

Chapter 1

The Emergence of a Labor Leader, 1870–1898

The bloody Civil War, which ravaged this nation and impacted so many millions, passed all but unnoticed on the barren prairie of central Will County, Illinois. When at last the war ended in 1865, the local historian described the area, located some sixty miles southwest of Chicago, as “nothing but a sea of tall grass, or in the winter a boundless field of snow, reaching out to meet the horizon, with scarcely a cabin intervening.” The only inhabitants were “a few unthrifty farmers scattered throughout the neighborhood.”¹ Just eight years later, however, this worthless tract was transformed into the bustling town of Braidwood. With a population surpassing 5,000, the town had a main street stretching for over half a mile. It had its own banks, daily newspapers, churches, schoolhouses, hotels, and stores. One amazed journalist suggested the change had been so rapid it must have come “by magic.”²

The “magic” was bituminous coal. And its discovery came by accident in 1864, when a farmer, digging a well, discovered a significant vein of coal about eighty feet beneath the surface. While geologists explored and examined the vein, capitalists sank shafts to exploit the resource. Development was especially rapid because the vein was situated near the main line of the Chicago, Alton and St. Louis Railroad, and the product could be easily transported to nearby Chicago. By 1870, the area was abuzz with activity. Farmers sold their once worthless land at great profits, miners and their families rushed to find work, homes were built, and shopkeepers took up residence. The emerging town took its name from a Scottish immigrant, James Braidwood, who played a central role in the sinking and developing of the first mines. One of the earliest, and certainly the largest coal company to begin operations was the Chicago, Wilmington and Vermillion Coal Company, a group of financiers from Chicago and Boston. By 1868, the company had already invested over \$475,000 in the area. Braidwood was a coal “boom” town and it quickly became the most important coal producer in northern Illinois.³

The vast majority of miners who flocked to Braidwood in the late 1860s were immigrants, and most of these were skilled coal diggers from Scotland, England, and Ireland. The growth of Braidwood coincided with tough times, for the mining industry in the British Isles was wracked by overproduction

and unemployment. Alexander MacDonald, president of the Miners' National Association of Great Britain, encouraged emigration to relieve the miners' plight. "I would strongly encourage you not to think of continuing in the mines," he told a throng of Scottish diggers ready to set sail for America.⁴ MacDonald's own brother moved to Gardner, Illinois, next door to Braidwood. Yet, once in America, the Scots found themselves enticed by coal operators with the promise of steady work and high wages; many took up their picks once again. When MacDonald himself visited Braidwood in 1867, he was greeted by 500 men, many of whom were familiar faces from the lodges of the Scottish unions. And when he returned two years later he found even more from his native land.⁵

The 1870 census revealed the ethnic diversity of Braidwood. Of the 630 heads of households listed, 449 had been born in England, Scotland, Wales, or Ireland. The Irish had a majority of 162, while the Scots were second with 143.⁶ But there were other groups that lent the town a certain cosmopolitan air. Bohemians, Swedes, Germans, Italians, French, Belgians, Poles, and Russians, few with any mining or trade union experience, began to arrive in increasing numbers as the years passed. In 1874, a Chicago journalist found Braidwood "akin to Babel of old, as regards the confusion of tongues."⁷ This clash of cultures would soon exacerbate the ethnic tension already existing between the Catholic Irish and Protestant Scots, but in the early years observers found the various groups working in "harmony and good feeling."⁸

Into this ethnic mix came Robert Mitchell. As with the majority of workers in nineteenth century America, almost nothing remains to chronicle his life. Born in Dublin to Protestant parents, he went to Scotland at an early age to work in the mines, living in a town named Killmornick. Sometime in the 1850s he embarked for America. At that time he was most likely in his late twenties. After working a short time in New York City, he moved near Buffalo and worked there as a farm laborer until the outbreak of the Civil War. It was probably in Buffalo that Robert Mitchell first married. His wife bore him three sons. Like so many immigrant miners, Robert enlisted in the Union army and served his full term.⁹ At the end of his service, he moved to Braidwood with his family and returned to the craft of coal mining. Life in coal communities was often brutal and short, and Robert's experience was no exception. Soon after settling in town, his wife died. He married again, this time to Martha Halley, who gave birth to three children, two sons and a daughter. Then Martha died. Robert married a third time, this time to a widow who brought one child to the marriage, and the couple produced a son.¹⁰

Amid this bewildering assortment of marriages, births, and deaths, John Mitchell was born on February 4, 1870, the child of Robert Mitchell and his second wife, Martha Halley. Since his biological mother died when he was just two-and-a-half, he carried no memories of her into his adult years. He

could not even recall her maiden name. Nor did he have the opportunity to develop lasting ties to his father. When John turned six, his father was crushed to death by a runaway team of horses. In later years, John remembered only that his father “looked like a Big Well Proportioned Man.”¹¹ Young John was thus left in the care of his stepmother, Robert’s third wife.

Scratching out an existence in the bleak coal towns was difficult enough with the family intact. The loss of the principal breadwinner, however, usually created a nightmarish struggle for survival, and Mitchell’s early years were blighted by abject poverty. No laws existed to provide compensation for the widows and orphans of dead miners, although local union leaders were pressing for such measures at this time.¹² The poverty of the Mitchells may have been mitigated to some extent through charity, for Braidwood diggers prided themselves on their giving nature. A local journalist in 1875 commented on their “willing hands and generous hearts,” which were “always ready to drive the wolf—want—from the door.”¹³ Whether or not the Mitchells received handouts is impossible to determine. Nor is it clear whether they received compensation benefits from the Illinois Miners’ Benevolent and Protective Association. Robert Mitchell was undoubtedly a member of this union, founded in 1871, which had resolved to pay forty dollars to the survivors of members in good standing.¹⁴ This union was financially weak by the time Robert Mitchell died in 1876, however, and it was probably incapable of paying benefits.

Mitchell’s stepmother endured a cruel life of unremitting toil. While the eldest three children had left the nest by 1876, she was the sole support for John and the other four who remained. Only two legitimate means of earning money were open to widows in the coal camps—taking in boarders and doing laundry for the families of mine bosses and superintendents—and she engaged in both pursuits. Caring for boarders entailed cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry for single miners or married miners living without their families. In many coal communities, it was customary for each boarder to bring his own food for the woman to prepare, which made cooking much more time consuming than it would have been had she prepared the same meal for everyone.¹⁵ Laundry and housecleaning in a coal town were even more onerous than cooking. Coal dust filled the air, covered the walls, and even entered the house. Every boarder required a daily bath to remove the accumulated grime, and their clothes had to be scrubbed often to remove coal and oil. Even fetching water was a heavy burden, involving numerous trips to often distant sources.¹⁶

Mitchell’s stepmother supplemented her income by planting and tending a small garden. Those fruits and vegetables not eaten fresh were canned and stored. It is not known whether she, like many other women in coal camps, raised chickens and cows. But she undoubtedly spent many hours each day

baking bread, pies, and cakes for her boarders and her family. She also saved money by making all necessary clothing, gathering chunks of coal that fell from the loading chute along the railroad tracks or at the slag heaps, and perhaps even sewing for other families. Her only comfort in this unending grind of work and poverty was religion. She strictly adhered to her Presbyterian faith and found solace by reading the Bible.¹⁷

Mitchell experienced an unhappy childhood. Rarely did he mention his youth in later years, but on those few occasions when he confided in his close friends and siblings, his bitterness and self-pity rose to the surface. "In those Days I used to consider my self (*sic*) the most unfortunate Being on Earth," he lamented.¹⁸ He bemoaned the fact he had lost his natural parents, and he cursed his family's poverty. While all miners were poor, he was acutely aware of his deprivation relative to other children in the town. He resented the endless list of chores his stepmother assigned him. All miners' children were expected to contribute to the family economy at an early age, but Mitchell's chores were more numerous and exacting than most because survival of the fatherless family depended on them. He therefore had less time to play with friends, and he felt ashamed because his time was consumed by "girl's work" such as laundry, housecleaning, and babysitting his younger half-brothers.¹⁹

His chores also left less time for school. His stepmother could spare his labor only a few weeks each year, and as a result he fell behind the other students at the public school in Braidwood. "The humiliation and shame of lagging behind them caused me to lose interest in my studies," he later recalled.²⁰ After five years he stopped attending school altogether. Even for a miner's son, his formal education was slight. For the rest of his life, he was embarrassed by his ignorance and he came to prize education above all other accomplishments. Years later, when his brother became a father, Mitchell expressed the hope that the child would receive "a better education than either you or I had when we were lads together."²¹

The most lasting memory of his youth, however, was that of his stepmother. The only public comment he ever made about her was that she "failed utterly to understand my nature."²² Even in his private letters, he almost never referred to her. Yet one handwritten letter to his sister revealed the depth of his emotion. The Mitchell children went their separate ways in the 1890s, and he tried to reestablish contact with his siblings once at the helm of the miners' union. When his sister replied to one of his missives, a flood of feeling was released. Her reply "recalled to my memory many long forgotten incidents of my Life. And Dear Sister for the first time in many years I sat down and cried." He had not "shed tears Since the unhappy Days of my youth when the occasion of my Sorrow was the sting of the cat-o-nine-tails (*sic*) on my poor little Nude Body in the hands of my Well Meaning But unthoughtful Step Mother." Certainly the physical punishment of children was not regarded with

the same disapproval it is today, but the lingering psychological impact makes it difficult to downplay the significance of this abuse. “Many, many times I wondered if my Brothers or Sister had forgotten my existence,” he continued. But he did not blame his sister for her failure to intervene. “I know you have had your own trials in this cruel world.”²³

The ultimate effect of this abuse is, of course, impossible to determine. Nor are psychological explanations essential to an analysis of his union leadership. But Mitchell’s problems as an adult—his alcoholism, his powerful need to conform, his feelings of inferiority, his obsessive financial speculation, his discomfort with his own body, his inability to form intimate friendships, his compulsion to work himself to the point of exhaustion—were certainly not unrelated to his unhealthy relationship with his stepmother. As union president he carefully maintained his distance from her. Although he paid the rent on her home, he refused most of her invitations to visit.

Shut off from school and friends, overworked and abused, Mitchell believed he had been cheated out of a childhood. As an adult he regretted he had never experienced “freedom from care” in his youth, or a time “in which play and laughter and pranks had their place.”²⁴ Circumstances for this unfortunate boy took another turn for the worse when he reached the age of ten and his stepmother remarried. She wed a skilled miner named Smith. Whether this new stepfather was also abusive cannot be determined from the record. But clearly Mitchell believed this man’s presence made his home life intolerable, for soon after the marriage he ran away. Securing work as a water boy on a farm outside the town, he lived on the farm for the next two years, earned his own room and board, and visited home only at irregular intervals. At the age of twelve, he moved back to the home of his stepparents. The time had come to learn the craft of coal mining.²⁵

Although Illinois state law required all mine workers to be at least thirteen, Mitchell at twelve was probably not the youngest boy in the employ of the Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermillion Coal Company. The first day must have been a harrowing experience. After rising early and walking to the mine entrance with his stepfather, they joined the others and rode down into the earth in the elevator or “cage.” Braidwood mines were not as deep as many shaft mines, and the descent was probably no more than 100 feet.²⁶ But conditions in the mine were typical: cold, dark, and filled with strange and ominous noises.²⁷ Surface weather, either extreme heat in summer or cold in winter, did not affect the underground air, which stood at about sixty degrees. The only light came from lamps on the miners’ hats, which allowed them to see only what was in front of them and left the rest in eerie shadow. Aside from the clinking of picks and shovels, and the squeaking of mule-drawn trains, he could hear the occasional crackling and rumbling of the roof.

The air he breathed on that first day was permeated with fine coal dust that obscured vision and within years could create the respiratory condition known as "black lung." The air in Braidwood mines was also filled with carbonic acid gas, which the miners called "black damp." If the gas became too thick, an explosion might occur. In smaller concentrations it simply made miners nauseous and numb. Braidwood mines were also noted for their lack of sufficient drainage, and it is probable that Mitchell found his feet submerged in cold water.²⁸ The dark, wet, and dust were not the only shocks to his senses. There were also large numbers of rats. In time he would come to regard the presence of these creatures as a sign of security, an indication the air was safe to breathe. Until then he had to adjust himself to the sight of rats scurrying around his feet and dinner pail. He also had to develop proper mine habits, such as learning how to relieve one's self without causing distress to one's work mates. Another future leader of the miners, John Brophy, remembered entering the mines at age twelve and receiving the following advice from his father: if a miner "had need for a bowel movement, he took care of that need over in the gob, and covered the waste with dirt and slack, to minimize the contamination of the air."²⁹

Since the coal vein in northern Illinois was only three feet thick, Mitchell spent that first day continually bending and crouching without a single chance to stand erect and stretch. Over a period of years, this necessity to crouch would permanently affect the miner's posture. Mitchell claimed he would have been a taller, more graceful man had he not worked in the mines. "My Physique was Dwarfed and my Growth stunted" by mine labor, he cursed.³⁰ In his novel *King Coal*, Upton Sinclair wrote that miners, emerging from the pits at the end of the day, continued to walk with their head and shoulders hunched forward and looked like "a file of baboons."³¹

The unpleasantness of the mine, however, was probably not foremost in Mitchell's mind that first day. He likely was more aware of the possible dangers. All inhabitants of mining towns were attuned to what one scholar described as the "brooding expectancy of death."³² As did all miners every work day, Mitchell must have wondered whether he would return that evening alive. Miners "constitute a class peculiarly exposed to hardships and perils," concluded the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics after surveying the state in 1882, the year in which Mitchell began to toil underground. "The air they breathe, the light they carry, the powder they use, the cage which sends them down, and lifts them out from the bowels of the earth, are all active and deadly agents against them."³³ Mitchell believed the constant fear of death made the job all but intolerable. Once he became president of the miners' union, he urged his brother to give up the "dangerous work" of mining and "seek employment in some other field."³⁴

On February 16, 1883, young Mitchell witnessed the kind of ugly tragedy that could strike any miner at any time. While most mine fatalities involved

one or two miners at a time, on that day between sixty-nine and seventy-four miners perished in the adjacent town of Braceville. The Diamond Mine Disaster occurred when surface water from the prairie broke through to the mine below, drowning the miners. More than a month passed before sufficient water could be pumped out to allow rescuers to remove the victims.³⁵ Although he was only thirteen, Mitchell took part in the recovery operation. A friend and fellow union official later recalled seeing blood on the prairie ice left by Mitchell's cut and shoeless feet.³⁶

Constant danger and deplorable working conditions became Mitchell's reality in 1882, just as isolation from peers and physical abuse had been his reality as a child. But now he was acquiring the skills of a craft which would instill pride and independence. Late nineteenth century miners such as his stepfather, Smith, considered themselves an elite class of workers, set apart from general laborers in and around the mines by virtue of their ability to use a pick. They worked in relative isolation from other skilled miners, and they took a fierce pride not only in their ability to outproduce other miners, but also to cut coal with greater precision and geometric exactness. A fist fight or heated argument between two craftsmen over proper techniques was not uncommon. Skilled pick miners often worked with little or no supervision. Since they were paid by the ton and not the hour, they usually came and left as they pleased, missing entire days when personal emergencies arose. When supervisors visited the miners' "rooms," they often came to chat and rarely to reprimand.³⁷

A miner's skills were handed down from generation to generation, father to son. Mitchell thus became his stepfather's apprentice in an underground workshop. Usually a youngster began his mining career as a trapper boy, the person responsible for opening and closing the wooden doors separating one section of a mine from another when mule-drawn trains passed through. While the trapper boy played a vital role in mine ventilation, his was a lonely job, often sitting in the pitch black by himself for several hours at a time. Mitchell claimed he avoided this entry-level position. "I never worked regularly as a trapper," he wrote, "although on some occasions when a trapper failed to report for work I took care of his door." Instead, he went straight to work as Smith's assistant, loading the coal cut by his stepfather, listening to his advice, and watching his technique.³⁸ Working for long hours in close quarters, sharing the dangers and the secrets of the trade, often created intense bonds of love and loyalty between fathers and sons. Such was the case with John Brophy and his father. Unfortunately, Smith and Mitchell never bonded in the same way. Mitchell recalled that his stepfather was a good miner, but a harsh taskmaster.³⁹

At the age of fourteen, Mitchell ran away a second time, this time to Braceville. But he had not developed sufficient skill to obtain a job as a miner. After working as a mule driver for a short period, he returned home once

again and rejoined Smith to complete his apprenticeship. He remained in Braidwood until he reached sixteen.⁴⁰ During this time, he became a master with pick and powder, and for the first time in his life, he took pride in himself and his accomplishments. Learning the craft of mining also helped him develop a social life. Since he was engaged in the same pursuit as his peers, he was no longer an outcast. He developed lasting boyhood friendships and became increasingly active in community life.

Physically, the community of Braidwood in the 1880s was an ugly wooden outpost on the bleak Illinois prairie. With the exception of the schoolhouse, the entire town was built of cheap wood.⁴¹ One scholar described the town as "dark and dirty, gray and drab." Every house was small and unpainted, "with sagging front porches and decrepit steps." And because the town lacked sidewalks, "streets and paths were like swamps" when it rained.⁴² Whether they were company owned or privately owned, Mitchell recalled that every house was "built of the cheapest material." One outhouse was built for every three or four homes.⁴³ Other than general stores, a few banks, and newspaper offices, the business district was comprised almost entirely of saloons. There were as many as eighty saloons in 1883, when the population was less than 10,000.⁴⁴ The town was also plagued by incredible numbers of dogs, hogs, sheep, and chickens roaming at will throughout the business district. One citizen estimated there were probably three dogs for each family, and since few dogs were kept tethered, a reporter protested that Braidwood was "literally overrun with canines."⁴⁵

Not only was the town ugly, but like most rough-hewn mining towns, Braidwood was violent. Heavy drinking was the impetus for most brawls, while widespread gun ownership often turned brawls into deadly encounters. "The dirk and revolver have already too often made the name of Braidwood synonymous with crime and bloodshed," bemoaned one resident. Another declared the prohibition against concealed weapons was "a farce and a laughing stock."⁴⁶ A fearful outsider suggested that those who wanted "a foretaste of hell," an understanding of "what the world will become before it tumbles back into the arms of chaos," should certainly spend some time in Braidwood. A Chicagoan believed "every man in Braidwood owns a gun, a revolver, and a dog," and they "prowled" over the countryside, causing trouble and stealing food.⁴⁷

Underneath the grime and violence, however, an exuberant culture thrived. The city was unequalled by towns of similar size, one reporter noted, in "institutions for improving the mind, morally, spiritually, socially, and intellectually." The public schools were "excellently conducted and well attended," six benevolent societies serviced the needy, a variety of fraternal, temperance, and miners' lodges provided profitable ways to spend one's leisure hours, and seven churches offered proof that Braidwood was "a moral

town and God-fearing community.” Town boosters also claimed “more reunions and sociables the year round than any other city in the state.”⁴⁸

More important than the institutional culture was the sense of community existing among the town’s citizens. Due to the shared burdens of poverty, the danger of mining, and frequent strikes, the diverse ethnic elements of the town coexisted in relative harmony in the early years. The mayor of Braidwood, in his 1882 Fourth of July speech, asserted the town was “not so black” as outsiders imagined. Immigrant and native born, German and Scot, all “the thousands hereabouts could meet on social terms and enjoy themselves without outlawry and riot as well as any city on the continent.”⁴⁹ The degree of cooperation among the various elements was revealed by the emergence of a particular Braidwood dialect. A Chicago correspondent believed outsiders would have difficulty comprehending the dialect, “which appeared to be a cross between Scotch, South of Ireland, and Yorkshire.”⁵⁰

Coexistence did not mean Braidwood represented a melting pot. Ethnic groups retained much of their traditional heritage, and the town was divided geographically along ethnic lines. The Bohemian neighborhood, for example, was located in “Lower Braidwood.” Here residents spoke their native language and ran their own school.⁵¹ Italians, Welsh, English, Scots, and Irish also had their own neighborhoods, clubs, games, traditions, religion, cuisine, holidays, and prejudices. While generally peaceful, ethnic rivalries and hatreds existed. One unsympathetic writer noted that the various “clans and nationalities” disagreed on everything except “drinking and fighting.”⁵² And at times ethnic hatred led to violence, as happened in 1883 when peaceful Italian picnickers were set upon by “some of the hoodlum Irish element.”⁵³

Braidwood also had a sizable African-American community. Imported as strikebreakers by the Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermillion Coal Company during a bitter strike in 1877, white miners at first were able to run them out of town by force. Weeks later some 600 African-Americans returned under the protection of the state militia. They remained, but they suffered discrimination at work and in the community. Only two of the twelve shafts employed them as of 1881, and while white miners encouraged them to join the local union, they were expected to live in their own segregated community, dubbed “Bucktown.” Race relations were strained throughout the 1880s, and violence erupted periodically.⁵⁴

Mitchell grew up in an enclave of Scots and Protestant Irish. All his adolescent friends were from the same neighborhood, and it is doubtful that he ever socialized with Italians, Germans, African-Americans, or others of dissimilar heritage. His closest friend during his teenage years was the child of a Scot, George McKay. “Many an up and down we had together,” McKay recalled. Along with other chums, Mitchell and McKay spent their leisure time looking for fun, a chance to forget the long hours spent in the mines. A

favorite activity was going down to the shop owned by "Old Man Miles." Here the boys purchased "taffy-on-a-stick" and sat "listening to the Old Man telling stories." The boys also challenged each other to foot races, and McKay remembered that Mitchell was the fastest among them.⁵⁵

Not only was he beginning to take part in the social life of the town during his teenage years, but also he participated in the most important Braidwood institution, the local union. By the time he entered the mines in 1882, Braidwood miners had experienced an action-filled sixteen year labor history. In the late 1860s and 1870s, Braidwood miners exhibited remarkable solidarity and exercised a great deal of community control. Despite their ethnic differences, they created a local union strong enough to secure a wage agreement with the three operating coal firms in 1872. In the fall of 1873, the local union was one of the first in the nation to affiliate with the newly created Miners' National Association (MNA).⁵⁶ The fact that most of the early miners were British immigrants with trade union experience helps account for the strength of the local union. So, too, does the leadership skill of John James and Daniel McLaughlin. These two men, both Scottish immigrants, had learned their trade unionism directly from Alexander MacDonald. Indeed, the MNA, founded by Braidwood's McLaughlin and James, along with John Siney of the anthracite region, was "almost a complete replica" of MacDonald's British coal union.⁵⁷

MacDonald's trade union philosophy was based not on direct action through the use of strikes, but on conciliation and arbitration of disputes, the establishment of friendly relations with employers, and the signing of annual wage agreements based on the sliding scale, in which wages would rise or fall according to the price of coal. John James, like his mentor, believed strikes were "ruinous" and should be sanctioned only when operators refused to bargain.⁵⁸ James and McLaughlin soon found, however, that the Chicago, Wilmington and Vermillion Coal Company, the largest in town, preferred battle to negotiation. In 1874, for instance, McLaughlin consented to strike only after the company closed the mines and refused to negotiate with the union. Although operators hired fifty Pinkerton detectives in an effort to provoke violence, union miners and their supporters remained peaceful and defeated the operators. Victory was a product of miner militancy, effective union leadership, and the active support of professionals and shopkeepers in the town who were dependent on the miners for their livelihood.⁵⁹

The celebration of this victory was short-lived. McLaughlin was forced to call a second strike in 1877 after the company announced a wage cut of twenty-five cents per ton and demanded miners sign "yellow-dog" contracts, in which they promised never to join the union while employed by the company. This strike lasted nine months and ended in defeat when Illinois Governor Shelby Cullom ordered a large force of the state militia to Braidwood.

General Ducat of the militia arrested McLaughlin, who was at that time mayor as well as union head, for exceeding his municipal authority. The 1877 strike proved a catastrophe for the local union. McLaughlin and a dozen other leaders were blacklisted, and the union was effectively crippled for several years.⁶⁰

Thus, when Mitchell received his union card, the local was too weak to resist the operators. Conditions in the mines were worse in 1882 than they had been when he was born, and they were steadily deteriorating. In that year, the six Braidwood coal firms employed 1,986 miners and extracted 649,000 tons of coal. Mitchell worked for the largest firm, the Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermillion, which employed 1,018 men at three main pits and accounted for nearly half the local output.⁶¹ One symptom of union weakness was the decline in wages in the early 1880s. Braidwood miners accepted a five cent per ton reduction in pay in 1883, and a similar reduction in 1884. According to the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1884 the average mining family's expenses exceeded earnings by seven dollars.⁶² A second symptom was irregular work. Mitchell and his comrades could expect to lose at least fifteen weeks of work during prosperous years and more during hard times. While all industrial workers in the late nineteenth century experienced unstable employment, the bureau stated that miners received the fewest weeks of steady work among all classes of Illinois laborers.⁶³ The absence of a strong union hurt Mitchell and the other miners in other ways. They had no means to protest the various techniques operators had devised to cheat miners when coal was weighed, and they had no means to force operators to ensure proper ventilation and safety precautions.

As grievances mounted in the mid-1880s, Mitchell and other Braidwood union men looked to their undisputed leader, Daniel McLaughlin, for solutions. And McLaughlin's creative efforts on their behalf would provide Mitchell with an object lesson in practical unionism he would never forget. McLaughlin's experience in the 1877 strike reinforced his belief that miners' demands "had to be expressed in other ways than by strikes and rioting."⁶⁴ In September 1885, along with John McBride of Ohio, he helped forge the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers (NFMML), which became, in the words of one scholar, "a movement more significant than any of the past."⁶⁵ McLaughlin had more in mind than simply founding the latest in a series of weak national miners' unions. His goal was to establish a system of collective bargaining that would make strikes and lockouts unnecessary. Labor-capital friction in coal, he believed, "stemmed from the existence of too many operators and too much production." Overproduction and cutthroat competition among coal firms forced the price of coal downward, and as profits disappeared, operators slashed wages, which provoked strikes. Strikes invariably caused hardship for the miners and ate up operator profits. To over-

come these problems, miners and operators must meet together, establish uniform costs of production, and work toward limiting the output of coal. In a letter to the *National Labor Tribune*, he laid out his "plan of establishing a wage scale by a joint convention of miners and operators." The NFMML endorsed McLaughlin's plan, and the call went out to all coal operators to attend a joint convention.⁶⁶

At least a dozen operators met with McLaughlin and other union officials on October 16 in Chicago. One of the most powerful operators attending was A. L. Sweet, superintendent of the Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermillion Company where Mitchell worked. A committee of three miners and three operators, including McLaughlin and Sweet, composed a letter urging all operators and miners to send representatives to Pittsburgh on December 15 to establish a joint conference. The letter referred to strikes and lockouts as "false agencies and brutal resorts for the adjustment of disputes and controversies" between employer and employee, which "generally involve waste of capital on the one hand and the impoverishment of labor on the other."⁶⁷

For fifteen-year-old John Mitchell, the call for a joint conference was not a distant and inconsequential event. It was the most dramatic lesson in his early trade union education. At the conclusion of the Chicago meeting, the entire town of Braidwood erupted in celebration of "an improved feeling between employers and the employed." A parade marched through the town, two bands performed, and enthusiastic speeches were made by McLaughlin, Sweet, and local politicians. Mitchell and the whole town looked forward with anticipation to the Pittsburgh conference and the opening of a new era of labor peace and prosperity.⁶⁸

They were not disappointed. While the Pittsburgh conference failed, at a second conference held in February at Columbus, Ohio, seventy-seven operators met with thirty-six miners and agreed on a wage scale to be effective from May 1, 1886, to April 30, 1887.⁶⁹ Hailed by one scholar as "a landmark in the history of collective bargaining,"⁷⁰ the agreement covered six states, including Illinois, where Braidwood miners were to receive a ten cent per ton advance. McLaughlin, now honored as "the father of the joint convention" in coal, returned to Braidwood in triumph.⁷¹ Miners later celebrated his accomplishment with a mass rally, speeches, and, predictably, by drinking "oceans of beer."⁷² Whether Mitchell was one of the guzzlers is impossible to determine, but he undoubtedly shared in the revelry, and he also absorbed valuable lessons. He learned that the basic thrust of MacDonaldism was not an abstract theory divorced from economic reality. Strike action was not always the best way to advance the interests of miners. Labor gains could be secured through peaceful means, through the shared interest of operator and miner in a rationalized industry, through the joint conference. These were lessons he would live by as union president.

As important as the interstate joint conference was, it by no means solved all the problems and frustrations of Braidwood miners. There were conditions which even the great McLaughlin could not control. One was the playing out of the Braidwood mines. While the mines were not yet exhausted, by the late 1880s companies found it increasingly difficult to locate profitable sites to sink new shafts.⁷³ The result of this decline was an intensification of the already unstable employment patterns in the area. A second condition was the increase in the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Beginning in the mid-1880s a flood of Italians, Bohemians, and Polish arrived in Braidwood. By 1889, these three groups outnumbered the “old stock” from the British Isles.⁷⁴ Competition for scarce jobs aggravated existing ethnic tensions and destroyed much of the community solidarity that had existed earlier. Violence and ethnic hatred flared. According to the biographer of Chicago politician and Braidwood native Anton Cermak, by the middle of the decade hostility between the various ethnic groups was “more or less continual; the boys, with willow switches and weapons, frequently carried it to the very gate of the school.”⁷⁵ Lack of work and the decline of community explains Mitchell’s decision to leave Braidwood in 1886.

At sixteen Mitchell was old enough and skilled enough to embark on his first great adventure. He said farewell to his family and friends to seek work in the faraway West. Such uprooting was the typical response of miners to hard times. For young miners it was almost a rite of passage, a chance to see the world before marriage and family. Miners lived a “gypsy life,” wrote John Brophy. Geographic mobility rarely led “to any great improvement, but it was impossible to sit around and make no effort to do better.”⁷⁶ As the mines declined in Braidwood, local miners dispersed in all directions in search of work, from New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas in the West, to Indiana, Ohio, and Maryland in the East. And some immigrants retreated to their homelands.⁷⁷ While union leaders deplored the constant movement because it inhibited the development of stable unions and made the miners appear shiftless, the late nineteenth century miner was by necessity a “bird of passage,” one who had to roam to find steady employment.⁷⁸

With little money and all his possessions in one bag, young Mitchell rode the rails to Colorado. For the next two years he was a vagabond, working off and on in the coal mines of Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico. Little evidence remains to describe his experience, but later he recalled the deplorable conditions of work in the camps. Long hours, low wages, and unhealthy working conditions, similar to those in Braidwood, meant that his flight from misery had been unsuccessful. Dan McLaughlin’s message of joint action had special meaning in Colorado, where intense overcrowding and lack of steady work helped lead “to the conviction that the only way out of this chaos and

confusion lay in organization and concerted action.”⁷⁹ It is probable that Mitchell also worked at the Sante Fe, New Mexico mine where another old Braidwood union leader, John James, had become superintendent.⁸⁰ In the desperate struggle for work, Mitchell’s youth and lack of experience undoubtedly put him at a disadvantage, and his search for adventure was soon shattered by the hardship of the transient’s life. Two years were enough. When he learned that new mines were opening in Spring Valley, Illinois, he trekked back to his home state. He arrived home penniless, but with a sharper appreciation of the common plight of miners nationwide. But by no means was he worldly—he still knew nothing of life outside mining camps.

Located on the Illinois River about forty-five miles west of Braidwood, Spring Valley did not develop as a coal town until the mid-1880s. Until that time the area was frontier prairie, although more wooded and with better farm land than Braidwood had offered in the 1860s.⁸¹ When coal began to dominate the local economy, Braidwood miners were the first to take advantage of the new job opportunities. As Braidwood’s population declined, from 4,641 in 1890 to 3,279 in 1900, Spring Valley’s rose, reaching 6,214 in 1900. In addition, many of the immigrants in the continuing wave from southern and eastern Europe came directly to Spring Valley. By 1899 fifty-eight percent of residents hailed from southern and eastern Europe and there were few who had been born in the United States of native parentage. Perhaps hoping to avoid the racial strife of Braidwood, town officials followed the practice of racial exclusion and barred African-Americans from entering the city limits.⁸²

Mitchell recalled that Spring Valley, at that time, was vital and dynamic, alive with activity and growth. “A thriving city had sprung up, as though over night, in what had been up to that time a peaceful farming district. The population had increased so rapidly that it was impossible to build schools (and other institutions) fast enough.”⁸³ At first there was plenty of work. Mitchell found a job at the Spring Valley Coal Company, the largest employer in town. His first job was not as skilled miner, but as mine laborer responsible for “dead work” in and around the mines. For two years he sweated on some of the most back breaking chores in the mines, such as laying track for coal cars and timbering to support the roofs. He also remembered “pounding sand rock” for days on end.⁸⁴ It was difficult work, but he had a steady income; he was independent, and he had the camaraderie of fellow miners, some of whom he had known from Braidwood.

This tough but tolerable life did not last long. In early 1889, the interstate joint conference collapsed. Miners and operators had met on an annual basis since the founding of the movement in 1886, but many operators, including those in southern Illinois, never participated. Operators who agreed to pay union wages complained they could not compete against these nonunion operators. First, Indiana operators and then those from northern Illinois withdrew

from the movement, and the 1889 joint conference adjourned without agreeing on a scale of wages. “The failure to agree will be regretted by all who believe in reason rather than force in the adjustment of the differences between operators and miners,” predicted miners’ leader John McBride. “It may be necessary to again plunge into industrial warfare to finally convince both operator and miner that any advantage to be gained by either party, from the dissolution of this movement, can only be temporary.”⁸⁵

Nowhere was the impact of the collapse of the joint conference more strongly felt than in Spring Valley. The Spring Valley Coal Company and other local operators immediately moved to destroy the local union and drive wages far below existing levels so they could capture markets dominated by cheap southern Illinois coal. In April 1889, without notice or provocation, the Spring Valley Coal Company locked out their 1,000 employees and closed the company store. In August, the company posted notice that mining would resume at a fifty percent wage reduction and that any miner seeking employment must sign a “yellow dog” contract. Other operators followed suit. Thus began the desperate eight-month struggle dubbed by Henry Demarest Lloyd, the famous reformer of the period, as the “strike of millionaires against miners.”⁸⁶

Mitchell and his comrades faced the full force of corporate power. Since most homes in the town were company owned, miners did not have the option to mortgage their homes to buy food as they had done during the Braidwood strike of 1877. Company housing also enabled operators to evict strikers. While some evictions occurred and many eviction notices served, operators understood that large numbers of evictions might incite violence and the destruction of company property. Operators tried to break the miners’ will to resist by spreading rumors they were about to introduce African-American strikebreakers or permanently replace the majority of miners through the use of machinery.⁸⁷ Operators tried to sow dissension by urging men to listen to reason rather than the “shiftless minority”—the union leaders.⁸⁸

Before long the lockout caused severe suffering. At the end of June, a Chicago correspondent asked “a bright, intelligent German housewife” how she and her family of seven children were faring after two months without income. She replied “with mute eloquence by bringing out an empty flour barrel and disclosing its hollow inwardness.”⁸⁹ Hunger forced local union leaders to plead for arbitration time and time again. Each request was dismissed by operators. Yet the miners remained unified and defiant. When the Spring Valley Coal Company called off the lockout in August and encouraged the men to return at half their wages, they refused. And they paid the price for their resolve. By the end of August “death (hung) . . . over the town. From a cursory examination it (was) . . . a low estimate that seven of every ten families (were) . . . sick, seriously so,” one reporter noted.⁹⁰

Still the miners stood firm. And they were supported in their struggle by local businessmen and politicians. Local merchants signed a petition castigating the destitution brought on by the strike, and Henry Demarest Lloyd observed that while merchants often displayed class prejudice against working people, this prejudice was "tempered by the kindest personal feelings."⁹¹ The national labor movement attempted to assist the strikers as well. Both the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor declared boycotts of Spring Valley coal. The *Chicago Tribune* spearheaded relief efforts, such as benefit concerts, to raise money for the hungry men and women.⁹²

Of all the support given, Mitchell was most impressed by the relief work of Henry Demarest Lloyd. When we were engaged in this "almost hopeless struggle," he remembered, when we had "battled on for many, weary, weary months, when starvation and eviction" stared us "in the face," Lloyd came to Spring Valley. He investigated conditions, he learned the story of our "hard, grinding lives," and he "took up the fight" through the daily papers. "He called public attention to the wrongs we had endured; he appealed to the patriotic and charitable citizens of the country." And as a result, provisions and money poured in, enough to keep death from their doors.⁹³ Mitchell would remember Lloyd's assistance years later and call on his aid during the anthracite strike of 1902.

Charity could not sustain the men, women, and children of Spring Valley forever. By mid-December hunger, combined with bitter cold, drove the miners back to work. Miners agreed to a twenty percent wage reduction and signed individual contracts promising to give up their union membership. According to Lloyd, signing these contracts meant miners bound "themselves, individually, not to take part in any combination to obtain better wages, and agree to leave the settlement of all grievances to the sole judgment and decisions of the company."⁹⁴ The company also blacklisted former union leaders and other miners who played a significant role in the distribution of food, clothing, and medicine to the starving and sick.⁹⁵

Mitchell had not been a major player during the strike. He shared equally in the suffering, but he was able to return to work at the end of December. Less than a month later, on January 22, 1890, some two hundred and forty coal miner delegates from around the country met in Columbus, Ohio, and formed a new national union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The union was a merger of the two existing national organizations, the NFMML and the Knights of Labor's Trade Assembly 135. The UMWA represented a curious blend of different approaches to union advance. Some delegates envisioned a reform organization that would support cooperatives, while others pressed for a fighting organization that would strike for improved wages, hours, and working conditions. The result was an industrial union affiliated with the craft-dominated American Federation of Labor that accepted the existence of the wage system as "a natural and necessary part of

our industrial system," but that also actively engaged in reform issues such as women's suffrage and the direct election of senators.⁹⁶

For Mitchell the founding of the UMWA was not an event of great importance. Several national mine unions had come and gone in his lifetime, and this one did not appear very powerful. He had more pressing concerns in 1890, including the task of making a living after the lockout. Moreover, he had signed a "yellow dog" contract prohibiting him from joining the new organization. In the months following the lockout, Spring Valley miners found no respite from their misery. Operators had only partially resumed operations, creating the problem of half-time work for many men. Lloyd denounced this "policy of partial operation" as "but a turning more softly and slowly and secretly, so as not to awaken the public, of the old hunger-screw."⁹⁷ At the end of the lockout, operators had agreed to advance wages beginning November 1, 1890, but when that date came no advance was given. Only when miners resolved to strike again did the companies grant the increase, and operators took the occasion to raise charges for tool sharpening and coal used by the miners at home.⁹⁸

By early 1891, Spring Valley erupted again. Without other means to redress their grievances, miners struck. The infant UMWA sent several organizers to the town, signed up 3,000 miners, and spent over \$5,000 in a vain effort to win its first major battle. After ten grueling months, the union could no longer afford strike benefits and the men returned to work, defeated once again.⁹⁹ As did thousands of strikers, Mitchell vacated Spring Valley in the summer of 1891. Perhaps realizing the futility of this second clash against intransigent operators, unwilling to endure again the privation suffered in 1889, Mitchell traveled west once more.

He secured work at the Starkville Coal and Coke Company of Colorado, where his superintendent was none other than Dan McLaughlin. The "father of the joint conference" had been a state legislator until 1889, when the interstate movement collapsed and the lockout at Spring Valley began. Disgusted by developments, he gave up his seat in the legislature and joined the ranks of the operators.¹⁰⁰ Mitchell not only worked for McLaughlin but also spent many of his leisure hours with him discussing the coal trade, the need for effective national organization, and collective bargaining. Upon assuming the UMWA presidency, Mitchell told reporters his trade union outlook had been shaped "by the many lively discussions" he had with the old man in Colorado.¹⁰¹ It is quite probable that while in Colorado Mitchell developed his understanding of and appreciation for the joint conference. It is also quite probable that he also began to consider a career in the trade union movement at this time.

In less than a year, Mitchell was back in Spring Valley. In the wake of the strike, so many had left and others blacklisted that Mitchell was able to find work once again. The hated "yellow dog" contracts were now gone, and

Mitchell joined the Spring Valley local of the UMWA. At twenty-two he was ready to settle down, to conclude his wanderings and establish a permanent home. Early in 1892, he met Katherine B. O'Rourke, and after a short courtship, they married. Kate, as she was called, was born in Catlin, Illinois, a small mining town five miles west of Danville on the Wabash River. Her father was Henry O'Rourke, a miner who was called "Old Man" even when young. Her mother had died when she was a child, and her only sibling was a brother, James. Soon after the mother's death the family moved to Belleville, where she attended public schools. In the mid-1880s the family moved to Spring Valley.¹⁰² In many respects, Kate was similar to the man she married. She knew the trauma of losing a parent, she was accustomed to the daily privations of life in Spring Valley, she had survived the brutality of the lockout of 1889 and the strike of 1891, and she knew nothing of life outside mining camps.

There were several notable differences between John and Kate, however. Of least importance was the fact that she was two years older. More significantly, her father was one of the few miners in Spring Valley to own his own house. It was a double-family house. The O'Rourkes lived in one half and rented the other. This perhaps made Kate a more desirable mate, for marriage to her meant escape from the exorbitant rents and deplorable conditions of company owned housing. Another difference was religion. Kate was a practicing Catholic. Since escaping from his devout Presbyterian stepmother, Mitchell exhibited no religious convictions. Yet religion was an important dividing line between the various ethnic groups in mining camps, and the taking of a Catholic bride would have been an unusual if not a scandalous act. Mitchell did not convert to Catholicism, nor did he ask his wife to abandon her faith. Indeed, she continued to attend mass, and she raised their children in the faith.

The Mitchells were a handsome couple on their wedding day. Kate was slender yet strong, and the many years of hardship had not etched lines into her face, which was long and angular with remarkably high cheekbones. She had thin lips and a bulbous nose, but her large, round eyes dominated her visage and gave her an appearance of sincerity and warmth. Her dark hair, cut short just below her ears, made her look younger than her age. At five feet, seven inches, John was not much taller than his wife. His physique, common in the isolated mining camps, was muscular and lean. He was also blessed with a pleasant face. With olive skin and clear, expressive eyes, full lips, and well-proportioned features, all topped by dark, neatly combed hair, Mitchell looked intelligent, respectable, and likeable. His good looks would attract notice once he became a public figure.

After the wedding, Mitchell moved in with Kate and her father. Kate's brother James, himself a miner, had recently moved to Iowa and therefore did not live with the couple. Neither partner knew anything of the healthy functioning of a nuclear family. Mitchell's upbringing, in particular, gave him little

insight on questions of love and affection. Nevertheless, in their first years together Kate and John were able to establish close emotional bonds that would last a lifetime. While in later years the couple would be separated most of the year by the pressing demands of his office, their marriage was one of love and commitment. Their marriage would prove fruitful as well. A little over a year after the wedding, Kate gave birth to Richard, the first of six children.¹⁰³

Marriage and family were not the only signs indicating Mitchell's desire to establish permanent roots in Spring Valley. By the mid-1890s he had developed close friendships with fellow townsmen, and he began to take an active role in the institutional and cultural life of the town. And for the first time, he began to demonstrate leadership qualities that set him apart from ordinary men. While he did not begin reading law and philosophy at this time, as his first biographer claimed,¹⁰⁴ he did develop a voracious appetite for newspapers and conversation. He soon became recognized for his intelligence and insight, especially on matters relating to the coal trade and the local union. He was an active and well-liked member of the community, a joiner and a leader.

His mentor in these years was a Catholic priest, Father John Power, one of the most influential men among the miners. Unlike many priests and ministers who concerned themselves with spiritual matters only, Father Power was equally committed to improving the material conditions of his flock. He corresponded often with Henry Demarest Lloyd and was largely responsible for securing his aid during the 1889 lockout. In 1891 he testified in Springfield for the abolition of company stores, telling legislators "he found it hard to work to educate people in the paths of duty when soulless corporations were daily devising schemes to rob them of all they possess." His pro-union bias was sufficiently strong to prompt W. L. Scott, owner of the Spring Valley Coal Company, to pressure Bishop Spaulding of Peoria to remove Father Power from the town.¹⁰⁵ Power and Mitchell became close friends, and the priest helped Mitchell develop intellectually. Perhaps as a result of this relationship, Mitchell had a better understanding of the positive role priests could play in encouraging union growth, an understanding that would prove valuable during the anthracite strikes of 1900 and 1902.

Mitchell also joined an "athletic club" for coal miners. Drink and debate, rather than sports, were apparently the favorite activities of this club. The men would meet either in James Hicks's saloon, the union hall, or on a member's front porch and discuss mining issues. The long chats with Dan McLaughlin and Father Power served him well in these exchanges. One friend later wrote: "Many a time I look back to those Athletic Club days when we used to come together at times in debate. Even at that early date your judgment was considered superior to any of the older heads." Little wonder the miners selected Mitchell president of their club. Being recognized for his judgment and intelligence built his ego. And being noticed by the operators for his increasingly

outspoken union views fueled a love of competition. He recalled these days fondly in later years, a time when "I was pounding sand rock in the mines . . . during the day, and fighting my good friend Dalzell at night." L. M. Dalzell was a foreman in the mines who later became general manager of the Spring Valley Coal Company. "I recall to mind the many times we sat devising methods by which we could compel an observance of the law regulating mines . . . and the attacks our mutual friend Heller used to make on us through his paper, the Spring Valley Press."¹⁰⁶

In 1894, Mitchell's growing status in the community was demonstrated by his election as president of the Spring Valley Board of Education. He took his duties seriously and worked hard to alleviate problems caused by the rapid influx of immigrants. The schools at that time were "crowded beyond their capacity and teachers were worked to the utmost limit of endurance." He considered it his job not only to help build new schools but also to help cultivate a "spirit of unity, Americanism, and love of country" among the diverse ethnic mix of the town. He was successful enough to win reelection to the post the next year.¹⁰⁷

Mitchell's rising popularity occurred during some of the blackest years for the UMWA in Illinois and nationwide. When Illinois miners met in convention in early 1892, there was little reason for optimism. The UMWA represented but a tiny fraction of the state's miners, and operators routinely ignored an 1891 law calling for weekly pay and outlawing company stores. The convention announced an organizing drive to drum up new members. The union circular asked miners "to consider their honor and manhood, their homes and the future of their families and not to allow themselves to be driven like dumb beasts or operated like so much machinery."¹⁰⁸ UMWA President John B. Rae announced in April 1892 that organizing Illinois, West Virginia, and Maryland was the "question of the hour." While the union spent \$15,000 in Illinois in 1892 alone and successfully set up numerous locals, these locals "withered and died in early childhood." By 1894, only 500 Illinois miners were dues-paying members of the UMWA.¹⁰⁹

Union leaders offered numerous explanations for their failures. Operator intransigence in the form of blacklisting of union members was a principal obstacle to growth. Ethnic tensions among the miners themselves stymied union appeals. Many immigrants from southern and eastern Europe displayed an "I-don't-care-if-I-am-a-serf" attitude, declared one Illinois leader. "One thing sure, we must organize the non-English speaking miners to make our organization effective."¹¹⁰ By far the most deleterious effect on union growth, however, was the Panic of 1893 and resulting depression that left three million Americans idle by the end of the year. As industrial production plummeted, operators battled each other over the remaining coal markets. Operators slashed wages and curtailed production, leaving many of the nation's miners