

The Beechmont Coal Mine

In the early part of his life, my Grandfather John Calhoun McMichael was part owner and superintendent of the Beechmont Coal Mine located at Beechmont, PA in Collier Township, Allegheny County, PA. It was a drift mine, i.e. it was mined by tunneling into a side of hill and using rail carts pulled by mules to bring the coal to the surface. It was one of at least four mines operating along a creek called Thoms Run.

How the coal rights originally came into his and his sister Florence "Flora" McMichael Sturgeon hands is a bit cloudy, and I have not done a rigorous title search. However, according to a few short sheets of paper signed by John's sister, Flora, the property was originally owned by Alexander Liggett¹. Alexander gave the coal rights to his son Archibald but we do not know how the coal rights were transferred. Alexander's son Archibald married Mary McMichael, sister of John McMichael, Jr., and when Archibald died in the 1850's, the court appointed John McMichael, Jr., the administrator of his estate and guardian of his minor children. Things became a bit muddled when Alexander Liggett died in the early 1870's. A neighbor, William Boyd, was appointed the administrator of Alexander's estate. He sold the surface rights to a Captain John W. Nesbit and was planning to sell coal rights separately but too cheaply. When the children of Archibald learned of this, they sought out John McMichael, Jr. who had administered their father's estate and asked him to bid at a fairer price. John did, but afterwards the heirs asked him to take it off their hands because they had moved to Ohio. Shortly thereafter John sold the coal rights to a man from Ohio, an Emery F. S_ynn (sp?), who first opened it as a pit mine in 1885. Being an absentee owner, he soon fell prey to the mine's dishonest managers, and found himself in financial trouble. Exactly, how it happened is a bit uncertain, but the mine ended up in John McMichael Jr.'s hands. John brought suit against Lynn Cope and Company in the Court of Common Pleas regarding "certain leasehold of premises at Beechmont Station, P.C. & Y.R.R." There was sheriff sale on 27 December 1887 at which J.W. Nesbit purchased the mine lease for \$25. Just two days later Nesbit transferred the lease to John "for value received." John in turn leased it to his son John Calhoun McMichael and his son-in-law William Sturgeon². A ledger dated 24 August 1887 recorded that John C. and William put up \$500 each to buy a "set of mules" and other equipment, and they were selling coal as early as 29 August 1887. Oddly, they did not sign a lease with John C.'s father until 1 January 1889³. On 5 February 1890, a bit over a year later, William Sturgeon died leaving John C. McMichael to run the mine himself with his sister Flora, William Sturgeon's wife, as a partner.

¹ Flora states that this Archibald gave the mining rights to his son Archibald Jr., but this seems unlikely because Archibald Jr. would have still been a minor at the time of transfer and not had children. I believe she confused Archibald Sr. with his father Alexander Liggett.

² William McConnell Sturgeon was a school teacher with certificate from Jefferson College. But after having been treated rather savagely with the stove poker by some of the larger boys in the school, he had to retire. The result of that treatment led to his early death.

³ You can find the ledgers and this lease in the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh.

John C.'s father John Jr. died 4 August 1891. In his will he instructed that the proceeds from the lease of the mine be divided among all four of his children. His son John C. was the executor.

Sixth—I will and direct that all my just debts and funeral expenses be paid out of the rents or royalties of the tract of coal-land which I now own situate in Collier Township, said County and which is at present leased to my son John C. McMichael and my late son-in-law Wm M. Sturgeon deceased and after the payment of said debts and expenses, I direct that the proceeds derived from the mining of said coal according to the terms of said lease be divided equally among my four children above named and in case the lease of said coal should be determined before all the coal contained in said tract has been mined, I direct and empower my executors to sell or release so much thereof as may then remain unmined upon such terms and conditions as in their judgment shall be most advantageous to my estate and divide the proceeds among my said children in the manner and terms herein before set out.

His father's will, thus fundamentally changed the original lease arrangement. Now instead of just being the property of John C. and his one sister Flora McMichael Sturgeon, it was in effect owned by all four of John Jr.'s children: Nancy, Flora, Maud and John C.

John C. was still single then and a cloistered life at the mine probably wore on him. He found relief in reading and began attending the local literary society. Literary societies were quite popular then, and other than church, was one of the few local social outlets available other than a tavern. The one John C. attended met at the Hickman School not far from the mine. There he met his future wife, Eleanor "Ella" Douglass, who taught at that school. He married her on 9 June 1892, and she came to live with him at the mine. The first three of their eight children were born there. Life for the two of them while they lived at the mine before they had children was documented in Ella's diary. In it she wrote about spending her time sewing, baking and doing other domestic duties. It also noted that she took over running the company store at Hickman. John C. is recorded as paying a license tax of \$7.00 in 1897 for the right to operate the store. Her diary also indicates she did the payroll. Since they were conservative Presbyterians, it is not surprising that she also wrote they walked to church on the Sabbath rather than taking a buggy.

In the ledger containing entries from 24 August 1887 to 30 November 1897, most of the sales recorded were to the Pittsburgh and Lake Eire Railroad (P.&L.E.), but there were sales to many others including Standard Oil. The price ranged from a low of 45¢ per ton to \$1.00 per ton. This is consistent with what William Vogel, my cousin, told me before he died. While the Pittsburgh and Lake Eire Railroad R.R. may have been the chief buyer, the coal was carried from the mine on the tracks of the Pittsburgh, Chartiers and Youghioghney Railroad (P.C.&Y.) that had built a spur along Thoms Run to service the mine tipples there. This railroad was not very long, and was built as a shortline connector linking several larger railroads including the P.&L.E., Pennsylvania, and Baltimore and Ohio (B.&O). In addition to carrying away the coal, the railroad offered scheduled passenger service and there was a stop at Beechmont. Thus, it was very convenient for John and Ella to make occasional trips into Pittsburgh.

Flora stated that the mine never experienced a strike but reports in local papers indicate otherwise. Further, Ella recorded labor unrest in her diary entries from January 1894. She wrote:

Jan 27. Slept late as usual. Baked and made some doughnuts and a cake.

The mob made us a call today, and considering that this is pay day, and that we paid as usual, it is a wonder they did not do more damage than they did. As it was, they battered our milk can all to pieces, pulled the bell rope down, and worst of all destroyed the men's tools. We are unable to say just what they have done elsewhere, but have reason to think that if they do not come here again we may be very thankful we fared no worse.

The mob has burned several tipples and is coming back this way. Our tipple is guarded by ten men. Did ever such a state of affairs exist before?

Jan 28. Everything is quiet, but, Oh my! such a state of unrest as the existing state of affairs causes. John went to Oakdale to Church, but I thought it was more than I was equal to, but went to the school-house and heard Mr. Duncan preach. He is not a first class preacher, but his sermon today had a somewhat quieting effect on my nerves. Altogether it has been a very unpeaceful Sabbath.

The man who was shot at Beadlings died this morning.

Jan 29. The day has passed about the same as the two days before. One feels as though they were a dynamite bomb which indeed they may be. Quite a number of arrests have been made and I think things will quiet down presently. Hope so at least as I think I will be worried to death pretty soon if they don't. So far as my work is concerned, I have to say that it is not getting along very fast.

Jan 30. Am here by myself and just wander from room to room and cannot content myself to sit down and sew. Went to see Mrs. Hickman in the afternoon. Found her as usual. Called at Mrs. Wilhelm's on my way home. Got home about six o'clock and got supper, washed up the dishes and read awhile. When John and two of the deputies came in and stayed until bedtime. The rioters are quiet, but they give evidence of the spirit of riot and no doubt will break out again if they get half a chance or have the least provocation. I wish things would quiet down that so a person could take up their work as they ought to do. John is going to run tomorrow.

Jan 31. As usual am here alone, have been since early morning and it is now after seven o'clock P.M. I have not felt well all day and must say that I feel intensely home-sick, but get no encouragement whatever to go home.

I think the guards have been withdrawn and all is quiet for the present. How long it will last we do not know. Thus closes the first month of the year. If the next eleven are anything like this, I am afraid we will all be tired living when the year ends.

This episode was known locally as the Mansfield riot after the nearby town of Mansfield⁴. The mob apparently marched up Thoms Run wreaking damage on some of the mines in their wake. They were carrying black flags, clubs, stones and some guns. A trial of some 58 men and boys who took part in the riot was held the following month in Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh Press, 12 February 1894). The unrest led to much concern. The union considered company stores, to be particularly abusive (Pittsburgh Post, 7 April 1895). While there were some honest ones, most

⁴ This town later renamed itself Carnegie, PA in a deal to get Andrew Carnegie to build a library there.

company stores over priced their goods and they would often threaten their employees with firing if they shopped elsewhere. In early July of 1897, the United Mine Workers went on strike and closed down most of the mines in the area, including the Beechmont Mine. On 29 July 1897, the Pittsburgh Post reported on the drawing up an agreement among the coal operators in the Pittsburgh area to bring uniformity and address the complaints of their laborers. There were some twenty points in the agreement. Perhaps the most important ones were that laborers had to be paid in cash on a semi-monthly basis and the abolishment company stores. On 4 August 1897, the Beechmont Coal Company was informed that it was one of the companies expected to sign the agreement. Having made progress on that agreement, the union pushed for more, among its other issues was an eight hour work day (Pittsburgh Daily Post, 27 November 1898).

On 19 August 1898, the family leased the mine to a Mr. E.W. Powers for a five year term and 8 cents a ton royalty on the mined coal. Mr. Powers was already operating one of the adjacent mines. This appears to be the same E.W. Powers that the Commonwealth brought charges against for lack of ventilation at the nearby Chartiers Block Coal Mine (Pittsburgh Dispatch, 1 February 1880), but was acquitted (Pittsburgh Daily Post, 4 February 1890). Mr. Powers must have been a rough character. He was once indicted for an unknown misdemeanor crime. In another case, he brought suit claiming he was slandered when he was accused of theft and murder. He won that case too (Pittsburgh Dispatch, 18 November 1892).

After leasing the mine, John C. moved back to the farm in North Fayette Township that he had also inherited from his father. This move was something he has discussed with his sisters since at least 1896. In a letter to his sister dated Mar. 27, 1901, it is noted that he had developed an adversarial relationship with Mr. Powers. He mentioned this in a letter to his sister while discussing the fixing up the houses they still owned on the mine property to make them suitable for rent. He noted that Mr. Powers might be doing a shoddy job of mining and was seeking an engineer to estimate the amount of the remaining coal. How this lease got terminated is unknown, but sometime before 1900 John C. leased the coal rights to Peter F. Hormel. Hormel appears to have run the mine well and John mentions him paying a royalty of \$274.94 on 21 January 1903. In addition to the Beechmont mine, Mr. Hormel also ran three other mines including the nearby Federal Mine No. 2.

Like all businesses, mining was at the whim of the economy. In 1904, there was a shortage of railroad coal cars for shipping the coal (Pittsburgh Press, 29 March 1904). Then in the summer of 1905 John noted in his letters that many mines were shutting down and he would not be able to sell them the hogs he had reared. Mr. Hormel may have taken advantage of these events to increase his holdings. He made an offer to John C. and his sisters to purchase the coal for \$200 per acre plus \$600 for the two acres and house at the tipple⁵. John C. and his family turned him down.

⁵ John C. and his sister Flora also owned six acres outright at the mine on which there were tenet houses. In a letter to one of his sisters dated Feb. 27, 1899, John C. was debating whether to sell or fix them up in order to rent them. He did rent them,

The *Report of the Department of Mines of Pennsylvania*. (Vol. 2., march 30, 1905) gives an idea of nature of the mining business at Beechmont. In it Hormel reported 21,494 tons of coal were mined in 1900. This report also noted that there were 38 employees and only 100 tons were used by the mine itself for heat and steam. The mine was worked 228 days a year, so there was no rest on many Sundays. Among the employees were 2 foremen, 1 fire boss, 34 miners, 2 drivers and runners, for a total of 39 workers inside the mine. Outside the mine there was 1 foreman and 1 other employee for a total of 41 people. The report also noted that the Beechmont mine was in poor condition particularly in providing adequate ventilation. Still, compared to other mines its was relatively safe. One known injury at the mine was a broken leg from a slate fell on a single 48 year old Italian named Antonia Miluni on 31 March 1905.

In early 1905 The Pittsburgh Coal Company sued Hormel, claiming it owned the coal rights at one of his other mines. John C. worried that Hormel might not be in business by the time the trial came up. The verdict in December of 1905, however, was in Hormel's favor. John C.'s relationship with Hormel, while better than with Mr. Powers, was not always easy. In a letter to his sister dated 10 October 1906 John C. wrote: "Peter Hormel has leased or bought the Old Federal Mine and the Oak Ridge Mine. He is getting ready to run the Oak Ridge. I expect he will try to queer me on my or our suit for royalty against the Pittsburgh Coal Co. If he does, I will do enough and plenty to him."

The history of the lease holders after Hormel remained confusing up until John C.'s death on 30 September 1933. At the time of his death, the lease was held by the heirs of Tom Catley who had a perpetual lease on the coal rights. Mr. Catley mined the coal until about 1922, but died leaving the lease to his children. Tom Catley had only operated the mine intermittently and the royalty checks to the McMichael family were sporadic. After Tom Catley's death, the lease became a part of his estate. Catley's children were in disagreement and quarreled over the Beechmont lease. They were still quarrelling at the time of John Calhoun's death in 1933. One son, Tom Catley, Jr., had reopened the mine and re-equipped it, but the opposing faction of his family slipped in and sold some of the equipment. Even before that, some of the Catley heirs had operated the mine without paying any royalty.

With John Calhoun's death, his oldest son John Clive McMichael took charge of clearing up the mess and convinced his fellow heirs to give up ownership of the coal rights. John Clive determined that the coal had pretty much been worked out and the lower seams were too thin to be worked economically. So he marshaled his siblings into agreement, and got the approval of his Aunt Flora and Aunt Nancy to sell their coal rights. (His Aunt Maud McMichael, who also

at least for a while, since in his letters he often wrote about collecting those rents and distributing them to his sisters. One curious letter to his sister Maud dated 11 February 1904, noted that there were several cases of small pox among the tenants living at the mine and all the schools were closed.

rights, had died in 1906.) Thus ended all McMichael claims to the coal rights at the Beechmont Mine.

Genealogy: Alexander Liggett → Archibald Liggett m Mary McMichael. Archibald Liggett. Mary McMichael was the daughter of John McMichael, Esq.

John McMichael, Esq. → John McMichael, Jr. → John Calhoun McMichael m Eleanor "Ella" Douglass → John Clive McMichael, Robert Neale McMichael, Paul Littell McMichael, and James Maxwell McMichael.