

# Coal miner research in the United States

By **Tim Pinnick**

Think back to when you started searching for your ancestors. At some point in those early months, you sought some guidance. Perhaps from an experienced family researcher, a how-to book, a genealogy group, a genealogy class, a genealogy conference, or some combination thereof. In doing so you gained, among other things, worthwhile help in locating and using the necessary resources. The search for your coal mining ancestors follows the same pattern. Being introduced to the correct resources is a key to your success.

## Finding the coal miner

Many genealogists have a coal miner ancestor lurking about inside their proverbial closet, although some of us have such cluttered closets we may not have noticed him yet! Well, for those who have spotted a miner hanging from your family tree, consider yourself fortunate. For unlike your ancestors who were employed in other unskilled occupations, coal miners belonged to a highly regulated industry beginning in the late nineteenth century. This translates to a bevy of government documents that can provide welcome assistance to the researcher, and leads us to possibly the most valuable one—the state coal mining report.

The coal mining states, some as early as the 1870s, appointed a mine inspector whose primary job was to promote safety by conducting inspections, enforcing laws and regulations, and investigating accidents and disasters. The inspectors also collected a variety of materials pertaining to the coal mining activity of the state, and in some cases the nation, and compiled an

annual or biennial state coal mining report, usually submitted to the governor. Many of these reports still exist, and provide a wealth of information for those with coal mining ancestry. To find the reports, the most probable place to search would be a state historical library, state archive, or large university library. As a general rule, you should investigate any sizable repository within a state of interest.

In the university libraries, state coal mining reports can generally be found in the government documents area. When the library has a special collections division, you will often find them in both places. On campuses where multiple libraries exist, you will often find the reports in a library designed for engineering

or the study of geology. In addition, you may find that a particular institution may have reports from multiple states, as is the case with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, which has a number of copies from the states of Tennessee, West Virginia, and Colorado, along with a few others.

These reports are located in the Stevenson Science and Engineering Library. A word of advice when planning a visit to look at these “old”

coal reports—contact the library ahead of time. Since these reports are not the most popular items on the shelf, a number of them may be in remote storage, and take a day to retrieve.

## Coal mining accidents and fatalities

From a genealogical standpoint, the heart of a state coal mining report lies in the data provided on coal mining accidents and fatalities. A report will typically contain a list in columnar format of the deaths and accidents from the last twelve months (see figures 1



& 2), along with additional details, in paragraph form, on many of the fatalities. The number of columns of information in the lists, however, is not standard and will vary from state to state and often from year to year within a given state. At the Birmingham (Alabama) Public Library, some industrious folks up in the Government Documents section on the second level have created a Microsoft *Access* database containing information on mine fatalities extracted from a number of state coal mining reports published between 1898 and 1938. Within the last two years the database was put on the Web, and can be accessed at <<http://bpldb.bplonline.org/db/coalmine>>.

When major mine accidents occurred, more often than not the testimony of survivors and other witnesses appeared in the mining report. The Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor, Statistics, and Mines in Tennessee included material gathered on an explosion at the Dayton Coal and Iron Company in Rhea County. Depositions, rich in detail, were given by supervisors, workers, physicians, undertakers, and the coroner. Age, marital status, occupation, number of years in the mining industry, employer, and mine location represent some of the data elicited from those involved. It should be pointed out that if, through oral tradition, you have been told that an ancestor was injured in a mine, and you don't find him in the state mining report, keep digging. According to the state mine inspector of Kansas in his report at the end of 1894, "...75 percent of the non-fatal accidents are not reported to this office. I obtained the information of 75 percent of the non-fatal accidents from local newspapers."

## Newspapers

Today's technology allows us the unprecedented ability to both locate and access old newspapers containing this information and much more. The papers during the coal mining era gave extensive coverage to events occurring in and around coal camps. Mining disasters, incessant labor unrest, and the gun play that frequented many coal communities garnered media interest and found its way into both local and national papers. To unearth this material, much can be gained from using online databases such as ProQuest Historical Newspapers or the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* <<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/>>, and being creative in the use of search operators. A search on ProQuest with *negro* and

*Ancestry.com 1880 United States census search form allows you to search by occupation.*

*miners* turned up dozens of relevant articles. When the terms *colored* and *black* were substituted for *negro*, many more nice articles surfaced giving many leads on topics that included ethnic enclaves, migration patterns, recruitment activities, strikes, and both mining and non-mining related fatalities.

A tremendous resource that is sadly under used is the labor newspaper. Coal miner union activity and other news from the early 1870s and beyond constituted a considerable portion of the pages within the Pittsburgh-based *National Labor Tribune*. The Knights of Labor, a labor organization with extensive coal miner membership, had its own paper that was called the *Journal of United Labor* during the 1880s. Also during this early period the Miners National Association operated for a brief time and published the *Miners' National Record*. However, with the effectual demise of the Knights and the NMA by the early 1890s, a powerful new organization emerged—the United Mine Workers of America. The UMWA's

official newspaper, the *United Mine Workers Journal*, is a treasure trove of genealogical information. The *UMWJ* carried lengthy biographies on members in a feature called “Who’s Who in the Union,” printed resolutions of respect from local unions and cards of thanks from bereaved families, and a column titled “Information Wanted” to assist those looking for friends and family members. The *United Mine Workers Journal*, along with the other aforementioned labor papers, can be found on microfilm.

### Censuses

The census collection of Ancestry.com can be of great assistance to those in search of early coal miners. When using the 1880 census, the researcher has the ability to search based on occupation. Performing a search for *coal miner*, and adding *Ireland* in the box for the father’s birthplace will set before you thousands of Irish miners from hundreds of coal mining locations. Compiling and retaining the results of the search could prove to be very useful in finding your wayward miners, or at least figuring out potential migration destinations or patterns. Using this tactic recently uncovered several elusive miners who were sitting in a southern Illinois coal camp with badly misspelled names.

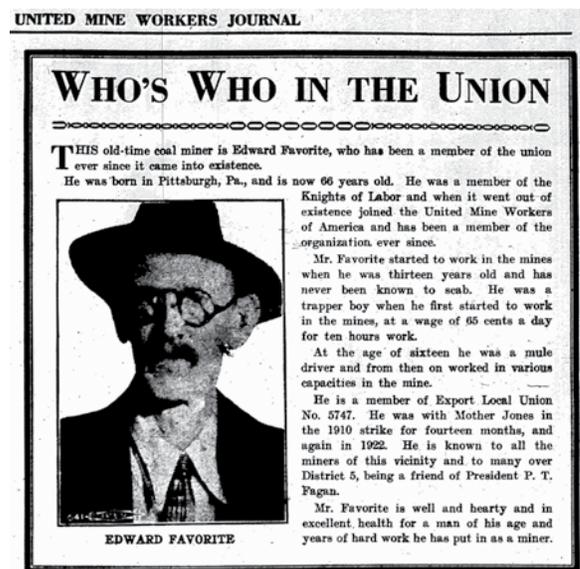
### Government sources

Earlier in this article the use of state coal mining reports and newspapers were discussed as places where you may locate specifics on coal mining accidents. However, there are a couple of government sources that can assist researchers looking for a particular accident. In 1960, the Bureau of Mines produced Bulletin 586, the “Historical Summary of Coal-Mine Explosions in the United States, 1810–1958.” A key feature of this bulletin is a chronological listing of coal mine explosions resulting in five or more deaths. In addition, in some cases summaries of the accidents are provided along with pictures of the aftermath of the explosion, although individual victim data are not reported. If you have Internet capability, you should head to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health Web site at <<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/mining/statistics/discoal.htm>>. The Institute has put together a table of coal mining disasters that draws on source material beyond Bulletin 586. Among its references is the Bureau of Mines Bulletin 616, “Historical Documentation of Major Coal-Mine Disasters in the United States Not

Classified as Explosions of Gas or Dust: 1846–1962.” The Web site table is presented in chronological order, but may be sorted by location or type (explosion, roof fall, fire, cage accident, suffocation, etc). Like Ancestry.com, this is a great resource for identifying coal mining activity at distinct locations within specific timeframes.

### Company records

Attempting to locate the records of the coal mining company that employed an ancestor is a daunting task. Finding extant records is really a hit or miss proposition, and often the researcher that is fortunate enough to find them is disappointed because there are few, if any, employee-related records. One of the major problems in trying to find company records is that of consolidation, and the movement from coal to oil as the primary energy source. In the early part of the twentieth century, many of the larger mining concerns acquired their rivals, particularly those competitors that were less successful in making the transition from coal to oil and gas. In turn, a considerable number of them then became part of even larger conglomerates. United States Steel and International Harvester are examples of companies that took possession of substantial mining corporations. Access to the records of such companies was very unlikely twenty years ago, and the chances of success today have almost surely declined even further given our litigation-driven society. It stands to reason that the lawyers of these companies are



*Edward Favorite vignette from United Mine Workers Journal.*

## **Selected Illinois-related entries from**

*The Coal Industry in America:  
A Bibliography and Guide to Studies*  
By Robert F. Munn

### 139. ILLINOIS COAL OPERATORS ASSOCIATION

A brief outline of 25 years history and experience, with special reference to the unusual developments of the war period and subsequently. [Springfield], 1921. 78p.

### 140. ILLINOIS DEPT. OF MINES AND MINERALS

A compilation of the reports of the mining industry of Illinois from the earliest records to the close of the year 1930. Springfield, 1931. 177p.

### 157. KEISER, JOHN H.

The union miner's cemetery at Mt. Olive, Illinois. Illinois State Historical Society. *Journal* 62: 229-66 1969.

***"It is the only union-owned cemetery in the nation, and it contains the remains of those who participated in most of the early major events of coal unionism in Illinois". Account of the history and events associated with the cemetery.***

### 264. RUTLEDGE, J. J.

Recollections on early mining in Illinois. Illinois Mining Institute. Proceedings 2: 76-84 1944. 998. GUTMAN, HERBERT G.

The Braidwood Lockout of 1874. Illinois State Historical Society. *Journal* 53: 5-28 1960.

***Early labor problems in the Illinois coal fields.***

in its value to those pursuing their coal miner roots. The guide included repositories that had not reported their collections to NUCMC at that time, and possibly never did. There are 926 total entries, and each is accompanied by a thorough description. What makes this book even more indispensable is its identification of dozens of oral history collections. Oral histories are another one of those exciting, yet underused, resources for tracing coal miners. Following the leads presented in this book will point you to several significant oral interview collections located throughout the country. Some of them have been updated, transcribed, and placed online. The collection at the University of Illinois at Springfield at <http://www.uis.edu/archives/oral.html> is an excellent example of this.

*Coal Industry in America* is an extensive bibliography of nearly 3,000 entries. The material is organized into fifteen separate categories including history, life in the coal fields, mine disasters, racial and ethnic groups, labor relations, and health. The entries are comprised primarily of articles, theses, books, dissertations, and a variety of reports. They cover coal mining from its beginnings, to well into the twentieth century, and are equally expansive from a geographical perspective. Be prepared to spend hours uncovering many intriguing entries, and the only unhappy person will be the local librarian dealing with all of your interlibrary loan requests. Happy hunting!

*Author's note:* The "Who's Who in the Union" biographies and other material found in the *United Mine Workers Journal*, appeared in issues from the 1930s. It is unknown when they began, or when they ended them.

*Tim Pinnick is a lecturer and independent scholar with more than seventeen years of research experience; he has been actively involved in African American coal miner research for more than ten years, is the creator and webmaster of the African American Coal Miner Information Center, past newsletter editor (1992-94) of the Afro-American Genealogical and Historical Society of Chicago, and recipient of a 2005-06 Formby Research Fellowship to conduct research on African American coal miners at the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University. He can be reached by e-mail at [blackminers@yahoo.com](mailto:blackminers@yahoo.com).*

advising against public access, arguing that it is not in their best interest.

However, on a more positive note, if you pose the question of extant company records to a seasoned genealogist, he or she will probably point you to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, commonly referred to as NUCMC. Although this is sound advice, you will absolutely want to consult the *Guide to Coal Mining Collections in the United States* by George Parkinson, and Robert F. Munn's book *The Coal Industry in America*. The obvious appeal of these books is that they focus on coal mining manuscripts.

Parkinson's work, produced in 1978, is timeless