In 1977, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania acquired fifteen volumes, dated 1883 to 1903, of a diary belonging to a mine employee who worked for the Southwest Coal and Coke Company of Westmoreland City, Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, not one of the volumes included the diarist's name. Therefore, as part of the task of inventorying the diaries, it became necessary to establish the identity of their author.

Evidence within the diaries themselves helped to unravel the mystery. Under the date August 31 in the 1895 diary was the first clue. The author noted that his uncle, Will Neely, had died and had been buried at Mount Vernon Cemetery. Because the name Martha had been frequently mentioned in previous volumes, it was surmised that her last name possibly was Neely, and that she, too, had been buried at Mount Vernon. But a check of the cemetery's records revealed this not to be so — seemingly a dead end.

William Gibson worked as a volunteer in the Society's archives from 1978 to 1979. Andrew Rudoff served at the Society in the fall of 1979 as an undergraduate intern from Carnegie-Mellon University. — Editor

1 The exact occupation of the author is unknown except that he carried out administrative duties which frequently meant visiting other companies, attending meetings with labor, and ordering merchandise for use in the company.

2 The Southwest Coal and Coke Company consisted of five mines located in Westmoreland County. These mines were considered to be a part of the second bituminous mine district which then included seventy-seven mines. The five mines were called No. 1 "A," No. 1 "B," Nos. 2 and 3, and No. 4. In 1885, No. 1 A and B, located at Mount Pleasant, employed 451 workers. Nos. 2 and 3, located in Tarrs, employed 126, and No. 4, located in Stonerville, employed 53. There were 470 coke ovens at No. 1 A and B, 136 at Nos. 2 and 3, and 72 at No. 4. The address of the central operation was Westmoreland City, and the owners (as of 1884) were E. C. Converse, O. D. Delano, B. F. Raferty, J. H. Deweesy, John Shields, and William Duncan. The superintendent was Morris Ramsay. The inspector for the year 1886 described the operation as follows: "This company has five mines in the second district and they are all very well managed." Pennsylvania, Report of the Bureau of Industrial Statistics (Harrisburg, 1887).
Subsequent diaries proved to be the catalysts which enabled the puzzle to be pieced together. On January 30, 1897, the still nameless author noted his fiftieth wedding anniversary. Three months later, he listed the thirtieth wedding anniversary of John and Bella Painter. The Painter name also turned up in several business transactions, and because of the author's previous diligence in recording family events, it seemed reasonable that the Painters were related in some way. More clues appeared in the 1899 diary. In it, the author noted January 5 as the start of his wife's terminal illness and he confirmed that her name was Martha. On November 2, 1900, the author sadly remarked in his diary that his wife had died and that she would be interred at the Versailles Cemetery in McKeensport. He provided details about her life and her family and added that her maiden name was indeed Neely. A final clue came in the 1902 diary. Tucked away on the page for November 2 was a photograph of a burial vault with the name "Painter" inscribed on it. Acting on the assumption that this vault may have contained the remains of the anonymous author's wife and that he had placed the photograph in the diary as a remembrance of the second anniversary of her death, a check was made with the McKeensport-Versailles Cemetery. The records of the latter indicated the presence of a Painter family vault, in which a Martha Neely had been laid to rest. The records also revealed that Robert Cornell, husband of Martha (Neely) Cornell, had been buried in the Painter vault after his death on July 18, 1909.

Robert Cornell was born on January 30, 1822, in Winton Hill, a mining village in Midlothian, Scotland. His family emigrated to the United States seven years later, arriving in Pittsburgh on September 12, 1829. While still in his late twenties, Cornell was hired by several partners to construct a coal-hauling railroad on the Youghiogheny River near McKeensport. This successful enterprise subsequently became part of the Southwest Coal and Coke Company, for which Cornell worked until his death in 1909.

The times during which these diaries were written were hard on both the coal mine operators and the miners. Strikes meant a loss of profits for the owners and a loss of wages for the miners. Because the condition of the miners was considerably more desperate than the operators, their problems seem to warrant special attention. First of all, miners who were being paid barely enough to live on were facing the possibility of further wage reductions. The editor of the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette on March 10, 1885, asserted that: "There can be no general revival, no permanent improvement in trade,
while wages are being pressed down. Prosperity will not come to stay until those who employ labor are able to pay at least fair living wages to their workmen."

The houses of miners were, as a rule, the worst class of laborers' homes in the state. They were built in the cheapest possible manner with no regard to sanitary conditions. They had no facilities for drainage, and were built in blocks with one yard common to all the tenants. In some cases, as many as four families shared one toilet. Because the houses and land were generally the property of the coal company, the miner was, to a great extent, at their mercy in regard to these conditions. The rent for these shanties was grossly disproportionate to their real value, but miners either had to accept the accommodations or do without work.

Although Cornell mentioned the miners striking for higher wages and pay for dead work — that labor around the mine not directly related to yielding coal — it is clear that this was merely one facet of their dissatisfaction. Cornell did not appear to be overly concerned with the miners' plight, because there is little mention in his diaries other than noting the beginnings and endings of strikes. He was not a social commentator, but rather was content merely to record the routine activities of the day. Perhaps we should look for no value beyond this. However, the Cornell diaries are revealing about the man and his work. In them are vignettes of nineteenth-century life in southwestern Pennsylvania as well as firsthand accounts of the day-to-day operations of the coal company. For clarity, punctuation and capitalization have been added to these selections from the diaries.

March, Monday 9. 1885.
Thermometer at 9 A M 5 at 4 P M 37
It was cold this morning but it moderated Some during the day. I got George Fleming to go down to Long Run this morning to try Blowing the gorged ice out with Dymite. He fired about 25 shots. We got it through the gorge. We also used 1 keg of Powder. A number of the men helped us. This is the first day of the miners Strike.¹

¹ Five thousand miners joined in this strike, including all men in the Youghiogheny River region, the location of the Southwest Coal and Coke mines. All through the district the miners held meetings and planned for a long strike. Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, Mar. 10, 1885.
March, Wednesday 25. 1885.

Thermometer at 9 A M 20 at 4 P M 36

It snowed about 1 inch during the night but it Melted during the day. I went to Pittsburgh this morning. I went to Fort Perry on the P Mc & Y R R. I then went to Brown Station & stoped there & then went on to Pittsburgh. I Saw Capt S S & Harry Brown. The[y] Say the[y] will not Pay 3 cts per Bushell.

There was a good deal of ice in the Monningh. River, some of the upper Pools being frozen over. The miners appear to be firm but they are weakening a little. I came home on 4 25 P M train. The Steamer Alarm Came up through today. She brought up one coke barge & towed out 3 loaded Coke Barges.

August, September 22. 1885.

Thermometer at 9 A M 83 at 4 P M 86

This has been a Pleasant day. It looked like rain nearly all day. It Rained a good deal last night. The Dredge Boat was at work today. The[y] are getting very slow. Sam Culbert, Bill Kerr, Frank Duncan, Henry Kerr, Jim Hackett, Dave Graham was working at the abutment & Ice Breakers & Alf Graham was Pumping the fleet. Sam Culbert cut his leg very Bad this afternoon with a foot adize up at the Ice Breakers. Dr. Black went up to the Ice Breakers & Bandiged his leg & then went home in Painters buggy with him So that he could fix his leg after he got home. The Miners Committee was notified this morning of a Reduction to 2 3/4 Cents per Bushell for mining.

4 Pittsburgh, McKeesport and Youghiogheny Railroad.

5 A main issue in the miners' strike of 1885 was the fact that the miners wanted three cents per bushel of coal. The operators argued that at three cents there would be "no money in coal" (Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, Mar. 10, 1885). Another factor concerned the competition from the Kanawha River region. The Kanawha operators had no lockage fees to pay, enabling them to offer better terms than the Pittsburgh coal men. Furthermore, Pittsburgh operators were more at the mercy of changing river conditions which many times stopped them from hauling their coal. Notice in the Cornell diaries the problems of ice jams in the early spring. Also, Kanawha coal was almost as good as Pittsburgh's for iron and steel making. The Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette of March 10, 1885, warned: "This is the Kanawha region's great opportunity. It is absolutely necessary for the upper river men to keep a sharp eye on their interests."

6 Although the Pennsylvania Bureau of Industrial Statistics kept records of both fatal and nonfatal accidents, this particular one and many others in the Cornell diaries were never recorded. These records, therefore, were grossly inaccurate. For example, the records of 1886 report no nonfatal accidents for Southwest Coal and Coke. Especially for a mining company, this statistic seems highly unlikely. Pennsylvania, Report of the Bureau of Industrial Statistics (Harrisburg, 1887).
November, Saturday 21. 1885.
Thermometer at 9 A M 40 at 4 P M 44
This has been a Cloudy and gloomy day. It has looked Rain or Snow all day. The Caulkers got done this Evening. Sam Culbert worked until noon. Bill Kerr was putting in Brace Rollers at Sagans. I attended the Funeral of Eliza Mary Duncan this afternoon. She was Buried at Mount Vernon. The Miners at there meeting at Monnonghella City yesterday agreed to continue the Strike for 3 cnts.

December, Wednesday 23. 1885.
Thermometer at 9 A M 40 at 4 P M 41
It commenced Raining Slowly at noon & continued Raining at Intervals during the afternoon. We Run of the coal today we made 6 trips. There are a few more miners going in but the miners are very loth to give up. The[y] had a Riot at the old Eagle Mines this morning about 150 Masked Strickers attacked the miners going to work & Injured Some of them very badly. We received per P Mc & Y R R one car No. 1476 loaded with oats. 266 Sacks 8593 Bushells.

December, Tuesday 29 1885.
Thermometer at 9 A M 33 at 4 P M 38
It has been Soft and Cloudy all day with Indications of Rain or Snow. It may Rain Some to night. Bill Kerr and John Lamb is working at the gates for the Pit mouth. There is more men going in Every day. I think the Strike is about over. I think a large number of the miners think so.

January, Saturday 2. 1886.
Thermometer at 9 A M 30 at 4 P M 52
There was a very heavy frost this Morning. It was cold but it turned out a Beauty full day. John Lamb was fixing the Bell Wire down to Logans. Bill Kerr was Putting the Locks in the doors at the Pit Mouth & Sam Culbert was Shoeing the Mules to day. A number of

7 Possibly the wife of Frank Duncan, a worker at Southwest Coal and Coke.
8 Violence and threats were nothing new to these coal strikes. On March 10, 1885, striking miners placed this warning on a tipple at the O'Neal mine in nearby West Elizabeth: "LOOK OUT BLACKLEGS. BEWARE OF DYNAMITE!" This was intended to scare the miners who had returned to work at their old wages. Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, Mar. 11, 1885.
9 The Southwest Coal and Coke Company owned sixty horses and mules, crucial to underground operations before electricity came into widespread use. Pennsylvania, Report of the Bureau of Industrial Statistics (Harrisburg, 1886).
miners made application for work today. The strike may be considered over. It has been a long & bitter fight. Alf Graham was jobing around.

May, Wednesday 12. 1886.
Thermometer at 9 A M 73 at 4 P M 81
We Run Coal only until 9 A M we made 4 trips 105 Cars. The Miners Called a Meeting about us hireing Some of Oneal Miners. Frank Cornell and Myself attended a meeting of the miners at the Back Mouth & made an Explanation but we firmly declined to answer the miners to say who should work here. After the miners found that we would not make an concessions, the[y] voted to go to work to morrow morning. W. S. Scott Starting his mines and needing about 1000 miners gives us a good deal of trouble. We have lost about 60 men already. The Steamer R A Speed Came up this morning. She brought us two barges & She took away two barges of Coal & one French Creek Boat of nut & dust mixed & one flat of fuel. We received per P Mc & Y R R 4 Bars Iron 1¾ Square & 4 Bars 4 X ¾. Dana Shannon hauled them to the Post Road. Frank & I went over to old Alf's works to see Charley Dillon. I think he will get done this week.

June, Wednesday 30. 1886.
Thermometer at 9 A M 76 at 4 P M 78
We Run Coal to day untill noon we made 9 trips 307 Cars. We only Run Coal untill noon. The miners held a meeting in the afternoon about getting Paid for Dead work. It was a little Cloudy all day. The out Side hands was cleaning the track this afternoon. Henry Kerr & Alf Graham was working at the river. George Graham and Bill Shannon was loading Pit Posts & Coke in the Cars.

January, Monday 31. 1887.
Thermometer at 9 A M 33 at 4 P M 32
We Run Coal to day. We made 3 trips when the miners Struck for 3 cents & a whole String of other things. The Strike is General all

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10 The Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette of Feb. 1, 1887, noted: "There has been no meeting called by the Coal Exchange, and all the operators say they cannot afford to give an advance, and that they will stand out as long as the men will. They give as a reason that unless the Kanawha men advance wages in proportion, they cannot without ruin. There are about 6000 of the Monongahela river miners in this strike." Since the miners were again striking for three cents per bushel, it is obvious that the strike noted earlier in the diaries (March 1885) was a failure.
along both Rivers. I think it will be a hard fight. I sent a letter this morning to the office of W H B[rown] Sons notifying them that the miners would Strike.11 The[y] held a meeting early this morning & Resolved to Strike in accordance with the action of the Monnonghela Convention held on Saturday last. The tipple crew was taking Pit Cars out of a flat after we got done Running. The River is falling.

February, Tuesday 8. 1887.

Thermometer at 9 A M 38 at 4 P M 40

It Rained aggood deal during the Night & Some to day. I went to Pittsburgh on the early train. I stoped at Brown Station to See Mr. Hammitt. I saw him 7 went down to town on the Cars with Capt Harry Brown. The Executive Board of the Knights of Labour made there award.12 The[y] gave the 1st 2 & 30 Pools 2 ¼ Cts per Bushell, the 4th Pool Miners 237½ Cts per Bushell.11 The miners & operators are both ki[c]king about it. The[y] may calm down in a day or two. We Received per Express P Mc & Y R R a Box Containing 16 cylinder Bolts from Millholland Bros.

11 W. H. Brown and Sons operated the Black Diamond mine in Washington County in the first bituminous mine district. The author of these diaries came in contact with this firm often, as they are mentioned frequently in his entries.

12 The Knights of Labor was founded in Philadelphia in 1869 by a tailor named Uriah S. Stephens. The purpose of the organization was to unite the workers of all branches of industry into one body. Stephens started the Knights of Labor because he felt the already established trade organizations were ineffective. In outlining their faults, Stephens pointed out four major problems. The first and most important one was that trade organizations had neglected to recognize the government as a factor in economic relations between the various citizens in the country. The second was their refusal to recognize the unskilled labor force as being entitled to full and free representation in labor disputes. Third was the fact that trade unions were extremely clannish and thus estranged their members from seeking support from other unions. Finally, because trade organizations had failed to harmonize relations between various workers, the class distinctions which arose kept these workers from uniting into one solid body.

The Knights of Labor was a secret organization until 1881, after which its name and existence was made public. The order began to grow and by 1886 virtually every major city in the north contained from a few to several thousand members. Finally, when cliques of trade unionists began to form in local assemblies, the mass cooperation needed to make the organization a success diminished. In fact, it was the trade unionists of the anthracite and bituminous coalfields that were largely responsible for this occurrence. The strikes that appeared frequently in the Cornell diaries were the main cause for fluctuation in the total number of members in the Knights of Labor. This happened because after the failure of a certain strike members would frequently leave the order and resort to the courts. See, Joseph G. Rayback, A History of American Labor (New York, 1959).

13 Cornell probably meant 2½ cents per bushel or a similar figure.
February, Wednesday 9. 1887.
Thermometer at 9 A M 38 at 4 P M 48
This has been a Beautyfull day clear & bright. At noon to day I Received a telegram from W H Brown Sons Saying the[y] had accepted the award of the Executive Board of the Knights of Labour & for me to notify our miners. I Saw the Pit Committee & the[y] Called a Meeting & after a good deal of Parleying the[y] decided to go to work at the 2 3/4 cts per Bushel. We Received per P Mc & Y R R Several Pacages of Paint for to Paint our Engines. I Received per Mail a letter from Rush & Moon giving me there Prices of Roolers. We Received per P Mc & Y R R 10 Pit Car wheels from Oliver Bros & Phillips Pittsburgh.

February, Thursday 10. 1887.
Thermometer at 9 A M 40 at 4 P M 48
This has been a Pleasant day. It looked like Snow or Rain at times. It sprinkled Rain at noon. The Steamer Delta Came up this morning. She took two Barges down to Oneals & then She took away the Coal Barge that was nearley loaded. The[y] loaded it out at Keystone. Sam Culbert & Bill Kerr was working at the old Brick School house fixing it So that a family can live in it. Our miners held a meeting this afternoon & Decided to go to work to morrow morning.