

An Interview With

GORDON PATTERSON

By

Students Andrea Hays and Cami Sue
Conger, with teacher Larry Fults of
Soddy Daisy Junior High School

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PREFACE

This manuscript is a transcript of an interview conducted for the Oral History Project of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Library. The purpose of the project is to capture the first-hand accounts of the social history of the Chattanooga area in the twentieth century.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that the transcript reflects the patterns of the spoken, rather than the written, word. The information is presented as it was recalled by the interviewee at the occasion of the interview and has been edited only for clarity.

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Two indexes have been prepared for locating specific information from either the transcript or the tape. The page index to the transcript is located at the end of this volume. A meter count number has been given in the left margin of the text for locating a section on the tape. It should be noted that this number will vary depending on the equipment used.

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This is an interview by Andrea Hays and Cami Sue Conger with Gordon Patterson.

Hays: Okay, Mr. Patterson, how old are you now?

Patterson: I'm going on 87, I'm 86 and going on 87.

Hays: How old were you when you went to work?

Patterson: I was 14.

Hays: And you worked in the mines in Soddy-Daisy?

Patterson: Yes, Soddy. I went in there when I was 14 and trapped --
007 that's going with the drivers, you know, keeping the doors closed.

Hays: Could you tell us where the mines are now?

Patterson: Right about a mile up in this little gulf there, on the right. You can see the sign of the old drift mouth right there now and see the old brick where they had their boilers to make steam, you know, and to run power.

Hays: Okay. How many hours a day did you work?

Patterson: At that time ten hours; it finally got down to eight after they got organized good.

Hays: Were there many accidents, bad ones?

Patterson: I know of about four anyhow, pretty bad accidents.

Hays: Could you tell us of one, like of my great-grandfather?

Patterson: Oh, yeah, Joe Abernathy, isn't it? Joe Abernathy, he got
019 killed with a slate fall, after they started up the mines again under W. R. Milligan, and Colonel [Harold J.] Weeks. They operated there. I was working with cutting their air cores through down there, and I heard a great noise up there. And Skeet come running down there, said, "Daddy's killed. He's been working in the mines 40 years and now he's dead, now
024 he's killed." And I went up there and seen the slate and helped get the slate off of him.

Hays: About how much slate had fallen?

Patterson: I'd say there was around five ton.

Hays: What kind of lunch did you take?

Patterson: Well, I took just mostly rough grub. I'd have some meat and have beans, and maybe a cake in that upper tray there. Just mostly rough grub.

Hays: Okay. Where did you buy your lunch box?

Patterson: We bought them at the company store down there. They had a big store, and we bought all such things as we needed right there, for the mines. Then they had a place up at the mine
036 that sold some supplies too. They kept them there handy for the miners, such as your soap and things like that that you needed.

Hays: Where was the store that you bought [from]? Where was it located?

Patterson: There where they make those trailers.

Hays: Okay. Where Tennessee Trailers is now?

Patterson: Yeah, right there.

Hays: Okay.

Conger: It's been burned down now.

Patterson: Oh yeah, the old building's been burned down, and then the brick -- a guy come in here and got all the brick, cleaned
040 them and sold them.

Hays: Okay. What about the Soddy Lake? What was there before the lake was built?

Patterson: Just a creek coming down out of the gulf and going on down through there. There wasn't no lake at all, just places where there's deep water. You'd go fishing or in swimming if you wanted to. And then it was well watered. There were big springs that have been covered up by that lake. I know of two big springs, one of them that run off down there and went to the -- they made a mill race out of it and had a mill down
048 there and ground corn at that mill. It was called the Berry Mill; old man Berry used to own it. And the Wallace Spring, it's covered up now. Old man Wallace used to sell water there. He'd jug that water up and then ship it and sell water out of that Wallace Spring.

Hays: Okay. About that general store that was there --

Patterson: Yes?

Hays: Could you tell us about it?

Patterson: Well, they had lots of business there, and on Saturday, especially. They had about eight clerks that would be going as fast as they could go to wait on the customers. And upstairs they had furniture; and you could get measured there for a suit from Cincinnati, Riverside Tailoring Company. I've got measured there for a suit right up there in that place.
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Fults: Did they pay you in script, Gordon, or cash?

Patterson: You could draw script. It was a little old yellow pasteboard thing with quarters and fifty cents and all like that on there, even down to ten cents.

Hays: Okay. Now what about the glass factory?

Patterson: Well, I don't know about that, only [that] I've seen some of the bottles that's been made in Soddy, here at Soddy.
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Hays: Okay. Do they say "Made in Soddy"?

Patterson: Soddy. You know, Gene Elliott has one; he can show you one.

Hays: Okay. Now back to the mine.

Fults: Did they make the glass here or just bottle a drink or something down in Soddy?

Patterson: Well, I don't know how they'd a got that name on there without it had been molded here for that purpose.

Fults: It said Soddy Bottling Company, I believe.

Patterson: Yeah, it's in the glass, made, yeah.

Hays: It was probably packaged and made here. Okay, back to the mine. You said that there was a trench like that came down from the mountain. Could you tell us about that? -- that they washed the coal in.

Patterson: Oh, that's an incline.

Hays: Incline.

Patterson: It had a great big cable rope on it, steel rope. There's forty cars, twenty-two trips; that's twenty-two forties. And they'd run over a ton apiece. You could see how much coal they was getting off of there.
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Hays: And what did they wash it with?

Patterson: They had water here. Most of it came from that creek up there. 079 They had it troughed in there and then piked. It come down here, and they had plenty of water from that that they could wash the coal with.

Hays: Were you paid with cash from working in the mine, or were you paid with a check or how? Or how much did you get?

Patterson: Well, we just was paid by the ton, to get it out. It ran about a little over a dollar a ton. They'd hold you two weeks behind when you was working, and then they'd pay you up after that two weeks was out, the month, you know. And then you got a regular two weeks pay day.

Fults: How many tons could you load a day, Gordon?

Patterson: I usually run about eight ton a day.

Hays: Were you paid in checks or did they give you cash?

Patterson: Cash. When I first come here and went to work, they paid off 091 in gold, gold money, sure did.

Conger: What kind of education did you have? Any at all?

Patterson: Yes, I went to the fifth grade. Well I guess I might have gotten more, a little more than that, on the last. But I've read so much and studied books, everything that would help me a whole lot.

Conger: Whereabouts was the school located? Was it the house where you lived or --

Patterson: Well, the first school was right down there where -- you know, where Gene Elliott's got his old place there?

Conger: Yes-sir.

Patterson: Along in there that old school sat, a big two-story building. And I first started school right in there.

Conger: Is it close to where the elementary is now?

Patterson: No, way back over here.

Fults: By the old feed store.

Patterson: Right in above Fuller's now, Harper's store, right in above there is where that school was at.

Hays: How many grades did it go through?

Patterson: In that building there, they could almost educate you in there,
105 you went right on up pretty high; just about get an education
in that one building. Like my mother used to say about the
old blueback speller, you'd just about get an education out of
that blueback speller.

Hays: Now could you tell us some things about Daisy -- like do you
know where the old railroad depot used to be?

Patterson: Oh yes, I know where the first one was.

Hays: Where was it located?

Patterson: Right in there close to that -- used to be a silk mill there,
right on side the railroad.

Hays: Is it near where the houseshoe factory used to be?

Patterson: Yes close to that old shoe factory, yes.

Hays: And it was called?

Patterson: Daisy.

Hays: Okay, what about Melville?

Patterson: Melville is named after a man in the history. I found his
115 name in the history that they named Melville after.

Hays: Where was Melville Station?

Patterson: Well it's right in there, you know, where that coal is that
they have down there, where they piled up a lot of coal.

Hays: In Daisy?

Patterson: Well, it's right on side of the railroad up there above it.

Hays: You said that they produced lime?

Patterson: They made lime, yes.

Hays: Where?

Patterson: At that rock quarry over there. They produced lime and they
122 also had a store there, too, that they sold stuff to the min-
ers, to the ones that worked in the quarry.

Hays: Could you tell us something about the potato factory?

Conger: Do you know anything about it, other than you've heard of it?

Patterson: Well, they built a place there where they could store potatoes and keep them. I remember when they put it up. That's what it was built for, just to take care of the potatoes, to take care of the farmers' produce around here.
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Conger: So, it was mainly built for that.

Patterson: For that purpose, yes.

Conger: And they lived in the upstairs?

Patterson: Well, has it got an upstairs?

Conger: Uh-huh.

Patterson: Well, they'd use the whole thing.

Conger: I've heard that they used the bottom stairs as the place, and the family who owned it lived in the upstairs, and it was just on -- like stilts.

Fults: How about the old pottery in Daisy, Gordon?

Patterson: Well, I used to work at one of those potteries down there at Herty's. That's down there where they pile that coal up; they had a big shop right there. And then below there they had another one they called Pringle's. Back on this side of the creek they had another one in there. So they had about four potteries in Daisy there one time. And they used to make churn jars down there and jugs.
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Fults: What about the old kerosene bottles or something they used to make down there?

Patterson: Oh, that's turpentine jugs.

Fults: Turpentine jugs, okay.

Patterson: They made them something like that flower pot yonder only they had a place where they could hang them up where they cut the tree to get the turpentine to flow out of. And they'd nail a nail there and hang that up, and then they'd have a little spout, maybe, coming out of there and run in that jar. They'd save that turpentine.
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Conger: What about transportation? Was it just walking, riding horses, carriages, buggies?

Patterson: Well, the first bus line that was put up here at Soddy was
153 Jim Card. He started a bus line. It ran to Chattanooga, back
and forth. And so we've had a bus line here for 75 years or
more, 80. But now we have got none, they took it off.

Hays: That's kind of ridiculous just to have it way back then and
not have it now.

Patterson: They got along pretty good back then.

Conger: Getting back to the mines, what kind of tools did they have?

Patterson: They had shovels, maybe they'd have a couple of coal picks,
and the auger, breast auger, and then the breastplate. They
had a breastplate they'd put up here too, a different kind to
what I showed you while ago. And they'd push on that and make
that auger cut.

Conger: Did any women enter the coal mines?

Patterson: No, they's kind of afraid back then, thought it was bad luck
for a woman to go in.

Hays: What did they do? What were their jobs to do?

Patterson: The women?

Hays: Yes.

Patterson: They'd be around the office and inside the company store. Mrs.
165 Grimsley used to take care of the bills and things there in
the company store. You remember her, don't you?

Fults: Yes, I remember her.

Hays: Could you tell us about the light that you used and --

Patterson: Oh, you're wanting to know about the first lights? It was in
the shape of a coffee pot, and used lard in it, and had a wick
made out of cotton thread. You'd put that end down here and
have a little string on it and pull that wick up in there. It
had a hook on it and you'd hang it on your cap, and the miners
could see the smoke fogging from them. That's one bad thing
about it, it made a lot of smoke.

Hays: We heard they couldn't use lanterns because of some type of
176 gas that was in there that would make it blow up or something
like that.

Patterson: There wasn't any gas at all in the Soddy Mines they knowed of.
But now in Kentucky --

Hays: Could you tell us about the lights on the hats of this kind right here?

Patterson: Well, that's the carbide light, you used carbide in it. See, you'd put water in this upper part right here. You regulated the feed by that little leverage right there.

Fults: It let so much water drip down and --

Patterson: Yeah, you could make it fast or slow.

Fults: Put the carbide in the bottom, and the water would drip down
186 and make gas and the gas would light; you'd light your gas with a flint, see? And you'd have your light.

Conger: What would happen if it went out? Would you just be in the dark?

Hays: Could you restart it?

Patterson: That's one of the darkest darks [that] ever was when you are in the dark in the mines. You couldn't see nothing. It's just black.

Hays: Did you ever get lost in the mines?

Patterson: No, I never did get lost.

Hays: And did any other miners get lost and never were found until
194 they died or people were digging?

Patterson: Sometimes they'd get trapped in there. Maybe there would come a slate fall out there on the hallway in front of them, and they couldn't get through until they removed all that slate; you know how that was. They'd get trapped. I know Earl Elder got trapped up there in the mines in Kentucky, Blackie I believe it was. Down ahead of him there come a big fall, and they couldn't get through there. But they kept working and finally found a breakthrough and went through and got out; that's the only way. They had to crawl a long ways.

Fults: My daddy used to work in this coal mine. I believe he told
205 me that he drove a mule in there and pulled the cars out to the entrance of the mines.

Patterson: Yes, he did.

Fults: Said they'd put blinders on the mule before they'd take him in.

[interruption]

Fults: We're going to be leaving in just about a minute or so, Gordon.

Hays: Well, thanks a lot, and we've got some archaeologists and they might be interested in coming by and looking at your tools and lunch box if it would be convenient. They might
213 want you to come up and try to show them where the mine entrances were.

Patterson: Okay, I could show them all the tools I've got, too, that I used.

Hays: Okay. Well, thank you a lot.

Patterson: Yes, glad to help.
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End Tape 1, Side 1
END OF INTERVIEW