

Digging in the Dirt – A Family Tradition

By Donna Bishop

McBee is the family name on my mother's side. That would be Irish you might know. Now as far back as anybody can recall all the McBee men both young and old were coal miners or so we've been told. Coal mining was the family tradition but ended in three violent tragedies. Three separate mining explosions claimed the lives of Mother's grandfather, father, and her older brother.

Digging for coal in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was dirty, dangerous, unpleasant work but often the only job available to feed the family. Mother's grandfather mined in Ireland before coming to America during the time of the potato famine. As a skilled coal miner he found work easily. He married an Indian woman from the Choctaw tribe. Ultimately the family was forced to move to Oklahoma where the Choctaw Nation was deeded land by the United States' Government in exchange for fertile land in Arkansas and Mississippi. Charles Irving McBee was killed in a mine explosion in McCurtain, Oklahoma on March 20, 1912. Seventy-three men died that day.

Mother's father Walter Elijah McBee was killed in a gas mine explosion in 1920 along with fifteen other miners. Oklahoma mines were notorious for being "gassy." Methane gases were trapped in mines and due to poor ventilation such gases were often accidentally ignited when black powder explosives were used.

The daily threat of a deadly explosion was reason enough to avoid being a coal miner but daily working conditions were bad also. Men often lay on their sides in narrow seams never higher than 20 inches. The seams were dusty, filled with water and rats. In early years candles were the only lighting. Many mines worked 24 hour shifts. The miners were responsible for placing wooden props to support the rocks over the seam as they were digging out the coal using a hand pick or short-handled shovel.

After Mother's father died she was taken to live in Colorado by her Aunt Montie and Uncle Ed. Ed had escaped death in a gas explosion and left Oklahoma to work on a road crew building the first Morrison Highway. Unfortunately, mother's older brother stayed in Savanna, Oklahoma. He followed his father's footsteps into the mines at age sixteen and was killed in a 1930 explosion along with his whole shift of thirty men. He was only eighteen.