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A coal mining song

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by Jim Van Fleet

Minstrels of the Mine Patch

SONGS AND STORIES
OF THE ANTHRACITE INDUSTRY

By
George Korson



Philadelphia
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
1938

Coal Dust on the Fiddle

SONGS AND STORIES
OF THE BITUMINOUS INDUSTRY

By
George Korson



Philadelphia
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
1943

Every aspect of a miner's work life and social life too, produced memorabilia of interest. And for each type of tool or "cultural artifact" there seems to be a collector. Miner's songs are no exception! The anthracite miners of Pennsylvania had a rich and varied body of shared folk songs, and they were collected by a newspaper reporter turned folklorist named George Korson.

Korson collected coal mining songs and folklore from the 1920's through the 1960's in and around Wilkes-Barre, PA, and published several books of song. His most notable collection is **Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry**, published in 1938. The book's black cover was pressed to resemble anthracite!

One of Korson's informants was Bill Keating, who had been a breaker boy, then mule driver from the age of eleven. Keating made up his ballad "*Down, Down, Down*," as he said "between gangway roof falls, put together on a mine car bumper, penciled with car sprags, punctuated with mule kicks, tuned to the thunder and vibration of underground blasts and muted

to the solitude of the mines, while this mule driver rhymester worked between drunks traveling in and out of the Buck Mountain counter gangway on the third level of Oak Hill shaft at Buckley's Gap, Duncott."¹

Keating would hold forth in the local bar room, singing the forty or more verses of the song for free drinks. On the following page are a few verses of the song, which give a wicked description of the miner's electric cap lamp.

Notes:

1. Korson, George, **Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry**. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938. Reprinted with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Musical arrangement by Christopher Para. For an excellent recording of the song, as sung by Bill Keating himself and recorded by Korson, find the L.P.: **Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miners**. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Archive of Folksong, AFS L16 1976.

Down, Down, Down



With your kind a - tention a song I will



trill, All ye who must toil with the pick and the



drill, And sweat for your bread in that hole in Oak



Hill, That goes down, down, down.

The lamp man he squints through the window at me,
"What's your name? What's your age? What's your number?"
Says he.

"Bill Keatin', I'm thirty, number twenty three,
Mark that down, down, down.

With a frown of disfavor, my joke it was met,
For an argument plainly, the lamp man was set.
He told me that devil a lamp would I get
To go down, down, down.

Says I, "Mr. Lamp Man, now don't l'ave us fight;
Can't ye see by me eyes I was boozin' all night?
Sure the mines will be dark and I'll have to have light
While I'm down, down, down."

With an old greasy apron, Jim polished his specks,
Declarin' the lamp house rules would be wrecked,
If he'd give out his lanterns without a brass check
To go down, down, down.

I found the supply clerk, of him I inquired
If he had any checks of the sort Jim desired.
He said: "here's a check, if you lose it, you're fired,
Mark that down, down, down."

Now I had the lamp check to pacify Jim,
flip, into his window, I flung it to him
Sayin', "Now quit your grumblin', an' give me a glim
To go down, down, down."

A contraption Jim gave me, a hose on a box,
Twas so heavy I thought it was loaded with rocks,
If a car jumped the track, you could use it for blocks
While you're down, down, down.

With a note from the boss to the shaft I made haste,
Saluted the top-man, in time took me place.
Sayin' "Give me a cage for I've no time to waste,
Let me Down, Down, Down."

"All aboard for the bottom." the top-man did yell,
We stepped on the cage, he ding-donged a bell;
Then from under our feet like a bat out o' Hell
She went Down, Down, Down.

The box breaks the bones in the small of your back,
Wears the hide off your hips where it hangs by a strap;
Oh! the gawk that transported such lamps to the Gap
May go down, down, down.