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"Now Mining Coal is for the Big Boys" [1]: Agency and Adaptation in the Changing Culture of Tazewell County Coal Camps: 1945-1965

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Abstract

Across Central Appalachia the boom and bust cycle of the coal market has shaped the character of company-owned coal towns since their inception. Existing scholarship on mining has focused on economic imbalance and labor unrest, primarily in West Virginia and Kentucky. These studies generally obscure cultural practices of adaptation and modes of resilience embraced by coal camp families throughout periods of flux. Drawing from the collection of oral histories, this study explores the complex reactions to the post-WWII years of increased mechanization and declining paternalism throughout the coal camps of Tazewell County, Virginia.

Epigraph

"Red Ash"

In the coal camp they call Red Ash,
I watched the coal trains move that coal as I grew up,
They used coal to fire those engines.
As we played, we'd breathed a lot of smoke and sutt'.
When mama saw them coming,
She'd run and take the white clothes off the line.
As soon as they moved on;
Ever thing went back to normal and just fine.
…
From the fifties through the eighties,
They tore the coal camps down.
Now mining coal is for the big boys,
With the tools to move the ground.

~ R.C. Baldwin (July 15, 2015)

1. Introduction

Scattered throughout more than twenty States in the Union, there are people to who the pick, shovel, and drill are the symbols of livelihood, to who the tipple of a coal mine is both a monument to

> bloody strife and a promise of economic security. These are the soft-coal miners of America. Highly individualistic, yet bound together by a common isolation, steeped in tradition but yielding to the forces of mechanical progress, uneducated but as intelligent as the average American, they form a mass of human beings upon whose labors the industrial motion of the Nation depends.[2]

This summary from a narrative supplement to the 1947 *Medical Survey of the Bituminous Coal Industry* captures a surprisingly nuanced depiction of the coal miner, intrinsically bound to the historical landscape of Central Appalachia.[3] The company-owned coal towns (camps), hastily constructed to centralize a sustainable labor force in this sparsely populated and geographically isolated area, were transformed over time into epicenters of unique cultural expression driven by the tenacity of their inhabitants.

Oral histories from these former residents often provide an important contrast to the negative portrayal in popular images of the poor Appalachian coal miner unaware of the extent of his own blight. The stories that emerge when former coal camp residents express, in their own terms, how they interpreted their lived experiences provide a means to shift the lens of scholarship away from a narrative of victimization to one that acknowledges resourcefulness and endurance.

The *Medical Survey* (also known, and referred to hereafter, as the Boone Report) was initiated as a result of negotiations between the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and the Federal Government over wages and working conditions in the mid-1940s. The commission visited 206 mines in 22 states, including the communities of Amonate, Bishop, Jewell Ridge, and Red Ash in Tazewell County, Virginia. Despite its importance to the national fuel economy, the sub-region of Southwest Virginia has been generally underrepresented in discussions of rural industrialization and its impact on native mountaineers. Some important case studies have helped carve out recognition for Wise County mining towns, but Tazewell County's major coal camps offer their own distinct and dynamic representations of how coal affected social history in Appalachia.

Advancements in transportation, communication, and mining technology combined with post-World War II recession to transform the model of coal operations between 1945 and 1965. Recorded oral histories from camp residents who navigated this era of cultural change complicate the portrayal of Appalachian industrialization as a definitively disruptive phenomenon and provide insight on how communities fostered agency and a sense of dignity for miners and their families during the decline of coal company ownership.

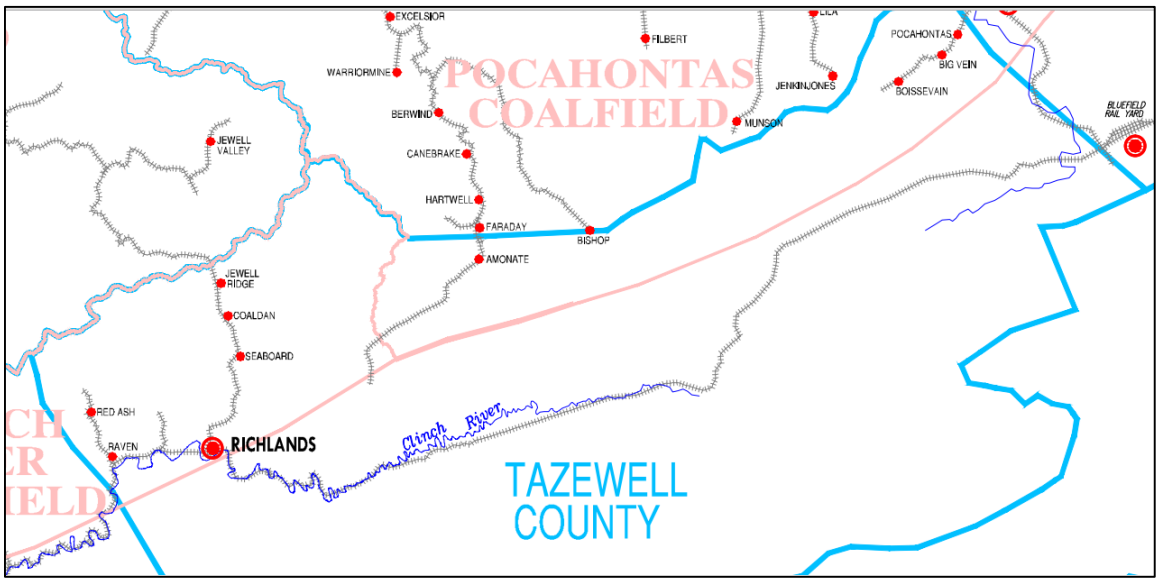

Figure 1. *Map by Chris DellaMea, coalcampsusa.com*

2. Historiography

From the 1960s-80s scholarship on coal town communities primarily focused on the exploitation of miners and the degradation of traditional folkways resultant from the oppressive tactics of coal operators. Labor historians

romanticized pre-industrial mountain life as harmonious and self-sufficient. Harry Caudill, a former attorney, congressman, and history professor, was one of the earliest writers to assess the legacy of King Coal as detrimental to Appalachian life and the environment. His 1963 book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands,* depicts southern Kentucky as a wasteland ruined by the coal industry and the towns it built: "Coal has always cursed the land in which it lies. When men begin to wrest it from the earth it leaves a legacy of foul streams, hideous slag heaps and polluted air. It peoples this transformed land with blind and crippled men and with widows and orphans." [4] While later historians improved their methodology, many echoed Caudill's example in terms of generalized observation of post-coal mountain life based on only the worst examples.

Between 1980 and 1982 a few prominent scholars concentrated their assessments of coal town culture in terms of powerlessness and dependency. In *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, political sociologist, John Gaventa presents a theory of the "third dimension of power" to explain how coal operators successfully manipulated the very psychology of miners to support corporate management and remain complacent with sub-standard conditions.[5] David Alan Corbin's *Life, Work, and Rebellion* asserts that a shift in the political system in West Virginia after the arrival of coal effectively cut miners off from their traditional practice of self-governance based upon kinship and turned social policy into a profit-driven scheme directed by capitalist elites.[6] Ronald Eller approached rural industrialization in the same vein with *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, arguing that Appalachians were "suspended halfway between the old society and the new" and "had lost the independence and self-determination of their ancestors, without becoming full participants in the benefits of the modern world."[7] Through this gaze, the paternalism that companies embraced to secure and stabilize a productive workforce was merely vicious exploitation under cover of attractive but empty promises.

Since the 1990s, a number of scholars have contributed to a progressive shift in historical approach which identifies coal camp residents' negotiation in preserving habits of subsistence and daily life in the face of limited resources and lack of official political voice. Crandall Shifflett's *Coal Towns* presents the case that modernization in Appalachia was not "universally alienating" and that the collapse of an agricultural-based economy across the nation led to a general willingness of mountaineers to accept the opportunity for a secure, living wage. Miners "knew the reality of their own limited means and, with a stoic optimism, played the cards they were dealt."[8] Shifflett's reliance on the collection of oral histories conveys a report on the quality of camp life that is antithetical to the oppressive and depressed images evoked by earlier scholars.

Chad Montrie's 2007 article, "Continuity in the Midst of Change" also discusses the transition from rural subsistence farming to wage-earning industrial labor. While he acknowledges that the power differential between company operators and miners was problematic at the very least, his research also reveals some of the creative ways families were able to minimize the plight of exploitive circumstances. In the practice of preserving their traditional means of subsistence, miners continued to take advantage of the forests and streams for collecting, trapping, and fishing much as they had done before moving to the camps.[9]

While Karen Bescherer Metheny's research is centered on the coal town of Helvatia, Pennsylvania, her methodology and analytical framework are indispensable in the shift toward a more balanced, oral history-centered social history of coal mining communities. Extending the revisionist approach initiated by Shifflett, *From the Miners' Doublehouse* critiques the trend of simplifying power structures and minimizing the diverse roles of miners and their families in shaping the narrative of coal town existence. Metheny instead has written about "individuals who daily made decisions about their welfare, who not only responded to but also acted upon various aspects of the industrial regimen as it related to living and working conditions and to the well-being of their families, who daily negotiated identity and place within the industrial landscape."[10]

Price Fishback's *Soft Coal, Hard Choices* analyzes the culture of coal town communities from an economic perspective, though one that contests a Marxist approach. This study is particularly useful because it puts into perspective the typical socioeconomic position of Appalachian coal mining families in terms of the broader average American working class status of the time. Fishback highlights the broad range of physical conditions found throughout the coalfields and cautions against sweeping generalizations of the "coal town" as a homogenous organism.[11]

Of all the sources referenced, the time frame of study either stops around the Great Depression or pays far less attention to the years following. Increased mechanization and down-turning market factors met with trends of rapid modernization in the American domestic sphere and led to the demise of the company owned coal camp by the early-1960s. However, in most cases, this transition was gradual and fraught with a range of social and economic outcomes. While the image of the classic paternalistic coal town reached its peak around 1930, the post-WWII years of decline and corporate pull-out are well-deserving of closer research and interpretation. Drawing from the unique and intimate perspectives provided by oral histories, this study focuses on the scope of personal and communal reactions to a shifting cultural landscape toward the end of the era of company towns in Southwest Virginia.

3. Tazewell County Coal Companies

In order to more comprehensively evaluate the consequences of fading company involvement in mining operations, the origins of Tazewell County coal companies must first be considered. The extension of the Norfolk and Western Railroad solidified Pocahontas Fuel Company as the first major operation in the region, claiming property and mineral rights on both sides of the Virginia-West Virginia state line by the late 19th century. Pocahontas attracted high-dollar business partners (such as the U.S. Navy) which sustained its success for the next several decades. The company's coal camps of Bishop and Amonate were not constructed until after the Great Depression, a time in which other camps were already being abandoned.[12] Inspired by an operating philosophy of progressive welfare capitalism, these late era camps were designed to be gleaming models of modernization.[13]

Frances Clark Huffman and her parents were among the first families to move to Bishop, arriving in 1930 before construction was officially complete. Her father died the following year leaving Huffman and her mother to run the company-owned boarding house.[14] In an interview recorded in 1981, Frances recalled what hard work it was to house and feed 25-35 men: "We got up 4:00 to 4:30 each morning. Built fires… Had hot biscuits, gravy, sausage, eggs, whatever we had money to buy with. Because the men who did the work in the mines, back in the days that I can remember, had to have something to go to their back bone."[15] Providing such an important service for the community secured the Clarks a stable position in the camp.

As Bishop and Amonate continued to grow, single male miners became a proportionately smaller component of the work force as "family-men" were recruited with the assurance of sustainable wages and attractive housing. Third-generation miner, Bill Heflin, offered this insight regarding how the appeal of Bishop drove competition for residency: "Back then, there was probably about eight to ten-thousand people worked at Bishop. And to get a company house, you had to be really up-standing or thought-well-of by the company."[16] The enthusiasm with which miners willfully migrated to the camps counters the victimization narrative that Appalachian families were commonly forced from their farms into deplorable conditions under company ownership.

Pittsburgh-Consolidated Coal Corporation (formerly Consolidated Coal, later CONSOL Energy) purchased Pocahontas Fuel Company for over $107 million dollars in 1956.[17] Daily operations remained under the same management as before and production continued at a similar rate. In 1957, Bishop employed 540 miners and produced an average of 6,500 tons per day while Amonate produced around a thousand less tons with 515 men on payroll. [18]

About twenty years after Pocahontas Fuel was founded, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad opened an opportunity for another coal corporation to gain traction in Southwest Virginia. Attorney George W. St. Clair joined Thomas M. Righter, a coal mine operator from Pennsylvania, to form the Pocahontas Mining Company (not to be confused with Pocahontas Fuel Company) in 1902. By 1910, they purchased the mineral rights to over 18,000 acres of land at the state line between Tazewell and McDowell counties and officially formed the Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation.[19]

St. Clair had a unique vision for a model modern coal town. He purposefully chose a residential site high above the drift mouth, on the mountain ridge away from the noise and coal dust of the mines. The 105 frame homes with paved streets, sidewalks, and planted trees eventually served as the pinnacle of coal camp construction in the region.[20] The company's successful expanse attracted native mountaineers from the many ridges in proximity to the camp and undoubtedly influenced Appalachian life in Tazewell County. At peak production in 1943, Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation employed over 4,500 miners and was one of the leading producers of high quality coal in Southwest Virginia.[21]

At the far western end of Tazewell County, between the town of Raven and Shortt Gap leading to Grundy, a much smaller company built a string of four coal camps in the late 1920s.[22] Surprisingly little has been documented about the origins and operating philosophies of the Raven Red Ash Coal Company, making its legacy more difficult to decipher. It was an early member of the Virginia Coal Operators Association, although the ledgers show the operation at relatively low production between 1938 and 1947.[23] The company closed its Number 2 mine and cut wages at its Number 1 and Premier mines in February of 1932, spurring the *Clinch Valley News* to speculate that "the depression has just hit the miners of this section instead of the speedy return of prosperity."[24] The Boone Report contains several photographs of the Red Ash camps from the mid-1940s. While some of the captions offer commentary about specific camp conditions, details about the Raven Red Ash Coal Company and the housing projects it oversaw are not explicitly mentioned in the text of the report.[25]

4. Regional Disparities

The juxtaposition of the Boone Report's photographs illuminates the stark disparities of socioeconomic conditions between geographically proximate communities and challenges the notion that the "coal camp experience" can be homogeneously typified. This description of the worst of the camps is particularly vivid: "…an assortment of unpainted, moldering shacks set in a broad plot of muddy soil and mine waste, and surrounded by garbage, animal wastes, and malodorous filth"[26] At the other end of the spectrum, the supplement to the Boone Report praises communities characterized by "attractive houses surrounded by green lawns and set close to clean, paved roads that lead to parks and playgrounds…"[27] The bleak comparison of Bishop and Jewell Ridge to Raven Red Ash is a strong case-in-point for Tazewell County. The dirt roads and stilted houses of Red Ash are more in-line with the portrayal of coal camps favored by scholars with agendas similar to that of Caudill. The manicured sidewalks and painted sheet-rock walls at Jewell Ridge indicated a very different narrative. [28]

Figures 2.1 & 2.2. Contrast of exterior company housing at Bishop (*left*) and at Red Ash (*right*), *Courtesy of the Nation Archives and Records Administration (NARA).*[29]

Understanding how residents thought about these communities during their prime helps to frame their opinions of the transformations that resulted from corporate pull-out in the 1950s. Thinking back to his childhood, Bill Heflin offered the following description of Bishop:

> Bishop was a little self-efficient community. I mean, it had...the doctor's office, and they had the restaurant underneath the company store, and they had they pool hall underneath there.... They had a taxi service. And when I grew up there, they was a bus run every 30 minutes through Bishop to Pocahontas to Bluefield to War… It was a real Norman Rockwell deal.[30]

Betty Woodall Boothe shared similar sentiments about growing up in this model camp. Her father too had worked for Pocahontas Fuel before they moved to Bishop from Endwell, West Virginia in 1943. Betty was six years old. She fondly reminisced, "I loved my childhood in Bishop. We had a great time. We'd sleigh ride… roller skate on the sidewalks… trade funny books… Good clean fun."[31] Many participants declared that there was never a locked door in the camp and that neighbors collectively looked out for one another.

R.C. Baldwin, better known as the "singing barber" in Raven, Virginia, was raised in the Upper Red Ash Camp. During his father's career as a miner, the family lived both in formal company houses and in a private residence on Horton Ridge. Born in 1943, Baldwin saw the dwindling years of the Raven Red Ash Coal operation, the houses torn down, and the culture of the community change. He too looks back on his camp childhood fondly, but acknowledges that, "It would be hard to go back to the old ways. We have all this modern convenience we got and everything. But back then, people were more happy, because they didn't know anything about all these things." For him, the conditions of the camp were tolerable in their own time simply because its residents had nothing more sustainable against which to compare them.

One particular memory of Baldwin's truly gets to the heart of the disparity between Red Ash and better constructed camps such as Jewell Ridge:

> Nobody knew anything about insulation at that time. So in some cases - in the wintertime - you'd cover up your head… You had a - what they called burnside - pot belly stove - and they'd bank the fire. But up in the night, it would start to get cold and actually sometimes, you know, you couldn't tell it much if they had a fire, because sometimes you could feel and see the snow blow in on you, if you lived in a certain house. But usually the houses… There were boards up and down, then they had the little smaller boards up over that crack. But they were cold![32]

The geography of Red Ash, at the bottom of frequently flooded creek bed hugging the railroad tracks also offers considerable contrast to the mountain top ridgeline of Jewell Ridge. Bob Moore, Jr. compared his home to Seaboard, a camp similar to Red Ash, in terms that highlight the impact of the physical landscape:

> Well, I'll tell you, driving up from Richlands on a hot summer's day, you had all these coke ovens going – it was terrible. How people could live there!... Poor people having to live in conditions like that. The houses were all run down, unpainted. We'd come up here on Jewell Ridge, houses were always painted, the yards were all mowed, and everything was trimmed and the flowers were all blooming. It was just like going to another world.[33]

Figures 3.1 & 3.2. Contrast of interior homes at Jewell Ridge (*left*) and Red Ash (*right*), *Courtesy of the Nation Archives and Records Administration (NARA).* [34]

5. Corporate Paternalism

Notwithstanding the important local variations of specific mining operations, the common thread of corporate paternalism as a managerial philosophy is broadly inherent in the nature of the company town. Metheny borrows from Phillip Scranton, a scholar on labor relations in textile mills, to construct a definition of paternalism as a system based on "mutual obligation," "patriarchal authority," and the supervision of "social relations beyond labor."[35] There was considerable incentive for companies to invest in the well-being and physical comfort of their laborers. In theory, a happy workforce equals a productive and compliant workforce.

While paternalism primarily functioned as a subtle principal throughout many aspects of coal camp life, instances where it was made explicit showcase various attitudes about its direct influence. Frances Huffman credits the benevolence of many Bishop "boss men" in sustaining her boarding house:

> A.O Bishop would do things for my mother that was unbelievable, you know, that would carry her on… We used scrip in those days and I don't think Mother ever drew over $25 dollars in her check… Mr. H.A Castel and A.V. Sproles had her a bathhouse put in her yard, because in my day the miners did not have their own bathhouse. They put it in the yard and we had thirty lockers and she would

> rent those lockers all the time and that would help her expenses and pay her light bill and buy her a coat.[36]

The matter of her mother's low-wages was, to Huffman, overshadowed by the expression of fatherly good will in specific situations.

Former Jewell Ridge resident, Burton Smith's fondness for the company's founder reflect similar sentiments tied to particular memories. Smith recalled that George St. Clair would dress up as Santa to give out candy and turkeys at Christmastime. The camp children affectionately referred to him as "Uncle." Smith also praised St. Clair's policy of screening families before they were allowed to live in the camp and a strict ban on alcohol.[37]

Bernard Nearhood also grew up in Jewell Ridge Camp, but had a much different experience with paternalistic oversight toward the end of World War II. Like many of his fellow miners, he secured a deferment with the assistance of the Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation on the basis of his employment at the company's tipple. However, according to Nearhood, revoking this "favor" could also then be used as a threat by the mine superintendent to keep men from seeking work elsewhere.[38] This instance illustrates the double-sided cost-benefit nature of paternalism that generated such complex personal reactions.

6. Miners' Housing

Attitudes regarding the transition away from paternalistic management can perhaps be understood most clearly in context of the shift in the ownership of miners' housing. Jack Nipper was born in 1940 on the Blacksburg spur off Jewell Ridge Camp proper. His family moved to a four-room house in the main camp two years later. The Nippers, one the first families to purchase their home from the company, did so for $22,000 in the mid-1950s. Jack Nipper indicated the pang of nostalgia for more paternalistic times when his parents received an electric bill for the outrageous amount of eight dollars. This utility had previously been included in the $22 monthly rent deducted from his father's wages, but hence became one item in a list of services they had to maintain. [39]

Reka Cole, a school teacher from Whitewood, Virginia, married Claude Dye in 1950. The newlyweds lived for a short time at the Dye family farm in Swords Creek (Russell County, Virginia) until Claude secured a position at Jewell Valley Number 3 Mine and was eventually able to relocate his growing family to a company duplex in the camp.[40] Both have fond memories of their neighbors, and the many amenities within the coal camp. They attended the movie theater and shopped at the company store. Reka Dye and her four small daughters regularly walked to the Presbyterian Church on Sunday mornings.[41] Despite the conveniences and pleasant social relationships as Jewell Valley, the Dyes seized the opportunity to buy a home in the transitioning Jewell Ridge Camp in 1961. The security offered by company housing was viewed as a temporary phase, a step in the progression toward the family's ability to enjoy the independence of becoming home-owners.

Some distance from their Jewell Valley camp days allowed Reka Dye to more candidly reflect on the demands of her domestic duties. Regarding those earlier years, she described, "You would not believe the coal dust that come in! You would clean your house - you would clean your kitchen stuff – it'd be white, you know. You'd get up of a morning and it'd be black!"[42] After their move, Claude Dye was able to erect a smoke house and raise a productive garden where, like the kitchen appliances, the cabbage would be free of coal dust.[43]

Roger Barnett, born in 1933 to a farming family just outside Amonate, also bought a former company-owned house in the early-1960s. The purchase was negotiated through a real estate company based in Welch, West Virginia. This detail demonstrates not only that Pocahontas Fuel was loosening its control over social components of the mining operation, but that the company was actively participating in the wider regional economy. Many of Barnett's neighbors bought the duplexes they had been renting and began renovations to convert the homes into single units. He described the transition:

> There was a big change when they started selling off these houses. Because the comp'ny kept ever thing up to date - ever thing…up. People started lettin' the houses run down… When they had coal camps, they graded 'em ever year for their beauty, and Amonate was number one. And you see how it's run down now, oh boy…after people bought their own houses.[44]

Barnett's words exemplify a complicated dynamic felt by many camp families during the retreat of company interests. While residents might have celebrated expanding autonomy, they also inherited challenges from altered neighborhood aesthetics to diminishing property values.

7. Company Housing v. Non-Company Housing

In regard to the evaluation of company owned housing in comparison to residential dwellings outside the camps, the criteria used by the commissioners of the Boone Report were rigidly based on the National Housing Agency and the U.S. Public Health Service. For satisfactory grading, houses were required to have a separate space for cooking in dwellings, a reliable source of potable water, refrigeration, a stove for cooking, an adequate heat source for winter, proper ventilation, artificial lighting, as well as garbage and sewage disposal.[45] A problematic aspect of these measures according to Shifflett, and enforced by the evidence in oral histories, is that they overlook the social history of specific regions and enforce a bias resultant from the comparison of coal camps to "urban ecosystems" found in the Northeast.[46]

Camp residents did, however, think about coal camp life in comparison to the rural farm settings throughout greater Southwest Virginia and central Appalachia. Jo Alice Russ was born in Rock, West Virginia in 1938. Her father had a college degree in mining engineering and worked at several mines in the Clinchfield coalfields, during which time their family lived in the town of Richlands. It was not until 1948, when her father was hired as a mine foreman, that the Russ family moved to the coal camp of Amonate. Russ's mother was from a farming family in Lashmeet, West Virginia. Jo Russ often visited the farm for several weeks at a time in the summers. She viewed her camp life as preferable to local alternatives, as she observed, "The cousins that lived on the farm, they really didn't have as much as we had and they worked harder." Later when Russ returned to Tazewell County and was working as a home health nurse, she witnessed shocking conditions of destitution in remote areas of the rural county. For her, the coal camps offered a viable opportunity to alleviate extreme poverty and sub-standard living conditions.[47]

To be sure, mountaineers did not have to live inside the confines of the formal camps for their lives to be unmistakably intertwined with the coal industry. In 1902, Melvin Bernard Sparks' great grandfather, Israel Nelson, deeded the mineral rights to more than 300 acres of land on Bear Wallow Mountain to Thomas Righter.[48] While the surface property remained in the family, many of Nelson's children and grandchildren left the farmland in search of mining jobs in McDowell County, West Virginia. Sparks' uncle, Tom Nelson, leased land from Berwind Coal Company and ran a boarding house for miners in Vallscreek, West Virginia. It was because of this connection that Sparks' father came to know his future bride, Ocie Nelson. The newlyweds lived in various coal camps such as Coalwood and Hartwell, moving back to Vallscreek at the time of Melvin Sparks' birth in 1934. When Sparks was about five years-old the family returned to the homestead on Bear Wallow, moving their belongings by horse and sled. His father still worked as a miner, but for reasons never shared with their children, the couple decided coal-camp life was no longer desirable. Their life on the hillside farm provided them opportunities to assert degrees of agency over their living quarters that they might not have found around the bend in Jewell Ridge Camp. Sparks elaborated on the family's innovation:

> They was a little house they moved into up in the field on top of the mountain. But we didn't have water. We had to carry water up from under the hill. And later, Mother got two of her brothers - my uncles - to tear the house down and move it down under the hill where the water was. And that's where the old house is sittin' today. We had water in the house - running water. My uncles had built a spring box to catch the water from a little ol' coal seam that just run outta' the back of the road. They made concrete boxes and caught the water and we piped it into the house. We had the only one, and the first one, that had bathroom in the house - commode and sink and runnin' water.[49]

Melvin Sparks married June Griffith the day after her 18th birthday in June of 1957. June's family lived on a small farm off of Stinson Ridge, just north of Jewell Ridge Camp. Her father was a miner for Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation, but they also never lived in company housing.[50] A few years into their marriage, the Sparks' rented a previously company-owned house from a private owner. They both still referred to this period as "when we lived in the camp." Because they had both been so strongly connected to Jewell Ridge through school, social institutions and friendships during the years of formal company ownership, their notion of camp life was rooted in a sense of neighborhood and convenience, not in to whom they wrote their rent check.

8. The Company Store

Throughout the coal camps of Tazewell County, the controversial hallmark institution of the company store persisted as a staple of the community for years after the selling of houses began. In varying degrees, the lingering enterprise

shaped material culture in the post-war years. Critics often point to the company store as the epitome of corporate exploitation, a corrupt capitalist establishment that monopolized the local economy and purposefully inflated prices to keep miners in perpetual debt.[51] Other scholars counter that the company store, paired with its infamous exchange of scrip, offered a necessary convenience. Higher prices on certain goods merely reflected fair competition with local markets and compensation for higher transportation costs in more remote camps.[52]

The Boone Report found company stores generally reflected the wealth of the operating company and degree of local competition in their design and offerings. The commission found no evidence of companies making exorbitant profits from dishonest price inflation. In fact, data showed that while some items were sold at slightly higher prices than local competitors, other goods were priced the same or even lower. In general, the report observed that the practice of company stores offering credit was an important and beneficial practice, citing that most stores would extend credit to miners in periods of suspended mining operations.[53]

Even families that lived on farms outside the camps engaged in commerce at the company stores. While her family raised their own meat and produce, June Sparks was often asked to go to the store for staple items like salt and flour.[54] Other families sold their farm wares directly to the company store.[55] This arrangement not only supplied coal camp residents with fresh local food; it was a meaningful way in which the coal corporations could impact the local economy outside of mine wages.

The collection of oral histories from Tazewell County residents indicate a general opinion that personal choices about money management dictated a miner's relationship with the company store. Although he does remember times where using store credit was necessary for large purchases, Melvin Sparks credits his parents' disciplined financial practices for his own understanding of how to avoid debt to the company.[56] When asked whether or not he thought there was any truth to the lyric about owing one's soul to the company store from Merle Travis's song, "Sixteen Tons," R.C. Baldwin replied with the conviction that miners were personally accountable for such a scenario, but added that he knew men who had indeed "dug themselves a hole."[57] Bill Heflin had an even more impassioned response: "The same person that's got that same idea [that] the companies were robbin' 'em and takin' advantage of 'em is goin' out there and pullin' out a Visa card and financin' a Coco-cola at 29 percent"[58]

Like other participants, Heflin felt the conveniences of the company store out-weighed the potential for exploitation. After phones were installed, Pocahontas Fuel company stores began a home delivery service. Heflin argued that the company offered a range of quality materials that could be purchased without having to leave the camp: "Even ol' Robert Yeats would buy truckloads of sugar to make moonshine with!"[59] Jo Russ shared a pleasant memory of Grace, the buyer for the store at Amonate, traveling to New York to bring back the latest fashions in women's clothing. Russ made arrangements to purchase many of these select items in preparation for her departure to college.[60] These subtle ways paternalism was embraced by camp residents contradicts Eller's assertion that company towns offered far less amenities than incorporated towns and in doing so "left [their] residents powerless to control their own destinies."[61]

9. Alternative Enterprise

Camp folks also exercised control through the persistence of pre-industrial traditions. Evidence of alternative enterprise and means of subsistence further challenges the argument that coal camps exhibited a "colonial" economic structure. [62] Folkways such as gardening, hunting, fishing, collecting, and preserving foodstuffs continued throughout the lifespan of company ownership.[63] Many people maintained small gardens and even kept hog pens behind their company houses. From her school days, June Sparks remembered that she and her classmates were often assigned to bring a particular vegetable from home, while the teacher donated the meat for a pot of communal soup that would simmer on the classroom's potbelly stove while the children attended to their lessons.[64] Some traditions also offered opportunities for socializing and leisure. In the summer, women congregated on their porches' with other miners' wives to string beans and chat. Men gathered for hog-killings (sometimes of hogs actually supplied by the coal company) much as Appalachians had been doing for generations before migrating to the camps.[65] Not only did these practices provide a sort of cultural backup during times of meager earnings, they provided opportunities for small-scale rural entrepreneurship.

Farming families who lived in close proximity to coal camps took advantage of an eager market in selling their goods to residents who did not garden. Roger Barnett's mother "peddled" in Amonate where she accepted cash as well as scrip for payment. [66] June Sparks' mother was famous in Jewell Ridge Camp for her delicious hand-churned butter, a commodity that many residents walked to Stinson Ridge to procure on a regular basis.[67] In order to supplement the income from their miner husbands, Melvin Sparks' mother and aunts rode horseback with sacks of vegetables, meats, and molasses to peddle in the coal camps of McDowell County.[68] The ability of folks in the

coalfields to engage in alternative means of distributing and acquiring food outside of the company store is just one more way in which they negotiated their livelihood and maintained agency.[69]

10. Labor and the Union

The variable rates of unemployment that served as the impetus for mining families to seek means of subsistence beyond the corporate payroll became an increasing challenge in the post-war era. The national average hourly wage for coal miners in 1941 was 99 cents. It had only increased to $1.37 by 1946. These wages were on par with or higher than average wage rate for workers in other industries such as non-metal mining, timber, and automobile production.[70] However, a straightforward comparison of earnings neglects the fluctuating pattern of employment throughout the coal industry. Reflecting on the years between 1955 and 1965, Bill Heflin elaborated on how the instability of mine production added to the plight of the miner:

> It's dangerous work, and you know it's hard work, and you know it's very cyclical - I mean, it's always been boom or bust. The coal miner has always had a real, real hard time at making a living. And the problem is not his wage when he's workin', it's the no wage when he ain't working - you're on boom and bust cycles. If you're workin' at a mines and you're makin' that big money, you get lulled into thinkin' that, 'Hell, it's gonna be that way forever!' And you finally - after you get about forty to fifity years old - you finally realize that you can't get ahead. Because they'll work you to death or they'll starve you to death. You can't... It's no nine to five job. It's no cradle to grave job.[71]

Membership in the United Miner Workers of America was one way miners attempted to navigate their livelihoods; however, the power and influence of the union was limited by larger forces of post-war economic recession. Unlike West Virginia and Kentucky, Southwest Virginia mines experienced a near absence of labor-related violence and wide-scale efforts to unionize prior to 1934.[72] Pocahontas Fuel was one of the earliest companies in Tazewell County to negotiate a union contract, and at that time the workers' main concern was the increase of wages.[73] The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, reported on a series of conferences between Jewell Ridge operators and UMWA District 17 regarding the classification of the newly acquired Jewell Valley Mine in the spring of 1937.[74] The Raven Red Ash Coal Company more actively resisted unionization efforts, although there is indication that some individual miners paid UMWA dues in 1952.[75] By the late-1950s, the union was focused on addressing safety regulation and attempts to minimize lay-offs, issues approached with varying consequences.

Betty Boothe's first husband, James Howard Neely was killed in the second of two major mine explosions at Bishop on October 27, 1958. He was twenty-five years old. She was only twenty-one when she became the widowed mother of a two-year-old son, unaware that she was expecting a second child.[76] After a federal investigation of the incident the U.S. Bureau of Mines issued clearance for the men to return to the work. The local UMWA 6025 responded with a call for Bishop miners to strike until a meeting could be held to address the union's concern regarding fifteen safety measures brought to light by the explosion. An intense series of negotiations transpired before operations resumed.[77]

What is clear from interviews with former Tazewell County coal camp residents is that personal opinions regarding the union spanned a wider spectrum than simply standing "for" or "against" labor organization. Claude Dye, Roger Barnett, and Melvin Sparks expressed deep convictions of faith in the leadership of the UMWA. While they acknowledged a superficial appeal in the higher wages offered by non-union mines, all three men maintained that such positions were not worth the forfeit of union health care and retirement pensions.[78] While Jack Nipper made clear his appreciation of the health benefits, he also perceived some troubling policies. Looking back to when his father's generation of Jewell Ridge miners were on strike toward the end of WWII, Nipper recalled that union officials still drew their pay checks while his family had to rely on government commodities until a contract was secured.[79]

Jo Russ's father had to join the union as a condition of his employment at Amonate. However, his broader experiences left him with an unfavorable attitude toward the UMWA. As the coal industry was in deep decline in the late-1950s, Russ hired many unemployed miners to work a strip mine he purchased in Buchannan County. According to Jo Russ, union representatives demanded that her father pay union wages and "all the high dues," which forced her father to shut down the mine altogether.[80]

Still yet, some workers were able to traverse situations with applied personal agency. When Melvin Sparks worked at Jewell Valley Number 4, production slowed and the company and local UMWA agreed to implement lay-offs. Under the pretense that they lacked efficient training on new equipment, Sparks saw the older men let go first. Finding this measure unjust, he began training the elder miners on the equipment he operated as a young-hire. Sparks believed

skill, not youth should dictate a man's ability to work and used this small measure of control to empower his fellow miners.[81]

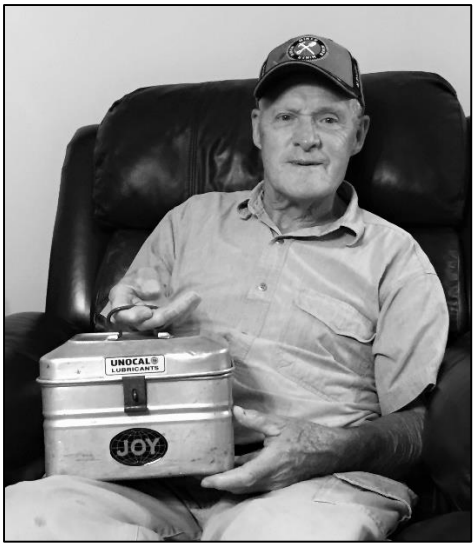

Figure 4. Melvin Bernard "Uncle Bernie" Sparks poses in his UMWA miner's cap with the dinner bucket he carried during his thirty-five year mining career. *Photo by Laura Fugate Engel.*

11. Truck Mines

Previous scholarship has generally neglected an essential mode of miner agency that both subverted the model of paternalism and aided families in financially surviving the instability of corporate mining jobs during the post-war years – the privately-contracted "truck mine." In addition to coal produced at a company's primary mechanized mine operations, corporations such as Jewell Ridge, leased out small points of access to their coal seams. Individuals who could afford their own hand-loading supplies and a small dump truck would finance their own small-scale mining operations. Payment was issued by the tonnage hauled to the company tipple.[82]

Howard and Carrie Altizer ran a general store on Bear Wallow Mountain, but also operated a truck mine leased by Jewell Ridge. Carrie Altizer described her attitude toward physical labor during an interview in 1988: " I'll do anything there is to do to make an honest living, because it was hard and couldn't make a living. A lot of times people'd say, 'Mrs. Altizer, why don't you hire some men to do that?' I'd say, 'What I've got to pay the men, I can save by doin' it myself.'" [83]

After Jewell Ridge Number 1 shut down in 1958, Melvin Sparks was hired to work in a truck mine leased by Jim Richardson. Despite not being a formal operation of Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation, these contract mines were accountable to the UMWA. Sparks explained, "When I worked in them truck mines… I got union pay - but it was low pay. I've worked for a dollar a car, hand-loadin' the little ton cars… Forty cars was the most I ever loaded in one day. That was an eight hour shift." Later, when he was not called back after a period of lay-offs, Sparks filed a grievance against Richardson through the union and won the case.[84]

The practice of contracting small mines also occurred in the Raven Red Ash area. R.C. Baldwin started hand-loading coal at a truck mine under Harley Cordle in 1960 for 80 cents a ton car. [85] Harley Cordle himself worked at many various operations in and around Tazewell County. In 1954 he earned between 80 cents and $1.10 per car. His 1957 pay stubs show he worked for Slayers Coal Company of Raven at an average of $90 gross income but there is no indication of how wages were negotiated (by hour or by ton) and the pay-period is unclear.[86] Unlike Sparks, Baldwin did not join the UMWA until he was hired at "the big mines" at Jewell Valley in 1967.

There is no indication that Pocahontas Fuel Company leased small mine operations. The company's payroll records for Bishop Mine from August 1957 show the average miner making between $2.80 and $3.10 an hour as a "straight time rate." Most men worked a 40 hour week comprised of five 8-hour shifts.[87]

While truck mines offered individuals an alternative the unpredictable boom and bust patterns of large-scale mines, these small business partnerships often served to benefit the corporations. Turmoil developed between the Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation and the Virginia Coal Operators Association during the mid-1950s. Correspondence between the two parties reveal a debate over Jewell Ridge Coal's delinquent account for dues owed in 1954. Dr. Huston St. Clair declared his company would no longer pay higher rates for reporting tonnage from the tipple that included production from leased truck mines. After being informed by the president of the Coal Operators Association that this refusal was in violation of by-laws, Dr. St. Clair severed their membership effective January 1955.[88]

Given the pretext of this situation, it might not have been surprising that, some years later, Dr. St. Clair was legally confronted about private leases to non-union competitors in eastern Kentucky – a "personal" business arrangement that effectively undercut the corporation's prices while making Dr. St. Clair a considerable fortune. During the court proceedings in 1966, St. Clair arranged for the sale of Jewell Ridge Coal Corporation to Pittston – a sly move that effectively dismissed the case.[89] Snapshots such as these into the backroom dealings of coal companies poignantly illustrate how operators could maintain a complacent workforce through outward expressions of sincere paternalistic concern while making larger business decisions that could adversely affect miners.

12. Leaving the Coalfields

Another prevalent way in which miners and their families responded to the decline of paternalism and increasing unemployment in the mines was to leave the coalfields. By the time Betty Boothe married Neely in 1955, the boom years of her coal camp childhood had waned. More efficient machinery and the declining value of coal resulted in widespread lay-offs. Given the region's near non-existent job market outside of the coal industry, the young couple was forced to leave Appalachia when Neely was cut from Bishop's payroll in 1957. They went to Baltimore where he worked in manufacturing and she held a job in a department store. To their delight, they only stayed eight months before Neely was called back to work at Bishop. When asked about her experience in Baltimore, Boothe exclaimed that she "hated every minute of it!" and found the culture of the city too jarring and unfamiliar to justify the perks of its wider job market. [90]

R.C. Baldwin left his home of Red Ash for a short stay in Chicago. The reason he gave for leaving was more nuanced: "Well, I never did look at a coal mines and just look at it and say, 'You know, I like you.' I never did think, 'I can't wait to get in there!' Because to me, it's takin' you outa the sunshine... I never did *like* mining."[91] Regardless of his lack of passion for the type of work, Baldwin was pragmatic about the absence of alternative employment. Weighing that reality against the prospect of living outside of Appalachia, he made the deliberate choice to return to Tazewell County and head underground. His side career as a barber and his love of song writing provided sufficient escape from the darkness of the mines.

Figure 5. The Singing Barber, R.C Baldwin, preforming a song he wrote about Red Ash in the single-wide trailer he converted to barbershop by the railroad tracks in Raven, Virginia. *Photo by Laura Fugate Engel*

Jack Nipper also felt no love lost when he left his short career as a miner. He detailed the horror of his brief experience in his father's truck mine:

> Six months is all I's in there. I hated it from day one. I dreaded goin' to bed at night knowin' I had to get up at four the next mornin' and go to work. Didn't mind work. It was the coal mines… We'd climb in this car, fill the cars up with men layin' on their stomachs. Cold steel. I mean they'd be snow… and you just had to lay in that snow and ride that thing in.[92]

The pitch-black darkness was frightening, the explosion of dynamite and the shaking of the timbers and rock it produced gave Nipper such anxiety that he decided coal-mining was not the profession for him. He left home at 21, living in Martinsville, Virginia, South Carolina, and eventually Tampa, Florida where he worked in retail management. Nevertheless, he maintained that Jewell Ridge was "a great place to grow up. Anybody that you talk to on the mountain… if they'd had a choice would ever have grown up any place else."[93] His affection for Jewell Ridge Camp and disdain for the mines illustrates how residents generally separated work from community life.

Melvin Sparks and his two first-cousins, Evert and Dewy Nelson, left for Ohio in 1955. In Cleveland, Melvin got a job "breakin' on the railroad" through the winter months. The experience made a profound impression:

> I couldn't dress because it was so cold. The night shift - it was forty below zero some nights. And me a tryin' to be a grown man and lota' times I couldn't hardly keep from cryin' with my feet and fingers…was froze off… They would just ache and hurt. So I didn't stay very long. I came home. I thought, "I can do better making minin' timbers and get me a job workin' in the coal mines." And that's exactly what I done." "If I had it to go over, to do over, I wished I'd headed for the mines when I was much younger.[94]

Whether or not Tazewell county miners felt themselves personally cut-out for the difficult physical labor of mining coal beneath the earth's surface, their affection for the Appalachian mountains of southwest Virginia was something of a magnetism rooted in a dynamic cultural framework and sense of communal pride.

13. Conclusion

Tazewell County miners and their families continually discovered and maintained small, daily practices by which they were able to actively shape their communities and influence their well-being. The span of complex opinions captured in the collection of oral history interviews reiterates what Shifflett has identified as the problem with a "monolithic understanding of paternalism" that "renders its subjects hapless victims with no hand in shaping their own destinies."[95] It is arrogant and misguided to assume that coal camp residents did not fully comprehend the scope of their world, or that they were quiescent in their reactions to hardship. Company towns were far from utopian, but neither were they void of financial opportunity and interpersonal comradery. The transformation of coal camps from enclaves where corporate oversight was entrenched in daily life to towns where residents met new responsibilities and challenges with dynamic agency has proven to be a rich area of focus deserving of continued research.

Figure 6. The Coal Camp of Bishop, Virginia. *Courtesy of Eastern Regional Coal Archives.*[96]

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