



# Black Days, Black Dust: The Memories Of An African American Coal Miner

*Robert Armstead*

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Among those drawn to jobs in the booming West Virginia coal mines during the first part of the twentieth century were thousands of African Americans. They proved successful in this industry—despite low wages and discrimination at the hands of mine operators. This book, the first published memoir by an African American coal miner, is a stirring tale of survival and achievement. Bob Armstead interweaves stories of family and community with a broad history of underground mining to paint an engrossing picture of the work, the dangers, and the drama of that industry.

Armstead remembers his childhood, growing up in a segregated coal camp during the Great Depression, and he recalls his family's efforts to confront economic challenges while also dealing with the reality of racism. His father worked as a horse driver in the mines until machinery put him out of work. Even though, as a youth, Armstead saw how his father had suffered, he himself went to work in the mines in 1947. From his first day on the job, coal mining fascinated him. He initially labored in a timber crew, shoring up mine roofs. Then, in a life peppered with mine closings and layoffs that sent him from one place to another in search of work, he eventually became a mining machine operator, a foreman over predominantly white crews, and finally a safety inspector.

Black Days, Black Dust evokes a vivid sense of a coal miner's life. Armstead's recollections of his father provide descriptions of primitive mining methods in the 1930s and grueling twelve-hour work days. Armstead's memories of his own career document his enthusiasm for mining and the work ethic that earned him responsible positions in the mines.

Engagingly told, Armstead's story is both a rich historical document and a moving portrait of one man's life and how he overcame adversity.

The Authors: Robert Armstead retired from the coal mines in 1987. He died in 1998.

S. L. Gardner is a former teacher and librarian who has written feature articles about coal camps for the Times West Virginian in Fairmont, West Virginia. Her article on the Armstead family appeared in the magazine Goldenseal.

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