

**Survey and History of
Coal Company Towns :
Benham and Lynch, KY**

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For whatever reason, I have always been intrigued by the lives of the people of Eastern Kentucky, and more specifically the coal miner. As a young man, I spent my summers at my grandmother's home on East Sixteenth Street which we called concrete street because at that time and maybe for all time, it was the only residential concrete street in the city. I would walk downtown to the library every day to read the morning newspaper and to check on the new books. An avid reader, I fell in love with Jesse Stuart books and have probably read them all at one time or another. Stuart wrote about an Eastern Kentucky land and people that seemed distant and almost foreign to a West Kentucky boy. As I became a little older, I tired of Stuart's books somewhat. While he is surely one of our greatest writers, he could sometimes be a little too stereotypical in his portrayals of the mountain people. I remained intrigued by the Eastern Kentucky culture though and continued to read offerings of other writers of the area, including Harry Caudill's seminal book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. I have read other books of Caudill, but this one made a lasting impact. There was something fascinating about the people and the area of which he wrote. Like Stuart, he wrote of Eastern Kentucky, but his books delved more into the plight of the coal miner and not the hillbilly. There was always something fascinating and mysterious about these coal miners, I had seen their pictures in black-and-white for years in the Courier-Journal, and I was always intrigued by the forlorn look worn on the faces of the people, whether it was the miner, his wife, or his children. I am not sure now how much of the sadness seen was the work of the photographer or the true sorrow of the miners. More interesting to me, was the story of the company town and the role it played in the lives of these people. Even though as a young man I never made it deep into the mountains that I loved to read about, I always was intrigued when we would drive through Muhlenberg and Hopkins County and see the coal trucks and would wonder if they were going home to a company town. Though I do not believe that Christian County ever had true company towns, my research does show former coal camps in Empire, Mannington, and an area I have not heard of, Powerful.

The coal company town began to come about after the turn of the last century. These towns were built on land that had been settled almost one hundred years before and bought from the families of those settlers. The original families that made up the East or more precisely, the Southeast region of our state owned over 190,000 acres of mountainous land. The majority of which lay in Kentucky with small portions in Virginia and

Tennessee. Amazingly, they had surveyed this land themselves in the 1840's. The family names are still prominent in the Eastern Kentucky mountains to this day, Napier, Ledford, Noe, Caywood, and Farmer. In 1876 a Philadelphian named Edward Davis purchased 86,000 acres of this land for \$86,000. The land remained virtually untouched and underutilized until 1902, when Warren Delano, Jr., a member of the boards of the L&N and Atlantic Coastline Railroads, learned of the railroad's intent to build a passage in that remote area of the world. Delano, the uncle of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, worked on behalf of a syndicate led by Edward Davis' son Charles to secure more acreage and clear any problems to the mineral rights on the original acreage. They named the syndicate Kentenia, playing off the various syllables of the three state names on which the land lay.

FDR would accompany his uncle to Harlan from time-to-time and would help with the title work at the courthouse. In 1908, he wrote a series of letters to his wife Eleanor about the area. After one twenty-two mile trip out into the land with his uncle, he described it as the roughest trail and worst road in a county known for rough trails and bad roads. Before long the land belonging to the Kentenia syndicate was leased to various coal companies and the now famous coal company town began to spring up. In order to integrate his industrial empire, Henry Ford purchased 50,000 acres of the land in the area. The company, called Fordson in honor of his son Edsel built one of the early company towns and was considered at that time one of the best. But the best of these new communities would be Benham and Lynch. These two communities sprung up just below the South face of Black Mountain, which is the highest point in the state of Kentucky at over four thousand one hundred feet and near the mouth of Looney Creek. Lynch was built by US Coal and Coke, soon to be US Steel, and Benham by International Harvester. Built on the theory that advanced mining technology and corporate paternalism would make their workers the most efficient, these towns would become the model of what most company towns hoped to be. Benham was built first and Lynch would come a few years later. These towns lay next to each other, though next-to-each-other is somewhat of a misnomer. Built in a valley between two mountains with a height of at least 3,000 feet, the towns lay end-to-end and snake through the valley. Literally, these two towns are no wider than Fort Campbell Boulevard.

In 2007, the Kentucky Department of Parks entered into a lease option

with the town Benham to operate the Benham School House Inn. I decided to take a trip to this area and began work on this paper there.

Though the United States was experiencing an early energy boom that led to the construction of these company towns, it was not until the start of World War I that all hell broke loose. The allies needed steel to fortify their armies and to protect its people. The coke mined in these hills was of the highest grade and would fuel the steel mills of what is now known as the rust belt. Twenty mining towns sprung up in Harlan County alone as its population tripled from 10,000 to 30,000 people in just ten years. That may not sound like a tremendous amount of people for one county in Kentucky, but when you consider the almost non-existence of flat and tillable land, it's phenomenal. The allies needed explosives also, and the coal in Harlan County was rich in toluene. In desperate need of a living wage, people came down out of the hills and inundated the mining towns. Though I talked about stereotypes at the first of my discussion, these folks not only mined the coal, but they did drink whiskey from moonshine stills and fought with guns and knives. Even after some of the more cosmopolitan Europeans began to enter the society, the company's hope of creating a Utopian atmosphere for its working families proved to be a tough sale. The residents were too young, too diverse, and too quick-tempered for such a society to take hold. It has always been somewhat conventional wisdom that "Bloody Harlan" acquired its reputation during the famous labor wars of the 1930's. But in 1916, Harlan and its sister county Letcher, had the highest homicide rates in the United States. With Letcher nosing out Harlan with 78 deaths per 100,000 people. Obviously these two counties did not have 100,000 residents, but the prorated numbers are still staggering.

Knowing that steel had forever changed the world and the wars it fought, US Steel sent its top metallurgical engineer, L. A. Billups to the region. Billups' goal was to find the best coal and coke for the making of steel. Billups found three veins in the side of Big Black mountain. The veins were ripe with good coal and excellent for the making of steel. Tests revealed the coal to be low in ash, moisture, and sulfur. Further, tests revealed that this coal was high in volatile matter. The L&N terminated only three miles down the creek at Benham and the small railroad that was to serve these new mines of Lynch would be called the Looney Creek railroad. The coal mined from these mountains would be known as "captive coal", coal that is mined strictly for the use of their parent companies US Steel and International Harvester.

The first objective was to construct temporary shelters for the workmen and buildings in which to bathe and eat. After these necessities were completed the European labor recruiters began to deliver their gangs, with the first wave consisting of Italian and Hungarians. In time, eight hundred duplexes and four hundred houses would make up these two towns. The managers, physicians and engineers lived in dozens of larger homes in secluded neighborhoods above the towns. Homes were located no more than 200 feet from a fire hydrant. A paved road was built over the Big Black to Appalachia, VA.

Nearly half the populations of the area were white with the remaining half blacks and European. These two halves were then grouped into four main groupings were northern whites, mountain whites, blacks, and immigrants. These towns were no democracies. People of similar backgrounds lived together on streets set aside for their particular ethnic group. Everything was company owned – every brick, stone, and shingle. There was no mayor, city council, or sheriff to lead the town. The company supplied the police and the jail and many a man made bond through his wages after a wild Saturday night.

Education was valued somewhat by the companies that ran these two towns, but the population turnover was volatile. The 1920-1921 school year showed that one grade alone started with 61 students and ended the year with 82, having 52 withdrawals in between. One would take that to mean that 73 students entered that school during the school year. Though the company strove for a more communal society, it still built separate schools for its white and black residents. White teachers were paid an average of \$1100.00 per year in the 1920's while black teachers were paid \$800.00. I find it interesting that these two Eastern Kentucky towns had and have to this day, a representative black population.

When I think of the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, I think of a more homogenized population. I ordered a book a few weeks ago titled the “East Kentucky Social Club” which is the history of the black experience in these two towns, but regretfully it has not arrived so that may be the subject for another paper at another time. Both city councils have at least two members that I recall from the pictures on the wall of their respective city halls who are black, and I believe the size of those city councils to be around five to six members each. And on a final note on this subject, if you are a basketball fan, you will be familiar with Bernie Bickerstaff, one of the

winningest head coaches in the National Basketball Association and is now a prominent executive in the with Charlotte Bobcats. Coach Bickerstaff was born and raised in Benham.

The buildings in these two towns are some of the most unusual I have ever seen. Benham's public buildings have a brick facade and match the pre-war architecture that you see in buildings in Hopkinsville. The high school, which closed in 1984, looks to be a smaller version of the old Hopkinsville High School on Walnut Street. The remaining city buildings seem to be cut out of the same cloth. Lynch has the more striking buildings. Truly, I have never seen more opulent architecture than the buildings that remain in Lynch. The buildings, made of cut limestone, stand against the mountains and resemble castles and building them must have been a feat in itself.

The cost of electric supply lines over the mountains and the maintenance required to keep them working was deemed to be too expensive and too much trouble. A coal powered electric plant was built to supply the mines and the towns. These became the first electrified mines in the world. With all the pieces finally in place, whether industrial, commercial, or residential, Lynch was ready to become the mine that the coal companies dreamed about. On February 12, 1923, the world record for one-day's coal output was set at Portal 31, with over 7,000 tons of coal removed from the earth. This was an average of almost five tons per man. In the fifty year existence of these mines, the output would increase to over 10,000 tons per day as technology advanced, and averaged almost three million tons per year.

Socially, the area had most of the comforts and needs that most modern cities require. Hotels, theaters, social club, benevolent organizations, and churches occupied the residents free time. Many famous performers visited the clubs and theaters. The world renowned Yugoslav tenor Tina Pattiera sang at the Croatian club. Italo Picchi of the Metropolitan Opera performed at the Italian club, and many jazz and gospel musicians played at the black clubs.

Sadly, the mines could not last forever and in 1957 the demise of these towns began. US Steel sold Lynch to its residents and began a slow pull-out. In 1960, International Harvester began the same process in Benham. Benham High School closed in 1961 and operated as an elementary school until 1992. The black and white high schools in Lynch merged in 1964 and

lasted through 1984. These two towns are now a part of the Harlan County School System.

In the early 1990's, Benham and Lynch were visited by a group of political scientist and sociologists from one of the Eastern Bloc countries of the former Russian empire. They had come to discuss with the town leaders the transition from a Totalitarian regime to a democratic society. Benham and Lynch both had learned how to govern themselves over the past thirty years, after having all things supplied from one single source, and the visitors wanted to know what were the pitfalls and unseen troubles ahead.

The people of this area love these mountains and the significance they bring to their families' history. But, sometimes it seems they take a more utilitarian look at the mountains as a place to supply them with jobs for their sustenance. For example, the lack of designation for the peak of the Big Black, this mountain seems to be more a point of reference in an area of tall mountains than it is something to be shared with the rest of the world. As I said earlier, and I am sure most of you know, but Big Black Mountain is the highest elevation in Kentucky at over four thousand feet. I drove the treacherous road that spans the mountain over to Virginia and was struck by the lack of provenance given to its location. When you reach the peak of the mountain by road, there is a little green sign declaring that this mountain is the highest point in our state. The sign is much like the small green signs that you encounter when you enter a town like Pembroke or Crofton. The viewing area is a dirt and gravel pull-off in that area that evidently leads to what appears to be an entrance to an old mine and is not there for scenic or viewing purposes. From atop this mountain you are looking down on the Virginia side at a strip mine below. I was quite amazed that at some point in our state's history, that someone had not worked to have this point designated with a look-out or given some significance.

The towns have a somewhat sad and lonely look to them now. The beautiful limestone buildings of Lynch I described, now have their windows busted out and graffiti defaces them.

There are signs that this area is trying to recover and begin to try different forms of revenue. As I stated earlier, the original Benham High School has been converted into a small hotel. The museum of coal mining has been built in the old company store in Benham and contains four floors of mining

and local exhibits. Portal 31, the largest of the area mines is being turned into an interactive mine with a small train ride into the mine and a IMAX feature inside the mine. These three entities will become a part of Kingdom Come State Park which is located a few miles away in Cumberland.

I am always glad when I go to the mountains to see that so much of it just as it is described and pictured in the books I have read, but I am always just as pleased to see that so much it is not.