

The Coal Mining Way of Life in Virginia's New River Valley: Hard Work, Family, and Community

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Coal mining was once the major non-agricultural industry in the New River Valley of Virginia, shaping a way of life for many families up to the 1970s. Although few physical traces of mining remain today, memories of that life continue among many in the region. The "New River Valley Coal Mining Heritage Project" was designed to document and preserve oral histories of the coal-mining culture.¹ To collect first-hand knowledge of mining household and community activities from the 1930s-1970s in Montgomery and Pulaski Counties, a research team of Radford University students and faculty in 1995-97 conducted fifty-one interviews with miners and their wives and children. The interviews provide a composite picture of the mining way of life in this region.² Three themes especially emerge from the interviews: the hard work, the strength of family, and the strength of community.

You know, the mines round here, from eighteen and ninety, was a way of life. That was it — that's all that was here. That's all the jobs that people had — the mines was it.³

Such was the comment of former miner Donald Minnick of Belspring. Esther Jones of Wake Forest, daughter and wife of miners, confirmed the observation:

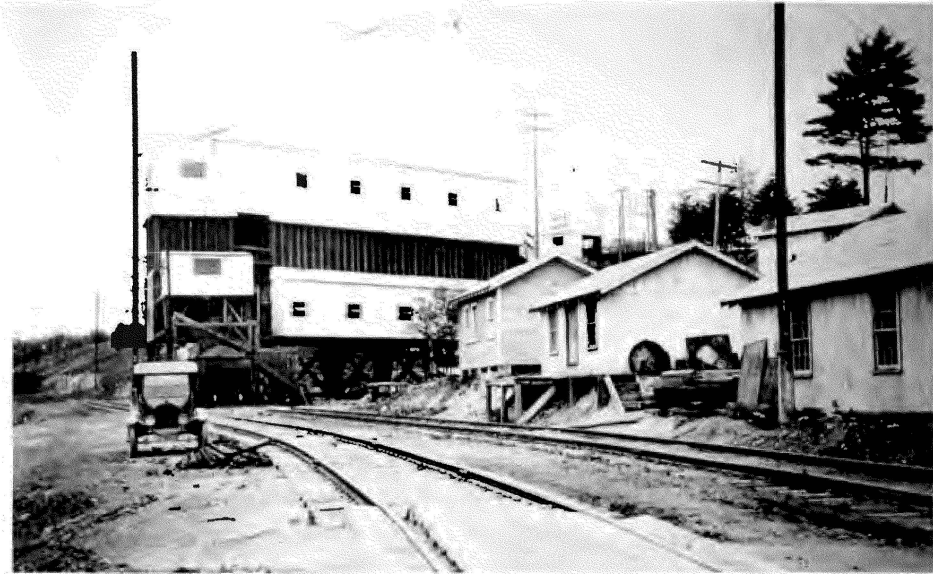
That was the way people made their living. And that's what they would depend on, was getting that coal from the mountains ... that was just the way of life.⁴

To speak of mining as a "way of life" refers not only to the occupation, but also to the lifestyle and structure of family and community life. It includes the way people acquired food and necessities, family organization and sense of cooperation within households, and the social life and support structures built between kin and neighbors.

The mining experience that we typically associate with southwest Virginia and Central Appalachia is based on the extraction of rich bituminous coal deposits by large corporations operating mines across a region, with large-scale output. From the end of the 1880s almost continuously through the 1970s or longer, these corporations often housed their work force in large company-run towns.⁵ In comparison, the semi-anthracite coal fields of the New River Valley were characterized by a broader range in size and scale of mining operations — from numerous small “truck mines” (so named because coal generally is carried away in trucks, rather than railroad cars) to the larger mines at McCoy, Merrimac, and Parrott. As we will see, the diversity of mining operations also allowed for some variations in housing and land-holding among mining families in the New River Valley.

The largest operations were the Great Valley and Big Vein mines at McCoy, the Parrott Mine, and the Merrimac Mine. Each employed between 125-200 miners. While these were large-scale operations for the New River Valley, they operated on a smaller scale, as well as a shorter duration, than many mines in the bituminous coal fields of Central Appalachia. The Parrott Mine operated about 54 years, opening in the 1880s and shutting in 1934. The Merrimac Mine operated as a Civil War mine and colliery, but its peak period was from around 1900 until its closing in 1934. The Big Vein Mine opened in 1920 and closed in 1934, later reopening and then finally closing in 1958. The Great Valley Mine opened in the early 1900s and closed in 1946. A few companies operated smaller mines at places such as Coal Bank Hollow and Stroubles Creek, employing between 30-60 miners. The Depression and labor unionization of the 1930s closed some of the New River Valley mines, and the rest cycled down and closed as a result of the coming of the Radford Arsenal. However, until the Radford Arsenal opened in the early 1940s, offering an alternative source of good pay, the mines provided just about the only industrial occupation available in the New River Valley.⁶

While the large mines came and went within a relatively short time period, the real long-term backbone of New River Valley mining has been the small-scale mining that people refer to as “wagon mining” or “truck mining.” Much of the mining on Brush and Price Mountains took place as small ventures operated by a few men. These men were true entrepreneurs. With a sharp eye they located likely sources of coal, struck deals with land owners, and organized small crews of men to dig out the coal. When the coal from one location was used up, they moved on to another. Despite their size, these truck mines occupied an important niche in the New River Valley. Much of their coal went to supply the



Coal tippie at Great Valley Mine, McCoy, scene of the accident on April 18, 1946, at which twelve miners were killed. Photo courtesy of Kenneth McCoy.

universities and homes in Blacksburg, Radford, and Christiansburg. Small-scale entrepreneurial endeavors operated across the New River Valley until the 1970s, when the last of them finally closed.

Underground mining in the New River Valley, throughout its history, remained a labor-intensive occupation. Miners worked underground with picks, shovels, augers, and dynamite. According to Oscar and James Sherman, miners who have worked with both the New River Valley coal and softer bituminous coal found elsewhere, mining the semi-anthracite requires much harder work because the coal is harder and contains a large amount of rock.⁷ None of the New River Valley mines used the mechanized coal-cutting machines commonly used in Appalachian bituminous mines.

Unlike those Central Appalachia regions where mining families lived in fairly densely populated company-run towns, the New River Valley offered mining families a range of living alternatives. One was to rent company housing. The Merrimac, Parrott, and Great Valley mines, as well as some smaller operations, housed miners and their families near the mine sites. These were relatively small collieries consisting of a few company houses, a commissary (store) and occasionally a hotel. Merrimac, probably the largest of the New River Valley mines, had a commissary, a

hotel, and about 34 company houses.⁸ None of the New River Valley mining companies provided company-run schools or churches, but these were developed independently by members of the community.

New River Valley people perceive their mining settlements as being different from coal “camps,” a term used by many miners in West Virginia and far southwest Virginia to describe their company-owned towns built at the mine sites. Mining families rarely use the term coal “camp” in the New River Valley. Instead, they prefer the terms coal “community” and “village.” Merrimac, according to Fred Lawson, “was never called a coal camp. Never.”⁹ And at Coal Bank Hollow, Hazel Hodge said, “We didn’t call ours coal camps even though the houses were owned by the coal company. Nobody ever told us it was coal camp, you know, we thought those were in West Virginia.”¹⁰ When the term coal camp is used at all, most often it is applied quite specifically to the area containing the Great Valley Mine’s company houses, distinguishing that area from the rest of the community of McCoy, which pre-dated the mines. The choice of terms other than coal “camp” seems to suggest that New River Valley people consider their mining settlements, even with company housing, as having a more community-like character than the large company-run mining “camps” found elsewhere in Central Appalachia.

But company housing, limited to the larger mines and in short supply, was not the dominant living situation. Many families lived in the vicinity of the mines in houses they owned and built themselves. Other families lived in independent communities scattered across Brush and Price Mountains like Sunnyside and the African-American community of Wake Forest, two bedroom communities for the McCoy mines. Miners walked back and forth from these communities each day to work in the large mines or else worked truck mines near their homes. In addition, a substantial number of mining families lived apart from established communities, on fairly large tracts of land on Brush and Price Mountains. Often this was property that had passed down through families for generations.

Unlike other regions in Central Appalachia, where miners mined coal year round, New River Valley coal was mined only during the winter months.¹¹ Miners were out of work in summer when there was little demand for coal. This was a predictable seasonal layoff which created the need to take on additional jobs and subsistence activities in the summer to supplement the mining income. Most mining families owned, or had access to, some amount of land which they used for gardening and raising animals. The amount of land available varied with their living situations. People living in company houses often had a small space

available to them for a garden. At Merrimac and Coal Bank Hollow these were next to the houses; at McCoy garden space was available to some camp residents down by the New River. Frequently there was also room for families to have chickens and pigs, and some families at Merrimac even kept cows which they left free to roam and graze the hillsides. Families who had access to more land were somewhat better off than the families in company housing because they had the ability do a substantial amount of farming and animal husbandry in addition to mining. In many cases, families with their own land were nearly self-sufficient for food, raising everything they needed with the exception of things such as sugar, salt, and coffee. Often they even bartered items of their own produce, such as eggs, for any remaining items they needed from the store. Corn, beans, tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, cabbages, turnips, beets, potatoes, sweet potatoes, apples and grapes, were commonly grown foods. As in other Appalachian mining areas, families canned much of their garden produce and preserved meat for use during the winter months. New River Valley mining families also buried cabbages, root crops, and apples directly in the fields, then later unburied and used them as needed.¹² Enterprising families frequently added food to the table by fishing; hunting animals such as rabbits, squirrels, groundhogs, possums, and racoons; and gathering foods such as berries, nuts, and wild greens from the mountains.¹³

In addition, miners and family members supplemented the mining income by taking on additional jobs. Seasonal wage-labor was often available at one of the large commercial farms and orchards, such as the Kentland Farm near the New River, the Heth Farm near Blacksburg, or the Spradlin orchard located between Merrimac and Cambria. Fred Lawson, for example, talked about picking apples for 12 cents an hour at the Spradlin orchard,¹⁴ and other miners said they regularly tended corn for farmers during the summer months.¹⁵ Miners speak of other creative ways to earn money. Warren Lilly and Leo Scott told of trapping animals to sell their pelts, Lucy Kessinger's husband worked at a sawmill, Lee A. Shepherd did stone masonry, and William Fisher became an entrepreneur in the junk business, tearing up old cars and selling the parts.¹⁶

The New River Valley mines drew most of their labor from the local region. Overall, this created a relatively stable mining population composed of families who were either here before the mines or who moved into the region and stayed over multiple generations. The mining population includes a number of families who can trace a long family history of residence in the region. Family names such as Price, Linkous, McCoy, Albert, and Shepherd are widely represented in the region's mining popu-

lation. Marriages frequently occurred between the children of families living in the same community or vicinity, creating strong family links which served as primary channels for mutual support and economic sharing. Young couples tended to live close to their kin, and often built their homes on land given to them by their families. In many places, people's sense of community is associated with family histories and attachment to particular lands in the New River Valley. For example, when people speak of "our community" in McCoy, they frequently are referring with pride to a core group of families, such as the McCoy's, the Alberts, and the Lillys, who have a long history of residence, intermarriage, and land ownership at that location.¹⁷ Or, as another example, when people speak of the Sunnyside community they are referring to a group of families such as the Prices, Montgomerys, and Shepherds, to name a few, who have lived on land at Sunnyside for generations. Family and attachment to land are two strong sources of identity for many coal-mining families.

The bond between neighbors is another key element of the coal-mining way of life. Many people speak about the strong sense of support and responsibility to help one another that developed between neighbors in their community. For example, speaking of Coal Bank Hollow, Hazel Hodge said:

If somebody needed help, you know, everybody helped everybody. They helped each other, and that's the only way you could survive in those days 'cause you had to depend on your neighbors.¹⁸

And Lee Linkous of Merrimac reflected:

I think the people looked after one another. I think that was one of the most important things. People depended on one another for different things. You needed something and didn't have it, you'd go to your neighbors, borrow it or something like that. If you needed help why you would go there. And help them, do whatever you had.¹⁹

As Hazel Hodge and Lee Linkous indicated, neighbors needed to depend on neighbors for support. A code of mutual support developed among neighbors that applied especially in cases of sickness, injury, death, and shortages of food and clothing. Sometimes this was done informally, and at other times through more organized methods such as when a community church congregation held a "pounding" to assist a family in need, other families bringing the needy family a "pound of this and a pound of that," according to the tradition.²⁰ When mining accidents and tragedies occurred, all did what they could to comfort and help the affected families. Neighbors helped neighbors.



On the way to school, with books and lunch bucket. Mining company houses are on the slope in the background, at McCoy, Virginia, in the 1930s. Photo courtesy of Kenneth McCoy.

Neighbors also socialized with their neighbors, strengthening the sense of community. With limited access to transportation and low frequency of travel, much of a person's school, social, and church life took place within his/her community. People visited with neighbors as a regular form of entertainment, especially in the days before television. Women quilted together; men played horseshoes and croquet. Events such as revivals, apple butter stirrings, and baseball games brought large portions of the community together. And, of course, the focus on mining formed a common bond among all the families within the community.

While mining in the New River Valley may have had some differences from other Appalachian regions, its mining families also shared some of the common experiences of miners elsewhere by virtue of the type of work they did. Mining was hard and dangerous work. Miners suffered serious work-related injuries, such as broken bones and head injuries due to rock falls. They frequently suffered from chronic arthritis and back problems due to the physical stress placed on the body by mining, and they contracted black lung due to the coal dust, so thick in the mines that they could barely see at times.²¹ In addition to the health risks, mining could be a deadly occupation. Mine explosions, caused by an accumulation of methane gas, claimed the lives of 43 men and one

boy in Montgomery County.²² The region's largest mining disaster on April 18, 1946, killed twelve miners at the Great Valley Mine in McCoy. The possibility of mining accidents affected family life. Jimmie Price told of his and his mother's fear that his father might not return home from the mines at the end of a day's work.²³ Many New River Valley boys went to work to earn money at an early age to help support their family, especially when their fathers had been disabled or killed by mining accidents. But in spite of the hard work and danger, many miners enjoyed their work. William Fisher put it this way: "Was nothing easy about it, but let me tell you this, I loved to work in mines over any other place I worked. I just loved to work in them."²⁴

A household's daily routine revolved around the miner's work. The day usually began with getting the miner fed and off to work early, and ended late in the day when the miner returned home. With the miner away all day, there was great reliance on women and children for complementary household roles. Women handled a heavy work load of household and child-raising chores while their husbands worked in the mines, and interviews emphasize the importance of women's work in household economics. Family members worked together, pooling their efforts to support the household. As Della Snider said:

The children and the mothers worked just as hard as the fathers did. They were in them old coal mines, black and cold. We were at home taking care of things, and the mothers were taking care of the children. They didn't have to do it when they came home. But it was all hard work, it was hard work for all of us. And I wouldn't want to go back to some of the things, but that was some of my happiest days.²⁵

Yet with all the hard work, many people like Della Snider frequently remember that their lives included good times as well as the hard times. Others, like Esther Jones, simply considered the hard work to be a basic part of their lives. "I didn't look at it as being hard," she said. "I looked at it as that was the way people made their living. That was their way of life and that's what they expected to do."²⁶

Endnotes

1. In the citations of interviews in the following Notes, the word *Project* is used as an abbreviation of the NRV Coal Mining Heritage Project, Sociology and Anthropology Department, Radford University, Radford, Va. All interviews were conducted as part of that Project.

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2. This article is adapted from Chapter 6, "The New River Valley Mining Way of Life: Overall Patterns and Comparisons," by Mary B. La Lone, in *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories: Life in the Coal Fields of Virginia's New River Valley*, which La Lone edited and which is to be published in 1997 by Pocahontas Press, Blacksburg, Virginia.
 3. Donald Minnick, interview with Elizabeth Franklin Bryant, Belspring, Va., 25 Sept., 1995, 9255DM1, Project.
 4. Esther "Queen" Eaves Jones, interview with Lauren M. England, Wake Forest, Va., 30 Sept., 1995, 9305EJ1-4, Project.
 5. Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Mary B. La Lone, "Recollections about Life in Appalachia's Coal Camps: Positive or Negative?," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association*, 1995, 7:91-100; Mary B. La Lone, "Economic Survival Strategies in Appalachia's Coal Camps," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* (1996) 2(1):53-68.
 6. See Chapter 2 in La Lone (ed.), *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories*, for a more thorough discussion of the region's mines. See also Garland Proco, *Merrimac Mines: A Personal History* (Blacksburg, Va.: Southern Printing, 1994); Jimmie Lee Price et al., *A Brief History of Several Coal Mines of Montgomery County, Virginia* (Blacksburg, Va.: author, 1994); Kelly D. Webb, *McCoy, Virginia Remembered* (McCoy, Va.: Golden Years Club, Eubank Printing Co., 1989); Walter R. Hibbard, Jr. and Theodore J. Clutter, *Virginia Coal: An Abridged History* (Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Center for Coal & Energy Research, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1990); and Marius R. Campbell et al., *The Valley Coal Fields of Virginia*, Virginia Geological Survey, Bulletin 25: 97-216 (1925).
 7. James and Oscar Sherman, interview with Becky Prior, Blacksburg, Va., 17 Oct., 1995, 10175OS1, Project.
 8. Fred "Cody" Lawson, interview with Stacie Spradlin Haynes, Blacksburg, Va., 17 Feb., 1996, 2176FL1-3; interview with Mary La Lone, Christiansburg, Va., 18 Jan., 1996, 1186FL; Project.
 9. Fred "Cody" Lawson, interview with Mary La Lone, Blacksburg, Va., 22 June, 1995, 6225FL1-3, Project.
 10. Hazel Kanode Hodge, interview with Carol Adkins, Christiansburg, Va., 14 Sept., 1995, 9145HH1, Project.
 11. Jack Carden, interview with Sam L. Linkous, Parrott, Va., 25 Jan., 1996, 1256JC1; William O. Fisher, interview with Alex Sweeney, Blacksburg, Va., 21 Sept., 1995, 9215WF1-2; Fred "Cody" Lawson, interview with Stacie Spradlin Haynes, Blacksburg, Va., 17 Feb., 1996, 2176FL1-3; Oakley A. Lilly, interview with Lauren M. England, Christiansburg, Va., 13 Feb., 1996, 2136OL1-2, Project.

12. Fred "Cody" Lawson and Marie Linkous Lawson, interview with Mary La Lone, Blacksburg, Va., 22 June, 1995, 6225FL1-3; Oscar Sherman, interview with Becky Prior, Blacksburg, Va., 17 Oct., 1995, 10175OS1; Charles Snider, interview with Alex Sweeney, McCoy, Va., 17 Oct., 1995, 10175CS1-2; Jimmie Lee Price, interview with Mary La Lone, Kim Knight and Robert Freis, McCoy, Va., 8 July, 1995, 785JP4-5; Project.
13. See Chapters 3 and 4 in La Lone (ed.), *Appalachian Coal Mining Memories* (1997), for a more detailed description of household economics.
14. Fred "Cody" Lawson, interview with Mary La Lone, Blacksburg, Va., 22 June, 1995, 6225FL1-3, Project.
15. William O. Fisher, interview with Alex Sweeney, Blacksburg, Va., 21 Sept. 1995, 9215WF1-2; Albert Hamlin, interview with Kristen Hedrick, Blacksburg, Va., 12 Oct., 1995, 10125AH1-4l, Project.
16. William O. Fisher, interview with Alex Sweeney, Blacksburg, Va., 21 Sept. 1995, 9215WF1-2; Lucy Smith Kessinger, interview with Becky Prior, McCoy, Va., 26 Sept., 1995, 9265LK1; Warren A. Lilly, interview with Parker Gillock, Pearisburg, Va., 21 Sept., 1995, 9215WL1-5; Leo Scott, interview with Otis Jamie Bauguess, McCoy, Va., 16 Oct., 1995, 10165LS1-3; Patsy Price Shepherd, interview with Stacie Spradlin Haynes, Sunnyside, Va., 13 May, 1996, 5136PS1-3; Project.
17. Kelly D. Webb, *McCoy, Virginia Remembered*. (McCoy, Va.: Golden Years Club, Eubank Printing Co., 1989).
18. Hazel Kanode Hodge, interview with Carol Adkins, Christiansburg, Va., 14 Sept., 1995, 9145HH1, Project.
19. H. Lee Linkous, interview with Jane P. Delicate, Blacksburg, Va., 25 Sept., 1995, 9255LL1-3, Project.
20. Jimmie Lee Price, interview with Alicia Gallant, Blacksburg, Va., 23 Jan., 1996, 1236JP1-4, Project.
21. James and Oscar Sherman, interview with Becky Prior, Blacksburg, Va., 17 Oct., 1995, 10175OS1; Henry Price, interview with Lauren M. England, Blacksburg, Va., 14 Oct., 1995, 10145HP1-3; Albert Hamlin, interview with Kristen Hedrick, Blacksburg, Va., 12 Oct., 1995, 10125AH1-4; William O. Fisher, interview with Alex Sweeney, Blacksburg, Va., 21 Sept., 1995, 9215WF1-2; Palmer Caldwell, interview with Bryan Dilday, Christiansburg, Va., 25 Sept. 1995, 9255PC1; Alex "Jun" Linkous, interview with Parker Gillock, Blacksburg, Va., 18 Oct., 1995, 10185AL1-2; Jack Carden, interview with Sam L. Linkous, Parrott, Va., 25 Jan., 1996, 1256JC1; Project.
22. In 1994, the Coal Mining Heritage Association of Montgomery County erected a monument at McCoy in memory of the 44 victims of mining disasters in Montgomery County in the 20th century.
23. Jimmie Lee Price, interview with Alicia Gallant, Blacksburg, Va., 23 Jan., 1996, 1236JP1-4, Project.
24. William O. Fisher, interview with Alex Sweeney, Blacksburg, Va., 21 Sept., 1995, 9215WF1-2, Project.
25. Della "Gertie" Price Snider, interview with Alex Sweeney, McCoy, Va., 29 Jan., 1996, 1296CS1-3, Project.
26. Esther "Queen" Eaves Jones, interview with Lauren M. England, Wake Forest, Va., 30 Sept., 1995, 9305EJ1-4, Project.