Message from the Darkness

By Bill Archer

As he was waiting for death, 49-year-old Powell Harmon wrote his final thoughts on the pages of the small notebook that he carried with him into the Fraterville Mine on May 19, 1902. It was at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and Powell Harmon was among the men whose muscle and willpower would lift the United States from its agrarian past into an industrial might that would change the world order.

During the late decades of the 19th Century, the rural Cumberland Mountains of Anderson County, Tennessee, became one of the national staging sites for large scale commercial extraction of coal. The first coal boom in the US that started in the years after the American Civil War, attracted immigrants from many nations to the coalfields. Immigrants from Wales were among the most experienced coal miners who immigrated to North America, having ushered in the first wave of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain.
The pre-Civil War wealth in the southern states that formed the Confederacy was consumed by the high cost of war. As part of its post-war restoration efforts, Tennessee authorized the use of inmate labor in various industries as the state worked to rebuild. That practice didn’t set right with native Tennesseans from the Cumberland Mountain region who wanted to take advantage of the new coal industry jobs. Welsh miners had never quit battling for personal rights and freedom from their English hosts.

The free Appalachian mountain men and Welsh immigrants battled for fair pay, fought against coal company corruption, and eventually took on the Tennessee militia in an armed insurrection in 1891-92 that would become known as the Coal Creek War. Unlike the Civil War, the Coal Creek War was a struggle between the provincial rule of the past pitted against the free enterprise industrial movement of the future. Coal miners found themselves on the front lines of that struggle.

“These coal miners were willing to fight for the right to work in the mines,” Barry Thacker, PE, founder of the Coal Creek Watershed Association Inc., said. Thacker is owner of a geological firm – Geo Environmental Associates -- but for the past 12 years, he has worked to tell the story of the Knoxville, Tennessee area coal industry, and to shine an unbiased light on the state’s coal industry – past and present.

“Why did the Coal Creek miners oppose the use of inmate laborers in the coal mines?” Thacker asked himself. “To me, I think that because a lot of those inmates were black, the Welsh coal miners who left their homes in Wales to escape the oppression they experienced there, saw the same thing happening with the black inmates who were forced to work in mines with little or no concern for safety,” Thacker said. “The Welsh people had an impact on the development of coal mining in the Appalachian Mountain region.”

Indeed, Jenkin Jones, a native of Wales, came to Philadelphia as a young teenager, worked a short time in the anthracite coal mines of eastern Pennsylvania, but soon went to the bituminous coal fields on the New River and later, the Pocahontas coalfields of southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia. His Buckeye Mine was among the first mines in the Flat Top fields. The combination of experienced coal people from Wales and independent, hard-working men from the rugged Appalachian Mountain region combined to provide the human power behind the quest for a fuel to fire the industrial revolution.

Powell Harmon was the son of a Tennessee farmer and a Cherokee Indian mother. No matter where a man was in the post-Civil War South, prospects for work ... honest work ... were scarce. The coal industry provided work, but it was dangerous work. Coal operators of the Cumberland Mountain region of Tennessee who had become accustomed to using inexperienced and expendable inmate labor to work in mines, were not required to put safety first in the mines. As large scale commercial coal operations emerged, coal miners, regardless of their level of experience, died by the thousands. The first decade of the 20th Century was among the most deadly in terms of coal miners who were killed on the job. During the period from 1900 to 1910, 24,228 coal miners died on the job. At the time, coal mining was a hands on, labor intensive profession with as many as three-quarters of a million coal miners working in US mines in 1910.

At about 7:20 a.m., on May 19, 1902, the Coal Creek Coal Company’s Fraterville and Stillie mines were rocked by an explosion with initial reports indicating as many as 300 -- coal miners -- were inside. Later reports would state that the first explosion had claimed the lives of 190 coal miners. However, an additional 26 coal miners were able to barricade themselves in a side passage. Some of that group survived as long as seven hours after the explosion. Powell Harmon was in that group of 26. When the available air was about used up, he wrote a message to his family in the little grocery book he carried to work with him. From the appearance of it’s cover, a local store issued the book to customers so they could make a list of the provisions they needed to purchase the next time the family came to the store. The 1902 Coal Creek miners were paid in cash – not company scrip that was the more traditional form of coal mine wages at that time.

“Dear wife and children,” he wrote in the book that was discovered by a mine rescue team that found the bodies of the 216 coal miners who died in Tennessee’s deadliest coal mine disaster. “My time has come to die,” Harmon wrote. He spelled the word “dye” in the book now in the possession of his great granddaughter, Barbara Titus, an aerospace engineer from Macon, Georgia. She provided the text of her great grandfather’s message for this article, and suggested that her grandfather’s words would be better understood if correctly spelled.

“I trust Jesus,” Harmon wrote. “He will say ...” Titus suggested that the “v” in “say” appears to trail off, as though her grandfather was losing his strength. As a result, she reads the line: “He will save.” The message continues: “Teach the children to believe in Jesus,” Harmon’s wrote. “May God bless you all is my prayer,” (written: “pray it”) Harmon continued: “Bless Jesus.”

George Camp, Fraterville’s superintendent and the son of mine owner E.C. Camp, gave the press an initial estimate that 150 miners may have been killed in the explosion. Superintendent Camp and Phillip Francis (left), a mine operator from Wales who ran a mine in nearby Jellico, mounted the initial rescue effort, but were pushed back by bad air after only making it 200 feet inside the mines. Another rescue effort started more than 8 hours after the first explosion. The rescuers moved slowly into the mine, ventilating the methane gas as they went.

“It is now 10 minutes till 10 and we are all most smothered,” Powell Harmon wrote of himself and his 25 fellow trapped coal miners. “Don’t know how long we will live. But if it is our time to go, I hope to meet you all in heaven. May God bless you all, wife and children, for Jesus’ sake. Good-bye ’til we meet to part no more.”

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He signed the message: "Powell Harmon," but must have had an afterthought as the air grew thinner. "My boys ... Never work in the coal mines," he wrote. "Henry and Condy, be good boys and stay with your mother and live for Jesus."

The cause of the explosion was controversial. The Tennessee Commissioner of Labor believed that gas had accumulated in the mine shaft when the mine's ventilation fans were idled on the previous weekend. However, the report of the disaster also suggested that the gas may have entered the Fraterville Mine from an unventilated mine that had been operated by the Knoxville Iron Company, but had been mined out and was no longer active at the time of the explosion.

Henry and Condy Harmon weren't the only children that Powell Harmon had. William Conda "Condy" Harmon was the oldest of eight children born to Powell and Josephine (Josie) Harmon. He was 15 at the time of his father's death, and in spite of the warning his father wrote in the minutes before his death, Condy Harmon went to work in the mines to support the family. Of the other Harmon children, Henry Harmon was 14, at the time of the explosion, Ida Harmon was 12, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Harmon was 11, Myrtle Harmon was 8, James Jacob "Jake" Harmon was 5, and Silas Harmon was 2. The two other Harmon children, Alice and Mary, died in early ages.

"My daddy didn't talk a lot about Uncle Condy," Carolyn McCafferty of Florence, Alabama, said. She was a daughter of Jake Harmon who was born in 1896, and was only five when his father died. Life wasn't easy for any of the families who lost loved ones in the disaster. The United Mine Workers of America bought a headstone to mark Powell Harmon's grave in the Longview Cemetery, but a widow and six children would have faced some mighty challenges in 1902. With his family depending on him, Condy Harmon went to work in the mines.

Condy Harmon went to work in the mines and even joined a fraternal organization, the Improved Order of Red Men, Delaware Tribe No. 60. The Red Men tribe had been established in Briceville in the same year as the explosion that claimed the lives of 216 coal miners -- 1902. Condy Harmon worked and, in time, his mother, who was known as Josie, an herbalist who also served as a midwife in her community, would eventually find a new husband.

There's no such thing as a return to normal life in the coalfields. Tragedy struck the Harmon family again on Saturday, December 9, 1911, when an explosion fueled by methane gas and coal dust, ripped through the mine, killing 84 coal miners including Condy Harmon, who had been warned by his dying father to trust Jesus and not to work in the mines.

Although the facts of the second tragedy were similar to the 1902 disaster -- a methane and dust explosion that killed some coal miners and left others trapped underground -- the attitude of the nation and the federal government had changed. The thousands of coal miners killed on the job led to the formation of the U.S. Bureau of Mines in 1910, and brought with it a new attitude related to regular inspections of mines to determine if they were being operated safely. The next day news account of the 1911 tragedy revealed that federal inspectors visited the Knoxville Iron Company mine in August and October of 1911, and gave it a positive report. An eight-year veteran mine inspector -- J.F. Hatmaker, had inspected the mine a week before the explosion and another inspector, a casualty insurance representative, had also visited the mine recently.

"At the time of the last report, the mine was reported as properly sprinkled and the entrance hallways and workings kept free of dust. No dangerous conditions were noted," according to an article that appeared in the December 10, 1911, Bluefield Daily Telegraph. The Bluefield newspaper had barely mentioned the 1902 explosion that claimed the life of Powell Harmon and 216 of his fellow coal miners, but after a deadly decade in the coalfields, the attitude had changed.

Early newspaper reports indicated that flames from the 7:30 a.m. explosion shot out of the mouth and ventilation shaft of the mine, and the initial group of rescuers that entered the mine at 10 a.m. were trying to reach the trapped miners by going in three different entrances. By 11 a.m., another explosion ripped through the mines as "great billows of flames belched from the openings and rescue parties were hurled back by the flames. Hope that any of the imprisoned miners are still alive has been practically abandoned."

However, the families of the trapped coal miners didn't give up hope. "As the news spread about the Briceville district, throngs of women and children rushed to the mine entrances, clamoring to go inside the mine to aid in the rescue," according to the next day news account. "Many women knew their husbands had entered the mine before the blast."

At least some of their prayers were answered. On the day following the explosions, a mine rescue team from the Federal Bureau of Mines that had traveled to the mine site via a special mine rescue car rescued five miners. After the first explosion, the rescued miners told the press that they rushed to a cross entry, threw up a brattice that kept out the black damp that killed many of their fellow coal miners. In addition to using gas masks and oxygen tanks, the Cross Creek Mine disaster marked the first time that federal mine rescuers used canaries in cages to detect dangerous gases in the mine.

Reports of the five rescued coal miners brought the families back to the mine entrance, but hope soon faded into despair. Four days after the explosion, the rescue team reported seeing two men screaming wildly as they approached, and later found incoherent directions scribbled on both ribs of the mine. The newspaper saw fit to report that Knoxville Iron Company ordered hundreds of coffins, that were brought in on the same train that brought mine rescue equipment to the scene of the disaster. Six days later, the company brought the last 25 bodies to the surface, and reported that all of the coal miners had been accounted for. The death toll was 84 coal miners.

Condy Harmon had never married. His brothers with the Red Men purchased the headstone that marks his grave beside of his father's grave marked by a UMWA headstone in the "Miners' Circle" at Longview Cemetery.

"One day, we were walking through an alfalfa field, and my father (James "Jake" Harmon, looked at me and said: "Fifty years ago, my father was killed," McCafferty said. Jake Harmon had also defied his father's warning and went to work in the mines for a time after he completed his tour of duty with the US Navy. "Daddy just didn't talk a lot about it."

"In about 1966, my grandmother, Myrtle Harmon Shaver, told me that when her
brother Condy's body was found, only his right shoe was off," Titus said. "She said her mother always believed that Condy was trying to tell her that he had gotten 'right with the Lord.' For me, it's interesting to see how much his mother thought about how his body was found and what the significance of a shoe being off might mean. Also, I'm impressed that the rescuers noted the details of how his body was found and told her as much as they could."

Barry Thacker established the Coal Creek Watershed Association 12 years ago for a number of reasons. Like many people who work in the coal industry, he had become fed up with the distorted record of the coal industry's heritage that had been conjured up by groups that stand opposed to coal mining. In addition, he thought that the story of the little known Coal Creek War, as well as the 1902 and 1911 tragedies would be a good vehicle to tell the true story of coal miners and the legacy they left behind. Add to those reasons the fact that he met Eric Davies, an Irish language expert who was researching a donation of several Welsh language books that had been given to a library by one of the Welsh miners who died at Briceville, and Thacker started working to tell the story.

Each year on December 9, he started talking to students of Bricetville Middle School about the tragedy. Eventually, he started taking the students to the cemetery where many of the coal miners are buried. In 2011 -- the 100th anniversary of the second explosion, Thacker invited several members of Powell Harmon's family to attend the service. To his surprise, more than 200 people -- including several Harmon family members -- attended the service on December 9, 2011.

In the face of challenges, Thacker has sought ways to build on the positive strengths of the community he loves. When the environmental community started grumbling about the positive spin he put on the coal industry, he organized middle school students to participate in a tree-planting effort. But not just any tree-planting. The students participated in a planting that would aid researchers in the restoration of the American chestnut tree. When he read a script of a local theater group that planned to do a performance on the 100th anniversary of the 1902 Fraterville Mine disaster, he saw that the images were all about the horrible conditions the coal miners faced. "I showed him the messages that the coal miners left for their families, and the local theater group came out with a very different centennial play," he said.

As part of his presentation to the students each year on the anniversary of the Coal Creek Mine disaster, Thacker said he tries to tell a story of how a descendant of one of the coal miners who died became successful in life. When Barbara Titus and Carolyn McCaffrey heard one of the stories, they were able to supply Thacker with scores of stories of the descendants of Powell Harmon who went on to make a positive impact in the world because of the sacrifice made by Powell and his son, Condy Harmon.

"That's why I thought Condy Harmon's story would be good for readers of Coal People Magazine to know," Thacker said. "That's why we work so hard to let the next generation know who these people were."

There is a wealth of information available about the efforts of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation at (www.coalcreekami.com).