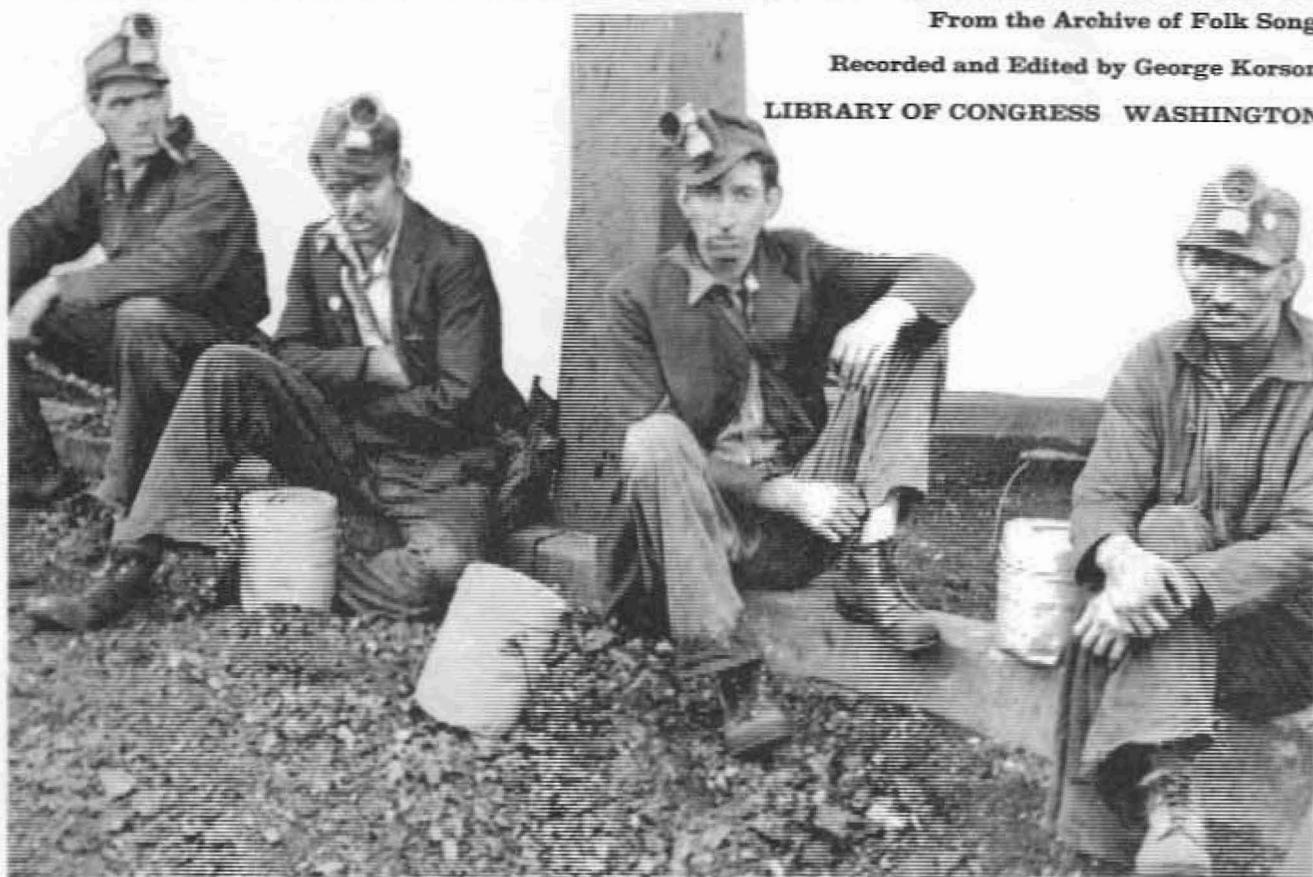# SONGS AND BALLADS of the BITUMINOUS MINERS

From the Archive of Folk Song

Recorded and Edited by George Korson

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS   WASHINGTON

INTRODUCTION

Long-playing record L60 is a companion to L16, *Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miners,* issued by the Library of Congress in 1948.

This record consists of songs reflecting the folkways of bituminous (soft coal) miners of a generation ago before automation wrought its greatest social and economic changes. The songs have historical as well as intrinsic cultural value.

These field recordings were made in the bituminous miners' own environment during 1940 as part of a project carried out with a grant from the United Mine Workers of America.

My bituminous collection covers far more of the folk music spectrum than do the songs and ballads from the anthracite (hard coal) mining region. There are several reasons for this, one being geographical; the anthracite region is confined to the northeastern part of Pennsylvania. Bituminuous regions, on the other hand, extend from Pennsylvania clear across the continent to the Pacific coast.

I concentrated my research in the following states because they were the most promising from a collector's standpoint: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama.

My field work was performed chiefly in isolated and remote places. Hundreds of miles separated coal camps from one another. To follow up leads occasionally required overnight train rides or long drives over tortuous and hazardous mountain roads.

I was often driven by a union field representative who knew the miners in his jurisdiction and who was known by them. This eased my way among miners suspicious of all strangers. When in rapport with folksingers I found them both friendly and cooperative.

Although bituminous coal was mined even before the American Revolution, the industry did not really get its start until 1840 when its first million tons were produced, chiefly by native white workers and Negro slaves.

The earliest waves of immigrant miners came to American coal fields from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland in the 1850s and 1860s. Skilled craftsmen, they virtually took over the young bituminous industry, introducing Old World mining methods, tools, and terminology.

They also introduced many mining songs and ballads from the coal fields in their homelands.

A. L. Lloyd, English folklorist, in a book, *Come All Ye Bold Miners* (London, 1952) says that "the greater part of the ballads (in his compilation) belong . . . in the first half of the nineteenth century."

This marked the beginning of the period when British miners' ballads crossed the Atlantic. Not until the English-speaking immigrant miners had become oriented did they turn to their New World environment for inspiration in coining songs out of everyday experiences.

It is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of this period, but a good guess would be shortly after the Civil War. One of these ballads bears internal evidence of having been created in 1876: "Two Cent Coal," sung by David Morrison, in his home at Finlayville, Pennsylvania. "It's a great song," he commented, "and many's the time I sang it in the mines." At eighty-one, Mr. Morrison probably was the oldest bituminous miner to record for me in 1940.

Like the anthracite miners, the soft-coal men created a folk culture all their own. When they began to express their thoughts and feelings about the American bituminous environment, immigrant British miners adapted the bardic and minstrel arts common in their homelands. In creating songs and ballads they used metric patterns, folk melodies, and hymn tunes familiar to them. Although the mining population was diversified, coal camps were small enough to encourage neighborliness. Miners drew closer together, feeling and acting along similar lines. Their ultimate homogeneity led to the growth of a tradition based on the bituminous industry. Coal camps were generally integrated.

Negroes, who had made no discernible contribution to the body of anthracite songs and ballads, played an outstanding role in the development of folk music in the bituminous industry. Negro slaves were probably the first soft coal miners in the United States. Commercial coal production started in 1750 when an English company, with slave labor, operated an open-face coal mine along the James River near Richmond, Virginia.

In antebellum days, Negro slaves in the Great Kanawha Valley, West Virginia, mined coal by hand and carried it on their backs in jute bags to landings along the Kanawha River. Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography, *Up from*

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Slavery, tells how as a boy slave but recently set free, he worked in a coal mine at Malden, near Charleston, West Virginia. After the Emancipation Proclamation many freed slaves drifted into southern coal-mining states. To their dismay, they found working conditions just as frustrating in coal camps as they had been on cotton plantations. Maybe more so.

To escape possible punishment, Negro slaves had an equivocal meaning for the word "freedom." When questioned, they explained that the "freedom" in their songs referred to the next world, and had nothing to do with worldly things.

As coal miners, Negroes were similarly circumspect regarding the use of "union." Sometimes the term referred to the Union Army, sometimes to a fraternal society or organization, but more often to the United Mine Workers of America, organized in 1890.

Negro bituminous miners showed a marked preference for country blues as models for their improvised topical songs. Blues were sung as a solo with a guitar or some other folk instrument. This was in contrast to the anthracite miners' ballads which were rarely sung with instrumental accompaniment.

Many spirituals originated in churches. The blues were worldly and sprang from everyday life. The blues were more suited than spirituals for the miners' purpose. After a song had been created it was taken over by the folk, Negro and white, as an unquestioned possession. L60 has six blues songs recorded by white miners.

For further information, see George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (Philadelphia, 1943); second printing with new introduction by John Greenway (Hatboro, Pa., 1965).

A1—THE HARD WORKING MINER. Sung by G. C. Gartin at Braeholm, W. Va., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

Variant recorded: Norton, Va., 1940. Sung by Jeo Glancy, Harlan, Ky. Text contributed by Gladys Smith of Stonewell, W. Va.

1. The hard working miners
   Their dangers are great,
   And many while working
   Have met their sad fate.
   They're doing their duty
   As all miners do,
   Shut out from the daylight
   And darling ones too.

CHORUS:
   The miner is gone,
   We'll see him no more;
   God be with the miner
   Wherever he goes.
   And may he be ready
   Thy call to obey,
   And looking to Jesus
   The only true way.

2. He leaves his companions
   And little ones too,
   To earn them a living
   As all miners do.
   And while he was working
   For those that he loved,
   The boulder that crushed him,
   It came from above.

3. God be with the miners,
   Protect them from harm,
   And shield him from danger
   With Thy dear strong arm.
   Then pity his dear children
   Wherever they be,
   And take him at last
   Up in heaven with Thee.

A2—BLUE MONDAY. Sung by Michael F. Barry at New Kensington, Pa., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

The miners regarded a saloon as a poor man's club, the only place outside of the local union hall where men of diverse origins and clashing nationalities met as social equals. A boisterous welcome was extended to all adult mine workers.

The saloon satisfied a miner's craving for fellowship and offered balm for wounds suffered in the daily grind. In the mellow atmosphere of the saloon, bitterness was forgotten; men laughed without inhibition; and their masculine humor gleamed through the darkness. Mingled with humor was song.

1. I went uptown last Saturday night,
   Intending to get one drink,
   The boys were all standing in front of the bar
   Telling what they could think.
   Their entries they were driving,
   Rooms and pillars too;
   I never saw such a mess of coal
   As around that barroom flew.

CHORUS:
   But it's always the same blue Monday,
   Blue Monday after pay.
   Your shots are bad and your buddy is mad,
   And the shaft will work all day.
   Now I'll have no more blue Mondays
   To make my hair turn gray;
   I'll join the White Ribbon and then I'll be givin'
   Me wife the whole of me pay.

2. The track layers and the drivers,
   Machine men and loaders too,
   They were all sitting around the tables
   Telling what they could do.
   But if they would only stay at home
   Their dollars and dimes to save,
   When a strike come on they could sing this song,
   "Operator, your work we don't need."

A3—TWO-CENT COAL. Sung by David Morrison, at Finlayville, Pa., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

"Two-Cent Coal" commemorates a major disaster on the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh in 1876. Morrison recollected that the river was frozen to a depth of fourteen inches, which was deep enough to support the crossing of a team of horses hauling a wagonload of hay. Because of the ice, the river coal mines were idle from

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Christmas to late February. The miners pooled meager resources to keep alive.

Their plight was worsened by a cut in wages from three cents to two cents a bushel, the equivalant of fifty cents a ton. When the ice broke suddenly, tipples and other mine property were destroyed and swept down the river. The hapless miners interpreted this destruction as God's retribution against the operators for cutting the men's wages.

This tune is closely related to some versions of the "come-all-ye" song "Foreman Young Monroe" ("The Jam on Gerry's Rocks"). Singer David Morrison follows the come-all-ye custom of dropping into speaking voice on the last few syllables of the last stanza.

1. Oh, the bosses' tricks of '76
   They met with some success,
   Until the hand of God came down
   And made them do with less.
   They robbed the honest miner lad
   And drunk his flowin' bowl
   Through poverty we were compelled
   To dig them two-cent coal.

2. But the river it bein' frozen—
   Of course, the poor might starve;
   What did those tyrant bosses say?
   "It's just what they deserve."
   For God who always aids the just,
   All things He does control.
   He brought the ice and He sent it down
   And sunk the two-cent coal.

3. Their tipples, too, fled from our view,
   And down the river went.
   They seemed to cry as they passed by:
   "You tyrants, now repent!
   For while you rob the miner lad,
   Remember, you've a soul.
   For your soul is sinkin' deeper
   Than the ice sunk your two-cent coal."

4. It's to conclude and finish,
   Let us help our fellow man,
   And if our brother's in distress
   Assist him if you can,
   To keep the wolf all from his door,
   And shelter him from the cold,
   That he never again shall commit the crime
   Of diggin' two-cent coal.

A4—THE YOUNG LADY WHO MARRIED A MULE DRIVER. Sung by James T. Downer at Steubenville, Ohio, 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

This song was recorded with its refrain, "A hell of a time," as sung by Mr. Downer. Setting up my portable recording equipment in his parlor I had considerable difficulty convincing him that it would be proper to sing "hell" instead of "heck."

After I left he seems to have been conscience-stricken, as indicated by a letter I received from him several days later.

"I write you in regard to the song poem I sang for you 'A Heck-of-a-Time,'" his letter began. "I think there is too much h - - - or L in it. I suggest you scratch from the record all the L's but after the last, or closing verse. You may have to use L after the first verse. I may have used L after [the] first verse instead of A Heck-of-a-Time. In this case you will have to use L after first and last verses. I am sorry but I now see my mistake. It will sound better with not so much h - - - in it. Try it."

1. There was a young lady who lived at a mine,
   Who married a mule driver and had a heck of a time,
   He would come from his work all covered with mud,
   To dirty the floors she had recently scrubbed.
   A hell of a time.

2. He would put his arms round her in loving embrace,
   And leave the black marks all over her face,
   He was a jolly good fellow and loved his dear wife,
   But he made a mistake—the mistake of his life.
   A hell of a time.

3. He met an old chum with a little brown jug,
   And was late getting home his wifie to hug;
   She saw them both coming a-staggering along,
   And quickly got ready to sing them a song.
   A hell of a time.

4. When she had finished she put Patsy to bed,
   But the chum and the jug I think are both dead,
   She was the young lady who lived at a mine,
   Who married a mule driver and had a heck of a time.
   A hell of a time.

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A5—THE DYING MINE BRAKEMAN. Sung with guitar by Orville J. Jenks at Welch, W. Va., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

In 1940 I recorded the following versions of this ballad under different titles: March 13 at St. Charles, Virginia, Monette Wilson and Odette Farmer, singers; March 27 at Lochgelly, West Virginia, Lorraine Blake, singer; May 28 at Braeholm, West Virginia, Jerrel Stanley, singer.

From the wide diffusion of these variants I concluded that the ballad was a favorite among the mountaineer bituminous miners.

I tried tracing the author. His identity eluded me until May 29 when I met Orville J. Jenks in the subdistrict office of the United Mine Workers of America at Welch, West Virginia.

When Jenks had completed singing this ballad, I asked him the usual question:

"Who made it up?"

"I did," he replied unhesitatingly.

This is how Jenks described the origin of his ballad:

"One day in 1915 when I was working as a motorman inside the No. 3 mine of the Republic Coal Company at Corbin (Cabin Creek district), W. Va., there was a wreck. A motor hauling a trip of cars was coming off the mouth of sixth left which was pretty steep.

"I was standing still on the main entry just above the mouth of sixth left when the accident happened. The motorman had been sitting on the deck of the motor up in front and the young brakeman was on the stirrup in the rear of the motor when a loaded car next to the motor was wrecked. The boy brakeman leaped in the dark and fell under the trip. Two cars passed over him before the trip could be brought to a stop.

"I found his mangled body under the third car. The accident made a terrible impression on me. The idea for the ballad came to me as I was lifting the boy's body from the bloody mess. All the words did not come at once, but after mulling the idea over in my mind for a week, the ballad was finally finished and I wrote it down on paper. Then I suited a tune to it."

1. See that brave and trembling motorman,
Said his age was twenty-one.
See him stepping from his motor
Crying, "Lord, what have I done?"

2. "Have I killed my brave young coupler,
Is it right that he is dying?
Well, I tried to stop the motor,
But I could not stop in time."

3. See the car wheels running o'er him,
See them bend his weary head;
See his sister standing o'er him
Crying "Brother, are you dead?"

4. "Yes, sister, I am dying
Soon I'll reach a better shore,
Soon I'll gain a home in heaven
Where this coupling will be no more.

5. "Tell my brother in the heading—
These few words I'll send to him;
Never, never venture coupling,
If he does, his life will end.

6. "Tell my father—he's a weighboss,
All he weighs to weigh it fair,
They will have true scales up yonder
At that meeting in the air.

7. "Tell my mother I've gone to glory,
Not to grieve for me no more,
Just to meet me over yonder
On that bright and golden shore."

A6—THE COAL LOADING MACHINE. Sung by the Evening Breezes Sextet of Vivian, W. Va., 1940. Recorded at Welch, W. Va., by George Korson.

CHORUS:

Tell me, what will a coal miner do?
Tell me, what will a coal miner do?
When he goes down in the mine,
Joy loaders he will find.
Tell me, what will a coal miner do?

1. Miners' poor pocketbooks are growing lean,
Miners' poor pocketbooks are growing lean,
They can't make a dollar at all,
Here is where we place the fault:
Place it all on that coal loading machine.

2. No boys, I think I have a scheme.
   And I'm sure that it's neither rude nor mean.
   We will pick our bone and refuse,
   Then we'll know our coal is clean,
   Then we'll outdo that coal loading machine.

A7—SPRINKLE COAL DUST ON MY GRAVE. Sung with guitar by Orville J. Jenks at Welch, W. Va., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

1. I'm just an old coal miner
   And I labor for my bread,
   This story in my memory I've heard told.
   For the sake of wife and baby
   How a miner risks his life
   For the price of just a little lump of coal.

CHORUS:
   Don't forget me, little darling,
   When they lay me down to rest,
   Tell my brothers all these loving words I say.
   Let the flowers be forgotten
   Sprinkle coal dust on my grave,
   In remembrance of the U.M.W.A.

2. Mother Jones is not forgotten
   By the miners of this field,
   She's gone to rest above, God bless her soul.
   Tried to lead the boys to vict'ry
   But was punished here in jail,
   For the price of just a little lump of coal.

3. When a miner in the morning
   Gets his car up to the face,
   He'll set some timber, then he'll bore hisself a hole,
   He'll get a shot of powder
   Get his battery and his line—
   He's shooting down that little lump of coal.

4. When a man has toiled and labored
   Till his life it's almost gone,
   Then the operator thinks he's just a fool.
   They sneak around and fire him
   Just because he's growing old,
   And swear they caught him breaking company rules.

A8—THAT LITTLE LUMP OF COAL. Sung with guitar by William March and Richard Lawson at Kenvir, Ky., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

A bituminous coal mine was like a city built underground where work was carried on in darkness. What to a confused visitor might look like an inextricable labyrinth actually was a systematically laid out underground factory, cut out of rock and coal. From the drift mouth (or from the bottom of a slope or shaft, whichever the entrance happened to be) there ran an avenue called a "main entry," wide enough for a railroad track; this was the principal traveling way for the mine workers and for the transportation of coal. Driven off the main and at a right angle to it were headings or branch entries, like cross streets in a city. Off these branch entries were the "rooms," the daily workshops of the miners.

It was a miner's task to win the coal by advancing on the face of the seam until the room had been mined out, when he would move on to another room. The side walls, called "ribs," were also of coal. They were left standing in columns to support the roof until all the rooms had been mined out. Then, one by one, they were retrieved by means of an extraordinarily hazardous operation called "robbing."

1. Oh, to those who know no better,
   And the ones that do not care,
   I'll take this means of telling you
   What a miner has to bear.
   When your servant fires the furnace
   And the smoke and blazes roll,
   Just stop and think who suffered
   For that little lump of coal.

2. Oh, he gets up in the morning,
   He's in the land of Nod,
   And at the family altar
   He will kneel and ask his God,
   For, to care for and protect him
   From dangers underground,
   So he can come back in the evening
   To his family safe and sound.

3. Oh, he eats a hasty breakfast,
   Fills up his carbide flask,
   Picks up his lamp and bucket
   And he's ready for his task.
   Says goodbye to wife and baby,
   Stops to kiss them at the door;
   He doesn't know if he'll see them
   In his life any more.

4. Oh, he's soon below the surface,
Gets his car up in its place.
As he swings his pick and shovel
The sweat pours off his face.
Oh, he's tired, weak and weary—
Two hours have rolled around,
But he's got six more to suffer
Till he gets above the ground.

5. Oh, he's got to set some timbers,
Then drill a hole or two,
And then he'll roll some dummies;
Then there's something else to do.
So he stays, toils, and labors,
Loads every car he can,
To earn a measure living
And to pay the clothing man.

6. When he lines up at the office
With the others in a row,
With their statements signed and ready
For their little bit of dough,
And everything he's buying
Is away up in the air,
Do you think what he is asking for
Is anything unfair?

7. Oh, he only asks for wages
That enable him to share
A part of mortal pleasures,
And that is only fair.
Oh, it's a six-hour day, and Saturday
To stay at home and see
The sun rise in the morning
Like God aimed for us to be.

8. So brother, when you're knocking
On the man that digs the coal,
Just stop and think he's human
And he's got a heart and soul.
And don't forget the millions
Of tons he loaded out,
When the Kaiser tried to smear on us
His lager beer and kraut.

9. So you tell your pals and neighbors,
Your servants and your wife,
The plaster of your office room
Cannot crush out your life.
Oh, he's just a dirty miner
A sort of human mole,
That takes those dangerous chances
For this little lump of coal.

A9—MULE SKINNIN' BLUES. Sung by Joe Glancy of Harlan, Ky., 1940. Recorded by George Korson at Norton, Va.

1. All around my shanty door
I heard someone sing:
"If there ever was a hell on earth,
It's a-holdin' of an old tail chain."

CHORUS:
Mud in my eyes and slack in my shoes,
Lord, Lord, I've got them mule skinnin' blues.

2. The boss driver sits
On the end of the old side track,
Saying, "Pat 'em on the tail, boys,
I'm looking for you back."

CHORUS:
Lord, Lord, I've got them mule skinnin' blues,
Mud in your eyes and slack in your shoes,
Lord, Lord, I've got them mule skinnin' blues.

3. Top is bad and the track is wood,
Scrapped-up harness and tied up with wire;
Boys, you can't grumble, you knew what it was,
When you came here to hire.

CHORUS:
Lord, Lord, I've got them mule skinnin' blues,
Mud in your eyes, slack in your shoes,
Lord, Lord, I've got them mule skinnin' blues.

B1—HARLAN COUNTY BLUES. Sung with guitar by George Davis at Glomawr, Ky., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

George Davis is known all over eastern Kentucky for his mining songs. His is the authentic voice of a bard and folk minstrel.

Asked how he happened to write "Harlan County Blues," guitar-strumming George Davis said: "It happened in 1937. One day while sitting around in the mine waiting for the pump to pull a sump hole dry, the words came to me. I quickly grabbed a rough piece of paper and wrote them down with a pencil. My desk was an old powder box and the light came from my own carbide lamp."

When he was writing the song, Davis was a mine pumper. "Harlan County Blues" was his first song. He was thirty-three years of age and

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the father of three children when he sang for me. A native of La Follette, Tennessee, he comes of pioneer Scots-Irish stock. With a guitar suspended from his shoulder, he went everywhere singing not only "Harlan County Blues" but other songs which he had coined out of his coal mining experience.

1. A bunch of fellers the other day
   O'er to Harlan went;
   They told me about the fun they had—
   All the time in jail they spent.

2. Most of the fellers were like me
   Who didn't go along;
   If you want the story, boys,
   Just listen to this song.

3. "You didn't have to be drunk," they said,
   "To get throwed in the can;
   The only thing you needed be
   Was just a union man."

4. None of the boys didn't like it much,
   They said they's treated bad;
   They took their knives or pocket books,
   Or anything they had.

5. They throwed Bill Wheeler in the can,
   With all his p'ison gases;
   He had no money to pay a fine
   So they just took his glasses.

6. Then Kelly said, "You can't do this to me,"
   When they come to get his name;
   "The hell they can't," the jailer said,
   "You're in here just the same."

7. Walter he's a funny chap,
   With me you'll all agree;
   He wants some one to hold to him,
   When he gets on a spree.

8. Delmos he went down the street,
   To a restaurant was bent;
   When two fellers picked him up
   And to the jail he went.

9. Put Bill Sheets in the jailhouse,
   For reckless walking, so they say;
   They can't hold Old Bill for that,
   'Cause he always walks that way.

10. Sam Ward went to the jailhouse,
    And the jailer twirled his keys;
    Sam said, "Mr. Jailer,
    Now won't you listen, please."

11. Everything grew quiet, boys,
    You couldn't hear a sound;
    "Turn 'em out," Sam Ward said,
    "Or I'll turn this jail around."

12. When they all was freed again,
    You could hear them all take on;
    "Just think of the fun that we'd a missed,
    If we hadn't come along."

13. Then our president he asked our 'vice,
    "How'd you get along so well?"
    And Taylor Cornett laughed and said,
    "Why, I was drunk as hell."

14. Lloyd Baker went over there,
    To dodge the jail, he did;
    He said, "They'd all stayed out of jail.
    If they'd kept their buttons hid."

15. Now my song is ended,
    And I hope no one is sore;
    If there is, then please speak up
    And I won't sing no more.

B2—COAL DIGGIN' BLUES. Sung with guitar by Jerrel Stanley at Braeholm, W. Va., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

1. Fifteen years in the coal mine,
   For 'taint a very long time,
   Fifteen years in the coal mine,
   'Course 'taint a very long time.
   Some pullin' lifetime
   Some pullin' ninety-nine.*
   Yodel ay dee hee hee

2. Thought I heard a sea-gull
   'Way down on that ground;
   Thought I heard a sea-gull
   'Way down on that ground.
   Must've been those miners
   A-turnin' that coal around.
   Yodel ay dee hee hee

3. When that train left Braeholm,
   It sure was pullin' slow;
   When that train left Braeholm,
   It sure was pullin' slow;
   My good girl said, "Honey,
   I hate to see you go."
   Yodel ay dee hee hee

* years

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B3—COAL LOADIN' BLUES. Sung by Joe Glancy at Harlan, Ky., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

1. Here come Old Man Adkins with a battle-axe,
   Cuttin' everybody with a three-cent tax.
   Lord, Lord, I got them coal loadin' blues.

2. Take up your bottom, lay down your track,
   Shoot down your coal, boys, the motor's comin' back.
   Lord, Lord, I got them coal loadin' blues.

3. Got my check in my pocket, I'm goin' to town.
   Lord, Lord, I got them coal loadin' blues.

4. Hurry up, driver, give me two on a trip,
   My wife's gone to the store for to draw some scrip.
   Lord, Lord, I got them coal loadin' blues.

B4—DRILL MAN BLUES. Sung by George "Curley" Sizemore at Lochgelly, W. Va., 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

Recording George C. ("Curley") Sizemore's mine ballads in his home at Lochgelly, West Virginia, on March 27, 1940, was an unpleasant experience. A rock driller in the mines, Sizemore suffered from silicosis, or "miner's asthma," an occupational disease, a symptom of which is shortness of breath. He said new ballads take shape in his mind, but he cannot sing them spontaneously because he would get a mouthful of rock dust if he parted his lips.

1. I used to be a drill man,
   Down at Old Parlee;
   Drilling through slate and sand rock,
   Till it got the best of me.

2. Rock dust has almost killed me,
   It's turned me out in the rain;
   For dust has settled on my lungs,
   And causes me constant pain.

3. I can hear my hammer rollin',
   As I lay down for my sleep;
   For drilling is the job I love,
   And this I will repeat.

4. It's killed two fellow workers,
   Here at Old Parlee;
   And now I've eaten so much dust, Lord,
   That it's killin' me.

5. I'm thinkin' of poor drill men,
   Away down in the mine,
   Who from eating dust will end up
   With a fate just like mine.

B5—HIGNITE BLUES. Sung by Wesley J. Turner at the foot of Shamrock Mountain, in eastern Kentucky, 1940. Recorded by George Korson.

On March 21, 1940, in eastern Kentucky, I clambered up a steep, slippery footpath halfway up Shamrock Mounatin, balanced myself on a foot log spanning Stony Fork Creek, and resumed climbing to the top of the mountain. There I found a cabin, the only sign of human habitation. Living in the cabin was a bituminous coal miner, Wesley J. Turner, who sang "Hignite Blues."

Still wearing his working clothes, Turner met me and my driver, Bill Clontz of the Union, at the gate. His mule joined us and was an apparently interested witness to our conversation.

Turner explained that this had been his home for fifteen years, ever since he started working in the Hignite mine across the hollow. He used the mountain path daily to and from the mine entrance, and didn't mind it at all except in the winter when he had to plough through two feet of snow.

Turner informed us further that he was once a "right smart singin' man," but when I invited him to sing "Hignite Blues," he declined because he was no longer a "sinnin' man." By that he meant that he no longer sang secular songs. A revival in 1935 seems to have changed his attitude toward music. Now he did his singing in the Free Will Baptist Church where he was choirmaster.

Wiping the perspiration from my brow, I pointed out that he owed it to posterity to have the ballad recorded, a small sin compared to other sins of mankind. With great reluctance he finally agreed to sing for me.

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Bill Clontz and I accompanied him to a little crossroads store along a highway at the foot of Shamrock Mountain. I disconnected a big white refrigerator to plug in my portable disc-recording machine. Turner seemed thrilled to hear his voice on the playback, but remained unconvinced that he had done the right thing singing into my microphone.

1. A mile and a half back in the mines,
   Slate a-fallin' all along main line,
   Hey, hey, got the Hignite blues.

2. Two men put in every place,
   The way they're cramped it is a disgrace,
   Hey, hey, got the Hignite blues.

3. I talked to the foreman to see about,
   He said, "To take your tools and get out."
   Hey, hey, got the Hignite blues.

4. I'm goin' to the hall to make my request,
   It's up to the committee to do the rest,
   Hey, hey, got the Hignite blues.

5. Bumps all along to skin your back,
   They lay their wire and hang their track,
   Hey, hey, got the Hignite blues.

6. They say, "Boys, we can sell our slack.
   If on Saturday you will come back,
   And break the code."

7. Tom said to us entrymen: "You must take your
        slate,
   But you will have to work an hour late,
   And break the code."

8. He said to Sil: "At three o'clock,
   You make another trip while we dump this rock,
   And break the code."

9. They are all afraid to quit—
   Afraid they will lose their tit.
   Hey, hey, the Hignite blues.

10. I took my case up in the hall,
    The committee accepted but that was all,
    This is the union blues.

11. They took Walter Griffin off of the track,
    They docked him on dirt so he couldn't come back,
    Such union blues!

I recall my visit to Uncle George Jones in Trafford, Alabama, on March 19, 1940. Hartford Knight and J. W. Heathcock, union field representatives, drove me there from Birmingham.

The Negro bard and folk minstrel lived in a tumbledown cabin, his home since 1922. There were no windows in the cabin. Of what use were windows to a blind man? As I pushed open the creaking door, a frightened mouse scurried across the floor. The furniture comprised an old iron bedstead, an open grate with a low fire, an antique table, and two or three broken chairs.

A crutch under his right arm and bearing down on an old hickory stick with his left hand, Uncle George hobbled out of the darkness to greet us. The voices of Knight and Heathcock brought a grin of recognition to his face. When I was introduced he extended his gnarled right hand. With his white crinkly hair and stooped shoulders, he looked the image of the immortal Uncle Tom. He wore dark glasses, a yellow shirt, blue sweater, and blue trousers.

We helped him out on the porch where, leaning against one of the props, he regaled us with stories out of his picturesque past. Born in Greene County, Alabama, on August 15, 1872, Uncle George went through seven grades after which he hired out as a hand on a cotton plantation.

In 1889 he took a job as loader in the Woodward iron-ore mine at Bessemer. Two years later he became a coal miner. He joined the United Mine Workers of America during the miners' national strike of 1894. Union progress in Alabama was marked by many bloody battles. With a grin he pointed to his crippled leg and explained that he had been wounded in 1902. "I been shot at like a rabbit and been doin' a little shootin' myself," he said. He continued working in Alabama coal mines until blindness

finally overtook him in 1914.

Despite his sixty-eight years, he spoke in a firm voice. He was in good humor throughout the interview; I was struck by his intelligence and grasp of current affairs. Miners' children made it possible for him to keep abreast of the times. They called for him and guided him to neighboring homes where he listened to the radio and had newspapers read to him.

"I'm eager to keep in touch with what's going on," he explained. "I get my logic from that."

The whole coal camp of Trafford seemed to take a personal interest in his well-being. A deacon, an elder, and a lay preacher in various churches for many years, he was able to attend services regularly.

Throughout his career, Uncle George sang church hymns and Negro spirituals. He sang in church choirs, down in the mines, and on the picket line.

Knowledge of the Bible and a large repertoire of spirituals led to his career of local bard and folk minstrel.

There was much need in Alabama's coal camps for ballads to record local events and inspire hearts burdened with trouble. Upon Uncle George's shoulders descended the bardic mantle.

Shortly before each annual district convention he was visited by a committee of miners who ordered a new ballad to be sung by him at the coming convention. After questioning them to determine the most timely and appropriate theme, he went into a period of "studying." This meant that he searched his memory for a suitable Bible theme and a hymn tune.

On the day the district convention opened, an automobile called at his cabin and he rode to the meeting hall in state. A lusty cheer went up as he was assisted to the platform. When he had finished singing his ballad, the delegates applauded, cheered, whistled, and stomped their feet in boisterous but sincere approval.

Uncle George's battered old hat was passed around the hall and came back filled with money. There was no odor of charity about this gesture. The miners understood that they were paying a fee for a service that gave them great pleasure, and in that spirit Uncle George accepted the money. He was living by his minstrelsy, a profession rich in tradition and full of honor in the mining country.

1. In nineteen hundred an' thirty-three
   When Mr. Roosevelt took his seat,
   He said to President John L. Lewis,
   "In union we must be.
   Come, let us work together,
   Ask God to lead the plan,
   By this time another year
   We'll have the union back again."

CHORUS:
   Hooray! Hooray!
   For the union we must stan',
   It's the only organization
   Protect the living man.
   Boys, it makes the women happy,
   Our children clap their hands,
   To see the beefsteak an' the good po'k chops,
   Steamin' in those fryin' pans.

2. When the President and John L. Lewis
   Had signed their decree
   They called for Mitch an' Raney—
   Dalrymple make the three:
   "Go down in Alabama,
   Organize ev'ry living man,
   Spread the news all over the lan':
   We got the union back again!"

3. There's one law [of] President Roosevelt,
   That made the operators mad:
   Gave all the men the right to organize,
   Join the union of their choice.
   When the President had passed this law,
   We all did shout for joy,
   When he said no operator, sheriff or boss,
   Shouldn't bother the union boys.

4. In nineteen hundred an' thirty-two
   We was sometimes sad an' blue,
   Traveling round from place to place,
   Trying to find some work to do.
   If we're successful to find a job,
   The wages was so small,
   We could scarcely live in the summertime—
   Almost starved in the fall.

5. Befo' we got our union back,
   It's very sad to say,
   Old blue shirts an' overalls
   Were the topic of the day.
   They was so full of patches
   An' so badly torn,
   Our wives had to sew for 'bout a hour
   Befo' they could be worn.

6. Now when our union men walks out,
   Got the good clothes on their backs,
   Crepe de chine and the fine silk shirts,
   And bran' new Miller block hats;
   Fine silk socks an' the Florsheim shoes,
   They're glitterin' 'gainst the sun,
   Got dollars in their pockets, smokin' good
     cigars—
   Boys, this what the union done.

7. Befo' we got our union back,
   Our wives was always mad,
   When they went out to church,
   A print dress was all they had.
   But since we got our union back,
   They're happier all the while,
   Silk an' satin of ev'ry kind,
   To meet with ev'ry style.

B8—WE DONE QUIT. Sung by Sam Johnson
at Pursglove, Scott's Run, W. Va., 1940.
Recorded by George Korson.

This ballad was sung by the Scott's Run
miners during the 1930 strike. They sang it to
the tune of "I Can Tell the World," a Negro
spiritual.

CHORUS:
   You can tell the coal operators 'bout'n this
   You can tell the company we done quit;
   Tell them what the non-union have done,
   Tell them that the panics have come
   An' it brought sorrow, I declare, unto my home.

1. Went up on the top house the other day
   Yes I did
   Went up on the top house to see 'bout my weight
   Yes I did, yes I did.
   The checking weighman said that they dock me
     for slate
   Yes he did, my Lordy, yes he did.

2. Bittner told the operator the other day
   Yes he did, yes he did.
   Before he'd sign the contract, he'd leave this place,
   Yes he did, my Lordy, yes he did.

3. Bittner told the operator the other day
   Yes he did, yes he did
   They will sign the contract or leave this place
   Yes he did, my Lordy, yes he did.

4. Sam told Bittner the other day,
   Yes he did, yes he did.
   Befo' he sign the contract they'd all be dead,
   Yes he did, yes he did.

B9—A COAL MINER'S GOODBYE. Sung by
   Rev. Archie Conway at Man, W. Va.,
   1940. Recorded by George Korson.

Conway created this song while lying flat on
his back in a cast waiting for death. Falling slate
had broken his back and paralyzed him from the
waist down in the Guyan Eagle mine in Am-
herstdale, West Virginia, in 1938. He was still
bedridden when he sang for me on May 28,
1940.

In a program beginning in 1949, the Union's
Welfare Fund sent paraplegic miners like Con-
way to hospitals where they were taught to walk
again. They were also taught a new trade to
make them self-supporting again.

1. For years I have been a coal miner,
   I worked day by day in the mine;
   But no longer am I a coal miner,
   I have come to the end of the line.

2. I toiled 'neath the ground like the others,
   Of hard knocks I have had quite a few.
   Now my prayers as you labor, my brothers
   Is that God will be watching o'er you.

3. May He throw His great arm round about you,
   From harm keep everyone free;
   I guess I'll be lonesome without you,
   Since it's quitting time forever for me.

4. My tools are all rusty, I reckon,
   I last saw them stacked up inside,
   No longer to me do they beckon,
   Since I started that last fatal ride.

5. Some day I'll be absent forever,
   Then be true to your union, I pray,
   I'll deposit my transfer in heaven
   Where no slate fall will come night or day.

6. We will have a good local in heaven,
   Up there where the password is "Rest,"
   Where the business is praising our Father,
   And no scabs ever mar or molest.

7. Our Savior is on the committee,
   He is pleading our cases alone,
   For ages He's been on committee,
   Pleading daily to God on the throne.

8. The Bible up there is the journal,
   And the members all know it is true;
   The contract up there is eternal—
   It was written for me and for you.

9. No strikes ever happen in heaven,
   The boss loves the men, I declare,
   The house is in order in heaven—
   I hope I shall see you up there.