

# Rethinking Labor History

## The West Virginia/Virginia Coal Mining Industry

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After several years of planning the National Park Service has now begun the Labor History National Historic Landmark Theme Study. This study will combine the highest standards of historical scholarship with the practices of the historic preservation community to preserve and interpret for the American people the rich and culturally diverse heritage of labor in America. The Labor History Theme Study is intended to serve as a vehicle through which government, the private sector, organized labor, the academic community, and other interested parties can cooperate to recover, interpret, and preserve the key sites in American labor history in its fullest variety. This history encompasses the entire life span of the nation since the founding of America and provides a window on America's past that is largely unacknowledged by the historic preservation community.

There are many facets to this history that are now under study by the National Park Service. These facets touch all areas of our history and impact every region and state. The Labor History Theme Study has the ability to provide links between seemingly disconnected parts of American history and to bring into focus subjects that have been overlooked by the more traditional studies. Sites associated with the Labor History Theme Study may not have the individual and immediate recognition of national significance associated with properties such as the USS Arizona Memorial, Independence National Historical Park, Women's Rights National Historical Park, or the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, but they are

the glue of American history and have the capability to bring into focus important parts of our history associated with the working men and women of this nation.

### **The West Virginia/Virginia Coal Mining Industry**

Recent issues raised concerning the preservation of the historic resources associated with the coal mining industry in West Virginia and Virginia illustrate these issues. While the most immediate question now faced by the historic preservation community in West Virginia and Virginia involves reaching an agreement concerning the best methods and techniques to preserve these resources, other issues regarding the proper role of federal, state and local governments, private preservation orga-

nizations, the coal mining industry, the coal miners, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), and other interest parties must also be addressed.

The way these questions are resolved will determine what we as Americans believe is important about our history and culture and how much time and resources we are willing to commit to preserve this heritage. Hopefully the resolution of this question will provide a positive course of action that will generate jobs, protect the environment and preserve the traditions of local pride and independence associated with the coal mining industry.

### **The Present Condition**

The glory days of coal are now gone. At one time, prosperous coal company towns dotted the landscape of Virginia and West Virginia. These coal company towns now exist on the edge of extinction. The economic base (coal) has diminished and no one industry has replaced it. Announcements concerning the closing of additional mines continue to make local headlines. The economic repercussions associated with the continued slide in the coal mining industry seem to go unnoticed by the nation at large while the people suffer and endure. The history of the men and women who worked in the coal mines and supporting industries is in danger of being lost to the national memory.

The Labor History Theme Study will assist in the documentation of this proud history that re-

flects the record of the Industrial Revolution that brought America to the heights as the world's pre-eminent industrial power of the 20th century. The efficient mining of coal and the cheap power this resource provided for American industry formed the foundation of America's climb to greatness as a world industrial power. This story is important and needs to be told. Through the preservation of selected sites the wide and diverse themes of this story can be interpreted to the American people. These interpretive themes can be summarized as follows.

**Industrial History.** Paramount in the region's economic history, the coal industry has been of critical importance in the development of the national industrial economy. Historically, West Virginia and Virginia coal has been widely considered as unsurpassed in quality. Some of its seams are the best in the world. West Virginia coal fed the boilers of the nation's trains, factories, fleets, and power plants. As a processed fuel (coke) it helped satisfy the enormous appetites of the nation's iron furnaces. West Virginia coal was the basis for the tremendous growth of the American economy in the 20th century, and played a critical role in sustaining America's "arsenal of democracy" in wartime.

**Union History.** The West Virginia and Virginia coal fields also illustrate the struggle of American workers to secure the right to be represented in a union and to have some control over their working conditions.

The historic role of the United Mine Workers of America for example, has been to unite the miners into one body with a common set of goals and beliefs. This, however, took years of struggle, since the introduction of the union was adamantly opposed by the coal operators. The low wage structure was their competitive advantage in the dog-eat-dog regional competition in the 1910s and 1920s. They fought the UMWA with all the weapons they could garner. The UMWA, with its base of strength in the northern fields, realized that it was threatened with extinction if the nonunion mines of West Virginia continued to out-produce and steal the markets of the union mines. Therefore, the UMWA concentrated all its energies on organizing West Virginia. It is no surprise that West Virginia became a battlefield in the early years of this century. Throughout the mine wars, there were many bastions of nonunion strength which remained unorganized until 1933 with the passage of the National Recovery Act. Labor contracts signed by the mine owners and the UMWA established a standard for fair wages and decent working conditions that impacted industries far beyond the coal fields of West Virginia and Virginia.

**Ethnic History.** In many ways the ethnic history of the coal mining fields of southern West Virginia/Virginia is a microcosm of the ethnic history of the United States. These coal fields were

scarcely populated before the coming of coal. The small population was inadequate to serve the needs of the labor-hungry coal industry. Coal operators were forced to recruit labor from three sources: white Americans from older coal regions, black Americans from the south, especially Virginia and North Carolina, and immigrants from Southern and Southeastern Europe. Many coal companies became and remained active in recruiting labor, sending agents to New York City to attract the rapidly growing influx of European immigrants including Italians, Hungarians, Poles, Russians, Slavs and Rumanians.

**Social History—The Company Town.** The company town was the most important institution in the coal fields of southern West Virginia. Since most mines were opened in virtually unsettled areas, there was little existing housing for the influx of laborers. Housing was a necessity, and the coal operators were the only parties in the region with the wherewithal to build it. The location of the company town was determined, not by considerations of health or community life, but by the proximity to the mine outcrop. The facilities for mining, the mine opening and tippie, were built first. Next, consideration was given to the location of railroad siding. Finally, in the remaining space, whether it was valley floor or hillside, the town was laid-out and constructed.

The social history of the typical coal company town is illustrative

of the status of American race relations of the time. The different racial groups were segregated, with the native whites occupying the choicest dwellings near the tipple, the foreigners in those on the fringes of the settlement, and the blacks in houses that were often separated from the main cluster. Although segregation did not apply inside the mine, there was a hierarchy of occupations. The majority of native whites held the higher paying and more authoritarian positions, such as superintendent, foreman, fire boss; they most often operated the machinery. Some whites were also coal loaders, the lowest occupational category. The foreign born were on the second echelon of the occupational ladder, holding some machine jobs and machine helper jobs and being loaders. Blacks were the lowest on the occupational ladder, rarely having machine or machine helper jobs, and almost always being coal loaders.

**Technology.** Another important theme that is illustrated by these resources concerns the role of technology in the industrial revolution. When the first coal mines in southern West Virginia were started in the 1880s it took only modest capital investment of a few thousand dollars. Nearly all of the early mines were drift mines, so expensive excavation equipment or hoists were not required. The operator had to provide little more than housing and a store for miners, a simple wooden tipple, mules and some light track. No power machinery

was used, and the miners supplied their own picks, shovels, and tamping bars. The small capital outlay necessary for opening made it easy for the small operator to enter the industry: a situation which created a highly competitive industry with a large number of firms, and because it encouraged production, ultimately led to the overexpansion of the industry.

The evolution of the mining industry in this century was marked by the disappearance of the small-time and indigenous operators. Large corporations soon dominated the industry and introduced technological innovations, such as loading machines, necessary to increase output per worker and changed the industry forever. While technology helped to make the industry more cost effective the loss of good paying union jobs was severe.

**Local History.** When the coal industry began its "boom" in the southern coal fields, the number of mining jobs increased dramatically. However, with the exception of the coke industry, it generated very few manufacturing jobs. Most of these manufacturing jobs were in the coke industry. This meant that the economy of the southern West Virginia and Virginia coal fields was built on a narrow base of resource extraction, rather than manufacturing. Because the coal lands and major coal companies were absentee owned, there was little in the way of profits from mining that could be re-invested in other industries. This dependence

upon coal placed the region at the mercy of the national coal market, a situation which had harmful consequences not only for the coal industry, itself, but also for the development of housing and infrastructure in the region. The decline of coal after World War II illustrates the dangers of depending on the extraction of only one resource as the basis for a regional economy. As the industry of America matured, the towns and communities in the coal fields failed to change. This inability to change led to the loss of jobs and the devastation of the population and economic infrastructure of the West Virginia and Virginia coal fields. The lesson is clear. The economic health and preeminence of any community is not assured for all time. Change and evolution are necessary for economic survival.

### Summary

The history of coal and of the men and women who worked in the mines is a consequential story that should generate self-esteem in these communities and pride for the nation. Coal was central to the development of the industrial might of the United States. The struggle of the coal miners for union recognition, decent wages and safe working conditions was reflective of the desire of the American worker for social justice, equality and economic opportunity. The men and women who came to the coal fields of West Virginia and Virginia were seeking a part of the American dream. They wanted high paying jobs and

the opportunity to work and support their families. The coal mines gave them this opportunity. In the struggle to unionize they changed the industry and re-defined the American dream.

The history of coal also illustrates an important ecological lesson. Coal, an important resource that once fueled the Industrial Revolution in America, is now used primarily as the underpinning of the American chemical industry. Coal is a natural resource of incomparable worth. Coal and the people who worked in the mines are resources that are now being recycled to support the continuing evolution of the American Industrial Revolution. We may no longer burn large amounts of coal for fuel, but we do utilize coal as a chemical resource that forms the basis for many of our present day industrial activities. Coal is part of our future. This story needs to be told to this generation of Americans.

Through the implementation of the Labor History National Historic Landmark Theme Study, Congress intended that concerned interested groups working with the National Park Service should begin discussions with leaders from local communities to develop planning strategies to assist these communities in the preservation and interpretation of their locally based but nationally significant labor history resources. It is the intention of the National Park Service to see that this is done in a manner that will acknowledge the national signifi-

cance of the labor history inherent in these sites and respect other issues involving local pride, and the nature of our federal and state form of government. The resources associated with the coal mining industry in West Virginia

and Virginia offer an insight as to what is possible. The challenges are great but rewards resulting from the preservation and interpretation of the coal mining heritage sites in West Virginia and Virginia are worth the effort.

