

**APPALACHIAN RESTRUCTURING IN HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVE: COAL, CULTURE, AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN WEST VIRGINIA**

by

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that West Virginia has experienced revolutionary social changes which are exemplified most vividly in the coal industry. Ownership of 2/3 of the land was transferred from farmers to natural resource corporations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Farmers became miners, retaining a portion of their agricultural ways in the coal towns by raising extensive gardens and livestock. Thus emerged a rural society of wage-dependent, landless industrial workers. Mechanization of the mines began during the post WW II and has continued to the present. This restructuring of the coal industry, and the out-migration it precipitated, has had a profound social, economic, and political impact on the state.

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APPALACHIAN RESTRUCTURING IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:
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One of the enduring images of West Virginia is that of a forbidding landscape inhabited by "hill folk" stubbornly clinging to small worn-out, uneconomical subsistence farms in isolated hollows. It is easy to understand why this image persists; West Virginia has been and continues to be an overwhelmingly rural, state. In 1870, on the eve of the industrial transformation, West Virginia was almost entirely (92%) rural, and even after sixty years of industrial development in 1930 three-quarters (72%) of the population still was rural. Two-thirds (64%) of the state's population remained rural in 1990. (U.S. Census, Characteristics, 1870, 1990; Occupations, 1930)

The element of economic redundancy contained within the "hillbilly" caricature has become a fixture in the pantheon of stereotypes found in American popular culture. Fashioned by the local color writers at the turn of the 20th century to entertain a rapidly urbanizing middle class of leisure readers, the caricature persists because it serves to reassure the urban middle class of its cultural superiority. (Shapiro) Empirically, the problem with the redundant "hill folk" stereotype is that it presumes a traditional, static, preindustrial society. In fact, West Virginians have been swept along before a torrent of political, economic, and social change produced by the development of the enormous supply of natural resources, such as timber, gas, oil, and coal. West Virginia is most noted, however, as a major producer of coal. Therefore, in this paper, I will focus on the role of the coal industry in transforming life and labor in this

rugged region.

The history of the coal industry in West Virginia is characterized by a series of struggles for control. The first began with the struggle for control over the natural resources, the transfer of timber and mineral resources from the farming to the industrial interests. Even though the population of West Virginia is overwhelmingly rural, it is also overwhelmingly industrial, rather than agricultural. As early as 1920, about one-quarter (24.3%) of those employed were in agriculture, down from two-thirds (64.2%) in 1870. That figure continued a long downward slide until 1990 when the U. S. Census calculated that only 1.86% of all gainfully employed individuals in the state were employed in the census category of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing. (Pudup, 12; U. S. Census, Characteristics of Population (1990); See also, W.V., Employment, 1990, p.5)

Even though the idea that Appalachia was bypassed by America's industrial expansion during the late-19th and early 20th centuries is well-fixed in the public mind, West Virginia was in fact the frontier of American industrial capitalism during this period. At the turn of the century, syndicates of northeastern bankers and industrialists accumulated vast tracts of coal lands by reorganizing and consolidating numerous small holdings into fewer large ones. (Eller, pp. 132-34; Tams, pp. 24-33) The coal industry, and in many respects the state itself, was transformed into a peripheral economic and political appendage of the nation's industrial and financial centers. With capital investment from New York and London, indigenous people lost control of the land and their government. (Eller, chap. 6; Gaventa and Williams offer examples) Already by 1923 absentees owned more than one-half of the state's private land, and in the 1970s when the last ownership study was completed, two-thirds of all privately-owned land in

West Virginia was controlled by natural resource corporations. (Miller, 1974) There is no evidence that this trend has been reversed. It was, therefore, the kind rather than the lack of economic development which has shaped West Virginia's unique rural-industrial heritage.

West Virginia was transformed into an industrial state during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Mining developed in the narrow valleys and on the steep hillsides which had been least attractive to agricultural settlers so the local labor supply was usually scarce or non-existent. Hundreds of independent coal operators established mines on land leased from large absentee corporate owners. The proliferation of small independent mines led to a concentration of coal camps, one after another, for miles along many narrow valleys and hollows. (Eller, pp. 161-65)

Operators often created not just the town's physical plant, but also the social institutions necessary to maintain those towns. In this case the operator was not only the miners' employer, but also filled the roles of landlord, merchant, postmaster, provider of entertainment, and sanitation officer. Operators often provided mining towns with police and fire protection, and medical, spiritual, and educational services, as journalist Winthrop Lane observed in 1921. (Lane, pp. 22-23) "Model" company towns attracted public attention, but they comprised less than 2 per cent of all coal company towns. All company towns were limited by the will and resources of their owners, and abuses of this power led contemporary critics to characterize West Virginia as "Russia," and coal towns as "relics of feudalism." Mother Jones, the octogenarian union activist, had the company town in mind when she spoke of "Medieval West Virginia," and vowed: "When I get to the other side I shall tell God Almighty about West Virginia." (Eller, pp. 190-91; Norton, pp. 154-55; Gompers, pp. 825-35; Parton, p. 235)

Industrialization dramatically altered the size of the population as a work force was imported into this labor scarce region. The population in the southern West Virginia coal fields nearly quintupled between 1880 and 1920, from 93,000 to 446,000. Nearly all of the imported workers and their families came to company towns. Nearly four-fifths (78.8 %) of the mine workers in southern West Virginia, and over two-thirds (64.4 %) in eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia, lived in company-owned towns, compared with 8.5% in Indiana and Illinois, and 24.3% in Ohio. (U.S. Coal Commission, Table 14, p. 1467)

In some counties where farming was the only form of sustenance, a nearly complete shift from agriculture to mining occurred as farmers abandoned the land for the mines. In the 1880s, the typical mountain farm averaged about 187 acres, but by 1930 the average had fallen to between 47 and 76 acres. By the 1920s, less than 15% of the land in Mingo and Boone counties remained in farms, and in McDowell County only 7% of the land was devoted to agriculture. (Corbin, p. 7)

The composition of the population also was radically altered by the influx of people. In the coal camps mountain farmers encountered a bewildering array of recently imported foreign immigrants and southern blacks. On the eve of World War I, for example, four counties in the southern West Virginia coal fields contained approximately 11,000 white Americans, 9,000 black Americans, 8,000 Italians and Hungarians, 2,800 European immigrants of 24 other nationalities, and 5,800 people of unknown origins. (W.V., 1909; Trotter, p. 69)

Coal companies controlled this diverse work force through a policy known as the "judicious mixture," a labor policy which sought roughly a 25% foreign--25% black--50% white American work force composition, in order to use cultural and racial fragmentation to inhibit

unionization. (Bailey)

The population boom which accompanied industrial development also brought into the coal fields middle-class merchants and professionals to open banks, law offices, stores, and insurance agencies. Each town had its old established families who disapproved of the transformation, but many of them were also enthusiastic agents of change, and when they joined forces with the ambitious newcomers together they far outnumbered, and out-financed, those who resisted. (Savage, p. xiv)

The miners themselves struggled to overcome their differences, however, and a sense of class solidarity grew out of their shared grievances and sense of powerlessness. The coal companies responded by adopting what miners called a "gun thug" system. Under this system a new social order emerged in the coal fields maintained by the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, a private police force contracted to protect company interests, and to keep out the union by any means necessary. The infamous mine wars of the early 20th century were a direct result of this new system. The basis of the violence lay not with radical individuals, or some presumed violent streak in the mountaineer character, but with issues, particularly the fundamental issue of who would control and profit from development of West Virginia's natural resources. This struggle for control has played a major role in shaping the state's history, influencing institutional life at every level. (Corbin, Savage, Williams)

The power relationships in coal company towns and in the coal fields generally during this period helps explain why the worst working conditions in the industry seemed always to be found in the central Appalachian region. Much has been written about coal field conditions, and the conflict between capital and labor during these formative years, but surprisingly little is

known about the process by which these new, ethnically diverse people assimilated and adapted to a new life in this rural-industrial setting.

Like wheels within wheels, the development of a rural-industrial culture within a rural rather than an urban context, represents still another subtlety in the industrial transformation which has been ignored by scholars more fascinated instead by the drama of incessant conflict between miners and management in West Virginia. Mining towns were the rural equivalents of the ethnic ghettos which served as transitional communities for foreign immigrants in the cities. In these coal towns native-born whites, blacks from the South, and foreigners of many descriptions intermingled. Despite the great racial and ethnic diversity, and cultural conflict, nearly all of the miners who came into the WV coal fields during the developing years had one characteristic in common which made the process easier: most had some prior experience with farming. Raw as conditions were in these early coal towns, their rural surroundings provided for a more gradual assimilation of the imported work force into industrial life than was possible in the cities.

Basic skills developed on the farm became survival skills in many of the coal camps. In fact, the prominence of the land itself in the daily life of this rural-industrial occupation actually encouraged the retention of these agricultural skills. As late as 1972, sociologist Kai Erikson, who was in southern West Virginia conducting field research for his book on the Buffalo Creek disaster, was struck by the intimate relationship that prevailed between the residents and the landscape in this coal mining hollow. These people did not so much "live on the land as in it," he observed, because "most of the terrain they see and relate to is either above them or below them, enveloping them on all sides." (Erickson, p. 130) Erickson's description

of West Virginians immersed in a culture sustained and nourished by the land characterized the lives of miners in the region even more so during the first decades of the 20th century when the rural-industrial culture evolved in this new environment.

Most of the migrants who came to work the coal had previous experience with farm work. Field interviews conducted in 1932 among 956 unemployed miners in Kentucky and West Virginia found that one-half (50.4%) of their fathers had been farmers, and a little over one-third (36.8%) of the miners themselves had worked as farmers. (Morris, p. 58) This helps to account for the agricultural character of many Appalachian coal towns where extensive gardening and raising livestock was widespread. In 1924, the West Virginia coal Association estimated that a majority of the state's coal miners cultivated gardens, and raised livestock and barnyard fowl. The percentage was highest in the southern counties where over 70% of the miners reportedly tilled gardens and raised livestock. (Lewis, 1989, p. 88)

Industrialization made it necessary to rewrite law which had grown up around agricultural custom in order to provide protection for new industrial investment. For example, custom dictated that crops were fenced in while livestock grazed on the mountainside commons. With the development of the railroad, however, the legal question had to be resolved as to who was responsible for keeping the livestock off of the railroad tracks, the railroad or the farmer? Rephrased, the question revolved around which should be fenced in, the farmer's livestock or the railroad's iron horse? (Blaine, Layne, Starks)

As the population grew, free-roaming livestock prompted debate over keeping them off the town streets and out of the gardens as well. An example is found in the campaign of Garland Skaggs of Ansted, West Virginia, who is described as the miner who ran for mayor to

pen up the cows: "I was elected mayor of Ansted in 1936 and only one reason made me decide to run," Skaggs informed an interviewer. "Everybody had a cow or two cows, and they ran all over town. . . . So I ran for mayor to put the cows out. There was a lot of opposition to that. One old gentleman came to me and said, 'Garland, why should I have to build a fence to keep my cows in?' I said, 'Why should I have to build a fence to keep your cows out of my garden?' I was elected. Once they'd seen what a difference it made to have the cows penned up, everybody was for it." (Athey, p. 51; Bragg, p. 18)

Prior cultural skills and economic realities coalesced in many coal camps to sustain some aspects of farm life in this rural-industrial setting. Wage work for women and children was scarce in the mine towns, and little opportunity existed for them to directly supplement the family income as they had back on the farm where women and children had played a key role in production. In the coal fields women and children reduced the family's expenditures at the company store by raising garden crops and animals for their own use. (Green; Lewis, 1989, p. 89; Trotter, pp. 90-91)

In "model" company towns, those in which the operator attempted to "uplift" the quality of life for miners and their families without relinquishing the levers of control, gardening not only was encouraged but also rewarded. Cash awards for the best garden, free seed and fertilizer, and expert advice from the extension agent, were supplied by some operators to instill desirable values, such as a personal improvement orientation, and individual competitiveness. (Coal Age, 1914, 1917; Munn) Coal companies had a variety of motives for encouraging the cultivation of foodstuffs, but the workers responded enthusiastically because previously acquired skills retained their utilitarian and psychological benefits. In this way many migrants to the coal

field were able to retain more continuity with the past than was possible for those who left their farms for the cities.

Not everyone was happy about leaving the farm behind. Homer Morris, the Friends social service worker assigned to the central Appalachian coal fields during the early 1930s, interviewed many miners whose experience mirrored that sentiment. "I was dissatisfied with things on the farm and wanted to get in the mines where I could make some money," he informed Morris. "I know now I was a fool but I didn't know it then." Another unemployed miner declared: "I've had all of the mining I want. I'll stay on a farm if I can get there. If mining would pick up to six days a week I wouldn't go back." "I'd rather be back on the old farm in Georgia, naked and one-eyed," proclaimed one southern migrant, "than a miner in Kentucky with fifty dollars." (Morris, pp. 62, 71-72)

This fusion of agriculture and coal mining was not peculiar to West Virginia, of course, nor was it even uniquely American. Numerous studies of the coal industry in the British Isles, for example, demonstrate that gardening and livestock raising remained important in mining districts long after the landscape ceased to be either rural or agricultural. (See for examples: Benson, 157; Laslet, 19-20; Harrison, 56,65; Roy, 52; Harvey, Chap. 7) Subsistence farming supplementing wage labor in the pits may not have been uniquely Appalachia, but as a cultural process it did reflect distinctive regional characteristics. The new culture that emerged in the coal fields was a transitional culture, a hybrid from preindustrial agricultural roots transplanted and adapted to new industrial islands surrounded by a rural landscape. American historian Herbert Gutman, argued that workers retained their "preindustrial" traditions in order to resist the attempts of industrialists to remold them into a malleable and dependent proletariat. These

preindustrial customs, he contended, permitted workers to maintain a meaningful identity in the harsh impersonal environment of industrializing America. (Gutman, p. 561) Certainly most of the migrants who settled in the Appalachian coal fields were from such a background. The retention of agricultural customs in this particular industrial environment was a rational cultural and economic adjustment, however, rather than an attempt to cling to the past, for the workers would have retained the customs even if the labor markets were not monopsonistic.

Unlike the violent clash between culture and work values which occurred when rural migrants entered city and factory, there was much in the structure and relations of mine work which mitigated such conflict. Rural farmers who entered mining were not compelled to radically restructure their work habits in order to adjust to what the British social historian E. P. Thompson called "new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively." (Thompson, p. 67)

By 1925, when labor economist Carter Goodrich published his classic The Miners' Freedom, coal-mining technology and the organization of underground labor remained fundamentally unchanged from what it had been at the beginning of the industrial revolution in England. With decisions relating to work and production still controlled by the miner, coal mining remained nearly untouched by technological change which had been revolutionizing urban factory life for a century. In Appalachia, as in most American coal fields, work was not yet regulated by time clocks; supervision remained casual; miners controlled their own tools, their own work places, and the pace and number of hours they labored. Coal mining, in fact, still operated at the cottage industry stage of development. Thus the miners' freedom had become part of an established web of labor relations shrouded by centuries of custom and accepted by

operators and miners alike by the time advanced capitalism embraced central Appalachia. Management interference with the miners' prerogatives was fiercely resisted. (Goodrich, Freedom, pp.15-16, and New Republic, pp. 91-93; Dix, 1977, chaps. 1-2) The editor of a magazine for professional managers warned other industrial employers to avoid hiring the former coal miner, for he "resents all suggestion as to his working methods, resents all effort to compel continuous application, and assumes in general a hostile attitude to all supervision." (Haring, p. 372)

Professional managers found the miners' lack of servility objectionable, but many migrants preferred coal mining because the miners' traditional independence resembled familiar work habits. Like farming, traditional methods of coal mining called for alternate periods of intensive labor and rest which permitted miners, who were paid by the ton rather than the hour, simply to walk out of the mine when they had loaded enough coal to satisfy their needs. Mining involved little direct supervision which added to the sense of independence, and was not possible in the factories. (Goodrich, Freedom, pp. 15-16) A miner from southern WV stated in the 1920s that he had worked a stint in a northern factory, but had returned to the coal fields because in the mines, the supervisors "don't bother you none." Another miner informed a Quaker social service worker that in the mines he could be "his own boss," and that he did not appreciate someone pushing him to "hurry up" all the time. (Morris, p. 67)

The economic system under which the typical company town operated also reflected a vaguely familiar industrial outline of the tenant or share farm system which many mountaineer, immigrant, and black arrivals had experienced in one form or another. Neither system functioned as a cash economy on a daily basis. Instead, economic exchange was based on a

credit arrangement that enabled landowners to assure that their fields were cultivated, and at the same time allowed poor people access to the land and to retain at least some of the trappings of the independent farmer. Migrants squeezed off their farms readily identified the general outlines of the tenant farm system in the coal company town. If the migrant had virtually nothing but the willingness to work, the company provided a place to live, as well as tools, work supplies, and food from the company store. The new miner was charged for these advances, and the cost of transportation, when appropriate, against the coal he produced. The miner, therefore, often began his mining career in debt and, as with sharecropping, he had to produce a sufficient amount of coal to clear these charges from the balance sheet. Paydays were, in effect, settlement days for many miners who, like tenant or share farmers, often found it difficult to free themselves of credit dependency. (Lewis, 1989, p. 92; Baker, pp. 75, 99)

Migrants, therefore, found a system of work and economic exchange which muted the shock of entering industrial life. This transitional mining society would not outlast the Great Depression and World War II before another economic restructuring occurred in the coal industry which transformed life in West Virginia. Traditional methods of mining had called for "manpower," and machines were merely mechanical aids. During the 1930s, however, when miners finally won the right to collective bargaining, a new struggle for control developed which centered on the workplace itself as companies sought to reorganize the underground production process around new technologies.

Historically, the reorganization of work following the introduction of new technologies has been accompanied by the corollary process of "deskilling" the worker by transferring the control of knowledge and production from craftsmen to machines owned by management.

(Gordon, Edwards, and Reich; Braverman) Prior to the Great Depression of the 1930s, miners had effectively retarded the process because of their unique control at the point of production. The mechanical coal loader was the first machine to significantly restructure the work process underground by reorganizing the independent colliers into work crews. The coal loader had been introduced as early as 1921, but the declining markets for coal and labor seriously dampened investment in this new technology until World War II. (Lewis, 1987, p. 169; Dix, 1988, pp. 84-90, 96; Mechanization, 1950, pp. 341-44; Coal Age, 1939, pp. 52-53)

The first truly revolutionary machine, therefore, to radically transform the work process itself was the continuous miner which reorganized miners into work crews subject to direct company supervision. It replaced not only men, but machines as well, including the mechanical loader, by integrating several stages of production into one process.. With its introduction in the 1940s, and rapid spread throughout the industry, a new era began in the state's history. (Lewis, 1987, pp. 178-79; Continuous, 1950, p. 114; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) The impact on the work force was dramatic and immediate: between 1950 and 1970 the national coal mine work force was reduced by 75 per cent, from 483,818 miners to 128,375. This trend was mirrored in West Virginia where the number of employed miners fell by nearly 70 per cent, from 127,304 in 1950 to 40,513 in 1970. (U.S. Census, 1950, vol. 2, and 1970, vol.1)

Mechanization turned into automation during the 1970s with the development of long-wall mining, a system which again completely revolutionized the way coal is mined underground. The computer controlled shear of the long-wall operation chews its way through an underground coal seam with amazingly efficient rapacity. Cutting back and forth along a 500 to 750 foot wall, the coal falls onto a conveyor belt system which carries it sometimes miles to the surface

where it is processed and deposited into river barges or coal cars.

The impact of mine mechanization and automation is dramatically revealed in the data. The number of tons mined by the average West Virginia miner rose slowly during the first half of the twentieth century, from 755 tons per year in 1900 to 1,217 tons in 1950. With the introduction of continuous miners that average rose to 3,567 tons in 1967, and continued to climb during the long-wall era, reaching 5,921 tons by 1988. Unfortunately, the rising productivity which was so beneficial to the industry was not so salubrious for the state's miners; their numbers declined precipitously from about 40,000 in 1970 to about 24,000 in 1990. (Nyden; National Coal Association, pp. II-24)

The unemployment and poverty resulting from job displacement were symptoms of the broader, long-term restructuring of the coal economy in West Virginia, a process which has been unusually prolonged. While both the labor force as well as employment declined, employment declined more rapidly and spawned one of the great regional out-migrations in U. S. history; over one million people have left the state during the past four decades that this restructuring has been underway. The final consequences of this process are yet to be revealed, and current anxieties arise from not knowing where the modern economic downturn will end. One optimistic sign is that unemployment has declined from a high of 18% in 1983 to about 8% in 1991. On the other hand, some of this decline in unemployment undoubtedly is accounted for by the net loss of about 122,000 people during this same period. (Steelhammer)

The coal industry fundamentally altered life and labor in West Virginia, but in the coal fields farming persisted in a rural countryside which provided ample space for the older agricultural ways to co-exist with the new industrial order. Agricultural skills have become

survival skills as coal mining employment recedes in importance. This kind of economic activity generally is unrecognized in official data. The labor force participation rate measures those (over 16 years old after 1970) who are "economically active," but does not account for all those who work. To be counted one must have an "unambiguous relationship to the market, whether it is in the form of commercial production and exchange of goods and services or wage payment." (Pudup, 7) Probably for this reason, West Virginia ranks last among the states with the percentage of its working-age residents officially participating in the labor force at 49.8% in 1988. Of the remaining 50.2%, only about 20% can be accounted for as surviving on welfare payments. The other 30% are presumed to rely on the "informal economy." (Long) Much of the "work" required for survival among the unaccounted for 30% undoubtedly is subsistence agriculture for household consumption.

Thus, large segments of this rural-industrial population never lost their abilities at getting by without cash. Many of those redundant coal miners who have not migrated to other states, therefore, fall back on the "make due" culture of growing gardens, raising livestock and barnyard fowl, bartering, and labor swapping, customs based on an agricultural past the origins of which have been forgotten, but nonetheless persevered in this particular kind of rural-industrial landscape. Few if any of them would show up in the census as farm operators. In fact, neither the state nor the federal government even attempt to gather this kind of data. The diffusion of this statistically invisible agricultural activity is far more generalized in the population than appears in the official data. One series of data gathered by the Bureau of the Census relating to farm operators, however, shows that only 42% of the farm operators listed in 1987 claimed farming as their principal occupation, and 58% declared "other" primary

occupations. (U. S. Census, Agriculture, 1987)

Measuring the extent to which this "informal economy" has dampened the urge among poor West Virginians with a strong sense of place to migrate to more promising economic locations presents a significant challenge to social scientists. Nevertheless, even though the evidence is impressionistic it is also readily observed that subsistence farming skills learned in preindustrial Appalachia, and preserved during the decades of industrial transition and mature capitalist development, are now survival skills for many of the unemployed during the latest restructuring of West Virginia's coal economy.

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