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“Above and Below: Stories From the Lives of Brookwood, Alabama Coal Miners”
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Ten of the feature articles in this volume were authored by Cauthen Fellows: community and academic researchers awarded funding from the Alabama Folklife Association to conduct original research on an Alabama folk tradition. Learn more at alabamafolklife.org/fellows

Alabama Folklife

Folklife includes cultural products and artistic expressions passed down through the generations via families, communities, and work life. It includes genres like music, dance, food, stories, clothing, and traditional arts like pottery, quilting, and basketry. Folklife is comprised of living traditions that evolve as new groups arrive, environments change, and individual personalities leave their mark.

Alabama holds a rich array of folklife that includes both rural and urban traditions and contributions from diverse cultures and art forms. Alabama's geography, including the Gulf Coast, Black Belt, Tennessee Valley, Shoals, Wiregrass, and Appalachia, yields folkways representing distinct environments and histories.

Alabama folklife includes practices as wide ranging as shrimp net building, piñata making, old time fiddle, herbal remedies, gospel singing, the Vietnamese lion dance, storytelling, Indigenous finger weaving, hanji, brass bands, Greek dancing, pine needle basketry, Rangoli, duck decoy carving, layer cakes, and much more.

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Alabama's waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state's cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of "tributaries" rather than a single dominant mainstream. **JIM CARNES** | 1994 | *TRIBUTARIES NO. 1*



Above and Below

*Stories from the Lives of Brookwood,
Alabama Coal Miners*

KRISTINA MULLENIX WITH ALLISON GRANT

When my father, Roy Mullenix, passed away in 2021, I began sorting through the hundreds of drawings and artwork he had created. Many depicted the entertaining, unusual, and surreal situations he encountered underground as a coal miner at Jim Walter No. 4 Mine in Brookwood, Alabama, where he worked alongside four of his brothers from 1978 to 2009. As a historian and archivist, I began to imagine a project to gather additional stories and archival materials from other Jim Walter miners — something my research revealed to be inadequately captured or preserved. To this end, I teamed up with Tuscaloosa artist Allison Grant, who has photographed chemical and fossil fuel industries in West Alabama over the past six years. She was also curious about the stories and lives of coal miners, especially those who have lived through volatile energy markets, recent decarbonization efforts, and shifts in union power. Together, we began the collaborative oral history and photography project *Above and Below* in the summer of 2023.

In vivid accounts collected in recorded interviews and richly detailed photographs, we've sought to capture many aspects of a complex past and present in a region of the country that has relied on energy production as an important economic engine and social glue. Our work touches not only on the stories and experiences of miners and their families, but also on the surrounding Tuscaloosa County community, labor history, economy, and environment.

Over the past year, we began our project by interviewing and photographing seven former Jim Walter Resources coal miners, and often spoke with family members about how mining touches those who pursue it as an occupation. It is not our aim to tell any story in totality, but rather to open a window into the daily realities for coal miners

For Coal
Mining
Terms and
Vocabulary,
see pages
46-47

James Blankenship, fourth-generation coal miner, keeps this photograph of his father, circa 1960s (front row, far right) with fellow West Virginia coal miners on the wall of his office (Photo by Allison Grant)



Formerly a Jim
Walter Resources
mine, now owned
by Warrior Met Coal
in Brookwood, AL
(Photo by
Allison Grant)

and their families. In doing so, this project touches on themes such as the impact and trauma of working a dangerous job with daily threats like rock falls or explosions, generational mining, work traditions and occupational folklife, United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) labor history, identities, and bonds. The project also sheds light on coal mining not only from a local view, but one that is also statewide, national, and global — particularly because several of the miners have worked in multiple states and organized or socialized with miners from other parts of the country and globe.

Coal mining, as a subject, is too large and multifaceted to be captured in its entirety. While our work intersects with geopolitical issues and long histories, we do not fully capture the shifting significance of fossil fuels to Brookwood, global economies, human health, or future energy systems. It is also impossible to distill any one truth about the lives of those photographed and interviewed for this project, or to represent all the meanings of a place photographically. It is our aim, rather, to allow miners to tell their own stories in their own words, to highlight their experiences and memories about what it's like to be a coal miner, and to capture some of their thoughts on the various threads of coal mining in Alabama and beyond. The title, *Above*

Above and Below is drawn from the ways miners talk about the divided worlds of underground mining and life above ground — places that are physically separated yet coexist and are sometimes intertwined in the identities of miners.

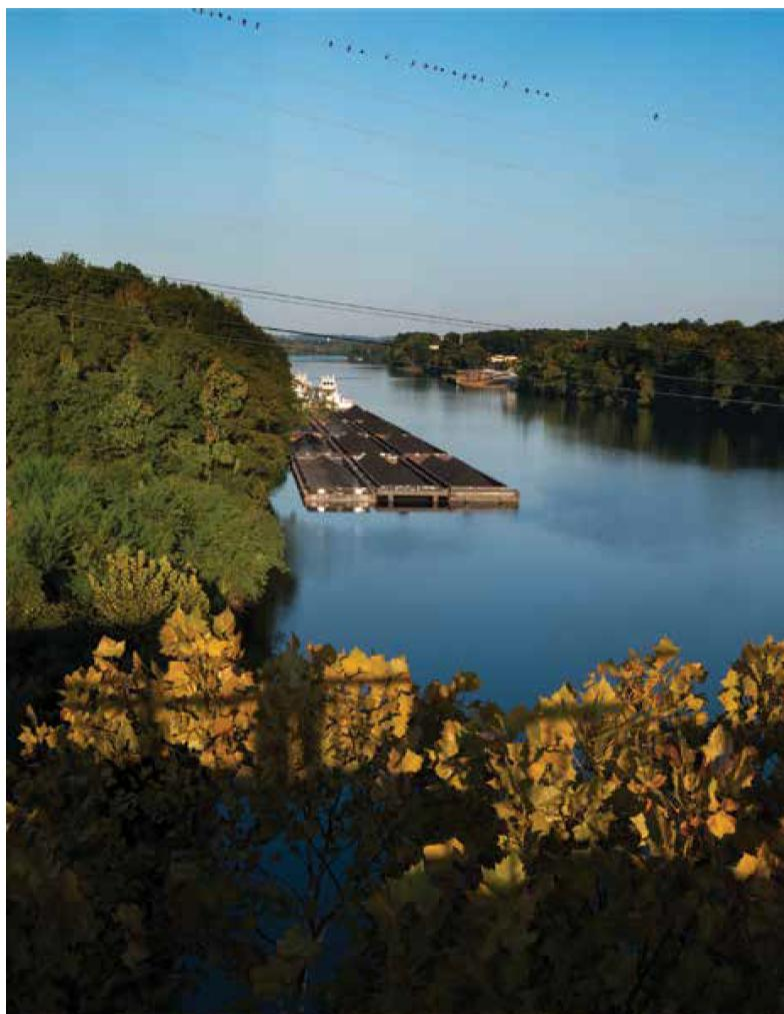
and Below, is drawn from the ways miners talk about the divided worlds of underground mining and life above ground — places that are physically separated yet coexist and are sometimes intertwined in the identities of miners.

The stories and lives of Alabama coal miners are underrepresented, both in contemporary art and historical collections. Most historical materials concern the Appalachian areas, including Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. Very little historical material, especially from the modern era, is about Alabama coal mining. The little that does exist is mostly related to the Birmingham or Walker County areas, and almost exclusively centers on corporations and the development of coal mining. Additionally, scholarly works center on the environmental aspects of coal mining rather than the actual people working as miners. The most famous and comprehensive work on the history of coal mining in the state is Ethel Armes's book titled, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, originally published in 1910 under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce in Birmingham. A few more recent works have small bits of stories from Brookwood miners, yet lack detailed information about the actual coal miners or their experiences and lives. Our project was not only an opportunity to fill an archival silence but also a way to expand accounts of Alabama's coal mining history by focusing directly on the Brookwood miners and their personal experiences.

Coal mining in the Brookwood area of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama has a complex history, but began in 1889-1890 under

Fireboss coal miner writing dates and times on a board underground as part of a regular safety check
(Courtesy of Kristina Mullenix)





Coal barge on the
Black Warrior River
near Brookwood,
AL (Photo by
Allison Grant)

the auspices of the Standard Coal Company.¹ There were also individual groups of people doing some coal mining operations or who had coke ovens and coal washers in Brookwood and in other parts of the county. This is particularly true along the Black Warrior River, where currents flow both above and below some of Brookwood's active mines. Later, in 1889-1890, the Standard Coal and Iron Company merged with the Alabama Consolidated Coal Company and employed about 450 to 500

people — and they also owned the town of Brookwood, making it a coal company town with about 260 houses and an office, commissary store, company doctor, and stables. By the 1900 census, Brookwood had 2,150 residents.² In 1924, those mines closed after being purchased by Sloss Sheffield Steel and Iron Company; however, one mine in the Searles area continued operations. In 1935, the Abston Mining Company was also organized in the area, later becoming a strip mine. In 1952, Sloss Sheffield Steel and Iron Company merged with U.S. Pipe and Foundry Company of Birmingham, Alabama, which later merged with Jim Walter Corporation in 1969.³

In 1976, Jim Walter Corporation restructured to form what became Jim Walter Resources, with a purpose to mine the high level metallurgical Blue Creek coal seams. They bought out three of the older preexisting Brookwood mines called Flat Top, Nebo, and Bessie, and then expanded. These new mines were known as Numbers 3, 4, 5, and 7. Jim Walter Resources was also one of the first mining companies to introduce the longwall: a high-productivity form of coal mining where hydraulic shields support the roof as a shear cuts coal in a single slice. From the very beginning of Jim Walter Resources in Brookwood, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was an active presence — beginning at the No. 3 Mine, followed by the other mines. The UMWA has a long history in Tuscaloosa County; it was recognized by the Alabama Consolidated Coal and Iron Company on May 30, 1900, followed by the first strike in that area in 1908.⁴ It was during that 1908 strike that the local union supplied tents and food for the striking miners; the company, on the other hand, “brought in scabs [and] Gov. Comer sent in the state militia who tore down tents and forced the union men out.”⁵ Many of the miners



Tire spike similar to those historically used to flatten the car tires of scabs and coal trucks during mine strikes; Hat commemorating September 23, 2001 explosion at No. 5 Mines, which killed 13 coal miners (Photos by Allison Grant)



Jim Walter
Resources,
No. 5 Coal Mine,
Lock 17 Road in
Brookwood, AL
(Courtesy of Library
of Congress, N.D.)

Opposite: Miners
after working
underground
prepare to go
home at shift
change.
L to R: Buddy
Caudill, Clifton
"Toots" Cottingham,
Hollingsworth, and
Mike Smith, circa
mid-2000s
(Courtesy of
Buddy Caudill)

we interviewed recalled various strikes during their time at Jim Walter Resources. Most present-day coal miners also still remember the tragic 2001 explosion at the No. 5 mine that killed thirteen coal miners. They also recall the daily dangers and incidents they faced. Jim Walter Resources (and what later became Walter Energies) filed bankruptcy several times, then was bought by Warrior Met in 2015. Notably, the UMWA miners at Warrior Met recently ended one of the longest strikes in US history after a nearly-two-year strike, lasting from April 1, 2021 to March 2, 2023.⁶

In the first phase of this project, we used personal contacts to interview a tight-knit group of former Jim Walter Resources coal miners of similar ages and backgrounds. Their differing experiences and roles in the mine — both above and below — and various involvements with the union and generational mining offer significant insight into a place and time in history. We have identified and continue to reach out to additional people as we embark on phase two, in which we hope to expand our work to engage a more diverse group of people. Of particular importance, we plan to interview women miners and people of color, whose stories are vital to ensuring that we capture a broad set of perspectives and experiences. Below are photographs and excerpts from the work completed thus far.

Our project was not only an opportunity to fill an archival silence but also a way to expand accounts of Alabama's coal mining history by focusing directly on the Brookwood miners and their personal experiences.



Gary Holley | age 70 | Abernant, AL

After working for 5 years at U.S. Steel and getting laid off, Holley worked for 39 years (1977-2013) as a miner at the No. 4 Mine — with 22 of those years underground. He worked as an electrician after completing an associate degree training program at what is now Lawson State Community College. He also worked as a hoist man at the mines, was a roof bolter, and ran a miner machine. From about 1980 he served as the recording secretary for the Local 2245 UMWA (for Mine No. 4). He serves as a deacon at his church.

“Coal mining gets in your blood ... after you been there awhile ... you just get more at ease. And now, but you can’t ever let your guard down either.



“Coal mining gets in your blood ... after you been there awhile ... you just get more at ease. ... but you can’t ever let your guard down either. Because conditions in a coal mine can change in the bat of an eye.”

Because conditions in a coal mine can change in the bat of an eye. [Coal mines are] just a totally different world ... you gotta be a totally different breed of person. First of all, you got to keep an open mind to what’s going on. And adapt to [your] surroundings ... conditions can change in a heartbeat. You can be rocking along, everything might be fine, all of a sudden water might start coming in, the top might fall in. You might have a fire, you might hit a bleeder gas.”

When asked how miners deal with these dangers, Holley said, “Well, a lot of it come(s) from experience; you gotta learn [and] you have to adapt and overcome, sort of like the Marines.” He explained that coal mining involves using all your senses, “especially your hearing, cause if you heard that top start working, you better get some rabbit in your feet.” He remembered one incident:



I was out there working on a load ... and I heard a BOOM, I knew what it was when I heard it, so I grabbed a fire extinguisher and took off to the face.⁷ There was a blue flame sitting there, in the face ... just sitting there rolling ... gas burning. It blew the curtain line⁸ down and the only way, you got to get rid of that gas because you could take and put anything on it until you got that gas off there it was gonna burn. Couldn’t see it, couldn’t smell it, couldn’t taste it ... but it was there.

Just thank the Lord nobody got hurt on that. I wanna tell you the truth, after it was all said and done, we got the fire out and everything was over, I couldn’t even stand up my knees was so weak. I mean, I ain’t gonna lie about it and I didn’t have time while it was going on, but after it was over with that was the scariest I ever been in my life, after it was over with. Matter of fact, sometimes I even have nightmares about it ... dreaming about things.

We had to go back to work the next day and to be honest, he’s passed away now but I can speak for Joe. It scared Joe so bad he had to bid off [the] miner onto a belt header job.

Underground at
JWR Mine No. 4
(Courtesy of
Kristina Mullenix)

"Coal was it. The whole community worked in the coal mines. When the kids got old enough to go work, the dad got 'em the work, got 'em a job in the mines they worked at, so it's just right down the line."



James Blankenship | age 68 | Duncanville, AL
A fourth-generation coal miner from West Virginia, Blankenship has been the UMWA international representative for District 20 since 2012. He has been active with different local UMWA positions since he first began mining at Olga Mines in West Virginia, continuing after he came to Jim Walter Resources in 1975 where he worked at both No. 4 and No. 5 mines. As a miner, Blankenship did various jobs: inside laborer, electrician, and outside diesel mechanic in the shop. He also worked the owl shift and drove a man bus, motor bus, and diesel scoop underground. The other miners nicknamed him "Grape Ape" after the cartoon of the same name.



Mining boots that belonged to Blankenship's father, James A. Blankenship, who mined in West Virginia for about 38 years; Flame safety lamps used to detect methane gas. The device had a candle-like flame encased in a glass lantern-like frame that would change colors and get bigger in the presence of methane. It became obsolete in the 1980s and was replaced by electrical devices
(Photos by Allison Grant)

Where I lived [in West Virginia] you either worked in a coal mine...you worked for a family grocery store because wasn't any Walmarts or none of that stuff, or you worked for a family-owned gas station. That was it. Coal was it. The whole community worked in the coal mines. When the kids got old enough to go work, the dad got 'em the work, got 'em a job in the mines they worked at, so it's just right down the line.

After studying animal veterinary medicine for two years at West Virginia University, Blankenship left his studies to work in a coal mine after his miner father had a roof fall accident.

So I came home against his will and mother's will...till Daddy got better. They didn't want me to, but I did. And my plan was to come home and get a job and work till Daddy got better and then go back to school, but I didn't really go back to school. When I came home to get a job, all Daddy



had to have done was get on the phone and call where he worked and say, "I'm sending my son up there, put [him] to work," and I'd a went to work *that* day. But he said, "I'm not gonna do it."

Blankenship tried to get a job at U.S. Steel, but they took too long responding, so an acquaintance nicknamed Squirrel got him a job at the Olga Mine Company. He was actually hired by the same superintendent featured in the *October Skies* film about West Virginia coal mining.

Blankenship explains why he visits classrooms today to talk about coal mining work and more about why he got into it, saying, "You know, the kids need to know what's out there." In explaining his own journey to coal mining, he adds:

At that time, mining was booming. And not everybody's going to college. I thought I was. The whole time I was growing up, I was going to college. But it didn't work out that way.

But I ended up getting a job where I could make really good money. I had really good health care. But as a young person, I didn't really care about health care. I was healthy as a horse. Didn't care about it. Now,

James Blankenship,
District 20 Representative, sitting
at his desk at the
UMWA office in
Brookwood, AL
(Photo by
Allison Grant)

at my age, health care is more important than the paycheck is. 'Cause one trip to the hospital and you're broke. I mean, that's just the way it is. But I was fortunate then, and at this time when my girls were growing up, my son ... all the mines right here was hiring. And that was really good jobs for young boys and girls that wasn't going to school. They wasn't gonna go on to college, that they could really make a good living and have something in their life. And that's why I wanted to do that. Plus, the kids loved it. Oh, when I take that flame safety lamp,⁹ you put your hand over it, flint it, it goes POW!

James Mullenix | age 74 | Tuscaloosa, AL

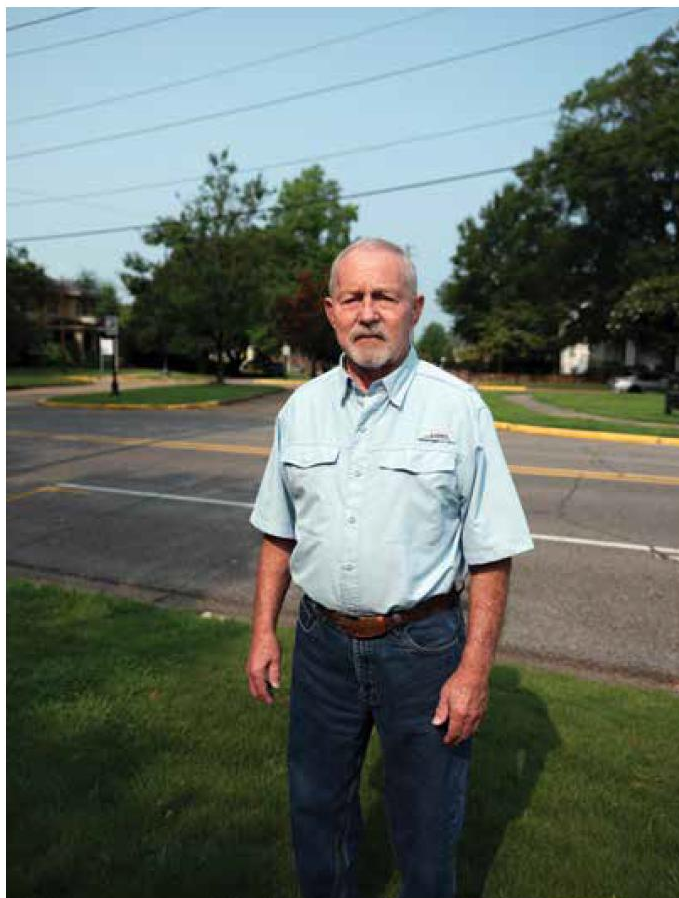
The eldest of five coal miner brothers all trained as carpenters by their father and grandfather, Mullenix first began mining at the North River Mine in Berry, Alabama in Fayette County in 1977, then followed his brother, Sam, to Jim Walter in 1978. He spent 16 years working in mining at the North River Mine, Jim Walter No. 3 and No. 4 Mine, and at a coal mine in New Mexico. He worked at the mines as an inside laborer, roof bolter, continuous miner operator, cutting machine operator, shot blaster (dynamite blasting underground), and electrician. He also drove a shuttle car. He said that at the mines, all the other miners referred to him and his brothers, Sam, Jerry, Roy, and Danny, as "them damn Mullenix boys."

At North River [in Berry, AL], when I first went to work in the mine, there were very few younger miners. Most of the men there had worked in mines before that. And they'd always get you by the shirt and say, "Don't

Example of
cribbing
underground
at No. 4 mine,
circa 1995.
(Courtesy of
Kristina
Mullenix)

Opposite:
James
Mullenix
(Photo by
Allison Grant)





go in there boy” ... keep you out of a place that had bad top ... They’d say, “Don’t do this. Don’t do that.” You know, kind of look out for you. Help you look out for yourself. Teach you the right way and to keep you safe.

They taught me how to sound the top¹⁰ and see if it was stable and how to look for it along the edges of the coal wall — we called it the rib — to see if the top had started chipping. If it was, most of the old miners could tell you that it was gonna be a rock fall. They couldn’t tell you exactly when, but they could tell you it was going to be one and a lot of times when they saw that we would have to start setting timbers and building cribs, cribs or wooden blocks about that long ... about eight inches by eight inches square. We’d have to go in there and stack them up to the top so the top wouldn’t fall in where we can keep the airways open.

He remembers one incident:

We were 2,000 feet deep and it scared me because a buddy of mine had been killed that way. He was a roof bolter. The piece that killed my buddy was ... they said it was a four by eight, by about twelve feet long. And that's solid rock.

When asked about the piece of middleman rock that missed him, Mullenix said, "It was about four by four by probably four feet, which is more rough than a man can hold up. When things like that happened with me, it just made me more aware of my surroundings. And I paid closer attention to what was going on."

Mullenix recalled mining strikes, beginning with his work at the North River Mines in Berry, Fayette County, AL:

Part of the time they [the strikes] were short, but back then they struck every time a contract came due to try to get raises and more pension and things like that. When Jim Walters came into the picture, it seemed like negotiations were a lot harder. And the contract strikes we had there were longer because Jim Walters was kind of unyielding. They had their way, and they didn't want anybody else trying to tell them what to do.

He goes on to recall some of the events that happened around the strikes:

I'll tell you about one time. They were on strike at Jim Walters, number four. They had a picket line, and there was a guy that worked there that decided he's gonna go in and work. Well, he started to go through the





picket line and they stopped his car. He pulled out a pistol. Somebody took the pistol away from him. They pulled him out of the car and they beat the mess out of him. And Pam Huff was there when she was first starting out.¹¹ And, they took her camera away from her and told her she had to leave.

We asked him about coal miner stereotypes:

[Some] people think that coal miners have a low mentality, that they just go underground and shovel coal. Well, that's not the way it is. They've got modern machinery. And it's true. A lot of coal miners don't have a lot of education. But I've worked with some people that had college educations, and they were there because coal mining was a more premium job than working at a bank or being a manager of a drugstore or something like that. And they think that ... I guess you could say coal miners always gonna be unshaved and have a big chewing tobacco and drink beer but all of them don't do that. I never could stand the smell of chewing tobacco.

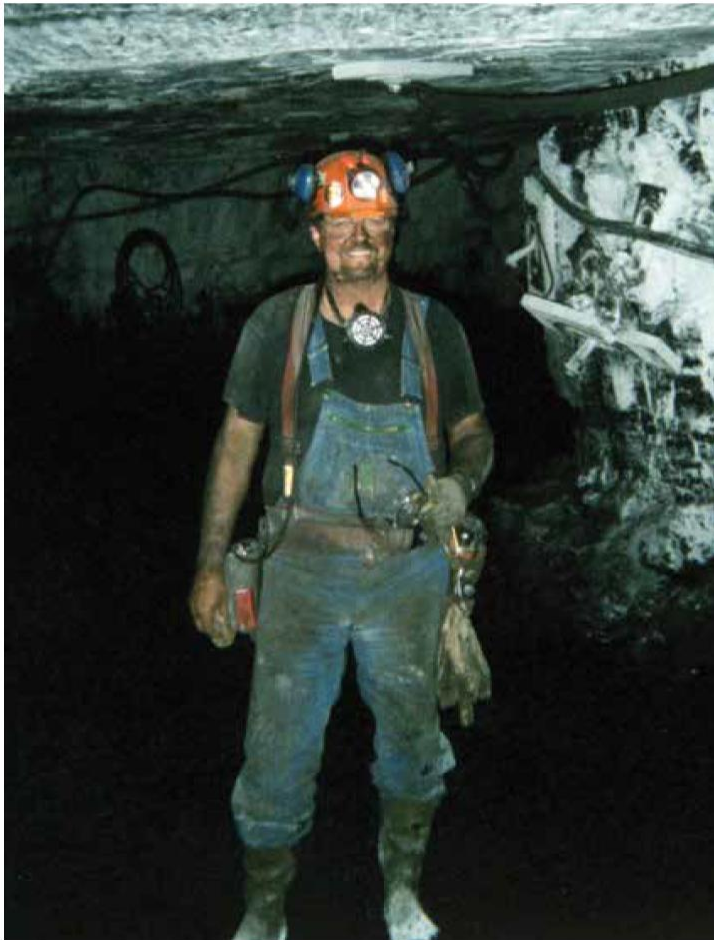
First thing I'd tell [a new miner] is you can't be buried any deeper any cheaper! If anybody said they were going to work in the coal mine, I'd tell them as much as I could about what to look out for to try to stay safe. And I'd wish them good luck.

Child's bicycle in a Brookwood, AL yard (Photo by Allison Grant)

Opposite: An underground mine locomotive hauls coal on the track at No. 4 mine, circa 1990s (Courtesy of Kristina Mullenix)

Buddy Caudill | age 74 | Tuscaloosa, AL

After working as a barber for about ten years, Caudill began at Jim Walter No. 4 in 1979 and retired 33 years later in 2012. At Jim Walter, he was also a member of the Mine Rescue Team, which trained to go in after mine disasters to rescue and recover other miners. The team competed with other rescue teams for practice. Caudill began as an inside general laborer and then worked as a pumper, UniTrack operator, and longwall machine operator (which he helped to build). He also drove a shuttle car. After retiring, he continued to work with the State of Alabama Mine Rescue Team until 2018.





I used to be a barber ... I cut hair for almost ten years and in the meantime, my daughter was born. And the kind of work that I did when I cut hair, it was strictly commission. If you didn't cut any hair, you didn't make any money. And any benefits that you had, you had to provide your own — and so if you took off for vacation, it's just you took off without pay. And all those factors [and] lack of like health insurance for my family and all. I had friends that had went to work for the mining company. Back then it was Jim Walter Resources. And they were telling me about benefits and all that kind of stuff.

And I discussed it with my wife and told her ... I said it'd be a big change going from something really clean, like cutting hair, to work in a coal mine. But I said if it'll be good benefits it'd be a big plus for our family.

Caudill demonstrates how he used Q-tips to clean coal dust from inside his eyes when he worked as a coal miner.

Buddy and Judy Caudill
(Photos by Allison Grant)

Opposite: Caudill underground, circa 2010

Caudill shared some of the difficulties in removing coal dust after working underground:

I'd wear the prescription safety glasses at work. [But] I would get home from work and take a Q-tip ... try to dig that coal dust out of the corner of my eye. Even though you try your best to get all that off, it's like face powder in the air and I mean it'd just get in every crook and you had to really pay attention to get it all cleaned up.

It was a challenge ... many times all of us coal miners had the same thing happen. People would look at you real

"People would say, 'How did you get on that cage and go down knowing that there already had been two explosions that night?' And I would tell them that because there was somebody missing down there. And if I was there, I'd want somebody to come after me. It wasn't a hard choice at all."

funny. I would take my overalls to a laundromat. We had one washing machine [at home]. It would literally ruin it. [My wife] then would do a wash with just detergent and bleach and to try to make sure it wasn't any coal dust left inside. I told her, Look, I'll just start taking mine [to a laundromat] once or twice a week.

[Coal dust] just gets in everything. You have a towel laid on the seat of your truck or car. One time [the company] had put in a coal dryer outside. Well, they would take coal out of the washer where it would wash clean, so they could ship it to wherever. The union had their own parking lot. And if the wind was blowing from the south toward the north, it would pick up those [coal] particles. It literally was like powder outside. And it





would just be in your car ... I remember when they first started that dryer up, one of those days it was windy and I went out there and all the cars in the parking lot just had a black dust film. I got in my old Dodge truck and cranked it. And when the fan came on, it [was] almost like somebody took a handful of flour and threw it up and the dust was all in my face. But it started damaging the paint on people's car[s].

Caudill recalled that "Jim Walter Mines had their own [volunteer] mining rescue team that trained regularly. So in the event of a disaster, they would call us and we're supposed to report either to the training center where all of our equipment's stored or meet at the mine site." He said, "I'm thankful I worked all those years and came out without being seriously injured or worse. The mine could be a dangerous place, at time[s]." Caudill recalled assisting with the mine rescue efforts after the tragic explosion in 2001 at Mine No. 5:

Well, I finally went back to work at number four mine after that incident. People would say, "How did you get on that cage and go down knowing that there already had been two explosions that night?" And I would tell them that because there was somebody missing down there. And if I was there, I'd want somebody to come after me. It wasn't a hard choice at all.

Coal tracks near one of the Brookwood mines
(Photo by Allison Grant)

Opposite:
Drawing showing the No. 4 Rescue Team. Buddy Caudill is pictured on the bottom right
(Art by Roy A. Mullenix)

Randy Gilbert | age 77 | McCalla, Alabama

A fourth-generation coal miner, Gilbert worked for 32 years at Jim Walter Resources, and also at Black Diamond Shannon Mines at the Tuscaloosa-Jefferson County line. He grew up in the mining camp there. Over the years, he worked in the mines as a laborer, foreman, electrician, shuttle car driver, fire boss, welder, and handyman. He retired in 2006. Fellow miners nicknamed Randy "Moncho," taken from a wrestling cartoon at the time.

I've been around the coal mines all my life ... grew up in coal mining towns and one in John's, Alabama, [and] Black Diamond.¹² The mining camp had a commissary, its own money called clackers, [its own] company doctors, and a union hall.

He explained that people lived on different tiers or areas of the Black Diamond mining camp:

And then on the bottom is where the laborers lived. You had one side of that bottom was the white laborers, on the other side was the Black laborers. Then you had a tier that was for drillers, roof bolters, shuttle car operators, and stuff like that, and then the next tier was for top house people, electricians [company people].

We had a Black lady named Miss Love ... she's passed a long time ago. She would come around and take your scraps from your break-



Randy Gilbert (middle) talks with Tim Dunn (left) and Rickey Dunn (right)
(Photos by Allison Grant)



fast, dinner, and supper. And it was called slop. [It was] for her pigs. Well, everybody that give Miss Love the slop through the year, [then] when it comes time to kill a pig, we went down there ... they had two or three big round pots with scowl and water. Everybody that give her slop through the year, they got their portion of the meat. Now, that's the way that camp life was.



Gilbert also talked about safety at Jim Walter:

That was one thing they [Jim Walters] did a great thing for safety. They trained people [to be] first responders. They had people that saved so many lives underground. We had this woman lost her leg down in the very bottom of the mines down there ... you had a slope that coal dumped into, and it bounced out. She got her leg cut off. They got down there and stopped her from dying ... stopped the bleeding. That was one thing that Jim Walters did that I'm very grateful for — they trained people to take care of us miners, really. And they was a lot of miners saved from that training from Jim Walter. Now, I'm not a company man. But they did do that.

Top: Coal mine in Cordova, AL, circa 1900 (Courtesy of Winston County Genealogical Society)

Vintage hard hats worn by underground miners on display at the UMWA office in Brookwood, AL (Photo by Allison Grant)

Rickey Dunn | age 76 | McCalla, Alabama

A third-generation coal miner, Dunn grew up in the Black Diamond Shannon Mines Camp Town. He worked for 35 years as a coal miner at Jim Walter No. Mine and SEGCO¹³ in Shelby County, Alabama. He retired in 2010. Before mining, Dunn served in the U.S. Coast Guard for five and a half years, followed by four years in the U.S. Navy. While working at the mines, he did several jobs: laborer, track crew, miner operator, roof bolter, fire boss, pumper, miner helper, motorman, and bath house attendant.

Dunn said, “My dad always told me, ‘I’d like to see you retired before I leave this world.’ And I kept telling my dad, ‘I need a couple more years to work. So I could kind of be square with the world when I quit.’ And he died five days later ... I wouldn’t work another day.”

When asked if this was because of the dangers in mining, Dunn said:



Every time you got on that cage and dropped in, you was in danger ... you’re gonna believe that. But you know, it’s like that old saying ... if you hear or see the rats run, well, you better run ‘cause the top’s fixing to fall. And a lot of that’s true. And I would say, yeah, that he just wanted to see me out of there before he passed on. And I didn’t do it. And I regret it.

That element of death followed you all day long. I’ve heard rock falling on a lot of people. But I might have walked under that same rock fifteen times but it fell on that guy. You see what I’m saying? It’s just every day. And the first thing that I learned when I went into the mines

was listen to the Old Hands. They’ll carry you in the right direction.

Gilbert and the Dunn brothers all agreed that miners continue coal mining despite its dangers for the benefits. As Dunn explained, “feed[ing] your family, insurance, dental care, eye care.” He added:

If you’re lucky enough to work down there for more than a month without being scared and run off, it’s in your blood then. People say, “Well, I wouldn’t go underground.” I say, “It’s just like getting in your car and going to the grocery store. You can get killed going to the grocery store.” And that’s where it come in to listen to the Old Hands.

“The first thing that I learned when I went into the mines was listen to the Old Hands. They’ll carry you in the right direction.”



Slope belt
area of No. 4
JWR Mines,
circa 1990s
(Courtesy
of Kristina
Mullenix)



Rickey and
Patsy Dunn
(Photos by
Allison Grant)



Tim Dunn | age 73 | McCalla, AL

Brother to Rickey Dunn and also a third-generation coal miner, Dunn grew up in the Black Diamond Shannon Mines Camp Town. He worked about 15 years at Jim Walter No. 4 and also at Black Diamond Shannon Mines. As a miner, he did a variety of jobs underground. At Black Diamond, he drove a shuttle car and a loading machine underground.

He also ran motors that transported coal to the training shack underground and worked a chaining sack that took coal from underground to a tippie. At Jim Walter, Dunn drove several types of equipment to operate the mines, including a bulldozer, earth mover (rock truck), and motor grader. He also loaded the coal truck and kept up the onsite haul roads.

"You're thinking in so many different ways. The way the earth lays and what you got to do to adjust the blade to make it do what you want it to do."



Dunn grew up in a coal mining camp with his brother Rickey and fellow miner, Randy Gilbert. He said, "We actually lived the coal miner's life, that's what it basically amounts to. We were raised in it. We lived in it; we worked in it." He recalled a story about his mother's father working in the coal mines for 25 cents a day and using a mule and wagon for underground coal mining work. He reflected that "it's an overwhelming difference to think back on what the older generations of miners went through and how they worked. It's a big difference to today's modern equipment used in mining."

Throughout his years as a coal miner, Dunn did many types of jobs:

I guess if I had a favorite job, I would probably say bulldozer, but even outside we rotated around. You didn't run a bulldozer all the time. I run a bulldozer. I run a motor grader, a rock truck ... earthmover, that's what we used for a rock truck was earthmover. I done just all kinds and I also would run a load out where they loaded the truck ... it's just a skill. It's something it makes your mind work and you got to have all kinds of different ... you're

Train car in
Brookwood, AL

Opposite: Time
Dunn; Coal
mining artifacts
(Photos by
Allison Grant)

thinking in so many different ways. The way the earth lays and what you got to do to adjust the blade to make it do what you want it to do. When asked about the different issues miners face, Dunn said:

There's a lot of issues. There's a lot of diseases like black lung — different type stuff that you get, like, rock dust in your lungs and a lot of that, you know, it all plays a part in there. So yeah, it's kind of a scary situation. It wasn't scary to be able to do it, it's just you never knew what was gonna happen.

Roy A. Mullenix | 1953-2021

This project is in his memory and in his honor.

Fellow miners called Roy by the nickname "Bullet" because of his focus on details and precision. At the mines, he worked as an inside laborer and roof bolter, and did other various jobs: drove a shuttle car, installed high voltage cable throughout the mine, and worked at a belt header where coal was dumped and then distributed into large skip loaders that hoisted it out of the mine. As soon as he had the opportunity, he also trained to be a First Responder. These were people trained in first aid at the mines to get to injured miners quickly so they could be cared for and brought out of the mines safely.

Kristina's remembrance:

My dad, Roy, had a natural talent for art and for observing people and behavior — and a sense of humor. He started working at Jim Walter's No. 4 Mine in 1978 when he was only 25 years old and retired in 2009. He left carpentry work, which he had been trained to do by his father and grandfather along with his five brothers, for the better pay and benefits of coal mining. At that time, there were few such options in Tuscaloosa. I can recall many times riding with him to pick up his paycheck at the mines. He always pointed out the elevator (or cage), the bath house, and the fans, and explained everything about how it all worked.

My entire childhood contains memories of him sitting at the kitchen table late at night drawing. He drew everything ... patterns and designs, old Hollywood movie stars sketched in detailed pencil and charcoal, portraits of his family in pastels and pencil, and caricatures. Those were his favorite, it seemed. I've been told that on one of his very first days at the mines, the hot water went out at the bath house. Consistent with his personality of always trying to make the best out of a bad situation, he picked up a scrap of work paper nearby and sketched out a funny cartoon



about it. The other miners laughed, and his supervisor hung it up on the bulletin board. Pretty soon, all the miners were saying, “Hey, Roy, when you gonna draw me?” Or funny things would happen at work, and they would say, “Hey Roy, you gonna put this in your cartoons?” He even designed coloring books about coal mining life and sold them at the Moundville Archaeological Park gift shop. Today, those coloring books are distributed to elementary school kids when UMWA miners do demonstrations

Roy A. Mullenix,
underground at
Mine No. 4,
circa 1990
(Courtesy of
Kristina Mullenix)



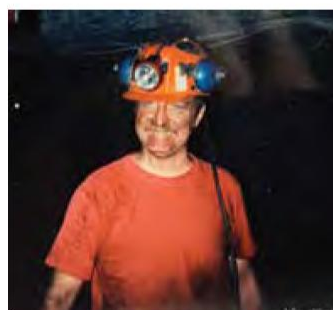


at schools. He seemed to want others to know and understand about coal miners and what their experiences were and how he saw their work as valuable. About his extensive collection of coal mining artwork, he wrote:

I have seen a lot in the way of human behavior. These cartoons are an attempt to capture some of that in a humorous way. I hope in some small way I can give you a glimpse of some of the people that worked at No. 4 Mine. My hardhat is off to everyone who ever passed thru the gate at No. 4, and especially those who worked underground all those years ... anyone would have to be crazy to work in the coal mine. I have documented proof!¹⁴

But he knew very well the seriousness of coal mining. For a while, he volunteered to be a First Responder, which I am told that he did as soon as he had the opportunity. Once, just a few years before he finally retired, he

Artwork by Roy A. Mullenix (pictured below) illustrates coal mining situations and occupational folklife (Courtesy of Kristina Mullenix)



told me that he was working in a distant part of the mine, farther from the track. He explained that he would purposely turn his light off on his hard hat, making it so dark that he could not see his hand in front of his face. With his light off and in complete darkness, he would practice counting how many footsteps it was to the track. Because if you can find the track, you can make it out of the mine in an emergency — as long as you go the right direction.¹⁵ ○

Coal Mining Terms and Vocabulary

Cribbing | A type of roof support made of wooden crossties stacked like jenga blocks about eight inches by eight inches square. These are placed in underground areas of the coal mine where the roof looks like it might be in danger of coming down. Fiber blocks made of a mixture of concrete and metal fibers are also used. These are stacked with cribbing timbers and crossties to support the roof.

Curtain | Materials hung between underground coal tunnels to direct the airflow or possibly block it. Burlap, canvas, and plastic are used.

Elevator | Miners also call this “the cage” — it takes miners from above ground to below, into the mine.

Face | Describes the area in which miners work and the location where coal is cut out or mined. The face’s location changes as miners work to mine the coal. Some faces can be more than a mile from the bottom.

Flame Safety Lamp | A device used to detect methane gas. It had a candle-like flame encased in a glass lantern-like frame that changed colors and grew bigger in the presence of methane. It became obsolete in the 1980s and was replaced by electrical devices.

Longwall | A high-productivity form of coal mining where hydraulic shields support the roof as a shear cuts coal in a single slice. Jim Walter Resources was one of the first mining companies to introduce this method in the US. It was developed in Germany.

MSHA | Mine Safety and Health Administration. They regulate safety standards through inspections and training programs to reduce injuries and mining deaths.

Ribs | the walls or sides of the area being mined underground

Rock Dust | Powdered limestone that resembles flour. If there were ever



Underground at the bottom area of JWR Mine No. 4, where the coal was hoisted out of the mine. Roy Mullenix worked near here, kept the area clean, and put out rock dust to cover the black float dust, circa 2006 (Courtesy of Kristina Mullenix)

an explosion from methane, the rock dust permeates the air and eliminates secondary explosions. MSHA requires a specific amount. Rock dust is vital in coal mining.

Scab | Refers to someone who crosses a picket line or a non-union worker.

Sound the Top | A technique miners use to determine if the rooftop of a mine is safe. They take a hammer or steel rod and bump it against the top. If it sounds like solid rock, then it is considered safe. But if it sounds tinny or hollow, they know it is not stable.

They also look to see if the rock top chips and look along the ribs or sides. Firebosses and foremen traditionally carry a walking stick with a brass tip for this purpose.

UMWA | United Mine Workers of America (union). Founded in 1890 to advocate for miners in order to secure better and safer working conditions, pay, benefits, and rights. There are international, national, regional, and local divisions.

Underground | the inside of the coal mine, below the ground

Short bio from the back of the journal issue:

Allison Grant (page 223-224)

Allison Grant is an artist, educator, and curator and brings expertise in the fields of photography, curation, and art criticism. Artworks by Grant have been widely exhibited and are held in collections at the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), DePaul Art Museum (Chicago), Columbia College Chicago, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Research Foundation art collection, Cisco Systems Corporate Art Collection (Durham), and the King County Portable Works Collection (Seattle). She was included on the

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2022 Silver List, awarded the 2020 Portfolio Purchase Award from the Atlanta Photography Group, received the 2019 Developed Work Fellowship from the Midwest Center for Photography, and was shortlisted for the 2019 FotoFilmic Mesh Prize. Grant received the MFA in photography from Columbia College Chicago in 2009 and the BFA in media studies from Columbus College of Art and Design in 2004, and holds a certificate in museum studies from the University of Cincinnati. She also serves as director of Graduate Studies for Studio Art at the University of Alabama.

Short bio from the back of the journal:

Kristina Mullenix (page 224-225)

Kristina Mullenix is a local historian pursuing a PhD in history at the University of Alabama. She holds a BA in History (Mount Mary University), an

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TRIBUTARIES

MLIS with specialty in Archives Management (Indiana University), and a Certificate in the Basics of Archives (AASLH). Her research focuses on recovering Alabama's historical silences. She has experience in digital humanities and previously served as the Archives Coordinator at Mercy Heritage Center in Belmont, North Carolina. She is currently collaborating on an oral history project about the lives and experiences of coal miners in Brookwood, Alabama as a 2023 Cauthen Fellow with the Alabama Folklife Association. In 2023, Mullenix was also awarded a Friends of Alabama Archives research grant. As a native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, she grew up traipsing through old cemeteries on the hunt for ancestors with her family. This shaped her love of genealogy and history. Mullenix is most interested in community participatory historical research and preservation, as well as oral history and all things archives-museums-history-genealogy. In her spare time, she facilitates a historical fiction book club.