

COAL MINER POET: A LIFE LAID OUT IN VERSE

Charlie Cole was a coal miner from, fittingly enough, Coal Hill.

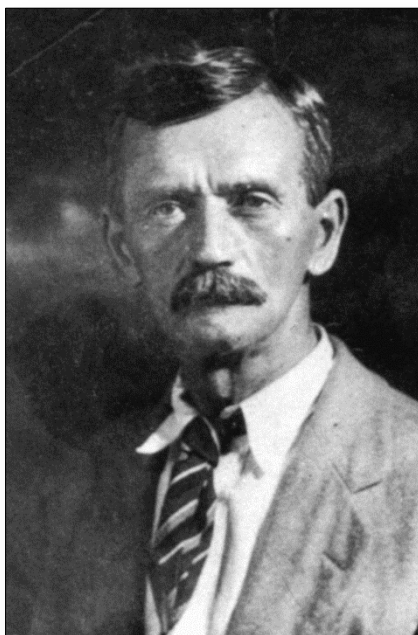
At the age of twelve, Charlie entered the coal mines, where he spent his life working in subterranean gloom until leukemia outraced his blackened lungs to kill him at sixty.

“He had no childhood, no real home life,” said his late daughter Loma in 1979 in describing her father’s time on earth. “His education was possibly the equivalent of third grade, yet he supported his father and brother all of their lives.”

Charlie Cole grew up and married Ida May Brundage, and together they raised a family of nine boys and three girls in their home at Coal Hill, not far from Braznell. Charlie and Ida were particularly fond of the letter “L,” an devotion displayed a dozen times when they dubbed their offspring Lawrence, Lloyd, Lewis, Leoda, Laird, Lester, Lincoln, Leona, Logan, LeRoy, Leonard and Loma.

Charlie spent most of his life in the dark. He began many workdays before dawn, descending into the bowels of the earth and emerging only after the sun had disappeared. He led a bleak life of toil, of being the family’s provider.

Yet despite years of cheerless drudgery in dust-choked gloom,



Charlie enjoyed rare moments of leisure above the surface. When he wasn't at work in the mine or tending to the demands of his dozen children, there was one particular pastime in which he indulged himself.

Charlie Cole, the miner with a third-grade education, wrote poetry.

It isn't certain when Charlie began to write about his life experiences, but it was probably around 1910 when he was nearly forty. Where he wrote his poems, and when he found the time to write, no one now living knows, but Charlie wrote enough verse to fill a book.

During the two decades before leukemia claimed his life in 1931, Charlie wrote in rhyme about the news of the day, his boyhood memories, the first World War, the coal field strikes, and whatever other topics struck his fancy. He even intended for some of his verse to be sung to familiar tunes, because some of his poems included a "chorus" to be sung after each of the stanzas.

Charlie did not allow his third grade education to handicap his self-expression as an observer of daily life around Brownsville during the 1910s and 1920s. A reading of his straightforward verse, which his daughter Loma published in 1979, carries the reader back to the rugged 1920s – years when coal was king in the Brownsville area, and when the Union was stumbling as it struggled to gain a foothold in this valley.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a day on which we recognize the social and economic achievements of generations of workers who have made America strong and prosperous. One American worker who joined the battle to strengthen the United Mine Workers of America in its clashes with the coal operators was coal miner Charles T. Cole.

Charlie was proud of being a union man, and in the years when he was toiling in the mines, the coal miners' battle to establish a union in southwestern Pennsylvania precipitated some of the nation's most violent labor strife. In his writings about the turbulence in the coal fields, Charlie left no doubt about how he felt about the coal operators and their hired guns. These were not the musings of a professional writer trying to imagine the feelings and sentiments of a typical coal miner. These words came directly from the soul of a coal miner himself, straight from his heart to his writing tablet.

In 1922, with post-World War I demand for coal declining, coal mine operators drastically slashed their employees' already meager wages. In response, some miners sought factory work, but others clung desperately to the hope that the trend would reverse. In the end, it took more than hoping.

It took the mother of all strikes.

The terrible coal strike of 1922-23 in southwestern Pennsylvania, which began in April 1922, was a violent year-long life-and-death

struggle for union recognition. The United Mine Workers of America, which was desperately trying to gain strength in the coal fields of southwestern Pennsylvania, led the fight. Only after many months of standoff marred by Coal and Iron Police evictions of families from their coal patch homes, leaving them to spend a frigid winter living in tents, was some degree of success finally achieved.

Through it all, Charlie Cole wrote his poetry. Below are his words, penned nearly a century ago. As you read them, remember what these workers went through in 1922-23. Some of those miners may have been your ancestors, and what they did three generations ago has led to the standard of living many Americans enjoy today.

THE GREAT COAL STRIKE OF 1922

*Twenty weeks of the Great Coal Strike have almost past and gone,
And the public loudly cries for coal and is wondering what is wrong.
Kind friends give me your attention, listen to what I have to say,
And I humbly ask your sympathy for the miners that are out on strike today.*

*They are shot, starved and beaten and driven from their homes,
By the iron hands of the coal barons, whose only god is gold.
But the younger generation is getting wise of late,
They want some of the profits that their labor does create.*

*Now friends just take an automobile ride and visit the various mines,
The cause of the strike you will plainly see, it isn't hard to find
At every mine that is trying to work you will see, the iron hand of monopoly,
Men, women and little children are thrown out in the rain,
By the company they made millions for, these tyrants have no shame.*

*The deputies employed to guard the mines are the lowest type of earth,
And I sure to God am sorry for the women who gave them birth.
We wonder where they came from and if the good Lord did create
A man as low as a deputy, that the world has learned to hate.*

*Now they should be deported to the wilds of Africa or on some isolated isle,
That is infested with poisonous reptiles and everything that's vile
And keep them all together there for humanity's sake,
For everybody knows that a deputy is more poisonous than a snake.*

*A snake once bit a deputy, it was a copperhead,
And just ten seconds later that copperhead was dead.
It was poisoned by the deputy; it met an awful fate,
Those are the kind of reptiles that infest our Keystone state.*

*The Operators through selfishness, hatred, greed and lust,
Overlooked the interest of others and tramped humanity in the dust,
If they could only overcome that awful greed for gold,
And be satisfied to give a small percent of their profits to the men that mine the coal.*

*And be friendly to one another and not stand in each other's light,
For the Lord smiles on the miners' cause of justice and of right,
Now a warning to all miners, to your Union be true,
There are brighter days in store for you, cheer up and don't be blue.*

*The dark clouds are passing over and the sky is getting clear:
A few more weeks will win the strike, have confidence, don't fear,
For all we want is justice; we ask for nothing more,
So place your trust in the Lord above, He will guide our ship to shore.*



This photograph, taken on April 8, 1929, provides a view of two communities. On this side of the river are homes, some of them miners' dwellings, situated north of Baltimore Street on Brownsville's North Side. On the extreme left margin of the photo is the First Methodist Church, identifiable by its steeple. West Brownsville is laid out on the far side of the Monongahela River.

The strike dragged on through summer and fall, until it became clear that the mine operators would challenge the fortitude of the striking miners and their families to make it through the cold winter without a job or a home. Since the coal companies owned the houses in which the miners had lived, all striking miners had been evicted from their homes. Some of the houses were turned over to “scab” laborers brought in from the South to break the strike.

Furnishings and personal belongings were callously dumped in the street as the Coal and Iron Police, the “deputies,” supervised the evictions. As autumn leaves fell in October 1922, after seven months of striking against the unyielding coal operators, the miners refused to knuckle under and re-enter the mines. Instead, they and their families moved into canvas tents to shelter themselves against the coming winter winds and snow.

To bolster his own spirits and to preserve this amazing scene for posterity, Charlie Cole took pen in hand and set to describing the circumstances he and his fellow miners faced as winter approached. Next, Charlie Cole will vividly portray this gritty battle for labor solidarity in his poem, *The Miner’s Tent Colony*.

**COAL MINER’S POETRY PORTRAYED
BROWNSVILLE IN AN EARLIER ERA**

“He was keenly interested in all that went on around him. He was also aware of the injustices with which the poor had to contend. He used his voice, in prose and poetry, at times, a limited vocabulary, to state his beliefs.

In all the drabness and the day to day plodding, his sense of humor and his compassion and empathy for people came through. He was extremely proud of his Irish ancestry and equally proud of being an American.”

---- *Loma Cole Kaminski, 1979*

Charles T. Cole was a Brownsville coal miner and amateur poet who, with his wife Ida May Brundege Cole, raised twelve children.

Nearly fifty years after Charlie died of leukemia in 1931, one of his daughters, Loma Cole Kaminski, sorted through poems her father had written. As she read them, a plan formed in her mind.

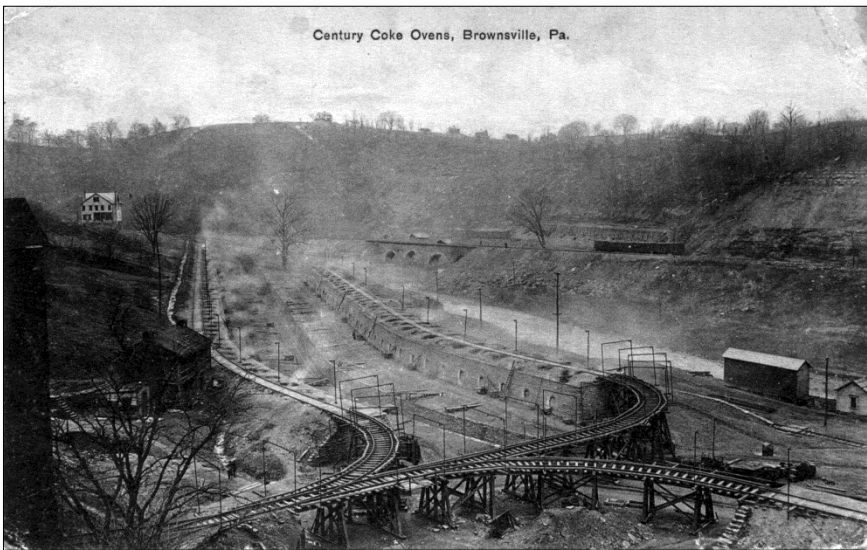
Her father had poured too much of his soul into writing these poems to allow them to be tossed aside and forgotten. Loma vowed that she

would do whatever was necessary to see that her father's poetry would survive for his many descendants to read.

Cindy Isler Keefer of Brownsville is a grandniece of the late Loma Cole Kaminski and a great-granddaughter of Charlie T. Cole. Cindy explained how her great-grandfather's poems came to be published in book form.

"Loma lived in Ohio in the late 1970s," Cindy told me. "She felt her father's writings should be preserved, and she gathered his loose poems, arranged them by subject, and had them printed in a book she called *The Words of C. T. Cole – Coal Miner*. I doubt that she had very many copies printed, and I am under the impression that she distributed the books to family members."

Charlie Cole's poems painted pictures of Brownsville during the early twentieth century. In particular, some of them detailed the life-and-death struggle between the coal operators and coal miners, who were determined to strengthen their union, the United Mine Workers of America.



The terrible coal strike that began in the spring of 1922 dragged through autumn into winter. Families who had been evicted from their patch houses took refuge in tents where striking miners desperately tried to shelter their wives and children from winter's fury. In the deadly battle between fabric and icy winds, overwhelmed canvas lost. Some miners' children died from exposure, casualties of a war beyond their

bewildered comprehension.

The stories of misery and death emanating from the icy mud of the tent camps were heartbreaking. Furious at the coal operators and bitter at what he perceived as their heartless tactics, Charlie Cole unleashed his outrage in a torrent of vitriolic verse.

THE MINERS' TENT COLONY

*Here is to the miners that are out on strike,
May they live to be old and gray,
And always carry a Union card
And stand on their merits and say:*

*"We have helped to mine the coal
For the Great World War and never once felt blue,
But now I stand in my own native land
And Kaiser Bill looms in view
The combined force of the Coal Barons of nineteen twenty-two*

*Gunmen are guarding the mines today,
And no man is safe on the public highway
And the miners have no rights they say.
The miners' families are thrown out in the rain.
These tyrants are vultures and void of shame.
They are powerful, we know full well
But the Tower of Babel once crumbled and fell.*

*And many a miner now lives in a tent,
With a great big heart, he is old and bent,
In a tumbled down shack his youth he spent
And all his earnings were taken for store goods and rent.*

*And when he no longer could carry the load,
He and his family were thrown on the road.
But on Sunday morning you can safely say
To some little church he will wend his way.
And young and old, feeble and gray
Will ask the Lord to bless them on the Sabbath Day.*

*Now friends will visit the various mines,
Hundreds of families in tents you will find.
These miners were evicted from their homes,
And for the tents they are glad
Even better than the houses they had.*

*The tents were a godsend from Heaven above,
To the miners as a token of love.
And we are going to hoist Old Glory over the tent-colonies dome,
And wave over the miners that were driven from home.*

*Men, women and little children were thrown out in the rain,
By the company they made millions for. These tyrants have no shame.
Now when this great coal strike is won, and peace reigns throughout our land
We will ask the Lord, who is all wise, to bless our Union band.*

*So the tent colony now is the miners' home,
And the stars and stripes wave over her dome,
A few more words then we are done,
We will never go back to the mines, until the strike is won.*

*We are Union and law-abiding citizens, this is no brag,
We love our country, God and flag
So let us hope for a brighter day,
When the Union Miners receive more pay.*

The Great Coal Strike ended in Fayette County in early 1923 with only minimal gains made by the miners. One consolation was that they had shown the coal operators that miners could maintain solidarity despite the incredible forces of nature and man arrayed against them. In later years, their stubborn example inspired southwestern Pennsylvania miners to carry on the “fight for the Union.”

In Charlie Cole’s later years, he and Ida May resided at 325 Pearl Street in Brownsville, and he wrote some of his poems while they were living there. Charlie died in 1931, and his widow Ida May died in 1952. After Charlie’s death, his poems lay forgotten for many years until his daughter Loma rediscovered them and had them printed in a soft-cover book in 1979.

A few months ago, my wife noticed a copy of *The Words of C. T. Cole - Coal Miner* at a sale, and she purchased it. We have donated the book to the Brownsville Free Public Library so that others may share this Brownsville coal miner’s long-ago perspective on a wide variety of topics. The book contains seventy poems written in the 1910s and 1920s about personalities of that era, local sporting events, prohibition, coal mining, the first World War, and poems on miscellaneous topics that are assembled in the book’s final section, “This and That.”

Charlie Cole wrote about whatever was happening in the Brownsville area. In one poem, he described the opening of Peter Sickles’ new grocery store on Union Street. In another, he praised local hero Paul Wyatt’s capture of two Olympic swimming medals in 1924

and 1928. In a third, he humorously portrayed a Brownsville - South Brownsville pool hall showdown between Ollie Mitchell and a shark he called "old Kennebec."

In the book's last poem, *Visions Of Bygone Days*, Charlie reminisced about his youth. He recalled the old wooden covered bridge in Brownsville and its toll keeper, Jack Rathmell; the boatyards that once lined the riverbank at West Brownsville; the horse racing track along the Mon near "old Lock Five;" the circus ground in the bottoms of Dunlap Creek; and the Mon River packet boats whose distinctive whistles were so familiar to all who lived in the valley.

Very little went on in Charlie's world that he didn't feel inspired to preserve in rhyme. Thanks to his daughter Loma, we still have his simple collection of verbal snapshots of the Brownsville of a century ago. *Visions of Bygone Days* ends with these words from Charlie:

*Now I am going to lay my pen away
To write some more some other day.*

*Now watch and wait and you will see
When visions, they come back to me*

*Of places where I used to roam,
At Brownsville, my boyhood home.*