



Focal Points

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Special Issue: the Award for Research & Creative Activity

Research and creative activity is celebrated in the College of Arts & Sciences through a newly-established faculty award. The award recognizes a significant research publication or creative project appearing during the previous two years and receiving expert critical review at the regional (i.e., multi-state), national, or international level. A faculty committee, chaired by the Associate Dean, selects the annual recipient, and this year the winner is Dr. Earl Hutchinson, Sr., Director of Journalism/Communication. In the following essay, Dr. Hutchinson describes the research upon which the award was based.

Kurt Eisen, Interim Assoc. Dean

A Description of Growing up on the Illinois Prairie During the Great Depression

The publisher of *Growing Up on the Illinois Prairie During the Great Depression and the Coal Mine Wars*, The Edwin Mellen Press, describes it as “a beguiling yet incisive memoir of growing up in a small town [Virden] in central Illinois in the 1930s. Writing in a casual and engaging way, the author evokes a past that was pastoral and idyllic for a young boy, yet at the same time somber and precarious for his family and community because of the deprivations of the Depression and ominous tensions of the coal-mining dangers and disputes that haunted his family. The times were hard and challenging, but the people we meet reflect some of the best traits of the American character – tough, resilient and adaptive . . .”

This description is augmented by what one of the reviewers wrote: “. . . we are transplanted back to the 1930s and enter fully into the small world of the author’s friends, family and neighbors.”

Virden is an ideal setting for this study. It has a significant place in coal-mining history because of a battle on Oct. 12, 1898. Coal miners battled guards protecting a trainload of Negroes imported from Alabama to break a strike called by the miners to enforce a joint agreement, by a previous labor and management conference, for an eight-hour work day and a prevailing wage.

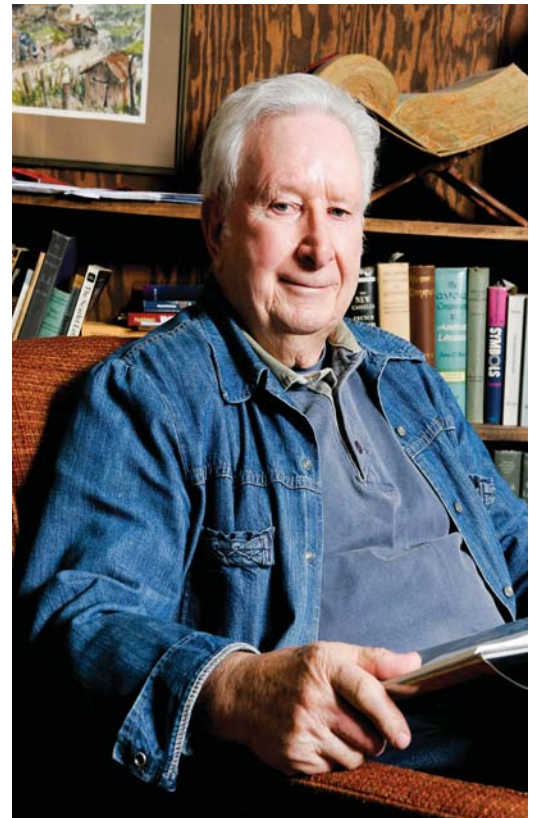
The miners won the battle, but seven were killed and eight wounded. Five mine guards were killed and a dozen wounded. When the union members were denied burial in established Virden cemeteries, an acre of land was purchased in Mount Olive, Illinois, and Mt. Olive Union Miner’s Cemetery was founded. October 12



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has ever thereafter been known as Virden Day. These events ensured that Virden would be a focal point for the 1932-1935 mine wars in central Illinois.

The Illinois mine wars took the lives of 47 miners. More than 300 violent acts of mine sabotage, railroad derailments and dynamit-



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ing were committed by striking miners, primarily by the Progressive Miners of America. The PMA union was formed by miners who broke away from John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers union because Lewis was working in concert with the coal companies to reduce miners' wages and to mechanize and so reduce the labor force. The major theme of *Growing Up* focuses on the micro level of forces working in the social context of this time, rather than the macro level that economic and labor historians have generally treated. [A precedent had been set for such a study: Mollie Panter-Downes, a New Yorker correspondent in London, wrote more than 100 articles about what it was like to actually live in a war--the day-to-day existence in England--during World War II.] One reviewer noted of these interlocking essays, "Numerous lessons exist in the author's account of his journey, but the over-arching one seems to be that the human spirit can be afflicted and blessed by the same experiences."

My favorite account of *Growing Up* is this review by Professor Dwight L. Teeter, Jr., University of Tennessee. After reading it you'll understand why:

"A child of the Great Depression has given us an important memoir, a piece of the American mosaic from the poverty-ridden coal towns of Illinois of the 1930s. Anyone wanting to understand more about the United States will be enriched by Earl Hutchison's struggles overcoming his dangerous environment characterized by early death and wage slavery, moving on to service in World War II, and to a career as a welder turned college professor, burnishing the American dream. This beautifully written book belongs on the same shelf with other notable American memoirs, including Eric Sevareid's *Not So Wild a Dream* and Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*." ✓

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