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Oral History Interview: Frank Brooks

Frank Brooks

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Interview of Frank Brooks, Retired Coal Miner

Question: What is your name?

Answer: Frank Brooks

Question: What is your age?

Answer: 71

Question: Where do you live now?

Answer: Route 3 Box 22, Chesapeake, Ohio

Question: Where did you live when you were a small boy?

Answer: Small boy? I was. In Carter County, Kentucky.

I was born in West Virginia. Fayette County.

Question: Did you go to school in Carter County, Kentucky?

Answer: I went to the third grade. Where I went to school it was a one room school house. It only taught to to the third grade. The only books that I ever had was a reader, spelling book and a slate and I think I had a writing tablet. Like I say, I went to the third grade and I couldn't go on to school because it was about eight or ten miles to the next school to a higher grade. There was no buses, no way to get there. The road was muddy and as far as I could go, my schooling was the third grade.

Question: Did you live on a farm in Carter County?

Answer: I-----My Father owned a farm, but didn't farm much. He owned a little store for about eight or ten years, but I was raised on a farm. Until I was about sixteen years old.

Question: Did you start working in the coal mines in Carter County?

Answer: No, my first work in the mines was at Borderland, West Virginia and I was thirteen years old. Back then, people think now, when you say you were thirteen years old and start in the mines, they think something funny about it. Back then, there was no such thing as a social security card. All

you had to do was be big enough to do a days work. I went to helping my Daddy on the track and I was kind of thin and he told me to put on extra pair of pants and on an extra shirt to look big and we worked on the outside the first day I started to to work. I got hot and started shedding the pants and shirt.

Question: This was on the outside of the mines?

Answer: Yes, but my first day was on the outside , but I did work inside, because he was a main line man, some days we worked inside and somedays we worked outside.

Question: What's a main line man?

Answer: A track man, where a main line hauls coal--Hauls it from the drift mine to the tipple where it was dumped.

Question: Did they use horses then to pull the coal?

Answer: I have worked in mines where they used horses, but this particular mines, they didn't. I worked on the Big Sandy River where they used ponies to gather up the cars. That was where the loaders loaded the coal in the cars by hand . They hauled it to _____. I rode a mule. All my mining then was three or four months at this place and three or four months at that place. My main mining at Cinderella, West Virginia. I went there in 1928. I worked on the outside for about a year. I believe I was making \$3.20 a day. I started loading coal then. Mining then was all by hand. I mean you put the coal in the car by shovel. It was from daylight --in the winter time--I left home before daylight and got home after dark. I have worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day. I remember one night I came in from work and my wife said "the

kids meant to stay up until you came in but they got so sleepy they had to go to bed! I loaded coal by hand--I don't know--I guess for six or eight years and then they got the first--I want to say something about loading coal by hand first-- We worked these long hours, they had --like I say-- it was fourteen or fifteen hours a day and the best words I ever heard in the mines, a boss, he came around one evening, four o'clock was quitting time, and he came around one evening and he said "Frank, now the mantrip is going to leave at four o'clock, and he said, I want you to be ready to leave, oh but if you are a little, I guess five or ten minutes over getting your place ready to cut again, we'll wait on you" And about three or four days he came back around again and he said "Frank, the mantrip leaves at four o'clock regardless, he said you be, the mantrip leaves at four o'clock, you be ready to get in it." That was the best news that ever I heard around the mines in my life. And from then on--like I say-- we was loading coal in by hand, with a pick and shovel. Now I loaded coal for, I guess for six or eight years and then I went to shooting coal for, after they got the drill loaders in the mines, I went to shooting coal, then my job was to prepare the coal, get it shot out, for the joy to load it up. But by then it was all eight hours a day. The union came around, I believe it was 1932, when they had the union. But before we had the union the mines was terrible. I know where they used to have to work in bad air and in smoke. And I had a , I guess, I call it a nervous break down on account of working in bad air and smoke.

And I was off six months. I went back to work two days and I seen I couldn't make it no longer, the doctors then, they, of course, were in cahoots with the company, they wouldn't say I had a nervous breakdown, if they did they would have to paid me for it--like I say-- I was off six months and went back to work and worked two days and was off six months more. That was before we had the union. After the union, of course everything changed then. The mines, the mining got a whole lot better. When I quit the mines I was making about \$30.00 a day. But I worked at this one particular mines, I believe I worked thirty-three years at one mines in Cinderella, West Virginia. And let's see that was the last mines I worked in. I was retired in 1958. I haven't worked any in the mines since--- but----I am retired now. I draw black lung and miners pension and social security.

Question: You talked about the doctor working for the for the company. What else did the company offer you. The coal companies you worked in? Did you live in a company house?

Answer: Yes, we lived in one particular house, I believe about 33 or 34 years.

Question: Did you pay rent on the house?

Answer: Yes, we paid \$11.00 a month. They gave us bone, they hauled bone for fuel, it would burn allright.

Question: They furnished this bone coal?

Answer: Yes, for a dollar a month.

Question: At Cinderella, they had a swimming pool for the people?

Answer: Yes, after I went there they built a swimming pool.

Question: And a company store?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Did you trade in the company store?

Answer: Yes, I did for a while- I want to tell you this- The reason I quit trading at the company store- Back then, everybody was in debt with the company- And when you got in debt they called- You go in to get groceries- And they would give you- the script writer- He would write you- an order- say you wanted fifteen dollars that day, he would write you an order for fifteen dollars. If you asked him for it- but, you had to hunt the superintendent up and he had to O. K. this order- and you was lucky if you got a dollar. Lots of time you would go up in the tippie, I've heard women and little kids, both say that he would go up in the tippie and stay three or four hours- a day and make them wait on him to O. K. this order. You never got over a dollar a day. Maybe on Saturday he would give you two dollars or a dollar and fifty cents or something like that- Like I say, I never traded too much at the company store, for I went up there one day and they had a new, had a new-----store manager- And they had a red card- A red card meant no groceries----- And the store manager's name was Horace Tiller- And I ask for some groceries- And he looked over at me and he said, "Frank, you've got a red card!" He said, "How long have you been here?" I said, "Oh, I don't know, I've been here- at that time I'd been there- twelve or fifteen years- And he said "Everybody else is in debt around here- I don't see why they put a red card on you." He said, "You come around and ask Mr. Mose about it. " Mr. Mose was the superintendent. So, I went around and ask him- ask him about it. I don't know what Mr. Mose got mad at me about. I guess I was kind a firey and wouldn't take a lot of the stuff he tried to hand me- Anyway, I ask him about it and he said, "Now Frank, I'll tell you, I never put the red card agin you. You go see the super.

His name was Thomas, Evan thomas was the super- And I ask him about it. And-----Now he was the one then told me "No, Frank, I didn't have anything to do with it"- He said "You'll have to work it out with Mose and Hoarce, that was the store manager- so I went down and went upstairs to see Mr. Thomas and then I went back down ask Mr. Mose, the superintendent what was the matter, I couldn't get any groceries- And he give me some kind of an excuse said- he's the one told me, I believe though, that I would have to work it out with Hoarce Tiller- Anyway I told him, I said well Mr. Moses, everybody else is in debt around here and I said you know I got a family of kids, I think I had three or four kids at that time- and nothing to eat- well he said- he didn't give me no satisfaction - I didn't get no groceries so I had a- a- I had a watch- And I took my watch downtown, down to Williamson- which was about three miles- and I pawned it. I believe I got three or four dollars- for it on pawn. That's when I quit trading at the company store- I went back and told my wife- and said, now I said, we're not gonna trade any more at that store, I said what money I make we're going to draw it. And we're going to do our trading down town. So we did - and after then we never done no trading much at the company store.

Question: Was this during the depression that you're talking about?

Answer: Uh- uh, it was what was called "Hoovertimes."

Question: Did you work these long hours during the depression?

Answer: Yes, we worked, well I've knowed men to have to work sixteen hours a day. Going back to when I got sick- I got nervous. I was working- of the night. And

to show you now the way the company- would do you. One evening I went to work. I was going to try to get on the day shift. And the mine foreman's name' was Sam Dooley. Well his office was about a hundred feet from the shop, the electrician's shop- so I, he started out that way and I went long behind him like a little poodle dog. And I ask him, I said, "Mr. Dooley," I said "Is there a chance of me getting on the dayshift. "I said "I'm so nervous that I can't hardly stand it. I can't sleep of the day" and he never even stopped or looked back. The answer he give me was "You're lucky to have what you got."

Question: Did you feel that way?

Answer: No, I was never madder in my life but, what could I do? I had a wife and like I say three or four kids. They wasn't no place to go. Every mine you went to was just the same way. I didn't have any money. Couldn't move. You just hung up with the coal company. You done exactly what they said. If they wanted to boot you in the rear end it wasn't to do but to take it. But after-----like I say, after we got the union, everythingchanged. That is really what helped the miner out. _____

Question During the depression did you, did you stay in the mines all the time or did you go to work for anything like the D. P. A. where they built all the bridges, there in Mingo county?

Answer: The D. P. A.? What was it they called that project they had was- Yes I believe they paid you about two dollars a day. I worked a while on that for about a couple of weeks. See we just worked about three days a week at that. But the mining then when I started was really something terrible.

Question: What about it when you retired? Was it pretty hard then?

Answer: When I retired in 1958, well the mines, of course the work wasn't so hard. You only worked eight hours. If you worked over eight hours of course you got paid for it- you got time and a half. But the mines got dangerous, they had these old loading machines. They wouldn't give you no chance to examine the place. Lots a times the cables would catch a fire. I know one night I was working a night then and we was from, this was after they the loading machine, I was working on a conveyor line, where they load coal on a conveyor line, and the boss came around and said "let's get out of here." I said "What's a matter?" He said there was some coal cars got in a hot wire, a juice line down at the other end where it empties into a car. And so we took out down the old air course, wading water way up above our knees. Just a climbing over slate fall. And you talk about somebody really scared. I really thought that time we was really gone. The smoke was right behind us. We just outrun it, that was all. And we got down there though and we eventually got out. But going back to these hard times... After I got _____ . I quit trading at the company store and got a little money, we bought us a cow. We always had a cow. I raised two hogs every year, had chickens, raised a good garden, and from then on, we had plenty to eat. I never, we never did go hungry. We always had something to eat. As far as money was concerned, I went for a year or more- two years I guess, that I never drew nary a dime of money for my work, I took it all out in the company store. Guess it was what I'm talking

about was what we called in the Hoover Days. So after I got on my feet, and got a little money... Like I say we got a cow, raised chickens, and raised hogs and made it very well from then on.

Question: You've told me before about when they formed the union, about some of the trouble they had- can you remember any of that now?

Answer: Well we didn't have too much trouble where there we were at. I believe it was, President Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt- When he took office- if I'm not mis---, Yes I know it was. He said, "You had a right to join any union you wanted to." So when we joined the union, everyone at this time joined the union. Either had to accept it or shut the mine down, one of the two. So, after we got the union, of course, everything got better then, I believe the first contract we had, I believe it was day work, that was men working of the day. I believe _____ and when I quit the mines, the mines closed down in 1958, I believe I was making, around thirty dollars a day then.

Question: What about the big strikes that they had in the coal mines? What was that in the nineteen forties?

Answer: Let's see. I remember we had two. We were off fifty nine days each time. Of course we had some small strikes that lasted a day or something like that. We had two strikes that lasted fifty nine days. The government would ship in stuff for us. I guess it come from the government, It had flour, rice, meal, and stuff like that. They would hand it out to the miners.

Question: Mr. Brooks, when you think about life today- You know, you think of your grandchildren, like Jada, Kay, Herby, and all of them- Then like when you were

a small boy. Can you compare these two lives? Tell some of the differences it was for you than it is now?

Answer: Of course, we didn't have no money when I was a little boy. But you didn't have to have any. We'd go to church, a gang of us would. A bunch of boys and girls. If you had a dime, you could buy it in chewing gum and candy and stuff. We didn't have to have no money. Of course everything is better today. Automobiles, T. V. and a like— But me my myself, I would rather take the olden days when I was a boy. We went barefooted the year around— Not the year around, went barefoot in the summertime. Of course we wore shoes in the wintertime. But I really liked the olden days better than I like today. Uh, these times today.

Question: What did you do for entertainment when you were a young boy. What did you do for fun?

Answer: Well we would get out of the night, we'd get out of the night and play games called— go sheepie go, hide and seek. Sundays men and boys altogether, we'd get out in the yard and in the road and have big marble games and just anything like that— play any kind of games. As far as entertainment, I remember the first— they call them victrolas then— that I ever seen. I believe it had a horn on it. Any way my uncle, he bought—a little while after that he bought a larger one. And that was about the only one there was in round there close. Everybody didn't have one. And people would gather around there and listen at his victrola. The house would be full and in the meantime we'd go to people's houses they would have— they would be someone there could play the fiddle, somebody there to play the banjo, some-

body could sing. We just had a great time. Like I say me, myself, I enjoyed those days better, really better than I do now and I think the kids were a lot better off. Like a say- You didn't have to have no money to have a good time.

Question: Where did you meet Mrs. Brooks? She isn't from down in Carter county is she?

Answer: She was raised, I believe in Denton, Kentucky. I was- I've heard her say. The first time I ever- I believe I had my foot hurt, a wagon or a bank car rolled over it. Anyway, I mashed my toe and I was on crutches. That's the time when I first met her. And they was- I guess they was- we was agin, I guess we was about seventeen or eighteen years old. And it was seven years after that we got married.

Question: You had seven children?

Answer: Uh huh- four boys, three girls.

Interviewer: I believe our tape is just about up now and I'd like to take a few minutes on it to thank you, for talking with me on this today. It's very nice of you. Would you like to add a few more things before we quit?

Interviewer: Well I'm afraid I didn't do a very good job. This is something new to me.

Interviewer: Well it's time to turn the tape off. Thank you.