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## Colliers in Corsets? Uncovering Stark County's Nineteenth-Century Coal Mining Women

According to the United States government, women did not enter underground mining until four decades ago. The Rockefeller Report on *The American Coal Miner* notes that, “prior to 1973, government records show no women miners.”<sup>1</sup> If “government records” includes either the federal census or Ohio state death records, that statement is false. While the numbers are small, the fact is that some women in the mining region of Stark County, Ohio, do appear to have mined coal more than one hundred years before such work was officially acknowledged by the government. In Stark County population schedules for 1870 and 1880, four people are indicated as having a sex of “female” and a profession of “coal miner.” Despite their presence on population schedules, they remain conspicuously absent from the published summaries.<sup>2</sup> Stark County death records are even more revealing of this disparity, identifying another dozen women who, at the time of their deaths, were occupied as miners.<sup>3</sup> In total, between 1870 and 1900, government records actually indicate that at least fifteen women worked in the mines in Stark County alone. Their invisibility from government records, however, is not an sign of the

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1 President's Commission on Coal, *The American Coal Miner: A Report on Community and Living Conditions in the Coalfields* (Washington: The Commission, 1980), 191.

2 Summaries in the 1870 and 1880 census list the number of miners in the state of Ohio, but fail to note the presence of any women in mining. See Department of the Interior Census Office, *Ninth Census, United States. 1870, V. 3: Industry and Wealth* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 748, 764; Department of the Interior Census Office, *Tenth Census, United States. 1870, V. 1: Population* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 735. Population schedules from both censuses indicate four female miners in the county, though one, Francis Cassidy, was a male miner, incorrectly indicated. Population Schedule, Lawrence Township, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870* (Dwelling 3, Family 6). See also Estate of Francis Cassidy, Probate Court Records, Stark County Public Library, Canton, Ohio (Case #4521). Name spelled Cassady in the 1870 census.

3 *Early Ohio Death Records, 1867-1908*, Microfilm, Stark County Public Library (Canton, Ohio).

challenge these women presented to existing gender norms, but an indication of the prevalence of an older, pre-industrial notion of family labor that persisted in the coal mines.

In the 1970s, when American women first entered the coal mines en masse, they encountered a hostile environment in a hyper-masculinized work place. Hazing and practical jokes were one of the primary ways in which male colliers reacted to the presence of women. When Annie Rocha entered the mines in 1976, her male coworkers took to messing with her lunch until she retaliated by dumping their lunches on to the coal feeder.<sup>4</sup> Only when female miners reacted to their tormentors in kind did they begin to earn respect, or at least a reprieve. Of course not all of the tribulations that women endured in the mines were of such a “jocular” nature. Female laborers were harassed by male coworkers and supervisors, both physically and sexually. Women who entered the mines in the 1970s had to be constantly on guard against supervisors who sought to take license against them in the dark confines of the colliery. Despite government mandates requiring women to be hired, once employed they had to defend themselves from their lascivious coworkers, both legally and physically.<sup>5</sup> Dona Gearhart, a former miner turned historian, has argued that what these women encountered in the mines was a

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4 Dona G. Gearhart, "Coal Mining Women in the West: The Realities of Difference in an Extreme Environment," *Journal of the West* 37, no. 1 (1998): 62-63.

5 Accounts such as this are almost too numerous to list, however Rita Miller's experiences in a Kentucky coal mine is pretty typical. After repeated harassment by her supervisor, she eventually initiated a class-action lawsuit to stop the constant sexual advances. See Marat Moore, *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 167-180. Annie Rocha took matters into her own hands, literally; when taunted with crude innuendos, she responded by smashing the offender in the face with a shovel, breaking his hard hat and lamp in the process. Gearhart, "Coal Mining Women in the West," 63.

“male culture carefully constructed over centuries.”<sup>6</sup> It was indeed a “male culture” which they encountered, however not one nearly so old as either the miners or historians have argued.

The sex-segregated system of female exclusion from the mines was a relatively recent introduction in the history of coal mining. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, most coal throughout the industrializing world was mined using a system of family labor that depended on the contributions of both women and children in the subterranean depths. Prior to 1842, when Parliament passed the Mines and Collieries Act, coal mining in the United Kingdom was a family affair. Scottish bondmen were the United Kingdom’s first colliers, hewing coal in permanent servitude while their wives and children loaded and carried the cut coal to the surface.<sup>7</sup> In Belgium, one of the centers of the European coal trade, mine labor was not as harshly divided by sex. Women in Belgian coal mines could be found hewing and cutting at the face of the coal along with their male counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Family labor in the mines had been the norm for centuries, and the impetus for change did not come from within. Middle-class

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6 Gearhart, "Coal Mining Women in the West," 62.

7 Jane Humphries, "Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State, and Working-Class Men: The Case of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act," *Feminist Review*, no. 7 (Spring, 1981): 10-11; Jane Mark-Lawson and Anne Witz, "From 'Family Labour' to 'Family Wage'? The Case of Women's Labour in Nineteenth-Century Coalmining," *Social History* 13, no. 2 (May, 1988): 156; Andrew Roy, *A History of the Coal Miners of the United States: From the Development of the Mines to the Close of the Anthracite Strike of 1902 Including a Brief Sketch of Early British Miners*, First Greenwood Reprinting ed. (Columbus, Ohio; Westport, Connecticut: J.L. Trauger Printing Company; Greenwood, 1905; 1970), 20; Priscilla Long, *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Bloody Coal Industry* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 8-9. Humphries notes that only widows in the most extreme circumstances worked the face of the mines and that hewing was primarily the province of adult males. Roy's description of female haulers is indicative of the outrage of middle-class reformers who saw women and girls dressed as men and worked like beasts of burden in their underground toils.

8 Patricia J. Hilden, "The Rhetoric and Iconography of Reform: Women Coal Miners in Belgium, 1840-1914," *The Historical Journal* 34, no. 2 (Jun., 1991): 412.

reformers and clergymen in both countries were outraged by the children who spent their whole lives underground and the women who “dressed like boys” and were “hitched to the mine car.”<sup>9</sup> In the 1840s, both countries managed to pass laws that banned women from working inside the mines. Most colliers did not support these reforms, moves that forced them to change from a centuries’ old system of family labor on the promise of a family wage which never emerged.<sup>10</sup> It was this European, primarily British, tradition of family labor which was transported to America in the mid-nineteenth century, along with the laborers themselves.

In the 1870s, the traditions and mores of Stark County colliers bore a closer resemblance to that of the previous generation of British miners than to the boundary-breaking women who entered the mines a century later. There was good reason for this similarity as the majority of miners in the county had immigrated from Britain. In 1870, almost half of the families headed by a miner were British. A decade later, the number of British mining families had more than doubled.<sup>11</sup> The oldest of these miners would have grown up working alongside their sisters and mothers in the mines, while the youngest would have heard tales of these endeavors. John Brophy recalled hearing his grandmother speak with great pride of her days in the mines, and the

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9 Roy, *A History of the Coal Miners*, 12, 20; Alan Heesom, "The Coal Mines Act of 1842, Social Reform, and Social Control," *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 1 (Mar., 1981): 74-75; Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 48-49; Carletta Savage, "Re-Gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors," *Appalachian Journal* 27, no. 3 (Spring, 2000): 233; Hilden, "The Rhetoric and Iconography of Reform," 412. Quote taken from Roy, who also noted that the commission wiped “out the disgrace of female labor in British coal mines”(30). This process, he argued, “gradually but surely raised the craft from the lowest depth of degradation and ignorance to a plane of respectability and intelligence unsurpassed by any class of workingmen” (28). Numerous historians have found that the exclusion of women from underground mining was led by middle-class reformers. Heesom has noted that churchmen played a significant role, questioning the “decency” of male and females working so close in the dark. John finds that the leading reformer, Lord Ashley, was moved by the oppression and corruption of the “poor girls themselves.”

10 Mark-Lawson and Witz, "From 'Family Labour' to 'Family Wage'," 156; Humphries, "Protective Legislation," 16-18.

great burdens she carried helping to support her family.<sup>12</sup> However, in America these miners encountered a different set of barriers that limited women's capacity to work in the coal mines. Few states had laws that expressly forbid women from mining, and no such federal statute existed, however cultural proscriptions of Republican Motherhood, True Womanhood, and the Separate Spheres served the same purpose as European laws, effectively keeping women out of the mines.<sup>13</sup>

These gender constructions were powerful in their ability to influence expected behavior, but they were also flexible based on the exigencies of individual situations. In the Stark County mines, as in the vast majority of American mining regions, women did not work in the collieries because of socially-constructed ideals about appropriate female roles in work and the household.

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11 Numbers from this section are drawn from statistical summaries of the population schedules of Stark County, Ohio, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870* and *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880*. In 1870, mining families with a British head-of-household numbered 172 out of 359 families (47.9%). In 1880, British-headed households grew to 349, though total families had increased to 767 (45.9%). For the purpose of this summary, British includes miners who indicated their nativity as England, Ireland, Scotland, or Wales.

12 John Brophy, *A Miner's Life, an Autobiography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 4.

13 The dominant notions of womanhood in the late nineteenth-century were largely based on ideas of domesticity, nurturance, and motherhood. Compare ideals of middle-class womanhood from Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: From Banners to Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). They further drew on earlier conceptions of "Republican Motherhood" which supported women's role in the household as the proper place, one which helped to create and support democratic ideals in the public sphere. See Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-an American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2, Special Issue: An American Enlightenment (Summer, 1976); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980). Working-class womanhood was rarely that "neat." For examples, see Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, Illini Books ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982; 1987).

However, in times of duress, tragedy, or simple financial need, women crossed these boundaries and sought work in the mines. Though their numbers were not great—only fifteen women appear to have worked the mines during a forty year period—their very presence in the mines indicates the fluidity of gender roles in coal-mining communities. When women did enter the mines they did so in a familiar pattern, working alongside their husbands, fathers, and brothers in a system of family labor. A closer look at one such woman, or girl, to be exact, highlights the pattern of female mine labor in the late-nineteenth century.

Mary E. McBride was born into a mining family. Her father Thomas was a miner, as were her two of her older brothers, John and Alexander. John would later go on to become the second president of the United Mine Workers of America and president of the American Federation of Labor. Irish by way of England, Mary and her brothers were all born in Ohio coal country. Only eight years old in 1870, she was youngest miner in the county, but only by a year.<sup>14</sup> Many young boys entered the mines at an early age, the first step in their journeys towards becoming practical miners. Though Mary never became a full miner herself, she could have easily worked as a trapper, opening and closing the ventilation doors in the mine as the coal carts passed. Given the family's circumstances in 1870, the additional income Mary earned would have been sorely needed. The McBride family was in dire straits by the time of the 1870 census. Mary's mother, Bridget, passed away shortly after she was born, as did her brother Thomas. Though her father remarried in 1864, Jane Peterson brought three children of her own into the family. The family income was strained by the departure of three older siblings, Sarah,

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<sup>14</sup> McBride's family can be found in Population Schedule, Perry Township, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870* (Dwelling 302, Family 295). The next youngest coal miner was nine-year-old David Killoway of Lawrence Township (Dwelling 24, Family 33).

Edward, and William; without the additional income they provided, the family struggled. What income the family did earn was stretched thin after Sarah's death, when Mary's father took in his granddaughter. Though Thomas was one of the few Stark County miners who owned his own home in Perry Township, upon his death in 1874 the family owed \$420 in taxes and to various creditors. The McBride family was sorely in need of the additional income Mary's labor provided.<sup>15</sup>

Mary's work in the mines appears to have been short-lived, a temporary stop gap in a time of financial crisis. By her father's death in 1874, she was no longer listed as a miner, having returned to helping her step-mother around the house. Six years later she married Harry Mort and moved to Toledo, Ohio, where she lived out her remaining years. Widowed less than seven years into her marriage, Mary never had any children; she lived most of her life with her sister Elizabeth and her brother-in-law, William Haynes.<sup>16</sup> If she was anything like her female forebears who worked the mines in England, she looked back on her time in the mines with pride, in the work she did and the contribution she made to her family.<sup>17</sup> Mary never returned to

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15 Family size and structure reconstructed from census and probate data. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States: 1860* (Washington, D.C., 1864), Population Schedules of Summit County, Franklin Township (Dwelling 464, Family 458); Population Schedule, Perry Township, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870* (Dwelling 302, Family 295). Estate of Thomas McBride, Probate Court Records, Stark County Public Library, Canton, Ohio (Case #1025). See also case #6-38MA for his Marriage to Jane Peterson.

16 Probate Court Records, Case #1025 and 9-323MB. Harry's funeral took place on January 11, 1887. *Toledo City Directory, 1887-1888* (Toledo, OH: R. L. Polk and Co., 1888), 131. Mary's final appearance in the census comes in 1920. As in 1900 and 1910 she lived with her sister and brother-in-law. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920* (Washington, D.C., 1922), Population Schedule for Toledo, Ward 1 (Dwelling 103, Family 114).

17 John Brophy recalled family lore about his great-grandmother's work in the mines and her "pride in her youthful labor." Brophy, *A Miner's Life*, 4. This same pattern of pride in their work can be seen in women's work in factories during the WWI and WWII.

the mines, nor did she appear again in the census with an occupation other than “keeping house.” Her brief sojourn into the darkness of the coal mines occurred at her father and brother’s side and contributed to the household economy. It was not, however, the beginning of a career as a practical miner, nor was it a nascent movement for women’s equality.

Over the vast majority of coal-mining’s history, it was the absence of women in the mines which was an anomaly, not their presence. When Mary McBride entered the Stark County mines she was participating in a long tradition of family labor, one which had only recently been ended, legally in some countries and by custom in America. Mary, however, was not alone. According to census data and county death records, at least fourteen other women spent time working in the mines. Those who entered the collieries found themselves in similarly dire straits and worked in similar circumstances. When the appropriately-named Catharine Miner died in 1881, she had only entered the mines within the last year, in the wake of both a prolonged strike and a financial panic which had put her family in a precarious position.<sup>18</sup> Mary Oglethorpe was similarly driven into the mines for financial reasons. Both in their seventies, Mary and her husband William had no children at home who could help to support the household. When she died in 1887 she was working alongside her husband, loading the coal William hewed.<sup>19</sup> Jane Legg, Maria Kettler, Margaret Pickren, Minnie Bowing, and others all entered the mines in such circumstances, working alongside their families in a system almost as old as coal itself. The meaning of women’s labor in the coal mines has changed over the centuries. By exploring the circumstances

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<sup>18</sup> Population Schedule, Jackson Township, *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880* (Dwelling 9, Family 9). *Early Ohio Death Records*, Vol. 2, Page 117. Last name misspelled as “Minor” in the 1880 census.

<sup>19</sup> Population Schedule, Tuscarawas Township, *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880* (Dwelling 33, Family 36). *Early Ohio Death Records*, Vol. 2, Page 133.

in which women entered the mines it is possible to see the continuation of pre-industrial patterns of life and labor in a trade which stood at the heart of industrialization.