

# *Miner, Minstrel, Memory: Or, Why the Smithsonian Has Bill Keating's Pants*

AS AN INTERN IN 2003, while in the vast basement collections of the Smithsonian Institution, I found a folded pair of miner's blue jeans. Patched all over, and a brass colliery check-tag attached to one belt-loop, the pants were dirty with coal dust. Other artifacts in the same drawer—including a soft miner's cap, a mule whip, a lunchbox, and a water bottle—all had the same accession number, and all belonged together. I realized that I was looking at an assemblage of the everyday stuff of one long-dead miner.

More research revealed that the man's name was William Keating and that his collection of artifacts was unique in the museum. Keating was the sole representative in the storehouse of national memory of a particular form of important and grueling work that has all but disappeared from modern society.<sup>1</sup> (Almost 2 percent of all workers in the United States—some 430,000 people—were employed as coal miners in 1900.<sup>2</sup>) His was a universal story about mine work that was embedded in the dirty patched blue jeans, in the grimy cap and rusty lunch pail. Anyone could see these

The author would like to thank Bill Leslie, Peter Liebhold, Steve Lubar, Larry Haifen, Allison Marsh, Hyungsub Choi, and Andrew Russell for their assistance and insights; and Tamara Miller, Angus K. Gillespie, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> On the Smithsonian as a keeper of object-based narratives of national memory, see Steven Lubar and Kathleen M. Kendrick, *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian* (Washington, DC, 2001). There are several excellent studies of anthracite miners and their culture. See particularly Anthony F. C. Wallace, *St. Clair: A Nineteenth-Century Coal Town's Experience with a Disaster-Prone Industry* (1987; reprint with corrections, Ithaca, NY, 1988); Harold W. Aurand, *Coalcracker Culture: Work and Values in Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1835–1935* (Selinsgrove, PA, 2003); and Donald L. Miller and Richard E. Sharpless, *The Kingdom of Coal: Work, Enterprise, and Ethnic Communities in the Mine Fields* (Philadelphia, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> This figure includes both anthracite and bituminous coal miners. Mark Aldrich, *Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870–1939* (Baltimore, 1997), 42.

pants and understand their resonance.<sup>3</sup> These artifacts brought the story of working in a coal mine to life more vividly and authentically than anything else could.

Americans trust museums more than any other purveyor of historical information, even family members, in large part because “authentic” objects offer a more immediate, less mediated entry into history. Museum artifacts, especially in such hallowed halls as those of the Smithsonian, are powerful in part because they are trusted to be authentic. The authentic artifact can convey a kind of spirit of association with past people and events to the museum visitor, putting the viewer in close touch with the past.<sup>4</sup> These clothes were certainly those sorts of artifacts.

The importance of their authenticity was also compounded by their rarity. The Smithsonian holds seemingly endless numbers of other kinds of mining artifacts—row upon row, drawer upon drawer of mining lamps, for example—but the pants of William Keating were the only example of miner’s clothing in the collections. One of the challenges inherent in practicing social history in museums is the relative lack of objects with which to tell the story. Personal objects belonging to history museums overwhelmingly are from “people of comfortable means.”<sup>5</sup> Here, however, were authentic artifacts that could tell a story about industry and hard labor. That rarity made the clothes resonate even more with me.

But a chance encounter with the business files of a former curator complicated the story. A photocopied obituary of Keating revealed that he was not just a miner, but locally famous in the anthracite country as a troubadour. The grainy newspaper photo showed him in his “singing miner” garb—including dirty, patched pants, lunch pail, water bottle, and miner’s cap. The artifacts in the Smithsonian were his costume (fig. 1).

<sup>3</sup> For “wonder” and “resonance,” see Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC, 1991), 42–56, esp. 42. Greenblatt defines resonance as “the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand.” Keating’s pants also have an element of wonder, described by Greenblatt as “the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (p. 42).

<sup>4</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998), 21, 105–8; Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects” *Public Historian* 15 (1993): 9–25; Lubar and Kendrick, *Legacies*, 224–25.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, “Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Karp and Lavine, 159–75, esp. 164–68.



Fig. 1. Bill Keating's pants, item MHI-MN-8993C, accession 262096, Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Photograph by author.

### *William Keating, Miner*

William Keating was born in 1886, in Mount Laffee Patch near Pottsville, Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup> Keating was a third-generation miner of Irish

<sup>6</sup> Korson reports his date of birth as March 31, 1886. George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry* (Philadelphia, 1938), 299. However, Keating's obituary gives April 8, 1886, and Korson's own early research notes give the latter date. "Wm. Keating, 'Singing Miner,' Wrote Ballads," *Pottsville Republican*, Dec. 9, 1964; "Bill Keating," typescript notes, folder "Minstrels of the Mine Patch Research notes," box 54, George Korson Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (hereafter Korson Collection). Internal evidence suggests these notes were probably taken in 1928. The above typescript appears to be a very close transcription of Korson's handwritten interview notes, in folder "Notebooks—anthracite songs, anecdotes, etc.," box 105, Korson Collection.

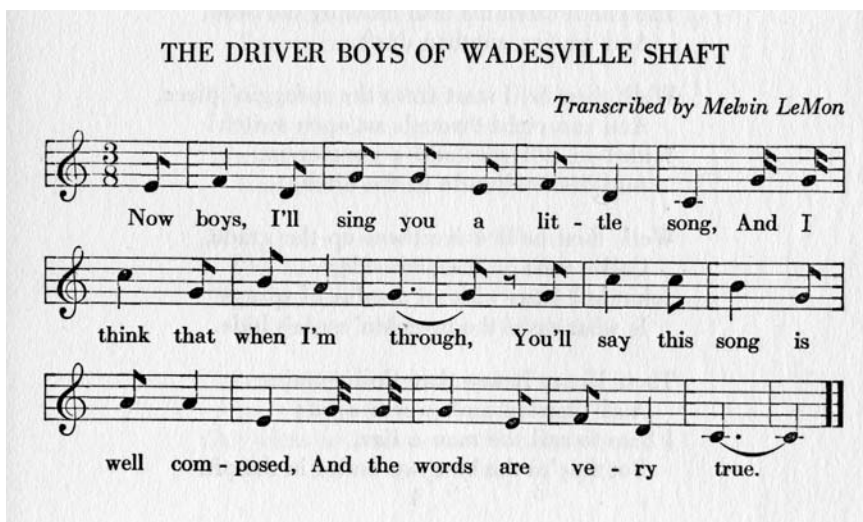


Fig. 2. Music to “The Driver Boys of Wadesville Shaft,” from George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch* (Philadelphia, 1938).

American ancestry. His mother died when he was eighteen months old, so he was cared for by his older sister until age six or seven. Keating only attended one year of school before he began working, and he payed little attention in class.<sup>7</sup>

After leaving school, young Keating worked in the collieries near his home. Beginning when he was nine years old, Keating worked in the anthracite industry as a slate-picker at Glen Dower Breaker in Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania. At age eleven, he went to work as a “curb-boy” or signal tender for the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, Wadesville Shaft, near Pottsville, where he also worked as a door boy for “a couple or three years.” While at work in 1898, Keating developed his song “The Driver Boys of Wadesville Shaft” (fig. 2). He was twelve years old. Keating claimed that a group of visitors to the colliery were so impressed by his song that they offered to take him to Philadelphia for an education, but the young boy refused, a decision Keating regretted later in

<sup>7</sup> Korson, *Minstrels*, 16, 299–300; “Wm. Keating, ‘Singing Miner,’ Wrote Ballads”; 1910 Manuscript Census, Sheet 1, Supervisor’s District 8, Enumeration District 64(54?), Norwegian Twp., Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, line 35; William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, in folder “Correspondence—August 1938,” box 18, Korson Collection. Keating’s parents were Michael and Kazia Reddington Keating. The 1910 manuscript census page indicates that Keating’s father, Michael Keating, had a Pennsylvania-born father and an Ireland-born mother.

life.<sup>8</sup>

Keating left the anthracite country to pursue life riding the rails and working at odd jobs shortly after the turn of the century, but homesickness brought him back to Pennsylvania in 1909. Keating soon had a family to support, so he took a job in the mines. He married Alvania (Alvina) Lechleitner in February 1910. Two months later, the census enumerator found Keating and his wife, along with their one-year-old son, William, living with Keating's father, Michael, and his sister, Kazia. Keating was working as a "teamster" in the coal mines, and his father, a widower, labored at odd jobs. Perhaps the demands of an unexpected family had helped persuade Keating to put an end to the itinerant life.<sup>9</sup>

Keating composed "Down, Down, Down"—the song that eventually became his calling card—while working as a mule driver in the Oak Hill shaft, in 1916 (fig. 3). As Keating remembered, "There was no body but me and the mule during the shift. I composed this song as I traveled in and out of the gangways on the car bumper mostly to break my loneliness and to show my mule I was in a friendly mood."<sup>10</sup> Keating would sing the song in barrooms, where he, in accordance with the traditional treatment of roving minstrels in the mining country, would be treated to drinks for his efforts. "Down, Down, Down," in particular, had to be broken into sections due to its length. After each section someone would call "Time out for drinks," and everyone would have a round. Alcohol was an integral part of working-class mining culture in the anthracite fields. One observer noted that in 1902, Keating's Schuylkill County supported a saloon for every fifty adult males.<sup>11</sup> Keating had a bit of a drinking problem at the

<sup>8</sup> "Bill Keating," typescript notes, Korson Collection; William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection; Keating, quoted by Korson, *Minstrels*, 17, also 104, 117–22. Keating told Korson in an interview ca. 1928, "I wish I had accepted." "Bill Keating," typescript notes, Korson Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Keating, quoted in Korson, *Minstrels*, 17; 1910 Manuscript Census, Sheet 1, Supervisor's District 8, Enumeration District 64(54?), Norwegian Twp., Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, lines 35–39. "Alvania" is the spelling from Keating's obituary; the manuscript census taker spelled her name "Alvina." The manuscript census for 1910 and 1920 list son "William," but Keating's obituary records his son's name as "Russell." Russell B. Keating was the son who was active in Keating's affairs in the 1960s, but it is not clear whether young "William" and "Russell" are the same person.

<sup>10</sup> He was working in "Buck Mountain counter gangway on the third level of Oak Hill shaft at Buckley's Gap, Duncott," in Schuylkill County. Keating, quoted in Korson, *Minstrels*, 38. The date, and the mule's name of Jerry, appear in "Bill Keating," typescript notes, Korson Collection.

<sup>11</sup> Keating, quoted in Korson, *Minstrels*, 39. On the role of alcohol in mining culture, see Wallace, *St. Clair*, 159–71. Wallace mentions Keating as a singer of anthracite ballads in this section as well. See also Peter Roberts, *Anthracite Coal Communities: A Study of the Demography, the Social, Educational and Moral Life of the Anthracite Regions* (New York, 1904), 223.

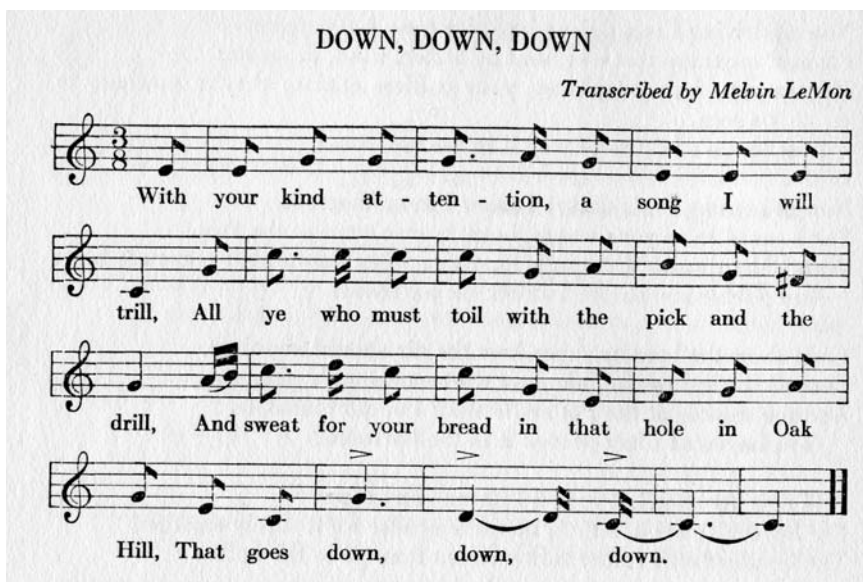


Fig. 3. Music to “Down, Down, Down,” from George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch* (Philadelphia, 1938).

time, which lends added veracity to his lyrical story of reporting to work with a hangover.

He said, “Billy, me bucko, how are you today?”  
 “Outside of a headache,” I said, “I’m O.K.  
 I’ve been samplin’ the moonshine in every cafe  
 In the town, town, town.”<sup>12</sup>

Singing in bars was a cheap way to drink: in one verse of “Down, Down, Down” Keating claimed “But for ballads like this, I’d have starved for a spree.”<sup>13</sup> Despite his evident enjoyment of the alcoholic life, Keating quit drinking in 1934. His poetry was not affected, however. Keating

<sup>12</sup> “Down, Down, Down,” stanza 15, George Korson, “Coal Miners,” in Korson, ed., *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends* (Philadelphia, 1949), 354–400; “Down, Down, Down” appears on pages 364–66. Every written version of “Down, Down, Down” contains minor variations, but the largest divergences are between the earlier, longer version of thirty-nine verses that appeared in Korson, *Minstrels*, 48–53, and the twenty-one-verse version sung by Keating in 1946 for the Library of Congress recording, which was transcribed for publication in *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends*.

<sup>13</sup> “Down, Down, Down,” stanza 37, in Korson, *Minstrels*, 48–53. This verse did not appear on the Library of Congress recording or in *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends*.

expressed, in his inimitable typewritten style, the pride he had in his successful personal battle against alcohol:

'Twas Nineteen Thirty-Four (in October)  
 Bill vowed: of "John Booze" he'd be rid.  
 Past FOUR years\_\_\_\_\_he's been, teetotally, SOBER.  
 Can a "rummy" Reform ?\_\_\_\_\_Bill DID.<sup>14</sup>

"Down, Down, Down" and the other ballads Keating sang in the barrooms of the anthracite country existed only in his head, because Keating could not write—he did not learn until he was thirty-two, in the army for World War I. He was apparently drafted, and sent to Camp Meade, Maryland, for ten months, where army personnel taught him to write in after-hours tutorial sessions. Keating served with Headquarters Company, 316th Infantry, U.S. Army. After his time at Camp Meade, he was sent to France and wounded in action. He reportedly wrote poetry on the battlefield.<sup>15</sup>

After returning from the army, Keating probably worked at least part of the time in the coal mines, but in the poor postwar economic climate in the anthracite country, Keating struggled to find work. In 1920, the census listed Keating as living with his wife and two children in a rented house near his father, in Norwegian Township in Schuylkill County. Keating by this time could read and write, but his wife Alvania could do neither. In addition to son William, the census taker reported an eight-year-old daughter, Estella. The entire family, Keating included, had "none" marked for trade or profession, and consistent with this designation, Keating had no industry or sector listed.<sup>16</sup> During the early years of the Great Depression, Keating apparently worked as a bootleg coal miner, independently and illegally mining on anthracite lands owned by the large coal conglomerates.<sup>17</sup> Keating, like many of his peers in the anthracite country, struggled to get by.

<sup>14</sup> "Bill Keating," typescript notes, Korson Collection.

<sup>15</sup> William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection; "Wm. Keating, 'Singing Miner,' Wrote Ballads"; "Bill Keating is Green Thumb Gardener," *Orwigsburg News*, Sept. 27, 1956.

<sup>16</sup> 1920 Manuscript Census, Sheet 16B, Supervisor's District 6, Enumeration District 75, Norwegian Twp., Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, lines 51–54. The manuscript census of 1920 seems to indicate that he was out of work (and not temporarily), but the impetus for Keating writing out "Down, Down, Down" came after he performed the song at a company picnic for Oak Hill colliery in 1927, which suggests that he may have been employed at that later time.

<sup>17</sup> "Bill Keating," typescript notes, Korson Collection. For bootleg mining, see Patrick Shea, "Digging in a Dog Hole: Independent Anthracite Mining in the 20th Century," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 1 (winter 2001): 17–19; full text available online at <http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=508>.

*William Keating, Minstrel*

In the late 1920s, Keating was relatively well-known in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania—a colorful local drunk with a knack for rhymes. So how did his pants come to reside in the collections of the United States National Museum fewer than forty years later?

The turning point came when Keating met George Korson, a newspaper reporter with a budding amateur interest in industrial folklore (fig. 4).<sup>18</sup> Korson was the son of immigrants from Jewish Ukraine who had come to the United States when George was seven years old. In 1912, Korson's family moved to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in the heart of the anthracite region. Thirteen-year-old George had a newspaper route, which entitled him to participate in the Boy's Industrial Association, where he befriended many boys who worked in the mines, much as Keating had done during his youth. After graduating high school in 1917, Korson worked for several years at local newspapers (apart from a year in the Jewish Legion, where he fought for the liberation of Palestine). After a short stint at Columbia College in New York City, Korson returned to Pennsylvania in 1924 to work as a reporter. His former paper in Wilkes-Barre had no jobs available, so Korson found a job with the Pottsville *Republican*.<sup>19</sup>

As a general-assignment reporter, Korson spent a considerable amount of time in the small mining communities that surrounded Pottsville. One day, he was struck by the fact that he had not heard any songs about miners' lives. Korson asked the local librarian, but was informed that they had never been collected. Korson began to gather the songs from long-time residents in the spring and summer of 1925. What Korson initially conceived of as a magazine article quickly grew into a book, and then into a life-long fascination with the folklore of mining communities.<sup>20</sup> Korson serialized his first book, entitled "Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner," in the *United Mine Workers Journal* in 1926 and 1927. Unable

<sup>18</sup> By the conclusion of his career, Korson transcended "amateur" status and became widely recognized as an expert in industrial folklore. The American Folklore Society bestowed their highest honor on Korson when they elected him a Fellow in 1960. Angus K. Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields: George Korson's Life and Work* (University Park, PA, 1980), 150–51. I very much appreciate Angus K. Gillespie for pointing this out in comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>19</sup> Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, 15–26.

<sup>20</sup> George Korson, *Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner: A Seam of Folk-lore which Once Ran Through Life in the Hard Coal Fields of Pennsylvania* (New York, 1927), xxii–xxiv.



Fig. 4. George Korson, 1946. Photograph from the Korson Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

to interest a traditional publisher in the work, Korson dipped into his personal savings to bring the book out with a subsidy press in 1927. To pay the bills, Korson continued to work as a reporter, in Pottsville, then New Jersey, then, beginning in 1931, in Allentown, Pennsylvania.<sup>21</sup> As often as he could, Korson collected ballads and interviewed new subjects.

Keating does not appear in Korson's first book, *Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner*, but Korson did include "Down, Down, Down" in a short book of songs that he published in 1936, and he included four ballads by Keating in his well-regarded 1938 book, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*. Korson probably first interviewed Keating in 1928, and after about

<sup>21</sup> The series ran from November 15, 1926 (vol. 37), to March 15, 1927 (vol. 38). Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, 31–32, also 28–30, 32–34, 37–41.

1934, the two were, in Keating's words, "Good Buddies."<sup>22</sup>

Korson's interest in the folklore of the anthracite miners came at a time when interest in American folklore was on the rise nationally.<sup>23</sup> Korson was invited to bring a group of singing miners to the 1935 National Folk Festival. The director of the festival, which had been founded the year before, had read Korson's first book and was impressed. Korson arranged some sponsorship from the miner's union and selected a small group of miners. Inspired, Korson organized the first Pennsylvania Folk Festival, held in Allentown in May 1935. This festival was enough of a success to prompt Bucknell College, in Lewisburg, to offer the Pennsylvania Folk Festival a home and Korson a job directing it. The 1936 Pennsylvania Folk Festival was a much larger affair and was preceded by a series of regional festivals.<sup>24</sup>

Korson took an active role in recruiting Keating to participate in the festivals.<sup>25</sup> Keating participated in the Pennsylvania festivals of 1936, 1937, and 1938, and at least the national festivals of 1937 and 1938.<sup>26</sup> At

<sup>22</sup> George Korson and Melvin LeMon, *The Miner Sings: A Collection of Folk Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner* (New York, 1936); "Bill Keating," typescript notes, Korson Collection; William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection. The notes say Keating composed "Down, Down, Down" in 1916, sang it in France, and "never wrote it down until last Spring." (emphasis in original) If the well-dated story of Keating writing down the ballad for the first time in 1927 for a mine boss named McGee after a company picnic is correct, then the notes would have been taken ca. 1928.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), 407–43.

<sup>24</sup> Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, 41–49.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Korson inviting Keating to sing "Down, Down, Down" at the 1937 Pennsylvania Folk Festival. Keating accepted. George Korson to William Keating, June 12, 1937, folder "Correspondence—June 1–15, 1937," and Bill Keating to George Korson, July 4, 1937, folder "Correspondence—May 1–10, 1937," box 14, Korson Collection.

<sup>26</sup> Keating's performance of "Down, Down, Down" was mentioned in newspaper coverage of the 1937 Pennsylvania event. Henry Pleasants, "Pennsylvania Festival," *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 1937. In Keating's half-humorous attempt to get money out of Korson at the urging of his wife, Keating billed Korson for travel costs and lost wages for two trips to Bucknell and one to Beaver College, which is where the 1936, 1937, and 1938 Pennsylvania festivals were held (respectively). William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection. The 1937 National Folk Festival was held in Chicago. A newspaper article does not mention Keating by name, but recounts his story of how he made up a song to keep himself and his mule, Jerry, amused while working at Oak Hill colliery. "Let's Give Them 'Turkey in the Straw,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, June 9, 1937. The 1938 National Folk Festival was held in Washington, DC. *Washington Post*, Apr. 25, 1938. This issue has a special section devoted to the festival, which the *Post* cosponsored. Keating appears on the program listing. However, Keating was not listed as part of the program for the 1939, 1940, 1941, or 1942 National Folk Festivals. See George Korson, "America's Anthracite Miners: Their Ballads Tell Their Story," *Washington Post*, Apr. 13, 1941, and also *Washington Post*, Apr. 14, 1939, Apr. 18, 1940, and Apr. 26, 1942.

the festivals, the standard procedure called for a group of Pennsylvania miners, also organized by Korson, to sing several traditional mining songs before Keating took the stage for a solo performance of "Down, Down, Down." Late in life, Keating reminisced about traveling with Korson and other singing miners to Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia, New York, and other places.<sup>27</sup>

The ballad "Down, Down, Down," which Keating wrote in 1916 while working as a mule driver in a coal mine, was very popular with festival crowds and readers of Korson's books.<sup>28</sup> The song remained in exclusively oral form until Keating was persuaded in 1927 to write it down. After performing at an Oak Hill company picnic, a mine boss named McGee offered five dollars for a copy of his ballad. Keating forgot about the offer until several weeks later, when the moonshine ran out in the midst of a post-payday spree with several friends. Determined to get more booze, the four retired to Keating's house and managed, after much effort, to write it out. They then went in search of the mine boss. After hours of fruitless searching, the men stopped at a speakeasy, and, as Keating later related to Korson:

we took a different "tack": I said: "Yerdy, pull over to that Pool Room, accross the rail-road, and if I can't SEL this song\_\_\_I'll sing it and if there's any Grog within 'getting'-distance, we'll get it, and, also, some Gas for the Flivver, for It must be (almost) as 'dry' as we ARE."<sup>29</sup>

The bartender didn't know the McGee Keating was looking for, but read a portion of the song and offered Keating five dollars plus a round of drinks for the song if Keating would stay and teach him to sing it. "We

<sup>27</sup> "Let's Give Them 'Turkey in the Straw'; 'National Folk Festival' (Special Section), *Washington Post*, Apr. 25, 1938; George Korson to Russell B. Keating, June 10, 1964, folder "Correspondence—June 1964," box 41, Korson Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Gillespie said that "Down, Down, Down" was "a favorite among folk festival audiences, and it is perhaps the most entertaining item in Korson's entire collection." Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, 65. For popularity with readers, see for example Ann Ward Orr to George Korson, Aug. 1, 1938, folder "Correspondence—August 1938," box 18 ("I sang several [ballads] from the 'Miner Sings' . . . The class seemed to be quite delighted with the songs—especially, 'Down, Down, Down,' which happens to be one of my favorites."); also Elfriede[?] Mahler to George Korson, Oct. 15, 1945, folder "Correspondence—October 1945," box 23, and Ruth D. Keener to John A. Lomax, carbon to Mrs. George (Rae) Korson, June 24, 1946, folder "Correspondence—June 1946," box 24, all in Korson Collection.

<sup>29</sup> William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection. All spelling and punctuation is exactly as written by Keating, except that Keating double quotation marks within the quote have been changed to single quotation marks here.

'drank'. I sang, we drank again, and I sang again; this song-without-END\_\_\_\_aye Men!"<sup>30</sup>

The song quickly became locally popular. In 1938, Keating reported that he was able to sell, without much effort, printed copies of "Down, Down, Down" on the streets of Pottsville for fifteen cents each. Keating let Korson know that he was quite concerned about being paid for his work and making sure other singing minstrels could not profit from it. He attributed part of this attitude to his wife's pressure and also mentioned that the newspaper editor and other important people in Pottsville were quite concerned to make sure he got his due.<sup>31</sup>

In January and February 1946, Korson made a trip to Pennsylvania to record anthracite ballads for a record for the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress and made sure that Keating and others would be present (Korson's wife Rae was head of the division). The folklorist recorded songs in the Pottsville Public Library (which he also used as his "headquarters"), in the underground Newkirk Tunnel anthracite mine, as well as in the homes of his singers. He traveled with Skip Adelman, a photographer, and Arthur Semmig, a Library of Congress sound engineer, who was in charge of operating the portable recording equipment they brought.<sup>32</sup>

Keating recorded "Down, Down, Down" in the Pottsville Public Library during this trip, and this song became the first track on the record that resulted. Keating showed up in full minstrel garb, complete with lunch pail, water bottle, and cap crowned by an oil lamp. Adelman took two photos of the occasion, which captured Keating singing, Semmig operating the record equipment in the foreground, and Korson looking on or taking notes in the background (fig. 5).<sup>33</sup> Korson apparently played

<sup>30</sup> William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection. Keating's spelling and punctuation left intact, except that Keating's own double quotation marks have been changed to single quotation marks here. A summarized version of this story appears in Korson, *Minstrels*, 39–41.

<sup>31</sup> William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection.

<sup>32</sup> Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, 96–104, covers the trip and the recordings, and describes Rae Korson's role in encouraging George Korson to make the record. George Korson to Edith Patterson, Dec. 28, 1945, folder "Correspondence—December 1945," box 23, Korson Collection. Patterson reported that "Bill Keating has already appeared on the stage at the Jewish Centre. By the time you get up here, I bet he proves to have written the Psalms!" Edith Patterson to George Korson, Jan. 17, 1946. For "headquarters," see George Korson to Edward A. Lynch, Jan. 23, 1946. On Korson's associates, see George Korson to Rae Korson, Jan. 28, 1946; all in folder "Correspondence—January 1946," box 24, Korson Collection.

<sup>33</sup> Photographs are in folder "Photographs—Library of Congress Field Trip—1946, Pennsylvania," box 119, Korson Collection. The backs of the photos credit Skippy Adelman for Black



Fig. 5. William Keating being recorded in the Pottsville Public Library, with Korson in the background. Photograph from the George Korson Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

his cards rather close to his vest in terms of the possibility of a Library of Congress record resulting from the trip. When he received final approval of the record, he told his friend and Pottsville Public Library librarian Edith Patterson the news, but asked her not to tell Keating or the other singing miners so that they could have the “thrill” of receiving the news directly from the Library of Congress.<sup>34</sup>

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Star photographs. It is clear from a letter that Adelman took the Keating photos. Edith Patterson to George Korson, Apr. 23, 1946, folder “Correspondence—April 1946,” box 24, Korson Collection.

<sup>34</sup> George Korson to Edith Patterson, Apr. 25, 1946, folder “Correspondence—April 1946,” box 24, Korson Collection. Korson also mentions that the May (1946) issue of *Harper's Bazaar Junior* should have a photo spread about the trip, but he had not seen it.

The status of “Down, Down, Down” as an original composition of Keating’s and his skittishness about receiving his due and preventing its theft by other singers caused problems, however. Keating told Edith Patterson that he gave the Library of Congress full permission to include the song on the upcoming record and Patterson dutifully telegraphed this information to Rae Korson, who was helping prepare the record for publication. But then Keating got cold feet and sent Rae Korson a telegram rescinding all rights. Patterson resolved the issue by visiting Keating personally. She listened to his concerns about having his song “‘lifted’ by other singers” and had him write out, “in his own hand,” permission to include “Down, Down, Down” on the record.<sup>35</sup> “Down, Down, Down” was the first track on the Library of Congress album *Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner*, released as a set of 78 rpm records in 1948. In 1958 the collection was released on a 33 rpm LP, and the album was issued on a compact disc in 1996.

The recorded version retained the popularity Keating had cultivated for unrecorded versions of the song. “Down, Down, Down” was used as the audio track to a large, detailed working model of a breaker and mine in the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society in Wilkes-Barre. For the cost of a nickel, schoolchildren could activate the works, sending a model miner into the depths. Bulbs illuminated the parts of the mine as they were described by Keating in the soundtrack. The model was destroyed by a flood in 1972.<sup>36</sup>

Despite his fame as an anthracite troubadour, Keating apparently held a multitude of jobs. In a 1938 letter, Keating alludes to being busy with work for the W.P.A., moving dirt and rocks with a wheelbarrow. In 1945, he worked as a night watchman for the Cressona Ordinance Plant and washed windows to make extra income—Keating even had a “poetic post card” as an advertisement. Keating worked nights at the Win-Ann Manufacturing Company from 1940 until his retirement in 1955.<sup>37</sup>

Keating took pride in having his poems published. After *Minstrels of the Mine Patch* was published, Keating enthusiastically sold copies to his friends. Keating was reportedly “delighted” that Benjamin Botkin included

<sup>35</sup> Edith Patterson to Mrs. George [Rae] Korson, May 15, 1946, folder “Correspondence—May 1946,” box 24, Korson Collection.

<sup>36</sup> Gillespie, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, 101–2.

<sup>37</sup> William Keating to George Korson, Aug. 3, 1938, Korson Collection; Edith Patterson to George Korson, Jan. 30, 1945, in folder “Correspondence—January 1945,” box 23, Korson Collection; “Bill Keating is Green Thumb Gardener.”



Fig. 6. Keating writing poetry, ca. 1947. Photograph scanned from negative, Walter Kraus Collection, Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

"Down, Down, Down" in his *Treasury of American Folklore*, and he quickly ordered a copy for himself.<sup>38</sup> He also continued to work on his poetry. A photograph taken by a newspaperman circa 1947 shows Keating at his desk, squinting with satisfaction at a poem emerging from his typewriter (fig. 6).<sup>39</sup> Many of his poems were about nature, in the spirit of "October on Mount Laffee," but others, such as "I Hear the Wild Geese Calling," intertwined natural themes with motifs from his own life, such as his wanderlust and hobo years.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Phelps Soule to William Keating, Dec. 13, 1938, folder "Correspondence—December 1938," box 18, Korson Collection; Edith Patterson to George Korson, Jan. 30, 1945, Korson Collection.

<sup>39</sup> Photograph by Walter Kraus. Negative 3, Jacket "William Keating of Mount Laffee," small box "Walter Kraus Negatives—good captions," Room 5028, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Kraus Negative Collection).

<sup>40</sup> "Bill Keating is Green Thumb Gardener" mentions in the last paragraph that Keating writes poems about "the wonders he sees in nature." "I Hear the Wild Geese Calling," photograph of signed typescript, by Walter Kraus. Negative 2, Jacket "William Keating of Mount Laffee," Kraus Negative Collection.



Fig. 7. Keating the gardener. Photograph from Walter Kraus photograph of the *Orwigsburg News*, Sept. 27, 1956. Walter Kraus Collection, Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

In his later years, Keating enjoyed tending his garden. He was a careful composter, and he was able to grow enormous flowers, tomatoes, and pumpkins. He mentioned that he learned composting as a child from his father, who also practiced the technique. A newspaper photo shows Keating in a broad hat, outside a house wall covered in flowers (fig. 7). Keating was married twice. His first wife, Alvania Lechleitner, died in 1935. His second wife, Dorothy Kuhl Hollenbush, died in 1953. He had a son and a daughter, and four step-children (his second wife's children), plus grandchildren.<sup>41</sup>

Keating spent almost all of 1964 in the Veterans' Administration hospital in Wilkes-Barre, suffering "only the dregs of his old silicosis and

<sup>41</sup> "Bill Keating is Green Thumb Gardener"; "Wm. Keating, 'Singing Miner,' Wrote Ballads."

his having lived alone without being careful enough of his diet." Korson visited Keating in the hospital in May of that year. Keating seemed ill, but was excited to see Korson. He wanted to go home, but the doctor would not release him. The former troubadour was in good spirits though fragile health, and he wanted Korson to take down more songs he had in his head. Keating was also lonely. After the visit, Korson wrote a letter to Keating's son, saying that the old miner was in relatively good spirits, but that he also sounded homesick and "would like to have more visitors, especially of members of his family." They had not visited in more than three weeks when Korson saw Keating.<sup>42</sup>

Korson wanted to be sure Keating got some proper recognition when he died, telling Edith Patterson,

I am concerned that when he does go he should receive the right kind of an obituary. The other miner singers died almost without any recognition of their participation in the anthracite miners' folk culture. If I can help it, Bill Keating will go with the dignity and respect he deserves.<sup>43</sup>

Bill Keating died Tuesday, December 8, 1964, at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Wilkes-Barre.<sup>44</sup> The Pottsville *Republican* published an obituary, complete with the "singing miner" photo (cover) of Keating in his prime.

### *William Keating and Historical Memory*

The same year that William Keating was bidding his time in a lonely hospital, the Museum of History and Technology of the Smithsonian Institution hired John N. Hoffman to build the museum's mining collections and create a series of major exhibits about mining history. Hoffman had earned a PhD in mineral economics and worked as a mining engineer. He had an ambitious overall plan to tell the history of mining in the United States, but he decided to concentrate his initial historical research and collection activity on the history of anthracite mining. Hoffman

<sup>42</sup> Edith Patterson to George Korson, Jan. 8, 1964, folder "Correspondence—January 1964," box 41, Korson Collection; George Korson to Edith Patterson, June 10, 1964, folder "Correspondence—June 1964"; George Korson to Edith Patterson, Dec. 22, 1964, folder "Correspondence—December 1964"; George Korson to Russell B. Keating, June 10, 1964, all in box 41, Korson Collection.

<sup>43</sup> George Korson to Edith Patterson, June 10, 1964, Korson Collection.

<sup>44</sup> "Wm. Keating, 'Singing Miner,' Wrote Ballads."

made several trips to the anthracite country in late 1964 and early 1965 to make contacts and collect artifacts. His trips were a success—in addition to the artifacts Hoffman collected himself, many residents of the area sent the Smithsonian interesting items after reading about Hoffman in the local newspaper. When Keating's obituary appeared, a local contact sent Hoffman the information. Hoffman wrote to Keating's son, Russell, and explained the museum's projects and asked to take a look at his father's items on his next trip to Pennsylvania.<sup>45</sup>

Hoffman's efforts paid off. Russell Keating sent a total of thirteen items belonging to his father, William, to the Smithsonian: two oil lamps, a carbide lamp, two mule whips, a lunch pail, a water bottle, a soft miner's hat, a hard miner's helmet, a leather belt, a checkered shirt, a coat, and a pair of pants.<sup>46</sup> The artifacts were tagged with a number and brief donor information and were placed in storage in the basement of the museum with other mining artifacts.

Hoffman had been hired to create a Coal Hall in the newly opened Museum of History and Technology, but major changes in Smithsonian culture and personnel stymied his plans.<sup>47</sup> Hoffman represented an interpretational and curatorial approach that painted the mining industry in a favorable light at a time when the industry was undergoing unprecedented criticism for environmental and labor abuses.<sup>48</sup> The Coal Hall was never constructed, and the mining industry and its workers have continued to

<sup>45</sup> See John N. Hoffman Curatorial Files, Room 5028, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Hoffman Curatorial Files). The Hoffman Curatorial Files are unprocessed. See also "John N. Hoffman, 59," *Washington Post*, July 17, 1982; John N. Hoffman, *Girard Estate Coal Lands in Pennsylvania, 1801–1884* (Washington, DC, 1972); John N. Hoffman, *Anthracite in the Lehigh Region of Pennsylvania, 1820–45* (Washington, DC, 1968); Photostat copy of William Keating obituary with additional type by Walter Kraus, and John N. Hoffman to Russell [sic] B. Keating, May 19, 1965, both in folder "Keating," in Hoffman Curatorial Files.

<sup>46</sup> Russell Keating's gift was acknowledged on September 8, 1965. P. W. Bishop to Russell B. Keating, Sept. 8, 1965, Accession File #263096, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. The items also received numbers from the Division of Mining. They are as follows: miner's cap, MHI-MN-8987; miner's [hard] hat, MHI-MN-8988; lunch pail, MHI-MN-8989; water bottle, MHI-MN-8990; carbide lamp, MHI-MN-8991; oil lamp (2), MHI-MN-8992A and MHI-MN-8992B; coal-mining apparel [coat] MHI-MN-8993A; coal-mining apparel [shirt], MHI-MN-8993B; coal-mining apparel [pants], MHI-MN-8993C; belt, MHI-MN-8994; mule driver's whips (2) MHI-MN-8995A and MHI-MN-8995B.

<sup>47</sup> For one of Hoffman's pitches, see John N. Hoffman, "Mining Hall Script (A General Proposal)," Jan. 1971, Hoffman Curatorial Files.

<sup>48</sup> For a letter to the editor harshly criticizing Hoffman's proindustry approach, see Ward Sinclair, letter to the editor "Coal Industry's View," *Washington Post*, May 19, 1973. For a wider view of the negative perception of the mining industry at the time, see Duane A. Smith, *Mining America: The Industry and the Environment, 1800–1980* (Lawrence, KS, 1987).

be almost totally ignored as topics for Smithsonian exhibits. After Hoffman's unexpected death in 1982, his position was absorbed by other curatorial staff.

Hoffman did not keep meticulous records about the things he collected. While he almost certainly knew that Keating's items were part of his costume, he did not take any steps to make sure that knowledge remained part of the collective memory of the division. The information could have been retained in one of several places. It could have been written on the tags that were attached to the items themselves, or it could have been written on the cards in the catalog of items maintained by the division (which was later computerized). The information could have been inserted into the bound, handwritten master catalog, or it could have been inserted into the accession file for the items, either the master copy maintained by the museum, or the duplicate maintained internally by the division. These are the standard places that curators look for information about the provenance of items in the collections. Since Hoffman did not leave informational breadcrumbs for his successors in any of those places, when Hoffman died, the institutional knowledge of Keating as an anthracite troubadour died as well—only the outline of Keating, as a representative miner, remained.

Keating's artifacts were first slated for use in an exhibition entitled *Working Together*. The exhibit planned to broadly outline the history of mining work in America. Curators intended to use his coat and his shirt as examples of the typical work apparel of miners, but there is no evidence that the exhibit was actually installed.<sup>49</sup>

Other items of Keating's were featured more recently in *Taking America to Lunch*, a small exhibit of lunchboxes, sponsored by Thermos Corporation. The lunchboxes were installed in glass cases near the Smithsonian's Main Street Cafe in late 2004, and a companion Web site allows virtual visitors to see some of the artifacts from home.<sup>50</sup>

This exhibit throws into stark relief the erasure of Keating. His lunch pail and his water bottle were a consistent element in his costume; he showed up to make a recording of his song in costume with these items, and his most popular song, "Down, Down, Down," included a line describing how Keating was prepared to go to work, "With booze in me

<sup>49</sup> The exhibit plan is in an unmarked binder in Divisional Files, Room 5028, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. The coat and shirt still bear tags that indicated that the items were separated from the collection for the exhibit.

<sup>50</sup> <http://americanhistory.si.edu/lunchboxes/index.htm>, accessed May 31, 2005.



Fig. 8. Miner's bottle and miner's lunch pail belonging to William Keating, featured in the exhibit *Taking America to Lunch*. Photographs from *Taking America to Lunch* Web site, Smithsonian Institution.

bottle and beer in me can.”<sup>51</sup> It is difficult not to imagine Keating waving the props at the appropriate time when performing in front of a live audience.

The photograph labels on the lunchbox exhibit Web site describe these items only as “Miner's dinner pail, Late 19th century” and “Miner's bottle, Late 19th century”; and the label in the museum case does not

<sup>51</sup> See “Down, Down, Down,” stanza 14, in Korson, ed., *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends*, 364–66; this is also stanza 14 of the recorded version.

mention them at all.

So are Keating's items in the Smithsonian "genuine"? Is Keating's lunch pail truly able to represent an authentic turn-of-the-century miner? If Keating's pants are not truly miner's pants, do they deserve a place in the primary storehouse of American national memory at all?

The questions prompted by the full story of Bill Keating's pants problematize the concept of authenticity that is usually applied to museum artifacts. He was seen by his contemporaries as an authentic anthracite troubadour, and he certainly had first-hand knowledge of anthracite mining. His costume was authentic enough to ring true with audiences who would have known the difference. More importantly, his costume is perhaps all that is left, and in a world where one of the best-preserved Pennsylvania anthracite mining villages, Eckley Miner's Village State Historic Park, is actually a movie set built for the 1970 film *The Mollie Maguires*, the simple fact of the existence of Keating's pants may be the thing that matters most.

Keating was a miner, but he was much more than simply that—he was a songwriter, a poet, a performer, and a family man. But how different, really, was he in the end? We historians talk about "miners" (or "workers" or "laborers") and classify people as we do so. This is of course necessary. But it is helpful to have a reminder of the richness and complexity of the lives of "ordinary" people. When I first found them, Keating's clothes resonated because they represented, in material form, all I knew about miners and their work. Keating was an archetype. Now, for me, Keating speaks as a representative of mining culture, but the message is a little different: Remember that we were complex, interesting people. We were miners, but also poets, and lovers of songs, and family.

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