

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress presents
the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

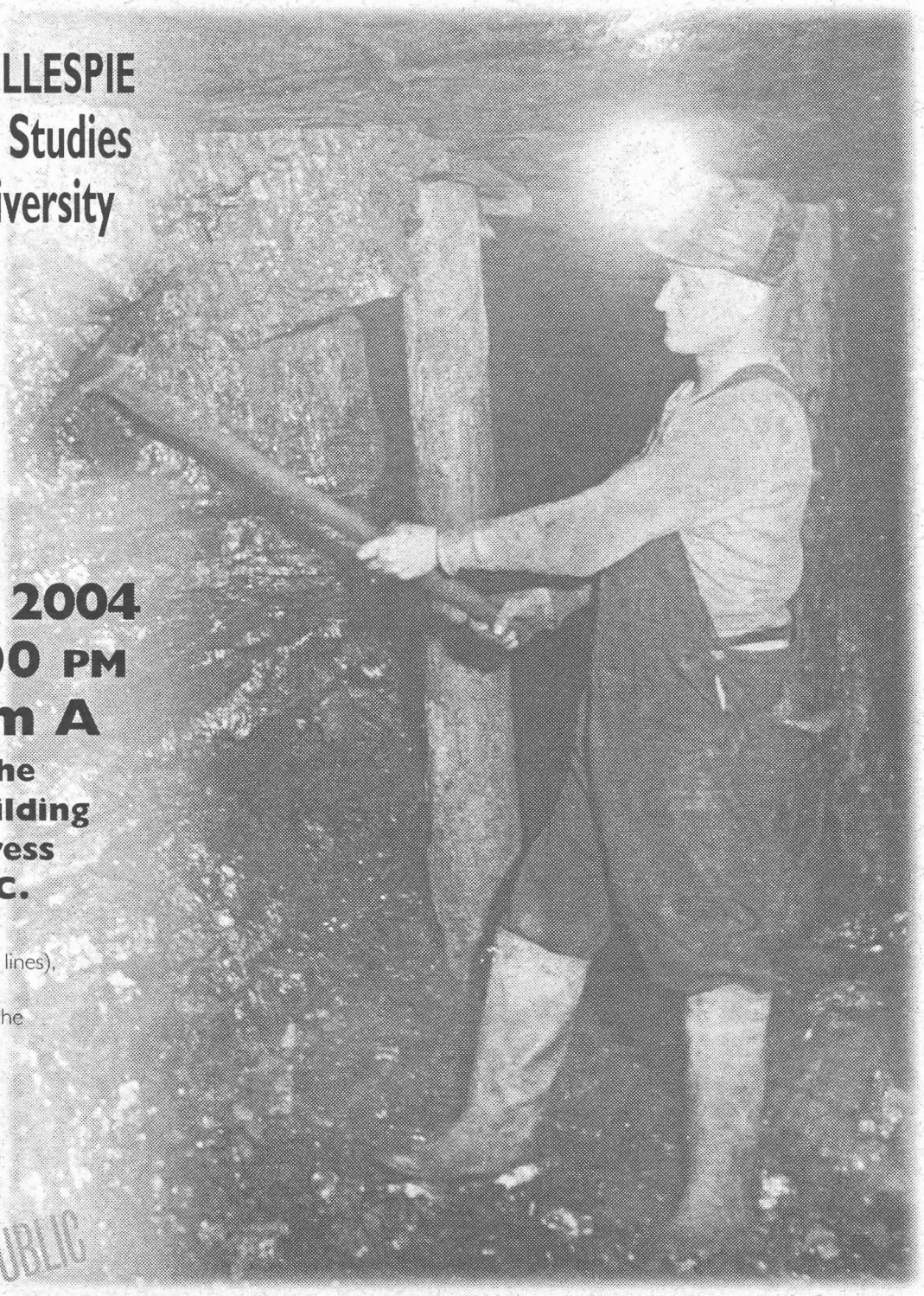
THE LORE OF AMERICA'S COAL MINERS: A FRESH LOOK AT THE GEORGE KORSON COLLECTION

BY **ANGUS KRESS GILLESPIE**
Professor of American Studies
Rutgers-The State University
of New Jersey

Monday
September 20, 2004
12 NOON - 1:00 PM
Dining Room A

Sixth floor of the
James Madison Building
Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

Closest Metro Stop:
Capitol South (orange and blue lines),
First & C Streets, S.E.,
located one block south of the
Jefferson Building



FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Request ADA accommodations five days in advance at (202) 707-6362 or ADA@loc.gov

THE LORE OF AMERICA'S COAL MINERS: A FRESH LOOK AT THE GEORGE KORSON COLLECTION

Back in 1924, when folklorist George Korson (1899-1967), first started collecting the songs and stories of the anthracite miners in Pennsylvania, labor strife and conflict were a prominent part of the American culture. The coal miners of that era lived in dusty shantytowns owned and controlled by the bosses. They worked in America's dirtiest and most dangerous occupation. Miners earned barely enough to live on, and, typically, they were not paid in cash. Instead, the mining companies gave them script to be exchanged at company-owned stores. Store prices and rents were unreasonably high, and miners were always in debt. At the workplace, there were fires and floods, explosions and cave-ins, deaths by suffocation and electrocution. At times their frustration with company exploitation and oppression caused them to lash out and fight in some of the most bloody industrial battles in American labor history.

As a newspaperman, Korson had been assigned to cover miners and their families in Schuylkill County Pennsylvania. Despite the harsh life of the miners, Korson was struck by the simple beauty of their songs and stories. His earliest work indicates that he was not satisfied with a scissors-and-paste collection. He was aware of the milieu in which the item was collected. He was concerned with finding out the meaning the item had for the members of the folk group. With no formal training in either folklore or anthropology, Korson instinctively used what today we call an ethnographic approach to fieldwork.

Korson had the newspaperman's instinct for a good story. Even later in life, he never lost his early habit of writing readable and lively prose. Another good habit that Korson picked up early in life was industry—sheer hard work. Over a lifetime he had eleven major publications. Nine of these were written by Korson himself; the other two were edited or co-edited by him. He also edited two phonograph records issued by the Library of Congress. In addition to these major publications, there were many articles and speeches.

Angus Kress Gillespie is the biographer of George Korson who collected and published the songs and stories of America's coal miners. Gillespie's book, *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, published more than twenty years ago; was based on archival material stored at King's College, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Those materials consisted of correspondence, manuscripts, photographs, sound recordings, and books. Recently, King's College decided that Korson's work would receive better preservation and more use by researchers at the American Folklife Center; and so a transfer of the collection was arranged. This lecture celebrates that gift and pays tribute to the life and work of George Korson. In this lecture, Professor Gillespie will briefly review Korson's accomplishments; trace the chain of custody of his papers; assess Korson's place in intellectual history; and report on the status of occupational folklore scholarship today.

