

The following is from an interview conducted by William A. Pencak, Professor of History and Jewish Studies, Penn State University with Margaret Jerles. I would like to thank Mr. Pencak for sharing this piece of history.

Excerpts from an interview with the late Margaret Jerles. Granddaughter of Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson who lived with him until he died in 1934. She was born in 1916; the interview was conducted by William Pencak in November, 2005.

He worked in the mines, when came over from Scotland. He was about 5 years old. He started into school. When was only in school two years he was going through his books so fast his parents couldn't afford the books, they couldn't keep up with him. He worked in the mines as a slate picker out of the coals. He had only had two years of public education but his mother was well educated -- somewhere along the line, we haven't been able to find it out how. She taught the kids at home after that because they couldn't afford the books to go to school.

He was ousted from Arnot in the mines; that's how he managed to get the house in Blossburg [where he lived for the last years of his life after returning from Washington in 1921]. Somebody won it in a poker game and he it had no use for it so he sold it to my grandfather and he didn't have to pay very much for it. So that's when grandfather went to Blossburg.

At 17 he was a rebel – he was always a rebel. He was barred from the mines anywhere around there. He worked on the railroad for a while and then he decided that he was going to take the part of the miners and see that they got some decent working conditions – so that's when he started to organize the unions, and he traveled all over. My brother sent me . . . the handcuffs and the blackjack that were given to a guy to do away with my grandfather when he went to organize the union in some town. The guy got cold feet and gave the blackjack and handcuffs to grandfather.

My grandfather was one of the first cabinet officers that had a car registered to him.– When he became [the first] Secretary of Labor [in 1913] his transportation was to be provided for him. They didn't have any provisions made for that. He got a horse and buggy from the commerce department, but he looked through the regulations and nothing said he couldn't get a car. All the same he went out and bought a second hand car and got a chauffeur. Grandfather never learned to drive till after he retired.
He was the first one [cabinet officer to drive].

We had a lot of people coming [to the house]. When I was in his house they declared Labor Day as Wilson Day[locally]– we had about 100 people there for dinner – we had 3 sets of china going. A couple of days before something like that happened my mother would get everything organized. One of the neighbors

would help her, the rest of the family were all girls, we all helped her. We peeled potatoes, and all this and that; she made her own homemade bread.

He never lived like a big shot, that's why I'm mad at the American Legion in Blossburg. They bought my grandfather's place. That's the only Legion post in the United States that was named for someone that didn't fight in the war, but he did so much for the soldiers and sailors that came back [after World War I]. He got them all jobs and so they named the post after him. But the Legion – grandfather never drank – the first thing the Legion does is to tear apart the first floor and put a circular bar in, a big circular bar. They took the front porch off because it was too easy for people to break in there and that was where he'd spend a good share of his time in the summertime. In the afternoons he'd sit out there and read, and that made me furious. I objected to them putting the bar in because grandfather didn't drink. You can't call that his home – I said you destroyed his home.

After World War II, in front of the place now they have a big cannon that was used in World War II. [After World War I, in the 1930s] they thought the Polish people [of the Blossburg area] were going to make a circular affair [monument] with 14 points, they were going to build that monument there. {Later, she notes it was too heavy to be built}. The Polish priest asked my grandfather if he could get the cannon, my grandfather got two -- the one is placed there and the other is down at the VFW.

Did he go to church?

Yes, when he was there [in Blossburg] he had to go to Arnot to church, he was a Scots Presbyterian. When he went to church someone always went along with him. Grandfather didn't drive so someone had to take him out and as far as churchgoing my family were all Catholics, my father converted when he married my mother. We were raised as Catholic, but when mother would be busy, he would take us in and set us in his library on a great big overstuffed couch – and you sat there and you studied your catechism. He would ask us questions, if you didn't know your answers he'd give you the answers and we'd go back and study some more.

Did any famous people come to visit?

Mother didn't go away very often, once my parents were going up to Washington in New York on the Hudson, my mother had a sister who lived there and they went to visit her. Grandfather took over the cooking, and one day he decided we're going to have a hot dog roast, and we're going to have it on the side of the woods. So we'd go up the side of the woods, had the fire built, somebody forgot to get the hotdogs. He sent my brother Bill back to get the hotdogs and when Bill got down there, there was someone down at the house, and he gave Bill his name. And he must have been important because grandfather said that if we

finished the hotdog roast, we'll have to do it after this person goes. So I met that John L. Lewis.

And he does have bushy eyebrows. He stopped at the house one night, that was before the AFL made up with the CIO, and he had a couple of guys with him. Grandfather was eating supper at the supper table and he [Lewis] insisted that he see grandfather. But he said he was having supper, maybe afterwards. And so he went into the dining room with my grandfather; he asked him to sit down to join us. No, he [Lewis] already made arrangements somewhere else, he just wanted to talk to him. He [my grandfather] told me to take Mr. Lewis into the library, and I'll speak to him after I finish my supper. Now if you refuse to break bread with a Scotsman, you're in trouble.

I think Lewis was Welsh.

I don't know what he was, but he was a crook, every time he got something for the miners, he got that much more for himself.

So your grandfather never wound up rich?

No, not rich, he went really bankrupt. When he took [William] Vare to the Supreme Court [to challenge the disputed Senate Election of 1926] of course Vare had the Republican party to pay all Vare's expenses. My grandfather had to see to all his expenses, the Democratic Party didn't. He had his secretaries and everybody else to pay, and that really put him in the hole.

Did he belong to clubs, societies, like the Elks?

No, he never joined any clubs that that I know of. If anything was going on in town that was being sponsored by a church, if it had anything there for kids, all the kids in the neighborhood got tickets --a carnival or circus, he would buy tickets for all the kids at that end of town, and that made me mad. I didn't mind him buying them the tickets, but then they would call him their grandfather too -- I was kind of jealous.

Did he like to read?

He had over 2000 books in his library, they were all political books, all the great classics. His book on Longfellow was one of my favorites. When he died they decided they didn't want to split the library up. Two years before that the school in Blossburg had closed and they lost everything. So they sent the books to the library at the high school so that's where they are.

Are the still there?

I suppose so.

I loved my grandfather very much. When I left home to go to nurses' training he was the one that I missed. My father's work was all physical [he ran the farm and worked in the mines]. When he'd come home from work especially at night he was tired. We always had to get him into dry clothes and eat his supper and he'd go right to bed. He had to be at the mine in the morning.

But my grandfather's work was all mental work. He had time to help us out with anything, he even learned math – that was one thing I hated – but he would help us out with any of our homework.

But we all got along fine. Grandfather was Scots Presbyterian, and we were all Catholic. Some of his family resented us because we were Catholic. They're all gone now too.

My uncle Adam lived in one of these houses, down here, and then his son Tom lived in the next house, they all came with the farm when grandfather got it. When were growing up a lady by the name of Mrs. Jones lived in the [one] house and her husband was killed in the mines and she had four children to raise. She couldn't afford to pay the rent, so grandfather said "Don't let your children go without," so she lived rent free in that house for years and years. Then the kids were all grown up and went away and granddad wanted the house for one of his sons and she was furious. She was an old biddy.

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A lot of people came in and out [of the house] on business. One time we were all picking blackberries. And it didn't take any time at all to fill a lot of pails. My mother even canned beef. We got these blackberries and we always had to show grandfather. We were on the porch and a couple of guys came by when we went to show him the blackberries. And we went back in the library the door was open. I heard him say to these men – that's the only time I ever saw my grandfather really mad == and he said I haven't worked for the miners to take your proposition now, you'll have to leave this place and not come back. They wanted grandfather to do something that would work against he miners.

Later informal conversation --

During the Depression "bums" would come around but they called themselves "Knights of the road" – they would put a marker on trees in front of houses that would let them stay or feed them –Mother would let them stay in the barn at night, they couldn't come in the house, there were furs back there. They would come into the kitchen in the morning and get a good breakfast.

I went into nursing in Lock Haven. A judge came to me and said if I ever needed help to come to him. I said my grandfather made it on his own and I'll make it on my own.

[During the disputed election contest with Vare} Senator Reed asked him how come he only spent \$10,000 on his campaign while Vare spent a hundred times

as much {see article, these figures are approximately right}. Grandfather said, "That's simple, I'm a Scotsman."

See also:

Samuel J. Astorino, "The Contested Senate Election of William Scott Vare," *Pennsylvania History*, 28 (1961), 187-201.