

Killing for Coal

AMERICA'S DEADLIEST LABOR WAR

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less lowered slowly back into the ground on a little rise above the Slate River, not far from the bodies of their comrades buried by fraternal orders in separate ceremonies, and almost within sight of the Jokerville mine in which they had perished. The earthly remains of at least sixteen others had already been taken to the little frame depot on Elk Avenue. From there, they retraced the star-crossed paths that had brought the miners to Crested Butte from other parts of Colorado, as well as Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.⁷¹

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Out of the Depths and on to the March

Even in an era marked by populist insurgency, convulsed by economic crisis, racked by strikes, and patrolled by so-called industrial armies led by Jacob Coxey and other self-styled generals of the unemployed, the march was an unexpected sight. In late May 1894 some two thousand striking colliers and a few dozen coal camp women descended on Rouse, a mining town tucked into the Rocky Mountain foothills south of Walsenburg. "The north and the south have met," one witness declared, "and their meeting was like the convergence of two murmuring streams." One stream of marching strikers had set out on foot from Fremont County, more than eighty miles away; the other had trekked from the coal camps of Las Animas County, thirty-five to fifty miles distant. As for Rouse, the miners had chosen it as their rendezvous because they had come to believe that their collective fate hinged on this particular piece of ground. The strikers' aim was first to advance into the streets of the town, then to persuade the men still working there to come out of the mine and join the march.¹

Knowledgeable observers expected that the remarkable marching strike of 1894 was nearing a decisive moment. Much more hinged on Rouse, however, than the fate of the largest miners' strike yet organized in southern Colorado. The shift from migration to mass mobilization as a strategy for betterment, the translation of underground tensions into surface conflicts, the coales-

cence of local disputes into regional and national strikes, the union of fragmented identities and narrowly defined interests in collective movements championing the rights of coalfield migrants as workers, citizens, and human beings—these and other trends seemed at the tipping point.

This was, of course, neither the first nor the last time southern Colorado mineworkers would strike. The southern coalfields' catalogue of labor woes stretched back to 1873, when colliers at Coal Creek had walked out of the mines in an unsuccessful bid to reverse William Palmer's effort to cut their wages from \$1.50 to \$1.25 per ton. Organized miners had scored their inaugural victory in December 1879. Amid a "general advance in wages, and in cost of supplies," Colorado Coal and Iron miners in Fremont County and Walsenburg had secured wage increases, though at Engleville "the strike was successfully resisted by the prompt employment of Mexican labor." Two years later, as we have seen, Engleville's *nuevomexicanos* had silenced company machines by refusing to work during Holy Week, and in June 1882 miners struck again at the mine in a fruitless effort to resist the imposition of new work rules at the property.²

These early disputes tended to be highly localized affairs, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes initiated by committees drawn from the miners' ranks or from the camp lodges of a national union called the Miners' National Association. The strike of 1884–1885, which affected Colorado's southern and northern coalfields, as well as the Wyoming collieries, set a much clearer precedent for the marching strikes and coalfield wars to follow. The strike was organized by the Knights of Labor, the first national labor organization to recruit workers without regard to craft or ethnic group. When Colorado Coal and Iron followed a Santa Fe Railway subsidiary in slashing wages and rates in the Fremont County mines, "an immediate strike" erupted. Though colliers managed to cripple production of domestic fuel during the winter heating season, the companies nonetheless derived a "great benefit" from the strike, for it enabled them "to introduce in[to] the various channels of consumption, where Canon coal only was known," fuel from Huerfano County. This "benefit" evaporated in October, however, as miners from Huerfano and Las Animas counties joined the dispute and demanded "that the miners at Canon be reinstated at old prices." When the companies sought to arbitrate with their workmen, Colorado Coal and Iron explained in its annual report to shareholders, they discovered the miners to be "controlled by an

association called the 'Knights of Labor,' who demanded that before work be resumed the Company should recognize their body." Believing that the Knights were "assuming unwarranted power" and preventing the company "from enjoying its natural advantages," CC&I allied with its competitors to crush the strike. The company imported strikebreakers (mostly Italians and African Americans), discharged alleged troublemakers, and imposed wage cuts on workmen, who found themselves pushed to "the eve of starvation." With the Knights of Labor forced to retrench and the region entering a boom cycle, seven relatively quiet years ensued; labor-management relations in Colorado were aptly described in the *United Mine Workers' Journal* as "not friendly, but peaceable." Beneath the surface, though, trouble was brewing—trouble that would lead hundreds and eventually thousands of men to walk off the job, join together, and embark with a few dozen women on one of the most remarkable mass mobilizations in the history of the American West. In ways these miners could not have predicted, what Jacob Coxey called "a petition in boots" would lead the southern coalfields away from the harmonious relations that both operators and miners desired, and toward the all-out labor wars of the twentieth century.³

The Madness of Markets

Markets and workscapes lay behind this long history of labor-management conflict in the southern coalfields. Mineral-intensive industrialization transformed the Western economy in ways that made it virtually impossible for colliers and coal companies to find common ground. Annihilating Western isolation, coal and railroads made it cheaper and easier for work-seeking migrants to reach Colorado. Labor, scarce and thus richly remunerated on the Rocky Mountain frontier, became plentiful by the 1880s. Prevailing wages throughout the region plunged accordingly.⁴

Railroads imported coal as well as people. Shipments of fuel into Colorado from Wyoming, Utah, and other states exacerbated the often cutthroat competition that pertained in Denver and other markets served by multiple rail lines. Imports also jeopardized the ability of Colorado coal miners to force concessions from operators through strikes, since the worst effects of even an all-out work stoppage could now be averted by supplies of fuel hauled in by railcar from coalfields beyond the state borders.⁵

The fossil-fuel-driven regional economy, like the organically fueled economy that had preceded and still sustained it, also ebbed and flowed from season to season and year to year. Complicated interactions of coalfield geology, Western ecology, and the international economy subjected industrializing Colorado to both regular rhythms and unpredictable crises; together, the variations had troubling consequences for mineworkers. The home heating market, for instance, picked up by late summer, as dealers stocked up on domestic coal, and then collapsed between January and April, depending on the severity of the winter. So even as men who worked the coking- and steam coal seams of Huerfano and Las Animas counties were enjoying regular employment, their comrades in the domestic coal mines of Fremont County were enduring months of slack work or layoffs. The high plains droughts of the early 1890s also caused a downturn in coal consumption in eastern Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and adjacent areas, as farmers undertook "forced economies" that "greatly curtailed their winter consumption of coal."⁶

Business cycles wrought still greater havoc than climatic cycles. Demand for coal increased exponentially between the 1870s and the 1910s, yet industry fortunes nonetheless declined whenever hard-rock mining, railroad construction, and urban expansion veered from boom to bust. Coal companies reduced output and cut prices during economic downturns such as the panic of 1883-1884. Strikes ensued as operators, pressed by financial challenges of their own and emboldened by the ready availability of workers discharged from other industries, tried to cut labor costs.⁷

The companies' efforts to reduce tonnage rates (for miners at the face) and wages (for the other underground and surface workers, collectively known as company men) owed as much to the structure of the coal industry as to the vicissitudes of the Western economy. William Jackson Palmer had assailed the "hot competition of American business life" for preventing employers from treating their workers properly; however valid this notion, the general's failure to secure a coal monopoly boded ill for Colorado colliers. Competition and increased production together pushed retail energy prices steadily downward from the 1870s on. Profit margins in the industry declined apace, from nearly three dollars per ton of coal in 1880 to perhaps ten to forty cents in the 1900s. Already in 1890 one large firm, the Colorado Fuel Company (which merged with CC&I two years later to form CF&I), was warning its stockholders: "Competition has reduced the profit on a ton of coal or coke to

so low a figure that no considerable reduction [in prices] can be made in the future." Since rates and wages accounted for perhaps 60 to 80 percent of the cost of producing each ton of coal, and since mechanization and other strategies for rendering extraction more efficient made only halting headway, operators chose to accommodate consumers' cries for cheaper coal—not to mention their own desire for profit—by cutting mineworkers' pay. Strikes, though troublesome, provided operators with a golden opportunity to slash labor costs by replacing militant craft miners with inexperienced newcomers, as well as a fighting chance to impose a victor's peace on miners reduced to hunger and despair by weeks or months without pay.⁸

No wonder southern Colorado's coal companies earned a reputation as inveterate foes of the unions. And though executives often resorted to ideologies of free labor or social Darwinism to justify their opposition to labor organization, their intransigence remained at heart a practical strategy for controlling mining costs. Elevating collective interest above selfish individualism, mineowners in the southern coalfields cooperated during strikes with even more gusto than they competed during peacetime. Unionization in the collieries also presaged higher fuel costs for other industries, while offering a precedent that might inspire other workers to organize. And so during colliers' strikes the small clique of men who controlled the railroads, streetcars, smelters, hard-rock mines, factories, and banks of the Rocky Mountain West hastened to lend moral, financial, and strategic support to the coal barons. Supremely conscious of the stake their own class had in the outcome of the coalfield struggles, the overlords of the fossil-fuel-driven economy closed ranks to present a united and formidable front.⁹

William Palmer's vision of Colorado as a "newer and grander and happier Columbia," a utopia of labor harmony and natural balance, vanished well before the marching strike of 1894 erupted. In place of his dream of coal-fired benevolence, the harsh reality confronting miners was one of a regional economy that was at once wildly erratic, brutally competitive, and closely controlled by the few dozen industrial oligarchs on whose actions the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of women, men, and children turned.

From the Welshmen who represented the driving force behind the strike of 1884 to the Italians and Austrians who were so eager to march a decade later, mineworkers of every nationality, race, and ethnicity suffered from irregular

employment, wage cutting, and union busting. But just as mine air exploded only when fuel, oxygen, and an ignition source combined within a confined space, so too did colliers' strikes erupt only when miners could come together in spite of the social divisions that tended to pit various migrants against one another.

Colliery work cultures characterized by craft pride, inclusiveness, autonomy, and solidarity exacerbated the madness of markets. Interactions between miners and mine workscapes—the uneven topographies of risk and reward underground, the devil's bargains posed by tonnage rates and dead work, the potential of mine disasters to kindle unrest in the camps above, and so forth—did much to generate and sustain militancy in the southern fields. Still, it would be foolish to explain industrial struggle in Colorado as a simple or direct consequence of shifting earth and explosive air. Nor should we underestimate the depth or force of the factors setting mineworkers against each other. Though some British commentators likened colliers to "Nature's noblemen," a diverse, far from angelic assortment of boys and men labored within the buried swamplands of the Mountain West. Distrust and dissension, fomented on many occasions by the companies, pervaded the mines. Discrimination and interethnic violence were rampant in the camps above. In the context of the economic segmentation, legal and extralegal discrimination, and racial violence that characterized the North American West during this era, however, the more interesting phenomenon is not that miners often had trouble banding together, but that they periodically managed to overcome their differences and to carry out mass mobilizations, such as the marching strike of 1894.¹⁰

Pride and Practice

Despite the widespread perception of coal mining as menial labor, most men who toiled underground took immense pride in their work. They knew what we tend to forget: that mine labor imparted a deep knowledge of underground nature. Since very few sources exist to document the contours of this knowledge in the years leading up to the marching strike of 1894, we have little choice but to extrapolate from later sources. Oral histories gathered in the 1970s offer particularly rich insights into how aging mineworkers remem-

bered their careers during the 1900s to the 1930s. Since basic mining methods remained relatively unchanged through the late 1920s, the interviews offer evidence about the connections between underground work cultures and mineworker militancy in the late nineteenth century, while illuminating the deep roots of coalfield violence in the early twentieth century.¹¹

It is useful to recall that even as coal liberated city and country from the Malthusian constraints of organic energy regimes, the extraction of fossil fuel continued to depend on the embodied knowledge of mineworkers and mules. The colliers' craft endured, even as most coal-powered industries replaced animals and skilled workers with machines and unskilled machine tenders. Miners honed, then passed on, their craft as they ascended an informal occupational ladder.

Though at least a few craft colliers first entered the mines as young boys or even as toddlers, most began to learn their trade well before puberty as "trappers." Former Colorado miner Bill Lloyd described trapping as "a job that kids always done. That was where they started in the mines, when their dinner bucket drug the ground." British American miners often started working underground at eight or ten; the deaths of two twelve-year-olds in the Jokerville explosion suggest that in this as in so many other respects, the Colorado mining industry replicated old-country practice. As they opened and closed underground doors so that mule trips could pass, trappers faced a lonely initiation into the hazardous and alien environment of the mines. In the process, boys learned from older males how to act like men. A miner related his father's experience as a boy of thirteen entering the mines; he was young enough that "if a piece of coal fell on his toe or he suffered some other minor injury . . . he would cry and my grandfather would tell him to pick up his bucket and go home and send one of his sisters in to help my grandfather work." Trappers' work, though mundane and poorly paid, brought grave responsibilities. In places where leaving a single door ajar for just a few minutes could short-circuit the flow of good air and enable firedamp to reach dangerous concentrations, one boy's negligence could cost dozens of lives.¹²

Boys who survived this introduction to mine workscapes were usually promoted to driving, the next rung on the ladder, by the time they reached their late teens. As they distributed empty mine cars and collected full ones, drivers embarked on fraught relationships with their animal co-workers. As

they grappled with their mulish charges, the colliers whose rooms drivers served educated them in the culture of manly labor that prevailed underground. Miners depended on drivers to maintain the "turn," a custom through which colliers sought to control output and equalize earning opportunities by ensuring that each miner would receive the same number of cars during a workday. As drivers conversed with more experienced men and learned to read signs of danger underground, their knowledge of colliery workscapes and work cultures expanded.¹³

Although some men continued to drive for the rest of their lives, most eventually exchanged their reins for picks, augurs, shovels, and powder. The room-and-pillar system of mining was well suited to educating newcomers in the ways of the collieries. Pairs of miners generally worked together in each of the work rooms that made up the city blocks of the mine grid; often, one man (known variously as a helper, buddy, or partner) was serving an informal apprenticeship beneath a more experienced relative, countryman, or stranger. Helpers were primarily responsible for loading coal that the master collier loosed from the face. Loading was physically challenging, but men soon developed the calluses, muscles, and discernment needed to shovel many tons of coal a day. As they sweated through this grunt work, they were also learning the miners' trade through observation. "I see them working," Pete Aiello explained, "and I done the same." Craft miners taught "green" men how to "read" important workscape signs such as the visible pattern of cleavage on the mine face, which suggested where to place powder charges; the various sounds rock made when tapped with a pick, which provided clues about the soundness of the roof overhead; and the distinctive effects produced on the flames of a miner's lamp by various mine gases, which warned of the presence of poisonous or explosive "damps."¹⁴

The knowledge that craft colliers imparted to their apprentices was at once physical, mental, and cultural. During lunch breaks and other slow points in the day, "there was a good deal of visiting back and forth," the union leader John Brophy later recalled. Master miners sometimes took advantage of the opportunity to instruct less experienced men in the lore and customs of the pits. Mineworkers, like other people surrounded by capricious forces of tremendous power and mystery, had a healthy appetite for stories that seemed to explain the inexplicable. Collieries, saloons, and boardinghouses



5.1. Partners at the Face, Western Colorado, 1915. Photograph by L. C. McClure. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, MCC-2228.

echoed with cautionary tales about how to avoid death underground. Intertwined with the humorous stories and fanciful lore—Don't set foot in any mine visited by women or white rabbits; lay off work for at least a day when a dream of muddy water wakes you—were deep and bitter memories of past injustices. "From earliest childhood," Utah collier Walter Morgan Donaldson recalled, "we were steeped in the lore" of the mines. "We learned at an early age," Donaldson recalled, about the "tragedy of the mine disasters" and "what the word scab meant."¹⁵

In the classic British American scenario, mineworkers had generally trapped, driven, and "helped" by their late teens or early twenties. Such men were said to have "grown up" in the collieries, a phrase that reflected how men and mine workscapes shaped each other's development. Bodies and minds, personalities and identities—all matured through a peculiar education carried out in constant contact with the underground environment.¹⁶

Miners schooled not only sons and younger relatives in the craft and customs of mining, but also older countrymen and complete strangers. "You took your son in," recalled Henry "Welchie" Mathias, "or you took your neighbor, or whatever, and they didn't work in the mine before, they'd put in with an experienced miner. I'd been in the mine 30, 40 years, well you'd get this new guy to come with you, see, to work. Show him many things—you got to detect gas, know the working conditions about the roof and that kind of stuff, you know, and a man wouldn't know it till he's worked." Adults who arrived in the coalfields lacking underground experience sometimes started as trappers. Victor Bazanele, born in Italy but raised in Germany, recalled the scorn that miners heaped on the immigrant men who performed this boys' job; the treatment was "terrible. We were called dago, mackerel snapper, all kinds of words." Many newcomers began with driving to avoid such epithets and insults, others jumped straight into helping, but in either case such "green men" eventually served apprenticeships that lasted for months or even years. Working day after day with the same master collier, they learned the skills, traditions, and even the politics first carried to the southern fields by British American miners. A single workman's inexperience could kill off an entire shift, but self-interest alone could not fully account for the unusually inclusive attitudes skilled miners expressed. "I had to work a lot of overtime, you know," Laurence Amicarella recalled. "Green men, huh. I stayed with them, worked with them. I didn't want to. I stayed with them to show them how to, you know, not to get hurt. Cause at the Columbine, I'd seen 17 or 18 of them get killed while I was in the mine." At least some colliers, Amicarella's comments suggest, felt a moral duty to instruct incoming migrants about the perils of the mine workscape.¹⁷

In time, both green men and migrants who had grown up in the pits became "full miners," men competent to work alone. Most had to hone their skills for at least another decade or two before earning the esteem of their fellow workmen as "practical miners," an honorific reserved for expert colliers of broad experience who often played an important role in developing new collieries and spearheading mine rescue work. Oral histories and accident reports filed by the state mine inspector—an office invariably filled by a British American practical miner—offer ample evidence that some Hispanics, Austrians, African Americans, Japanese, Italians such as Amicarella,

and other migrant newcomers eventually won the regard of their fellows as "practical" or "experienced" miners.¹⁸

Local supervisory positions, by contrast, remained the preserve of British American men well into the 1920s. Several factors combined to bar other migrants from the positions of fire boss, mine boss, and superintendent: simple discrimination, the superior craft knowledge of men raised in the mines, and the English-language and arithmetical skills needed to pass the required correspondence school courses and state certifying exams. Decades after college-educated engineers and managers had taken the helm of most gold and silver mines in Colorado, coal companies continued to draw virtually every local mine official in the southern fields from the ranks of practical miners. At a 1916 convention, former state mine inspector John McNeil—lauded by the *Denver Times* as "perhaps the best posted man in the West on coal"—explained the advantages men such as himself enjoyed over parvenus. Let those "who entered the mines in their early boyhood days remember," McNeil declared, "that they have already graduated in an important branch of coal mining that cannot be acquired in colleges, and in this you excel over college-bred engineers who enter the coal mines later in life. It is difficult for me to define what this is; that something which enters in by the tips of the fingers, as it were; something that is mirrored on the retina of the eye; an innate consciousness to feel the throbbing, practical pulsations of a coal mine."¹⁹

Such embodied knowledge—a "consciousness" that seemed innate but was actually acquired through years of on-the-job education—could not be learned from books or theoreticians. "Lots of people tell you that you never get warned in these accidents," former collier Tony Hungaro explained, "but you always get warned, but the only thing is you got to be awake and listening." The practical experience that trained "the tips of the fingers" and "the retina of the eye" vastly improved an expert miner's chances of being "awake and listening" when danger threatened.²⁰

Colliery work cultures resided more in the body than in the mind, more in practice than in symbolic systems of language. Those who have earned their bread in other ways have consequently tended to look down on mineworkers in Colorado and elsewhere with what E. P. Thompson once denounced as "the enormous condescension of posterity." Colliers, however, saw their

work as a "challenging and . . . an honorable occupation." The collier Joe Crump declared, "Once anybody start working at the mine, they won't do anything else. They just fall in love with it somehow, they just like to work there." Welchie Mathias phrased the same sentiment somewhat differently. "Boy, I'm telling ya, that goddam mine, it put something in you, see, that's what it does." Other colliers joined Mathias in characterizing their craft as the outcome of a process that seemed almost biological. "I don't know how to put it," said Amicarella, "just that it grows on you, just grows on you, being a coal miner."²¹

Miners' Freedoms

Together, craft pride and the inclusive occupational ladder through which it was transmitted inspired a third core characteristic of colliery work cultures: a fierce sense of independence that stimulated and sustained decades of conflict in the southern fields. What Carter Goodrich called the miners' freedom, in his 1925 study by that name of the American coal industry, took root in Western soil because coal companies and British American colliers largely re-created the physical, economic, and moral structures that had long underlain craft miners' independence. Other migrants to the coalfields subsequently joined their own traditions of autonomy to the independent traditions imparted by master colliers. Laurence Amicarella bluntly expressed the close connections between experience, craft knowledge, and industrial struggle. "I worked the mine 50 years," he told an interviewer. "Each day I worked I learned something. I learned to tell the boss to kiss it." For Amicarella and many other miners in the southern fields, occupational cultures easily metamorphosed into oppositional cultures.²²

A collier's time, to begin with, was his and his alone. Operators tried to establish shifts of nine hours or longer. Yet although drivers, tracklayers, and other company men had to abide by company time, colliers usually set their own hours. "Everybody," Victor Bazanele recalled, "could go in every time he wanted to in the mine." Some arrived early, to get a jump on their work; others straggled in later. But most arrived more or less in around the same time, as the victims of the Jokerville explosion had on that fateful January morning in 1884. Colliers also decided for themselves when to knock off,

take a break, or skip work altogether. Funerals, fishing trips, sickness, religious and national holidays, ill portents and rumors of portents, elevated workscape hazards, especially fierce hangovers—each offered the occasion to lay off work for a day or more.²³

Operators, though they surely bristled at the control miners had over their own hours, possessed neither the will nor the means to reform such customs. The tonnage system placed the opportunity cost for slacking or skipping work squarely on colliers' shoulders, thus removing employers' main financial incentive for mandating rigid schedules. Moreover, since the vast majority of Colorado mineworkers used their own tools, not their employers', coal executives could not enlist machines in their attempt to control workers or the labor process.²⁴

The freedom of the miner resided not simply in his command over time and tools, but also in the power he exerted over the room or "place" in which he worked. His place constituted both the object of his labor and the focus of his most thorough workscape knowledge. A collier generally labored in a single room until he and his partner had removed all the coal it contained. Miners asserted quasi-proprietary claims over the places they had hewn from the earth. Such claims lacked legal standing, but mine officials often honored them nonetheless. Ill and injured miners, as well as colliers who decided to lay off work, expected to return to the same room and to find it unmolested, no matter how long they had been absent. Strikes were even known to end with miners' resuming work in their old places.²⁵

It is little wonder that workmen who labored according to their own schedule and with their own tools, in places they considered their own, bristled at authority. As the Jokerville disaster demonstrated, mineworkers sometimes defied fire bosses such as Luke Richardson, who warned Peterson the Swede not to start working in his room before clearing out the firedamp that had accumulated inside. Mine bosses and superintendents rarely visited a collier's place more than once a week. Even these occasional visits, though, were greeted with indifference or hostility; some colliers even laid down their tools and refused to work in the presence of their ostensible superiors. Mineworkers who flouted their bosses' orders probably had a greater chance of being crushed to death or blasted to bits than they did of being dismissed for insubordination.²⁶

Two brief comparisons with other mining cultures of the American West illustrate the unexpected degree of independence colliers enjoyed. Gold and silver miners started and ended their workdays on fixed schedules determined by their employers and announced by steam whistle; worked for a daily wage unrelated to their output; performed most of their work using machines that ran on fossil fuel and constituted not their own property, but the owners'; and frequently toiled under direct supervision by engineers and managers. The hard-rock miners' craft, once the warp and woof of labor in the gold and silver districts, had unraveled. Only through drilling competitions and other nostalgic, largely symbolic demonstrations of obsolescent skills could gold and silver miners fleetingly reclaim their old manly independence.²⁷

The longwall system of coal mining offered an even more direct contrast with the room-and-pillar system used in all but a few Colorado collieries. Although the basic tasks of picking, blasting, and loading remained identical in the two systems, longwall miners worked in groups of a dozen or more to advance in unison along the single face or "longwall" of a very large room. The aptly named mining expert Thomas Collier explained the interdependence that resulted: "A good Longwall miner," Collier claimed, "realizes more than any one else the importance of being regularly at his place every working day." For even a single "day lost causes his place to fall behind the others which makes his work harder and his daily output is further reduced by the amount of small [and hence unmarketable] coal that is liable to result from the excessive pressure where the face falls behind"; worse still, "the bad results are also felt by" his neighbors, who had to work harder in his absence because "the coal does not break as well as when the face is kept in a uniform line." So different were the demands of the two systems that Collier claimed that "a good room and pillar man may not be successful in Longwall work."²⁸

Hard-rock mining transplanted many of the fundamental characteristics of industrial production to mineral extraction. Longwall mining depended on coordinated group effort, time discipline, and direct supervision. Room-and-pillar mining, by contrast, was a throwback to an earlier age. Coal mine workspaces remained a refuge of muscle power and craft autonomy, at the same time as they propelled a regional economy characterized by the dilu-

tion of skill, the triumph of machines, and the domination of production by capitalists instead of workers.

Mining and Militancy

Much as mineworkers prized their independence, colliery work cultures were hardly anarchical. Colliers acknowledged extensive obligations toward their fellows. The mutualism and solidarity that prevailed in mine workspaces drew men together underground, even as the culture of camp life on the surface above pushed them apart.²⁹

Consider the capacity of colliery labor to turn "white" skins black, and thus to undermine the distinctions of color on which American notions of race depended. "When you see me come out of the mine," Italian-born collier Dan DeSantis joked, "you see the nigger come out." An African American collier, Alfred Owens, made a similar point more delicately when he asserted, "Practically everybody's the same in the mines." Owens recalled how he and his white partner would josh each other at day's end. "When we'd come out I'd look at him and his face would be all dirty, we didn't see nothing but white, with his teeth, and I'd laugh at him. . . . He'd say, what are [you] laughing at? I'd say, you're so black. He'd say, well, what do you think about yourself?" In the collieries, Owens recalled, "We didn't have no Jim Crow stuff like that. Everybody was just what you are, that's what you was."³⁰

The sense of common identity and of common cause that Owens expressed resulted from the conjunction of migrant traditions, subterranean conditions, and coalfield realities. British American colliers arrived in Colorado bearing strong traditions of mutualism. We have already encountered three key strands of this heritage: the duty to throw oneself into rescuing fellow mineworkers when disaster struck, the obligation to "educate" unskilled boys and inexperienced migrants, and "the turn" by which drivers equitably distributed mine cars to enforce a moral economy in which each collier "got to . . . make a living like the other guy."³¹

Other distributive practices shored up the underground commonwealth. When work became scarce because of warm weather or economic depression, colliers allocated shifts among themselves. And when a man missed

work because of sickness or injury, his comrades helped him out. Tony Hungaro recalled that even during the machine-mining era, "Guys [would] donate their time and donate their money" when their buddies were injured, to "get the guys through. . . . If one guy don[']t feel too good everybody else picks up the slack. . . . You get him through so he could have some groceries for his family." Pete Gerglich recalled, "I see guys go down in the mine, he can't carry a pick. We had to help him. The guys help him take his tools down to the mine. . . . He had to go, he had to work if he want to eat."³²

Such practices fostered intense feelings of camaraderie. "Once you were down in the pit," as one miner succinctly put it, "you worked together, you helped one another and that was it." Workscape hazards cemented such bonds. In the process, they helped transform mutualism—cooperation for the common good—into solidarity—what the nineteenth-century philologist Archbishop Richard Trench once called "a fellowship in gain and loss, in honor and dishonor, in victory and defeat, a being, so to speak, all in the same boat." Like the coal dust that blackened white and brown skins alike, workscape dangers held the power to overcome race, ethnicity, and other distinctions.³³

Boys and men realized not long after they first set foot underground that their lives and livelihoods depended not only on their own skill and luck, but also upon their co-workers' actions and abilities. Every miner's room occupied just one part of a larger matrix. An accident anywhere in the pit could have sudden, often deadly, ramifications throughout the pit. Bonding across cultural divides offered some protection against such hazards. "It didn't make any difference whether you were a Mexican or—see, the Mexicans were the last ones to come in there. Italians and Bohunks [Slavs] and the Welsh and the English," Henry Mathias claimed. "They come in in swarms, in bunches at different times down thru the mining career. And he drinks outa your bucket, you drink outa his bucket. If your bucket is closer to him when he wants a drunk, why he goes and takes a drink out your bucket. . . . And that's the way you are, down below there. . . . When you get down there, you're a family."³⁴

Kinship, of course, can adopt a number of forms and serve a variety of

functions. Here Mathias seemed to use "family" to mean relationships formed between relatively equal, autonomous, yet interdependent men and cemented together in the face of great peril—a "band of brothers," similar to those often found among soldiers and sailors. John Tomsic seconded the contrast Mathias drew between "down there" and the surface. "The guys that you work with in the mine," Tomsic reflected, "they are so close together in the mine. . . . One was watching the other one, protecting the other guy all the time you know and any danger that would come up or anything else. It ain't like outside. But in there it just seemed like it just drew the men right together. You just couldn't imagine how guys get in there."³⁵

Laboring together in spaces where a danger to one could instantaneously erupt and become a danger to all, men began to lay a foundation for collective action. Entries, air courses, and other realms of company authority and responsibility stood between the miners' places. Explosions and other dangers that traveled through those channels and into the colliers' rooms revealed the limits of the miners' independence. If "continuing struggle," as a former collier, Bill Davis, put it, "created a common bond that lasted forever," no small part of that struggle consisted of pressing companies to ventilate mine air, mitigate coal dust, maintain haulageway roofs, and otherwise prevent disaster from spreading into the colliers' places via the areas where corporate control prevailed.³⁶

Notions of manliness were interwoven with the miners' occupational culture of solidarity, independence, and craft pride: the rugged masculinity one collier celebrated when he called a miner "a goddamned good man," the respectable masculinity epitomized by "practical miners," the paranoid masculinity for which the mere presence of women underground tempted fate, even the stupid masculinity that led some mineworkers to risk their lives simply to silence their co-workers' taunts. The mineworkers' diffuse yet ever-present perception of themselves as men became more focused and pugnacious when threatened. Unions—first the Knights of Labor, then the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers—succeeded in organizing the southern colliers only insofar as they could build on the pride, independence, solidarity, and understanding of masculinity forged in the daily struggles between mineworkers and their worksapes.³⁷

The World Above

The interrelationship among regional fuel markets, volatile mine workscapes, and colliery work cultures fostered chronic tension and instability in the Colorado collieries. Fortunately for employers, the mineworkers' capacity to build effective social movements on the promising foundations laid underground was often hampered by internal dissension, social dysfunction, the quest for upward mobility, and coalfield migrants' resumption of the wandering ways that had brought them to the southern fields in the first place.

Though Colorado never yielded a *Sons and Lovers* or a *Germinal*, the desperation and familial discord evoked by Lawrence and Zola permeated coal camp life in the Rockies. Mining fostered pride, but it also caused pain, frustration, and fear. When "everything go wrong in the mine," Josephine Bazanele told an interviewer, miners would "come out and they take it out on the woman you know, or the kids. My old man used to do [so]. . . . Something was wrong in the mine and [he] got to let the steam go someplace else."³⁸

Anger sometimes resulted in deadly violence. Between 1880 and 1920, Las Animas County's homicide rate—thirty-four murders per year per hundred thousand people—exceeded that of Omaha, New York, and Boston by five, eight, and twelve times, respectively. Men perpetrated 99 percent of these murders, and though women and children numbered among the victims, most of those killed were other men. Quarrels, which frequently had an interethnic dimension, started most of these incidents; others were connected with strikes, domestic disputes, police violence, or vendettas.³⁹

Alcohol did much to fuel the mayhem. Colorado's mineworkers, like their relatives in most migrant source regions, were a notoriously hard-drinking lot. Many colliers flouted company policies and state laws by drinking on the job. Some brought wine underground in their lunch pails; others slipped bottles of liquor into their pockets. After work, an estimated 90 to 95 percent of miners headed to saloons, most of which catered to a particular ethnic, national, or racial clientele. Any coal camp worth its salt provided miners with a remarkable range of drinking opportunities. Enterprising camp residents, most of whom seem to have been former colliers or women widowed by the mines, established seven watering holes to serve Rockvale's force of a few hundred, and Sopris, a somewhat larger town, once boasted nineteen

saloons. Miners sidled up to the bars of these establishments thirsting not simply for refreshment, but also for release from the anxiety, loneliness, and anger that mine work tended to inflict on them. "They gather," a coke oven worker, Emilio Ferraro, later recalled, "lots of people down [at] the saloon. . . . That was their life of the miner, anyplace you go." Drinking often served to solidify bonds developed underground, yet it also bore at least some responsibility for the exceptional level of violence among colliers. The overwhelming majority of murders documented in Las Animas County occurred in or near saloons and bars; a still higher percentage involved victims or assailants who had been drinking.⁴⁰

Like internal dissension, mobility was an obstacle for mineworkers who tried to organize collective movements. The quest for individual, family, or community betterment that had brought most migrants to the Rockies led some to pursue economic advancement for themselves at the expense of others. Practical miners who were promoted to boss or superintendent often turned their backs on the miners they ostensibly managed, their former fellows. In the camps above, meanwhile, company patronage elevated John Aiello, the Tarabinos, and other coalfield padrones to positions of power that reinforced preexisting divisions within migrant groups.⁴¹

The vast majority of people who came to the southern fields, however, were more likely to move out than to move up. Coal miners in Colorado probably moved as often as any workers in the industrializing world. Some found what they sought, then returned home flush with cash and brimming with stories. Most arrived in the Rockies after extensive migrations; few had any intention of staying a day longer than it suited them. If the work was too hard, the mine too gassy, the pay too low, the housing too squalid—"if you didn't want to stay with it" for any reason, as Laurence Amicarella put it—"you moved." The father of Bill Lloyd, to give a dramatic example, brought his family to the northern field camp of Lafayette from Monmouthshire, Wales, by way of Pennsylvania. "When the work slacked off up there," the Lloyds headed to Rouse, then to Rugby, where Mrs. Lloyd opened a boardinghouse. After the senior Lloyd was transferred from Hastings to Delagua "to open up them mines," Bill Junior began his mining career. Father and son soon quit and moved to Piedmont, then to Cokedale, to Bowen, and finally to Lester. In little more than a decade the Lloyds moved at least ten times.⁴²