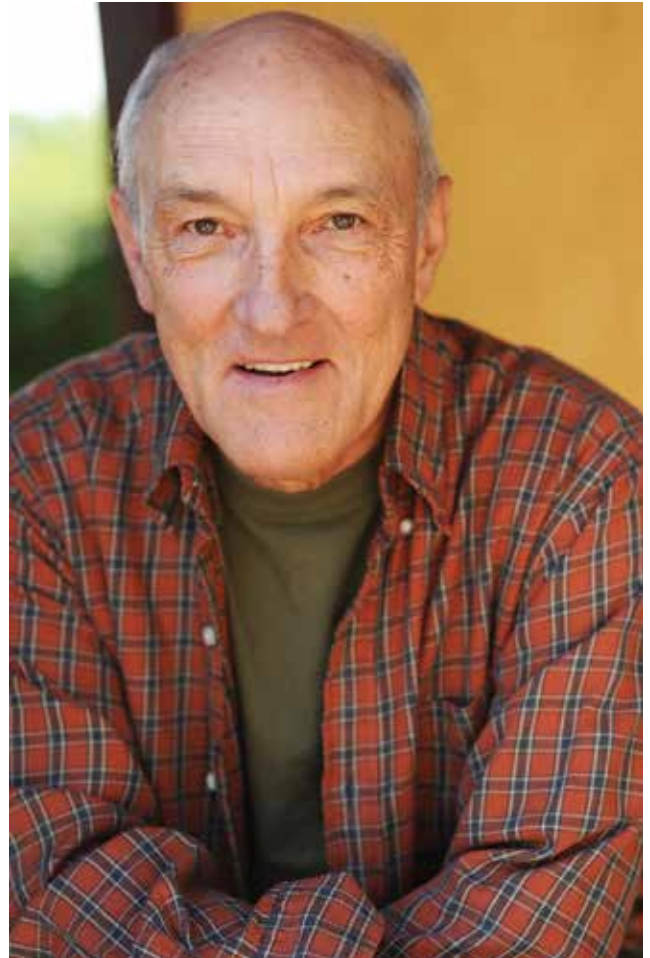
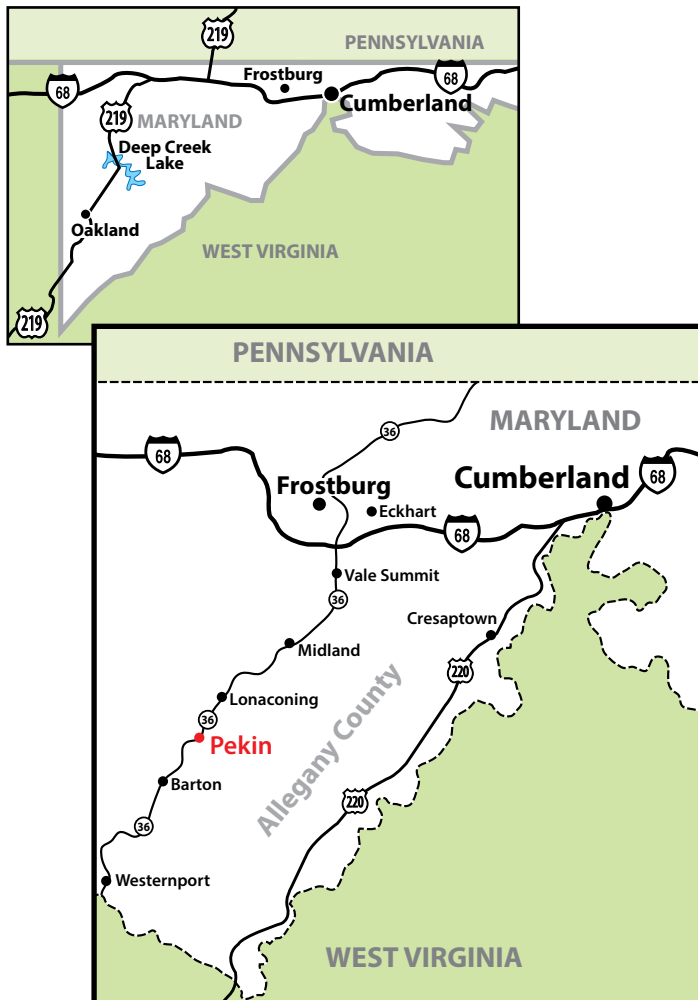


# From a Coal Town to **HOLLYWOOD**

## *A Professional Actor's Remarkable Journey*

Written by: **Bucky Schriver**



JOHN GOWANS

The Appalachian Mountain Range in the eastern United States has long been associated with the production and mining of bituminous coal, and with severe poverty. Western Allegany County in Maryland is transected by the Appalachian Mountains and shares in that legacy.

The George's Creek Valley of Allegany County is a 15-mile corridor extending from the city of Frostburg on the north to the town of Westernport on the south. The region derives its name from the stream that has its head spring near

Frostburg and empties into the Potomac River at Westernport on the West Virginia border. The valley is cradled by Dan's Mountain on the east and Savage Mountain to the west, each of which is just shy of 3,000 feet in elevation.

More than 700 men and boys died in the underground coal mines of Allegany County, Maryland. Directly in the middle of the George's Creek Valley is the small coal town of Pekin (now known as Nikep). The small town of Pekin was particularly hard hit. Considered per capita, there

were more miners from Pekin who were killed in work related accidents than any other town in Allegany County. Ten men and boys from Pekin lost their lives in the underground coal mines. Today, the town is home to just 150 residents.

Without benefit of the plethora of government assistance programs that exist today, life in the Appalachian coal fields of far Western Maryland in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a precarious affair. Desperate poverty would often make it necessary for children in coal mining families in far Western Maryland to sacrifice their education at an early age to work to help support the family. Young boys, aged 10 or younger, would commonly go to work in the underground coal mines with their fathers. Teenage girls were often hired out as domestic servants. Although the families were surely grateful for the extra money that the children earned, the lack of education condemned these children to a life of low-paying menial labor, and the cycle of poverty would be perpetuated for another generation. Anything beyond an elementary education was out of reach for many children in coal mining families.

The Industrial Revolution in the 1800s and the establishment of Frostburg Normal School No.2 in 1902 (which is now Frostburg State University) were seminal developments that would augur the end of the coal miner's cycle of poverty. Better paying factory jobs would offer wages sufficient for the father to support the family without the need for child labor. This allowed the children to finish high school, with an opportunity for an even higher education. A child labor



**World War I veteran John Thomas "Jack" Miller, John Gowans' grandfather, was killed in the Kingsland Coal mine in 1926.**

act, passed by the Maryland Legislature in 1912, prohibited boys younger than 16 from working in the underground coal mines. Parents who had been victims of child labor had more than ample reason to value the educational opportunities offered to their children and to make sure these children were diligent with their school studies.

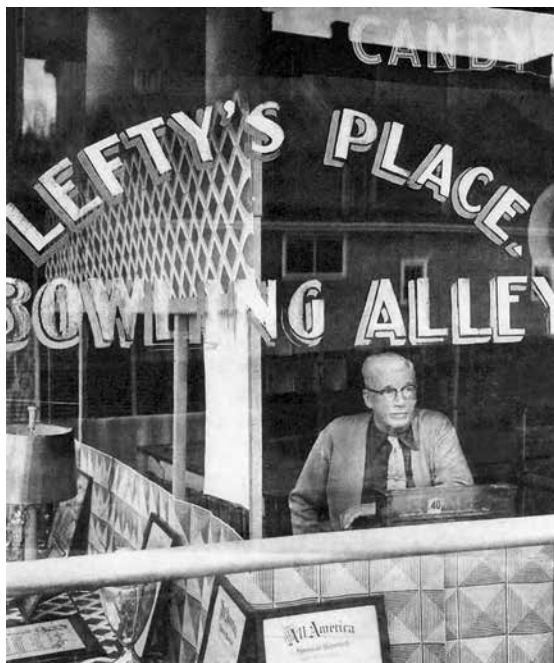
Funds were solicited in 1898 to purchase the Beall's Park property in Frostburg, Maryland, as the site for Frostburg Normal School No. 2, a training ground for teachers. The overwhelming majority of donors who contributed to the fund to purchase the Beall's Park property were impoverished coal miners. Although they were surely sacrificing money that was needed for the daily needs of their families, the miners realized that it would pave the way for future generations to have a better life. Many accomplished people with local roots can trace their success back to the establishment of the college in Frostburg.

World War I veteran John Thomas "Jack" Miller, a resident of Pekin, was killed in the Kingsland Mine in Lonaconing, Maryland, on June 1, 1926. He left his widow, Bertha (Rowe) Miller, and two infant children, two-year-old Virginia and two-month-old Francis. Virginia Miller's son, John Gowans, remembers his grandmother Bertha admonishing him to focus on his school studies. According to John's own words, "She wanted me to work in an office and not in a factory or a coal mine." (*Besides his grandfather, John Gowans also lost a great grand uncle and a maternal*

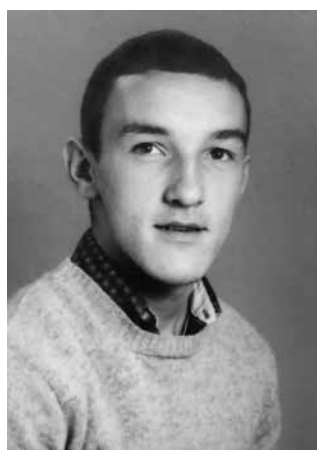


*great grandfather to accidents in the underground coal mines of Allegany County, Maryland.)*

John's elementary education began at the Pekin School, a rudimentary two-room schoolhouse built in 1870, featuring a tar paper roof and a rock rubble foundation. The school property included an outhouse, since there was no indoor plumbing. A water pail and dipper were placed in the school room to provide the children with drinking water. After spending four years at the Pekin School, John's elementary education was completed at Central School in nearby Lonaconing.



Baseball was a big part of life in the George's Creek coal towns. Games in Pekin were played in a small, grassy field simply known as "The Green," often with a worn-out ball that had been repaired with tape. In the 1950s, the Western Maryland Railway tracks in Pekin passed by the Pekin Mine coal tipple on the north end of town. One half mile north of the tipple, the railway intersected with Union Street in Lonaconing. A left turn on the sidewalk at Union Street would lead to the front door of Lefty's Place, a combination pool hall and bowling alley, which had the ambiance of an impromptu baseball museum. The proprietor, Robert "Lefty" Grove, was a retired professional



baseball player and an inductee of the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Lefty Grove, a native of Lonaconing, was the son of a coal miner and was forced to leave school at age 12, in order to go to work to help support his parents and siblings. A teen-aged John Gowans frequently stepped the railroad ties to Union Street to earn money as a pin setter at Lefty's Place and spent many enjoyable hours

**Top to Bottom:** Pekin School in Western Maryland; John as a member of the Safety Patrol at Central Elementary School in Lonaconing, MD; while working as a pin setter, teenaged John enjoyed many hours listening to baseball stories at Lefty's Place Pool Hall/Bowling Alley; John was born and raised in this humble home in Pekin; one of John's class photos from Valley High School, Lonaconing, MD.

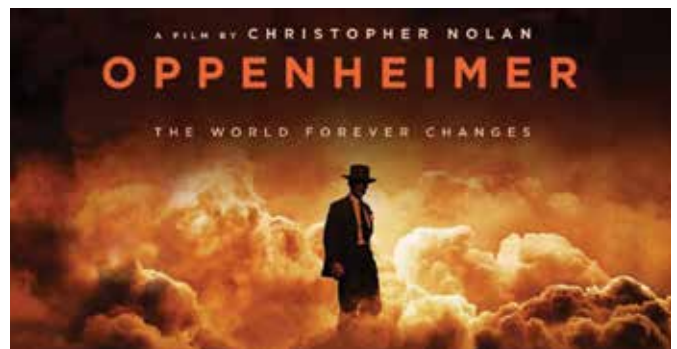
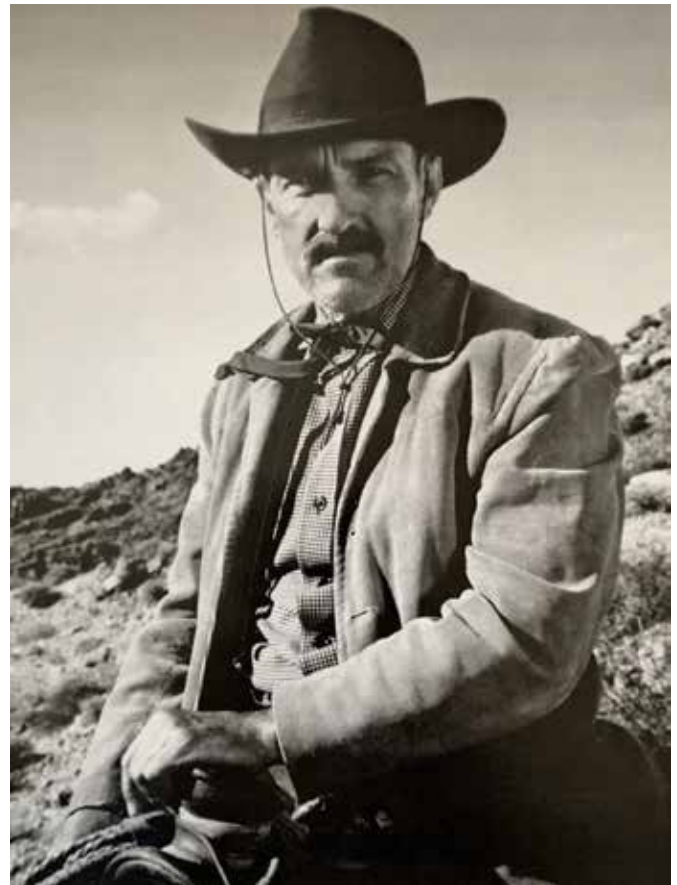
listening to Lefty's baseball stories as well as studying the trophies, photos, and baseball memorabilia that decorated the walls. Perhaps seeing the celebrity status that Lefty achieved after being raised in such challenging conditions was an inspiration to John.

After graduating from Valley High School in Lonaconing in 1961, John enrolled at Frostburg State College, where he majored in elementary education, with a minor in theater. John's drama instructor at Frostburg State College, Dorothy Stone White, had previously taught sophomore English and drama at Morgantown High School and directed the Community Theater in Morgantown, West Virginia. According to John, she always wore it as a badge of honor that one of her former students was the famous actor, Morgantown native Don Knotts.

Although John was trained as a teacher, his first love was the theater. After graduating from college in 1968, the aspiring actor made his way to Florida, where he quickly found work with the Asolo Repertory Theater in Sarasota. After spending three years in Florida, he moved to New York City to parlay his acting skills in an environment that offered more opportunity for advancement. During his tenure in New York, John played a role in the stage production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* for 2½ years. In 1974, the decision was made to relocate to Hollywood, California. Coincidentally, Harvey Medlinsky, the stage director John had worked with in New York City moved to Hollywood soon afterward; the two joined forces again on a stage production of this same play in California. The award-winning movie starring Jack Nicholson, based on the same script, debuted in 1975.

In 1990, John landed a leading role in the movie *Storm and Sorrow*, which was based on a true story. The movie depicted the saga of mountain climbing groups from 12 different countries that survived an avalanche in the Pamir Mountains in Tajikistan in 1974. The movie was filmed in the mountains of Austria and Budapest, Hungary. John played the role of Robert Craig, leader of the American climbing team. An avid mountain climber himself, the actor now looks back on his character in that movie as his favorite role. After filming, he had the privilege of touring the countries of Italy, France, and Switzerland.

Besides playing roles in more than 70 television series including *Hill Street Blues*, *Night Court*, *The Young and Restless*, *The Rockford Files*, *Dallas*, and *Dynasty*, the Pekin native landed roles in the movies *You Light Up My Life* (1977), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), and *Battle Beyond The Stars* (1980). More recently, John has appeared in the hit television series *Yellowstone* and played the role of



**Top:** John in the 1991 Loyola Marymount College student film *The Badland*. The movie was shot in the Mojave Desert near Baker, California.

**Middle and Above:** John portrayed Ward Evans in the recent Academy Award winner, *Oppenheimer*.



Ward Evans in the highly renowned movie *Oppenheimer*. *Oppenheimer* received seven Academy Awards (March 2024) including Best Picture, Best Actor and Best Director.

John Gowans' acting career has led him to many exotic places and depicts a remarkably sharp upward trajectory from his first acting experience in the Pekin School Christmas program in 1951, when he was eight years old. Sentimental ties to his upbringing in the small coal town of Pekin remain unbroken. He still has the hand-cranked Victrola from the Pekin School at his home in Hollywood, California.



**Above left:** John was recently presented with the Screen Actors Guild award honoring him for his outstanding performance by a cast member in *Oppenheimer*.

**Above right:** John still has the hand-cranked Victrola from the Pekin School.

**Left:** John visited the newly constructed Miner's display in Frostburg, MD. Over 700 miners who lost their lives in the coal mines of Allegany County, MD, are depicted on the display along with John's grandfather, John Thomas "Jack" Miller.

