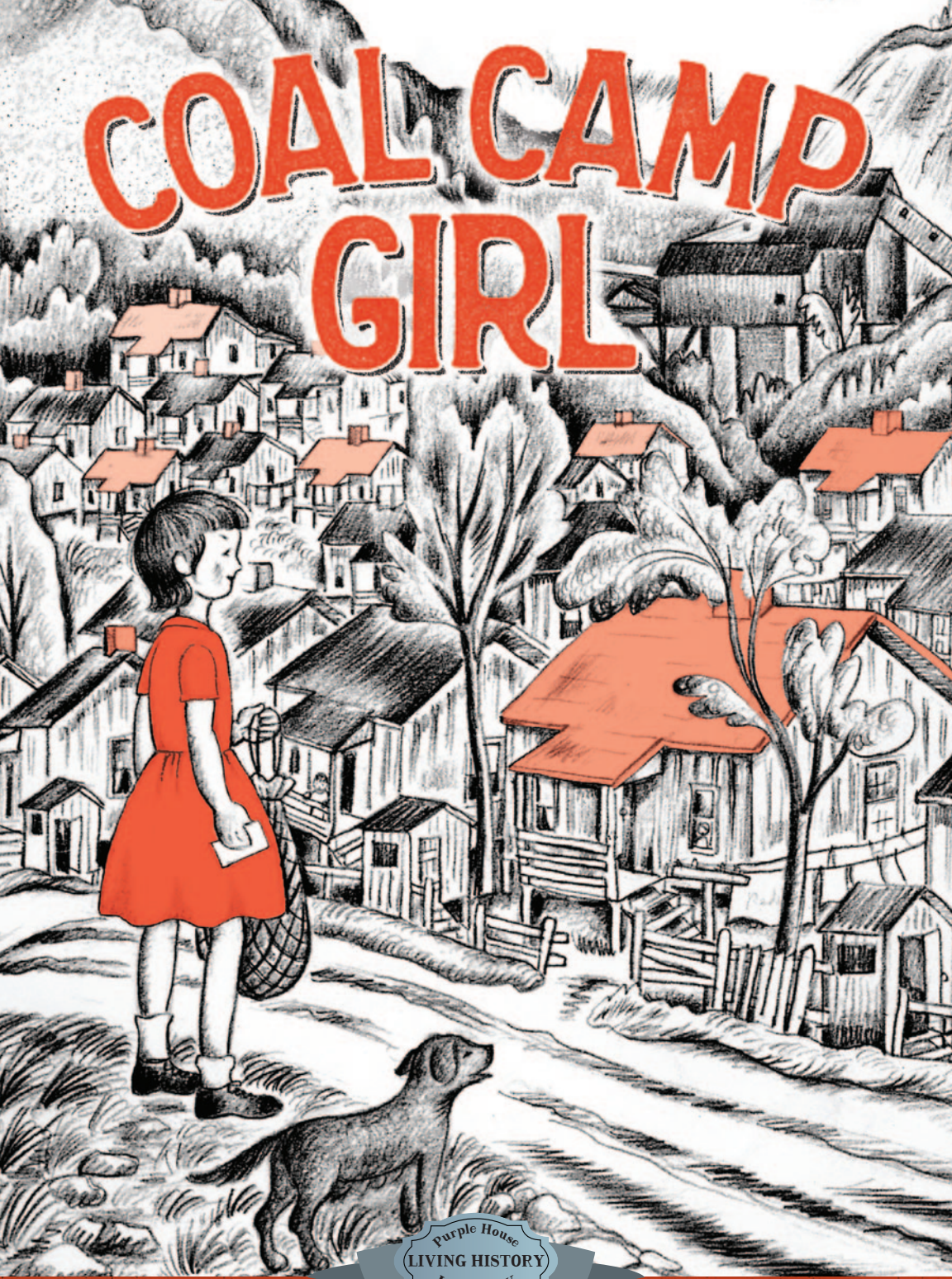


COAL CAMP GIRL

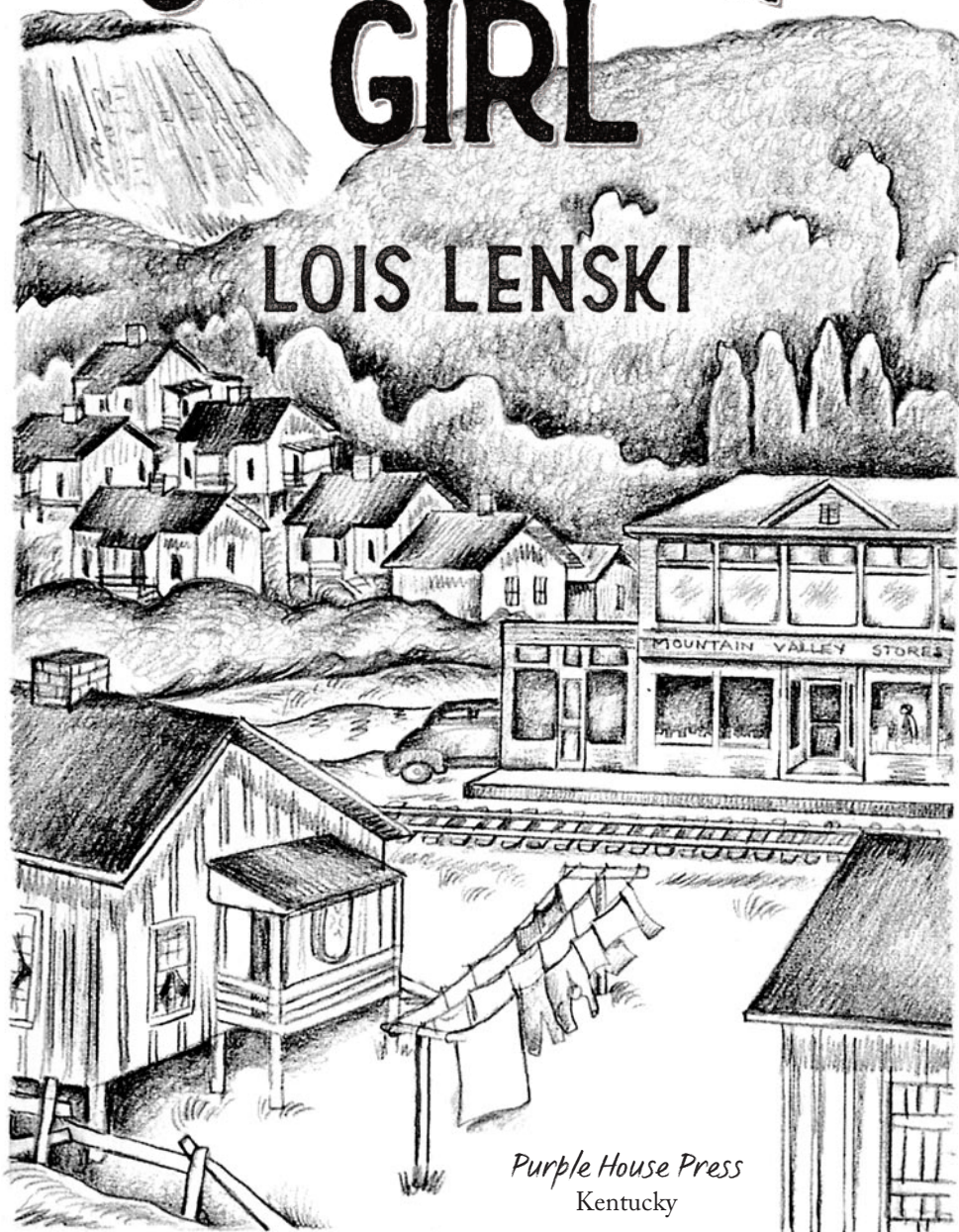


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LOIS LENSKI

COAL CAMP GIRL

LOIS LENSKI



Purple House Press
Kentucky

Foreword

To write of the beautiful mountains of West Virginia and to share the lives of the people, especially the many children who live in their shadows, has been a rare privilege. To enter into the experiences of the miners' families for even a short time, to share their hardships and hazards, their courage and their blind faith in an unknown future, has been truly enriching for me.

There is sadness and sorrow in their lives, but there is joy and gladness too. Even as the slate-blackened hill stands out like a sore thumb in contrast to the lush greenness and beauty of the mountain-side, so sadness makes a dark dent in the happiness we are all heir to but never attain.

For some of us the battle is soon over, easily won. For others, for the coal miner and his family, the struggle may be never-ending. But on he goes, despite setbacks that would dishearten most of us, never sorry for himself, always smiling and cheerful, for this is "the life he knows." Despite the drama in the life of every coal miner, which none can escape, there is a smile on his lips and hope in his heart. Knowing him and his children has touched me deeply.

Coal is the miners' life. They hate it and yet they love it, for they cannot live without it. With blind faith, they face a future when the coal may be used up, or rest secure in a fond hope that Nature's bounty is inexhaustible, no matter how greedy man may become or how devastating his clutches since he has armed himself with vulture-like machinery. Some run away from it, escape to other things, but most are slaves in bondage to it from birth to death. Coal strikes back sometimes, the miner stumblers and falters, but always gets up again, pressing onward.

My own experiences in the coal region were exciting and tremendous. I talked to management, inspectors, owners and miners alike. I rode on a coal car to the inside of a mine where the men were

working and talked to them there. I would not have wanted to write this story if I had not had this deeply moving experience. I tried to see and feel for myself during a short interval the underground environment where the miners spend their lives.

I studied the miners' faces as I watched them enter and leave the mines, or as I met them in company store or on the street. They were always cordial and friendly, willing to answer my many questions. I spent days with the children in a coal camp school and with the upper grades in a town school. They shared with me their excitements and adventures, and confided their worries, their fears and their needs. Through all their tales ran a strong thread of courage and hope. As far as I was able to, I tried to project myself into their dramatic and hazardous lives, and to see life from their point of view, not my own.

I loved the coal children. Coal is their life from the moment their eyes open until they close them at the end. Coal heats them, clothes and shelters them, feeds them, provides their all. The coal camp children know well the foreboding sound of the long drawn-out mine whistle and the dreaded shriek of an ambulance galloping down the hill, sounds which strike terror to the heart of the child as well as the mother. They live through the long hours of tense waiting, too, hoping, often in vain, for a possible miracle. Far too many of them know the pinch of want and the pain of hunger, caused more often than not by their parents' perennial improvidence. But even so, with the natural resilience of childhood, the boys can fight and ride each other piggyback and the girls in circles play In and Out the Window and other time-honored games of childhood.

I am grateful to Miss Wilma Brown, Librarian of the Kanawha County Public Library, Charleston, West Virginia, for her generous help; and to friends, teachers, parents and children in the Oak Hill area of West Virginia for sharing their ideas, information and experiences with me; also to the West Virginia Department of Mines

and several state mine inspectors for suggestions. I wish to thank also the school children in Shallmar, Maryland, Colver, Pennsylvania, and Beaverdale, Pennsylvania for their letters and kindly efforts to interest me in their locality. All the incidents described in this book are true—including that of the three lost boys,—and have happened in real life to living people in the area.

For fifteen years I have been wanting to write this book. Suddenly, after many setbacks, the way opened and I saw the pathway ahead to this particular location, which I visited in person in September and October 1958. I am happy to add a coal camp story to my series of Regional America books.

*Lois Lenski
Lutean Shores, Tarpon Springs, Florida
January 1959*

- Bank clothes, bank hat, etc.—the word “bank” evidently derives from “coal bank.”
- Crib-blocks—short timbers set in crisscross fashion, tower-like; used where a single post would not be strong enough to hold up the roof headers.
- Cross-cut—a passageway for ventilation.
- Drift-mine—a mine entered from the side of a hill instead of a vertical shaft.
- Drift-mouth—entrance to a drift mine.
- Entry—mine opening.
- Face—working part of the coal mine; wall where the coal is being cut, shot down and loaded.
- Header—a cross timber 4 x 8 x 12 ft. set on posts to hold rock roof up.
- Main haulageway, or hallway—passage through which the coal is hauled out.
- Man-trip—a train of coal cars fitted with seats which carried the miners from the portal along the haulageway to the sections where they work, and brings them out again at the end of the shift.
- Motor—electric locomotive which pulls care in and out.
- Portal—mine opening.
- Portal-to-portal pay—the miner’s workday begins when he enters the portal; he is paid for his time beginning when he enters the portal and ending when he comes out of the portal at end of shift.
- Punch mines—mines that are opened up along strip mine highwalls and extend several hundred feet underground, employing from three to five men.
- Runway—a track or path.
- Scrip—artificial money advanced by the coal company to miners on credit.
- Scrip-card—a card on which the miner’s advances are recorded.
- Stump—a large block of coal left between two rooms.
- Tipple—place where coal is dumped or loaded; apparatus by which loaded cars are emptied by tipping.
- Trip—a train of mine cars.

MY DADDY DIGS COAL

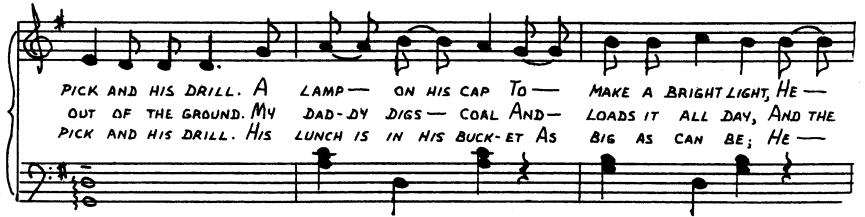
WORDS BY LOIS LENSKI

MUSIC BY CLYDE ROBERT BULLA

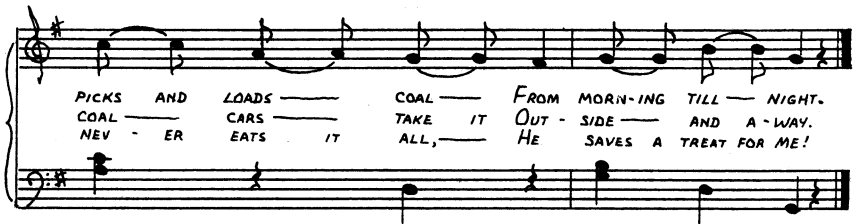
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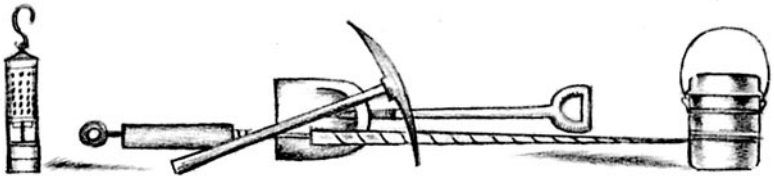
UN-DER THE MOUN-TAIN, UN-DER THE HILL, MY DAD-DY GOES TO WORK WITH HIS
UN-DER THE CI - TY, UN-DER THE TOWN, THE MINE — IS A CAVE HOL-LOWEL
UN-DER THE MOUN-TAIN UN-DER THE HILL MY DAD-DY GOES TO WORK WITH HIS

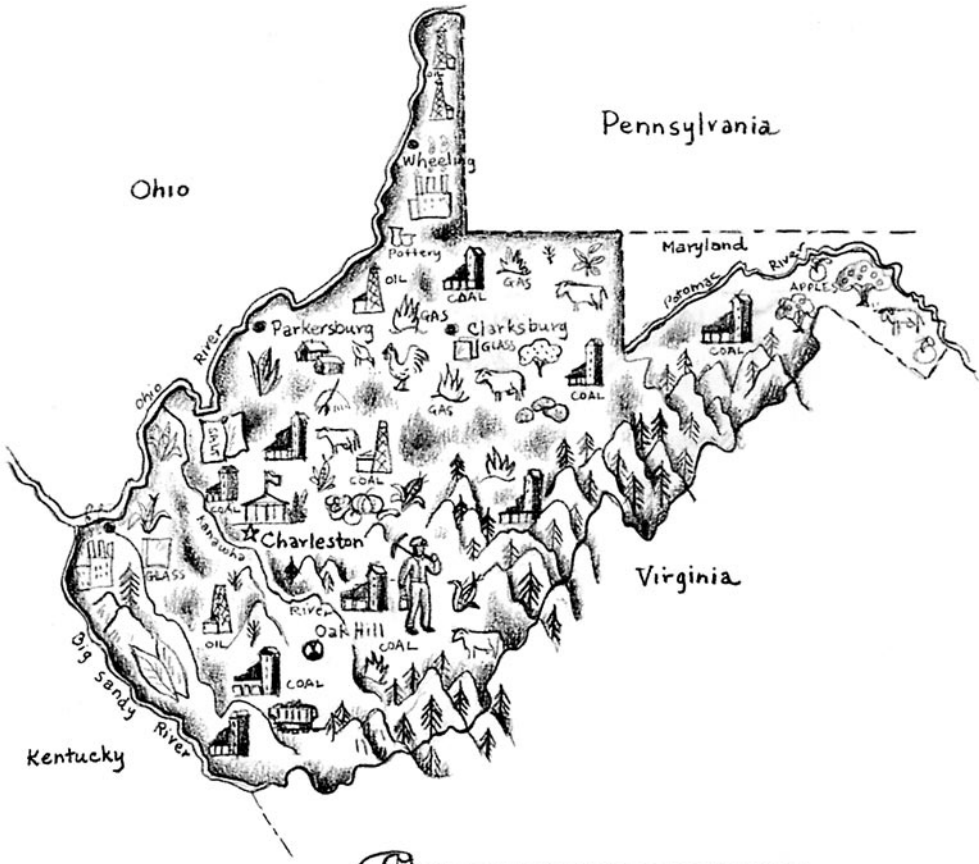


PICK AND HIS DRILL. A LAMP — ON HIS CAP TO — MAKE A BRIGHT LIGHT, HE —
OUT OF THE GROUND. MY DAD-DY DIGS — COAL AND — LOADS IT ALL DAY, AND THE
PICK AND HIS DRILL. HIS LUNCH IS IN HIS BUCK-ET AS BIG AS CAN BE; HE —



PICKS AND LOADS — COAL — FROM MORN-ING TILL — NIGHT.
COAL — CARS — TAKE IT OUT - SIDE — AND A - WAY.
NEV - ER EATS IT ALL, — HE SAVES A TREAT FOR ME!



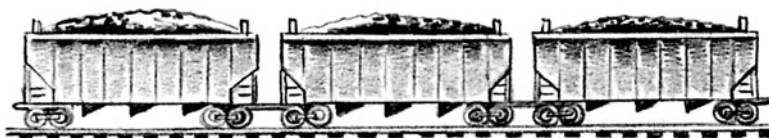


West Virginia

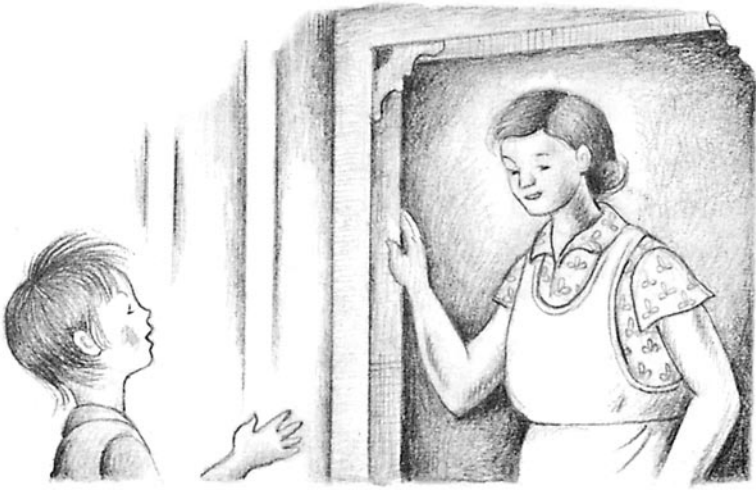
⊗ Location of Story

CONTENTS

1. Bucket	1
2. Coal	12
3. Payday	25
4. Hardship	44
5. Pony	58
6. Winter	70
7. Disaster	83
8. Summer	98
9. Lost	107
10. Rescue	120
11. Wedding	132







Chapter One

BUCKET

“MAMA, what time is it?”

Tina ran up on the back porch.

“Almost three-thirty,” said her mother. “There’s the whistle now.”

The sharp blast of the mine whistle echoed through the valley.

“Time to meet Daddy,” said the little girl. “I’m going now.”

Mama came out on the porch. She held up her hand to shade her eyes from the afternoon sun. She looked across the railroad track, where the large black coal-tipple stood.

“I see the men coming out,” she said.

But Tina was already flying down the road on feet as light as wings. She looked back once and saw Mama take the large oval tin tub down from its hook on the wall. That was for Daddy’s bath. Some of the miners went straight to the company bathhouse, but they had to pay extra for that. So Daddy always came home black. He said he liked to take his bath at home.

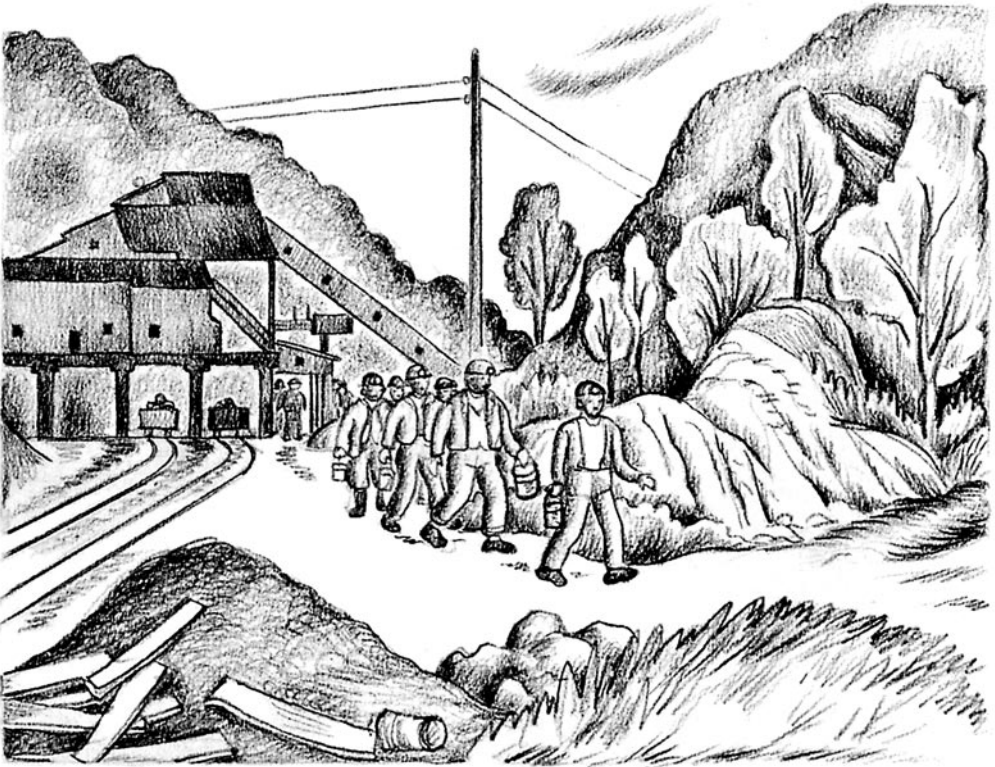
Christina Wilson was nine years old. She ran fast, her short hair flying loose in the wind. What would Daddy have for a treat today? Maybe it would be something special!

“Tina! Tina! Wait for me!” a voice called behind her.

“Oh, that Ronnie!” Tina slowed up. “Why does he always have to tag along?”

Little feet came pattering up and there was her brother Ronnie. Ronnie was only five and had brown hair like Tina’s. His clothes were ragged and dirty.

“Why can’t you stay at home?” asked Tina. “I thought you were sleeping.”



"You ran away from me," said Ronnie, almost crying.

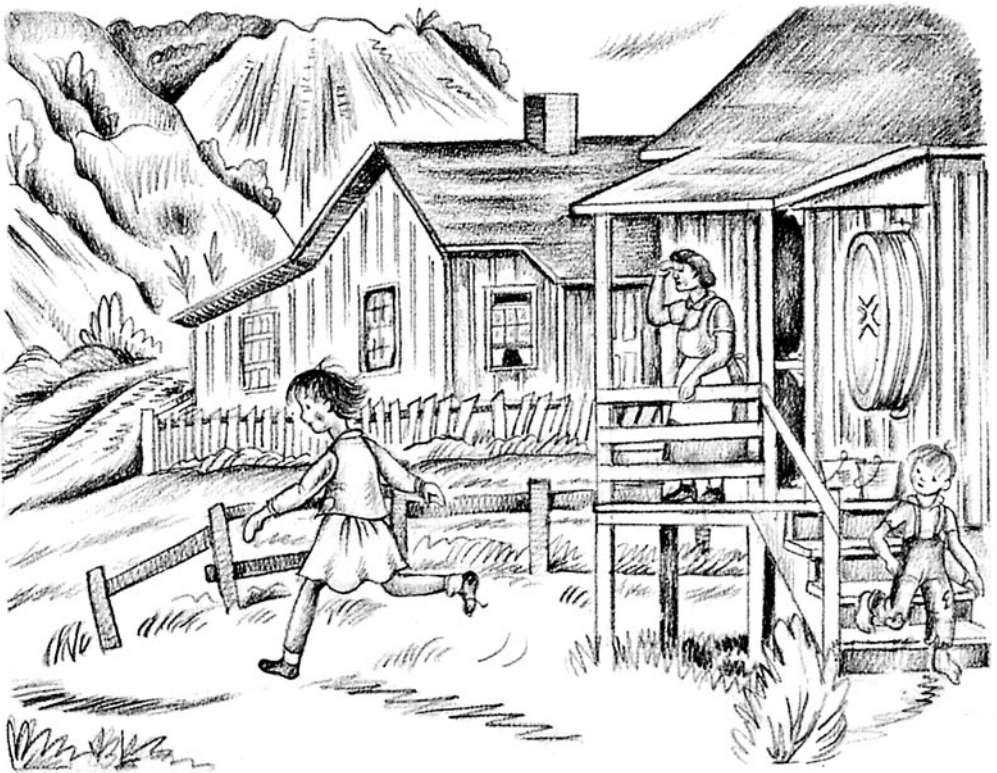
"Why do you have to come?" asked Tina.

"I want Daddy's bucket," said Ronnie.

"It's my turn today," said Tina. "I'll get there first." She ran on ahead.

There came the miners with their swinging buckets up the dirt road from the mine. They were talking and laughing as they walked along. Tina looked at them as they walked by. With their faces so black, all the men looked alike. Only their voices were different.

"Where's my girl? Did she come for me today?"



That was Daddy. His voice was big and booming. The next minute he had stepped behind her. Then Tina felt a hand on her face—a big black hand! She pulled it off, she knew it was Daddy's.

"Don't make me black!" she cried, laughing.

Other little girls came running to meet their black daddies, and were scrambling for their buckets. Every miner's child was looking for a treat. This was an age-old tradition in all mining camps.

Walter Wilson was a strong husky man of fifty, with a full face and a genial smile. He wore his bank clothes, his hard-shell bank cap, leather jacket and his mine shoes with the hard copper toes. He had been a coal miner all his life, for he had entered the mines as a boy of twelve. He loved the work for he knew no other.

Tina and Ronnie tugged at Daddy's bucket.

"I got it first!" cried Ronnie.

"I came first," said Tina. "He tagged after me."

"Now here, no scrapping," said Daddy. "There's a treat for you both."

The children never knew what they were going to get. But whatever it was, the food had a different taste just because it came from the mine.

Daddy opened the round aluminum bucket. It was made in two parts like a double boiler. The bottom part held two or three quarts of drinking water. That was why it was so big. If Daddy was ever trapped in the mine and could not get out for a few days, the water might save his life. The top half of the bucket, called the "deck" held his lunch. Daddy lifted the cover himself and the two children peered in. The sandwiches were gone, the pie was gone, the apple was gone, but there, hiding under the waxed paper, were two sticks of chewing gum.

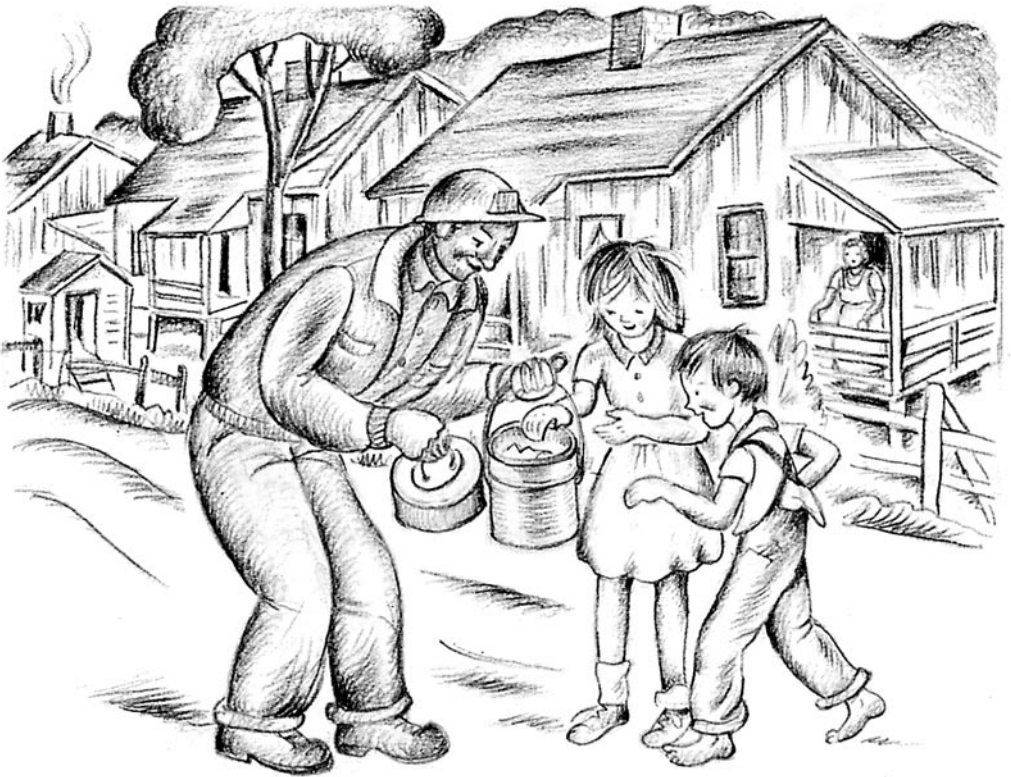
"Gum!" cried Ronnie. "Goody!"

"Peppermint!" said Tina. "Oh, Daddy!"

The next minute the wrappers were off and the two children

were chewing gum. They took hold of Daddy's hands and started happily for home.

The Wilsons lived in Linden, a West Virginia coal camp. "Coal camp" is the local name for a coal-mining town. Linden lay in a deep valley with high mountains on all sides, and was cut in two by Arbutus Creek and the railroad track. In the center of the valley, over the tracks, was the coal-tipple, a tall black structure which looked like a great coal bin standing on stilts. Two drift mines opened into the mountains on either side of the tipple. Only one was operating, and that only part time. Daddy said he was lucky to have a job.



The camp was filled with houses built by the coal company many years before, set together in rows on different levels. Some of the houses were boarded up and empty, where people had moved out when the mines began to close down, some to homes of their own elsewhere or to other occupations. There were yards and fences, and in a few yards flowers were blooming. Twenty-five years ago the houses had been painted white, but now were looking dingy and gray, blackened by coal dust over the years. Out by every fence was a small coal shed with a high window into which coal could be shoveled from a truck. All the houses in the camp were heated by coal.

Daddy knew everybody in town. He called hello or nodded his head to people he saw as they walked along. Men sat on the little narrow porches now, their tired feet resting on the railing. Women called children to come in and eat supper. As the sun sank behind Laurel Mountain on the west, the shadow of dusk fell across the camp. Daddy and the children came to the last house on the narrow street.

“Number 181—that’s us!” said Tina. “If I didn’t know our number, I might go in the wrong house—they’re all alike.”

Daddy sniffed. “I smell beef stew cooking.”

A three-foot porch was on the front close to the road. As they walked around the side of the house to the back, a short-haired brown dog came out to meet them.

“Hi, Queenie!” said Daddy, stooping to pat her on the head. “No, I didn’t save you a treat, old girl.”

“Here’s Daddy, Mama!”

Tina opened the back door and they all went in.

“Got my bath about ready?” asked Daddy.

“As soon as Jeff brings the cold water,” said Mama. “Do you want to eat first?”

Tina’s big sister, Celia, age nineteen, stood by the stove stirring food in a stew pan. She held her year-old baby on her arm. Celia

was the Wilsons' married daughter. Her husband had been in the Air Force and was killed overseas, so she lived at home.

"Dinner's about ready," said Celia.

Walter Wilson went over and tickled the baby under the chin. "How's Letty?" he asked.

"Fussy today," said Celia. "She's teething again. She won't let me alone for a minute."

"Where's Jeff?" asked Daddy.

"He's coming," called Tina.

At the outdoor spigot in a neighbor's yard, her brother Jeff had filled two buckets with water. One spigot was shared by four houses. The boy came up the back steps with the water, the dog Queenie at his heels. Mama started pouring hot water from the stove into the big oval bath tub. She had spread newspapers on the floor underneath.

As Daddy took off his jacket and his shirt, coal dust fell from his clothes. The pockets were full of coal dust. Mama took his clothes out on the porch and shook them.

"Stay on the newspapers, Walter," she said. "I get tired of mopping the floor every night."

"Hi, Dad," said Jeff, as he came in.

"Hi, son," said Daddy. "Got your chores all done?"

"Not yet, Daddy," said Jeff. "Got to get coal in next."

"Don't wait till it's dark," said Daddy.

"I stopped at Uncle Chick's on the way home," said Jeff. "He brought Snowball home from the mine. Poor pony—she'd hurt her foot. We both looked at it but couldn't see what was wrong."

"Maybe she just needs new shoes," said Daddy.

"Uncle Chick's going to have her shod before he works her again," said Jeff. "I took her up to Grandpa Ferris's."

"If he keeps her in the pasture a couple of days, likely she'll be all right," said Daddy.