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## MOUNTAIN EMPIRE

**The Story of J.G. Bradley, the Buffalo Creek and Gauley Railroad, and the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company**

**By: Michael K. Wilson**

(Michael Wilson is a Clay County native and earned his B.A. from Glenville State College, did graduate study at West Virginia University, and earned his M.A. from Marshall University Graduate College. He is currently the Senior Historian/Historical Services Unit Leader for the West Virginia Department of Transportation.)

The story of the Buffalo Creek and Gauley Railroad cannot be told without including the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company, or vice versa. It is also true that the story of these two organizations cannot be told without telling the story of the founder of both, Joseph G. Bradley.

Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1881, Bradley was the grandson of Simon Cameron, United States Senator from Pennsylvania, Lincoln's first Secretary of War, and Foreign Minister to Russia. Cameron had a reputation for corruption and Lincoln himself said that the only "thing Cameron would not steal was a red hot stove." Cameron became Secretary of War out of deals made at the 1860 Republican convention in Chicago to capture the Republican nomination for Lincoln. It is unknown what role this reputation played in the fact that Cameron acquired 102,000 acres of untouched land in Clay County, West Virginia in 1880. Bradley inherited the property upon his grandfather's death in 1889 (1).

In 1903, at the age of twenty-two, the Harvard Law School graduate organized the Elk River

Coal and Lumber Company. It was soon evident to Bradley of the necessity to construct a rail line for transportation purposes. The Buffalo Creek and Gauley Railroad (BC&G) was chartered on April 1, 1904. The line began at Dundon, across the Elk River from the town of Clay, where it linked with the Coal & Coke Railroad, which later came under the control of the Baltimore and Ohio, and progressed for eighteen miles to a location that Bradley named Widen after L.G. Widen, one of the contractors for the railroad. Mr. Widen reportedly said, "I don't want this hell-hole to bear my name," obviously, his protest was ignored (2). At Widen, in 1905, Bradley started a mine, a tippie, and a town (3).

In 1918, Bradley increased his empire by constructing a band sawmill at Swandale. The town grew around the mill and included a company store, community building and company housing.

The same growth was evident in Dundon, the location of the BC&G maintenance shops. Many railroad employees and their families lived in company housing in Dundon, which also had a school and community building (4). The most well known family in Dundon, however, was the Bradley family, who lived in a large 2-story frame structure. While neither Dundon nor Swandale approached Widen

in size or stature, both communities were vitally important to the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company and the BC&G.

Coal operators of this era sometimes received reputations for harshness toward employees and families. This was not the case with Bradley. The company provided affordable housing with a full time crew of carpenters to provide maintenance, free medical care, and recreational facilities. Widen also had company sponsored athletic teams and community organizations including a Rotary club. The local schools had excellent reputations. It was common knowledge that in order to attract quality teachers, Bradley paid a bonus in addition to their salaries.

Bradley policed his own towns. State and local authorities would not intervene in Widen without a warrant because it was private property. Most minor offenses were handled by a letter from Bradley to the offender ordering him to cease the offending behavior or be fired. This letter usually controlled the problem (5).

Like many West Virginia coal towns, Widen was an ethnic melting pot. Representatives of several nationalities came to work in the mines, shops, and related industries. The Elk River Coal and

Lumber Company employed Hungarians, Poles, Italians, and Japanese, to name only a few. These ethnic groups mixed together with no difficulties. Widen also had a large African-American population that remained, for the most part, segregated with their own church and school. Following Supreme Court ordered integration in the 1950's, the Widen schools experienced little, if any, problems. The same could be said for the town as a whole as there are no recorded racial difficulties (6).

The Bradley family became active in the community. Mrs. Bradley was known to walk around Dundon with her many dogs. Like his grandfather, Bradley was a committed Republican. He was involved locally with the party and served as a delegate to multiple national conventions. In 1958, Bradley was selected to give the keynote address for Clay County's centennial celebration (7). In addition, Bradley was listed for several years on the roll of county attorneys although he never actively practiced law (8).

The BC&G played the key role in hauling both coal, from the Rich Run Mine in Widen, and lumber from the Swandale mill. Milk from the company dairy at Cressmont, near Swandale, was transported on the rails, as were passengers, by a railbus that made two round trips

daily from Widen to Dundon. Bradley owned a private railbus that transported him from Dundon to his office in Widen each day.

As with most coal operators, Bradley looked at the United Mine Workers of America (UMW A) with much animosity. Attempting to circumvent the UMWA, Bradley started a company union in 1934. In 1935, however, the UMW A tried to gain a foothold in Widen but was rebuffed. A UMW A representative said, "We went in but the company guards just shipped us out and that was that (9)."

The UMW A made additional attempts to organize in 1941, when union sympathizers blocked the road into Widen before being driven out by Bradley's men, then again in 1944 and 1946. These too were unsuccessful and had little impact to the company or railroad.

By far the most significant period of labor unrest for the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company was the strike of 1952-53. This strike also had the greatest effect on the BC&G. Shootings, explosions, vandalism, and numerous acts of violence marked the strike including the BC&G railbus being held up and the passengers being robbed. In addition, BC&G trestles at Sand Fork and Robinson were destroyed. It was one of the most

violent and costly strikes in the history of the state and required intervention at various stages by the state police and the FBI. Bitterness remained between company and union supporters for decades. Regardless of these upheavals, Widen was one of the last mines in West Virginia to organize (10).

Following the strike, Bradley operated the company until 1958, then sold the Buffalo Creek and Gauley Railroad and the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company to Clinchfield Coal Company, a subsidiary of the Pittston Company of Richmond, Virginia. Clinchfield continued to operate the Rich Run mine and the BC&G but sold the timber operation to the William Ritter Company. Later, Ritter merged with Georgia-Pacific and the latter company kept the mill open until 1968. The mine and the railroad were not prosperous and operations ceased on December 30, 1963. At the time it ceased operation, the BC&G was the largest 100 percent steam-powered common carrier railroad in North America (11).

Following the sale of the company, Bradley returned to the Boston area. The man responsible for building the industrial center of the region and a resident of the area for over half a century, never returned to the site of his former holdings. A few years later when a

reporter attempted to interview the former baron, Bradley stated, "Nothing in my life was of any interest to anyone but myself (12)." Bradley died in the mid-1960's.

In 1971, Majestic Mining, Inc., a subsidiary of the Perini Corporation of Framingham, Massachusetts, started a strip mining operation in the Widen area and later started deep mining. In August 1971, the BC&G was rechartered and the rails were active again, this time with a diesel locomotive. The railroad was active for the second time until the late 1980's, when Majestic closed its mining operation.

Little remains of the empire that Joseph G. Bradley created. While the railroad line is still intact, most of the supporting buildings and other structures no longer remain. The entire mill and town of Swandale are gone and it is virtually impossible to tell anything was there. This is also true for Dundon, where little, if anything, is recognizable as being associated with the BC&G. Widen retains several structures of the period of significance, however, most have been altered and nearly all are residences. All of the principal community and company buildings have disappeared.

As the physical evidence fades, so do the memories. Many of the employees of the BC&G and the

Elk River Coal and Lumber Company have passed away. Their children, many of them with grandchildren of their own, continue to carry on the memories of what was once a "mountain empire."

11. Ibid. p.3

12. Ibid.p.6

### Works Cited

1. Michael Martin and Leonard Gelber. Dictionary of American History. Littlefield Adams, Savage, Md, 1978. p.97.

2. Clay County High School. Life and Legend of Clay County People. "Widen", Volume IV, Book 2. 1979. p.74.

3. William E. Warden. Buffalo Creek and Gauley. Ed Crist, Inc., Highland Mills, NY, 1991. p.4

4. Clay County High School. p.92.

5. Ibid. p.87

6. Ibid. p.88.

7. Ibid. p. 5.

8. J. Howard Myers, Editor. West Virginia Blue Book. Jarrett Printing Company, Charleston, WV, 1959. p.427.

9. Warden. p.5.

10. Ibid. p.6

### CALL FOR PAPERS

The West Virginia Historical Society *Quarterly* is soliciting papers for consideration for publication. The topics should be in some way related to the history, growth or development of West Virginia. Though shorter articles are preferred, longer articles are welcomed and will be published in successive issues.

### ARCHIVES AND HISTORY CELEBRATING ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SERVICE

Founded in 1905, the West Virginia Department of Archives and History has been celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary throughout 2005. The Department has celebrated with a number of special events throughout the year

including publishing *Picturing West Virginia: A Century of Collecting by the West Virginia State Archives 1905-2005*. On October 14, the noted historian, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., presented a lecture on "The Importance of History," at the Cultural Center theater. Earlier in the year, Civil War historian and Archives and History staff member, Terry Lowry, made a presentation on his indexing of The Adjutant General papers, Civil War documents. An index of those papers is online at the Archives and History web site.

The West Virginia Historical Society and its various precursors have always enjoyed a close relationship with the Department. The Director of the Department has usually served as secretary of the historical society and the Department has always provided support for the society. The WVHS offers congratulations to the Department and appreciation for Director Fred Armstrong and his staff for their work on behalf of West Virginia's history.

#### **HISTORY DAY AT LEGISLATURE**

The annual History Day at the Legislature has been set for February 16, 2006. Historical societies from around the state,

along with historical re-enactors will demonstrate their support of and interest in the preservation of local and state history. This is a great opportunity for those who want a greater recognition of the importance of preserving our state's heritage to convey their wishes to state legislators. Each year the various county and local society display booths provide a snapshot of the work that is being around the state. History day will run from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. The History Heroes Program will once again honor those who have made significant contributions on behalf of local history projects and preservation.

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