

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY NOVEMBER 17



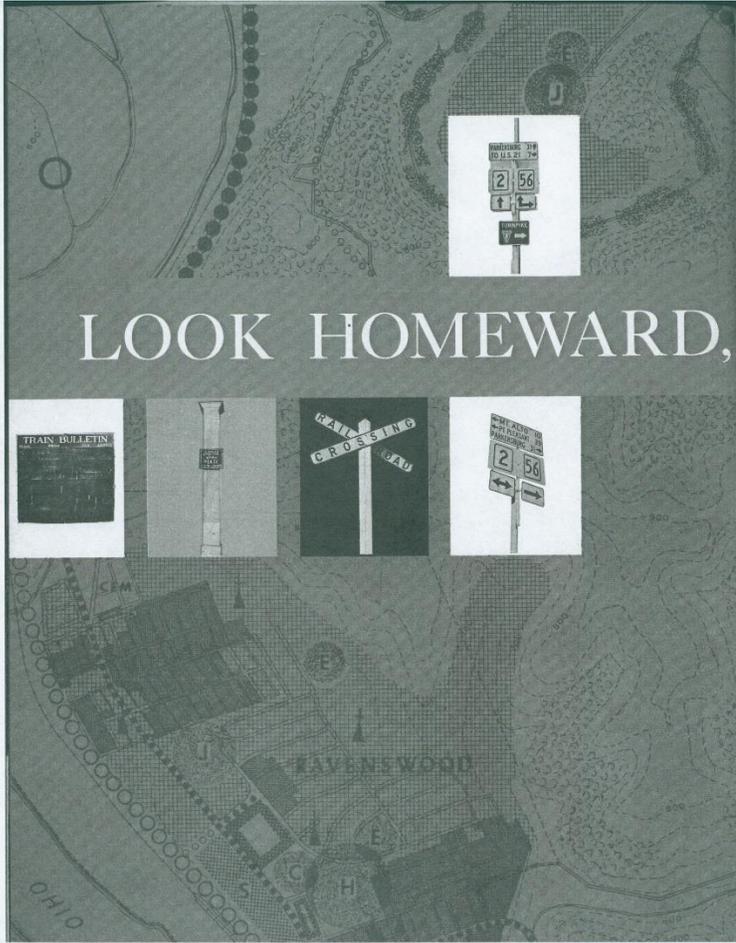
On November 17, 1957, workers at Kaiser Aluminum in Ravenswood produced the first aluminum in West Virginia's Ohio Valley.

CSO: SS.8.6, SS.8.7, SS.8.8, SS.8.9, SS.8.14, ELA.8.1

Investigate the Document: (Vertical Clipping files, “Ravenswood...Century Aluminum,” *Kaiser Aluminum News*, Summer 1958)

1. Ravenswood is located _____ miles south of Parkersburg and _____ miles north of Huntington.
2. The “\$5 Banquet” was not only vital to funding school activities, but incidentally provided the opportunity for the citizens of Ravenswood to impress upon the governor the dire need to complete *what* missing link to the community?
3. The decision to build the Kaiser Aluminum plant in Ravenswood dramatically transformed the community forever. The _____ production workers and _____ construction workers would multiply the Ravenswood population by a staggering _____ times the original size of the community. What improvements were forced upon the community as a result of the dramatic increase in population?
4. What state-of-the-art facility did Kaiser Aluminum build and lease to the town for \$1 per year?

Think Critically: The 1950s was largely a decade of prosperity for many Americans, including those living in Ravenswood. Evaluate Ravenswood’s role in the global economy as it relates to national/international business and trade. What potential uses does aluminum have in the marketplace? Describe the transformation that Ravenswood underwent because of the Kaiser Aluminum plant.



LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL

"In the state that you can build, the young man of today need not go elsewhere to seek his fame and his fortune . . ."

• In 1911, state geologist I. C. White of West Virginia sat down in his office in Wheeling and wrote the following description of Ravenswood.

Ravenswood, the largest town in Jackson County, is located on the Ohio River at the mouth of Sandy Creek, 36 miles south of Parkersburg and 85 miles north of Huntington. It is situated mainly on the second terrace of the Ohio River and is therefore above high water. The land where the town is located was once owned by George Washington. The town had a population in 1900 of 1,074 and in 1910 of 1,081.

There are located here an excellent high school, six churches, a canning factory, fifteen stores, three banks, and two building and loan associations. It derives a portion of its support from the railways, but the larger portion is derived from the agricultural districts.

As late as 1951—forty years that transformed most of the rest of the United States—the only item that would need to have been changed was that the population had grown to 1,175 and neighboring Ripley, county seat of Jackson County, had surpassed it with a population of 1,813. In increasing, however slowly, Ravenswood and Ripley had run counter to the fifty-year old trend in Jackson County, whose population of 22,982 had shrunk to 15,299 by 1950.

What had happened was that Ravenswood had been isolated from the main current of American economic growth by a series of mishaps completely outside the control of the people who lived there. Established as a river shipping point before the turn of the century (it had

been founded in 1790, incorporated in 1852), the town saw river traffic diminish and, ultimately, pass it by. The coming of the B. & O. only partially replaced the loss.

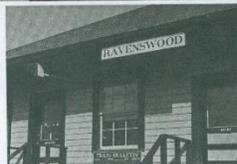
Then State Route No. 21, running North and South was built, bypassing Ravenswood, but going through Ripley. The county's center of gravity tipped and Ripley became the county seat. On State Route 2, along the banks of the Ohio, paving stopped 30 miles above Ravenswood, did not resume until 30 miles downstream. The link through Ravenswood was not completed until 1954.

Abandoned by the Ohio, bypassed by the highways, Ravenswood was trapped between the river and the hills. It lived through the services it could render as a shopping center and rail-shipping point for those of the county's 2,000 farm families who did not find Ripley more convenient. The population of Ravenswood was made up primarily of older, semi-retired people; the youngsters had taken off for the greater job opportunities in Wheeling and Charleston and to industrial cities of the North. Ravenswood's total industrial employment was only 109, in eight small plants.

By mid-summer 1954, the town's main street might well have been a movie set for turn-of-the-century motion pictures. Two blocks of red brick and painted metal buildings stretched down either side of Route 2. A single movie house and two taverns offered the town's "night life" entertainment. There were no intersection traffic lights, no parking meters, few intact sidewalks or curbs. The residential section of the town was characterized by old homes, some of them graceful reminders of a more prosperous



Local government is informal, democratic, worked out over cups of coffee; barber shop serves as communications center; lonesome station awaits Ravenswood's two daily passenger trains...



perous era, stately trees lining both sides of the unpaved streets. The most outstanding features in town were the church spires and the high school.

As the summer of '54 waned, the fall and winter ahead looked, to most of the people in Ravenswood, no more promising than all the winters that had gone before. But at Hupp's restaurant, where the town's leaders informally "governed" the community over cups of coffee, there was a stir of hope. All along the Ohio, things had been picking up as American industry responded to the lure of the great river highway, virtually unlimited electrical power, land big enough to build and expand on. Jackson County had all these to offer; there had been talk that industrial scouts were exploring all along the river, perhaps some industry might pick Ravenswood?

Among these men at Hupp's there was more than just talk and coffee. The town had already made itself a national reputation for the ingenious way it had holisted itself by its own bootstraps, through a device known as the "\$5 Banquet." Because its schools were in dire need

of money, and there was none to be had through regular channels, Ravenswood's civic leaders founded the Ravenswood Schools Improvement Association. This group decided to hold a banquet, charging \$5 per person, not only from those who attended, but from all those who participated, whether as cooks, waiters or speakers.

So successful did the Banquet prove that money was raised for athletic uniforms and the school band, audio-visual aids and other equipment were purchased for schoolroom use, and Ravenswood was soon able to field teams and a band as snappy as any in the state. More importantly, one of the \$5 Banquet speakers was the governor of the state, and during his stay the need to complete State Route 2 through Ravenswood was impressed upon him. It worked, and the final link in the highway was completed as a result.

So, Ravenswood was not entirely unknown to the outside world. It had shown it was willing and able to do things for itself, if only given an opportunity. Perhaps someone would notice?



Picture windows frame the "new" Ravenswood...

In August, 1954, the lightning struck. Headlines in Ohio papers up and down the valley blazoned that Kaiser Aluminum had picked a spot only seven miles from Ravenswood for a new sheet and foil rolling mill. It would employ 500 persons—five times the current industrial employment in Ravenswood. With their families, the workers would more than double the town's population. Coffee grew cold in the cups at Hupp's as the townspeople argued and speculated what it might mean.

For the Ravenswood postmaster, it meant adding more mailboxes (there was no home delivery for mail); for the town's barber it meant doubling his establishment—he added another chair to the one he had. For people—and there weren't many—with an extra room, it meant possible temporary rental to incoming construction workers and to personnel transferred to the plant. Most of all it meant opportunity for Ravenswood's younger people to find jobs close to home.

And with the opportunities, came problems. Where would all these people live? (There were less than 50 rentable houses in the area and 35 of these sub-standard.) Where would the children go to school?

Figures available from government agencies were studied. For every 100 new workers coming in, there would be 51 school children. For every 100 permanent employees, 74 new business employees would be needed. For every 74 new business employees—38 more school children.

In Oakland, California, executive headquarters for Kaiser Aluminum, and in Chicago, where the general sales offices were located, men city-born and city-raised, burned the fluorescents late pondering the same prob-

lems. Many of their own friends, and even perhaps they themselves, might sooner or later be transferred to Ravenswood—a town you couldn't even find on many maps. Where would they live? Where would their children go to school? What about hospitals?

While the people of Ravenswood and in the Corporation's office pondered the problems, lightning was prepared to strike twice at the little town on the Ohio.

In October, 1955, headlines throughout the Ohio Valley announced that Kaiser Aluminum had decided to expand the Ravenswood plant (still raw earth and foundation forms in a cow pasture) to include a hot rolling line and more cold rolling and finishing equipment. The expanded facility would employ 2,000. Let's see: for each 100 workers, so many children, so many more businesses to serve them, so many more children from the people who ran the businesses. Hmmm.

While the figures still bounced off the walls at Hupp's, the knockout punch came. In December, 1955, Kaiser Aluminum announced it would expand the rolling mill to include a reduction plant. The integrated works might ultimately employ more than 4,000 production workers. Meanwhile, it would take 7,000 construction men to build the facility.

The new multiples were staggering. In a few short years, sewers would have to be dug, water lines laid in, land graded and leveled, houses built, streets paved, police and fire protection provided, schools constructed, and shopping centers established not for twice the size of Ravenswood, nor four times the size of Ravenswood, but fifteen times the size of the original community!

It was obvious the sort of problem that could only be worked out through the joint efforts of community leaders and corporation representatives. Kaiser Aluminum had already arrived at the decision that, whatever happened, Ravenswood was not to become a "company town." The policy was adopted that housing must be developed by outside interests dealing directly with individual employees. However, the Corporation would use its financial contacts to encourage outside financing.

Virtually every major financing institution and large scale housing developer in the U. S. was contacted. An effort was made to "sell" them on the bright future of the aluminum industry, the Ravenswood Works, and the tremendous growth in store for the community of Ravenswood and Jackson County.

City planning consultants, including the Harold F. Wise Associates, were brought into the area at the community's request to assist local government in plotting the future growth of the community in an orderly and democratic fashion. The preliminary plans submitted by Wise and Associates proposed the number and location

One of the most modern in the nation



of schools and shopping centers, recommended certain areas suitable for large-scale development of low cost housing and provided for parks and recreation areas. The Wise "General Plan" was approved by the Planning Commission and the City Council, after the required public hearings, and the zoning ordinance recently passed by the Council was based on the general plan.

The growth occasioned by the coming of Kaiser Aluminum to Ravenswood has not been restricted to the community itself. Fifteen miles away, Ripley is seeing a burst of construction activity on Walters Avenue, on Third Street and on Robinson Heights. Neighboring communities such as Sandyville, just north of Ripley, Point Pleasant, southwest of Ravenswood, and at New Haven, down-river 25 miles, all show signs of new construction.

Most critical of all the problems was to provide adequate and up-to-date elementary school facilities, since most of the new people coming in for the plant were young, with children of elementary school age. This was not a problem that could be solved with local funds and children cannot wait. Kaiser Aluminum built a twenty room elementary school, one of the most modern in the nation, and leased it to the community of Ravenswood for \$1 per year. Schooling for other grades is expected to be provided by the community as it grows.

As for the 12,000 of the county's inhabitants that remain on their farms in the hills, the new plant has meant opportunities for outside income, through part or full time construction and other types of work. Ultimately, the growing communities will be good customers for the products of the farms. A city of 15,000, such as Ravenswood will become, consumes 3.5 million quarts of milk, 600,000 pounds of butter, 450,000 dozen eggs, 450,000 pounds of potatoes, 300,000 pounds of fresh fruit, and 2,250,000 pounds of fresh vegetables in a year. All of these are products produced on the surrounding farms.

Within the communities themselves, there has been a renaissance of community life. Weekly newspapers have increased their size, circulation and staffs. A remarkable growth has occurred in the churches of the county; nearly all are expanding, and Sundays find two morning services packed, where one sufficed before. Youth programs have been established; organs, choirs and organized church activities have been added. The "drop-out" rate of school children (required by law only to attend to the age of 16) has fallen, since they can afford to attend school longer, and the number deciding to go on to college has nearly tripled. And many of the young folks who had gone away have come back home again.

In the summer of 1958, Ravenswood is a town in transition, its sections as sharply delimited between the old

and the new as if they had been cut apart by a bulldozer, as, indeed, they were. On an early summer morning, one can walk down from main street, across the B. & O. (two trains daily) railroad tracks, and find something of the old tranquility down at the shelving asphalt-covered beach where the Ravenswood ferry docks. At this time of the day, the river is a quiet pulsation, birds are liquid with song, and from across the river, the cries of farm animals float over the water. It is a good place to meditate on the change that has transformed the town.

On the main street, buildings that have been there ever since anyone can remember are being torn down and new ones are starting to go up. At night, a new traffic light winks red and green and yellow at the main intersection opposite "The Glass Door," where the town's youngsters, not unlike those anywhere—denim, leather jacketed, pony-tailed—sip shakes and munch hamburgers, or prepare to tear about town with their tailpipes roaring. Now at night, a black prow car, its red light blinking, lucks at the curb side, and across the street a wan yellow light picks out the chrome on the Ravenswood's Taxi Company's three cabs. Big transcontinental rigs boom up to the intersection with a sigh of air brakes, their dimmed lights shining bleakly from the newly installed parking meters that line the street.

After the ferry (capacity one truck or 8 cars or 12 Volkswagens) has come and gone, a short stroll up to the hills that overlook the town reveals the whole panorama of transition.

Below and to the left is the "old town" with its tree-lined streets and its quiet houses, with its church spires pointing like fingers at the sky. In the foreground, beneath the hill is the warm yellow of freshly cut lumber laid like jackstraws across the red of newly-graded earth—"new town." Over there are the beginnings of a lawn and there a seedling tree propped against the wind; a dog sleeps in a driveway beside a station wagon, and everywhere are brightly-dressed, incredibly tiny children, engrossed in their own form of perpetual motion. In the backyards are surveyor's stakes, with ribbons fluttering in the wind, and stacks of staves for patios and barbecues. The "picture windows" of the new homes reflect the quiet river and the hills—and each other.

Far to the right, across the expanse of crow-darkened fields is North Ravenswood; an ocean of gleaming trailers surmounted by a forest of TV antennas; rough and rutted roads reaching out across the pastures toward the town.

Partitioning each of the sections, like rivers of raw red earth, are the bulldozed slashes of unnamed streets, walling off the old and the new, and new-old.
Someday—soon—it will all be one. ■



West Virginia's hillsides are reforested—with 2 x 4's...

