

Oral Histories of Former Residents of Tazewell County, Virginia's Coal Company Communities

Abstract

Purposefully designed to meet the demand for a sustainable labor force in a sparsely populated and geographically isolated area, company-owned coal towns were hastily constructed throughout Central Appalachia beginning at the turn of the century. While many features of these towns across the broader region were similar, there were significant local differences that justify close case studies. The capital and operating philosophies of coal companies, combined with the degree of union agitation and cooperation, produced stark disparities in the working and living conditions of coal towns physically separated by only a few miles. How miners and their families experienced daily life in these various communities, as well as how they remembered those experiences, illuminate undercurrents of social stratification and modes of resilience that are generally obscured in labor-based economic studies. Existing scholarship has not only overlooked cultural aspects of coal camp life, but has generally neglected the sub-region of southwestern Virginia. In an effort to help fill this gap in the history of Appalachian community life, this proposal for research, as part of the senior thesis requirement for graduation from the Department of History, seeks to incorporate oral history interviews as the key primary sources in an academic exploration of Tazewell County, Virginia's dynamic coal camp populations. Oral histories will allow authentic voices to emerge in telling the important story of how mining families employed agency to negotiate the terms of their livelihood under the regulations of local coal companies.



Mr. and Mrs. James Wheeler and their three children in front of their company-owned home. Raven Red Ash Coal Company, No. 2 mine, Raven, Tazewell County, Virginia. Summer, 1946.

Proposal

Since the 1960s, labor historians have largely romanticized pre-industrial mountain life as harmonious and self-sufficient. Many have focused their scholarship on the negativity of the exploitation of miners and the degradation of traditional folkways resultant from the oppressive tactics of coal

operators.¹ To this effect, much has been written about the predominately infamous conditions of mining, labor unrest, and the pervasiveness of company supervision in everyday affairs. In the early 1990s, a few scholars, namely Crandall Shifflett, began making assertions that the agrarian way of life had been declining by the 1880s and Appalachian natives welcomed the opportunity for wage labor offered by the emerging industrial economy.² With no intention to negate nor to diminish the harsh realities of paternalistic management intruding on civilian life, this study aims to shift the lens away from a narrative of victimization to one that acknowledges the resourcefulness and endurance employed by the residents of coal towns. As a means to accomplish this objective, in addition to careful analysis of primary sources including coal company records, union documents, miners' correspondence, and photographs, the strength of this research will be a collection of oral histories from the men and women who lived in the coal camps of Tazewell County.

Through networking with members of the Tazewell County Historical Society, the Jewell Ridge Reunion Committee, and the Eastern Regional Coal Archives, individuals who resided in (and around) the local coal camps during the boom years of the post-WWII 1940s and rapid decline of the late-1950s will be recruited as potential interviewees. Specific modes of recruitment may include personal referrals, mailings, social media, and local postings. The main objective of the interview questions will be to allow former residents to fairly represent the complexities of their lived daily experiences in their own terms. Most of the interviewees will be aged into their 70s – 90s. It is vital to capture the narratives of those who had first-hand life experiences during the peak and decline of the southwestern Virginia coal economy while they are still living and of sound health and mind. My training in the ethical collection of oral histories (as designated by the Oral History Association) has provided me with a necessary sensitivity for working with the elderly demographic around which this research is based. My position as a native of Tazewell County widens opportunities for a more expansive collection of oral histories from a population that is often hesitant to speak candidly to outsiders.

The communities of Jewell Ridge, Bishop, Red Ash and Raven will be of particular focus, as this research aims to investigate the reasons *why* residents in these camps experienced such a range of living conditions. When confronted with the apparent socioeconomic incompatibilities between geographically proximate communities, the notion that the “coal camp experience” can be homogeneously typified proves flawed. Residents' stories are the best (and possibly only) way to gain a sense of the diversity that daily life in Tazewell County coal camps entailed and meant to their inhabitants. It is not enough to rely on company records, news reports, and other primary sources from the perspective of superiors or outsiders. Against the backdrop of thoroughly engaged scholarship, oral histories will provide much needed insight about dynamic factors influencing the living conditions in different company towns and how community networks fostered agency and sustained a sense of dignity for miners and their families.

¹ For examples of narratives of victimization see: Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1963); David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981); and Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.

² Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). For another example of similar scholarship see: Karen Bescherer Metheny, *From the Miners' Doublehouse: Archaeology and Landscape in a Pennsylvania Coal Company Town*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).



*Street view of company-owned homes.
Raven Red Ash Coal Company, No. 2
mine, Raven, Tazewell County, Virginia.
Summer, 1946.*

*Multifamily company housing in Bishop,
Tazewell County, Virginia. Pocahontas
Coal Corporation. Summer, 1946. – Note
the striking differences in the quality of
the structure, landscaping, and street
conditions between his photograph and
the one from Raven*



Ethics & Oral History Guidelines

As a student historian, I will be stringently following the guidelines for oral history collection as outlined by the Oral History Association (OHA). I am therefore **exempt from IRB review**, per the Chair of the UNCA Institutional Review Board.

Prospective Publication Outlets

I plan to publish my research through the *UNC Asheville Journal of Undergraduate Research* and present at the UNC Asheville Undergraduate Research Symposium in Fall 2015. Throughout the course of my research, I will be actively seeking publication through academic journals in southwestern Virginia. Due to the regional focus of my research, I will be depositing my oral history collection at UVA Wise Special Collections. The collection would also be available to UNCA Special Collections if deemed applicable.

Timeline

- May 31, 2015: Have read supplemental oral history manuals (as recommended by my advisor) in contribution to my adherence of the Oral History Association's best practices. Travel to southwestern Virginia and continue recruiting for interviewees.
- June 30, 2015: Have conducted and transcribed 5-8 oral history interviews. Complete assignments as required by my advisor. Continue recruiting interviewees as necessary.
- July 31, 2015: Have conducted and transcribed an additional 5-8 interviews. Complete final assignments reflecting how the oral histories will be utilized in my senior thesis.
- Fall Sem. 2015: Through HIST 452 (Senior Research Seminar), complete my senior thesis paper and prepare for presentation at the Fall 2015 Undergraduate Research Symposium.

Budget

1. DIGITAL RECORDER.....\$40.00
A quality voice recorder will assure efficiency and quality of the interviews.
2. MATERIALS & SUPPLIES.....\$20.00
The amount estimated here is for notebooks, pens, and printing costs.
3. TRAVEL.....\$760.00
Accounting for approximately 1320 miles in travel (round trips from Asheville to Cedar Bluff, VA, and local travel in southwestern Virginia). This amount is estimated to cover fuel and vehicle maintenance at the federal rate of .575 per mile.
4. LODGING.....\$180.00
I am fortunate to have family in parts of southwestern Virginia with whom I can stay for the majority of my research travel. This amount is estimated to cover a two-night hotel stay near the Eastern Regional Coal Archives in Bluefield, VA, which would allow me to conduct research with existing oral histories on deposit.³
5. STIPEND.....\$1500.00
I am requesting the maximum stipend to assist in the financial support of myself and my family while I will not be gainfully employed for the duration of my travel and research.

TOTAL REQUESTED= \$2500.00

³ As an example of the potential of working with existing oral histories on deposit see: Frances Huffman, interviewed by Beth Hager, audiotape (Eastern Regional Coal Archives. Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV). It should be noted that these tapes are limited in number and scope. There is still considerable need for further investigation through additional oral histories conducted by a trained student historian.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Huffman, Frances. Interviewed by Beth Hager. Bluefield, WV. 19 August 1981. Local Identifier 86-1116. Eastern Regional Coal Archives. Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV.

Frances describes moving to the company-owned town of Bishop with her husband in the early 1930s. The female perspective concerning housing, domestic duties, and perceptions of men's work in the mines is essential in fairly representing the lived experiences of coal town residents in Tazewell County.

Photographs of the Medical Survey of the Bituminous Coal Industry, 1946-1947. Department of the Interior. Record Group 245: Records of the Solid Fuels Administration for War, 1937 - 1948, Local Identifier 245 –MS. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). <http://research.archives.gov/description/540230> [accessed September 25, 2014].

All photographs included in this proposal are attributed to this collection.

Secondary Sources

Caudill, Harry M. *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1963.

Corbin, David Alan. *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

Eller, Ronald D. *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.

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