

## [Johnnie Gates-Truck Driver]

John M. Gates

Truck Miner

Helena, Alabama

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JOHNNIE GATES - TRUCK MINER

(By Woodrow Hand)

Helena, lying 17 1/2 miles south of Birmingham on the main line of the Louisville and Nashville Railway, is the central point of what once was a great coal mining locality.

Main Street, or the business section, has on one side two stores and a shoeshop. On the other side is a store and the Post Office. The Post Office is alone in its assurance of continued operation.

The streets of Helena are rough and dusty; or muddy, depending upon the whim of the weather. They pass rambling houses that sag at the roots and on the corners; shot-gun houses that are even worse than their already questionably name. Helena, with one exception, fits any of numerous ghost town descriptions. The exception is that people live there.

They are a varied group - living examples of what Helena has been and hopes to be again.

On a hill overlooking Helena lives Dr. Lubright, Dentist.

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"Leave Helena?" His fat [Teutonie?] face first registers surprise; then indulgence, such as that reserved for a questioning child. "Why should I leave? Its my home; I've made a fortune here. Those people 2 down there need me. They still have the tooth acne - much oftener than they can afford to pay for relief."

Other illnesses fall upon the Irish shoulders of Dr. Ryan.

"I wouldn't leave this place," he says, "because there's plenty of good tinning around here."

Then with a twinkle in his eyes, "And you know how people will keep having babies. Why, I've got six kids myself. Believe you me, people will have babies and get sick regardless. Besides, I've been doctoring these people for twenty years; I know their troubles.

"Pay? Pshaw! These people can't pay! But they used to. The offices of six mines used to cut their men a buck out of every payday. I haven't spent all of that yet."

Luther Mullins, seemingly the busiest storekeeper in Helena, was next.

"Business to bad," he says, "but we'll make out [?]. I let out a lot of credit, but most of the bills are paid sometime or other."

Suddenly Luther laughed and pointed across the railroad tracks.

"There comes Johnnie Gates with a case of snuff from the Paramount commissary. He brings it in as fast as I can sell it. You see, the commissary charges so high that the miners trade with me when they draw a payday; but their paydays don't come very regular. 3 The miners have to trade checks. But Johnnie - he trades his check for snuff and it isn't above the popular price. Then he swaps the snuff to me for groceries. Pretty smart that."

Johnnie's face bears the unmistakable mark of years underground. It is pockmarked and lined with blue scars wounds that healed over coal dust. His hands are gnarled, with

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stubby fingers. Over all are the identifying blue marks. The introductory handshake was like rubbing a piece of oak bark.

“Shucks,” Johnnie grinned, “I can tell you plenty 'bout minin' 'round here, and show you plenty, too. Only I'd better go home to do it. Hattie don't like to keep supper waitin'. I gotta get home with the baby's candy too.”

Helena's main street becomes an ordinary road a few hundred feet west of Luther Mullins' store. Johnnie led the way past houses in every known state of disrepair, all facing the road.

“See how the porches are slap up a'gin' the road? I leave for work about five o'clock to walk the three miles to Paramount by work time. In hot weather, a lotta folks sleep on them porches in practically nothin'. Some of them oversleep. Some mornin's I'm late for work. Do you blame me?”

After nearly half-a-mile, the road suddenly tops a small rise. In a little valley below is a cluster of fairly new, unpainted houses, slightly weather-worn.

The houses are bungalows of four and five 4 rooms. One has a cracked-rock front. This is Johnnie's home.

He explains:

“A twister cleaned out what we owned three years ago, and the relief people helped us build back. I bought my place twenty years ago when things were hummin'.”

Flowers of varied hue dot the front yard. To the side is a small vegetable garden. A chicken yard and a half acre of corn take up the rear of the lot.

From the porch, the front door opens into the living room. Left is an open fireplace built of small white rocks. On each side of the fireplace are built-in bookcases - bare of books. The

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room is neither painted nor papered, but the floor is covered with a soft rug that matches the mohair furniture. In the corner is a radio of 1925 vintage.

Johnnie says, "It don't play so good, but I like to tinker with it."

Through an arch from the living room is the dining room furnished with a second-hand suite of maple. Also in this room is a circulator heater that is expected to heat the entire house.

Moving on toward the rear is the kitchen, which is as large as any of the other rooms (approximately 14' X 16'). A large spacestove takes up an entire side, with space reserved for a closet in which groceries and cooking utensils are left kept . A table and kitchen cabinet dominate the rest of the space. Most of the eating is done in the kitchen. 5 Hattie sees to that. Two bedrooms and a sleeping porch comprise the rest of the house.

Hattie has brown hair and eyes and a healthy, buxom figure. Her forty years are hidden by lines of laughter around her eyes.

Hattie's yell, "come to supper," is immediately drowned out by a rush of feet, and out of nowhere appears appear a four-year-old girl and a twenty-year-old boy.

"John Robert beats me to the table ev'y time," the little girl complained complains . "I wish he'd go back to college."

"Joan means Howard College," Johnnie explains, "but I doubt if she gets her wish. You see, I saved what I could while I was makin' it so's John Robert could be educated right, but you see (Johnnie waves his hand over the table, the gesture covering a bowl of lima beans, fresh garden lettuce, homemade jelly, fried white meat, and buttermilk , what we have to eat. Ain't no money in truck minin', and buildin' back the house, sending John Robert to Howard one year, and Joan - who we hadn't even figured on - just about took all I had and all I can make.

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"We benn been tryin' to get it fixed so John Robert can work his way through college. That'll help a lot. A feller's got to have a good education these days.

"Take me for instance. I know as much about minin' as anybody and I ain't braggin'. Its all I ever done. 6 "But awhile back there was a fire-bossin' job open at Paramount. It pays a salary, and all I'd had to do would be to look for gas and anything that might cause explosions. I could do the work with my eyes shut and my lamp out, but you know what happened? And the boss was pullin' for me too.

"I had to go to Birmingham to stand examination and I couldn't answer a dang question that was on the paper. Another fellow took the test; said he was sure glad he knew triggermomity. What is triggermomity anyhow? Anyway, that dude got the job. And I know as much about gas as anybody. So I still work by the day at Paramount, and ain't many days that Paramount works. That's why my two kids need [educatin?]."

Politically, Johnnie isn't sure how he stands.

"I vote straight Republican," he said, " 'ceptin' when it comes to Roosevelt. Then I vote Democrat. If he hadn't stood behind us workin' men I don't know where we'd be now. Too bad we didn't have him in '20 and '22. That's the time us miners busted our names. Come on out on the porch where its cool and I'll tell you about it."

Briefly, here is the story:

John Gates has worked the Cahaba Valley coal seam since he was old enough to swing a pick. He has seen coal mining communities grow from a shack at the prospectors hole to thriving colonies with up-to-date facilities; then with the fading of off demand, sink into obscurity among impenetrable, blackberry briar entwined undergrowth. 7 This was the fate of Roebuck, Numbers One, Two, Three and Four; [Cealmont?]; Messboro; Red Ash; and

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[Falliston?]. Once, these names stood for prosperous towns, with electric lights running water, recreation centers, schools, and fine people.

Today, the concrete mouths of the mines have fallen into the dark slopes. Tons of dirt have closed the entrances. [Waters?] Water, once [pressed?] from the mines with high powered pumps, has crept upward to meet the dirt and shale of the slopes.

The railroad line from Birmingham to Centerville rushed hordes of sweating laborers to build spurs to these mines when they were in they heyday. Grades and trestles were built for permanency. They thought the coal would last forever.

The coal is still there; but the mines and the railroad spurs are gone. Labor trouble which culminated in the Alabama strike of 1920 and the National strike of 1922 started the industry in this locality on a jerky sleigh ride that was sometimes fast, sometimes momentarily halted; but always downhill. The sleigh eventually smashed. Out of the pieces there arose the truck mining industry.

In Johnnie's words: "Its hard to say exactly when it started, but it musta' been about ten years ago. It took about six or eight years for the operators to decide that they'd never do anything else big with all the coal in this part of the country. 8 "Oscar Harrison was about the first to try truck mining around here. He'd make a pile and held on to it. He took his two boys and cleaned out the entrance of Number One Roebuck down to the first headin'. They cut pine poles and built a tipple and coal chute. From the chute to the first room of the headin' they laid a track that threatened to fall apart every time it was touched. Instead of the usual boiler engine, they rigged up an old auto engine with a contraption that looked like the roller on homemade well pulleys. It worked, pullin' up two cars of coal at the time. The daily output depended upon the trouble they had gettin' to the coal. Sometimes, they'd spend two or three days cleanin' out rock falls that, for the lack of workers, couldn't be propped right.

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“From that, truck minin' spread all the way from the highway at the Jefferson and Shelby County line down the [Cahaba?] River for thirty miles or more.

“Usually they didn't and don't last long, either foldin' up because all the available coal is taken or the operator goes broke. Truck mines are more or less like lightening' bugs. They flash up and then fade out.”

Paramount mine is a truck mine, but slightly different. The operators were well financed to begin with. The facilities are more modern than the rest . Five trucks usually operate between the mine and Birmingham.

The miners as a whole have come to accept the laissez faire philosophy. When there is work; they work. When there is none; they live as best they can.

Johnnie says: 9 “Sometimes I go a week without hittin' a lick; then get called for Sunday, right when me'n Joan are all triggerred up to go down to the Baptist church to Sunday School.”

So at Helena, if a group of men sit beside the railroad track, it is safe to assume that they are either waiting for someone to go over the hill into a hollow and open a truck mine; or waiting for Paramount to resume work. All are not so fortunate as Johnnie Gates, who manages to keep a fairly even keel. He owns home and is content.

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