

Life in the Coal Camps

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Introduction To Folklore

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Life in the Coal Camps

For my topic, I have studied coal camp life in the coal regions of Eastern Kentucky. With the help of two valuable informants, my grandmother and aunt, I have collected some valuable interviews on how it was like to live in these company provided camps. I believe that home life in this area has a folk culture unlike many parts of the country. This topic interest me because it is a part of my family history and their way of life. It is time for me to know how it was in these areas and to pass it on for generations to come. And I also believe that this information is relevant to this class and its meaning.

When I thought about doing this topic on coal camps, my main concern was how children and wives went on with their daily routines and entertainments when the men were in the mines. And that was exactly what I got. These coal camp communities did share a special bond in this isolated environment. I thought at first to interview my mother, since my grandmother and aunt lived two hours away, but much to my surprise they decided to visit one weekend and that's when I got my interviews with them----September 29, 1989. The interviews went very well.

For the interviews I used a General Electric recorder with a Realistic dynamic microphone. The interview took place at my house in Glasgow, Kentucky in my kitchen, and then later on moved upstairs in the living room. There is almost two full hours of the interviews on two TDK tapes. I did edit some of it to make it easier for me to transcribe, however most of the information is relevant to the topic of the coal fields.

Now, about my informants. Ruth Evelyn Collins was born in July 13, 1922, in McVeigh, Kentucky in Pike County. She completed high school and went to college for two years. She is now a retired business manger/ Sec/ Treas of Williamson

Daily News. She has also lived in Stone and South Williamson, Kentucky. She now lives in Versailles, Kentucky. She is Methodist. Sarah Spears Collins Copeland also lives in Versailles at the same address of Ruth Collins, 212 Dove Park. Born on January 9, 1901, in German, Kentucky, Sarah only went to the fourth grade then she got married at an early age.

The interview went well. By the end of the second tape, it seemed like we were just getting started. However, I decided to end it and just wait for another time to continue. I did have a problem with the microphone. It created, or picked up more noise than I thought when I had to move it around to Sarah and Ruth, due to the fact they both sat on opposite sides of the room. I wish I had had two microphones for this, but I just didn't have the proper equipment to do so. The sound was fine and the interviewees seemed very relaxed.

Some of the folk material collected was that of superstitions. As far as folk remedies or folk medicines, were those from the Indians that once lived in the area which were passed down to the early settlers, such as ginseng, which was considered to be a heart medicine; yellow root, a medicine for sores; catnip tea, in order for babies to go to sleep; asafetida, a root believed to repel germs like typhoid fever. Witches or gypsies were the fear of Sarah and her family and others alike in the area. They were afraid the gypsies would take them away.

For customs or festivals, an interesting thing was that of the father's hat being burned when the first child was born in the house. Shivaree was a common practice when a married couple got to the place where they would spend their honeymoon they would be harrassed with noise or the groom would be dragged off. The death of a person in the coal camps was a very big deal to these people. The making of the caskets by a person in the family was a common practice. A carpenter would make the wooden box and the lady or ladies would fit the satin lining. Along with that were the wakes in the houses, with the neighbor usually doing the cooking

while the family had the wake, and, just like there is today, the bringing of food by mourning neighbors. On Halloween the children didn't trick or treat like they do today, but they would go to house to house and the grown ups would try to figure out who the child was in the costume. There at the house they would visit and play with the other children. For Christmas there was no tree, unless the children brought the tree which was used at school home. Great big cords were hung from the corners of the main room in the house, and in the center would hang a big Christmas bell. The largest celebration which these coal camps seemed to have that was organized was the 4th of July. On this day everybody would go to the company store and pick up their order of pop, ice cream, or watermelon. They had hot dogs, never hamburgers. Getting these treats wasn't an everyday affair, so the children and everybody else really enjoyed it.

Some of the games the children enjoyed were those of playing cowboys and Indians in the mountains, along with snake hunting up there too. The coal companies provided organized baseball at times and the girls would just go crazy over the young men who would be playing. Post office and spin the bottle were favorite kissing games of the teenagers.

Sarah and Ruth did mention the houses that the coal company provided for the families. At first they were painted red for seemingly no reason, probably to indicate they were company houses. But later they were painted white or off white with black of green trimming. They houses were built for two families to live in but had a divider in the middle. And, of course, when a family moved out the company would paint and clean that house before another family would move in. Ruth emphasizes that the coal companies were very good to the families.

Instead of having turkey for Thanksgiving, the big meat was hen. Sometimes chicken 'n dumplins would also be a good meal for that too. Everything was made at home, none of the foods were bought already prepared at the store. Ruth and Sarah discuss the time they first ate t-bone and spaghetti. Sarah's son James brought

spaghetti home when he was stationed in Italy during the war. He also fixed t-bone the way it was supposed to be fixed. Sarah had never known to fix it like that. They didn't know what it was until the war was over anyway.

There are some wonderful stories that Ruth and Sarah told. One of them involves the death of Ruth's father in a car accident and the people who stole his money in water in which they had drown. Another story involves the Italian immigrants who had come to work in the coal mines--their rowdiness and gambling. One story is about Delmos, one of Sarah's sons, who wore his Captain Marvel costume after Halloween and tried to fly off a sixteen foot porch, thinking he could fly like Captain Marvel. Sarah's first husband Marion was a great prankster. She discusses a time when her husband stole his mother's chicken'n dumplins when she was having a big meal. It was funny she said.

I am very happy with the material I have collected. I only wish I had more time to spend with Sarah and Ruth on this area, but there is so much good information it is hard to get it all on two hours worth of tape. Maybe some day I will be able to do so. It is hard to analyze all of the material on the two tapes, however I do think most of it pretty much ^{self-}explanatory.