

AN AFRICAN AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY NARRATIVE:
LABOR, RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER
IN A COAL MINING COMMUNITY

by

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This project has taken me nearly three years to complete. Through all the stress, anxiety, and deadlines this is a true testament of a labor of love. The pages that follow would not have been possible without the help of Mr. Kenneth Keys. He sat with me for hours on end talking about growing up in the coal mines of Steinman in southwest Virginia. His descriptive narrative and love for his family and friends is evident in the stories he tells.

My professor, Dr. Martha Norkunas, inspired me to research the topics of race, class, gender, and labor, in the context of the narrative Mr. Keys and I co-created. Without her I would never have realized the importance of this story.

Mr. Dennis Reedy, a volunteer at the Historical Society in Clinchwood, Virginia, provided me with pictorial evidence of the coal mine where Mr. Keys grew up in Steinman, Virginia. He also shared his interviews and fieldwork research. He provided the missing piece to this writing.

To Dr. Pippa Holloway I thank her for encouraging and teaching me how develop a historiographical narrative. Her helpful remarks helped me bring the narrative into historical context.

My parents' and friends' unconditional support and words of encouragement helped me finish this long trek in my educational career. I am forever in your debt.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on a thirteen-hour life history interview with Mr. Kenneth Keys, an African American man who grew up in a coalmining camp in Virginia in the 1940s and 1950s. I co-created the first two interviews for the African American Oral History Project under the direction of Dr. Martha Norkunas and went on to meet with Mr. Keys three more times over a period of four months. The thesis examines Mr. Keys' narrative in terms of race, class, gender and labor in Appalachia in southwest Virginia in the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the town of Steinman, Virginia. It also draws on additional oral histories, primary source documents relevant to Steinman, and scholarly literature on coalmining communities and black labor.

Mr. Keys describes his childhood in Steinman, Virginia. He discusses his chores, and boxing and playing baseball with his friends. He talks about his parents lives, including his father's work as a coalminer and his antiunion activities. He mentions the hardships of everyday life and the experience of growing up in the middle of an all white neighborhood. He discusses the commissary store, and the extensive use of scrip. He also reflects on women and children's labor as contributions to the informal household economy, including his mother's business doing laundry (which resulted in the only cash income in the family), family gardens, hunting, fishing, and keeping and slaughtering animals for food. He also discusses his house, racialized housing conditions, the neighborhoods of the coalmining town and his perception of race relations in Steinman.

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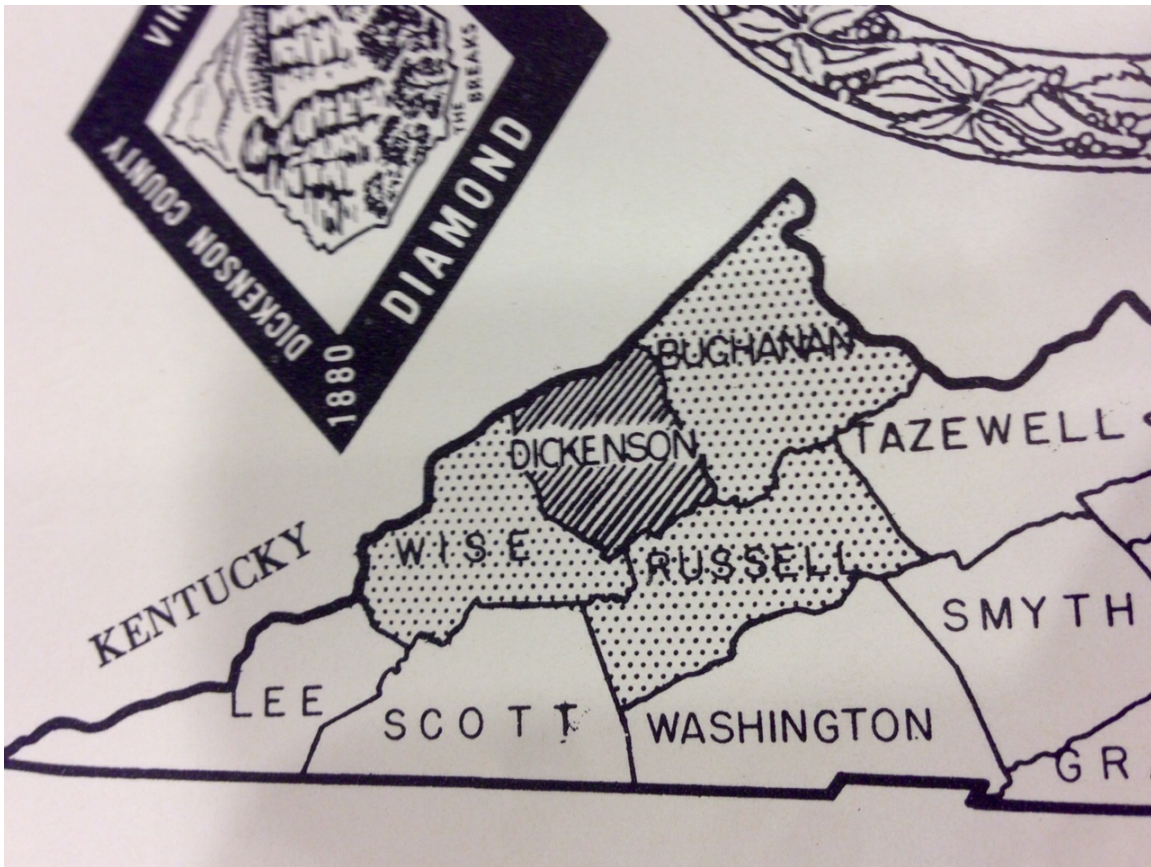


Figure 1

Map of Dickenson County. Image from *“Meet Virginia’s Baby: A Pictorial History of Dickenson County, Virginia.”*

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the segregated south, an African American man named Mr. Kenneth Keys told an eyewitness account of what life was like in a bituminous coal mining community in Steinman, Virginia in the 1940s and 1950s. In the winter of 2013 and spring of 2014, I co-created life history interviews with Mr. Kenneth Keys as part of the “African American Oral History Project” under the direction of Dr. Martha Norkunas. What initially started as a two-hour project, turned into multiple trips, and a thirteen-hour detailed life history. General themes of race, class, gender, and economy developed throughout his narrative and I began to realize that this was a larger story. His oral story contributes not only to the coal mining history, but to the overall narrative of Appalachian History.

I followed the guidelines set forth by the Oral History Association in the field of oral history. According to the Oral History Association oral history is defined as “both a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and the product of that process. It begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee (also referred to as narrator), both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a personal record to contribute to an understanding of the past.” The oral history is made accessible to the public, and to historians, researchers, libraries, and family members.¹

As part of the interview process I followed the ethical guidelines implemented by the Oral History Association and enforced by Dr. Norkunas. I sat down with Mr. Keys

¹ “Principles and Best Practices: Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History.” Oral History Association. Adopted October 2009. Accessed January 2, 2016. <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>

and his wife to explain the process and the intentions of the project. When the interviewee is more comfortable with the interviewer a relationship/friendship forms. This enhances the more personal qualities of the co-creation process. Mr. Keys asked what I was going to do with the recordings. I told him the project is affiliated with an accredited university, Middle Tennessee State University, and will become part of the Library of Congress database under the “African American Oral History Project.” I told him my intentions to use the narrative as part of a class project and that I planned to use the narrative as part of an oral history conference the following year. I reassured him that he does not give up his rights to the interviews, but rather shares them when he donates the oral history to public domain. Mr. Keys signed the release form. At the beginning of each interview I also asked for his verbal permission to record the interview.

The goal of the oral historian is to “respect the narrators as well as the integrity of the research” by asking historically significant questions, to acknowledge, the right of the narrator, not to answer questions he does not want to answer, and to let the narrator respond the way he sees fit in his own style.² This is the narrator’s story. The listener is gradually helping him remember details from his past. The co-creation aspect of oral history is critical. Above all else, the interviewer has to maintain trust and rapport with the narrator and to process the interviews with integrity.

² “Principles and Best Practices: Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History.” Adopted October 2009. <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>

Development of an Idea

The initial idea started out as a class project for Dr. Norkunas' graduate seminar, "Oral History Theory and Methodology." I needed to co-create a life history interview with someone who identified as African American, "in an effort to come to a deeper appreciation of the important events, values, and intellectual perspectives in the lives of African Americans, and to examine the importance of race and racial identity in America."³ A secondary goal was to enhance our oral history training. I thought that this would be a quick project and that would be the end of it. What started out as a two-hour project turned into something deeper, and I developed a desire to research ideas about race, labor, gender, and class further. Mr. Keys' life history as a window into these subjects became my thesis topic.

Mr. Keys invited me into his home to share his story. Over the course of the interviews Mr. Keys describes his childhood in a coalmining community in Steinman, Virginia, and his family in the 1940s and 1950s. Mr. Keys talks about life in a rural neighborhood and what it was like growing up with nine siblings. He devotes time to discussing his family life, how he was raised, and the toys he liked to play with. Mr. Keys also recounts the time he spent in the kitchen with his mother cooking, baking, and washing pots. She also taught him how to iron and sew. He discusses time to discussing playing with the white children of other coal mining families, being the first black child

³ Martha Norkunas. *Oral History Theory and Methodology* at Middle Tennessee State University, Graduate Seminar. Fall 2013.

to ride the school bus, and his chores as a child, including getting water from the well, living without an inside toilet or running water, and playing baseball and boxing.

Over time, I began to develop a relationship with Mr. Keys and an understanding of life in a coal mining town. What I found interesting was the contextual research I needed to do for a historiography class. I took Mr. Keys' narrative and situated it in the historiographical context of labor, race, class, and gender within the coal mining industry in Appalachia, and specifically in Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. What I found was an array of topics ranging from debt, destitution, inequality, violence, and death. I did not know about the uphill battle miners and their families experienced. Running water and electricity were nonexistent in many coal towns. Men worked in the mines, helped with the garden, hunted, and slaughtered pigs. Men had to fight for an eight-hour workday and fair wages. Women stayed home to tend to the children, maintain the house, cook, grow gardens, and earn extra income by taking in laundry. These men, women, and children were self-sufficient, but it was a life of struggle.

As I continued my research I felt like something was missing. I presented some of my findings at the Oral History Association Conference in Madison, Wisconsin in October 2014. I continued with the research in Advanced Projects, again under Dr. Norkunas, in Spring 2015. I had thirteen hours of audio from Mr. Keys, newspaper articles, census information, and a historiographical sense of coal mining, but something was lacking: historical information on the town where Mr. Keys had lived as a child. Finding exact information on the Steinman coal camp proved difficult. I had trouble finding pictures of the old camp. I only had a general idea of Steinman through Mr. Keys'

testimony. Larger camps within the area overshadowed the town. I needed exact detail about the coal camp, in addition to the general area in southwestern Virginia.

I decided to go to Steinman to conduct fieldwork research. I had to figure out exactly where Steinman is located. The problem however is that Steinman is not labeled on a map. I had to use Clinchco, the largest coal operation in Dickenson County, in order to find Steinman. Next I contacted the Dickenson County Visitors' Center to see if someone there would know anything about Steinman. I left my name and number, called back a few times, but received no response. I then contacted the Dickenson County Historical Society located in Clintwood, Virginia. It is a small volunteer organization and hours are based on the availability of the staff. The website suggested calling before coming by to make sure someone was on site. I spoke with Ms. Mary Hylton.⁴ I asked her if anyone knew about coal mining in the area, and more specifically about Steinman. She referred me to Mr. Dennis Reedy. I told her that I planned a trip from December 14 to 17, 2015 to do some fieldwork. I asked if I could stop by on December 15 to speak with Mr. Reedy and to see any material he may have about Steinman. She happily obliged my request.

On Tuesday December 15, 2015 I left my hotel to travel to the Dickenson County Historical Society to meet with Mr. Reedy. I arrived at 9:30 for our appointment. I spent the majority of the morning with Mr. Reedy. He told me what he knew about Steinman. He shared some critical information about the coal camp. He had written notes about his interviews with some of the community members in Steinman, pictures of the coal camp, and historical information about the development of Steinman. This was the missing

⁴ "Welcome to an Engaged Community." Dickenson County Historical Society, Virginia. Accessed December 4, 2015. <http://www.dickensonva.org/index.aspx?NID=328>

piece to my research. I needed to do one more thing while I was near Steinman. I asked Mr. Reedy if there was anything left of the coal town. He said Steinman does not exist any more nor does the coal camp. He said the only sign with the word Steinman on it is a road called Steinman Circle. That was the base of the old camp. There are no historical markers and hardly any remnants of the coal town. He said the only things at the site are eleven houses, seven of which are mobile homes.

Even though Mr. Reedy said nothing was there I still wanted to go see the area because I had travelled six hours to get there. As I was driving I noticed a monument in front of the Post Office. I drove by and it read, “coal miners” and had other text on it. I turned the car around to go back and look more closely. Upon further examination the monument read, “Coal Miners Memorial Dickenson County Virginia: Dedicated to Those Who Lost Their Lives in the Coal Industry.” In front of the monument was a memorial wreath. It had red and black artificial flowers, a black ribbon, and the words “Coal Miner” in the center. The pick and shovel—tools of the coal miner—were above the words. Over 300 names are written on the memorial (see photo).



Figure 2 Coal Miners Memorial in front of the Post Office. Photograph taken by author December 2015.

As I continued down the road I saw a sign “Steinman Circle.” I did not know if that was where I was supposed to stop. There were several houses that I could see from the street. I went down the road a little further. I realized I was headed out of town. I turned around to go back towards Steinman Circle. I crossed the bridge to go into the small country neighborhood. There were only eleven houses in the area and seven of them were mobile homes, just as Mr. Reedy said. I found what I presumed to be a road to go up the mountain, but it was a dead end. I decided to park my car and walk. I grabbed two pictures out of my bag, my coat, and then I began the walk up the mountain.

When I started the walk I was skeptical because I did not think I was in the right place. Mr. Reedy said nothing is standing from the coal mines, but I thought I would at least notice something from some of the research I had done. As I began to walk there was not a clear path to make it up the side of the mountain. I noticed a house at the base of the mountain. I walked towards it hoping I would find a clearing behind the house. As I got closer I noticed a pathway that went around the mountain. Still not sure if I had found the right area, I decided to climb further to see what I could find.

I climbed about fifty feet up and came to a partial clearing in the pathway and the brush. I pulled out my pictures to see if I could find something that looked like the coal town. I remembered Mr. Keys saying that the town was located at the river. The pictures were not clear enough to show the horseshoe bend in the river. I looked for another identifier in the picture. I decided to look at the ridgeline. There are two distinct peaks in the 1950s photograph (see page 12). Even though it appeared to be late spring or early summer in the photograph—the trees were full and the people were dressed in lighter

clothing in one of the photographs—I thought that indeed I was in the correct area because I saw the ridgeline and the river Mr. Keys’ and Mr. Reedy’s had both described.



Figure 3 Ridgeline overlooking what used to be the coal mining camp. December 2015. Photograph taken by author

I continued up the mountain looking for any clues of the coal mining town. As I looked back down the mountain I realized the path I was on. More than likely the miners used the same pathway. Next there were fine grooves in the underbrush. It looked as though they were wagon wheel tracks. Men did manual labor in the mines. Mules were hooked to wagons to haul the coal out of the mountain to the tipple. As I continued up I noticed traces of coal and fragments of slate. Based upon my findings I believe this was the coal camp of Steinman.



Figure 4 Left
Remnants of an old pole and conduit lines. December 2015. Photograph taken by author.

Figure 5 Right
Trail going up the mountain to reach the coal. Men and mules walked up the hill to at least a mile to get to work. December 2015.

Mr. Keys' Life Story in the Context of Race, Labor, Class, and Gender

As I listened to Mr. Keys he ventured back in his memory to his childhood in a rural Appalachian town named Steinman, Virginia. I am reflecting on Mr. Keys' experiences to explore several topics associated with black labor, race, class, and gender in the area of southern Appalachia in southwest Virginia. These include the economy of both men and women's labor and the social world he and his parents lived in during their years in the coal mining communities of Steinman. He described his father's work in the mines, why he thought the miners did not unionize, the commissary store, the houses he grew up in, his mother's work as a laundress, and friendships he had with the white families in the neighborhood.

Mr. Keys' describes his family's experiences in the coal mining towns of Virginia as nonunionized, with gendered work and a friendly relationship with the white workers,

managers, and company owner. One of his major topics was the economy of his family in the mining towns. He talks about the household economy and the economy of the mining community. His story includes both men and women's labor and how different they were from each other. He also talks about how his family generated income aside from his father's work in the mines. What labor did women do? How did Mr. Keys' mother's work as a laundress contribute to the family's income? What was the labor of the children? What other factors went into the household economy? How does he describe paid (male) labor in the mines? How did Mr. Keys' father's relationship with the white mine manager impact his family economy? How did Mr. Keys' father's work in the coal mines follow the pattern of company housing and being paid in scrip that kept workers from doing business outside of the town? I will situate Mr. Keys' story within the context of the literature of black and white mining families in the American southeast during the same time period comparing Mr. Keys' family's experiences to the experiences of other black and white coal miner families in the U.S. at the same time.

Next I will consider Mr. Keys' stories about the social world of his childhood. I will discuss Mr. Keys' narrative of the social world in terms of class, race, and gender. What was the social life of his parents? What was his social world as a child? How much did Mr. Keys say black and white families' social worlds intersected? How did the physical layout of the town impact his social world?

Mr. Keys' descriptions of being one of only a few black families in the town and living side-by-side with white families, sharing resources, entertainment and labor, is different from descriptions of racially segregated work and towns in the South. Why did Mr. Keys narrate his family status differently? What does this narrative contribute to our knowledge about race and class in the South in the early to mid 1900s? How does Mr. Keys' father's anti-union efforts intersect with David Barnum's work on African American workers in coal mining?



Figure 1.1
Ruth-Elkhorn Coal Mining Company c. 1950 (school house forefront bottom right.)
Photo courtesy of Mr. Dennis Reedy.

CHAPTER 1: SITUATING STEINMAN AND THE KEYS FAMILY HISTORIOGRAPHICALLY

Background Information About the Coal Camp: Steinman, Virginia

Steinman, Virginia is located twenty miles south of the Kentucky boarder in Dickenson County on the McClure River about one mile north of Clinchco. Founded in 1880 Dickenson County was the last county in Virginia. It is referred to as “the baby county” or “Virginia’s Baby”.¹ The county was named for William J. Dickenson, a state legislature from Russell County who was the patron of the bill to establish Dickenson as Virginia’s 100th and final county. The county’s economy has always depended upon natural resources—game and fur, timber, and coal. The Steinman Development Company from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was the first organization of its kind to buy coal deposits in Dickenson County in 1874. Coal mining began on a large scale in 1916 with the Clinchfield Coal Corporation.²

According to the Virginia Geological Survey, practically the entire county is “underlaid by productive coal beds in which is found the mineral wealth of the county. Dickenson lies in the central part of the great Appalachian coal fields and contains beds of fourteen inches or more in thickness, about 6.9 billion tons of high grade bituminous coal.” Moreover, Dickenson County is very rugged and considered a mountainous terrain

¹ “Virginia Coal Heritage Trail-Dickenson Co. Fam Tour.” Virginia Coal Heritage Trail-Dickenson Co. Fam Tour. Accessed December 1, 2015.

<http://www.trailsrus.com/vacoaltrail/dickenson-famtour.html> see also Eilhu Jasper Sutherland. *Meet Virginia’s Baby: A Pictorial History of Dickenson County Virginia From Its Formation in 1880 to 1955 with Stress on Pioneer Background*. (Clintwood, Virginia: Diamond Jubilee Publishing, 1975.)131

² Victoria L. Osborne. *Images of America: Dickenson County*. (Arcadia Publishing Charleston, SC 2007.) 8

with multiple flowing rivers and streams. This made mining the coal more difficult as a whole.³

The Steinman's bought a thousand-acre tract from Phillip Fleming on Cranesnest River and continued to buy other tracts of coal and mineral lands in the county until 1948. The company began to mine coal at Steinman in 1918 and built and built a small number of houses for employees.⁴ With the completion of the Carolina, Clinchfield, and Ohio Railway, several coal mining camps developed almost overnight including Steinman.⁵

A number of sources date to the creation of Steinman to 1918. Steinman was first listed in 1920 in the "20,000 Coal Company Store" from the book *Keystone Coal Field Directory*. One of the best-written sources about Steinman is from Mr. Dennis Reedy who wrote *Mountain People and Places: Dickenson County, Virginia and Surrounding Area*. He was born and raised in Dickenson County. He is a volunteer at the Dickenson County Historical Society in Clinchwood, Virginia and collected the material for this book in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Reedy dates the Steinman Coal Corporation as being active around 1918 to 1919 because the company store began operations in 1920. A school report also dates the mines opening in August 1918.⁶ Mrs. W.G. "Bill" Mitchell said, "Steinman was started in 1918 and originally contained forty-two houses, two

³ Harold B. Damron and Mrs. W.H. Smith. "Dickenson County Geography Supplement: Know Your Own County" in *UVA Summer Quarter*. (Dickenson County School Board: UVA 1928.) 5-6.

⁴ Sutherland, *Meet Virginia's Baby*, 131

⁵ "Virginia Coal Heritage Trail."

⁶ Dennis Reedy. *Mountain People and Places: Dickenson County, Virginia and Surrounding Area*. "A Brief History of Steinman" (Clinchco, VA: Mountain People and Places June 30, 1981). 44-47.

boarding houses (one for colored workers) and a school, which was also used for a church.”⁷

The initial address given was Tarpon, Virginia because Steinman did not get a post office until September 22, 1922. In 1923 the operation became known as the Steinman Coal Corporation, Steinman, Virginia and remained under the Steinman name until 1937. D. C. Anderson was the superintendent.⁸

One of the sources in Reedy’s book was a man named Don Kennedy who offered some recollections of the Steinman family. Kennedy, who lived and worked at Steinman, remembers hearing the older folks in the community talk about the Steinman brothers coming from Pennsylvania to visit the mines. The miners got new coveralls from the company store to wear for their visit.⁹

Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s the operations of the mine changed. The average number of men employed at Steinman from 1920 to 1937 ranged from fifty to just over a hundred men. In 1938 Steinman Coal Corporation changed operations to Ruth Elkhorn Coal Company. T. M. Gibson came from Kentucky to be the coal mine operator for the coal camp. According to Mrs. Mitchell, Gibson brought his own work force with him including “several more colored families.”¹⁰

Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell stayed on at the camp after T.M. Gibson came in and took control. Gibson came from Harlan County, Kentucky. According to her the camp was not kept as nice and grew more crowded. According to her, Gibson, “allowed people to

⁷ Interview with Mrs. Mitchell by Dennis Reedy. Copy at the Historical Society in Clinchwood, Virginia, Dickenson County.

⁸ Reedy, *Mountain People and Places*, 45.

⁹ Reedy, *Mountain People and Places*, 46.

¹⁰ Reedy, *Mountain People and Places*, 46-47.

throw trash out their windows. The Houses were also in a bad state of [dis]repair.” She remembers one house was “especially leaky—washtubs sitting everywhere to catch the water.” Gibson then converted five company garages into dwellings for the black workers. Mitchell said, “windows were cut in the back of the garages and this was where the trash was thrown out.” Mrs. Mitchell did say that most of the men who worked at Steinman were American. She did not recall any immigrants.¹¹

The most well known feature of the coal camp was the bucket line. The buckets carried the coal from atop the mountain down across the river to the tippie. Wooden towers supported the cable lines and buckets. This was the only bucket line operation in Dickenson County. A resident at Steinman said the buckets ran on four cables. They ran down on the top two cables and back on the bottom when the buckets were empty. She said, “You had to watch your head when you were out.”¹² Mining continued in Steinman until the tippie burned in 1952.¹³

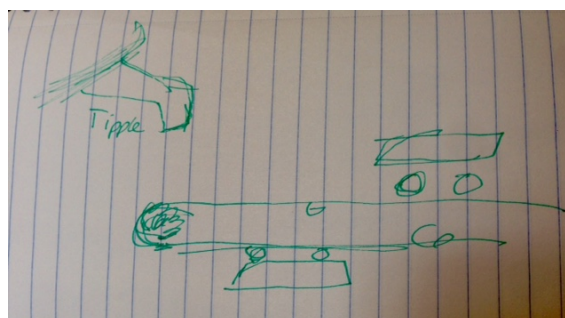
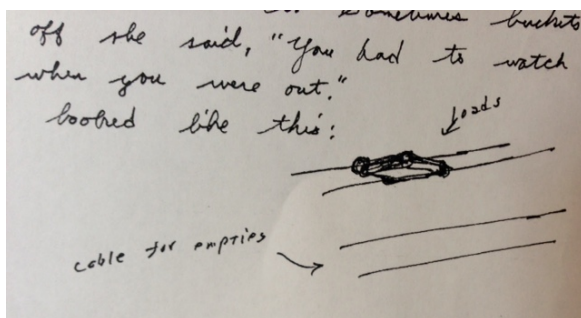


Figure 1.2 Vernon Cochran drawing of the coal cable lines (Left provided by Mr. Reedy) and Figure 1.3 Kenneth Keys drawing of the coal cable lines (Right).

¹¹ Interview with Mrs. Mitchell by Dennis Reedy. Copy at the Historical Society in Clinchwood, Virginia, Dickenson County.

¹² Reedy, *Mountain People and Places*, 46.

¹³ Sutherland, *Meet Virginia's Baby*, 49.

Dickenson County prospered until the mid-1950s. In 1952 Dickenson County “ranked third, 5,145,620 in coal tonnage amounts behind Buchanan and Wise County.”¹⁴ The average number of men employed until its closing in 1955 was 120 men.¹⁵ There was a company store, school, boarding houses, tipple fed by bucket line from the mine, and several homes. There is no sign of the old camp.¹⁶



Figure 1.4
Present site of where the coal camp used to be. Photograph by author December 2015.

¹⁴ “Mines Show Drop in Fatalities: Deaths Go Down Despite Largest Production Year in 1952,” *The Progress-Index*, Petersburg, VA, June 10, 1953, 7.

¹⁵ Reedy, *Mountain People and Places*, 47.

¹⁶ “Virginia Coal Heritage Trail.” www.trailsrus.com/vacoaltrail/dickenson-famtour.html

Background Information About the Keys Family

Mr. Kenneth Keys grew up in the coal mining town of Steinman, Virginia. He was the oldest of nine siblings. His father, Clarence, worked in the coal mines under the company boss and owner, Tim Gibson, to support his family. According to Keys his dad moved from Mississippi to "...Hazard, Kentucky. I guess he was working for Tim Gibson because Tim Gibson brought them from Kentucky to Steinman. He brought, oh I want to say at least eight families of black people, he brought from Hazard. I don't know how my momma and my daddy met because I don't know. I guess she was a young woman and he was a young man. I guess he was working in the mines and he met her.¹⁷ They come on to Steinman with Tim Gibson. Yeah. That was the man that owned the mine."

Life for Mr. Key's father, Clarence Elbert Key, was difficult from a young age. Clarence lost his father, Mose Key, when he was a child. According to the 1900 census Clarence's mother was widowed around the age of 28. Being the oldest of four siblings, Clarence had to help his mother, Lula Sturdivant Key, even though he was only a child.¹⁸ He Worked at Kansas City Shook & [unclear].¹⁹ Clarence moved to Kentucky where he met Gibson. From Kentucky Gibson moved the Keys and his wife Essie Dee to Steinman to continue work in the coal mines. According to his World War II draft card he was married to Essie D. Key and worked at Ruth-Elkhorn Coal Company.²⁰

¹⁷ Note: According to the 1940 census, Clarence and Essie lived in Perry, Kentucky (as of 1935). He was forty-seven and she was twenty-three. AncestryHeritageQuest.com Name appears as Clerance Key.

¹⁸ Ancestry.com-1910 United States Federal Census. Accessed October 11, 2015.

¹⁹ Ancestry.com-U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918.

²⁰ Ancestry.com-U.S. World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942.

Mr. Keys recounts what it was like growing up in the coal mining town. They were the only black family in a white neighborhood. He remembered there were other African Americans that moved to Steinman as he was growing up, but they lived in what he called “The Bottom”—“the bottom of the neighborhood away from the white community...all black. Yeah. It wasn’t about four or five [or] six families down there I think. Yeah, but they all was black.”

Mr. Keys’ family lived in a two-story shotgun house, which he said was the largest in the all white neighborhood. He said, “our neighborhood is about fifty houses or more on one side of the street, but we lived down next to the river. The river’s in the back of the houses. It was about forty houses on one side of the street. Well, it wasn’t a street. It was a road. Forty [houses] on the other side. Everybody lived just like it was a little neighborhood. It was all in one area...”

During Mr. Keys’ childhood he played with the white children and helped the white people in the neighborhood. He and his friends went swimming and played baseball. He said, “Every weekend was baseball. That’s all everybody wanted to do. Play baseball.” All the children helped others in the neighborhood hoe potatoes, help in their gardens, and carry water—there was no running water. They had to go to the pump near Gibson’s house to get water to take a bath or for cooking. Mr. Keys remembered carrying water for Ms. Whitely. “I’d carry her water all week for her. I did it all the time. I took care of her. I didn’t go knock on no door. I’d just go on over to her house, go in, and holler. At the end of the week she’d give [me] a dollar.” Mr. Keys slept over at white friends’ houses. He remembered that he “never knew racism. I’ll just have to say it like that. I never knew it.” I asked Mr. Keys what he and his friends did at the sleepovers. He

said they at supper and watched Television. He and the family sat around the table. They had to wait to eat until everyone had a plate and said the blessing. They watched cowboy shows. Red Rider was their favorite cowboy and “everybody wanted a Red Rider rifle.”

Some of the chores he did as a child dealt with the good of the house. There was not any electricity or running water in the house in Steinman. In order to have hot water and keep the house warm their primary source of fuel was coal. His parents bought a ton of coal. The mine delivered the coal to the house and unloaded the coal on the front lawn. He had to carry the water for dinking and to do the dishes. Before he went to school Mr. Keys had to wake up at five o'clock every morning. He had to get the eggs the chickens laid, feed the hogs, fill up all the coal buckets, and fill up the water tank on the side of the stove so “mom would have water to do dishes and cook all day.” Then he walked a mile to school.

The mine in Steinman flooded and Gibson moved all the families, black and white, who wanted to go to Tacoma, Virginia to continue work. Gibson transported everyone by bus and loaded their belongings into trucks. The home in Tacoma was better than what they had in Steinman. In Tacoma they had electricity and indoor plumbing. According to Keys as far as he can remember, “the mines flooded out [in Steinman]. They thought they could get water pumped out, but they never could pump it out. So they just shut the mines down. They moved everybody to Tacoma to another mine, right around a place called Norton, Virginia, in Wise County.”

Newspaper articles describe the flooding:

“There was still no contact today with Steinman, a community of thirty or forty homes. Inhabitants had reported Tuesday morning they were evacuating the town.” Surrounding area were flooded and evacuated.²¹

“Probably the hardest hit in this area was Pound, but it was one among many. Homes in Dickenson County were swept away by the dozens. Some were moved intact; some were splintered into bits.” Compared to a war zone.²²

“Rescue workers have been able to reach Steinman, Va. There have been no deaths although flood damage is high. The only transportation into the village now is by rail.”²³

Work in the Coal Mines

Keys describes Steinman as a typical mine

“The one in Tacoma was a shaft mine. The difference was in Steinman there wasn’t no slope. In Tacoma, there was a slope mine. The mines went straight down instead of just being level. The mines in Tacoma it was a slope mines they called [it] cause you had to go down like going down a hill to get into where they worked at. But the mines in Steinman were just a straight mine. You could just like walk in your door. As far as I know they said the slope mines was a dangerous mines, but everybody went and worked in the mines. They keep these big fans and things to blow the gas and fumes and stuff out of it. But I remember it was a dangerous mines there, cause it was so deep in the ground. It was so much pressure I guess, going straight down in that big ole hole. My daddy worked in there. Another difference in the mines, in Steinman they used what they called motorcars. Like railroad tracks. You would drive the motorcars into the mines, load the cars [with coal] and pull them back out. The mines in Tacoma, the slope mine, was a belt, a conveyer belt. It just went down

²¹ Doyle Howard, “Thousands Homeless In Flood: Scott Co. In Danger” *Kingsport Times*, June 30 1957, 1.

²² Ralph Rasnick, “Flood Waters Smash Va. Towns” *Kingsport Times*, June 30 1957, 1

²³ “City of Grundy is in Danger; Pleads for Aid”. *Kingsport Times* Jan. 31, 1957, 1.

in the ground and didn't have to have no motorcars or nothing to bring the coal out. They just throw it on the belts and bring it on outside to the tipples. Didn't have motor cars like they did in the ole mines."... "Then that tipple—they had these things on a conveyer-like belt. The tipple was about at least, I want to say a mile or two miles from the mines. These cars on this conveyer—like a big 'ole rope. But it was steel cables. The cars would come up, go get the coal, and go back down. Just keep in a circle all day long like that. Hauling the coal out, dumping it, fill up the cars, take them back. They come in fill them up and they be on top full of coal, take them down to the tipple. The same car come right on back, just eight or nine or ten of them on this conveyer line."

In coal mining there are four general steps: undercutting, boring, blasting, and loading.²⁴ In 1920 according to the Directory of the Mines the miners at Steinman Development Company had to cut the coal by hand and load the coal manually onto wagons walked out by mules. On average the fifty-man workforce's daily output of coal was a hundred tons.²⁵ In the late 1930s to 1950s Mr. Keys' father worked in the mines at night as a "powder popper"—blasting the coal. He and ten to fifteen white and black miners were in charge of "shooting the coal." Instead of cutting the coal by hand, mechanization sped up the process. A machine called a cutter, which had long blade like a chainsaw, cut the bottom out of the block of coal, drilled holes for the dynamite, and shot the coal down at night. The day shift would come in the next morning and load the coal by hand into the carts. The carts were hoisted onto the tipple line to take the coal to the tipple for the coal to be sorted from the slate.

²⁴ Mary LaLone. *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories: Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia's New River Valley*. (Blacksburg, VA: Pocahontas Press, 1997.) 17.

²⁵ Directory of Mines 1920, provided by Dennis Reedy at the Historical Society.

As a young boy Mr. Keys accompanied his father one night to the mines. He remembered going in and it was nothing, but darkness. The miners wore helmets with lights. He told his father he did not ever want to go back into the mines. “It’s so black in there. You can’t even see your hand this close to your face. It was black! Black in there...you had big ole lights on your helmet you could see stuff with. Scary. It’s just how something just closing in on you. I ain’t never going in the mines.” Mr. Keys worked on the tipple after he decided to quit high school. The tipple was located outside the mines. “A tipple is [a] thing where after the coal that comes out of the mines it goes in all these big hoppers” and dumped the coal in trucks. His job was to pick the slate out as the coal went on the conveyer belt. According to Warren Lilly in *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories: Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia’s New River Valley* edited by Mary LaLone, he describes a similar story to that of Mr. Keys: “It was damp...and you would not imagine the darkness. There was no light in a black hole and there was no light at all. You could hold your hands right against your eyes and you can’t see’em. You could feel, but you can’t see’em.”²⁶

Mr. Keys narrated his relationships with white families in the community and how “everybody just got along.” He discussed what his dad did in the coal mines and what it was like going into the commissary store—where food, clothing, and equipment were sold—and buying merchandise with scrip—coins that were given to coal miners as a form of payment for work.

²⁶ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 15

Steinman's Response to Union Organization

When thoughts of unionization took shape in late 1940s-1950s, Mr. Keys remembered his father and Gibson subduing the miners'. Mr. Keys' described the relationship between Gibson and the miners as ownership. According to Stacy Wood who was a resident of Steinman in the early to mid-thirties, the union only lasted a year at the coal mine under the Steinman Coal Corporation. He said that the coal company refused to sign the union contract. Wood said that he and some of the men stayed out of the mines, but some went back to work when T.M. Gibson took control around 1940. Steinman was never reorganized. Wood left Steinman and began work in Clinchco in 1941.²⁷

Mr. Keys' father became Gibson's right hand man. When surrounding coal mines started to unionize Gibson called upon Clarence and a few other miners to help quell the thoughts of unionization. Mr. Keys remembered Gibson riding through the neighborhood on his big white horse. He said, "Y'all ain't going to be union." According to the *Kingsport Times* and *The Bee* Steinman continued to work even though neighboring coal camps were on strike:

"Coal pits in the 90-mile area served by the Virginia Coal Operators Association were reported almost 100 percent closed following a close checkup which disclosed that only one mine in the area was in operation before noon Thursday. Ruth-Elkhorn Coals, Inc., at Steinman, Va., in Dickenson County, was the only mine reported in operation. The non-union mine employs approximately 175 men and has been operation all of this week. The remainder of the 8,000 miners in the Virginia Coal Operators Association whose territory is UMW's

²⁷ Dennis Reedy interview with Stacy Wood by Dennis Reedy in September 1986. Copy at the Historical Society in Clinchwood, Virginia, Dickenson County.

District 28, comprising Lee, Wise, Dickenson, Russel and part of Buchanan and Tazewell Counties, had not reported for work today. Fourteen mines in the area were operating Wednesday, E.H. Robinson, assistant secretary of the coal operators association, reported. The possibility that there were operations in a few scattered, unorganized 'wagon' mines, approximately 200 in the area employing one to 12 miners and producing one to 10 truckloads of coal daily, was vague. These mines, out of government control, are not unionized but do not generally operate during strike in order to avoid trouble. Their production, however, is so small in comparison to the normal organized production that their operations are negligible. No interference or trouble, indication union activity in the mining areas, has been reported. George H. Esser, president of the VCOA at Norton, said the non-union, Steinman Va., mine was operating without any friction exhibited. Police, however, have been alerted throughout the area for possible trouble in accordance with Governor Tuck's new pledge to protect all miners who desire to continue work.²⁸

"A spokesman for the Clinchfield Railroad said eleven wagon and truck mines and a non-union tippie mine on the Clinchfield were at work, however. The tippie mine was the Ruth Elkhorn Coals, Inc. mine at Steinman in Dickenson County, described as a small operation with a capacity of about twelve carloads a day."²⁹

Mr. Keys said his father was about 6'3" and 250 pounds.³⁰ He described their relationship as Gibson taking care of "his black man." Mr. Keys said Gibson "could control the people" that worked for him. That was why he did not want to unionize. "If

²⁸ Virginia Davis, State of Affairs News Editor, "Virginia Coal Pits Closed in Walk-Out". *Kingsport News* Kingsport, TN November 22, 1946, 13.

²⁹ Associated Press, "Full-Scale Coal Strike Hits Virginia: Number of Idle Placed at 14,000," *The Bee* Danville, VA, February 6, 1950, 10.

³⁰ He was 6'1" and weighed 184 pounds according to his World War II draft card.

you work for him he owned you. That's the only way to put it." I asked Mr. Keys if his daddy ever got paid more. He responded that whatever he asked for from Gibson he would get it. Clarence worked in the mines for over forty years to support his family. He earned twenty-five dollars a day. Mr. Keys said, "I don't see how he fed ten kids. I tell you I can never remember us wanting for shoes or clothes. We had food, clothes, just the basic things I guess."

Barnum writes about the significance of the United Mine Workers (UMWA) and their interracial outlook. Since its founding in 1890 the UMWA was a significant force in the coal mining industry.³¹ Many companies tried to use the black miners to fight the union. The operators used black miners as strikebreakers. Operators also hired a "judicious mixture" of miners, African Americans, immigrants, natives, and other whites, to promote disunity and angst against the UMWA.³² However, the UMWA recruited black miners because they tried to achieve "equality in fact as well as in policy."³³

Historiography

In order to put Mr. Keys' narrative into historiographical context, I will draw similarities and differences in historiography on the bituminous coal and anthracite mines in Southern Appalachia. For example the first work on coal mining history focused on coal production and the processes of mining. However, as new views of historiography of the bituminous coal mines progressed scholars have focused on more human aspects of the mines: class, race, gender, labor and the relationships within the coal mining

³¹ Darold T. Barnum. *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*. (Pittsburg: University of Pennsylvania, 1970.) 1

³² Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 19.

³³ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 22.

community among African Americans and whites. The authors still concentrate on the production and processes of mining, but tend to focus more on the people who run and work in the coalfields. The resurgence of coal mining historiography occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the national energy crisis along with various miner protests: the wildcat strikes, the Black Lung Rebellion, and the Miners for Democracy movement.

Starting in the 1880s African Americans began the migration from the rural farming areas of the Deep South to industrialized mining camps in Southern Appalachia. African Americans were drawn to Southern Appalachia because they found ready employment at better pay than on southern farms according to Ronald Lewis in, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*. The goal of African Americans was to assimilate into a new culture with “a chance to educate their children; to live in decent homes, under decent condition, to exercise the right of the ballot and in short they are looking for true American citizenship.” West Virginia was the largest producer of bituminous coal in the nation in the early twentieth century. By 1920 sixty-nine percent (60,000+) of blacks from the Deep South migrated to West Virginia. The relations between capital and labor in the South were rooted and developed in a slave society. Slavery provided the framework within which labor relations evolved in the southern coalfields.³⁴

David Barnum’s book, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mining Industry*, asserts that not only were blacks migrating to Southern Appalachia for economic reasons, but also the desire for occupational improvement, which is key to understanding their migration. African Americans provided a ready supply of labor for the demand of

³⁴ Ronald Lewis. *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.) 126.

workers in the coal mines and as strikebreakers. Most African Americans within the mines were tasked with unskilled labor jobs. According to Barnum, the majority of young African American males did not want to enter the mines because of occupational discrimination. Many white operators thought the black man was ignorant, irresponsible, and too lazy to perform skilled labored jobs. Despite the opinion of the white man, blacks were paid equally for doing the same jobs as whites and a sense of community arose among the miners because of the constant danger, hardships, and class status of all miners.³⁵

Mechanization is something Barnum focuses more heavily on than the other authors. Mechanization took a strong foothold during the 1960s within coal mining towns. In no other industry has mechanization developed at such a rapid pace as in coal. According to Barnum the “nature of accessibility of the coal reserves, the availability of the market, and the existence of transport facilities are factors, which influence the size of the mines and the pressures for mechanization.”³⁶ This in turn effects the employment of the black miners. Many black miners lost their jobs to mechanization because the white managers would not train black men to operate the machines because they were seen as unintelligent.³⁷

Barnum also underscores the significance of the United Mine Workers and their interracial outlook. Since it’s founding in 1890 the UMWA has been a significant force in the coal mining industry.³⁸ Many companies tried to use the black miners to fight the union. The operators used black miners as strikebreakers. Operators also hired a

³⁵ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 37-8.

³⁶ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 11.

³⁷ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 10.

³⁸ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 1.

“judicious mixture” of miners, African Americans, immigrants, natives, and other whites, to promote disunity and angst against the UMWA.³⁹ However, the UMWA recruited black miners because they tried to achieve “equality in fact as well as in policy.”⁴⁰ According to Barnum if African Americans lost their jobs in the mines, but regained their position when the union collapsed black miners thought the benefits of the union were greater than its faults.⁴¹

In David Corbin’s book, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*, argues that African Americans generally moved for economic purposes and to escape racism. Corbin in contrast to Barnum argues that family also played a role in African American movement.⁴² Many male miners migrated alone and would send for their family to follow after they secured a job. Once family members heard about others’ successes they soon migrated as well, hoping that they could easily get a job if said family member was a hard worker.

Coal operators, who only answered to the coal mine owner, had complete power over the miners. This led to the development of a social and political hierarchy based on color ethnicity or a “caste system” within the working-class population of the town. Standardized living also exacerbated the discontent within the coal towns because this and working conditions prohibited socioeconomic competition and mobility. This created distinct class lines based on occupation as opposed to race.⁴³

³⁹ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 19.

⁴⁰ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 22.

⁴¹ Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mine Industry*, 23.

⁴² Robert Corbin. *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880-1922*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.) 65.

⁴³ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 27

Mr. Keys describes the coal mining town as equal, perhaps seeing it through the eyes of the small privilege his family enjoyed due to his father's antiunion activities. Black and whites did not have running water or electricity in Steinman, Virginia. Children went and got the water from the pump located on Gibson's land. Their primary source of heat/fuel was the coal the men mined.

Instead of the coal mining operators driving a wedge between blacks and whites Corbin argues that they actually enabled the miners to develop a sense of group subjugation necessary for class feeling and conduct.⁴⁴ Corbin breaks the cycle of labor history by focusing on the worker first because "the failure to study why workers do not organize leaves a void in American labor historiography."⁴⁵ Then Corbin says one can study how culture influences miners' motives based on the relationships within the mines and with management. Only then can historians understand the progression of violence of labor strikes. Most of the black and immigrant miners initially had no experience in mining nor did they come from a union background. What led African Americans to become union members? According to Corbin because of the interracial atmosphere within the mines this "created a cohesive union spirit, [which] promised to abolish the system that held all miners, regardless of race nationality, or religion, in industrial slavery."⁴⁶

Unlike Barnum, Corbin explains the impact coal towns had on the mountaineer culture and how it literally disappeared within a matter of twenty to thirty years. The growth of the coal industry gave way to a new urbanity in southern West Virginia. The

⁴⁴ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 61

⁴⁵ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 26.

⁴⁶ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 66.

coal operators maintained dominance in the state government until the passage of the NIRA under the New Deal. Coal mining towns also broke down the traditional mountain culture with the influx of immigrants, non-natives, and African Americans into the area. In 1880 there was not a single black miner in West Virginia. By 1900 there were nearly 5,000 and by 1910 that number more than doubled to 12,000.⁴⁷ The migration into southern West Virginia was the only state below the Mason-Dixon line to have an increase in black population.⁴⁸

The largest change in culture came from the coal mining operators when they regulated black churches and the institution of a segregated school system. Black miners relied on their sacred tradition of church as a forum of spiritualism and community. The coal company built the church, made its rules and traditions, handled finances, and picked the leaders. Coal companies dismantled their sacred institution and forced out one of their primary forms of identity and culture as an African American. Preachers used to be the source of admiration and prestige, but when they became puppets of the coal mining town black miners tended to look within the mines. Men that were on the job down in the mines tended to look in reverence to the miner who “displayed an ability to meet emergencies, and efficiency in performance.”⁴⁹ Preachers were held in contempt even further when they were forced to go out and recruit more black miners for the company. School on the other hand created the “Golden Age of the Negro.”⁵⁰ Black teachers within the coal fields were qualified to teach students. Black miners sent their children to school. The schools provided the children with some “pride and dignity” as they learned about

⁴⁷ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 62.

⁴⁹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 76.

⁵⁰ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 70.

black heritage and but they also stressed cooperation with whites. The same teachers who taught the children taught the black miners for free at night.⁵¹

Mr. Keys does not narrate what he learned in school. Rather he recounts when he started school and his experiences. When Mr. Keys was in elementary school he went to the all white school in Steinman. As he got older he went to the all black school in Clinchco. Mr. Keys remembered he was the only black boy to ride the school bus to Clinchco. The bus driver dropped him off at his school, which was an all black school. Then took the white kids to their school. He also remembers two white ladies coming in and teaching the children the Bible. Mr. Keys said as the years went on and he got to high school, “That’s the first time that I ever knew about racism.”

In *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980*, Ronald L. Lewis agrees with the previous authors that better wages and essentially a better life looking for “true American citizenship” were why African American migrated to Southern West Virginia.⁵² They wanted to escape the racist south and have a chance at a better life. However, Lewis claims many black and white miners were mainly recruited, but some did migrate on their own.⁵³ All the authors mention familial ties and keeping in contact with family members. Once word spread that money was to be had in the coal mines and a better life many African Americans moved their families and left the rural south.

Lewis is more concerned with the orthodox Marxist theory of class conflict, which is the best explanation of race, class, and community conflicts. Lewis claims that

⁵¹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 73.

⁵² Ronald Lewis. *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980*. (Lexington, KY.: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.) 126.

⁵³ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 125.

economic and class conditions shapes the mindset of the miners. He asserts that these lines of intersection reveal the social relations between black and white miners and the coal operators.⁵⁴ According to Lewis, the primary conflict was initially between racial lines because blacks were seen as cheap labor amongst the white miners. Coal companies recruited black miners because of the labor demand within the mines. Company operators employed African Americans because the opinion of the period held that blacks were “docile, antiunion workers whose vulnerability in the labor markets made them grateful to whoever employed them.”⁵⁵ Discrimination against African Americans was important for success among southern coal mining operations.⁵⁶ Many white miners had angst against the black miners because many came into the company as strikebreakers and took the white miners’ jobs. However, once the new miners became established within the mines and worked side-by-side with whites for equal pay unity developed from diversity.⁵⁷ Mr. Keys saw his father and fellow miners, white and black, as hard workers. He believed Gibson treated the miners decently, but commented that “he controlled them” because they were not union.

In terms of class, blacks questioned how they could best improve their economic position. Should African Americans compete or cooperate with the white-dominated coal industry? Patterns in the North depicted a complete exclusion of blacks in the mines, whereas in the South coal operators depended on black labor. Like Barnum, Lewis agrees that coal operators instituted a “judicious mixture.” Operators maintained control over their workers and provided equal opportunity regardless of race or nationality. However,

⁵⁴ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, x.

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 136.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, xi.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, xiv.

Lewis takes it a step further and says the price of equality was freedom. Coal operators encouraged a class-consciousness, which “overcame racial and cultural difference to bring an end to the operators’ complete control” over life and work in the coal fields.⁵⁸

Certain living conditions within the mining town were similar for blacks and whites. According to the United States Coal Commission reports in 1925 “some of the worst living conditions were found in central Appalachia.” Houses were often backed on railroad tracks, fronted on a creek, and/or stilted against the mountainside. Many did not have electricity, indoor plumbing, or an adequate insulated home. The relationship between the company owner and miners was not landlord-tenant, but rather master-servant. Lines of segregation were drawn, but were not strictly enforced in terms of housing.⁵⁹ However, in terms of social life West Virginia was “segregated by custom and management design.” The key to understanding race relations in southern West Virginia was the “freedom of expression enjoyed by blacks.”⁶⁰

Mr. Keys family’s house backed up along a river. He narrates the river as more of a communal time on the weekends. The children could go play in the water, while the men fished, and the women cooked the fish. The community would come together on Saturdays to have fish-fries and drink by the riverbank. Mr. Keys also describes his house as having no indoor plumbing or electricity. It was not until the family moved to Tacoma, Virginia when they had better housing.

The UMWA acknowledged racial discrimination was a major obstacle within the mines, which had to be conquered if the union were to work. The UMWA used a racially

⁵⁸ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 121.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 136.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 152.

mixed leadership, but whites maintained majority control within the union.⁶¹ According to one white union member in Lewis's book, "Blacks were the best members in the union for they stick together closer, keep their views to themselves, and don't let the 'cat out of the bag' in times like these, and are the most eloquent speakers in this country."⁶² Even though the UMWA recognized the benefit of black unionist they also racially inhibited growth of the union based upon race. The union presented themselves, as equal opportunist in theory, but in practice the UMWA was a disappointment. As machine operators replaced black miners the union cooperated to "save the industry." In the process the union nearly eliminated the black worker. Barnum argues blacks were not trained with the rise of mechanization. However, according to Lewis in West Virginia there was a formal effort to train blacks in technical mining to prepare them for the impending technological advancements in coal mining.⁶³

Joe William Trotter centers his book, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932*, on the social development and transformation of African Americans through the use of proletarianization. "The process by which southern rural and semirural blacks became new industrial workers and crystallized into a new class."⁶⁴ As the aforementioned authors, Trotter explains African Americans left the poverty stricken rural south for jobs in coal mining. Many African Americans migrated to West Virginia because they had a guaranteed job and had kin in the area, which created a communal and cultural bond. According to Trotter this was the beginning to the

⁶¹ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 44.

⁶² Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 138.

⁶³ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, x.

⁶⁴ Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.) 1.

expansion of the black proletariat. In contrast to the other authors Trotter explains that advertising campaigns and middle-class black leaders supported by coal companies travelled to recruit help. As the black coal mining proletariat expanded it established the “socioeconomic and demographic foundation for the emergence and growth of the black middle-class, the rise of black communities in coal mining towns, and most important the emergence of a vial political and civil rights struggle.”⁶⁵

In the coal towns there was inequality in community life and segregation, which led to an emphasis on class distinctions. Trotter is the only author to stress the study of churches, fraternities, and politics in order to understand the development of class and culture. Churches helped to “sustain and reinforce the black workers’ spiritual and communal beliefs” through sermons, revivals, baptisms, and funerals.⁶⁶ Black miners paid for the church and performed regular maintenance if needed with financial backing from the black elite. Fraternities allowed miners to protect their material possessions, ensure their faith, and offer a form of insurance in case of injury or death.⁶⁷

Mr. Keys does address this topic. He does mention that he did not know of anyone who died in the mines while working. Trotter agrees with Corbin in saying African American ranked education as their top priority. However, Mr. Keys dropped out of high school before he graduated to go work on the tipple at the mine.

Trotter agrees with Corbin in saying African American ranked education as their top priority, however, Trotter and Corbin disagree on two critical aspects.⁶⁸ Corbin said that “politics did not provide opportunities for mobility or prestige nor did it produce any

⁶⁵ Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 77.

⁶⁶ Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 41.

⁶⁷ Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 42.

⁶⁸ Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 49.

black leaders in the company town.”⁶⁹ Trotter states in terms of politics it was the black coal miners vote that enabled the middle-class black politicians entry into office. The black elite arose in response to the increasing segregation and discrimination blacks faced in coal mining towns. Black miners perceived their growing political alliance with black elites to be of “great value” and ensure their efforts to “move up in the coal industry.”⁷⁰ The alliance of the miners and the black politicians intersected primarily in relation to education. Prestige came in the form of educating miners’ children and the mobility to send their children to post-secondary schools. Blacks used their alliance with the black elites to fight back racial inequality. Black miners’ alliance with the black elites gave them a foothold and a voice in the coal towns even though miners did not have a black leader within the actual coal mining camp. Moreover, Corbin says there is “little known about the role of social club and fraternities in the lives of black miners in the company towns.”⁷¹ Trotter devotes three chapters to churches, fraternities, and politics to show the cultural influences of these clubs.

Steinman, Virginia, was a small coal mining town situated in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains. As the last county designated in Virginia it became known as “Virginia’s Baby.” The county depended upon natural resources such as fur, timber, and coal. The Steinman Coal Corporation began coal mining operations in 1918. In 1937 the named changed to the Ruth Elkhorn Coal Company managed by T.M. Gibson. Clarence, Mr. Kenneth Keys’ father, worked in the coal mines for Gibson. Keys describes the coal mining town, his childhood friends, and his house he grew up in. Mr. Keys describes

⁶⁹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 74.

⁷⁰ Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 118.

⁷¹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 74.

Steinman as a typical mine. The historiography situates Keys' story into a historical context in order to bring the story full circle.



Image 2.1
Ruth-Elkhorn Coal Mining Company, circa 1950. Photograph courtesy of Mr. Dennis Reedy.

CHAPTER 2 ECONOMICS IN COAL MINING COUNTRY IN APPALACHIA

The Company Towns

Company towns dominated the entire region of Appalachia—Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia.¹ Laws in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia dictated social and political segregation. These legal dictates coincided with the companies own housing policies in establishing a segregated coal town.² For black miners the racial lines were firm. Down below ground in the mines everyone worked together. Outside of the mines and in daily life everything was segregated. However, the difference in the aforementioned states was that southern West Virginia was separate, but more equal.³ Moreover the boundaries between black and white were not observed in the same ways in different geographic areas.

When men, black and white, moved to company towns the coal operators made them sign a housing contract. The state court ruled that the contract dictated this relationship between the coal operator and the miner as “master and servant” as opposed to landlord and tenant. This ensured that the coal miners did not own the house that they rented from the coal company.⁴ Because company towns were unincorporated, “there

¹ Note: the cultural region of Appalachia extends from the Southern Tier of New York to Northern Mississippi and Alabama. For my research purposes I have focused on the heart of the Appalachia coal mining states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia.

² Ronald Lewis. *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.) 147-48.

³ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*. 148.

⁴ Robert Corbin. *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880-1922*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.) 9. See also the 1925 U.S. Coal Commission Report, Ronald Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 147. and Allesandro Portelli's, *They Say In Harlan County: An Oral History*, 120.

were no local political officials, no mayor, no city council, no ward boss to attend the immediate interests of the miners—there was only the coal operator.”⁵

Ronald Lewis, like Corbin, notes that the coal towns were not like normal communities in the usual sense because the community had such little control over the political life in the town itself. Miners felt powerless and afraid of job security without a say in their daily life.⁶ However, Lewis disagrees with Corbin in terms of segregation. Corbin argues that company towns were integrated. Lewis emphasizes that the scholarly evidence proves that most of the company towns were segregated. Managers implemented segregated housing patterns to create “appropriate social interaction.”⁷ However, there was flexibility and sometimes whites lived in black sections and vice versa.⁸ This perhaps may have been what Corbin meant by integration along with blacks and whites working together in the coal mines.

Keys’ account of the neighborhood describes flexibility in the rules of segregation that may have only benefited his family. His family “was the only [black] family in the whole neighborhood. Other black people lived down in the bottoms...” In *Black Days Black Dust: The Memories of an African American Coal Miner*, Robert Armstead paints a different picture of the Watson coal camp in West Virginia. He said the houses were, “duplex houses with four rooms on each side. A house might have ten to fifteen children living in it. No house had a white family on one side and a black family on the other. It was either all black or all white.” Armstead remembers going to visit his grandfather in

⁵ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 10.

⁶ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 147.

⁷ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 149-50.

⁸ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 150-51.

Watson after his family moved. He said his, “house sat on River Row, where all the black coal miners and their families eventually moved.”⁹

Mobility became an important aspect of a miners’ life. According to Thomas Wagner and Phillip Obermiller in their book, *African American Miners and Migrants: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club*, because miners did not own their houses they were not tied down to the area. They could move elsewhere to find better wages and living conditions. The miners’ availability to relocate played an important role later during labor resistance.¹⁰

Company towns varied depending on when and where they were constructed. According to Lewis, the typical mining town was built on lower slopes and valley bottoms so the profitable land was not used. Houses often backed up to railroad tracks, were fronted on a creek, or stilted on the mountainside.¹¹ In Steinman, Virginia at the coal camp the homes of both whites and the blacks homes were backed up against the river. Keys described his neighborhood of, “about fifty or more on one side of the street. We lived down next to the river. The river’s in the back of the houses.”

Wagner and Obermiller describe the coal towns as a, “complex social arrangement” set up by “undercapitalized coal operators leading to very poor working and living conditions.” Many company town owners saw the towns as a controlled environment to manage their workers and their families. In the company owners’ opinion, employees could be influenced through control of their living environment. The layout of

⁹ Robert Armstead and S.L. Gardner. *Black Days, Black Dust: The Memories of An African American Coal Miner*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002.) 18.

¹⁰ Phillip J. Obermiller and Thomas E. Wagner. *African American Miners and Migrants: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.) 20-22.

¹¹ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 146

the towns was structured to be a closed economic system. The design kept the miners' paycheck within the coal towns so the coal town owners did not lose economic control or power over their workers. This economic cycle kept the workers in a state of debt or dependence on the coal company. The coal company did not allow any input on key decisions that affected the well-being of the town and its people. However, despite the coal owners overarching realm of control, residents were never completely passive subjects.¹²

Julia Cowans in *They Say In Harlan County* describes the coal town with disdain. She writes that they enforced complete control and that the town had defined borders: "They had guards to let you in and guards to let you out. Like a concentration camp or something. And we grew up under those conditions. You didn't get in that camp without permission and you didn't get out of that camp without permission."¹³

Company Town Housing

Dennis Reedy, a volunteer at the Dickenson County Historical Society in Clinchwood, Virginia, states that in the late 1940s and early 1950s Miss Emma Smith and her husband ran the "colored boarding house" in Steinman.¹⁴ According to Norman Mullins, when he was a young boy circa 1940 the, "colored families lived in houses in

¹² Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrant*, 11-16.

¹³ Allesandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (New York: Oxford University Press.) 119.

¹⁴ Dennis Reedy. *Mountain People and Places: Dickenson County, Virginia and Surrounding Area*. "A Brief History of Steinman" (Clinchco, VA: Mountain People and Places June 30, 1981). 44-47.

the row below the school.”¹⁵ Mrs. Roma Hayes and her husband Winright Adkins moved to Steinman in 1940. They had twelve children. They rented the downstairs of a two-family home. When the upstairs became vacant they rented the entire home. The Smith’s boarding house and three homes, including the Hayes-Adkins home, burned in 1942. Mrs. Roma Hayes stated that a miner’s carbide lamp ignited the curtains and caused the fire.¹⁶ In 1947 Mr. Adkins died in a rock fall mining accident at Steinman.¹⁷

In West Virginia according to Franklin Frazier, “four-fifths of the state’s miners lived in company owned houses.” Only seven percent of the houses had running water. More than two-thirds of the roofs were made of tarpaper. Fewer than three percent of the houses had bathtubs or inside toilets.¹⁸

The structure of the coal mining towns allowed for cohesion and neighborly friendships between the miners, black and white, and their families. Coal companies standardized housing conditions in the company towns. The standardization and working conditions discouraged socioeconomic competition. Houses were all built alike, either in an A-Frame or Jenny Lind-type. With housing all the same it cut costs for the company and provided miners with low rent. However, the result was some poorly built and drafty homes.¹⁹ Obermiller and Wagner go a step further to explain that making housing

¹⁵ Notes from Dennis Reedy private collection held at the Historical Society in Clintwood, Virginia, Dickenson County.

¹⁶ Reedy, *Mountain People and Places*, 47.

¹⁷ Notes from Dennis Reedy private collection held at the Historical Society in Clintwood, Virginia, Dickenson County.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 149.

¹⁹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 66 & 67,

available, “also gave employers a competitive edge in a tight labor market and a measure of control over the workforce.”²⁰



Figure 2.2 Company housing in Dickenson, County c. 1912. Photograph courtesy of Mr. Dennis Reedy in “Images of America: Dickenson County” by Victoria L. Osborne.

Keys describes the house he lived in at Steinman as one of the biggest homes. He said they had, “a six room house: three bedrooms upstairs, three [rooms] downstairs. Ten of us kids raised in this three bedroom house. The boys stayed in one room. Mom and dad had their room. The girls had their room. It was a two story house, but you had to come out the front door and go upstairs to the bedrooms...my daddy had a bigger house than the white people or the black people had.” In order to have such a large home, Mr. Keys’ father, Clarence, likely had special status. Clarence Keys helped quell union uprisings and suppressed miners interest in joining the union in Steinman. He remembered his dad riding through the neighborhood with Gibson on his white horse and three other black workers. As Mr. Keys put it, “Clarence was there black man. They

²⁰ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 20.

didn't let that union come in Steinman. He jump on you, too." Neighboring coal mines unionized, but Steinman never unionized under T. M. Gibson's control.

When Robert Armstead's parents moved him and the rest of the family to the Grays Flats coal camp in West Virginia their house was similar to the one they had in Watson. He said it was a duplex, where, "Each family had four rooms: a living room and kitchen downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs. Though the outside of the house was strong, the walls between families were like cardboard."²¹

In Allesandro Portelli's, *They Say In Harlan County: An Oral History* Henry Farmer remembers waking up in the morning and, "Having to brush the snow out of your hair. Buddy it was cold. When I was raised up, we just had two rooms. Four of us all in that one little house. We made it."²²

According to Mary LaLone in "Recollections About Adult Life in Appalachians Coal Camps: Positive or Negative?" she argues that people talked about the company owning and controlling everything in the camps, but expressed it more as an acknowledgement instead of a negative attribute.²³ She interviewed people that viewed the company as a positive because they were "a 'provider' for jobs, facilities, and giving credit as needed" when times got tough. The company also issued credit scrip during downtimes as a form of credit until the mines reopened.²⁴ Again it is that vicious cycle of peonage.

²¹ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 20.

²² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 46.

²³ Mary LaLone, "Recollections About Adult Life in Appalachians Coal Camps," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* no. 7 (1995): 91-100. 93.

²⁴ LaLone, "Recollections About Adult Life," 95-6.

Housing rents were kept low to attract workers. The company owner in turn was able to avoid workers demands for higher wages. If the miners' got a pay raise, their rent would increase, as would prices at the company store.²⁵ Most houses lacked amenities such as indoor plumbing and electricity. In many coal camps, children fetched water for washing, housecleaning, cooking, and drinking. The water had to be carried a long distance, often up steep inclines. The water was frequently contaminated from sewage that leaked out from under the outhouses.²⁶ From 1922 to 1923, 713 company towns examined in Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky found that fourteen percent had indoor running water, two percent had sewage systems, and pollution and health issues ran rampant.²⁷ By 1932 only ten percent of the nation's rural residents had electricity compared to seventy percent of urban dwellers.

In the mid 1950s the Keys family lived in Steinman, Virginia. When they left the coal town, "there wasn't no lights, no juice. But then after we moved to Tacoma [Virginia] we had lights, juice, running water, inside bathroom and bathtub. When we lived in Steinman there was none of that. You had to go and carry the water...I can remember that down there in "The Bottom" [blacks] their houses didn't even have floors. They walked around on dirt. They had the kerosene lights that you turn the handle. You had to fill them up with kerosene. Buy kerosene and put in them. We had the same thing...Then after we move to Tacoma that's when everybody just go high. Everybody got inside toilet, running water, hot and cold water, [and] lights.

²⁵ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 22.

²⁶ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 23-24. Note: Outhouses were placed over the creeks or river of the coal towns.

²⁷ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 147.

The coal camp, Grays Flats, where Armstead grew up “had no inside toilets or running water. No electricity until 1935.”²⁸ In *They Say In Harlan County* Bobbie Davidson remembers “the outhouses and how cold they were. My first home that I can remember, we didn’t have any wallpaper or anything, the side[s] of the house were papered with just cardboard boxes.”²⁹

Even when laws were passed to protect mine workers, coal companies ignored them. Law prohibited the use of scrip, or company issued currency or credit, but it was not obeyed in the mining towns. Safety laws such as the Workmen’s Compensation Law in 1913 protected the coal operators by guaranteeing that miners would not sue the company if hurt on the job based on negligence. If the miner did try to sue the company, the miner lost his healthcare, home, and income. According to David Corbin, the miners seemed, “powerlessness in their new work world and repressed by the controls in the company town, this disparate collection of miners eventually formed a unified social consciousness that slowly evolved into a working class culture.”³⁰

The Company Store

The company store was one of the most economically oppressive features of the town for miners and their families. “Coercion, the scrip system, and physical distance” from neighboring towns forced miners to shop at the company store as needed. The company store had monopolistic control over clothes, food, and tools, which were overpriced compared to local town suppliers. If the miners received a wage increase, the

²⁸ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 21.

²⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 46.

³⁰ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 15-18.

company would just raise the prices on the goods the miners bought most often.³¹ According to Obermiller and Wagner the company store treated the black and white miners the same: both were subject to the same totalizing control. It was a first come first served basis.³² In Mary Lalone's book, *Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia's New River Valley*, the most common items bought were flour, coffee, and sugar, but for a price, people could buy anything they wanted (cloth, animal feed, and mining equipment).³³

Mr. Keys describes the store as, "just one big company store. Had everything that you needed. It was a store that had groceries, farming equipment, shovels, and picks. It was a hardware store and a store. It was like a Wal-Mart. The biggest thing they had was bibbed overalls. That's what everybody used to wear—men who worked in the coal mines." In *They Say in Harlan County* they had a commissary store where they traded goods. If a man wanted to go, "buy and trade at the commissary, he drew scrip. He bought what he wanted and they gave him change."³⁴

Other communities depended on the company store almost daily. In *Black Days Black Dust* Armstead, a black man remembers his mother relying on the company store everyday. They had a small refrigerated icebox. According to him, "Mother had to call the company store almost daily to order milk, eggs, and some cooking essentials. Every afternoon around four the delivery truck brought the groceries around to homes with order signs in the window. "Come and get it!" rang out through the neighborhood."³⁵

³¹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 32

³² Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants* 25.

³³ Mary LaLone. *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories: Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia's New River Valley*. (Blacksburg: Pocahontas Press, 1997.) 26.

³⁴ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 125.

³⁵ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 22.

Scrip

Miners were rarely paid in U.S. currency. They were paid in metals and paper called scrip, which was printed by the coal company where the miners worked. Only the company that printed the scrip would honor it.

The coal miner and his family bought their food, clothing, and tools from the company store. Sometimes the prices at the company store would be as much as three times higher than at local trade stores. Miners exclaimed they, “owed their souls to the company store.”³⁶

According to Keys, “Scrip look like play money. The scrip was just like a fifty cent, but it had a dollar on it. So they wouldn’t get the scrip mixed up with other stores the scrip had the company logo on it...[the scrip pieces] had round holes in them. Some of them had a hole punch[ed]in them like the Red Cross emblem [a cross]. The dollars had round holes in them. But they had the company’s name on them and a dollar...no paper money.” He said that they only place you could spend the scrip was where his dad worked. Keys stated, “You pay for stuff with the scrip. You would go to the commissary. You would take what they called a scrip card. You could go to the window and they would give you \$100 [or] \$200 in scrip. Then you would come back. Go to the store and spend it with scrip. There wasn’t no dollars and stuff like they got now. It was just called a scrip.”

³⁶ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields* 10. See also Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, “Companies engaged in price gouging and issuing company scrip instead of cash” 25.



Figure 2.3
Metal scrip from Ruth-Elkhorn Coal Camp. Mr. Reedy's personal collection. Photograph taken by author. December 2015.

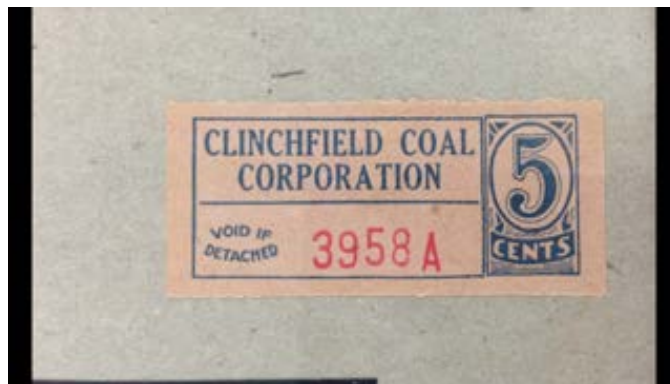


Image 2.4
Paper scrip from Clinchfield Coal Corporation (neighboring coal camp). Mr. Reedy's personal collection. Photograph taken by author December 2015.

Robert Armstead recounts what life was like growing up in a West Virginia coal mine. Like Keys, he remembers as a young boy having to go to the scrip office to get scrip put on his dad's card to buy items for his mom. He gave the woman at the counter his house number, 109, which matched the employee's payroll number. In the big book there were, "no names, just numbers."³⁷ A major difference in Armstead's recollection is he mentioned the miners dealt in scrip, but were paid in cash. Scrip was the preferred

³⁷ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 21.

exchange for the company. No one could go outside the town and purchase goods with scrip so it limited workers to shopping at the company store. Armstead compared it to “bondage really because no one had much choice with low wages.”³⁸

Frank Lawson in *Life in the Coal Fields* explains scrip: “If you needed to buy a couple dollars worth of groceries, well that’s what they, you just tell them that and they charge it to you... They didn’t give you a thing in the world, you know. It was charged to you... No, there was seldom any money, any cash money. Everything was always used up in scrip.”³⁹

In Keys and Armstead’s accounts they mention a fee for exchanging scrip for cash. Keys noted that if you took your scrip to get cash they would “just give seventy-five cents on the dollar.” Armstead mentions that for ten dollars in scrip the miner received seven dollars and fifty cents in real money; a profit of twenty-five percent that went back to the coal town owner.⁴⁰

Constant Debt

Starting in the coalmines, according to Obermiller and Wagner, the miners were already in debt. They had to pay for their own equipment to mine the coal—picks, helmets, lights, clothes etc.⁴¹ Rent and coal were deducted from miners pay before they received their paycheck.⁴² Black miners preferred the more dangerous job because it paid more than any other labor job. While in the mines the blacks also had a sense of

³⁸ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 39.

³⁹ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 26.

⁴⁰ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 40.

⁴¹ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 16.

⁴² Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 78.

autonomy.⁴³ Although certain jobs, such as coal-loader were set aside for black miners, in general they were, “treated equally below ground.” Above ground the state’s segregation laws were in effect and the “separate but equal” dictum guided both company’s management.⁴⁴

Obermiller and Wagner cite part of the reason for the increased price of goods was because of transporting the goods to the towns. Also, miners’ wages may have been higher in certain towns.⁴⁵ Company issued scrip was also used as a form of credit. Miners could get an advance in their pay if they used scrip. Miners lived in a cycle of debt. Debt peonage—when a miner owed the company more than he received on a given payday—became a common cycle for miners. Constant debt and financial ruin plagued most of the miners.⁴⁶

Reflecting back on his childhood Mr. Keys remembers the coal town as a “system [that] was set up for you to stay poor or be broke. That’s what I seen when I was a little boy. You can’t spend money but one time. You go spend the scrip money. You ain’t got no money. Then next week come around, you done spend up all your money. So you going to have to still go get scrip again. It was a circle they keep you in.” According to Keys it was better to have paper money all the time and to use scrip only when necessary. “Scrip was just something to keep you poor. Keep you under control.” Mr. Keys said “you work all week [and] he [Mr. Gibson] done got all of his money back from you.

⁴³ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 16.

⁴⁴ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 95. The two towns discussed are located in Kentucky. However, there are striking similarities to the historiography, as a whole, to Appalachia coal mining.

⁴⁵ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 25.

⁴⁶ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 26.

Yeah, controlling. After you look at it and get older, you see it. Keep you under his finger. Looking back at it you never could save no money.”

Armstead recalls how his father worked to exhaustion in the mine and they still did not have enough money for groceries. Even with both parents working “so hard no one had an abundance of anything during these hard times.”⁴⁷ He agrees with Keys’ opinion about the company town that the companies, “stole [it] from the miner. Once hired a miner had to buy work clothes, tools, and supplies at the company store so he started his job already in debt. The store sold everything a family needed to maintain a household. The products sold were high quality and expensive...he spiraled deeply into debt.”⁴⁸

In *They Say In Harlan County: An Oral History*, the miners “didn’t draw any payday’s cause they didn’t make much money and they’d spend it in the company store. “Owe my soul to the company store.” Well, that the way it was.” According to one of the miners you did not leave the company property to go to the next town to buy anything. He said, “No, you didn’t do that. That kept the person, especially if you had a family of any size, that kept you in debt, all the time, you know, just stayed in debt. Work a lifetime and be in debt to the company.” Hazel Leonard observed that the miner and his family were “always in debt. The poor old people had families and they took what he made just to eat and the few clothes you could buy. Now that was before they got the union.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 23.

⁴⁸ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 39.

⁴⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County* 125-26.

In David Corbin's work, *Life Work and Rebellion*, he discusses constant debt. In the words of a miner before the U.S. Senate investigating committee a miner said, "When an increase is given the miners, the store management invariably increase prices to offset it...it has always been customary in the coal fields [that] when an increase is given in wages, that the increase is absorbed by a rise in price of the commodities at the company store, and very often superseded by a rise in food prices before the increase is given."⁵⁰

Supplemental Income

Miners typically were farmers before they turned to coal mining, and they relied on these skills to survive.⁵¹ Gardening and raising of livestock were widespread among these miners. These activities brought the community together where relationships formed and dependency among neighbors thrived. As late as 1924, the West Virginia Coal Association estimated over fifty percent of the state's miners planted gardens and kept cows, pigs, and poultry.⁵²

These activities brought the community together where relationships form dependency among neighbors thrived. A coal miners' family home was a social network that encompasses the Appalachian region, specifically in their own coal town. Instead of being landowners families focused on building and maintain a community that supported each other in a time of need.

Gardening was a practice in which the whole family participated. The job of caring for the family garden fell upon the miner's sons, who were not yet old enough to

⁵⁰ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 32.

⁵¹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 33.

⁵² Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 33.

work in the mines, his wife, and daughters.⁵³ Gardens supplemented the miners' income where they did not have to spend as much money on food at the commissary.⁵⁴

Economic survival became a way of life in the coalmines in Appalachia. Miners raised and butchered livestock and hunted. Women tended to the gardens, canned produce, and took in laundry. The female children helped their mothers while the male children helped their fathers. Gender rolls were prevalent within the coalmining community.⁵⁵ Keys said there was, "just something to do all the time. It ain't just like come home and sit down and play games. We had to work. We had something to do all the time. White and black [people], we always had something to do."

According to anthropologist Mary LaLone, families in Appalachia, specifically southwestern Virginia coal camps, came up with various strategies to help supplement miners' incomes in order to make ends meet. LaLone contradicts the popular notion that coal miners were the sole source of income for the families. Because life in the coal mines from the 1930s to 1960s was based on economic uncertainty relying just on the coal miners pay proved risky. The 1930s were unstable because of the Great Depression. 1940s and 1950s the saw resurgence of coal as it was a necessity for World War II. There was uncertainty throughout both decades when coal mine owners and managers stalled in their renegotiations of union contracts.⁵⁶ Moreover, many mining families wanted to minimize their debt to the company store by doing a wide range of activities for more income or buying less at the company store.

⁵³ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 33.

⁵⁴ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 34.

⁵⁵ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 33-34.

⁵⁶ Mary LaLone, "Economic Survival Strategies in Appalachia's Coal Camps," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. Vol. 2 Issue 1. April 1996. 53.

Gardens

The most common household strategy to help supplement miners' income was gardening. Growing food for family consumption and swapping—bartering of one item for another without the exchange of money—with the community helped sustain families in harsh times. Nearly everyone had gardens. Gardens were essential for survival. Gardens needed to produce enough yield to get the family through the winter months. Companies however had to give permission to the families to have a garden. No timber could be cut because logs were used to support the mining economy. Everyone helped tend to the garden—women and children. The fields were plowed in the spring prior to planting. Once growing season hit all of the family members and community had to water the gardens. The most common vegetables grown were beans, potatoes, and tomatoes.⁵⁷

Growing up Keys said, “Everybody had a garden. Everybody would share. There wasn't a person, I don't think, in the neighborhood that didn't have a garden, little garden or big garden. Some guys could raise more potatoes and stuff. They would share with you. Share the whole garden, you know.”

Armstead remembers, “Every spring in Gray Flats my father planted a large garden to keep food on the table for our growing family. We actually had three vegetable gardens. Two were in a level area near the house. A nearby mountain spring made watering them easy.”⁵⁸ Before the vegetables or fruit spoiled women would can the produce for the winter months

⁵⁷ LaLone, “Economic Survival Strategies,” 55-56. See also LaLone, “Life in the Coal Fields,” 21.

⁵⁸ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 23.

Canning

Canning was an essential practice among the coal mining communities. Practically every family in Dickenson County had a garden. Many families grew vegetables such as cabbage, potatoes, beans, and peas.⁵⁹ Families grew extra produce and hunted throughout the summer and fall. They did this to have food for the winter. Families could not waste anything they grew or hunted. Every bit of food was kept in case a family or neighbors fell on hard times. Lucy Kessinger remembers, “When we had a cellar, we kept apples and potatoes and stuff like that. We had garden stuff all winter.”⁶⁰

The best way to preserve the produce and meat was through canning. Canning refers to the process of cooking and storing products in glass jars.⁶¹ According to Keys, “They [mom and grandmaw] would can all the food that we would use all year ‘round. They’d can green beans, blackberries, apples. And I loved sauerkraut. Made the jelly out of the blackberries or strawberries, raspberries, and cherries. Then just fix it up. I guess you call them [glass] pint jars, half-a-gallon jars, gallon jars. They put all this fruit down in the bottom of the house—under the house. They put it down there in the summertime, but it stayed down there all winter sometimes. It would last over to the next year...But now we used [to] have hundreds of jars of fruit and stuff down in the smokehouse. It never spoiled. It never froze or bust.” Jimmie Price in LaLone’s *Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia*, states, “We’d have our own canned beets, beet pickles, pear preserves for

⁵⁹ Harold B. Damron and Mrs. W.H. Smith. *Dickenson County Geography Supplement: Know Own County*. (Dickenson County School Board: University of Virginia, 1928.) 11.

⁶⁰ Mary LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 24.

⁶¹ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 24.

biscuits for dessert. We'd have our own apple butter sometimes...And we'd have maybe 500, 600 cans in the cellar. Most of them was half gallons. We didn't can much quarts."⁶² Some families also canned meat to keep it from spoiling. According to Betty Gearhart, "We canned chickens, you see. Back then we didn't have no freezers. Any you'd cook the chicken and can it" or whatever meat needed to be preserved.⁶³

Gathering and Raising Animals

Many people gathered wild fruits and nuts and hunted along the mountainside to provide food for their families and neighbors. They picked apples, pears, grapes, blackberries, blueberries, walnuts, and chestnuts. Whatever fruits was not consumed fresh, women processed and canned into jams, jellies, and butters. Keys said, "When it come canning time, putting up apples, everybody would do it together, all the fruit and stuff. See like you really hardly go to the grocery stores that much...When everybody had a garden, everybody would bring taters, tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, [and] okra. Back then you canned stuff to have stuff in the wintertime. I just loved picking blackberries. Go pick blackberries to make jelly. My mom and them made jelly. Their mom would come over and say, 'Essie, I need some jelly.' So mom would give them four or five jars of jelly."

To add protein to their diet men raised chickens, hogs, and cows. In 1920 there were 6,396 hogs in Dickenson County. In 1925 there were 5, 013. Feeding of hogs on any considerable scale is rather expensive. Hogs had to be provided with some sort of grazing crop for the entire year with less attention and with less expense. Some such crops are

⁶² LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 24-25.

⁶³ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 25.

clovers, soy beans, alfalfa, peanuts, sweet potatoes artichokes, and rape.⁶⁴ Each fall the man would kill a hog or two and cure it for the winter. The women rendered the fat from the hog to make soap. Chickens laid eggs for breakfast and provided another source of income by selling some of the eggs or bartering with the company store. Cows provided the family with milk. The milk could then be used to make butter, cream, and cheese.⁶⁵ According to Warren Lilly he would, “take five or six dozen eggs down every few days and maybe I’d get sugar, salt, pepper, cornmeal, the things we didn’t raise. And I could get a better price for my eggs by putting them on trade than I could by getting money.”⁶⁶

When it came time to killing the hog, the men gathered for a “hog killing party.” They helped butcher and process the meat. In return they received a good meal and a share of the meat to take home.⁶⁷ Men and male children also hunted wild game. The most common game hunted was squirrels, raccoons, rabbits, and groundhogs.⁶⁸

In the Keys household killing a hog for the community was a one-man job. Keys’ father, the only black man in the white neighborhood, killed the hogs. Keys remembers helping when his dad told him he was going to kill the hogs. Before you did the hog killing you had to go and carry all this water. Fill up this big ole fifty-gallon drum. Fill it up. Build a fire. Get the water red hot. You take the feed sacks and lay them on top of the hogs. Then you poured the red hot water on them. Then you take a knife and scrape all the hair off of them. My daddy, he did that for people. They paid him to do that. He’d dress their meat out. Put it in their smokehouse.” To keep the meat from spoiling and

⁶⁴ *The Heritage of Dickenson County, Virginia, 1880-1993*. (Walsworth Publishing.) 16.

⁶⁵ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 56 & 58.

⁶⁶ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 22.

⁶⁷ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 59.

⁶⁸ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 57.

preserving it through the wintertime his dad “rubbed the salt into the meat. Then they would cut around the bone. You had [to] take it and rub it [salt] all down the side of the meat.”

While Keys’ father killed hogs for other people, Armstead and Portelli’s refer to killing hogs a more of a family tradition. In Armstead’s home his dad kept “four or five large hogs for butchering in the fall. Hogs have a strong manure smell one doesn’t forget. The hog pens stood fairly close to the house because the further away from the house they were, the farther you had to carry slop and corn to them. Butchering time, a few days before Thanksgiving, was exciting to us kids. Most of the boys played hooky from school to watch.”⁶⁹ He said, “Everybody raised chickens. Everybody and I guess some of the memorable occasions was after Thanksgiving, the first time the frost would come on, and the whole family would come together and slaughter probably from eight to ten hogs.”⁷⁰ LaLone mentions neighbors and relatives came together to share in the labor intensive work of hog killing. Whoever’s hog was killed would share some of the meat with the men who helped.⁷¹

Hunting and Fishing

Hunting and fishing provided another source of meat for the mining families. Hunting squirrels, opossums, groundhogs, and rabbit were common practice. According to Mr. Keys his family, “Used to eat wild rabbits. My daddy was a hunter. We all hunted. All the boys hunted. We’d go kill rabbits and squirrels and bring them home. Ain’t

⁶⁹ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 24.

⁷⁰ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 31.

⁷¹ Mary LaLone. *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories: Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia’s New River Valley*. (Blacksburg, VA: Pocahontas Press, 1997.)

nothing like a squirrel gravy and rabbit gravy if you—but y'all probably don't eat wild animals. But you know at a certain time you can eat them you know. Because they [have] ticks in them. Well anyway we'd go squirrel hunting. Kill eight or nine squirrels. It took that many because squirrels ain't got no meat on them no way. Now the rabbits got a little meat on them. I'd bring them home. Me and mom would cook them. A lot of people don't even—I don't know, they cost a lot of money now, but bullfrogs... We used to go at night and go frog giggin'. You had to get down in the water and walk down on the edge of the bank on the water to get the frog. Shine the light in the frog's eyes and then stick him with the gig. I never heard of nobody getting' snake bit. Yeah. You ever eat frog legs? Oh, they good, they good, they good... We used to go turtle huntin'. Do all that kind of stuff when I was a boy growing up. You say you won't eat no turtle, but if somebody cook it and know how to cook it and a cut it up just right and cook it and just give you a plate of it, you'll eat it because you don't know what it is. It's delicious. A lot of people look at it and 'ooh, I ain't eating that nasty turtle, no, ooh!' But turtle meat's good. I've eaten a thousand turtles."

Fishing was a common survival activity to feed large families within the coal mining community. Not only was fish an important food item for the family, but fishing proved to be a leisure activity as well. Mr. Keys said on weekends, "Everybody'd go fishing. Men they'd go down on the creek banks. Women, black and white, they'd catch the fish. Fry them right there on the river. Clean them. Eat them and everything, kids and all. That's the only time you could really have a good time swimming because you didn't have to be worried that mama and daddy going to catch you swimming."

The river was a prominent feature in the coal mining town of Steinman. Mr. Keys said, “From Friday to Sunday everybody would be down on the creek banks, white and black, eating fish. Everybody just eat fish all the time. We had a big river in the back of our house. You know they catch the fish right out of the river... You know after everybody got through working on the weekend, everybody just come down on the river and fish. Eat, fish, yeah.”

In *Black Days Black Dust*, Armstead recounts what fishing was like in his community. He said that... “The men in our family fished year round and all species of freshwater fish came to our table. I saw men and boys standing next to Paw Paw Creek in all kinds of weather. Some with just a stick and string trying to hook a few fish for dinner.”⁷² “You’d kill wild meat, took a lot of wild meat in the mountains and plenty fish in the river—and [picked] some currants,” said Debbie Spicer.⁷³

According to LaLone it is interesting to find such diversified generalized “subsistence patterns at use with in the United States, a nation where many people would not expect to see this pattern because of the myth of household subsistence based on the wage earning jobs in the formal economy.”⁷⁴

Laundry as an Economic Activity

Some women in the coal mining community took on jobs as laundresses. They turned their homes into a laundry service. Mr. Keys’ mother, Essie De, washed the white people’s clothes in the neighborhood/surrounding area. She used to, “wash their clothes,

⁷² Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 24.

⁷³ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 33.

⁷⁴ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 63.

iron their shirts and I guess that's the reason we had a lot with daddy working and her taking in washing and stuff." According to Keys, "She do shirts. She do pants for lawyers—white people. They just had a little money. They'd bring shirts to her. It was fifty cent or quarter to do a shirt." He said, "We had this 'ole horse with this buggy that [had] rubber tires on it. She'd hook it up and she'd go round, like a laundromat, and pick up the clothes and take them. But she did it on her scrub board. She didn't have a washing machine back then. She'd wash them. His name was Lawyer Mullins. I remember her washing his shirts." Mr. Keys said his mother received real money rather than scrip for her services. "I guess that's the reason that we always had money because if you needed money momma always had money. I can never remember momma not saying—ten kids I can never remember her saying no to them. I ain't got no money for this or I ain't got no money for that. If the girls needed some shoes or a dress or whatever, it was always money. We had this pantry thing like that couldn't nobody go in but her and daddy. Kids couldn't go in it. You couldn't open it [and] couldn't look in it. I can remember her. Always somebody needed some money or some of her—well like sometimes some of her family would come by and they'd say they need two or three dollars I guess or whatever or however much they needed. She always go in this closet and come out. Give them the money."

Gendered Work:
Women and Food Ways

Women worked just as hard as men. Most of the women rose before the sun to prepare breakfast for their husband and children. She was also last to go to bed after a day of chores. The wives held the family together. According to Evelyn Price she said, "I've

been a miner's daughter all my life, I've been a miner's wife all my life, so I've lived with it. It isn't easy. And a lot of times, people will make a remark, [people say] 'Well, Henry has worked so hard, he worked so hard in the mines' and I said, 'Listen, I worked hard, too. I stayed home and raised a family.' And I would work out in the fields and help raise the food, and then help to plant it because he wasn't there to do it then." Women were the backbone of the family. They reared their children, a valuable partner to her husband, and help keep food on the table.⁷⁵

Husband and wives in the coal mining community typically had large families. It was not uncommon for women to have six to sixteen children. Mr. Keys is the oldest of ten children. Having to raise multiple young children and handle everyday household chores was a fulltime job for the woman. Florence Albert comments, "You never did see women sitting down hardly, unless they were knitting or crocheting or something." David Price remembers his mother's contributions to the family, "Daddy would kill the hogs and she'd scrape off all the meat. She'd pick the vegetables out of the garden in the summer and can them. We didn't really have to buy much, she'd cook just about everything we needed...She'd make the butter, and milk the cow...feed the chickens, and get the eggs." It was important for families to be self-sufficient.⁷⁶

Women prepared most of the food on a daily basis. On average women got up before daybreak to prepare breakfast for her family. According to LaLone women gathered the coal and wood to use for the day.⁷⁷ However, in the Keys family gathering coal and wood was the children's responsibility.

⁷⁵ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 29.

⁷⁶ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 30-31.

⁷⁷ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 31.

On Sundays women prepared large dinners for several guests and often the preacher. According to Keys, “Everybody would come over and want some chitlins[—cooked pig intestines]. I don’t know how they would eat them. I tell mom I cannot eat them. I cannot eat them. I can’t eat them to the day. But they used to love them. They’d eat them chitlins. Oh everybody loved chitlins. The preachers, the deacons. “Hey Essie, when you going to cook some chitlins?” She’d tell them. They’d come over to the house and they over sitting around the table. Ain’t none of the kids going to eat. Because we ain’t going to eat the ol’ chitlins. Them preachers they’d be there just eating cornbread, slaw, and just lapping up them chitlins.”

Women had to wash clothes by hand using a pail or tub with a washboard and lye soap. Water usually needed to be carried from a nearby stream. For the Keys family the women went down to the river to wash clothes. Lucy Kessinger said she, “used to wash in the washboard, in these big old tubs, and I’d get up and get my washing done. We used to boil clothes in a tub with lye soap. I made my own soap.”⁷⁸

Mr. Keys said they made their own soap too. “I don’t know if it was hog killing time or when. But anyway, we go build this big ‘ole fire. They would put, for the soap that you had to wash up with, they would put a sulfur chemical in it. Some kind of—I believe it was lye. You had to go and make soap. We’d make up the soap to wash clothes with. You didn’t buy soap. I can remember making this soap. My momma and them [neighbors] used to make it to wash clothes with. You know like how you get that green spot in your pants when you running and fall? Whatever kind of soap it was, it pull that green. We’d be out there and I used to love to help them. I usually like to help my mom

⁷⁸ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 31.

do the washboard thing. Wash the clothes and rinse them off. Take them [clothes] down the river and rinse them and then take them back up there. Hang them on a clothesline.

Sewing was another chore for women. Some women made girls clothes out of old feed sacks. Betty Gearheart remembers, “Now we used to have the chop for the cows, or feed for the chickens come in pretty bags. And, my momma used to make my dresses and skirts and things out of it. And then sometimes she’d sew four of them together, and make a sheet. I wore many a chop sack dress.”⁷⁹ With the women’s ingenuity and sacrifices for her family she truly was the backbone of the family and the community.

Child Labor

Children contributed to the household income. Some children had to quit school in order to help their parents.⁸⁰ Women and children had a gender-based set of chores to do.⁸¹ Many of the boys gathered coal to fuel the kitchen stove and heat the house during the winter, carried water in the house, and hunted with their father. Girls helped tend to the garden, helped their mother cook and clean, and do laundry.

When Keys was a boy he had to “bring coal in the house at night. You never let the fire in the heater go out. Always had a fire in the heater. I had to get the coal in the evening. I’d get the coal in where we could stay warm at night...if you forget to get the coal in, he [dad] would say, ‘Hey! Get up! Go get the coal.’ He wouldn’t say it but one time.” I asked Keys where he got the coal. He said, “You had to buy the coal because it was a coal camp. It was a mining camp. My daddy worked in the mine. They’d have to

⁷⁹ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 31.

⁸⁰ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 55.

⁸¹ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 57.

buy, they called it a ton of coal. They'd bring it to your house and dump it [in the yard]. You just had to come outside and get it..." Keys would then "fill up all five of the coal buckets and fill up the wood bins. So we did it every morning...so mom won't have to be getting no coal in."

James Wright in, *They Say in Harlan County*, remembers, "We [children] had our chores to do, too. We had to carry coal, a sack of coal every day, through the summer, so we'd have enough to last through the winter. And there was wood to be cut, then I went to working around the mines when I was twelve or thirteen."⁸²

Keys remembers the "girls, they had to help mom cook and the boys had to keep the water in the cook stove. Had to carry the water for the drinking water and stuff like that. To wash the dishes and stuff you had to have [water]. You didn't have sinks and running water back then. You just had to carry water." He said they had to get water before they left for school, "because we done used up all the water, you had to go up the street and fill the hot water tank on the side of the stove...[so] mom would have water to wash dishes and cook with all day."

Mr. Keys describes how he how had to go to the water pump at the end of the street where, "everybody had to use the same pump." Carrying water was one of his chores in the evening. Keys walked the length of a football field to carry water. Each trip he carried two buckets of water. Every evening he had to carry at least six buckets of water. He said, "You had to carry the water before you could get up in the morning to take a bath. You'd carry water for all the people that lived on that street. See, you did not have hot water. They had this thing built on the side of the cook stove that you poured

⁸² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 32.

water in. Dip out at night to take baths and stuff. They'd give you a dime or a nickel, which that was a lot of money back then." He carried water for Ms. Whitely. He said, "I took care of her. I didn't go knock on no door. I'd just go on over to her house. Go in and holler...at the end of the week she'd give you a dollar."

Armstead's account in *Black Days and Black Dust* is similar. He remembers carrying "water, coal, and wood and ran errands for neighbors who needed help." He said that there was one hand-operated water pump for twenty families. "Every boy big enough to carry a one gallon pail of water had to tote water for his family. Our house stood fifty yards from the pump, and I carried water on the hottest day in summer and on the coldest, iciest day in winter. If any boy, including myself, spotted another boy headed toward the pump the race was on."⁸³

Communities of Support

The key to coal camp survival was to "respond to the uncertain environment by developing flexible household livelihood strategies, with backup support at the community level."⁸⁴ Within the community, neighbors bartered with neighbors for items they needed. This ensured their immediate needs without having to spend their money at the store. The strong community support enabled everyone to help each other in times of need. It was referred to as "helping each other out" without any expectation of reciprocation.⁸⁵ A person's personal qualities were held in high regard in the

⁸³ Armstead, *Black Days and Black Dust*, 11 & 21.

⁸⁴ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 60.

⁸⁵ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 60. See also Mary LaLone, "Recollections About Adult Life in Appalachians Coal Camps," 93.

community.⁸⁶ The more the families were able to produce and collect the less money they spent at the company store. The only staples many families needed were salt, sugar, or baking powder.⁸⁷

In Mary LaLone's article, *Recollections About Adult Life in Appalachians Coal Camps: Positive or Negative?* she quotes, Louis Henegar about this aspect of the community: "The community was more or less just one large family' and he speaks of specific types of reciprocity within the camp: 'Now don't get me wrong. It don't mean that people didn't disagree and have problems. But yet still, it was more like, it wasn't just you having a hard time or me having a hard time. Everybody lived the same way and I think it made them more close knit, you know more of a family-type thing. Then if you were destitute to the point that maybe you didn't have food in the house or something like that, then I would be there to see that you had it. And the rest of the neighbors would be there to see what they could do. If you were sick, then everyone would come and offer assistance. If your husband had gotten hurt and no income and no food, the neighbors would see that you didn't go hungry. You know, make sure you got food and stuff like that.'"

Keys said back then, "Everybody had apples, pears, and peaches. You'd come home in the evenings or been up somewhere and come home, there's stuff—food, bags, baskets sitting on the porch full of apples. Like I say there was ten of us. Everybody just help. Did everything." In *Black Days, Black Dust*, Armstead said, "Mothers borrowed

⁸⁶ LaLone, *Recollections About Adult Life in Appalachians Coal Camps*, 95.

⁸⁷ LaLone, *Economic Survival Strategies*, 54 & 58.

salt, sugar, flour, onions, potatoes, or whatever they needed. Fathers shared tools for household repairs and gardening. The men banded together at harvesting time.”⁸⁸

In Portelli’s *They Say in Harlan County*, a resident of West Virginia stated, “I really liked it in the coal camps. It was just one big family. All the houses were sort of close together. Everybody knew each other. If you had a problem they had it. Everybody went to the same church. Everybody had the same occupation. We all had the same thing in common. Nobody considered themselves better than others because they all made the same. I think everybody just go along better.”⁸⁹

Overall, the living areas within the coal mines were racially segregated. Whites typically lived on top of the hill away from the floodplain area whereas the blacks lived in the bottom area near the river or within close proximity of the coal mines. The coal mining communities developed a self-sufficient way of life. Some families only needed staple items such as baking powder, sugar, and flour. The community was obligated to shop at the commissary store for staple items because the coal company paid the miners in scrip rather than legal tender. To supplement the family diet, they hunted, trapped, fished and kept gardens. Men and women performed different tasks to support the household economy. Men worked in the mines, hunted and fished and butchered the animals. Women tended to the laundry, cooked and cleaned, and raised the children. Women also took in laundry, which was often the only source of legal currency in the household. Children were an important part of the household economy as well, performing a range of tasks on a daily basis such as tending to the garden, gathering coal for the stove, getting water from the pump, and collecting eggs. Many sources indicate

⁸⁸ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 23.

⁸⁹ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 123.

that working families in mining camps relied on each other for material support. They borrowed items, shared food, and participated in hog killing and other activities. Hog killing tended to be a family occasion, but in the Keys' family Clarence killed hogs for the white members of the community. He received some meat for payment. The system of support seemed to encompass all members of the community, white and black. When it came time to can the all the women came together. When a miner was sick, hurt, or killed everyone in the community came together to support their neighbor's in need.

CHAPTER 3 LEISURE AND SOCIAL TIME

In order to escape from the rigors of everyday life the communities came together to enjoy leisure and social time. It was a way they survived mentally and physically demanding jobs and to maintain communal ties.

Moonshine

Men in the coal mining community made moonshine to celebrate holidays, weddings, births, etc. and drank on Saturday nights even if there were no planned celebrations.¹ In addition, liquor supplemented miners' income. According to one miner, moonshine could be made for about fifty cents a gallon and sold for fourteen or fifteen dollars a gallon.² The miners also drank to celebrate payday, which "was announced every two weeks by the playing of cards and the drinking of whiskey."³ Some miners made their own alcohol, using almost anything they grew in their garden, to make homebrew—ten pounds of meal, ten pounds of sugar, three cakes of yeast, water, and something for flavor.⁴ Gardening and moonshining "represented an adjustment, not a resistance, to industrialization."⁵ According to Ed Cawood in *They Say in Harlan County*, "The mountaineer, about all he could grow was corn and he used his corn, sometime, to

¹ Robert Corbin. *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880-1922*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.) 35.

² Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 37.

³ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 35

⁴ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 36

⁵ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 37.

make moonshine, make whiskey. And it was considered his private business if he had some corn and wanted to make moonshine.⁶

Mr. Keys remembers his father drinking moonshine. He said, “The biggest part of the thing was they didn’t have liquor like people got liquor now. They had moonshine. Cause I can remember my daddy and his friends they would go get [it] hold it up and shake it. They said, ‘Oh this is the good kind...My daddy he tried to hid it [drinking] but he’d get drunk down there on the river. White men [and] black men, they’d all get drunk and have a good time, you know. So my daddy he’d always try to keep his little drinking hid. I kindly knew. He be come staggering up and I said, ‘Dad drunk. You all don’t bother him.’ He’d come on home. Go to bed. Get up the next morning. Go to work.” Drinking was a release for the miners and became a social outlet of solidarity among the workforce.

Church

The company towns changed the way the members in the community held church services on Sundays. Company towns dissolved the sacred tradition of black churches and the black preacher who was once revered in black culture/society.⁷ “In the company town the coal company, not African Americans, built the church” and controlled every aspect of communal life.⁸ The preacher had to serve as the company “lick” if he wanted to stay in the mines.⁹ “Religion played a key role in the life of model company towns.”¹⁰

⁶ Allesandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.) 112.

⁷ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 68.

⁸ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 69.

⁹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 69.

“While coal-town religious facilities saw constant use, they were segregated by race as well as religion.”¹¹

Mr. Keys’ maternal grandfather was a pastor or a deacon. He said every fourth Sunday he and his siblings had to wash the pews and sweep the church. After he got to a certain age he and his family used to go to church all the time. He said, “Every time you look up we was in church. We was cleaning the church. Washing, mopping the floors, sweeping the church, going down to the [outhouse] and putting paper inside the outside toilet. Newspaper, you put in the wall. I guess it would keep it warm...” He said they had to go to Clinchco to church. It was the same building he had school in during the week. He said when he went to the all black church he had to “dress in little fancy stuff. Little coat on like you was a preacher. But when you went to the white church you just went on down there. You didn’t have to be dressed up or nothing.” A spiritual ritual they used to do was wash the congregations’ feet:

“When I was a boy everybody used to wash each other. They called it foot washing. Everybody washed everybody’s feet when I was a boy. I was about eight, nine, [or] ten years old or younger. We had to go to the creek. Now back then they called them tubs...had to fill it up. I didn’t like church way back when. Every time they would wash somebody’s feet, you had to go out and empty the water. Bring a bucket of water back. If it was a hundred, twenty people, [or] forty people in there you had to empty that thing forty time and fill it up. Nobody washed their feet

¹⁰ Phillip J. Obermiller and Thomas E. Wagner. *African American Miners and Migrants: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.) 27.

¹¹ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 27.

in the same water. I don't know why, but they didn't. Everybody in the church, women and men, got their feet washed.”¹²

Mr. Keys said at Sunday school there were two white ladies that would come in and teach the Bible. He said, “They used to have these big ole boards that they would come and set up. They'd be telling the story about the Bible and what happened. They could stick Jesus, the Saints, and all on this thing and make it look like a movie. But it wasn't a movie. They come every Sunday. Then they would come some days through the school time. They would come in the mornings or in the evenings and teach you the Bible.”

In *Black Days, Black Dust*, Armstead's mother was a very religious woman. She went to a different town to worship. According to Armstead, “Then the coal company gave blacks a tiny building near the mine for services.”¹³ He said the church members held prayer services in our home two or three times a month. The days leading up to the service in his house “were filled with fuss and bother and as kids, we dreaded the work. My sisters had to scrub the floors and dust everything in the house. My brothers and I shoved the furniture out of the living room and set up chairs. We all had to get cleaned up with shiny faces and our best clothes. Sometimes the show was comical.”¹⁴

Most members of the community went to church on Sundays. It was not just a spiritual or worship experience, but also social togetherness. Many young people got to

¹² *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. John Chapter 13 versus 1-38. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

¹³ Robert Armstead and S.L. Gardner. *Black Days, Black Dust: The Memories of An African American Coal Miner*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002.) 14.

¹⁴ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 15.

see their friends and the adults got to socialize. Church provided a mental break from all the worries and hardships the family had gone through from the previous week.¹⁵

Education

Black teachers who taught in the 1890s said it was the beginning of the “Golden Age of Negro Education in West Virginia.”¹⁶ In the 1890s coal companies became involved in public education in the belief that basic education would increase productivity, improve safety and stabilize the work force.¹⁷ Equally funded education in the coalfields was significant not merely as a magnet for attracting black workers or as a mechanism for upward social mobility, but also preparation for equal citizenship.¹⁸ Coal companies provided aid into local schools. According to Corbin, schools were segregated, but equal in West Virginia.¹⁹ Education was also an important aspect of life in company towns, if only because the schools served children of coal company officials as well as those of miners.

In 1921 some of the parents in the town decided their children, who were of age, needed to attend school. They organized a subscription school— members of the community paid upfront for teaching services to come in and educate their children. Seven children enrolled ranging in age from six to eight. In 1922 the number of school age children greatly increased. Vice President of the Steinman Coal Corporation and manager of the mines suggested a county school be started in Steinman. To accommodate

¹⁵ LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 37.

¹⁶ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 70.

¹⁷ Ronald Lewis. *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.) 154.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 156.

¹⁹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 70-71.

more children a five-room building located on top of the hill was converted into one large room. It had two small black boards, a homemade teacher's desk and benches to accommodate forty students. The county teacher was appointed on November 13, 1922, but did not actually serve the community until September 17, 1923. About thirty students ranging from primer to fifth attended the school. On March 2, 1927 the school moved to a new "Standard" building with enough students to warrant grades from primer to seventh grade. In 1928 the county appointed a second teacher. The second teacher taught primer through third grade. The principle taught fourth through seventh grade.²⁰

Mr. Keys recollects going to school in Steinman as a young boy. He said, "The first year, I'm thinking, I believe I went to the white school at first. [The white school] was in Steinman. I think I went to a white school because it just went to the first to third grade or something. Then that's when you had to go to the black and white school in Clinchco. I'd ride up with the white kids. Get off and go to the black school." When he got older the black school was in Clinchco. He said, "The kids in Steinman had to go to Clinchco to school. The white kids had a school bus. I didn't get to ride a school bus the first year. When I started going to school this taxi driver used to take me." The following year he "was the first black kid that rode the school bus." He said they rarely missed school for weather. Mr. Keys stated, "It' ain't like it is now, rainy days, snow days, I think you still had to go to school. You didn't miss no school back then."

²⁰ "History of Steinman School" by Virginia C. Stevenson, page 385-386, in *School and Community History of Dickenson County*, edited by Dennis Reedy.

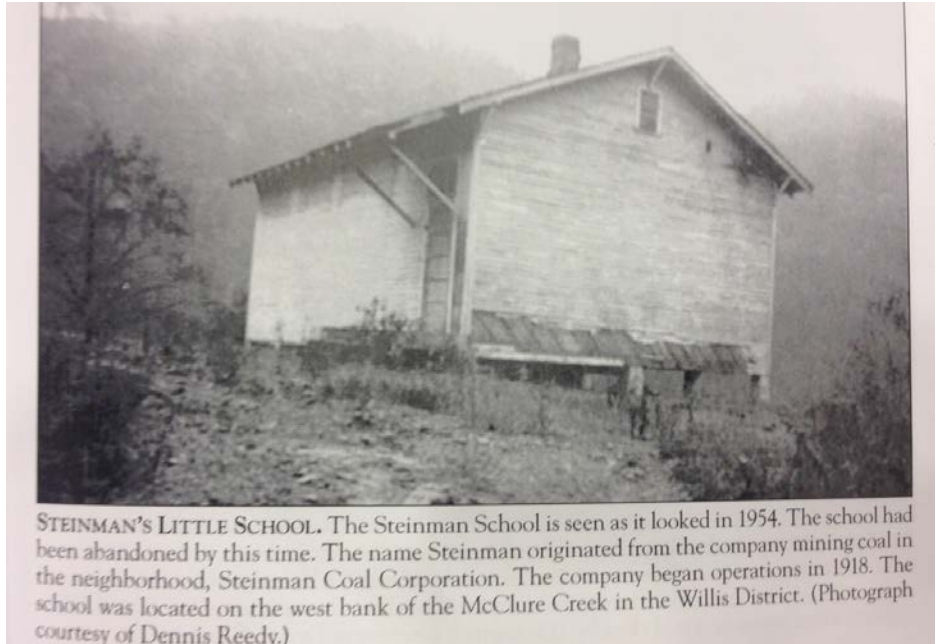


Figure 3.1
“Steinman’s Little School.” Photograph on page 386 in *School and Community History of Dickenson County, Virginia*.

Once Mr. Keys entered high school in Clinchco, he said everything changed. He said, “As the years went on, you know, I get to high school. That’s the first time that I ever knew about racism...Clinchco was just all black were the school was. From one end to the other end was just all black people. Yeah, Clinchco was big.”

Mr. Keys decided to quit school and go to work. He said, “Oh no. I quit school. That’s when I quit school. I didn’t finish high school. I quit school. I didn’t want to go to school so my daddy say, ‘You either go to school or you go to work.’ So I went to work. Didn’t go to school. I was about sixteen or seventeen.”

In Robert Armstead’s adolescence he had just started primary school at the black school near their house. His mom asks him to miss school so he can go to the commissary store. Robert is the oldest and his mother was pregnant. The family came first and

education a close second.²¹ He remembers as a young boy the school was near his house. He recalled thinking, “Why could black kids play with white kids after school or on weekends, but we couldn’t go to school together? Why was there a black school and a white school? None of it made any sense to me.” He was told to accept it. That was the way it the society developed.²²

Armstead discusses the difference in white and black schools. He said the white kids school was a “big two-story brick structure, built solidly with many pieces of playground equipment. Inside, they had radiator heat, water fountains and sinks, and electric lights. Our school had neither electricity nor running water. We had coal stoves, one outside toilet, and gravel for a playground...Black kids always played on the black playground. We were forbidden to play with white kids on the white school playground, after school or in the summer. Their playground is much better than ours. And their school is, too. It isn’t fair. That was the first open expression of the injustice I felt. Coloreds and whites are kept separated.”²³

Armstead narrates how he had to get to school. He said, “All black children in our area attending pre-primer through eighth grade had to walk to The Grays Flats’ school. There were no buses for them. These rules and policies forced black people to live very close to the mining towns or else give up their children’s education.”²⁴ Now, Mr. Keys only mentions himself riding the school bus. The only black person to ride the bus. When asked about the other black children he did not know how they got to school. When Armstead went to a new school he said, “Six of us had to walk almost a mile into town

²¹ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 8-9.

²² Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 30.

²³ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 30.

²⁴ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 31.

past the all-white Miller School, located just a few blocks from our house. Blacks and whites lived separate lives in Fairmont.”²⁵

A common theme between Keys and Armstead was they had white and black friends. Armstead said his “friends black and white, shared biscuits and double popsicles. We took it for granted that we were the same, except for school, and we just accepted that part. We didn’t have any racial problems.”²⁶ Mr. Keys said he “went to white peoples house to eat. I went to White peoples house to stay all day. They would come and get me like ‘Ken’s going to come and stay with us tonight.’ I would go to their house to stay and they would come to my house to stay when we was kids. I say we was about seven.”

Armstead did mention that his parents told him to remember certain things about the “white world.” They told him to “avoid trouble. Look for signs. Obey the rules, written, and unwritten. No knowing all the rules is never an excuse.’ I remembered those teachings and stayed inside the boundaries.”²⁷

Sports:
Baseball and Boxing

After mining and taking care of everyday life chores, members of the community played baseball and boxed. Coal operators wanted to keep the men in good spirits. They wanted to instill hard working values into their employees mindsets by “providing wholesome’ recreation and entertainment” including baseball.²⁸ According to Lewis

²⁵ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 69.

²⁶ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 55.

²⁷ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 71.

²⁸ Obermiller and Wagner, *African American Miners and Migrants*, 28.

informal activities such as cards and checkers races intertwined. But when it came to company sponsored baseball teams, they were segregated.²⁹

Mr. Keys said, “There ain’t nobody, black or white, everybody wanted to be a baseball player... That was about the only thing going back then. When I was a boy growing up you either played baseball or be a mechanic. You either had to be a mechanic or play ball. We didn’t have football... There wasn’t nothing no bigger than baseball once upon a time. Not a basketball game or nothing.”

“Then the boxing come. Everybody boxed. It’s all we did was box. You go on to the store and buy you a pair of boxing gloves. Get out there in the yard, put them boxing gloves on. Just punch out and everything. You either had the baseball or boxing. Because it was Joe Lewis and all them guys. You know, boxers. Everybody looked up to them. Everybody wanted to be a boxer.”

“We learned to entertain ourselves: we learned to do things for ourselves. Didn’t have money to buy anything with. We didn’t have baseball bats, gloves, or any of that kind of stuff. So if we wanted to play ball me and my sister would go into the woods and cut a tree down. We wanted to make a baseball [bat] out of that. We would get old green apples or rocks or anything that was hard and we would put rags around it and wrap black tape on it, and we would make balls out of that. We spent a lot of time swimming, playing in rivers...”³⁰

²⁹ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 151.

³⁰ Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 46.

“Hero worship of black athletes came slowly to us kids because blacks were banned from all national team sports, with one exception. The Negro League baseball teams filled the gap and were very popular.”³¹

Entertainment

Saturday evenings were often spent in the home of a family who owned a radio. Friends and family would gather around the radio to listen to the *Grand Ole Opry*, *Amos and Andy*, and *Inner Sanctum*. Sports broadcasts, particularly boxing, was a favorite among the neighbors.³² Mr. Keys remembers listening to the radio with his friends and family. He said, “First, everybody’d go to the house and listen to the radio. You’d come over to my momma’s house [and parents with] their kids. There was already ten of us there at the house. There’d be three or four little kids, little white kids, staying over at our house all night long. We’d just do everything together.”

When Mr. Keys got a little older his father went and bought a black and white television. Neighbors, white and black, would come to his house, but not every night. He said, “Everybody got in the floor, lay in the floor [watch television]. The grown people sat there [on the couch]. Their daddy and momma sat in the chairs and all the kids lay [in the floor]. Back then see everybody had at least eight to nine to ten kids. White and black. They had a bunch of kids... They had a TV where you could sit on the floor and see the TV. Everybody would watch TV [un]til they went off. I think it went off, what was it? Twelve [or] eleven back then. Then you’d have to wait until the next day for TV.”

³¹ Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 57.

³² LaLone, *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, 28

Members of the coal mining community had to have a social outlet from the everyday stress of working in the mines, gardens, and the home. Activities such as making moonshine, attending church on Sundays, and playing sports proved crucial as a form of leisure. Children who attended school got to engage with others and have time for recreation on the playground.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

Before the Great Depression, coal mining was a labor-intensive industry. Many coal camps had to mine and load the coal by hand using picks and shovels. By the time World War II broke out in the United States in 1941, the coal mining industry began to rise again because of the need for coal as a fuel source for the war. Technological advances soon followed with the machine cutter, mechanical loaders, and motormen.¹

After the war the demand for coal deteriorated. The 1950s saw the rise of mechanization, the dwindling need for labor, and the fall of the coal town way of life. Families in the southwest Virginia area could not afford to buy coal from the company store. During the spring and fall children and women took turns searching through slate dumps and picking out the coal. The stockpile could heat the entire home during the winters.²

The heyday of coal mining is long gone in southwestern Virginia. What was once a prospering mining town is now covered by nature. Only small remnants of coal towns exist. The landscape has changed. What was once a hustling and bustling town no longer stands. Eleven modern homes now exist where the fifty-plus home community used to be. There is nothing that suggests a coal mining town. The only way to know Ruth-Elkhorn Coal Camp ever existed in Steinman, Virginia, is through the oral testimonies of the residents, like Mr. Keys, of the coal town. Through them the story comes to life and becomes a tangible historical record that is not presented in everyday norms of education.

¹ Ronald Lewis. *Black Coal Miners in America*. 167 & 169.

² Mary LaLone, "Economic Survival Strategies in Appalachia's Coal Camps," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. Vol. 2 Issue 1. April 1996. 54. See also LaLone, "Recollections About Adult Life in Appalachians Coal Camps," 93.

Once the mine closed around 1954, the area was abandoned. The underbrush took over the hillside. Trees now fill in the mountainsides. The McClure River where families fished now flows slower.

Mr. Keys' oral narrative explores his childhood in the rural Appalachian town of Steinman, Virginia. His story can provide a better appreciation of the subtle histories of black labor, race, class, and gender history situated in the context of Appalachian history. These include the economy of both men and women's labor and the social world he and his parents lived in during their years in the coal mining communities of Steinman. He described his father's work in the mines, why he thought the miners did not unionize, the commissary store, the houses he grew up in, his mother's work as a laundress, and friendships he had with the white families in the neighborhood.

The Keys family never owned their home. They lived in an era of servitude, a master/servant relationship, between the family and the manager of the coal fields, T.M. Gibson. Everyone in the coal town was poor. Competition among neighbors was minimal. This provided a sense of community because everyone was the same economically.

The economic and social aspects of coal mining life intertwined in the daily lives of the community. Mr. Keys described his family's experience in the coal mining town as a friendly relationship with the white workers, a sense of a community, gendered work, and childhood chores. He talked about how his father not only worked in the mines, but hunted in the fall and slaughtered pigs in the winter to provide food. He explained how his mother took in white people's laundry for extra monetary income. How they all participated in gardening, canning, and cooking. Mr. Keys discussed the chores he had to

do as a child, from hauling coal to carry buckets of water for the stove. To have a break from the busy daily schedule, children attended school and played with friends. They attended church as a family and played sports, such as boxing and baseball. Each night the family gathered around the radio or television sets. Sometimes even members of the community would come over to the Keys house and participate in radio and television programs.

Mr. Kenneth Keys lives with his wife, Miss Bert, in Knoxville, Tennessee. He worked three years working for the coal mines on the tipple. Later he skinned logs for fences, worked as an orderly for a hospital, and worked construction for Reily Manufacturing as a finisher at the construction business. He has three sons, two daughters, and one grandson. Mr. Keys reflected back on his life and said he had “a good childhood life until we got up in our twenties and found out there’s some people that just don’t like you. But it’s alright because it just didn’t bother me no way. Because I know what I am and know where I come from.” Mr. Keys said as a child everyone was like family and “we took care of each other.” Mr. Keys and the children he grew up with are still friends. He said, “I go to their house. Go in their Frigidaire like it’s my Frigidaire. They come down here and visit with me...we just still friends. Fifty years later.” Even Mr. Keys said his children and his friends’ children “are like family.” Now that he is older he sits around more and reads the Bible. He tells his children that “whatever you get [it’s] a blessing.” Mr. Keys believes “if you do right, He’ll [God] bless you...we just do what we can do and let God do the rest.” Mr. Keys said to always listen and learn; “You ain’t going to know everything...it’s just your thought the way you see it. Never be

so that you can't listen. Always be able to listen because there is always somebody [that's] 'a little smarter [and] knows a little more.'

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