

# A LIFE OF HARD WORK: ARCHIE GEORGE

as told to  
Eileen Mountjoy Cooper

Indiana County has, since the late nineteenth century, been noted for its fine grade of bituminous coal, and for the character and stamina of the men who mined it. One of these men, Archie George, could represent the thousands of western Pennsylvania coal miners who helped to build this part of our country. In 1977, not long before he died, Archie told his story.

"The name," he begins, "is Archie George, as is well know. Francis A. George, I'm known to the Social Security. I was born in the town of Bakerton, in Cambria County, in 1913. My father was a jack-of-all trades. He was a lumberjack, a camp cook at a big woods camp—once, he cooked for sixty men. And he was a railroader, a steam engineer, and a farmer, and a machinist. The family originally came, on the maternal side, from Holland, and on the paternal side, from Wales.

"My first childhood memory is moving. My Dad had a disagreement with his boss, and we just moved. I had quite a few chores to do around the house. When I was five, it was my job to keep the coal buckets filled. In Clearfield County, we had a huge truck farm, 180 acres. We had 27 hogs, 500 chickens, turkeys, beef cattle, eight dairy cows, and three horses.

"We had a short school year, as all the kids helped with the planting and then with the harvesting. We all got up at 5:30 in the morning, went to the barn to do the feeding, and the milking, and then came back to the house for breakfast. And then I worked 'til noon in the truck patch."

At this point, Archie had to stop wipe his brow, and whistle at the memory: "Oh, boy! Rows of seed onions, 400 foot long, and you couldn't tell them from little blades of grass. Wow! I don't think even ol' Satan could have thought up a more torturous way to get along in this world!



"From noon, then, after I had my lunch, until five o'clock, that was my own time. I just roamed around, in the summer, fishing, and in the woods. At five o'clock, though, I had to be back, and we started the same procedure, feeding the livestock and getting ready for milking. The milk had to be put through the cream separator, and the eggs gathered. Every night, the cream had to be taken to town to a co-op we had, and the eggs, too, and put into a cool building. It was then taken out on the railroad to sell.

"After the evening meal, we lit the lamps, and went out to the barn again, to husk corn. Now, they always said a farmer could put on some fat in the winter time because he didn't have anything to do. That must have been a different kind of farm than we had! We were busy all the time, but it paid off.

In a few years, my dad sold off the farm, and we went down to Johnstown, where he and my brothers got jobs in the Black Diamond coal mine. We were there for a spell, and moved again, different places. A miner goes where he can make the best money, as a rule. When things slacked off in Johnstown, we came back to Indiana County and went to the mines at Ernest. My father and my uncle boarded there for a month, and then they got a house, and the rest of us came over and brought the furniture. Eventually, I finished school at Ernest, through the eighth grade. My dad didn't like it there; he claimed there was too much dead work... he always said he'd stay there until he got one good pay, and then leave. Well, he was 76 when he died, and even bought a house there when the company sold them. Seems like he waited an awful long time for that one good pay!

"He was there the rest of his life. I got employment papers for the summer, as I was only fifteen; you had to get them from the secretary at the school. I got those papers and went to work at the glass factory first... that paid \$1.56 a day. I had to buy two streetcar tickets to get from Ernest to Indiana to get to the factory, and they were 18 cents each. I didn't like it there. I was so hot. I only lasted three or four weeks and I was fired for fighting.

“When I got home, my dad and my brother were just going to work, and I told them I’d been fired, so that night, he told me to go down to the company store and get a cap, and some checks, that they had got me a job in the mines. I had sort of hoped I’d have a little time to run around over the hills, and such, but the next morning, I started in the mines.

“I was fifteen then. All told, I put in thirty-two years. It was all hand loading then... there were fifteen hundred men in that mine. We only had two shifts. I didn’t have to wait to get on the day shift, since I went in with my dad and my brother. We went in at quarter to six in the morning, on the man-trip. We had then what we called the clean-up system, loading coal that had been cut during the night. We had such trouble getting cars that sometimes, when the night shift came in, they’d have to stand and wait while we were still loading. It made twelve or fourteen hours every day. We only saw daylight on Sundays.

“We also had to do ‘dead work,’ such as laying heavy iron to keep the underground roadways advanced. And your hourly rate was really low. Now, I liked the work, and I never remember feeling afraid in the mines. I was scared once or twice, but only afterwards, not while the thing was happening. One time, a rock caught my heel while I was spragging, and I was thrown off the motor, and fell alongside the ear. I had to crouch against the side while the motor and all the cars went through. Every car that went by rolled over the heel of my boot. When it was all over, I nearly threw up.

“Another time, two of my dad’s friends were cutting coal. One man ran the controls of the machine, and the other was the scraper - he cleared the ‘bug dust’ away from the cutter so it wouldn’t clog up. But they were loading up the steel jacks they used to keep the machine in position, and the place caved in. The scraper was partly under the machine, with his left leg trapped under the skirt of the machine. His right leg and the rest of him were covered with rock. His buddy ran back, and Dad and I ran up to see what was the matter. We just started throwing rock off him, and the roof was kicking and cracking, and getting ready to come in again. We had him almost free, and another pile of rock came down. It was low coal, and we had our backs against the roof.

“The man never lost consciousness, he just gritted his teeth and watched us. Suddenly, my dad said to me, ‘Archie, go back and get the axe.’ Dad always kept good tools; kept them sharp, and always insisted I keep mine in good shape too. I said, ‘Dad, we don’t have time to set up any props; that roof’s going to come down any minute!’ But Dad said

again, ‘Just go get the axe - do as you’re told! We’re not going to set any props. If the roof comes again, we’re going to chop off his leg!’

“I said, ‘Aw, Dad, we’re not going to cut off his leg, are we?’ My dad said again, ‘What would be better, to lose his life, or just lose his leg?’ I said, ‘Before you start chopping, you tell me.’ But he said, ‘There won’t be any chopping, just one good whack.’ And there was this guy, lying there, listening to us. And my dad weighed 225 pounds and looked like a grizzly bear. One whack would have done it. On one occasion, I saw him knock down a mine mule with his fist.

“Well, we started throwing rock again, and the roof started talking pretty loud, and I kept saying, ‘Dad, it’s going to come in.’ All at once, the man pushed himself up, and go ahold of the rail, and with both hands, he gave an awful pull. You could hear the bones grating together in his leg. Dad and I each got under his arms, yanked as hard as we could, and he came free. We dragged him out of there as fast as we could, just as the whole roof came in.

“Just then, the boss came to meet us. We got the poor guy taken care of, and then the boss tells me and my dad to go back and get the machine! ‘Oh no, I’m not,’ I said. ‘I’m going home to bed!’ ‘Oh, no you’re not,’ says my dad. ‘You run away from this and you’ll run away from difficult things all your life. You’re going to stay right here and work. You’re not going to run away from it and neither am I.’ And you know, I’ve thought about that many times since, and what a wise man my father was, not to let me run away from something like that.

“I learned something else from him that day, too. I asked him later, ‘Dad, did you really mean to cut off that man’s leg?’ And he answered, ‘I would have if I had to, but I knew he had it in him to get himself out of there. He just needed a little encouragement.’

“My dad always said to me, ‘Hard work never hurt anyone,’ and I guess that’s the way I’ve lived my life. If I had it to do over again, I wouldn’t change it.”

The men of Archie’s generation had, as he recalled so vividly, much to learn from the preceding generation. We, in turn, have much to learn from our mothers and fathers, that in these days of push-button convenience and prosperity, the American ideals of hard work and courage in the face of life’s difficulties may not be lost.

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