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Mining different in 1914

A miner tells his story

By FRANK ROBERSON

Peter McGuire, the founder of the Brotherhood of Carpenters, made a suggestion in 1882 which resulted ultimately into a national holiday being celebrated annually on the first Monday in September as Labor Day.

It was McGuire's proposal that a day should be set aside to honor the working men and women of America. The first such celebration was held the same year in New York City.

Organized labor then began an extensive campaign to establish McGuire's idea into a national holiday. The first state to legislate such a bill was Oregon in 1887. The holiday was signed into law by President Grover Cleveland in 1884.

The Labor Day celebration taking place Monday Sept 6 on the Princeton fairgrounds can be traced to a celebration held at the Oakland City fairgrounds in 1904 which was an all-coal miners event. Similar celebrations were held through 1907.

In 1908 the Labor Day association was formed and the celebration was held at Lafayette Park in Princeton. After World War I the Southern Indiana Labor Day association was formed with all unions in the area joining. The celebrations have been held most often in Princeton, but also in Vincennes.

Swimming pool open weekend

Only three days of summertime remain as far as the swimming season goes in Princeton. Dewey Green, pool manager, announced Friday that the pool will be open Saturday, Sunday and Monday, September 4, 5, 6, after being closed since last weekend.

Oakland City, Petersburg, Washington, Boonville and Mt. Carmel, Ill.

Mention the word union to almost any resident of the Gibson county area and almost immediately thoughts of the miners union spring to mind. The UMWA (in its abbreviated form from the official title of United Mine Workers of America) is by no means the only union involved in the industries of southern Indiana, but over the years it has been proven one of the strongest and most vigilant.

It seems somehow appropriate to use one man—a long time miner and union official—to symbolize the organized labor movement over many years, as labor sought unity for the common cause of common men engaged in earning a living by the works of their hands.

Such a man is Adam Mair.

Mair is a retired representative of district 50 Allied and Technical Workers who lives at 225 East Emerson in Princeton and can look back at 57 years as a union miner, having taken out his first card in local 134, United Mine Workers of America, March 5, 1914.

During his lifetime he has spent 30 years at the coal face and 20 years as representative. He also worked for the Ferguson mine and spent several years at Kings Mine near Princeton.

He doesn't think of himself as being anything special, but agrees with this writer that it might be appropriate to share a bit of the mining history he observed with the public in a Labor Day edition. "There were so many others with a similar story, it wouldn't do to make a fuss over me," he says.

Mair began mining by doing a

half turn at the J. K. Dearing mine near Clinton, Ind. in 1914. He was 13 years old at the time. The coal was dug with pick and shovel and pulled by mules. His job was mule catching, or stopping one mule to prevent a collision with another. On Christmas 1914 he drew two weeks wages consisting of two five dollar gold pieces and some small change. This was for two weeks work. He was making 95 cents a day.

In 1914 working conditions were deplorable by 1971 standards. The miners entered a mine filled with smoke and coal dust every morning. Black powder charges were lit every night by shot-firers, and the exhaust fans then in use were inadequate to properly exhaust the air pollutants.

Pay began when the coal face was reached and ended when the miner left. Any breakdowns meant lost wages for as long as they continued. Miners went home in dirty clothes and bathed in a washtub behind the kitchen stove. An injured miner was carried home. There was no hospital in Linton, and the company paid the doctor.

Miners furnished their own tools and shot-firers bought their own powder. They even paid for having the coal weighed, so the company could determine their wages.

Mining safety was in its infancy, but much of the problem was due to the fact that technology was primitive, and many great safety inventions were still years away.

There was a choice between carbide gas lamps and oil lamps for the miners of that day and the carbide won out around 1917 or 1918 to be replaced years later by the much safer battery-electrical type.

At this point Mair mentioned

the advancements in mine safety over the years quoting statistics which revealed the 13 or 14 thousand miners were killed each year in accidents during the 1930s and showed only about 215 lost their lives in mining related accidents during 1971.

One of the memories he shares in common with veteran miners is the great depression. During the worst of that period in the 1930s by working every possible shift offered by the company he managed to earn between seven and nine hundred dollars annually. He had a family of four at that time consisting of his wife Mary and two small sons Charles and Robert.

In answer to a direct question on how many of the benefits enjoyed today by miners would have been granted by the companies, without union pressure, he gave a direct answer. "None, when I was the representative we had to fight hard for any kind of an improvement."

Mair's last trip into the mine came last spring when he accompanied Congressman Roger Zion on a tour of the King's Station Mine near Princeton. Mair's lifelong interest in mining has carried over into his retirement, and he was prompted to ask Zion if he would like to see first hand some of the problems of mining. The Congressman answered "You arrange it," without hesitation, and Mair set up the visit.

Mair says he's no different than any miner. The interest continues after retirement. "Once a miner, always a miner," he says. He continues to pay his dues (they all do) and eagerly awaits the labor papers.

Such a man is Adam Mair, and he says there are many more just like him.