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**Off the Job:
A Brief Look at Recreation in the Coal
Fields
1880-1930
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(Kenneth R. Bailey has served as editor of the WVHS *Quarterly* since 1995)

A large body of scholarly work has been developed to investigate the many facets of the West Virginia coal mining industry. Most of that historical writing, with a few exceptions, has concentrated on the struggle for union recognition, safety in the work place and other work related topics. Other aspects of the coal camp, such as recreation and leisure activities, have to be examined to obtain a more complete understanding of coal camp life.

Most leisure time activities among the miners in the state were like those of city dwellers in urban centers.¹ The most popular form of recreation for the coal miners, baseball, had taken the entire country by storm following the Civil War. Arnold Seymour, a baseball historian wrote "America had accepted baseball as no other sport by the turn of the Century."² In West Virginia, nearly every small mining town had its local ball team which frequently generated intense rivalries with those of neighboring towns.³

Coal companies supported baseball and frequently assumed the expense of providing ball

1. See Foster R. Dulles, *America Learns to Play* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940).

2. Arnold Seymour, *Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 345.

3. Robert Smith, *Baseball* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), p. 29.



Baseball team at Gary, WV.
(Photo Courtesy of WVSA)

fields, uniforms, and equipment.⁴ At Glen Jean, William Mckell built a baseball field with a grandstand seating several hundred spectators.⁵

Professional teams visited the mining fields to compete with the local "nines". In 1913, the Cincinnati Reds visited Montgomery for a game which was played before 1200 enthusiastic fans, many of whom were businessmen who had closed their shops for the event. Even though the Reds beat the local team, the game provided a great thrill to those in attendance.⁶ Another team, named the

4. _____, *Life in a West Virginia Coal Field* (Charleston: American Constitutional Association, 1923), p. 14.

5. W. P. Tams, Jr., *The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Library, 1963), p. 57.

6. *The Miner's Herald*, October 24, 1913, p. 1.

"House of David," visited Loop Creek. This team's members were noted as much for their waist-long hair as their prowess on the diamond.⁷ Then there was the group known as Green's Nebraska Indians, all full-blooded Indians except for Green, the manager. The baseball team was really just an attraction in order to keep a crowd interested in buying Green's patent medicine. Green encouraged the spectators to buy his medicine for the "insignificant, microscopical, pusillanimous sum of a dime, ten cents".⁸

Labor Day celebrations provided the opportunity for teams to compete before large crowds assembled for parades and speeches. At one Labor Day celebration, held at Montgomery, the visiting Ansted team defeated the Gem Stars 8 to 4 and then fell to Longacre 8 to 6.⁹

Baseball's prominence in the 19th and 20th Centuries has been well documented in television programs in recent years and contemporary West Virginia newspaper articles verify its importance. Scores from the World Series games were of great regional interest and before the United States entered World War I, relegated news of that conflict from page one to near oblivion, near the classified ads.¹⁰ The newspapers carried many stories

7. Tams, p. 57.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *The Miner's Herald*, September 6, 1913, p. 2.

10. *The Charleston Post*, October 23, 1915, p. 1.

concerning local baseball teams and players. One player from Logan County was showing such promise that the newspapers were predicting that he would soon be departing the coal fields for professional baseball.¹¹ Another player made the news when he was accused of murdering a man at Red Jacket. He had played ball in the Logan fields and then transferred his activities to Mingo County where he went to work for another coal company. The newspaper recalled that he had been "an outstanding player with the Aracoma (Logan County) baseball team".¹²

Baseball games brought color and excitement to the coal fields. One resident recalled that during his youth church services were usually cut short if a baseball game was scheduled for that afternoon and "saint and sinner alike congregated on the slopes surrounding the playing field to cheer on their favorites."¹³ When a game began, bottles of whiskey or two crates of beer would be placed in view to be awarded to the victorious team. A great deal of wrangling and arguing took place throughout the game. Whenever the players would begin to argue, knots of spectators would appear on the field and often the fists that were flying belonged to the spectators rather than to the players.

11.*The Logan Banner*, July 22, 1921, no page number.

12.*Logan Democrat*, February 24, 1916, no page number.

13.Jack Rogers, "I Remember that Coal Mine Town," *West Virginia Review*, Vol. 15 (7 April 1938), p. 204.

"Stouthearted and wise was he who could umpire an entire game and after it was done, wend his way homeward unafraid that his apprehensive head might become the object of hurled imprecation, both verbal and otherwise."¹⁴ Following the game and the "refreshment" the townspeople would return to their homes to prepare for Sunday evening church services, a date with a favorite girl, or to congregate on the company store steps to re-play the game, "inning by inning."¹⁵

While baseball attracted almost everyone, other forms of recreation appealed to only certain segments of the population. Card games were popular among the men in the camps. One resident recalled that the cellar of the Catholic Church provided a setting for gambling on holidays. Such games as "Seven-Up", and "Set-Back" were played and one could always find a group of "bickering, tobacco-spitting men and boys playing cards."¹⁶

Card playing was also one means of fleecing the miners of their hard-earned wages. In Mount Hope, where there were eight saloons serving a population of only 2,500, cards and whiskey were plentiful. Whiskey was sold at ten cents a drink and a full quart bottle was only one dollar. After imbibing on such cheap refreshment, it was reported that many of the miners became easy prey

14.*Ibid*, p. 205.

15.*Ibid*.

16.*Ibid*.

for professional gamblers who flocked to the coal fields. These gamblers, many from Cincinnati and elsewhere, made poker, faro, roulette, chucka-luck and birdcage available to the workers.¹⁷

Whiskey and cards provided recreation for some coal field residents, but others saw them as evil and counter-productive. Even though it was difficult to prevent employees from getting liquor, one coal operator determined to make an effort to dry up his coal mining camp. On Cabin Creek, in Kanawha County, there was a very profitable saloon on a small, thirty-seven acre plot of ground which was one of the few pieces of land not owned by the coal company. The company had never bought the particular piece of land because there was no commercially exploitable coal deposit under it. Besides, "the saloon did a business far more profitable than any coal mine."¹⁸ It was reported that the saloon was capable of grossing \$300 per day and on one memorable occasion, took in \$2,160 during one day's business. The coal operator in question was



A group of men enjoy a game of cards in Wheeling.

(Photo Courtesy of WVSA)

unhappy that the saloon attracted the miners on pay day and the men often got so drunk that they were unable to work for three or four days following the weekend. The operator, in order to keep the men away from the drinking, gambling and fighting, decided to buy the saloon. The saloon cost the company the "exorbitant sum" of \$12,000 for the building and property. Closing the saloon was only half the battle. Trains continued to bring in alcohol so the company decided to go on the offensive and turned the saloon into a YMCA, hoping to provide entertainment alternatives to liquor.¹⁹

The YMCA on Cabin Creek, like those elsewhere in West Virginia, provided a needed recreational and educational function for the mining regions. The building was remodeled to provide rooms for reading, shower baths, game rooms, a casino for the sale of soft drinks and candy and tobacco. There was

17. Tams, p. 55.

18. _____, "Cabin Creek YMCA," *Coal Age*, November 15, 1913, p.741.

19. *Ibid.*.

also a hall for moving pictures. The "Y" was funded by dues and the members chose a secretary to administer the programs. As more miners and their families took advantage of the programs offered by the "Y", and as dues increased, funds were appropriated for a bowling alley, a piano and phonographs, and an electric "Sweating" bath cabinet.²⁰

The YMCA was improved in 1912 when a "natatorium" was added. The swimming pool, supplied by an artesian well, was 35 feet wide, 60 feet long and from 3 ½ to 7 ½ feet deep. Some observers wondered where all the miners had learned to swim since they were seen doing the "fancy handspring, somersaults, and double somersaults, besides all the known strokes."²¹ There were few weeks when the pool was not in use and even during the strike on Paint and Cabin Creeks in 1912, both strikers and Baldwin Felts Guards could be seen enjoying themselves in the water.²² The most important result of the activities at the YMCA as far as the coal company was concerned, was the drastic drop in liquor consumption on Cabin Creek. According to newspaper reports, the importation of liquor declined from 223 gallons to less than 50 gallons per month.²³

Concern over the use of alcohol

20.*Ibid.*, p. 742.

21.*The Charleston Mail*, July 27, 1912, p. 1.

22."Cabin Creek YMCA," p. 742.

23.*Ibid.*

continued in various parts of West Virginia. Although the state had prohibited the manufacture and sale of hard liquor in 1912, there were still entrepreneurs willing to take risks to supply the demand for whiskey. For example, on Saturday nights, a "Fancy Train" arrived in Prince, Fayette County, to sell liquor to the miners.²⁴ A coal company complained that even though the state had gone dry, bootlegging was being carried on in the mining camps in a wholesale manner and it was difficult to maintain law and order as long as the men could get liquor at will. Saturday nights and paydays were the worst times when the men got "filled to the brim with cheap whiskey, find it impossible to behave themselves and fighting, cutting and near rioting takes place every week". Coal companies appealed to prohibition officials to halt the flow of whiskey, but with only limited success.²⁵

West Virginia newspapers of the early 20th Century frequently noted the difficulty in enforcing prohibition in the state. However, during the period following World War I, such articles are conspicuously absent from the papers. The reason might lie in the fact that West Virginians, like the residents of other states during the era of prohibition, simply ignored the law and imbibed at will.²⁶ Outraged protestations against the lack of enforcement fell on deaf ears.

24.Tams, p. 55.

25.*The Charleston Post*, August 20, 1915, p.2.

26.Charles H. Ambler and Festus P. Summers, *West Virginia The Mountain State* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1958), p. 366.

West Virginia followed the lead of the United States government and repealed its prohibition statute in 1934.²⁷

There were many other, more sober, forms of recreation available for the miners and their families. Hunting and fishing were major recreational outlets for men in the early part of the 20th Century as well as the latter part of the 19th because West Virginia's streams and mountains were still plentifully stocked with game.²⁸ Another popular form of recreation, particularly with the men, was horseshoes. There were also some tennis courts and playgrounds to provide amusement for all ages and both sexes.²⁹

Many of the towns offered Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and Campfire Girls organizations for the young people. According to one source, there would have been many more such groups if more adults were willing to take responsibility for them.³⁰ Interestingly, while these organizations attracted many miners' sons and daughters, a newspaper, the *Socialist and Labor Star* of Huntington, warned working-class parents against permitting their children to belong to the Scout organizations. The paper maintained that the organizations were designed to take the place of the militia and would be used in the interests of the ruling classes and "the church that

supports this training ground for war is a living lie." If the ruling classes wanted to help the workingmen, the paper continued, "let them do it without the characteristics and servility of militarism."³¹

While the youngsters had their organized Scout groups, the adults in the mining camps often had specialty clubs. There were organized sewing, cooking or drama clubs for adults which met in the community buildings in the coal camps to pursue their interests. Adults and children also organized bands and orchestras. Some of these bands were made up of particular ethnic groups such as a band reportedly made up of all Italians and an orchestra composed entirely of Hungarians.³² The large number of bands is not surprising when one considers how important bands were in the many parades held in the state. Nearly every mention of a parade in newspapers between 1880 and 1930 contained the names of the bands who took part. The bands, unlike those in present day parades, represented towns rather than educational institutions. The various bands had plenty of opportunity to "strut" for parades were universally popular in the coal fields. The greatest celebration for many of the miners was the annual Labor Day Parade and festivities. Both the miners and merchants of the towns in which the parades were held eagerly anticipated the holiday each year. The miners heard

27.*Ibid.*

28.*Life in a West Virginia Coal Field*, p. 14.

29.*Ibid.*, p. 15.

30.*Ibid.*

31.*The Socialist and Labor Star*, May 30, 1912, page 2.

32.*Life in a West Virginia Coal Field*, p. 24.

speeches by labor leaders and enjoyed ball games and other amusements, while the merchants had a golden opportunity to increase their sales.

In labor oriented Montgomery, the celebrations were always well planned and attended by good crowds. On Labor Day in 1913 there was a big parade led by the Ansted Citizens' Band followed by two baseball games. In the afternoon, the theaters were crowded with people who were treated to special labor day programs. Many refreshment stands were set up along the street and, reportedly, all did a brisk business. That night there were dances for white and Black miners in separate locations. The whites had their dance at the Opera House and the Black Americans at their Odd Fellows Hall.³³ Other community celebrations were smaller but important recreation. One held at Putney on Campbell's Creek, Kanawha County, featured a small parade, a dinner, a baseball game and an egg race.³⁴

The United Mine Workers Union itself provided recreation for its members. Local unions took every opportunity to hold a picnic whenever a union official visited the coal camps. UMWA Local 267 held a picnic on Monday, June 18, 1906, to honor District President John Nugent. Some of the attractions of the picnic were a baseball game between two miner's teams, sack and wheelbarrow races and a greased

33.*The Miner's Herald*, September 6, 1913, p. 1.

34.*Ibid.*

pole climb.³⁵ During a political campaign, UMWA National President John Mitchell visited the West Virginia coal fields. In one speech, Mitchell spoke outdoors to a huge crowd of over 6000.³⁶ In addition to these events, local unions also provided the opportunity for miners to meet on a social basis at their regular meetings.

As noted earlier, some of the events held during Labor Day, as with other holidays, were segregated. Whites and Blacks generally did not mix on social occasions although some of them lived side by side in mining camps. Though they lived in segregated communities, Black miners had opportunities for recreation. For example, Black miners annually observed the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1913, its 50th Anniversary, the Emancipation Proclamation was celebrated among the many Black miners in the McDowell County coal fields. Some 5000 people visited Keystone for speeches and to attend a ball held in honor of the occasion.³⁷

The Black miners of McDowell County were generally staunch supporters of the Republican Party. Their Republican Clubs met frequently and often provided recreation for the men and, after the 19th Amendment, for the women. A typical club meeting began with a small parade, led by a brass band,

35.*The Labor Argus*, June 7, 1906, p.4.

36.*The Labor Argus*, February 21, 1907, p. 1.

37.*The McDowell Times*, September 26, 1913, p.1.

followed by club members with placards and posters to advertise the time and place of the meeting. At the meeting itself, the emphasis was on perfecting oratorical techniques. After the speech making, a social hour would be held and refreshments served.³⁸

Many fraternal lodges were established in the coal fields. While recreation was undoubtedly a reason for membership, equally important were the insurance policies for accidental death and dismemberment which were available to the miners. Lodges permitted both white and Black members but usually in dual organizations. For example, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows was the Black parallel to the whites only Order of Odd Fellows. Some of the other lodges were the Knights of Pythias and the Pythian Sisters, the Rebekah Lodge (sister to the Odd Fellows), the Order and Junior Order of United American Mechanics, the Improved Order of Red Men, Elks, Moose and the Ancient Order, Knights of the Mystic Chain of West Virginia.³⁹ The popularity of the lodge is demonstrated by a study done in the 1920's indicating that 52 of 56 coal towns surveyed had one or more lodges for both white and Black miners.⁴⁰

Residents of West Virginia's coal

38.*The McDowell Times*, July 10, 1914, p. 1.

39.*Life in a West Virginia Coal Field*, p. 16.

40.*Ibid.* For excellent information on Black Fraternal Organizations, see Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Class and Color, Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

fields also enjoyed a variety of live and filmed entertainment. Before movies became popular, there were often traveling lecturers and groups from the Redpath Chatauqua circuit which performed in the coal fields. Plays, lectures, dancing and music of India, Germany, Japan, England and Scandinavia were featured in one program. In another, famous baritone, Marcus A. Kellerman performed.⁴¹ Traveling groups such as the Knickerbocker Stock Company played before a packed house at Keystone. One of the plays presented by the group was the "Burgler and the Waif".⁴² Professor Eph Williams and his company of Famous Troubadors and the Original Silas Green Company, reputed to be the best Black company on the road, visited the West Virginia coal fields.⁴³

For the more intellectually inclined, the Lyceum sponsored performances. One of the popular performances of the Lyceum was the Mamie Smith Jazz Review and another, the American Bell Ringing Quartet. "The Quartet were all artists of the first water and among the numbers rendered none excelled the quartet's arrangement of 'The Sextet from Lucia' and 'O Sol o Mio'."⁴⁴ While many of its artists were from outside West Virginia, Morris Harvey College at Charleston provided

41.*The Charleston Post*, May 27, 1915, no page number.

42.*The McDowell Times*, October 2, 1914, p.2.

43.*The McDowell Times*, August 1, 1913, p. 2.

44.*The Logan Banner*, March 3, 1922.

some performers for the Lyceum.⁴⁵

Movies became popular in West Virginia early in the 20th Century and coal field movie houses were featuring first-run movies like their counterparts in more urban areas. The Princess Theater on Front Street in Montgomery advertised in 1913 that it had an orchestra to go along with the silent films and a "noise-effect machine which is the hit of the Century."⁴⁶ Some of the newspaper advertisements in the 1920's indicated that such movies as "The Spoilers" with William Farnum and Kathryn Williams and the "Champion" with Charlie Chaplin were available.⁴⁷

Plays and other forms of entertainment were not only available from the lecture circuits, but showboats visited coal camps along the navigable rivers in West Virginia to expose the local population to the latest in music and art. Steamboats visited West Virginia both before and after the turn of the century with their musical productions and serious drama. Some of them had chorus lines, saloons and gambling.⁴⁸

Circuses made annual visits to many coal towns. The Metropolitan circus appeared in Keystone and was billed as a "14 car show". Some 10,000 people were expected to visit the carnival

45.*Ibid.*

46.*The Miner's Herald*. September 19, 1913, p. 5.

47.*The Charleston Post*, May 12, 1915, p. 7.

48.Interview with Mrs. Frances Smallridge, Montgomery, West Virginia, 6 September 1972.

during its three day performance and special railroad cars were made up to handle the crowds.⁴⁹

It is likely that the all time, favorite season for the coal fields was Christmas. Christmas was celebrated by nearly all the inhabitants of the coal mining camps, both natives and immigrants. In many of the towns there was a community Christmas tree. The coal company often gave either a turkey and a ham or some other present to each of its miners.⁵⁰ The Main Island Creek Coal Company, at Omar, Logan County, was noted for giving each child in the camp a present for Christmas, and holding a banquet for all the adults each year. The banquet featured turkey and dressing and music furnished by the 34 piece Omar band.⁵¹ At Cinderella, West Virginia, the Sycamore Coal Company gave each miner's wife a china plate for Christmas in 1914. Also the company store gave each family the choice of a free turkey or two chickens.⁵²

While Christmas was a major event in the coal fields, it did have complications, The biggest problem was the many different holidays celebrated around Christmas time by the various nationalities. A miners' newspaper, the Miner's Herald, noted that many of the holidays were unfamiliar to the management and often the foremen only

49.*The McDowell Times*, June 13, 1913.

50.*Life in a West Virginia Coal Field*, p. 15.

51.*The McDowell Times*, December 29, 1916.

52.*The McDowell Times*, January 2, 1914, p. 3.

knew of the holiday when the miners failed to show up for work. Greek Orthodox miners, for example, celebrated Christmas at a later time than Roman Catholic miners and the Polish miners generally spent four days celebrating the holiday. Since there were some 8 to 10 nationalities working in many of the mines, these various methods of celebrating Christmas often meant that the mines would simply shut down during the holidays.⁵³

No circuses, Lyceums or other forms of recreation and entertainment could match the automobile when it became common in the state. Automobiles, according to Foster Dulles, became the most popular form of recreation following World War I. The automobile became cheap enough for even average workers to own due to the development of mass production. In 1914 there were some two million cars in existence and more than eighteen million by 1926.⁵⁴ As early as 1915, the *McDowell Times* claimed that several miners in the New River field were able to buy automobiles and get as much pleasure from them "as the capitalist in his six cylinder." The newspaper noted that it was not surprising for miners to be able to buy cars if one recognized that in prosperous times the miners could make more than college graduates.⁵⁵ The car quickly replaced the horse and buggy for

many purposes, one of them courtship. The *Logan Banner* carried a little news item that indicated this was true early in the 1920's. According to the article, Mr. Mason Forner and Miss Mable Avis went "Flivver Riding last Sunday afternoon."⁵⁶

In this discussion of coal field culture and coal camp life, it is interesting to speculate on the effects of the automobile in changing both. West Virginia's geography and lack of transportation led the isolated coal towns to develop unique characteristics, special social relationships and community closeness that is lacking in much of modern West Virginia. The automobile freed the miner from having to live in close proximity to his work and had a major effect on changing that culture. The examination of the automobile's impact is beyond the scope of this paper but needs to be examined.

Coal camp life was difficult, dangerous, frequently frustrating and demeaning but coal camps were made up of close knit social groups who shared many good times as well as the hardship and tragedy. A picture of coal mining culture is not complete if we concentrate on the bad and ignore the good.

53. *The Miner's Herald*, December 5, 1913, p. 1; December 19, 1913, p. 6.

54. Dulles, p. 313.

55. *The McDowell Times*, March 5, 1915.

56. *The Logan Banner*, October 14, 1921.

Seminars Announced

The Society for German-American Studies will hold its annual meeting in colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, April 17-20, 2008. The Society is currently soliciting papers to be presented at the conference. For more details contact Albert Spengler, Program Coordinator at the University of Virginia at 434-982-55518 or e-mail at aws@virginia.edu.

WVHS ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the West Virginia Historical Society is scheduled for October 12 at 7:00 p.m. at the Cultural Center in Charleston. Mr. Jack Dickinson, Curator of the Blake Collection at Marshall University will be the guest speaker. Mr. Dickinson is a well known author on the Civil War and has recently joined with his wife to produce two new books on the history of Wayne County. He will have copies of his books for sale after the presentation.

Roots and Branches

An African American Genealogy Conference is scheduled for Saturday October 27, 2007 in the Physicians Auditorium of the College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina. For more information on this and other programs offered by the Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World organization, contact the CLAW office at atlanticwd@cofc.edu.