a regular paycheck and supply my hospitalization and benefits, we’ll talk.’ Not that I meant that, but I wanted to show them that you take home more than a paycheck, with retirement. And who’s going to give retirement to a prostitute?

If a man kept pushing really hard, my favorite thing to say was, ‘I’ve been in love with you for years. But I want more than an affair. I want marriage.’ That would usually stop it, and make a nice joke. But, honestly, being without a mate most of the time I was working, I was surprised that nobody got any better looking to me. They were still my brothers in the union, and my friends.

After spending some time in this area, I think the wives here realize that they and their husbands are limited socially. The wives may be afraid that their husbands will go ape with this female contact. Maybe a wife feels threatened because she has no control on how the woman miner will behave; that’s entirely up to her. And, of course, maybe this wife has no idea how her husband will react because he’s never been in a position of dealing with women since high school. So I think some of the wives’ feelings are well-founded, to an extent. A lot of it depends on what the
woman miner is going to do.

At times I felt lonely as the only woman. When other women came and went, it was difficult. Maybe I was too strong union, or too indoctrinated as a coal miner, but some of the women who would come and go would be, well, not weak but whiny. I don’t go for crybaby stuff. You either take it and do it or you leave.

But that doesn’t mean I don’t have the same emotional needs that any other woman does. Before, in divorces, I always identified with the woman, thinking the man was probably at fault. But now I’ve seen how men suffer over being separated from their children and how difficult it is for them to readjust, whether they were at fault or not. Sometimes I think it’s handicapped me in relationships now, because I can’t play coy games.

I remember asking a man I worked with if he wouldn’t rather a woman stay with him because she wanted to, not because she needed to for the bread and butter. He’d been married several times, and had said he wouldn’t want a woman coal miner for a wife because they made so much money that they wouldn’t need you and wouldn’t do what you said. That’s the way some of them think.

But why should a man, just because he is married and has children, work every day of his life to support them? Why isn’t it equally the woman’s responsibility? Maybe it’s because I know how heavy that responsibility can be. That was something I learned in the mines, how heavy the burden is of helpless human beings totally dependent on you for every bit of food they put in their mouths, every shoe they put on their foot. I think it’s too heavy a burden for any man or woman alone.

I’d worked about a year and a half when the women’s first-aid team got started. I asked why we couldn’t have a mixed team, and the women said that, the year before, some of the wives made their husbands quit when women came to the practices. They decided that mixed groups would not work, because of arterial pressure points!

Getting to know the women on the team better was wonderful. We had all been working at mines, within a general fifty-mile radius, but were totally isolated from each other. It was wonderful to be able to talk about the problems that we all had. And we really worked hard that year. There was such team spirit.

We should have won first place. As it was, we won second. One of the judges told me that we deserved first but they were afraid to give it to a women’s team the first year we competed.

I would have stayed with it, if it hadn’t been so demanding on my time
with my children in the summer. I'd have from 3:00 until bedtime, about 8:30, for my family when I was underground on hoot owl. I had no time for myself. All the time that was budgeted for my family was also for the laundry and for the evening meal and for homework and for all those domestic things.

I had been working really hard to get a safety inspector job with the union. But then, very unexpectedly, after three years of applying, and struggling, and begging, the federal people finally hired me. This had been my goal. I began thinking about it when I was on the first-aid team. The judges were federal inspectors, and I was impressed with their knowledge. I needed to establish some goals, and I thought that would be a good one, to become a federal mine inspector.

I couldn't settle in to working with the government at first. I had achieved this apple pie in the sky that I had been working for so many years, and suddenly I was without goals.

I had never done office work before. I just didn't fit in an office environment. Sometimes I had to fill in for the receptionist and I'd get real edgy, and feel confined. I can't stand that. I can't even sleep in my bedroom with the door closed.

Being underground is not confining at all. You have so much independence as a miner, to do the job, not necessarily at your own pace, but to choose your priorities as to what to do first with very little supervision. You can see the fruit of your labor. It's visible. Whereas answering the phone all day, you can't see anything visible that you've done. I miss watching the coal being cut. I know it sounds stupid, but it is really beautiful. I really miss seeing production.

I will never be the same person I was before I went underground, never in a thousand years. I had the desire to be strong and independent, but I never felt I would be, that I could be. I feel now that whatever life has to thrust upon me, I can handle. I'll just never be the same again.

Even though I had been through some difficult domestic problems before I went in the mines, I feel more resourceful now. When I was that age, or in that position or role in life, I never thought about making career goals or lifetime goals. I don't know if it was mining that made me see those things, or just a natural development. It doesn't have to be mining. It could be parachute jumping.

But now I know my qualifications. Every time I go to a mine, they offer me a job. But when I become an inspector, I'll have to be better than average. I'll have to prove myself all over again. When I was travelling a
lot to the mines with male inspectors, the supervisors would say to them, ‘Oh, you brought your secretary along?’ I’d tell them I had repaired equipment and they’d laugh until I showed them the scars on my knuckles to prove it.

Then I began to realize how many, many women there were out there who would like to have the same opportunity that I was having, but the opportunity was just not there without a little encouragement. One night at work, it just hit me that if this hadn’t come along, I would probably still be a waitress, or working in a school lunchroom, because I never thought that I would be a woman coal miner or get a non-traditional job. It just never crossed my mind. So I did become more aware of the issues, and I joined women’s organizations. Some people now might call me a libber, but I call myself a feminist.
BARBARA ANGLE
KEYSER, WEST VIRGINIA

Since the 1978 mining accident which could have cost her life, Barbara Angle has taken nothing for granted. In between skin graft operations to save an arm that was nearly severed, she taught herself to use her left hand and pecked out on the typewriter a short novel called Rinker that focused on one day in the life of a miner. “I didn’t want to forget,” she said.

But what she wanted to forget, she couldn’t—the dream flashbacks of the mine shuttlecar devouring her arm and moving toward her head. Unable to sleep, she typed out more than four hundred pages of an autobiographical novel and concentrated on winning an out-of-court settlement for her injury.

Now forty-three, Barbara laments what she views as the backsliding of the feminist movement during the 1980’s. “It’s harder for people to get what they need now. People aren’t acting collectively,” she said. “Where I could have acted with enthusiasm ten years ago, now I feel a sense of futility. I don’t think you’ll see women fighting again to get in the coal mines. I hope I’m wrong.”

Nobody remembers exactly what happened. All I remember is that I was grabbed—the canopy on the buggy grabbed my arm—and I was swung around and smashed into the coal face. I could see the canopy coming up like it was gonna take my head off, and I could hear the machine moving. And I just thought, hey I’m dying. I had read all those books about death, but all of a sudden I wasn’t even curious. I was just dying.

I started screaming and I heard somebody say, ‘Oh God, the woman’s been ground to hell!’ One guy turned around and threw up. Everybody was running around in a panic, trying to figure out why the power was cut off.

They couldn’t get the machine off me. They were afraid if they moved it, it would take my head off. So two guys used steel slate bars to pry a piece of equipment that weighs eighteen tons off the wall.

I moved one hand, but the other one—I was sure it was gone. I had always heard how amputees feel their arm in one place and see it in another. That’s how it was. I could feel the arm down here, but when I looked it was lying somewhere else, so I figured it was severed. I told them, ‘Hey, the other one is cut off. You can take me from one side and it from the other.’ But they didn’t, thank God. Later, they said my arm was hanging by an artery.
Ed, the roof bolter, was so good. When I lost my caplight, he came and held me, and put his finger on the pressure point, and comforted me. When everybody was running around trying to get the power on, he stayed there with me. Later he said it was because he didn’t want me lying there in the dark. He stayed and held me the whole way out. He was so good. He understood that the loss of the caplight is like the loss of another sense. When they carried me out, there were all the caplights around me, but I was lying flat on my back, looking up into the dark.

I didn’t cry when it happened. Later they said they couldn’t believe I was in shock because I was talking and making sense. When they put me in the jitney to take me out, I started crying about my baby, because he didn’t have a father, and now he was going to have a mother with one arm. I remember Ed saying, ‘Don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of your baby.’ The men were real upset about that.

They took me out to the shop and called my brother out of the mine, and the first thing those sons-a-bitchin’ company people did was ask me, ‘How did it happen? How did it happen?’ And the boss out in the shop ordered those guys back to work less than half an hour from shift change.

I screamed at him, ‘All you care about is your goddamned coal!’ They were going to use that against me in court. But you’re not thinking about what you’re saying at a time like that. That boss wanted them to go back in there and run coal! When they went back under, the men told the foreman, ‘You stick it. You’ve got all the coal you’re going to get out of us today.’ Some of the men didn’t show up for work the next morning. They were that shook up about it.

I never lost consciousness after the accident. They were talking about sending me to one hospital in a town about an hour away. Thank God they didn’t, because the guy that later had the same accident on the same piece of equipment got sent there and was really messed up. They ended up deciding to send me to Union Memorial in Baltimore, because it was the hand treatment center for the east coast.

They sent for a Medivac helicopter, but it was too foggy to fly, so they had to drive me. The ambulance was late in coming, and the dispatcher kept calling and saying, ‘We’ve got a woman with a severed arm.’ The company would go, ‘Sh, sh’ over the phone. They wanted to cover it up. They first took me to a small local hospital. The nurses there kept trotting over to look at me. They would make a face and turn away, then trot back over.

You talk about a long ride to Baltimore! My brother went with me,
and a nurse gave me pain shots. Somebody asked me how long it took afterwards, and I said about eight hours, but I found out it was only three. That was damn good time in the fog. By the time we got to Baltimore, I was really in pain. I was climbing the walls, and the driver couldn’t find the hospital. Finally, they got a police escort. We were half an hour cruising around the city.

The emergency room had been notified a coal miner was coming in. My face was black and my hands were black, and I was put on the table, before they realized I was a woman. Suddenly there was mass commotion, and I heard somebody say, ‘Don’t do anything until I get my camera.’ And I thought, that sonofabitch! But later it came in real handy with the lawsuit. In one picture, they were holding up what was left of my skin. My lawyer said it looked like a piece of battered steak.

Because I was dragged and mashed against the rib of coal, the coal dirt was ground into the flesh. The doctors said it came within an eighth of an inch of an artery. That’s how close I came to losing the arm.

It took eleven hours for them to clean out the coal dirt. It was so deep that they had to use tweezers, but it all had to be cleaned out before the surgeon could operate.

When they finally got the coal dirt washed out of my hair, the nurse said, ‘Oh, you’re a blonde! I thought you were a brunette.’

I had three or four operations in the space of a couple of days. I woke up one morning with this erector set on my arm. It was called a Hoffman apparatus, and it must have weighed twenty pounds. Instead of using an enclosed cast, they drilled nine holes in my arm, and inserted pins to set the bones. It was only the second time it had ever been used on an arm in the United States. You can still see the holes.

The worst thing about surgery is that they have to dehydrate you beforehand, and shock had put me into dehydration anyway. Then you’re in bed all the time and that constipates you, and you’re getting skin grafts. With the skin graft, I could not move for one week. Then a lot of the grafts didn’t take. The woman before me had to go through two or three grafts because the skin kept dying on her. They have to partially detach it from the back and flip it over.

It was a month before I saw my baby, who was just over a year old, and it was a bad scene. My brother had to get special permission to bring him down, and here is my big brother bawling. My baby wouldn’t even recognize me. He just wouldn’t. He wouldn’t even let himself hug me. Near the end of the time I was in the hospital, though, he was really
hanging onto me.

For a couple of years after that, my baby didn’t want me out of his sight. He didn’t want to go through losing me again. That was hard for people to understand. But for him, what had happened is that Mommy got up one morning and went to work and disappeared for a month. My sister told him, Mommy got hurt. She’s getting fixed up, and she will take care of you. But nobody’s explanation is adequate under those circumstances.

My legal case never did come to trial. We got the settlement beforehand, after a lot of depositions. Every time they asked me about the accident on the witness stand, I’d start to cry. I know my lawyer thought that was one of my strong points, but I couldn’t help it. And when they started interviewing one of the guys who helped me out, he started bawling.

Winning that settlement will have an effect on the way that piece of equipment is designed. There are three more cases just like mine waiting to be decided. My God, there were four people seriously injured on the same piece of equipment. The way it was designed was gonna get somebody killed.

I couldn’t say I had a premonition about the accident, but I’ve always known that I would not have a typical life—but what life is typical? Maybe I’m more susceptible to accidents because of my lifestyle. I cannot stand to be bored. You go around once, and there is no time for boredom.

I have always lived on the fringes, so to speak, but having a child makes you pull back from that. I went in the mines before I had the baby. If I’d had him, I might have thought twice. But then I would have had to take care of him, so I guess I would have gone in, and learned to live with the risk. I’ve always lived on the periphery. When I had a comfortable editor’s job, I couldn’t stand the bullshit.

But the accident did change my ability or desire to take risks. It made me scared of cars. I’m not afraid of airplanes, but when I’m driving, I creep along. I think it’s the fear of collision. Both my feet are flat on the floor, braking. I went underground in August 1975. The whole idea of women miners then was a kind of joke, but the companies wanted to cover their asses and hire them, in case any federal people came to check. They hired one for each shift, so we never really saw much of each other. The guys would make it so rough that the women would usually quit after a couple of months. That was the company’s way. They didn’t take up for the women. All they needed for their books was the record of having hired them. And if a woman chose to leave, well, that didn’t affect the company.
The hiring was still on the books.

We were tested. That was the first thing. They watched to see if you worked, and if the men saw you trying, they would give you a break. A lot of the women came in as tokens and sat on their butts.

I remember the first night. Hell, I didn't know nothing about tools. They were loading belt and I didn't know what that meant, and they gave me a pair of vice grips and I just looked at them. Everybody was pulling and tugging, and I started doing what they were doing. Whatever anybody else did, I did. The lifting was hard, because I wasn't built up then. But the next day, my brother was grinning. He said the guys felt that I was working right there along with them.

At first, some of the guys don't say anything. They don't even tell off-color jokes. I never used off-color language down there, not at first, because it seemed to me that if you did, you were categorized as a certain kind of woman and were more susceptible to harassment. You have to beat them at their own game and develop a fast lip. If you do, and I did, you'll make it. Underground is the training ground for a real fast lip. If you give it back, the men back off because they don't want to be made a fool of in front of the other men.

So when they said, 'Hey, did you get any last night?', I said, 'Take a look at those two fingers and all the calluses and you tell me.' That shut them up. Humor is the best way. Do the work, and never take anything too seriously. It takes a while, but you have to learn to retort in kind.

When they'd put up their *Playboys*, I'd put up a *Playgirl* centerfold, and they'd say, 'We ain't looking at no rubber-dicked fag all day,' so I said, 'Well, I'm not looking at the Grand Canyon, then.' That's the best way to do it. Works every time.

I had some trouble after I first went there because of my affiliation with a boss. It was a dumb-ass thing to do, but he moved in fast. I didn't even see it coming.

My involvement with him built up a lot of resentment among the union men, because they said I was the last person they would have expected that from. I was a real suck about that. Real gullible.

You've got to understand that when I went in there, I had no concept of union. None. My father belonged to a union, but he never went to meetings. I had no concept of the feeling you get for unions, especially the UMWA, what it means to the men and why they are so protective of their identity as union men. What happens is that a woman who dates a boss automatically gets the reputation as a scab, because they say you carry
So when I got put in the lamphouse two nights to replace the guy who was always off, the men started to walk out on a wildcat strike. Most of them had been put on the lamphouse job at various times, and they considered it a break. But when I got put there, they considered it special treatment. It was about 12:00 or 1:00 in the morning and the guys were sitting outside, refusing to go under. They called the superintendent and he said to never put me in the lamphouse again. That was blatant discrimination, but I had no idea of my rights.

When I got pregnant, I was on general labor, doing the hardest work in the mines, the drudgery that nobody else wants to do. I panicked when I found out I was pregnant because the doctor told me there weren't too many precedents, and that he couldn't tell me how long it would be safe to work. I was worried because I wanted the baby very badly. I had lost my parents not too long before it, and didn't want to lose the child.

I was on night shift, doing heavy work. The first three months is the most exhausting time, and I would just prop myself against the rib. The guys could tell I was really going downhill but I didn't want to tell them why.

Then one guy's wife saw me in the doctor's office and the rumor got out. The men really harassed me once it was known. The ones who wouldn't harass me were embarrassed to work with me. Some of them felt sympathetic, but they couldn't really express it because so many of the men were resentful.

In general, the men didn't know how to handle it. They did what they could in a very unobtrusive way. The ones who harassed me were more direct, telling me I shouldn't be down there pregnant. But others would help if I had to lift something heavy like brattice curtain. It is heavy canvas and big—maybe five feet wide and several yards long, and it gets caked with muck. It's hung near the coal face to help move the air. When they helped me with it, the men didn't say anything, and I didn't say anything, but we both understood.

I worked three months into the pregnancy. I was so tired during the day. I tried, when I was doing heavy labor, to center my thoughts away from my uterus. The first night I got a cramp while I was moving belt structure, I went and got a doctor's slip. That was it. I wasn't going to take the risk.

Right near the end, I was working as a pumper. The pumper walks the mine alone and moves the pumps, which are pretty heavy, and you have
to move the suction up out of the water. The guy who taught me was good. He showed me how to do it, so I bid on the job, off night shift and onto day shift.

The foreman on that shift announced to everybody that he was going to make it so goddamned hard on me that he'd run me out of the mines. I thought, Hell, I'm three months pregnant. I don't need that kind of pressure.

They didn't cut me any breaks. One night when we were hauling heavy belt structure, one of the guys said, 'You sure must not want that baby.' But I didn't have any money. There were no pregnancy benefits. My savings had been wiped out.

Welfare was sixty-some dollars a month, and in order to get it you either had to name the father, which I wouldn't do, or claim you'd been gang-banged and you didn't know which one it was. You couldn't get unemployment unless you quit or got laid off.

So I just said, stick it. I had to have a job for the kid, after I had him. It was a no-win situation.

It took the men a long time to assimilate the fact that I wanted the child. They couldn't understand why I wanted to be a single parent, since I was attractive and could be married if I wanted to.

That's when I went down to the union's International headquarters in Washington. I had heard all this stuff about union brotherhood, so I just decided to find out. I walked in and said, 'Hey, I'm pregnant, and I need a job.' And here I was, this pregnant woman coal miner with a college degree. I mean, how could they refuse me?

I worked at the union convention in Cincinnati and a month later they sent me home because I had dropped down and dilated. Six weeks after Jon was born, I was back down in the mine laying waterline. I had to go back to work. It was a financial necessity.

After I came back from having the baby, the men were very supportive. They knew I wasn't getting anything from the father. I made that very plain in the beginning. He was a foreman then, and in the mornings the guys would be lined up ready to go in, and they'd yell, 'Child support, child support!' and he would run into the shop. He wouldn't even come out to direct us for the day. He didn't want to deal with it, once I had the child.

When I got back after working for the International, there was a new respect. The company treaded lightly around me. The other factor was that I bid on the longwall section. The longwall mining technology was new.
then, and you cut coal with a huge shear. The coal face is extended for hundreds of feet, and you use hydraulic jacks. Nobody wanted to work on it because it was so dangerous. Usually, longwalls are safer, but not this one. In fact, they eventually pulled it out completely. We were lucky no one got killed.

But I really didn’t care what job it was. It was day shift, and I had been up all night working before that, and the kid kept me up all day. I was physically and mentally a wreck. The only way to sleep was to lay him down beside me, but then he’d wake up crying.

But I really got to like the longwall, because I was doing a job that ninety percent of the men in that mine would not do. When they pulled out the longwall is when I was put on the buggy right before the accident.

I would never have bid on a buggy. I hated them. I don’t know why. But they were uncomfortable, I couldn’t see out, and I was jerked all over the place. Maybe it was instinct.

After the accident, the red carpet was out. They said they couldn’t believe how well I handled it. And I did. I was in shock, but I didn’t go into hysterics.

I was a delegate to the Denver UMWA convention in 1979. Then I was elected recording secretary of the local, and buddy, the men walked all around me. They are deferential in their attitude, because I’m known to have friends at the International. Before the accident, it was ‘Goddamn this, motherfucker that,’ and at the last union meeting someone got up and said he wouldn’t cuss because there was a lady present. I said, Shit.

The Coal Employment Project, the non-profit organization that helped set up a national network of women miners, has been a big help to the women. When I met the first director, she looked like this ball of Southern fluff, and we were at some junior league meeting. All these women were sitting there in their print dresses, with their matching accessories, with their hands carefully crossed and their little house smiles on.

In walked the women miners from Kentucky, who looked like they’d worked hard and raised children. They were furrowed, and I thought, God! It was like this whole other breed, this other civilization, was marching by to be observed. Those women from eastern Kentucky did great in front of all those showpieces. I would have been very intimidated.

So there I was at this junior league meeting with my arm in pins, talking about things like going to the bathroom underground, and a few of the ladies began to twitch.

There’s so much that people can never understand about the mines if
they've never been down there. Part of it is the intimacy with men, without the sexual connotations, like when we would all sleep on the transformers.

We did. We had a very wet mine, and it was cold, so we slept on the transformer to dry off, even though we knew it was illegal. You ate your lunch in a hurry, and bang! Everybody's up on the transformer. And I'd lay there muddy and wet and miserable and happy.

Those six men were right there beside me, and I thought, Oh my sainted mother, if she could see me now!

Or you'd tell the guys you had to go to the bathroom, and go around the corner and drop your pants. Or you'd catch a guy going to the bathroom and just turn your head.

But in the conditions you're working under, you hear it all—the off-color jokes, the complaints about their wives, how they're not getting any, or how the old lady's gone to Baltimore and put all the clothes in the bathtub. In time, if you do it right, they'll talk to you like one of the boys and tell you their problems. But if you are more aware of yourself as a woman, rather than as just another coal miner, you're in for it.

There is one woman I really like, except that she takes on the whole mother role. She's an older woman who was in the social clubs and worked in a dress shop, but according to her, her husband wouldn't give her any, so she swore to God she would divorce him when her kid turned sixteen. She did, and went to work in the mines. But she hated it, and could not handle the work. That creates problems for the other women. What she did instead was bring lasagna to the men.

There are a few women who trade sexual favors. I know that for a fact. They tell the men if you do my work, I'll take care of you a little later in the parking lot. It happens, but it isn't the norm. Far from it. Most of the women are just in there feeding their kids.

Your average miner is kind of a funny duck. You're getting a new breed of miner—the younger miners, the Vietnam vets, the college graduates, and the women. The women are militant, and the whole mine force is starting to change. Miners read the contract now, the subtitles and all the fine print. I don't think the top management has quite assimilated that fact yet.

Miners don't want to strike. If they got a decent offer for a contract, they wouldn't come out. But the companies are giving out the worst they can, so they can successively withdraw a tidbit here and a tidbit there until you end up with one ginger snap above what you had last time. They want the union so beat down they won't fight it the next time around.
One advantage that miners have is that a lot of them don't have big rent payments hanging over their heads. Their wives put up food, they have a garden or they go shoot a deer. They might own their own property, and the banks know them personally. Unless they're living up to the hilt, which they usually aren't, miners can stretch things a hell of a lot farther than most people.

I would go back to the mines if I could, oh sure, because I really enjoyed it, but I think I might be able to make a more valuable contribution in other ways. I wrote my novel *Rinker*, which was done in a week after my accident, because I didn't want to forget what it was like being underground. Even though it's short, it has had a bit of an impact, and I think that's because so many of the wives are curious about what their husbands do. There are not many writers in the mines, and it is a whole subculture—the language, the attitudes, the territory.

Coal mining is different. I don't care what anybody says. There is just something about going underground, into an environment where human beings were never meant to be. In those conditions, you change your personality. You're one thing on one side of the pitmouth and something else on the other.

I know myself that I take on protective coloring when I'm underground. My language gets worse, you know, with a lot more 'ain't's' and 'gotcha's'. You walk a little different. I think to some extent the men do too.

And there is always the danger. It's always, watch out for this, watch out for that. If you see something, you tell your buddy or he tells you. That breeds a sense of camaraderie which I miss as much as anything. Once you get accepted, not only do you learn something that's very hard, but you have such togetherness with that knowledge. It's the only way you get out alive.

I've done toil work, production work, factory work, white-collar work. I've worked in all spectrums of the economy and I've never seen anything like the coal mines.

That's one reason why the UMWA, at least in the past, was always such an emotional and high-strung union. Because there was that togetherness, that solidarity, underground, and there was a tendency to carry that over into the labor struggles. You do it because that is what is going to keep you alive. So you're fighting, literally, for your life when you fight for the UMWA. That's why there is such emotionalism in the coal strikes in Harlan County, and why the wives were in there fighting, because they
were fighting for their husbands' lives.

Everybody has to have a cause. You have to have a reason to be. And it's the cause that gives our lives meaning beyond eating dinner and watching TV and paying the rent.
Marat Moore
OWNS BROOKSIDE MINE, BUT THEY DON'T OWN US

DUKE POWER CO. OWNS THE BROOKSIDE MINE, BUT THEY DON'T OWN US

Minnie Lunsford
photo by Earl Dotter
Sandra Bailey Barber
photo by Marat Moore
Elizabeth Laird
photo by Marat Moore
Brenda Brock
7 months pregnant

photo by Marat Moore
woman coal miner with child
photo by Marat Moore

Alabama By-Products #2 Mine
photo by Marat Moore
photo by Marat Moore

woman coalminer
photo by Marat Moore
It was late afternoon at the Rebel Queen Cafe in the crossroads coal and cotton town of Cordova. It was here that she stopped to relax after work in the years since her children had grown and gone. The jukebox blared as two teenaged boys fed quarters into the blinking lights, but she continued talking slowly, deliberately. The contours of her face, like those of her speech, were plain but gentle and belied her years. Just half an hour before, she looked exhausted. Lines of fatigue had creased the layer of coal dust on her face as she sat down heavily in the bathhouse, drawing solace from a cigarette. But in the cafe, she had recovered.

Today, she is still working underground as her sixty ninth birthday approaches. “This is my fifteenth year in the mines,” she says proudly. Elizabeth is also sporting a new diamond engagement ring after deciding to remarry her ex-husband after a separation of twenty-one years. She lost two fingers in a textile mill accident years ago, so she wears it on her right hand. “People joke about it,” she says, “but I’m just thankful to have a finger to put it on.”

I went in the mines when I was fifty-four years old. When I went to apply, the company people just looked at me. With all the younger women, I figured I had about one chance in a thousand. But it only took two months for me to get on. I had a good work record, and friends. It was 1976, and the company was under pressure to hire women.

My work record helped me. It should have. I’ve been working for forty-five years. I first went to work cleaning house when I was fifteen years old, after my father died. He had dug coal with a pick and shovel down the road in Aldridge, Alabama. He worked from can to can’t, you know, from daylight until dark, and I was lucky to see him on weekends. He made about a dollar a day.

By the time I was twenty, I was working in a cotton mill. I worked twenty-three years as a weaver. My pay started at fourteen dollars a week, eight hours a day. I started in 1941, and when it shut down after nearly twenty-five years, I was making about eighty-nine dollars a week. The mill was straight production work. If you didn’t make production, you didn’t make money. You had to keep your looms running. Some of them were wide as a sheet, and ran on electric power. I’d run the machines and tie knots and pull the threads through. Once I ran a loom with eighteen
harnesses.

The mill had its danger, just like the mines. It was a strain on your
eyes, to keep your threads drawn in straight. And the lint was bad. With
the coal dust, we have respirators, but with the lint, we didn't. I had one
bad accident in the mill, and lost two fingers. We were running seventy
five looms without gear guards, and I slipped on a wet floor and caught
my hand in a gear. The company gave me eighteen dollars a week. That
was thirty three years ago.

After that mill shut down, I went to work at a place in Jasper making
golf bags for three and a half years. But they came out on strike, so I went
to another cotton mill and worked there until it shut down after three
years. So then I came back to the golf bag place and it shut down! Finally
I went to a spinning plant and worked there for ten months, and it about
killed me.

Working as a spinner is the hardest thing I've ever done, because each
spool had a brake on it off the floor about chair level, and you had to
brake it with your feet. So if you messed anything up, you had to hop
around on one foot all night.

During that time, I took on extra jobs. At one place, I'd work day shift
in the mill, and work at a diner from 5:30 until 2:00 in the morning, and
then have to be back at the mill at 7:00. Five years I did that. After the
divorce, I had to work extra, to get the kids raised.

What brought on the divorce was our son's car accident. Our son Ernie
was seventeen when it happened. He and this boy had been to Jasper to a
church social. They were coming home, and the other boy was driving too
fast. They hit a culvert and it clipped the wheel and threw them about
seventy feet in the air. The driver wasn't hurt, but Ernie was paralyzed.
He was riding in the suicide seat.

The doctors didn't promise us anything for the first two weeks. I was
there with Ernie, but my husband couldn't deal with it. When the doctor
told us Ernie's spine was severed, my husband couldn't absorb it. I
couldn't either, but I prayed a lot and made it through. But my husband
couldn't accept it, and the marriage couldn't take the stress.

After the divorce, I was working two jobs because I had Ernie and
another child in college and one at home. My husband paid child support
on the youngest, but in Walker County that was nothing. What can you
give your children on twenty dollars a week? The mines was the only place
where I could work one job and have time with my youngest son. He was
about fourteen when I went underground. He was so proud! He was the
first kid in school who had a mother who was a coal miner. The middle one, it didn’t bother him one way or the other, but Ernie would smother whenever he thought about me going underground. He thought I might get in an accident, and he couldn’t breathe, just thinking about it.

I went back to work the year after Ernie’s accident. At the golf bag plant I sewed zippers, I sewed liners, I turned pockets, I trimmed, I beaded bags. It was good because I didn’t have to sit still all the time.

Before the mines, I was bringing home seventy-one dollars a week at the spinning plant. By the hour it was $3.40. And that place paid more than anywhere I’d ever worked before. But now in the mines I make about two thousand dollars a month.

All that work hurts a person, though. I had always worked standing up or walking, and worked two stand-up jobs back-to-back for five years. What happened was that my knees wore out.

The doctor finally had to put new knee joints in. I had to have two operations. He wanted me to wait six months between them, but I didn’t have that much time off from work.

The only trouble it ever caused me was the Thanksgiving after the last operation. I was standing out there in a dress for two hours watching the floats, and the wind was pretty cold whipping around my legs, and my knees froze. I couldn’t walk. So now I keep sheepskin bandages around my knees to keep them warm, even if it’s 100 degrees.

Six months after the operations, I was back at work, but not in low coal. I couldn’t scoot around on my knees all day.

That first day in the mine, I was real nervous. But I enjoyed my work. Face ventilation was the easiest job I’ve ever done. Keeping the air up to the section was an important job, and I could work by myself.

I was one of the first women hired at our mine. But now I’ve been on all the equipment—the drill, the scoop, the miner, and the pin machine. But my seniority isn’t going to help me much to get on one of those high-paying jobs full time before I retire.

I wish I’d gone into the mines earlier, but they weren’t letting women in. It would have been a lot easier on me. I wouldn’t have had to work two jobs and gone five years without a decent night’s sleep. I’d hate to go back to other work, because I’m used to this pay.

Around here, there’s nothing else that pays like the mines. Not for women, anyway. There’s the Arrow shirt factory, and some little places that make things like car seats, but they pay minimum wage. That’s about it. There’s a lot that’s shut down.
Most of the places I worked before didn't have any blacks. At one mill, there was only one or two working in the yard. At another mill, they didn't have any.

Underground on the section, the blacks and whites get along pretty well. I've never been on a section where there was a real bad dispute. Most of the ones I've heard about, though, seem to be between whites and whites or blacks and blacks. But I've never had any bad problems. On the section they call me 'Mama Liz' and we get along just fine.

But it took a long time before they felt they could trust a woman. It took an accident to change that. One guy's buggy got hot, juiced with electricity. He had taken the buggy part way through this ventilation curtain and I heard him talking to the other buggy boy, saying ugly words. I knew that wasn't like him, so I went to see what was going on.

When I got down there, he was getting voltage bad. It was throwing him around on that buggy. The wet curtain was touching the hot buggy, and the other buggy boy was being held down at the other end while Lewis was bouncing around. I hollered to get the power off and for somebody to come help. And buddy, it wasn't two minutes before they were there.

We had those boys out of there in thirty minutes. We got them on stretchers, and loaded them onto the big blade of the scoop machine. For being four miles in, we made good time.

After that, the men seemed to trust my judgment. I'd told them before to watch a rock, and they'd tell me I didn't know what I was talking about. One time I told this boy to watch some top, and he didn't listen to me. The last time I mentioned it was on a Friday, and on Monday we had two whole crosscuts fall in. And they still wouldn't listen.

Safety is the most important thing when you're underground. I watch out for the men I work with. I make sure that they've got the air they need, and if the top is fixing to fall in, I signal them with my light.

I talk to all the men, and when I eat out, a lot of them—married and single—will sit down with me. I know the men's wives. I stay so busy, I don't really socialize with anybody.

I don't have time to go to many union meetings either. I used to go regular, but for the last four years, my mother has been in a nursing home, and they have their meetings on Sunday, which is the only day I have to spend with her. But I go when there's something special going on.

One thing I've been lucky about is my lungs. I've had no problems yet, but something may crop up. I'm sure I've got at least as much lint in my lungs as coal dust, and that takes a while to develop.
You never know what’s going to happen. But whatever comes, I want to be prepared. We were brought up in the church, and I’ve stuck with it. I want to know that I’m forgiven when I die. Living right makes you feel good. So does being single. I had a happy marriage for twenty-six years, which is a lot longer than most people. It took me four years to get over the divorce, but now I’m perfectly happy. I like being my own boss, not having to report to somebody.

I like to be independent, but I was never part of the women’s movement. I never had time to think about it. I was too busy working. I’m still too busy. But I’m for women doing anything they want to do.

When I retire, I may sell this house and buy something on the water, and I want to do my own brickwork. I want an A-frame with a balcony for the bedroom, and lots of room for the grandchildren.

There have been a lot of hardships in my life, but I’ve come out alright. I don’t really regret anything. I have always told my children they can be or do anything they want to. That’s the only way you can believe. Because you have to build your life up like a house, like something you want to live in for a long time to come.
During my first series of interviews with Brenda in 1980, she was seven months pregnant and still working underground in Harlan County, Kentucky. We sat on rocking chairs on her broad front porch and talked through the languid summer afternoons. Even pregnant, she was tiny, but exuded a sense of confidence and power. Although her family’s roots were in neighboring Leslie County, her father had followed the job market from California to Flint, Michigan. At nineteen, Brenda returned to see her grandparents in eastern Kentucky and decided to stay. She worked as a miner for nearly six years, until she was laid off in 1983. Since then, she has worked in a series of non-traditional jobs. “I’ve been the only woman on almost every job I’ve worked,” she observes. Today Brenda lives with her husband and daughter, Israel, in a major Sunbelt city, where she refuels airplanes for a living.

It takes a certain breed of women to go underground. I think we’re women who aren’t satisfied with the role we’ve been put in all our lives. We’re bored with it.

When the women first went underground, we were a big threat to the men because we were messing up their playhouse. They knew the system. They controlled it. They were afraid we’d go in there and tear their playhouse down. And we did sometimes without ever meaning to.

The underground and the surface are two completely different worlds. What happens underground, you don’t take outside. We didn’t know that going in, or how hard it was to keep them separate.

It’s hard being a woman miner around the other miners’ wives. The wives have never had the threat of a woman working with their husbands. It makes them feel inferior, especially when you’re talking to their husbands about work. When the wife is sitting there, she’s totally excluded. I don’t like being in that situation, because some of the wives get jealous. They think about how dark it is in that mine when you’re in there with their husbands.

One time I went to this place where there was a live band, and this woman was giving me the evil eye. I worked with her husband every day. She was well known for going out on him; she even had a steady boyfriend. So she asked me in front of her husband and everybody if I’d ever gone out with him. I said, no. And I said, I’m sick of people never
giving women miners the benefit of the doubt.

So then she asks me, has he ever asked you out? And him standing right there! I said, oh yes. He's asked me out plenty of times.

His eyes got big as fifty-cent pieces and his mouth dropped open. It was obvious what he'd been telling her. After that, she hated me twice as much. Maybe it was because I told her that there was nothing about her husband I wanted, or would go through the problems of taking him away from her to get.

My dad's father worked all his life as a miner. He got killed underground. Dad worked in the mines until we moved to Michigan and he went to work at the car plant. At the time he and Mom married, being a coal miner wasn't the kind of job anybody wanted. People were ashamed to say their dad was a coal miner. They saw their fathers and brothers dying in the mines, and they wanted to get as far away as they could. And in the 50's and 60's, nobody was working. Oil and gas took the coal market and everybody left for Michigan and Ohio, to all the big cities.

I grew up babysitting in Michigan for fifty cents an hour. Then I worked in a restaurant for one dollar an hour. When they wouldn't let me take mechanics in high school, I quit and got married. My dad and mom were divorced, and life at home was hard.

But when I was nineteen, I realized I didn't want to be married, that it was unfair to me and him both. So I stuck my thumb out and hitchhiked all around the United States. When I got back, my husband was a wreck. So I kept on moving and ended up in eastern Kentucky.

I really like this part of the country. I came down here to tell my grandparents goodbye, because I knew I'd never see them again. I went to Leslie County and met an old boyfriend and fell madly in love and stayed that way for about four years.

But I knew it wasn't going to work and that I needed a job and some money if I wanted to pick up and leave. Then the thought came to me. Go to the strip jobs. They don't have any women.

Everybody laughed at me, but I had a feeling. Then my cousin asked me, are you serious? And I said yeah, I do value life and want to stay alive and I'm starving and I've borrowed money to live on. So he says, this company's hiring fifteen women.

My sister and I went up there, and we hid down in the floorboards of the car so we wouldn't be turned back at the gate. About a month after the interview, they called Tammy and hired her at one mine. She worked for six months.
The men beat her butt with wooden boards. She’d come home bruised up. They treated each other that way and she was no exception. One day some of them—including the boss on the section—knocked her down and plastered her with hickies.

She came in that day from work a wreck. And she said, ‘Look what the men done to me.’

She went to the woman who was head of personnel, and that woman acted like it was Tammy’s fault. So Tammy blew up at her and the woman said, you will never work for this company again. Or anybody else around here, either. So they blackballed her and she couldn’t buy a job around here now.

There wasn’t much of a union, just a little company union, that wouldn’t take up for her. So she gave up. She quit.

If it hadn’t been for Tammy, I wouldn’t know what I know today about my rights. She went through so much, and she was only eighteen. She was the first woman at that mine.

When I got hired, I went in to look at the equipment. I was so small that nothing fit me. Nothing. So I couldn’t go to work that day. I had to go out and buy a pair of little-boy boots and put some steel toes on them. They were a boy’s size three and a half.

I walked into the mine office and everybody just stood there and stared at me. Nobody said a word. Finally, the company guy told me to go with a man who was known to be an ex-convict, who had just got out of prison for killing his wife about two months before that. But he didn’t scare me, I was in such a daze.

This boss took me up one return entry and down another all night. We were pulling a roof-bolting machine. They dragged me everywhere and nearly walked me smack dab to death. But I stuck right at his heels. He must have speeded up his pace because I’ve never seen him work that hard since!

I was pretty well-educated about men, I thought, until I went underground. Then I realized I didn’t know as much as I thought. I did fine with them in my own life, or in public. But working with them underground was a whole different show.

When I first started, my foreman always let me know he’d like to take me out, but I told him I’d never go out with him because he was a boss. After that we got along alright.

But there was another foreman who made me stay right on his heels all the time. He wouldn’t let me talk to anybody on the section, would put me
working away from them. He never came out and asked me out. He just let me know he was available, that he was divorced. Then one night he came in and I thought, he's acting just like a man who's had a bad fight with his wife. He'd been lying to me all along and I never suspected.

Sometimes there would be ten men sitting around discussing something I would know something about, and they would totally overlook me. Like they were thinking, why is she here? Why is she trying to talk to us? Doesn't she realize she doesn't know what's she's talking about?

I'm not company and everybody knows it. But they had me brainwashed for a year and a half. I didn't speak up for nothing. Then one morning I got out of bed and thought, they've got me brainwashed. So I went to work. I'm going to have a voice in this. I'm going to speak up.

The men told me I was just making it hard on myself. But it couldn't have gotten no harder. When you've worked a year and half in the old sections by yourself, it gets to you. Then I started hearing that the company was out to get me. The men said, you better watch that guy there, he's known for hurting people. That worries you, because some of them will try to hurt you intentionally if the company wants to get rid of you.

The rumor got out one day that another woman and I were going to be put on track crew with a guy known to hurt people, and that he was going to get one of us hurt. We stayed up all night talking about it. It's easy to get hurt lifting those rails. And this guy was known for being fast, doing it so you could never prove it. Well, it didn't happen, maybe because we stuck together, but we were scared to death.

So then, the company tried to split us up, get us mad at each other, which wasn't hard. They put her on first shift before me, although I'd been there longer.

On third shift, I worked in water up under my armpits for about six months, and there was nothing you could do but pump water, and get wet. So I stayed wet for six months and danced on hot cables.

I thought all the sections were like that. Then this guy came up and said, I'd bet you'd die if you saw a dry section. And I said, you mean there are dry sections? And this was after ten months underground.

After that, I begged them to let me go on repair work, and finally they did. They put me with this repairman who ended up going outside to tell the company he couldn't work with a hard-on. So I was put with a sorry sloppy repairman, where I couldn't learn anything.

I asked the first repairman, 'Do you know you are messing up my life,
my career, because you aren't intelligent enough to control yourself?'

We were attracted to each other, but I could have dealt with that. I could have worked around him. I thought it would be a great challenge for him to train me.

Since we had a company-owned union, the men didn't want us women to get involved. They wanted to get rid of me and Pat because we were radicals. We were radicals to the point that we would speak up. One man said to me, 'I don't want a damn woman in there, knowing everything I know.' And then a company man said, 'If you do get a woman in there, get one who can be controlled.'

They call you radical, because they want to brainwash you to not be democratic in a company like the one I worked for. I really believe that one reason this company didn't want to hire women is that when the big strike happened, they saw what the women got done.

When the company interviewed me, they asked me what I would have done if I was on the other side of that picket line. I've thought a lot about a strike. They never struck at our mine. Even when the company cut back medical benefits, the union just sat back and took it.

There's four of us women who have been attending union meetings. At one meeting I made a motion that, due to the special problems of women working underground, we should have a woman representative. And the men told me to hush. I said, 'Don't you think we need one?' And they said, no. We didn't even vote on it. They just slid over it to something else, and we couldn't do much with just four of us there.

The company started a get-together for women who work at the mine, and after a couple of meetings, I realized that me and Pat were the only two underground women there. Everybody else was company. I saw we didn't have any business being there. They just wanted to know everything that was going on underground.

At the one company meeting, there was the company president, the superintendent and the general mine foreman present. That shows you just how company-owned this union was. It wasn't really a union, just an excuse to keep one out. The president of the local couldn't even answer any of our questions.

So Pat jumped up and said, 'If you can't do the job, why don't we just drop it and get a real union?' And everybody there cheered her on. The men said, 'Yeah, let's drop them!' But the minute she said that, a union representative came up and changed the subject, and broke the meeting up. So we lost the thread of our discussion.
When I got pregnant, I decided to use the pregnancy as a way to get the women together. I wanted the women to know that the men had changed union policy about donations for sickness. When a person is off five weeks, they get an automatic eleven hundred dollar donation from the union. But the men told me, we’re not giving no five dollars for a baby we didn’t have the pleasure to make.

When I told my boss I was pregnant, he jumped up and said, ‘You can’t work! You’ll be up here with morning sickness!’ And I said, ‘I’ve puked for two months and you haven’t even noticed.’

At that time, I had just been put on a belthead that would spill fifteen to twenty tons of coal a day and I was cleaning it up with a shovel. Before I knew I was pregnant, I’d feel my side hurt whenever I lifted that shovel over my head. And every time I’d sit down, I’d fall asleep. I’d go to bed an hour early and I still kept falling asleep. So I went in about a week later and told everybody. The men were shocked. They said I should quit, that I shouldn’t be working.

And they talked bad about me. So I said, ‘If any one of you wants to talk about me, fine, but I can make your life perfectly miserable because I’ll go straight to your wife and tell her it’s yours.

‘And for nine months, you’ll be miserable because they won’t be able to see the kid, and for the next two years your wife will be staring at it, then for the rest of their lives they’ll be wondering.’ When I told the men that, it shut them up good.

One of the men who had been trying to get me to go out with him kept giving me a hard time about my pregnancy. He said, ‘Brenda, if you’d stay out of the back seat of people’s cars, you wouldn’t be like this.’

Well, he had given me a watch for Christmas. So I told him the next time I saw him and his wife at the steak house, I’d bring out that big gold watch and say, ‘Honey, you better take this back because it’s not working.’ And then tell him how sorry I am to hear about his divorce, and is this his girlfriend? Well, he got wind of it and apologized to me five times in front of all the men on the section. I began to realize that you can use their wives as a weapon, to protect yourself from the harassment.

My pregnancy has protected me all the way around. The men don’t verbally harass me like they used to, because they’ve all got wives who have had children. They know the kind of moods you can get into.

But sometimes I get worried about the dust, and the effect it’s having on the baby. I just started wearing a respirator, and when I looked at how black the filter was at the end of the shift, I was shocked. I could feel the
difference. But I worry about the dust I breathed before I wore it. And then I smoke and that worries me, so I smoke more.

I do feel handicapped down there being pregnant. I can’t do anything like I used to. Used to be, I could shovel for eight straight hours.

Sometimes I don’t know whether people think I’m gay, or what. They can’t understand why I don’t have a man. They’re always saying, ‘Brenda, why don’t you just get you a man and settle down?’ Like you go out shopping for them.

When you’re young, you’re just looking for someone to be in love with. After I realized I didn’t need a man for money and realized what I did need one for, I was lost. Partly for sex, partly for companionship. And I started to see what it meant to be alone. I mean, I had everything I’d ever wanted. It had taken me twenty five years. And I was sitting there in tears, because I was alone.

At first, all these characters come and knocked on my door. They all knew I lived alone. The men at work wonder, what in the world do you do about your sex drive? But what I miss are the little things. I’d give anything in the world to get up to a breakfast just once in a while. Or have my lunch packed for me. Just once. It doesn’t sound like much, but it is.

I’d say some of the wives would like to have this job themselves. Most of the men have got their wives brainwashed against us, to think we’re whores and homebreakers, and that the underground is no place for a woman. They want to keep their wives at home. We’re a threat to the men because we’re evidence to their wives that they could, if they ever got the notion, get a job and leave them behind.

But I do think that every wife should go underground just to see what it is like, with the thought that her husband is doing it every day. She would definitely learn how to treat him.

At first coal mining was just a job. But now, I wouldn’t ever want to do nothing else. It started out as money but as time went on, I began to realize just what I did have. I’ve never felt this confident, this independent.

When I first went in, I asked a blue million questions. And I begged to get on equipment. And then this man said to me, ‘Brenda, you don’t know what it’s like. I’ve been on this bolt machine for five years. You’ve never had this feeling of coming here to do this one thing eight hours a day for the rest of your life.’

And he was right. Now I’m starting to wonder how it would feel for the long term.