Unleashing the Story of the Tracy City Stockade
(1871—1896)
by Jackie Layne Partin

In **January 1871**, 104 leased convicts, the first large group to come upon the scene in Tracy City from the State Penitentiary in Nashville, Tennessee, were to work in the Sewanee coal mines and coke ovens in the town. Twenty guards came with them to ensure peace and security once the free miners and convicts came together to work. I want to hasten here at the beginning to note that the convicts were both white and black, male and female; there were far more black men than white men and more males than females. According to a list of convicts at Tracy City, Edward Rice of Shelby County was received on Dec. 25, **1866**; Henry Sargeant of Green Co. was here in February 13, **1867**; James Ward of Shelby Co. was received July 6, **1868**; George Looney of Hawkins Co. was here January 20, **1869**; and Betty Scott of Maury Co. was received September 23, **1870**. I just randomly chose those names for those years, but there were others.

My question is "Where did they keep these convicts before the large group of 104 came, possibly the local jail? At first no fitting place had been prepared for the convicts, but on **April 1, 1871**, the **first** stockade was finished and the convicts had cells to call home for whatever term of punishment was given them by their county courts or the State. "*At night they are confined in cells in a strong log house erected for them, inside a stockade which encloses an acre and a half of ground.*" (*The Tennessean, **June 1, 1871***) My curiosity would have been to see that log house hold 104 dirty, tired, unhappy, unhealthy and betrayed convicts! Tracy City's coal company began a new adventure that year. Could it work? Should it work? Did it work?

"*Prior to the Civil War, African-American prisoners at the penitentiary rarely exceeded five percent. In the first year after the war, the African-American population jumped to fifty-two percent. By **1869**, sixty-two percent of the total prison population of 551 inmates were African-American.*" (*State of Tennessee Prison Records*—**1831-1992**) Please take a minute to understand the time in history when Tracy City started taking in leased convict laborers. Edward Rice came one year after the end of the Civil War. Has the reader ever wondered why the black citizens ended up in a place like the Tracy City jail/stockade/prison so close in time to the end of the Civil War? Where were the joy and fresh air of freedom from slavery? Freedom, true freedom is the ultimate, earthly gift from God. Many of the early citizens of Tracy City had found freedom from things other than slavery— from bad economies; religious persecutions; famines; wicked, evil, selfish, elitist governments; etc., and now thirteen years after the founding of the town (**1858**), freedom was once again being taken away daily from human beings in this little coal town—freedom from slavery and freedom to work. I HEAR YOU. I HEAR YOU LOUD AND CLEAR! If one does the crime, then one serves the time, right? And if one needs to work, he can always find a job, maybe digging ditches! I'm a believer in serving time for real crime, and I abhor the trait of laziness, but the punishment should fit the crime, and the work should be offered with fairness, according to one's experience or ability to do a fair day's work for a fair day's wage. A prison sentence usually denotes "lock up." There were many circumstances that were overlooked during and after the Civil War when it came to crime and punishment. For instance, the 1st Section of the 13th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." The key words here are the exception clause, "*except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted…*" This amendment was ratified **December 6, 1865**, so all former slaves or people who involuntarily worked as slaves were open to physical abuse if duly convicted of crime. This clause was openly used in the convict labor system taking the form of abuses of all kinds. Logically speaking, if one was convicted of a crime, he basically was still a slave, and beatings, whippings, and inhumane mental and emotional abuse was "just fine" with the lessee/s of convict labor.

I don't know the statistics, but I believe it would be safe to say that humans being hanged all over our state in the mid to late **1800s** were mostly black citizens; it just seems to me that when I read old articles in the media, without peeking ahead to take note of the race of the one being hanged, a greater percentage were black. I've written about some pretty naughty white people who lived in Tracy City during the same years of the convict lease system, but hanging was not generally a punishment here. To be perfectly honest with the reader, in earlier years a great percentage of sentences for terrible crimes in Grundy County was comparable to the ruler strike of an irate school teacher on the palm of a rowdy student.

The **104** convicts had appeared soon after the two hundred current free miners had gone on a strike on **January 18, 1871**, because they believed they would have to work alongside the leased convicts, or worse, possibly lose their jobs to other prisoners who might be forced toward a cell in Tracy City's prison sector. This frightened the convict laborers to the point of refusing to work for fear of the local miners' intimidation. The stock pile of coal in the yard was disappearing, but the miners would not go back to work. Twenty more guards were sent from Nashville. The local miners attacked the convict guards, but soon realized they could not win such a battle. The strike was short-lived. For certain, the coal waited in darkness to be picked from the earth, but no one, no not one, had offered to man the picks. Allow me to say that it would be speculation on my part to say that the feelings against the convicts stemmed from racism since some prisoners were white, but I do think a deep fear of being confronted with less opportunity for work or possibly loss of jobs was certainly forefront in their minds. Many Grundy County citizens certainly lived in poverty and survived paycheck to paycheck. Again, generally speaking, no one wants to go to work every day with any convicts regardless of their ethnicity, working alongside them inside of dangerous mines, and with the shoe on the other foot, the black convicts did not want to daily enter the dark, damp earth with a group of southern white coalminers. Folks, the Civil War brought some of these fears in amongst all the miners—white or black! Without a doubt, the white miners and their families were suffering. Does the reader know what it is like to be hungry, or cold, or desperately frightened of the future if there was to be one? Has any parent ever been scared that his or her children would not be schooled, fed, clothed, sheltered or even worse, sent off to live with some strange family because there was not enough to survive life at home? Believe it or not, these same questions were applicable to all races then and today in the year 2020. It almost seems believable that not only the war, but the greed of the coal company caused the racial issues that Tracy City confronted in its beginning and into the future.

In **June 1871**, "*One hundred and four convicts are now employed in these mines…The prison, is large and commodious and cost the company $7,000. It is kept clean and in good order. Inside the prison are the dining room, bathroom, sleeping apartments, and upon the whole is about as pleasant a place as a prison could be. The convicts seem to be pleased with the change…On Sabbath they all come into the hall for service, which is sometimes conducted by one of their own number, and sometimes by other ministers. They spend several hours each Sabbath in Sunday-school exercises…*" These were words from a *visitor* to the stockade five months after it was built—while it was still new. The convicts worked in the Lone Rock mines and coke ovens, being distributed between the two. The Lone Rock mines and ovens were on the west side of the valley that divided them from the East Fork mines and ovens. Today **(2020**) that valley is dammed with two dams, and the lakes formed in **1938-1939** belong to the Tennessee park system. Locals know the area as the Grundy Lakes. They may not be able to sit at a picnic table and see what my mind's eyes see, but they can see remnants of coke ovens. I see hot fires, smoke, coal dusts, and wearisome, black and white human beings; over-wrought and blinded mules; tram roads/tracks, small locomotives called dinkys; shackled, human ankles; guards, guns, shacks, a stockade; streams of black water running down to Black Bottom toward the beautiful Fiery Gizzard, and more. I hear singing, crying, lashes of the whip, cussing, laughter, shoveling of coal, coke, ashes, fighting, praying and much more. I smell sickness and death. Are these some of the things one can see, hear and smell as you picnic at a convenient table near one of the beautiful Grundy Lakes today (**2020**)? Or am I just a negative, antagonistic, old lady who cannot have a beautiful thought? Do I not see the ducks, geese, boats, "the big one that got away" and children enjoying themselves today while at the same time remembering what used to be and working strenuously to record that history?

One might understand the stockade beginning to be a panoramic view of the next twenty-five years at the Tracy City mines and coke ovens. The system did not work *from the get go* and evolved into a sad, ugly, torturous mess for all concerned. Everyone walked around with the thought of "*Lord, give me strength to confront the issues*" while forging ahead to make the system work for the coal companies, not only in Tracy City but other towns. Since today in **2020,** I loathe the mention of "Senate and House Committees," but it behooves me to go one step backward and mention that this *bright* idea of using convicts/criminals, though some unjustly judged and dealt harsh punishments, came from long, argumentative sessions of the Tennessee legislature. So, in conjunction with the coal company and lessees in Tracy City, our little town had thrust upon it a beast with its jaws buried deeply in local life for twenty-five years.

Dear reader, have you ever worked for a living in a situation where from time to time you heard these words, "The inspector, or Governor, or a certain committee, or maybe a news channel is coming?" I have! I knew just what to do when this happened on my job and so did the guards of the convicts; the coal company lessee; the convicts and free miners act accordingly on their jobs. Please make up your own mind as I tell this story as to what you will *take with a grain of salt* and what your common sense will allow you to accept as truth. *"We learn that the work of white-washing and cleaning up at the branch prisons is going on finely. The best appearance will be put on for the eyes of the investigating committee. At Tracy the work of washing the long-neglected bedding could not be done soon enough by the convict women and outside help has been engaged. This unexampled activity on the part of the management is very significant, but it will not deceive the committee. It is not what appears to be on the surface, after the management have had time to clean up which must be looked at; it is what has been going on under the management before they were* ***warned*** *of the investigation."* ***Feb. 14, 1885*** *– Nashville Banner.* Those words are not mine, but they are words published in **1885**, 135 years ago. Some things never change.

On Friday, **November 17, 1871**, a petition *"from the citizens of Chattanooga protesting against the employment of convict labor at Tracy City"* was presented in the Senate chamber by a Mr. Pope. Ten months after the introduction of the convicts to Tracy City's prison, Chattanooga citizens were protesting against this tactic of easy, cheap labor. We might call that a red flag of what lay ahead for all involved. The question raised all over Tennessee was to whether convict labor should be the means of getting the coal mined, or were there other means of getting the job done? Since most of Tennessee's convicts were black, wasn't this tactic just an extension of slavery; weren't the lessees in Tracy City rich, white men who hired others to see to the care of their new laborers. Folks, one of my sons caught chickens for a local business for years. He has heard me talk about the extreme physical, psychological and emotional strain the work brought on him and the men in that job, but he still says he would rather catch chickens than work in a coalmine.

A year later on **November 14, 1872**, a *Republican Banner* news article signed by "*Randall Brown (colored)*" actually labeled "coal mining an art" follows: "*Mining is an art requiring as much skill as other manufacturing. Miners should be protected as much as any other laborer. Mechanics will not work side by side with convicts in the same shop, and miners should not be compelled to do it. If the mines of our State are overrun with convict labor, the skillful miners will seek some other field of labor, and the mines, of which Tennessee is full, will never be developed as they should be. Protect the miners and you will procure all arts and skill in mining.*" Dear reader, many of the free miners in Tracy City came from foreign mining connections—countries like Ireland (Patrick McGaffin); Scotland (James Kirkwood), and England (Charles Withers). They knew their jobs well, either by doing them previously or listening to elders in their families speak of the mines. Others were hard-working local men, (Carroll Nunley, Harris Cope, John Tucker), who had families to feed and were willing to learn. They did not want to get involved with the other big jobs around the area, moonshining and boot-legging. Could it have been that Mr. Randall Brown hit the nail on the head; coal miners were skillfully special people that should have been paid fairly for the predicatively high risks they faced every time they entered the mines?

On **December 25, 1872**, Mr. Arthur St. Clair Colyar of the Sewanee Mines of Tracy City was offended by Mr. J. C. Hazelton of the Aetna Mines who felt the convicts should be "*put to manufacturing shovels, hoes, locks, knobs, carpenter's tools, cutting-scythes, moving machinery, and stoves.*" Mr. Colyar answered, "*In other words, put to mechanical pursuits, but not to digging coal, because it degrades the honest miners.*" He went on to state before the convicts came to work in the mines in Tracy City that there were not 150 miners in the State. Well, obviously, (*Republican Banner, **Jan. 19, 1871***), there were 200 working in Tracy City when the convicts came, so does that mean that there were no other miners in the state of Tennessee except in Tracy City. And according to Colonel A. S. Colyar, "*Mining coal at that time in Tennessee was nothing more than an out-post for Pennsylvania "Tramps," whose principal business was to "strike" and swear vengeance against any superintendent who dared hire a man to dig coal without their permission…*" History supports that a state like Pennsylvania that hired well-trained coal miners would never have the problem of convict labor introduction. The local miners would have never seen the first lessee pull that off; death would have been imminent. I doubt that A. S. Colyar would have called one of Pennsylvania's coal miners a "*Tramp*" to his face. Mr. Colyar was president of Tennessee Coal and Iron Company at the time and former member of the 2nd Confederate States of America Congress (**1864-1865**); he believed that all "*able-bodied convicts ought to be put to digging coal.*" His own son A. S. Colyar, Jr. may have been a better citizen if he had been put in a coal mine and treated equally as one of Tracy City's former convict laborers. Read about Jr.'s shenanigans on page four of the following site.

https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/historicalcommission/courier/thc_courier_oct05.pdf

I wonder if Mr. Colyar felt that all, able-bodied women who disobeyed their husbands should be put in the coal mines. I never lived during Arthur St. Clair Colyar's time, but I have driven many a mile over two roads in Tracy City that were given his name—Colyar St./Hwy. 41 goes straight through two red lights, and St. Clair St./Hwy. 56 intersects Colyar St. at the first red light. This may be nothing to the general reader, but it indicates to me that Mr. Colyar was a man of means. Of course, personal financial growth could cloud one's reasoning.

GREED—it is all about the money. We hear that often today in **2020**—**follow the money!** In **December 1872**, Mr. Colyar wrote, *"Upon the question of health and safety, there is perhaps nothing in prison life surpassing the branch prison at the mines. The prison was built without cost to the State, and in all of its departments and arrangements is a first-class prison. The mine is a perfect prison while the convict is at work, and coal digging itself is well-nigh a protection from disease*." Sometimes I need to read a sentence over and over to understand for certain what it means or implies. A. S. Colyar wrote basically that putting the convicts inside the mines in the daytime works as a great stockade—how are they going to escape from deep underground dungeons? He went on to say that coal digging gave the miner "*protection from disease.*" I like this little saying of my century, "It doesn't take a rocket scientist…" to see the error in that statement. Air pollution, consumption, black lung disease, pneumonia, injury or death by fallen coal, abscessed hands from handling sharp coal, broken limbs, the list could go on and on. Aren't these diseases or at least dangers one could confront inside the mines? Tell someone today with black lung disease that he did not get sick from working in the coal mines because in **1872**, A. S. Colyar said "*coal digging itself is well-nigh a protection from disease.*" My precious friend, Mr. Virgil C. Thomas is dead now, and I sorely miss him; he surely would like to have known that if he went into his mine with two arms, he would come out with two arms. This was true for many years for Virgil, but one day the mine did not **protect** him; he came out with only one arm.

Left: Virgil Calvern Thomas

(Oct. 22, 1912—May 11, 2012)

He entered his mine with two arms and came out with one. The last time I visited my friend, one could see the hook-like extension he wore on what remained of his left arm.

On **November 30, 1874,** the brutal murder in Gruetli, Tennessee of a Swiss colonist, Johannes Ulrich Baur, by four evil men, strangely became connected to the guarding of the convicts the same night of the murder. Mr. Baur died the next day, **December 1, 1874**, from his wounds. Interestingly, A. S. Colyar, Esq. wrote down the dying man's wishes. D. W. Purdom, a local guard at the stockade, was, unknown to the Warden, involved in the murder and was asked by Capt. Henry of the stockade to help guard the convicts that same night. Purdom gave no thought to the idea that he would be a prisoner in that same stockade the next night. County Sheriff Levan suddenly realized that he had a dangerous situation on his hands because later all four of the alleged murderers, all white, were placed in the stockade. He then had 150 convicts housed with four of Grundy County's leading scalawags who were known to be night prowlers. The thought came to his mind that if they tried to burn down the stockade allowing all the convicts to run wild all over the hills above Tracy City, look at all the money that would be lost in the buildings and escaped convict labor. So wisely the sheriff arranged to get the four hoodlums removed to the Davidson County jail. Granted, the four had not had a trial, but wouldn't it have saved the county the expense of sending them off to Nashville's jail by putting them in the mines to dig coal? According to Mr. Colyar in a previous news article, they would not have gotten sick, and the walls of the mines would have held them until trial time. That hard work would have been therapeutic and possibly turned the four into productive citizens of Tracy City.

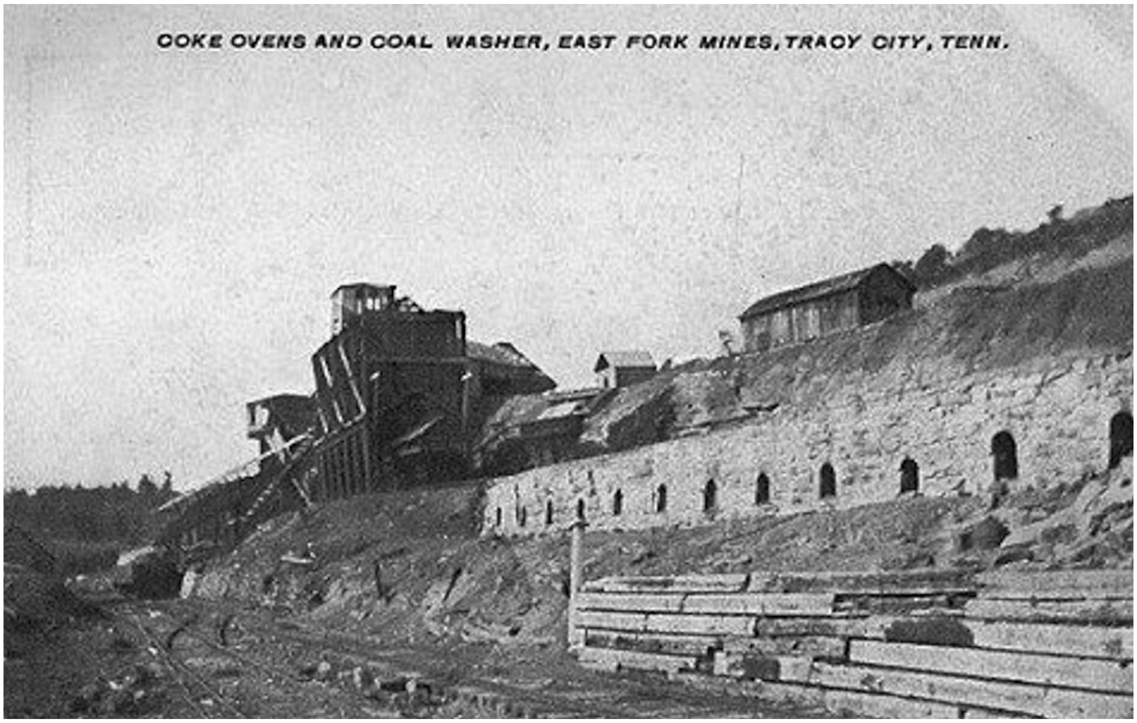
Many years ago, when I first saw the **1880** Census listing of occupations of the convicts in our coal mines, coke ovens and stockade, my thoughts turned to *what if*? How unfair was it to pick and choose out of hundreds of prisoners and send those chosen to the town of Tracy City to be forced underground into total darkness with only the tiny little light on their heads or be forced to work the coke ovens where the heat was so intense that even a mule could be killed. *"As you go toward the mines from Tracy City you come into a long, narrow valley. The mountains rise abruptly on each side. The slopes are strewn with bowlders and shaded by great trees. Up and down this valley extend the coke ovens, two long embankments with hundreds of circular openings in their tops, from which shafts of flame shoot many feet. The smoke of these ovens clouds the sky over the valley. The heat from them shrivels near-by vegetation. Despite this intense heat there are human beings scattered along the valley before the doors in the sides of this embankment. Most of them are negroes, clad only in shirts, opened to show all of the bare chest, ragged trousers, and torn shoes. Along the tops of the embankments between the two rows of chimneys is a narrow track over which a curious car is drawn by a mule. The car just escapes the flames on each side, and the face of the man, which projects above the sides of the car is shiny with sweat in the coldest weather. The mule travels as fast as is permitted. At a sudden burst of flame from one side, he often jumps into the flame on the other side, and dies miserably, with his whinny of terror and pain sounding about the roar of the ovens. The car feeds the ovens with coal, and the driving of it is the worst work round the ovens." (The Inter Ocean – Chicago, Illinois –* ***Nov. 22, 1891****)* Sadly, it was a disaster to lose a mule, but little was thought of losing one of the leased convict laborers. He or she could always be replaced by wiring the state penitentiary.

How did the convicts fair with that type of job requirements? Yes, they had committed crimes, but why did some stay in the State Pen and learn industrial skills, maybe planted gardens, worked in libraries, and dozens of other skills, but these poor souls, mostly black, few white, some female, were treated so inhumanely it is hard to write about, but I will. Previously before imprisonment, Dan Hendrick was a steamboat hand; William Hall, brick mason; Walter Jones, baker; Larkin Anderson, cabinet maker; John Carter, blacksmith; Eliza Owens, cook; West Montgomery, stationary engineer; and W. B. Smith, lawyer. Granted, many were farmers or common laborers, but that's true in all walks of life. Plus, there is no shame in farming or doing common labor. I've been a common laborer all my life.

Possibly many eyes, including *yours truly*, swelled with tears when the mule died, but do we remember that in the **1860s**, the black people were supposedly freed, bit by bit, until the 13th Amendment made history. The black convicts were just six or eight years this side of slavery, or shall we say becoming free from legally being sold or bought as slaves. There is no doubt that slavery continued for many, many years beyond the Emancipation Proclamation of **1863**. Why do I get the deep feeling that some of the lessees and other people, not all, in Tennessee had never gotten over the Civil War? Cry for the poor mule, but also cry for the men and women, white and black, who were also treated inhumanely.

Life went on as usual between the first stockade being built in **1871** and a second better one being newly built around **1885**, "*…the coal company had, at the expenditure of about $27, 000, erected a* ***new*** *prison at Tracy City. This was done on account of the unhealthful condition of the* ***old*** *one.*" I used to live in a small South Pacific country which had its own grammatical interjections, one being the word, "*Sa*." I used it frequently and still do sometimes (**2020**). That is what I blurted out after I transcribed the italicized phrase above. *Sa*! Why would the company need to build a new stockade because of its "*unhealthful condition*" since the old one was scrubbed and white washed and contained all the amenities of home? Hey, all you "non-rocket scientists" out there—of course, all aspects had been improved after the 2nd stockade was built! The lessee knew to do better. So, if one visited or investigated around **1885**, shelter, food, clothing, means of bathing, etc. appeared better, but it never lasted long if it ever began. There is no way getting around the fact that the Tracy City prison was disgustingly vile, and there is no way getting around the fact that a few bad apples make it tough on the rest of those in the barrel. Some prisoners were incorrigible, but that did not make the whole group impossible.

An often-asked question throughout my years of interest in the prison stockade in Tracy City is: "Where was the stockade?" The general area of the stockade is not so much a problem as we read the *Nashville Banner –* ***Aug. 15, 1892***: "*Leaving Tracy City by the branch road that leads eastward to the convict mines, the first noticeable thing on the landscape after leaving the suburbs of the larger town is a cluster of dwellings that goes by the name of Hootersville*. (Today in **2020** the cluster of dwellings is known as Hoot Hill.) *The miners are quite sure that the place is well named. But it is a pleasant place and picturesque. Tom Carrick's house is a short distance to the right. At Hootersville the dirt road swerves sharply across the railroad tracks and parallels a creek. A little further, and bits of coal and slate blacken all the land and make the water ink. A sharp turn in the road reveals the full scene of the operations of the East Fork and the Lone Rock mines.*" Black Bottom Creek was the name of the creek flowing from the valley dividing the two sets of mines. That name had nothing to do with the color of anyone's skin because when a free-miner worked the mines, his skin was black when he got onto the last car of the train where dirty coal miners sat on the way to the station nearest their homes. The creek was black because of the runoff from the coal doings above and beyond Hootersville.


COKE OVENS AND COAL WASHER, EAST FORK MINES, TRACY CITY, TENN.

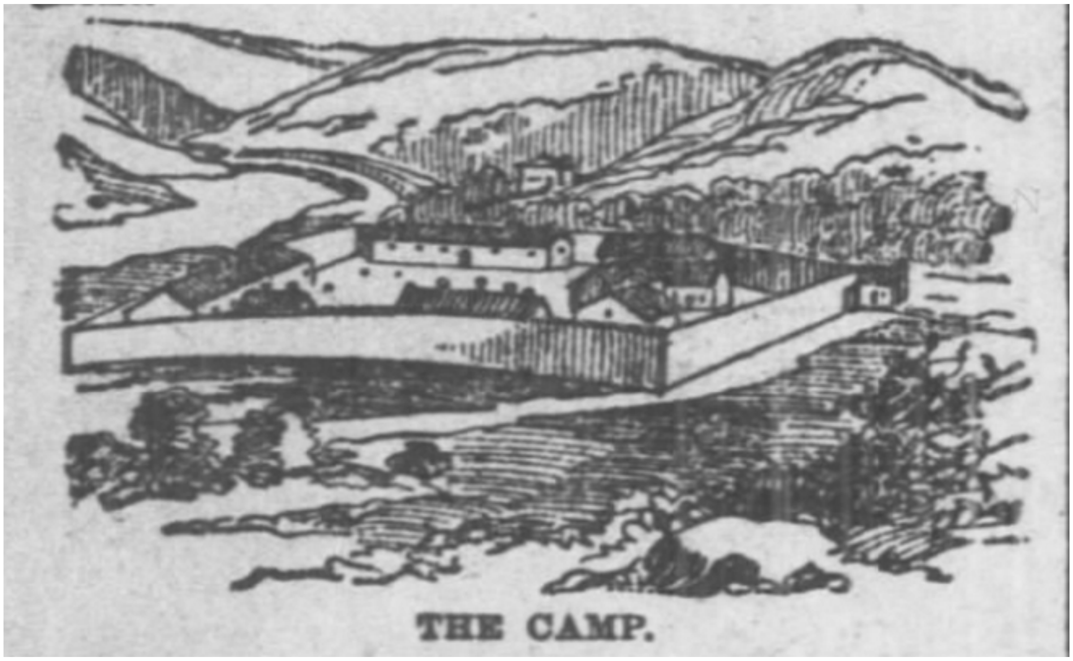
Coke Ovens and Coal Washer, East Fork Mines, Tracy City, Tenn.

"Away past the sheds and boilers and masses of loose coal, ***at the very head of the valley****, and looking down upon it, stands a great pile of buildings and high fences…build in such a way that it commands every approach." (The Inter Ocean, Chicago, Illinois—* ***22 Nov 1891****).* If the reader in his/her own mind, would remove the dams at the Grundy County Lakes in Tracy City, then the valley could easily be seen. The dams were built in **1938-39** by the Civil Conservation Corps. People who do not live on this plateau sometimes call our hilly topography, mountains, and our low ravines or headwater gorges, valleys. Much of the area one viewed in the beginning of the coal industry here was so raped and moved around that what we see today confuses us. Ben Wooten's former land looked like all the wilderness around it appeared—trees, hills, streams, gulfs, the land of the American Indians. Coal mining changed the Indian land into utter disarray. Old Ben Wooten, whose little log home and store stood in the area of where the current **(2020**) Tracy City Police Station is, would not have recognized his home, his beautiful wilderness when the convicts and free miners were at work here. Maybe $3,000 settled his mind a little.

Throughout the period between **1875** and **1885** in Tracy City, convicts came and went. We know from where they came, but where they went, after death, was a big issue in the Tennessee Legislature, among newspapers, and especially with family members who wanted to know about their loved ones. The prisoners came mostly from the State

Pen, but some came from other prison camps to Tracy City and vice versa: "…**1882**, George Bond (col.) transferred to Inman; **1883**, Frank Cole (col.) transferred to Inman; **1883** James T. Ellis (white) transferred to Inman; the transferred list goes on and on. Others were discharged or pardoned often before their sentences were completed. Some went back to the main prison in Davidson County. There was never a problem putting a good number of convicts on the train and sending them toward Tracy City via Cowan. On **December 1, 1886**, the stockade prison held 313 convict laborers. 267 of those were listed as black and 46 were listed as white. That statistic alone says something; it bothers me in the very realm of reasoning as to why so many black convicts filled the prisons. Grundy County alone had a good number of worthless, white men and some women who could have been sentenced to work the mines instead of destroying many lives with their bad behavior.

"Convicts were transferred both ways from one coal town stockade to another. In the *Chattanooga Daily Times* –***28 Oct 1883*** we read, "*WRETCHED CONVICTS – Nineteen sick convicts were carried through the city yesterday from Coal Creek mines to* ***Tracy City****. They were the most woe-begone, wretched and stricken creatures we have ever seen. Each one was pale and emaciated, with sunken eyes, pallid cheeks and trembling limbs, their condition excited the tenderest chords of sympathy. One poor wretch was unable to walk, on account of a broken back, and was transferred on the shoulders of two sturdy men. He suffered excruciating agony while being removed and each moment seemed his last. They were at all ages, from pale faced boys in their teens to white haired men decrepit with age and broken from long suffering. It was a horrible sight, and no one could gaze on that picture of desolate misery without feeling that some modification of our convict law was a necessity. As the reporter drew near an old man, grizzled and gray, puny and weak, whispered, "This is how we are worked," but before he could complete the sentence the keeper gruffly commanded him to keep his tongue between his teeth and be careful how he talked. The poor wretch, cowed by the rough tones, crouched in the corner of his seat muttering some inaudible words. It was frightful! How men, claiming to be human, can witness such misery unmoved, seems incredible."*



The above sketch is a depiction of the Stockade at Tracy City.

In one year between **December l, 1884** and **December 1, 1885,** forty-five convicts died (thirty-seven black and eight white) while incarcerated in Tracy City prison. Causes of death ran the gamut— consumption, pneumonia, diarrhea, flux, typhoid, measles, syphilis, heart disease, and let's don't forget prisoner Preston Sleydon (white) who came into the Tracy City stockade on **March 2, 1885**, and died thirteen days later of wounds he received while trying to escape. Then there was prisoner Charles Metlock (black) who was killed by falling slate; in other words, he was killed by a dangerously unsafe task thrust upon him, even at the risk of death, because a lessee needed Charles to help him, or his coal company, to make more money.

Let's look at the next full year between **Dec. 1, 1885**, and **Dec. 1, 1886**, and see if things got any better. In that year there were twenty-five deaths and all were black prisoners. The list of causes of death was similar to the **1884-1885** year with the exception of convict John Sullivan (black) who was received at the Tracy City stockade on **Nov. 9, 1883**, and died July **31, 1886**. We do not know the reason Mr. Sullivan was so upset that he advanced on Mr. Cain, who possibly was the known Superintendent of the Tracy City Branch Prison and all other prisons, but he died from pistol wounds in that confrontation.

But what happened to other convicts laboring in the mines and ovens? In **1885**, William Oaks and Joe Pike escaped, as did many others from year to year. Some were recaptured and others were never seen again. Now the big question is, "What happened to the bodies of those who ***died*** in Tracy City's stockade, mines or ovens? Joe Privett (col.)

died in **1883**; Green Phillips (col.) died in **1883**—6 months into his two-year sentence; James Smartt (white) died in **1884;** John Turnage died in **1884;** these are only a few names of convicts who died serving their sentence in the Tracy City prison. Died of what? George Regan was ***killed*** in **1883**, three years into a five-year sentence; Allen Seay was ***killed*** in **1883**, approximately a year and eight months into his six-year sentence; Hatton Malone was ***killed*** in **1883,** less than a month into his one-year sentence; Fred Ettons was "***killed** in the mines*" in **1883** after the commencement of his sentence. Again, where, how and why were they ***killed***? For the overwhelming number who ***died***, how did they die—by mine accidents, by brutal whippings, by fighting amongst themselves inside the stockade or mines, from disease, filth, hunger, cold, or at the hands of a guard/s?

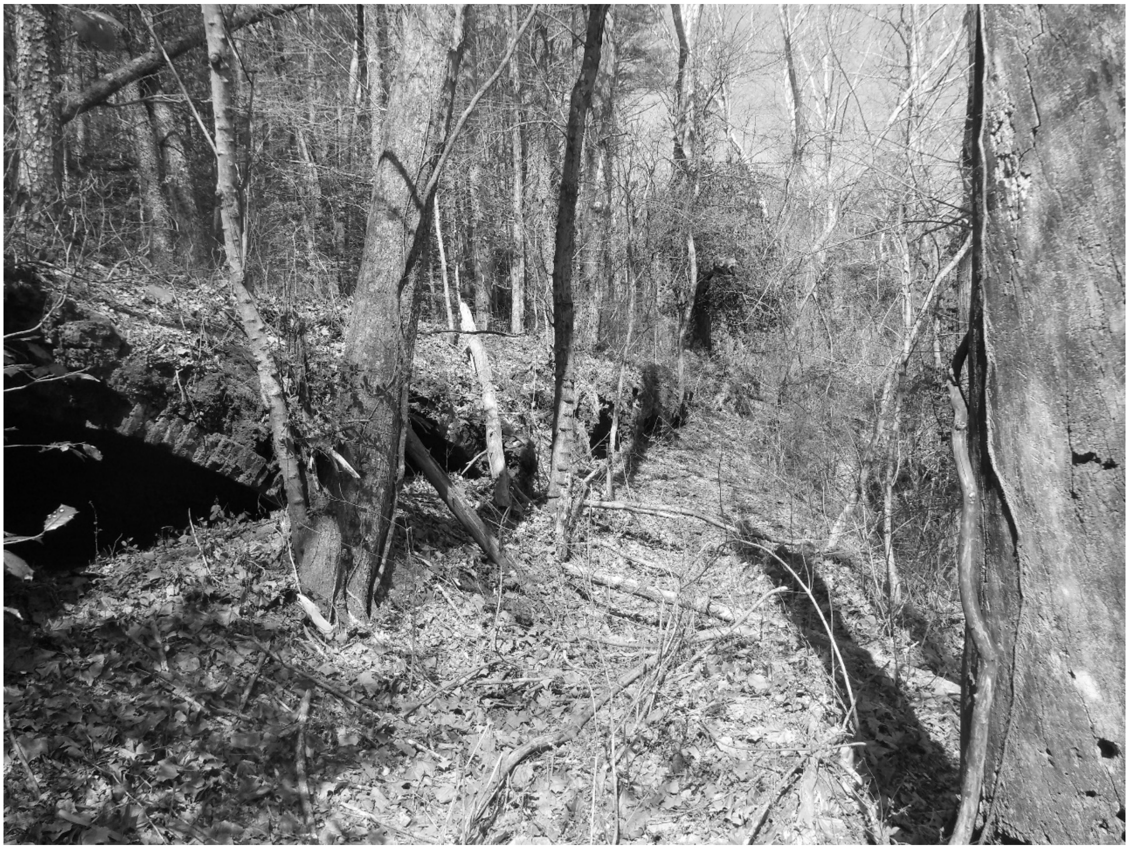
Another often asked question is, "Where were all the convicts buried who were listed on official papers as "***died***" in Tracy City?" *"Nashville Banner –* ***30 Jan 1885*** *– This is to certify that when I was appointed warden of the Tennessee penitentiary by Gov. Bate, among the first instructions I received from time to time was to this effect: That upon the death of a prisoner, if his body was not claimed by his legal representatives to see to it that his body was dressed in a suit of citizens' clothes and delivered to the sexton of the cemetery for decent burial, taking his receipt for the same. I have complied in every instance with this order, and have on file in my office the proper receipts.—F. S. Harris, Warden Tenn. Penitentiary."* Granted, Mr. Harris was the warden of the State Penitentiary and not of the Convict Prison at Tracy, but the same rules applied. So, where was this cemetery? Who was the sexton of the mysterious cemetery in Tracy City, and where are the records of burials in that cemetery?

Answers to these questions are still a conundrum, or are they? I stored answers in my head throughout the years; I knew what happened to some of the bodies of these poor alienated souls, but I kept searching for proof. Now believe me, I have asked local folks up to 100+ years of age these questions, and they left me and this earth without ever being able to give me an answer. I was given speculative answers. Obviously, some convicts' bodies were turned over to their families, but as one interested person brought to my attention, most families did not have the money or means to travel from any one of the counties in Tennessee to retrieve their loved one's body. But the convict lease program made contracts with lessees, and stipulations were required. However, once the lessees, companies or individuals, had the convicts in their hands, rules were often overlooked. Who would even want to babysit one to five hundred convict laborers except when investigators were coming? Let me first present some excerpts from newspapers concerning what may have happened to some of the bodies of the Tracy City leased convicts.

One lower section of ground to the right of what is today called the extension of Rutledge Street as it climbs up to Hobbs Hill and where the remains of coke ovens can still be seen peeking from under the many years of natural debris coverage, is one area where old timers spoke of fieldstones that marked convict graves. I was told that the stones cannot be seen anymore. This land lays above what locals called the Heading along the right side of N***** Hill. Unless there are documents, and I haven't seen any yet, then the Tracy City branch of the Tennessee State Penitentiary had no convict cemetery per se. I have read about convict cemeteries each associated with a particular prison; one even had a road leading out the prison door and right over into its cemetery.

In **1886** the following was published in the *Tennessean* as to the method that was used by the main penitentiary in Nashville: "*...the witness said that for many years it had been his business to see that the dead convicts were provided with good coffins. These were made in the proper shape of dressed poplar, stained in imitation of walnut. The dead convict was dressed in a suit of citizen's clothes, after which he was put in the coffin and kept in the dead-house until Fitz Gibbons, the man who had charge of the stables, called for the body and took it to Mt. Ararat Cemetery where he delivered it to the sexton and took a receipt for it.*" The same procedure should have been followed in Tracy City's prison branch within its ***unknown*** cemetery. The State Penitentiary had the authority over the convict labors here, but as said before, the lessee/s did whatever pleased them once they had control. Didn't they pay for that right?

A young man whose grandparents lived in the area of some of the soon-to-be-lost coke ovens told me that he well remembered as a young child playing in all the woods around the Wooten mines and up on N***** Hill, today—Rutledge St. The hill was also called Hobbs Hill, Kennedy School House and was situated above the old Tracy City ice plant. One item that really stuck in his memory was half a human skull that he held in his hands. As a young boy he never gave any thought as to why it may have been on top of the ground near some partially hidden coke ovens.



A View of Some of the Soon-to-Be-Lost Coke Ovens to the Right of the Extension of Rutledge Street

From the book, *No More Moanin': On* ***July 28, 1938,*** Mrs. Sarah L. Cleek of Laager, Tennessee was interviewed by James A. Dombrowski. Her son John Cleek had brought him to her little house to talk with her about the convict labor system. Although interesting, many bits of Tracy City history are included, but I will only use an excerpt pertaining to our subject of the Stockade Cemetery. *"…She talked freely about the old struggles of the miners to make a living. Me and a widow woman used to carry pies to the stockade and sell them to the convicts. They were treated cruelly. With my own eyes I saw where they were buried. Their thighs or shank bones were not buried deep enough or something. They used to dig there for clay to daub the coke ovens with. The bones stuck out of the ground. I could see where the coffins was buried.* ***.*** *N***** Hill, the convict burial ground was called. They sent them out to work sick or not…"* The content in any of the lengthy interviews came as no surprise to me, but I found it good to finally find someone who spoke words that I have always believed to be the truth. Sarah L*uda* (Tate) Cleek (1869-1945), daughter of Calvin G. S. and Francis (Christian) Tate had no reason to mislead her interviewer. God bless those old-timers who shared Grundy County's history, no matter how unfavorable and shameful or how beautiful and uplifting. Back then, it generally was the custom to talk of nothing, not even family history, good or bad. This researcher finds this custom to be one of the reasons that make "finding the story" more difficult.

White convict Jackson "Jack" Beets (**1868-1893**) was serving a three-year sentence for grand larceny when he was killed in the Tracy City mines. A load of slate fell on him. He was well-loved by his family and was **retrieved for a burial** in the ***family cemetery***. (*The Semi-Weekly Knoxville Sentinel—04 March **1893**)* Jack was buried in Mt. Harmony Baptist Church Cemetery in Knox County, Tennessee. By the way, more convicts served in Tracy City's stockade because they were guilty of larceny. I wonder why? Could they have been hungry, naked and cold, parents of needy children, homeless, jobless—oh, one gets the idea? "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche!"

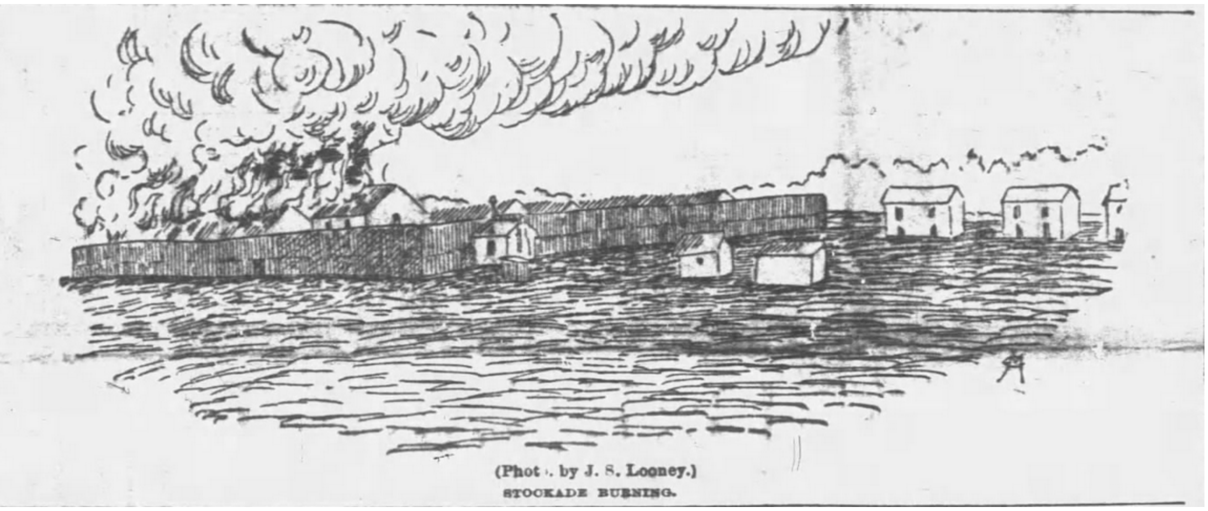
I wanted this story to stick as closely as possible to the convicts in the Tracy City stockade system and not those in other towns. However, I want to use an example from **1911** in Littleton, Alabama at the mines of the Pratt Consolidated Coal Company. On April 8th, an explosion entombed 118 men with nearly all being "*negro convicts*." They knew some were still alive because of tapping sounds coming from the mine. Usually when mine accidents occurred in that area, throngs of friends and relatives accumulated outside to wait and pray. But these men were convicts, and mourners were few. One hundred pine coffins were quickly ordered from Birmingham. *"It was stated tonight that unless relatives should ask for the bodies, they will be buried in the **convict cemetery at the mines**." (The Journal and Tribune—Knoxville, Tennessee—**09 Apr 1911**)*

*Nashville Banner, **14 Feb 1885**--"A reliable free miner, David Loyd, testified under oath at Coal Creek the other day, that he saw a **convict dissected**, that the prisoner's bones were put in a box in the creek to be bleached, and that an old sow was seen with some of the entrails of the negro. This is a pretty picture for the people of Tennessee to look upon!"* Would Mr. Loyd have lied under oath about such a desecration, under penalty of perjury? Possibly, but probably not. Folks, talk is cheap, but truth is expensive, hard to come by. My own ears have heard hard-to-believe stories of what happened to some of the convict laborers during those awful years here in Tracy City.

Let's go back to the mine workings. At times when less coal was needed during warm days, the free miners were cut to half-days, but the convicts worked whole days. Needless to say, the coal company was stirring the trouble that they knew would come about from taking that approach, just to save money. Use of convict labor was obviously not the answer to having coal mined in Tracy City. None of this situation was about human beings and fairness but all about money. *At 5 o'clock this morning a committee of miners awoke E. O. Nathurst, Superintendent of the mines for the Tennessee Coal, Iron and*

Railroad Company, and asked him that the miners be allowed as many hours work in each week as the convicts. Mr. Nathurst replied that he would submit the matter to the company and do what he could…" (The Courier Journal, ***Aug. 14, 1892)***

The miners were really fired up and threatened a battle and even "*destruction to the stockade.*" So determined were the miners that many came armed and ready to carry off their convictions of saving their jobs, get rid of the convicts. They had no intention of killing anyone as long as the convicts were railroaded back to Nashville. At 9:00 on Sunday morning on **August 14, 1892**, "*…the stockade was burned and the 300 convicts were placed on cars ready to be started for Nashville.*"


(Photo. by J. S. Looney.)
STOCKADE BURNING.

The Tracy City Stockade burning on Aug. 14. 1892—depiction by J. S. Looney

"*Later on, Conductor Finch and Engineer Bolten were ordered to leave immediately with the convicts. Being covered by guns they were obliged to obey.*" I personally feel as though I knew Wm. H. Bolton, the engineer, as if he were a part of my family. I have researched him and his and written about the family, so upon reading that he was put under this pressure with a gun pointed at him, makes me sad even today. Within five years (**1897**) his engine would accidentally kill him leaving a wife and three children behind in Tracy City. "*Between Sewanee and Monteagle, the convicts cut the train in two and ten or fifteen made a break for liberty. Several shots were fired. Matt Wilson, white, was killed and the jaw of John Smith, a Memphis negro, was shot off. Three others were wounded, but they succeeded in escaping, as the guards could not leave the train." (The Courier Journal)* That night with an overload of 200 convicts, the main Nashville prison was saddled with keeping the Tracy City convicts until a new stockade was built.

On **March 10, 1893**, Horace Maynard "H. M." Vanbeber (white) died at Tracy City's prison. Horace's father was a Union (U. S. Army) man, and named his son after *Horace Maynard*, the popular politician that was trying so hard in the **1850s** to keep Tennessee in the Union. He was from Claiborne County, Tennessee. Horace's crime was forgery for which he was sentenced to six years by the Tennessee Supreme Court with **November 16, 1892,** being the commencement of his confinement in the Tracy City branch of the State Pen. *"The Journal and Tribune – **11 Aug 1892** – H. M. Vanbeber in error vs. the State. Vanbeber is charged with forging the name of Sterling Goins to an order by which he obtained $3.50 worth of goods from John Jones. He was sentenced to three years in the penitentiary."* Horace made an effort to get a higher court to review his records, but the decision was an unsuccessful one and his sentence was doubled.

Horace's family never knew what happened to him. In the remarks section of the prison document they read, "*Died **March 10/93** at Tracy City.*" Underneath this writing is a small stamped word, **DIED**. For whatever reason, Horace finished less than four months of his sentence before he **DIED.** I have looked at the records, and I can find no *cause of death* on Mr. Vanbeber's record. The paragraph below is a story passed down through the years, but the family doesn't know what actually happened; however, they would like to know where his body was placed. Wasn't the prison system set up in Tracy City obligated to let the Vanbebers know about their family member? Surely Mr. A. S. Colyar had filed the state rules concerning the convicts, and he was still alive should someone need to be told in what filing drawer they could be found. Files are kept for reasons.

Written by a Vanbeber relative: *"One story my grandmother told me that she heard from his mother is that another man from the same neighborhood was sentenced with him, and this man saw things that he told Horace's mother. He said Horace did something and for punishment he was put down in a hole with a grid type door, and they gave him a cup. They turned water on him and told him that he would work or drown. He scooped water as hard and fast as he could, and they nearly let him drown before dragging him out of the hold. He laid down on the floor a long time trying to catch his breath. When he finally got strength, he hit one of the guards with something, and they killed him for this. They sent word to his mother and wife that he got sick and died. It's hard to say how much of this story is true, but this is what my grandmother told me. She worried about where he was and I told her I would try to find out…"*

Let's look at another newspaper article: "*Chattanooga Daily Times – **28 Feb. 1885** – Knoxville, Tenn., Feb. 26 – Two years ago John Ingram, aged twenty-two was sent to Branch Penitentiary at Coal Creek from Elizabethtown for larceny. His term was three years. In July last the prisoner took sick in the coal mines and could not dig the amount of coal required by the* *officials. He is said to have been given eighty lashes on his bare back with a heavy leather strap. Ingram's mother arrived at the prison with a reprieve from the Governor the day he was whipped, but was refused her son's liberty. The next day the man died. The old woman, aged sixty, could not give her son decent burial at the time of death, so he was chucked away in the convict burial ground. For the past five months Mrs. Ingram has been working night and day to secure money enough to take the body back home for burial. Today the dead convict was taken up, having been buried only* ***ten inches deep****, and was taken home by his devoted mother. The excitement over the affair is great."* (The Governor of Tennessee in 1885 was Wm. B. Bate.) Yes, this was at the Coal Creek mines, not Tracy City, but there were no differences in the two prisons when it came to the inhumane treatment of the live convicts and their bodies should they have died in custody. Again, why was Tracy City's Convict Cemetery not listed and burials not recorded? Coal Creek had a burial ground if the article in the *Chattanooga Daily Times* was correct. We must not disregard everything in newspapers, family Bibles, government records, local verbal records; we must accept some if not most of the information provided to us through these mediums. We know from State records that numerous convicts died here in Tracy City. We can go back to Mrs. Sarah L. Cleek's statement for our answer to the question of convict burials. There were reasons why the convict cemetery was never talked about, but we will not go there this time.

Nashville Banner – ***03 Apr 1885*** – At Coal Creek Mines, "*The committee found that on the 31st day of last August Dr. McFerrin, the prison surgeon, made a post-mortem examination over the remains of a colored convict name George Banks, who had been killed in the mines by the falling of slate, and that Dr. L. J. Price, who assisted Dr. McFerrin, mutilated the body, and took the heart, lungs and other portions of the body away with him to be preserved in alcohol."* This might be a good place to remind the reader of the *Tennessee Tewksbury* article published in the *Nashville Banner* in **1886** by an anonymous author who later gave up his identity in an article written in Florida but published in the *Nashville Banner,* ***Mar. 25, 1886***. He left Nashville and had moved to Florida, but even after losing his beloved newspaper in a libel suit, he still kept in contact and submitted an article wherein he admitted he was the author of the Tewksbury article. He signed with his initials: A. L. L., Jr., namely, Albion Lowe Landis, Jr. The suit was known as State of Tennessee vs. The Nashville Banner Publishing Company, A. L. Landis, Jr., Gideon H. Baskette. To make a long story short, Mr. Landis, Jr. boldly wrote and published in his newspaper what he believed was the truth of happenings in the Tennessee prison system bringing to the forefront the fertile ground for abuse in Tennessee's convict lessee system. Mr. Landis, Jr. lost the lawsuit, big time. He wrote what he believed was the truth. We don't have many people left who care about truth. (**2020**)

On Jan. 1, 1887, Superintendent of Tennessee Prisons, T. C. Cain wrote in the ***APPPENDIX TO THE HOUSE JOURNAL of the FORTY-FIFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE*** at **Tracy City**:

"Upon my first visit to this branch prison, I found over 400 convicts confined in it. I found from 125 to 140 unable to perform manual labor, including such as were assigned to duty as cooks, hospital stewards, etc. There were two hospital buildings for the accommodation of these sick and disabled convicts. I found the convicts poorly clad; the wings without proper ventilation; the facilities for bathing insufficient, and no towels furnished. I found a custom prevailing of cooking the food of the convicts one day for their use the next day. I found that unless a convict was able to do a full days' work on any given day, he was not required to do anything for that day, but was kept confined to the prison."

"Changes?"

"As soon as practicable I caused a change of clothing to be provided for each convict, and required a thorough bathing and change of clothing to be made each week. The convicts working as they were, in the mines, were necessarily full of coal dust and filth when they came out of the mines. To remedy this condition, I caused each convict to be furnished with a proper sleeping garment, and required their use. By a very simple process I caused each cell to be ventilated."

"Conceiving that freshly cooked and warm diet would be conducive to health, I directed two meals a day – breakfast and supper – to be furnished to the convicts warm, providing at the same time a neat tin vessel for each convict, in which he carried his dinner to the mine. Under my direction, a steam boiler was fitted up in the prison, and a number of large water troughs, by means of which facilities for comfortable bathing are at all times at hand, and towels are furnished to facilitate cleanliness."

"Additional stoves were placed in the wings, to the end that the convicts might be prevented from suffering from cold in the severest weather. Conceiving it to be more healthful for the convicts to require of the partially disabled such labor as they could reasonably perform, I changed the rule in this respect, causing their tasks to be graduated to their ability." If these changes happened to come about instead of being written on paper and filed, then it was a good day for the convicts, but it took sixteen years of cruelty to get to this point. And folks, if it took this many changes, the conditions must have been deplorable. And let it be known that Jackie Layne Partin writes that the conditions were absolutely deplorable, and many people along the way, starting with the State of Tennessee, the coal company, the wardens, the guards, the local people, even the doctors who could have reported

truthfully the bad conditions at the stockade and mines will be judged for what happened in Tracy City.

Below are contents of five interviews found in the book, *No More Moanin'*. The interviews are full of words uttered by Grundy County people, namely, I. H. Cannon, Mr. Thompson, Mrs. Sarah L. Cleek, Mrs. S. O. "Aunt Tut" Sanders, and Dolph Vaugn. Special permission was obtained for their use in this story from Sue Sturgis, {*This interview/*s *originally appeared in Southern Exposure, a now-defunct print magazine published by the nonprofit Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, North Carolina (online at* www.southernstudies.org.)"} This is a worthy book for local researchers' libraries; please consider making it an addition to your shelves.

I. H. Cannon, Tracy City (born January 24, 1859): Sunday, March 18, 1937 Interview

A man of slight build, thin hair, a drooping mustache, which at one time he could twist back of his ears, fine sense of humor, a sparkle in his eyes that 78 years, all but 16 of them spent underground, has not dimmed. He has three nephews and a brother-in-law who were in the Ludlow massacre. In ***1875*** *at the age of 16 he started to work in No. 1 mine at Tracy City.*

The first time I ever heard of a labor organization in the Southland was from a man named Powderly {Terrence V. Powderly, president of the Knights of Labor}. It must have been somewhere between ***1880*** *and* ***1890****. Powderly was not here, but Old Tom Carrick was a Knights of Labor organizer. A man named Gotchaulk called by us "Gutshot" was another organizer. He was a furriner and left for the north. The knights of Labor did not have a majority of the miners. The Company had its thugs join the Knights of Labor and when they found out the leaders, they were fired. I belonged to the Miners' Craft. Affiliated with the Knights of Labor, about* ***1880****. It reigned for about a year. We met in a building, on the railroad to White City east of Tracy. Conditions were bad. We worked eleven hours a day. Drivers got 80 cents a day; coal diggers 20 to 25 cents a car according to the thickness of the seam. Later this got down as low as 12 ½ cent. We had no organization and the Company had several hundred convicts to whip us down with. We never had no success with the organization so long as convicts were here.*

The year before trouble broke out in Tracy there had been severe fighting in Coal Creek. On August 13 the miners ran the convicts off the mountain at Tracy. On the 15th the same thing was done at the iron mines at Inman, on the 17th at Oliver Springs coal mines, and on the 18th at Coal Creeks. (Commons, History of Labor in the US, v. 2, p. 498)

When the trouble started we had no organization. The convicts got all the work. I was a guard in the mines for a while. Convicts would be punished for not getting their tasks. The warden and deputy warden would do the whippin'. I never did task anyone more than six cars a day. The whipping was done with a two ply strap as wide as your three fingers, tied to a staff. The convicts were face down with their pants off. They were whipped on the hips and legs from 5 *to 12 lashes. Ordinary offenses were punished with a few lashes. If they tried to kill a man they were whipped more.*

We miners were about half-starved and we got up something like the sit-down today. We met on Sundays in a holler back of that hill. A time was set when we would run the convicts off the mountain. It rained all that night. I spent the night out in the rain. About the third morning after that about 80 people started from East Fork Holler. When they got to the stockade the crowd numbered about 200. Tom Carrick was to be the leader but he backed down at the last minute. Berry Simpson volunteered and took the lead. This was between eight and nine o'clock after the convicts were out in the mines and coke ovens, and the guards were scattered.

The night before the men had been out notifying the miners, but I did not know about it. I was in No. 2 mine and as soon as we heard about it we left. Franz Nunnally, Plais Grantham and about eight others come out. We come by the tipple and spoke to the bank boss and to the blacksmith, Franz Crabtree, but they refused to join us. Our men had guns, sticks, and nothing. I came home for my gun. On the way back I passed E. O. Nathurst, superintendent. "Good morning.: I said. He smiled. "Good morning." By this time the stockade was burning!

We went to the coke ovens and asked the guards for their guns. Part of them were with us, being from our community. Some asked us to take their guns and we wouldn't do it, saying we had no use for 'em. The convicts were rounded up and marched to the Tracy depot. Captain Burton, warden, begged for their guns. He was a mighty fine man. He said they would take 'em to Nashville. All this time the railroad was trying hard to get the engines off the mountain. They was four or five and all but one had gone. The last engine was run by Bill Bolton, engineer, and Levi Sitz, my nephew by marriage. The engine was moving. I threw the switch, and George McCullough threw a Winchester on Bolton and said "Stop." The engineer asked Thomas, railway superintendent, what to do. He said, "I say, sir, the miners are running things today. Go to them and get your orders." We had a string of flat cars, about ten or twelve, and put about 60 convicts in each car. By that time all the miners and most of the county had joined in. We must have had about 300. About ten o'clock the train set off. On a curve this side of Sewanee some convicts jumped and made a break. I was not there, but I heard two were shot and some got away.

At the iron mines in Inman, Sequatchie, the TCI Company had about 100 convicts. They sent a trainload of guards to Inman but the whole train was captured at the bridge on Big Sequatchie river, the guards were disarmed. My brother was detailed to the bridge and was there. The bridge was three or four miles from the mines. The convicts at Inman were sent also to Nashville, but the stockade was not burned, although the press said it was. Also the stockade at Tracy was not burned by the miners but by the convicts and set 'em free. I saw the convicts pouring on coal oil from a gallon bucket. We made a lot of money that morning for the TCI because the state paid the company $20, 000 for the stockade that was destroyed.

The convicts come back and stayed two years. The stockade was rebuilt. Gun openings six inches square and three feet from the ground were built in, and guard houses set on top of each corner.

Since this was written, Brother Cannon has passed on. His request to be buried with his UMW badge on was carried out. H was out hunting when he passed away, a hunter all his life, hunting for justice. He loved his fellow workers and served the union, in his brothers, and his good humor until the end. [JAD, Summer, 1938]

Mrs. S. O. Sanders, "Aunt Tut," 69 years old, Tracy City, Tennessee, April 1, 1937 Interview

Union has had hard times because there is not enough "stickability." People here are "like hot weather mushrooms."

Her two brothers were union men. She learned "right smart" about the union from them as a young girl. They were blacklisted. "The Knights of Labor come in here. It crops out a little in '86 or '87." Her younger brother J. C.., was a member of the Knights of Labor. 'That's how come he came to be blacklisted." They had very few members, only 10 or 12. Company thugs joined and as fast as they found out the members, they would be fired. All meetings were in secret.

After the burning of the stockade "I fed men right off my own table and never saw a face." Miners were "lying out in the woods" being hunted by the company. "I called 'em by a white flag run up on the fence. Our house was in the woods near old Burrow's Cove. The men would come up out of the woods in the back of the house. I fed 8 to 10 men a day, some of 'em boys I grew up with."

*Free n****** were run out in December, 1882. The people here were just about starving to death. Franklin and Marion County joined in. The crowd had to come through where father had a mill to get to N***** Hill. They never left a hoot of 'em. About 30 houses for free n****** were burnt on N***** Hill, later called Hobbs Hill and Kennedy's School House, just above the ice plant.*

*Then they brought in seven or eight hundred free n****** to run the coke oven. White men could not stand the heat to pull coke. Paid 10 cents an oven. A good hustlin' n***** would pull four or five a day. Seventy-five cents a day the best any of 'em made. Convicts were here at the same time, seven or eight hundred convicts. White men could not get jobs. No Lawd no.*

After I was 14 year up to time I was married I made stripes. That's convict clothes. One woman had a contract and we worked for her. Fifty cents a day and made from 12 to 16 shirts a day, worked from 6 to 6. The lady did the cutting and we did the sewing. Made caps, coats, shirts, pants.

Toughest time I ever heard after the convict trouble. Lawing and punishing citizens. Lots of 'em had to sleep out in woods. People who lived in the woods would feed 'em while were were getting' up a purse to get 'em away. Some went out toward Whitwell, some toward Jasper and Monteagle. High Sheriff Alec Sanders got shot and some miners got little scratches.

In April during the time of the first attack on the stockade there was an awful storm passed over and they lost one man in the attack (the rain made it impossible to shoot the dynamite). In August they capture the stockade.

Everything was done behind closed doors. What we got we had to sketch it. My old man and two brothers was in that convict trouble. My old man was victimized from 1893 to 1918. He did not even try to get a job until they got a union.

A. M. Shook, general manager of the mines, never gave a dollar on the school building that bears his name. He docked the miners' pay a dollar every month, and they was only getting about a dollar a day. If they did not have the dollar to their credit at the end of the month their children were not permitted to go to school.

After that we moved to Alabama in Walker County 30 miles west of Birmingham. Horse Creek was the old name for it. In 1908 there was a strike. Four hundred thugs lived 200 yards from my house. The president of the local, my old man and a young man was with me in the house. The company got an injunction and no men were allowed on the streets at all. Women could not go to the post office or the grocery store. Guards paraded the whole community. I fed and cared for these three miners. I shifted 'em around each night. First in one room, then another, to keep 'em from finding 'em. I guarded the house at night. Slipped around in the grass, and behind trees finding out what was going on and carrying messages. Another woman and me did most of the messenger work and we scarcely saw each other. We was about one mile form the station. One night four guards was out on the trestle waiting for the union officers to come from Birmingham. They thought they was in Birmingham but they was safe in my house all the time. They come outside of the house and stood by the gate talking, not thinkin' anyone was home. But I was lying scrootched up underneath the porch. They aimed to take the president out and do away with him. I heard it every bit. I slipped around to the president's house and put 'em to bed.

I've looked down the muzzle of guards' guns, several of 'em. I wouldn't trust 'em as far as I could throw a mule. I've seen so many of their tricks. I've seen 'em haul women and children out of their homes and throw 'em in the woods. I expect there's beds now in the woods.

Mr. Thompson—Tracy City, Tennessee, July 5, 1938 Interview

At the end of a long road the old man's cabin faced the road. Sitting in his doorway, he could see anyone coming down the road for half a mile. No screens, lots of flies. A deaf woman for a wife, tough on one who evidently likes to talk as much as he does.

When the convict trouble came we was only gettin' one day work a week. And the convicts was workin' full time. My brother was a guard. I used to visit him no tellin' how many a Sundays. I heard 'em beating the convicts. You could hear the strap from clear over as far as that cabin. I heard 'em holler. Yes, Lord. It was a sight to behold. I saw 'em kill'em in the mines. The mine boss that is, for not getting their tasks. And maybe they was sick. It was shameful.

For two or three months before the first attack right on through the second one we was drilling out on Reid Hill, two or three hundred of us after dark. There was some funny things happened. Bless your life, yes. One night a horse got loose and liked to scared those men to death. I bet I saw six or ten men all in a water hole. I laughed and laughed.

After we sent the convicts off the first time and burned the stockade, they built another one better than the first one. It had a block house on each corner and portholes about four inches square all around the walls. There was a mule barn up the hill and I saw portholes in that too and reported it.

*We were to report on Bivens Hill, about 250 of us. They told us to black up so nobody would know us. I blacked myself up with gunpowder melted up. Just the finest kind of a n***** with my gun, and started up to the hill after dark. There was too much whiskey and I begged them to wait until morning. I knew there would be some killing that night. Good heaven and earth. There was about 20 shot and Bob Erwin was killed. Shot in the back from the left-hand corner of the stockade.*

I shot an old man. I hate it but we was under orders. They say all is fair in love and war, you know. I had my gun poked in a porthole. Not far enough so they could grab it. Shooting at anything I could see. I was holding one of the rear portholes. I was using BB's in a double barrel shotgun. The old man said to me, "What's your name?" 'Here's my name," I said and let him have it. He was only 20 feet away. It caught him right in the middle. If he had been 50 feet away it would have cut him, too. I followed that fellow. Kept asking after him for a long time after that shooting. I finally found out where he was. And by George, he got well. I was glad.

We had two cases of dynamite planted under the office building on the corner of the stockade. But a heavy storm come up, and what with all the shooting and the rain we could not get it to go off. We used up two boxes of matches."

Mrs. Sarah L. Cleek, Laager, Tennessee (July 28, 1938 interview)

Started to Tracy late this afternoon to return a bundle of newspapers borrowed from Mr. Wright. Stopped at Henry Thompson's café for a bottle of beer and met Charlie Adams, John Cleek and Millard Hall. The three were politicking about the county. Charlie is the union candidate for road commissioner and apparently has the job sewed up. We talked about the old days of the union and John mentioned that he had an old diary at home belonging to his grandfather that covered some of the convict warfare days. This sounded most promising and I drove him home to look at it. We passed through Tracy, Coalmont and Gruetli post office to the crossroad known as Laager. His old mother lives in a little shack just off the highway. I had often observed her sitting on her porch when we passed on union business. The house is a poor excuse for a home, just a two-room shack, but it is the best that $2.00 a week old age pension money will afford. The yard was a blaze of color, petunias, zinnias and red sage. John introduced me and Mrs. Cleek went into the house *and returned with a small gray canvas fold stamped "Monthly Time Book" and in large printed pencil letters "C. G. Tate, 1894." It contained a lot of loose pages from the time book of her father, who had been a guard in the mines during the convict trouble at Tracy City.*

*With a question or two from John to help, she talked freely about the old struggles of the miners to make a living. Me and a widow woman used to carry pies to the stockade and sell them to the convicts. They were treated cruelly. With my own eyes I saw where they were buried. Their thighs or shank bones were not buried deep enough or something. They used to dig there for clay to daub the coke ovens with. The bones stuck out of the ground. I could see where the coffins was buried. N***** Hill, the convict burial ground was called. They sent them out to work sick or not.*

My Daddy said the warden and the doctor sent one man out to work one morning. He lay around the ovens during the day. A white man found him dead. They used to cry out to my Daddy to let 'em out. The lice and chinch bugs were eatin' 'em up.

But I saw a line of men a quarter of a mile long with shotguns on their shoulders one night. They marched and told 'em what to do and they did it, and they never had no more convicts. But they shot some of 'em. My uncle John Tate was shot through the shoulder. They're still holding the laboring class of people down.

"About how old were you, Mrs. Cleek, when you were married?" I asked. John spoke up, "You were nineteen, weren't you mammie?" "No sich thing," she said quickly, I was sixteen" and she went inside to get some papers to verify it.

I was born in 1869 and married in 1885. Getting' married is the biggest piece of foolishness. I'm not sorry 'cause I got a good man, a fine man. But children come along and you can't raise 'em like you want to. I had ten children.

My husband had his ankle busted and we went to Huntsville to live. I put my children in the Merrimac mill to make a living for the family. The two girls mad $5.00 a week each. I was treated like a red-headed step-child by those mill people. I want to tell you how dirty they done me. I didn't think they was that kind of men in the south. My children worked on and on. Business got bad and they let some go. I took in boarders to help along. We was in a company house. My one girl left in the mill was making five dollars and the took it all for rent and deductions.

My children come home at night all pale and almost dropped. They sweated blood. They drained me down. Kept nudgin' me for rent. Threatened to put me out. The super Joe Bradley ended it. And Sheriff Ben Giles tells me to vacate or he'll set me on the street. I tell him, "You'll have it to do." I had no money and they finally did set me right out on the street, me and my crippled girl and a boarder with a five-month-old baby. That boarder was Charlie Adams (now running for road commissioner).

John spoke up. "The trouble was there was too much union talk around that house."

"That's right, my girl joined," she said. "There ain't a drap of that scab blood in my viens. I'm a socialist from the crown of my head to the end of my toe.

Interview with Dolph Vaugn, October 3, 1938

Dolph has been a leading spirit in the Hodcarriers Union of WPA workers. Since the 1924 strike he has been blacklisted. He could renounce the union and get along, but he prefers poverty and self-respect. He has a two-story cabin that once was a substantial home. Now tie has made it merely a rough wall against the weather. The floor is worn and several boards are loose or out entirely. Boards will do to repair windows when there is no money for glass. This week he sold his cow to pay the grocery bill. He wore a pair of pants that loving hands had mended until nothing remained of the original cloth. His youngest girl. Helen, 5, eyes like saucers, blonde curls, loves to sing union songs with her mother. She corrected mother when the latter sang a new union song composed by her daddy. There are three other girls, the oldest just graduating from the eighth grade and a boy of about 12. The mother is a lovely woman, and still sings the old mountain ballads with a high pleasing voice. She sang Little Mohea on the British broadcast at Highlander Folk School. There is never a word of complaint from any of them. Nothing but the finest family unity. Children well-behaved, considerate and lovely. Surely there is no defeating such spirit. Sooner or later these people will win for themselves a decent world where they can lift up their heads like men and women, free from the terrible fear of hunger and want for themselves and family, and know that their children will have the opportunity to develop, and to enjoy the beauties and good things denied to them. Old Uncle John took a liking to them, naturally, and they make his bed and cook his biscuits. He takes care of himself otherwise.

Dolph's father, Bob Vaugn, was one of the members and leaders of the first local in Tracy. Bob Vaugn, Hughes Cannon (I. H. Cannon's brother) and Jim Frazier were the three men that threw their guns on the super and demanded the keys to the stockade at Tracy City. After it was all over they sent marshalls in to Tracy to try and find out who was responsible. They agreed that if they would let the convicts come back until their contract was up, they would drop all charges and would take the convicts away at the expiration of the contract. {There is more to this interview, but for sake of space—I (jackie partin) will leave at this point.}

What a sad, but wonderful undertaking in the book, "*No More Moanin'*" by Mr. Dombrowski and other interviewers, and editor Sue Thrasher, of not only history in Grundy County but other areas.

This was the beginning of the end of convict leasing by the coal company in the Tracy City mines. So determined or greedy were the coal company and the State of Tennessee that rebuilding of the stockade began immediately following the insurrection of **1892**. The convicts were brought back in greater numbers, and once again moved into a new stockade, but they came back as discontented convicts, under new policing, unsettled, and ready to make a run for it. As for the 500 free miners, some were ready too, ready for a repeat of **1892,** or just simply freeing all the convicts. In early **1893**, the convicts took the initiative and barricaded themselves inside the mines with their main complaints being poor rations. Convicts, Pete Hamilton (col.) and Sylvester Harris (white), lead the rebellion. Mr. Hamilton, a known troublemaker, was killed in the uprising. The convicts were all returned to the stockade.

In **April 19, 1893**, scores of free miners set about attacking the guards calling for the release of the convicts; their efforts were met by full force defense, later, including the military. Some older miners had learned that they could not win a war against the lessees and the State, so they had quietly remained home, but the younger men had not been so convinced. At each uprising, life-threatening wounds and death occurred on both sides of the issue. Maybe it could not be seen as an actual war—but it was! This confrontation left Deputy Warden Shriver wounded in the head but not seriously; Mathew Parsons, and another whose name is not known, were wounded; Bob Irwin, a miner, was killed; Guard Walden was fatally shot,

On **August 1, 1894**, *The Knoxville Weekly Journal* stacked its sub-topics each more interesting and exciting, than the other about our dear convict situation in Tracy City*:* *"**FRENZIED ZEBRAS IN REVOLT**" – "Two Men Killed and Two Others Fatally Wounded" – "…Convicts Convert a Pipe into a Most Deadly Gun…"*. Would it ever end—this greedy decision on how to make money off the backs of convict laborers and the unrest of local miners? "Monday night quarterbacking!" Isn't that what one would call my looking back at all the years between **1871** and **1896** when the use of convicts as coal miners began and ended in Tracy City. One line written by a reporter the next day marks the position that my mind carries around when I am thinking of this dreadful decision made by the State of Tennessee; a *Journal* reporter wrote, *"Enter that stockade, leave hope behind, for life there is a living hell."*

The incident reported above happened on **July 27, 1894**. Deputy Warden Willoughby Howard Nelson lost his life when a homemade bomb sent out of the mines on a railcar by the bewildered convicts blasted a door against a wall crushing his head, killing him instantly. His home was in Maury County, Tennessee where his last thoughts during the affray were probably on home and family. The leaders in the convict uprising knew what terrible punishments would confront them. I think the reader also can understand the unbelievable behavior on both sides of this issue. Moving on to the year **1895**, charges of "receiving and withholding money" that belonged to the convicts were brought against Warden Dyer, his son and some of the guards. After a thorough investigation, removal of the Warden and others was recommended.

What next? There had even been talk in some gossip quarters of putting out all the free miners and just using convict laborers. Thankfully, a great resolution came about without having to destroy the whole town of Tracy City. The system of using convict laborers in the coal and coke mines of Tracy City was finally finished. *The Tennessean –*

March 2, 1896, reported, *"The convict lease system in Tennessee, so far as it pertains to mining, is a thing of the past; all convicts have been removed from Tracy City and Coal Creek; their places will be filled with free miners. The long sought for event in the history of mining in this State occurred **Jan. 1, 1896**, at the expiration of the lease to the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company."*

Thus, one tumultuous section of Grundy County's history ended, but the labor disputes seemed to have perpetuated. However, that story belongs to another eager researcher and possibly one much younger than I. I want to write that as of **2020,** the town of Tracy City, Tennessee has its good and bad periods of history as do all cities. We don't want to destroy any of it; we simply want to learn from it and not repeat our former mistakes. Our town is prospering with the help of great citizens of different ethnicities.

[Note: Almost all words in italics are quoted from others' work from old newspapers (newspapers.com); prison records; personal email messages; my friend Lillian Ey; Census records; word of mouth from old timers; *Southern Exposure Magazine, Institute for Southern Studies, and TSLA*; these are many of my sources. There are so many other bits of information in my head, but this story will complement the shorter one I wrote several years back.]