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A LEGACY OF COAL

THE COAL COMPANY TOWNS OF SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

In the past, little attention has been given to the role of bituminous coal towns in determining the physical and social character of a geographic region. Noted geographer Raymond Murphy was one of the first to recognize the significance of such communities, and in 1954 he made a plea for the increased study of American mining settlements, stating, "The investigation of mining regions reveals the interplay of the mining process with other elements of the local setting, including the people who work in the mines, the houses they live in, the transportation pattern, the other industries that are present, and the other items that go to make up the unique character of the region."[1] This interplay is particularly evident in southwestern Pennsylvania, where development of the region's vast bituminous coal seams led to eventual establishment of coal-company towns as the dominant form of settlement between 1880 and 1930.[2] Dependent upon natural geography and geology for their existence, these communities shaped not only the physical landscape but also the cultural identity of the region.

Pennsylvania's bituminous coal seams are part of the Appalachian region, which extends from the northeastern corner of the state through eastern Ohio, West Virginia, western Maryland, western Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and central Tennessee to central Alabama. This region has historically been considered to have the most important deposits of coal in the United States. Of these states, Pennsylvania was consistently ranked as the leading producer of both bituminous and anthracite coal between 1880 and 1930. The Appalachian region produced 92 percent of the total amount of coal mined in the United States in 1925. Pennsylvania, alone, contributed about one-third, or 34.5 percent.[3]

Coinciding with the dramatic expansion of the coal industry in the late nineteenth century, rural southwestern Pennsylvania witnessed the opening of hundreds of coal mines. The success of these mines, however, depended upon the maintenance of a large and loyal work force. For the most part, coal operators attempted to attract and retain labor by building inexpensive dwellings near the work site. Yet while coal operators realized the necessity of providing houses, they did not build them for altruistic reasons. The purpose of miners' housing was to increase productivity and profits by attracting labor, reducing job turnover, and establishing control over the labor supply.[4] This strategy worked best when houses were owned as well as built by the company. Discontented miners were less likely to cause trouble when faced with the threat of eviction. Although commended in the early stages of the industry as a practical and economical means of obtaining a labor supply for remote mines, coal towns came increasingly under fire after 1900 for what were seen as inherently exploitative methods of labor management and substandard living conditions.

Designed and constructed, for the most part, by mine engineers rather than architects, Pennsylvania's coal towns share a number of distinguishing characteristics. First, and most important, these towns were usually financed, built, owned, maintained, and operated by only one company. Companies provided houses, schools, churches, medical facilities, and a store where miners bought food, clothing, and supplies. In small towns, the store also housed the post office, once it had been established, and meeting rooms for various social functions. Larger communities had separate social halls and often boasted a hotel or movie theater as well. Streets were wide, with shallow setbacks; most were unpaved, although cinders and waste from the nearby slag heaps, called "red dog" or "boney," were used to keep the dust down.

A second distinguishing feature of these towns is that the dominant dwelling throughout the period was a two-story house, either detached or semi-detached (Fig. 1). Families generally preferred detached or semi-detached structures over row houses or tenements, and although such houses were more expensive to build, coal-company housing took this form because coal operators consciously wanted to attract married men. Contemporary articles indicate that employers believed men with families to be far less transient than their single counterparts. In fact, a federal survey of bituminous coal towns in 1917 revealed that more than 95 percent of all miners occupying company houses were married.[5] Companies did hire bachelors, but they were usually required to live in boardinghouses. And when the boardinghouses were full, families took single men in as boarders to supplement their meager incomes.

A third characteristic of Pennsylvania's coal towns was economy of construction. Several factors influenced the amount of a coal operator's housing investment, including the number of houses to be built, the projected life of the mine community, and the amount of available capital. For many years, mine engineers were not able to conclusively predict the life span of the mine. Consequently, coal towns were considered temporary settlements to be abandoned when the mine was worked out. Operators deliberately limited the amount of their initial investment in order to minimize their losses when the mine closed.

Fourth, the physical layout of Pennsylvania coal towns was remarkably consistent. Settlements were built in close proximity to the mine site to maximize the ease, speed, and economy of the operation and to minimize the amount of land to be developed (Fig. 2). One source recommended that the work site be no more than a fifteen-minute walk from town, or thirty minutes by "dependable transportation."[6] Laid out in a grid or linear plan,

Fig. 1. Semi-detached miners' houses built by the Washington Coal and Coke Company at Star Junction, Fayette County, Pennsylvania, circa 1895. (Photograph by Jet Lowe for HAER, 1988)

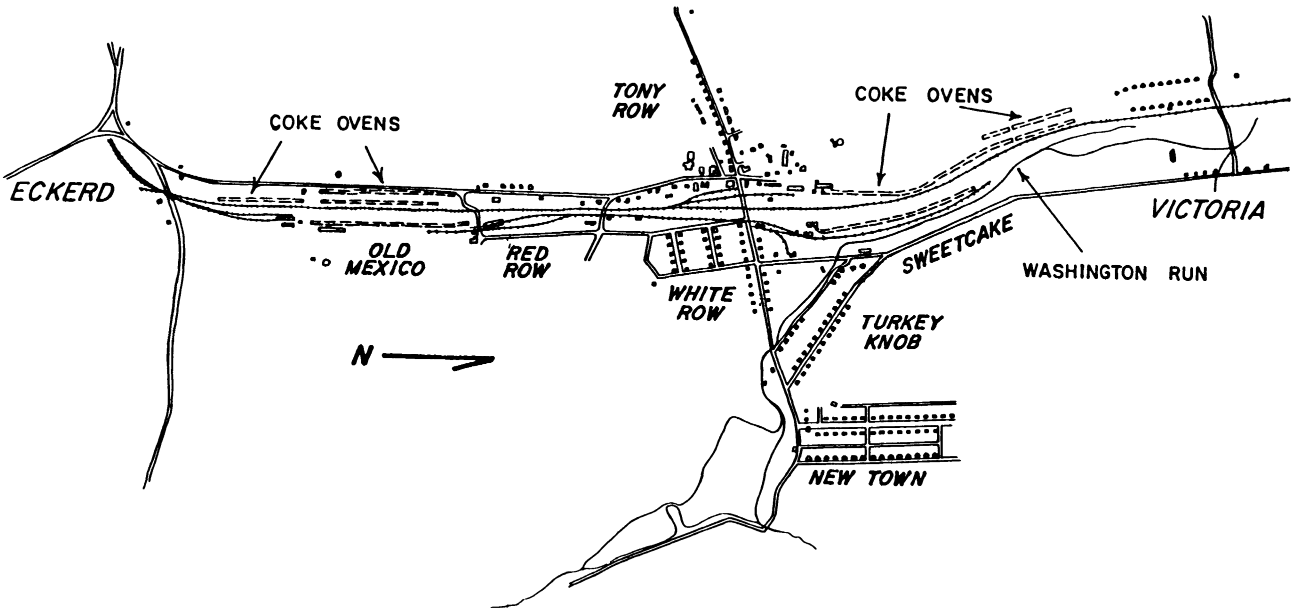

Fig. 2. Star Junction, Pennsylvania, circa 1920. (From a 1930 map entitled "Surface Tracts of the U.S. Steel Corporation at Washington Works"; courtesy Tony Grazziano, U.S. Steel Mining Office, Washington, Pennsylvania)

and usually conforming to the site's natural topography, streets had an average width of forty-five feet. Fifteen-foot alleys and large backyards served as firebreaks between houses. Lots were often generous in rural coal towns but varied according to house size, availability of land, and the benevolence of the operator.[7] Average lots were between fifty and sixty feet wide and one hundred feet deep to allow room for individual gardens, chicken coops, and perhaps a cow. Built in tight, straight rows at the extreme front of these lots, miners' dwellings presented an image of monotony and uniformity (Fig. 3).

A distinct hierarchy of housing types is a fifth coal-town trait, with marked differences between the residences for management and labor within most communities. The typical Pennsylvania miners' house was a plain, two-story, semi-detached, balloon-frame dwelling with an average of four to six rooms per unit (Figs. 4 and 5). Detached houses were also common and still generally followed the two-story, four-to-six-room arrangement. In either case, clapboards, weatherboards, or boards-and-battens were typical forms of exterior cladding and provided the only barrier to wind and cold; interior surfaces were given one rough coat of lath and plaster. Few houses had running water and fewer had indoor toilets even as late as World War II. Instead, water was supplied by a small number of outdoor pumps scattered throughout the settlement. Privies were shared, too, with the most common structure being a combined outhouse/coal bin designed for two families. Most company houses did have electricity, however, since each mine had its own generators. Heat was provided by a coal stove in the kitchen. A system of flues and grates sometimes circulated warm air to other rooms, but because they were uninsulated, miners' houses were almost always cold and drafty.

Management houses were larger and better built, although still arranged in neat, identical groups. Often they were situated near the mine so that an official would always be on hand in an emergency. In some cases, the location of management housing was determined by proximity to the

Fig. 3. Company houses at Eureka #40, built in 1905 by the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company at Scalp Level, Cambria County, Pennsylvania. (Photograph by Jet Lowe for HAER, 1988)

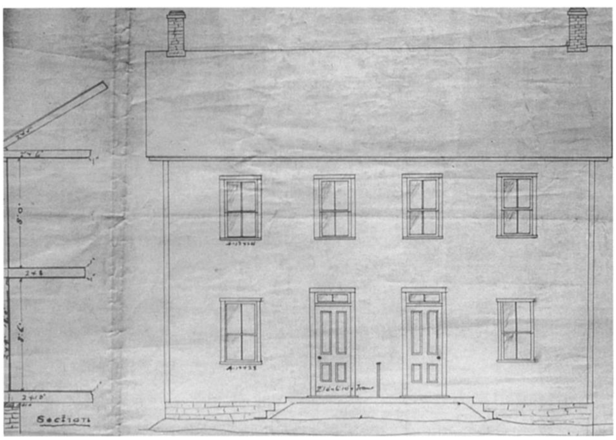

Fig. 4. Construction drawing by the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company (1897) showing front elevation and section of semi-detached miners' houses built in Windber, Somerset County, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy the Berwind Corporation, Windber)

company store or other public buildings. But in some cases conditions were such that no location was necessarily better than another. This was especially true in coke towns, where noxious fumes and sooty air emanating from the coke ovens polluted all sites equally (Fig. 6). Regardless of their location, management houses often had larger kitchens and parlors, more bedrooms, and a full, indoor bath. Other amenities may have included finished interiors, steam heat, exterior ornament, closets, and cellars. The mine superintendent's house possessed all of these features and was the largest and most ornamented dwelling, as befit his status in the community. Such differences resulted in a hierarchy of architecture that was rigidly defined and maintained from community to community. Yet, while the architecture of coal towns suggests a clear division between management and labor along occupational lines, it does not necessarily reflect the subtle distinctions that existed within each group, nor the peculiar occupational hierarchy of the coal industry.

Evidence suggests that houses in coal towns were segregated not only by occupation but also by ethnic group. In 1911, the U.S. Immigration Commission conducted a detailed investigation into the living and working conditions of immigrants in the bituminous coal industry. The commission noted that, on the whole, "American whites occupy a

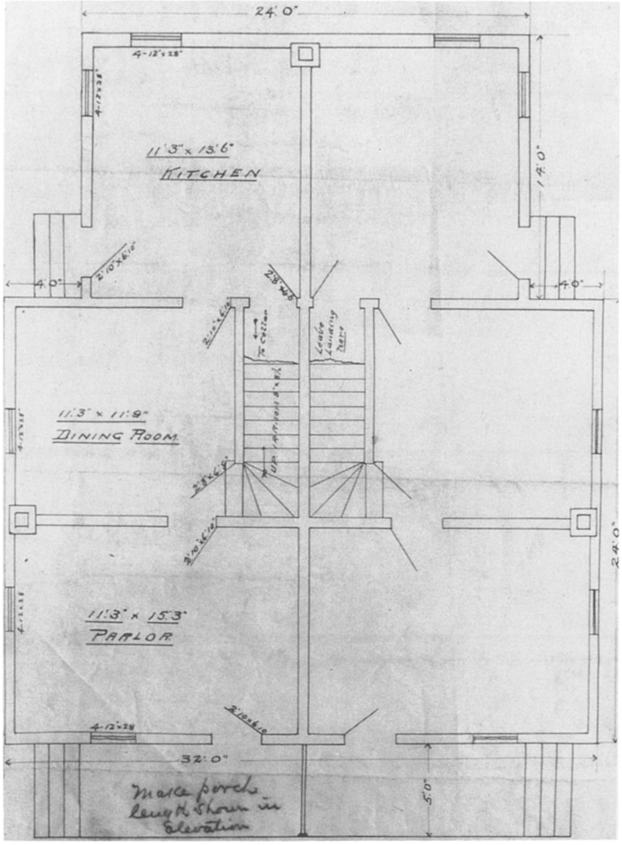

Fig. 5. Construction drawing by the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company (1897) showing the first floor of semi-detached miners' houses built in Windber, Somerset County, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy the Berwind Corporation, Windber)

Fig. 6. Partial view of Star Junction, Pennsylvania, showing proximity of housing to ash dump, railroad, and coke ovens circa 1900. (Courtesy Betty Palonder, Perryopolis, Pennsylvania)

somewhat better and commodious house as compared with the foreign-born, and that the foreign-born, with the exception of Mexicans, are practically living in the same general style of company house."[8] The commission also noted that foreigners were better housed than blacks, and blacks were better housed than Mexicans. Such was the case in Colver, Pennsylvania, where Italians, Hungarians, Slovaks, and other Eastern Europeans lived in four-room houses to the south of the main street, while Americans, Germans, Irish, and Scots lived in six-room houses to the north.

In addition, the nativity of an individual helped determine his occupational status. As architect Leslie Allen indicated in his book *Industrial Housing Problems* in 1917, there were two distinct classes of workers:

> First, the unskilled workmen, mostly foreigners or negroes, uneducated, unused to American houses and American standards of living, earning a low wage and second, the skilled men, mechanics, machinists, etc., earning a higher wage, mostly Americans, living according to American standards, demanding more and willing to pay more for the comforts that the foreigner does not consider essential.[9]

Amenities not considered essential for foreigners included closets, cellars, screens, and bathtubs.

Despite the influence of such factors, the physical appearance of miners' housing was primarily the result of economics and only partly of prejudice. Above all, a coal town was to be run as a business, not as a charitable institution. Even in model communities, basic comforts were often sacrificed so that houses could be built as cheaply as possible (Fig. 7). Such policies were ostensibly designed to benefit labor as well as management. Industrial housing authorities justified their spare designs by explaining that even if extras like cellars, bathtubs, and closets were provided, the unskilled miners would be unable to afford them. Leslie Allen summarized the feelings of many when he stated:

> Many of the workingmen whose homes we wish to build have come from countries where four walls and a roof are considered sufficient shelter from the elements to make a home. . . . We do want to house the

Fig. 7. Reflecting one of the most inexpensive forms of construction, these semi-detached, vertical-plank miners' houses were built by the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company at Eureka #35, outside Windber, Pennsylvania, in 1900, as part of a "model" mining community. (Photograph by Jet Lowe for HAER, 1988)

> lowest-paid man in a sanitary and hygienic home, but it is not necessary that this home be furnished with all the conveniences and appurtenances that are considered necessary in the American home.[10]

Judging by the documents they left and the houses they built, bituminous coal operators in Pennsylvania clearly concurred with Allen and his colleagues. For example, even as late as 1922, less than 3 percent of all miners' dwellings nationwide had bathtubs or showers.[11]

These conditions applied to coal towns throughout the United States, suggesting that coal towns encompassed an ideology for labor management that transcended architecture and planning. In fact, the interrelation between ethnicity, job status, occupational mobility, and housing can be seen as a cyclical progression. Each component of the progression determined and reinforced its neighbors in such a way as to establish an unbroken chain. Thus, the ethnic group to which a miner belonged determined the status of the job he held; this, in turn, determined his earning power. Companies then used earning power to compute the amount of rent an employee could afford, generally one-fourth of his monthly wages. Each company then used that figure to calculate how much it would spend on construction so that, ultimately, the amenities provided were a direct result of how much the employee earned. And to bring the cycle to a close, companies based the exclusion or provision of certain amenities on the ethnicity of their workers. But unlike other cause-and-effect relationships, this progression was not proportional; that is, an employee might alter the status of his occupation, and hence his earning power, but he could never change his ethnic origins and so remained somewhat limited in terms of housing. This aspect of coal-town life did not change until after World War II, when mine workers were finally able to purchase their own houses.

Housing segregation within coal towns by ethnicity and occupational status is indicative of the tremendous power wielded by the coal operator in his position as landlord. Simply put, "a housed labor supply is a controlled labor supply," for by holding the lease on an employee's house, an employer secured a total control not possible in a normal management-labor relationship.[12] In addition, employers used special police forces like the Coal and Iron Police to enforce company policies. From the long waiting list for houses, company officials could pick only the most skilled and most loyal employees for housing privileges. Similarly, on the pretext of reserving the best houses for the best qualified, company officials often practiced extreme racism and favoritism. Furthermore, blacklisting enabled most companies to deliberately exclude union sympathizers and organizers from their towns. In fact, some firms went so far as to insert exclusion clauses into leases that banned all persons the company considered objectionable from company property. Company property, of course, included not only the mine, tipple, and breaker, but the roads, houses, church, school, and store as well. But the most effective weapon employers used was the threat of eviction.

As early as 1865, coal operators in Tioga County, Pennsylvania, pressured their state representatives into legalizing a ten-day eviction clause.[13] Under this law, an employer could evict an employee from company housing if he failed to uphold his part of the labor contract for any reason whatsoever. Such practices continued well into the twentieth century. During the nationwide coal strike of 1922, for example, several thousand miners and their families were systematically evicted from company houses and forced to spend the winter months in tents.[14]

In response to this strike, the federal government established the U.S. Coal Commission, the first official body ever formed to study the American coal industry. The commission's findings revealed that in addition to long hours, low wages, and substandard housing, coal-town residents were being denied basic civil liberties. Outside observers concluded that coal towns prevented development of the sense of independence and self-reliance that was so closely associated with the American dream and called company towns "a great anomaly in the midst of a free country."[15] Gradually, labor reformers realized that labor unrest was not entirely due to lack of adequate pay; it was also the result of poor living conditions and the physical and psychological effect of these conditions on workers' families.

The dissatisfaction of American mine workers with their living and working conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries manifested itself primarily through transiency and strikes. Finding it increasingly more difficult to retain labor, coal companies slowly began to heed the advice of outside reformers, who advocated improved housing as the best method for solving the problem. But while housing reforms represented an important step in the right direction, they were useless by themselves. By their very nature, the housing policies of a coal company were intricately linked with labor relations. Housing reforms thus ultimately failed to placate mine employees by failing to address the deeper problems of the company-town system.

Predictably, living conditions in Pennsylvania's bituminous coal towns did not noticeably change until the companies departed in the 1950s. Faced with increasing competition from cheaper fuels, the American coal industry went into a sharp decline after World War II. For some firms, this meant a complete reorganization of corporate holdings, including the closure or sale of mines and housing. Many miners and their families moved away in search of better jobs, but those that remained eagerly bought their company houses when the surface land and its improvements went on the market. Sometimes the miners purchased and moved to houses elsewhere in town, while in other cases houses were sold to outsiders. As a result, Poles were soon living next to Scots, Italians next to Americans, and foremen next to miners. And for the first time in their lives, these miners and their families could begin to enjoy all of the privileges and responsibilities associated with owning property. Understandably, their first step was to make alterations intended to both modernize and individualize their homes.

The first thing most miners did was add indoor bathrooms and updated heating systems. Windows were changed, doors moved, porches replaced, and asbestos shingles or siding added. Old privies became sheds, sheds became garages, and additions were formed from porches and lean-tos. The retired miners proudly point out such changes and draw attention to how nice the houses are now (Fig. 8). Since the coal dust and smoke are gone, coal-town residents have beautified their yards with shrubs, flowers, and various yard ornaments. Yet, despite these cosmetic changes, the repetition of forms and regularity of placement continue to mark these communities as coal-company towns. Reflecting a unique ideology of their own, these coal towns provide an excellent opportunity to study the neglected physical and social legacy of the coal industry in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Fig. 8. When built in 1912, these miners' dwellings at Colver, Pennsylvania, were clad with clapboards, but the company covered them in asbestos shingles in the 1930s to reduce maintenance costs. Sold in 1954, the houses now reflect the needs and tastes of multiple owners.