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Contested Competencies: Colliery Gardens, Wage Work, and the Social Effects of Capitalist
Transformation in West Virginia, 1880-1940

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Abstract

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By Colin Hutton

This thesis examines fundamental changes in life and labor experienced by West Virginian households during the region's capitalist transformation from 1880 to 1940. The first chapter describes the pre-coal economy and ways of living in West Virginia. It discusses displacement as land was seized by coal companies and shows how company towns were established, coercing West Virginians to gradually move into them and started working for wages. It articulates the ways that personal gardens emerged in the face of a system of power imposed on coal mining families by companies that created their currencies and police forces. The second chapter uses gardens as a lens into the changes that coal mining brought to West Virginia families, including at the cultural level, social and political attitudes, and gender roles. The thesis ultimately argues that the system that emerged out of the tensions of garden laboring was one where mining families were able to gain a semblance of having independent sustenance and a tool of leverage against their employers, while ironically constantly facing the threat of being removed from the land they were using. It argues that at the same time, coal companies found it advantageous to let miners keep their own gardens because it allowed them to pay lower wages. It argues that the social system that arose in the hills and hollows—of company town authority, forced market dependency, and necessary subsistence work amidst an extractive capitalist economy—produced and reproduced poverty amongst coal mining communities. It contends that this manufactured poverty greatly affected the daily lives and living conditions of mining families—not only of the male worker, but also of his wife and his children, who at times carried the brunt of garden labor. It demonstrates that West Virginian cultural habits, behaviors and attitudes deemed destructive and backwards came under scrutiny, first by company officials and later by historians and anthropologists.

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Introduction

In his work on labor relations in West Virginian coal territory, David Corbin recalls an interview with a former Mingo County coal miner, Marion Preece, who, at the age of sixteen, found himself stumbling into a rebellion on his way home from a job in the late summer of 1921:

He had just started climbing the huge, steep ridge, called Blair Mountain, when he was suddenly grabbed from behind, an arm wrapped around his chest, and a hand placed over his mouth. A voice whispered: “Any noise and you are dead.” Looking around, the young coal digger saw hundreds of miners, dressed in blue jeans and wearing red handkerchiefs around their necks, hiding in trenches and behind trees, armed with rifles, shotguns, and machine guns.¹

Preece had incidentally come across the armed organizers of the Mingo County strike, a conflict in which 10,000 unionized mine workers clashed with coal companies and state forces in the largest labor uprising in American history. The strike, while eventually violently quelled by the United States Army and West Virginia National Guard, erupted class antagonisms between miners and their employers as strikes rose in frequency and disruption across southern West Virginia. Yet, it simultaneously belonged to a much longer history of dispossession, manufactured poverty, and class conflict that went back more than four decades, to when American industrialists first gazed upon the Appalachian landscapes and dreamed of mining the vast fields of coal.²

In the later part of the nineteenth century, West Virginia underwent a fundamental transformation in ecology and economic structure. Speculators built railroad systems through the mountains of Appalachia, expanding a network that drew industrialists hungry to sink coal pits

¹ David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015), 195.

² *Ibid.*, 196.

and sell the valuable fuel on the national market. Coal companies set up towns near their mining sites, arrogated to themselves some powers normally wielded by governments, and established West Virginia as an extractive periphery in the burgeoning United States industrial economy. However, as capitalist industry incorporated the people of Appalachia into systems of wage labor, deeply rooted modes of small-scale agricultural subsistence persisted. In West Virginia, from the 1880s to the 1940s, people brought the agricultural practices that once comprised their livelihoods in mountain communities to newly-established coal company towns.

Historians and economists have grappled with the uniqueness of the transformation to capitalism in West Virginia. Many emphasize how the Appalachian state's economy rapidly shifted toward industrial development over the course of only a few decades. West Virginia's economic transformation—from an economy primarily driven by household agriculture and trade to an economy primarily driven by extractive industry—characterized the region's relationship to the national economy. Perhaps the most thorough analysis of this type of transformation has been done by Appalachian economic historian Paul Salstrom, who has written extensively on both the pre-coal economy in West Virginia and its subsequent industrial transition toward a dependent relationship with the eastern U.S. economy.³

This paper is concerned with the transformation of the West Virginia household during the same period. While the economic and infrastructural landscape of the state rapidly changed around them, West Virginians felt the powerful forces of capital intimately in their lives. Many people had to sell their own labor to earn wages, working long hours in crowded coal mines while large companies took control of large landholdings and people lost access to their

³ Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 1-20.

historical areas for hunting, fishing, and crop raising. When West Virginians began to move into coal company towns, where their companies had allotted them the ability to live in a house with a small plot of land, some began to grow their own gardens, raising vegetables such as corn, beans, and onions, and in some cases keeping livestock. They kept these vegetables for their own consumption, or in some cases canned and sold them cheaply to other families. As workers simultaneously worked for wages on company land and grew their own food for sustenance, tensions arose between worker and employer. The core questions that this paper poses revolve around those tensions. As West Virginians were thrust from a primarily self-sufficient agricultural lifestyle into wage labor, what was the nature of the relationship between their personal gardens and their wage work? How did coal companies perceive and react to workers' maintenance of personal gardens? How did the families of coal miners live, and what was their relationship to garden labor? How did coal company town conditions affect the social and cultural practices of West Virginia mining families?

West Virginians often characterized their livelihoods by referring to their “competencies”. An agricultural competency, as defined by Steven Stoll, refers to “an adequate supply of something or the land necessary to create that supply”.⁴ Having a competency was a prerequisite for West Virginian families to survive on Appalachian land, by raising and storing crops, keeping livestock, and hunting and fishing in forests and waterways. The objective of a competency was to support the basic needs of one’s family, to keep them stocked during the unproductive winter months, and to possibly enable one to expand one’s family with economic security. It operated under the principles of what historians have traditionally labeled “subsistence” labor: a West Virginian family would grow, hunt, and gather enough food to get

⁴ Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 2018), 67.

by, without a major focus on producing a surplus for commercial purposes. The nature of competencies inevitably shifted in company town conditions, to include a range of survival strategies including wage work, garden raising, goods sale, and community services.

This paper relies on the concept of the competency to characterize the primary ways that West Virginians carried on in their daily lives and to illustrate the fundamental transformation of economic activity that came along with the extractive coal economy. The objectives of a subsistence farmer, after all, are at odds with the objectives of a capitalist. Yet it is incorrect to claim that a West Virginian subsistence farmer lived isolated from exchange or money. Before the 1880s—when coal companies brought enormous amounts of capital into the Appalachian hills—West Virginian farmers and hunters had been exchanging goods and producing according to their available land and resources for decades. Sometimes, they would take money in exchange for their traded goods and use this money to purchase goods from community members or salespeople. The ultimate trajectory of this money, though, was neither investment for the sake of future reinvestment nor accumulation, distinguishing the Appalachian subsistence farmer from the capitalist producer. Money was useful to the Appalachian farmer, but it was not essential in keeping a competency for his family. However, the advent of coal in the 1880s brought with it a transition where participation in the market changed from being useful to being necessary to survive.

Gardening, amongst other economic, social, and cultural strategies, thus emerged as a means of ensuring a family's competency and independence given the uncertainty of the coal wage in this era. The garden would however become a space of tension between mining families and company officials, one manifestation of the class conflict and cultural conflict that would permeate coal company towns across the region. A central argument of this paper is that the

system that emerged out of these tensions was one where mining families were able to gain a semblance of having independent sustenance and tools of leverage against their employers, while ironically constantly facing the threat of being removed from the land they were using. It argues that the social system that arose in the hills and hollows—of company town authority, forced market dependency, and necessary subsistence work amidst an extractive capitalist economy—produced and reproduced poverty amongst coal mining communities. It contends that this manufactured poverty greatly affected the daily lives and living conditions of mining families—not only of the male worker, but also of his wife and his children, who at times carried the brunt of labor. It demonstrates that West Virginian cultural habits, behaviors and attitudes deemed destructive and backwards came under scrutiny, first by company officials and later by historians and anthropologists. It will use the West Virginian case to demonstrate how a material insufficiency created by outsiders paved the way for a multitude of social problems in industrial Appalachia. The 1880s—a decade of swift land trading and rapid escalation of coal extraction in West Virginia—serves as a foundation point for the investigation. For the better part of a century, coal companies would establish towns in the state and position generations of West Virginians into situations of poverty, disease, and dependency. However, the company town model did not evade the eventual effects of the larger U.S. economy in the twentieth century. With the Great Depression dealing a major blow to the profitability of coal extraction in Appalachia, forcing many companies to halt mining operations, 1940 serves as an endpoint to the study.

The competency was a marker of independence among West Virginians that was directly and constantly challenged by the precarious nature of coal mining work and the wages attached to it. A family who subsidized their mining wage with garden production and other income-

generating activities did so seeking independence from the indebtedness that came from relying on coal company scrip and bought provisions. However, independence from the company that owned the home in which a family rested and the land on which their garden stood could not be wholly secured. Instead, it was a tenuous sense of independence that mining families fought for, contingent upon the products of their labor, their social and cultural behavior, and the ways that they related to company officials. Anthropologist James C. Scott has written extensively on the relationships that form between actors in a hegemonic system, specifically the range of behaviors exhibited by subordinate groups in relation to those with the social or political power to dominate them. He crucially argues in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* that between a system of unchallenged hegemony and acts of open rebellion, subordinate groups employ a continuum of strategies to survive or defy their oppressors. The uniqueness of these modes of resistance, according to Scott, is that many of them are undertaken in everyday life rather than in eruptions of violence or protest. Some strategies, referred to as belonging to a “hidden transcript” are pursued in private, out of earshot of authority, while others belonging to a “public transcript” succeed by taking a public face. At the same time, those in positions of power similarly utilize a range of public and hidden strategies to maintain their subjects’ subordination. Scott’s *Domination* provides a theoretical background to many of the assertions made in this paper. West Virginian miners sought independence in the margins of where companies exerted control over their lives: while they organized strikes in shows of force against their employers, they also raised vegetables in the narrow spaces around their homes, worked alongside their wives and children to maintain a competency, and built cultures that contested company town authority. It was simultaneously an independence under threat from

company officials, who came to either directly oppose efforts by mining families through violence and deprivation or utilized them for their own financial or reputational gain.⁵

The first chapter describes the pre-coal economy and ways of living in West Virginia. It discusses displacement as land was seized by coal companies and shows how company towns were established and how West Virginians gradually moved into them and started working for wages. It articulates the ways that personal gardens emerged in the face of a system of power imposed on coal mining families by companies that created their currencies and police forces. It characterizes gardens as leverage during labor actions, as garden products allowed miners to leave their jobs or strike with economic security.

The second chapter uses gardens as a lens into the changes that coal mining brought to West Virginia families, including at the cultural level, social and political attitudes, and gender roles. It identifies the tensions that emerged once coal companies began to find advantages in rewarding personal garden use and holding garden contests. It investigates how coal miners' wives and children made significant contributions to families' sustenance and through their reproductive labor and garden work but also endured significant exploitation. It examines observed aspects of the health and quality of life of miners and their families, as well as their diets. It explores cultural clashes that emerged between miners and their overseers over alcoholism and discusses how company town communities used liquor and spiritual and religious practices as tools of cohesion and palliation, situating these stories in conversation with other cases of subsistence labor and spiritual "hidden transcript" amongst enslaved Mississippi Delta plantation laborers in the United States. Finally, the paper identifies how this system that

⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 18-20.

dominated and shaped the lives of West Virginians for decades contributed to a popular perception of West Virginians as culturally backward, both at the time and in the work of some twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians.

A Note on Sources

This paper uses the individual and collective experiences of West Virginians living in coal company towns as a lens into the exploitative and unchecked power of coal companies. One critical set of sources is a collection of oral history interviews housed in the West Virginia State Archives: the “Matewan Oral History Project Collection.” With interviews conducted primarily in the summer of 1989, transcripts of the oral histories in the collection show conversations between interviewers and, most commonly, the children of former coal miners in various parts of Southern West Virginia. These interviews provide valuable information on daily life and work. Interviewees talk about their individual labor and their parents’ labor in family gardens (with some children taking a significant role in the process), the ways that communities related to the towns’ company stores (modes of exchanging currency, the ways in which company stores became a site of community congregation, and the store holdings), and often the side jobs that wives and children began to take to supplement the families’ income. Similarly, photographs from the state archives serve to bring the experiences of mining families to life. Apart from the archival collection, members of West Virginia mining families let their voices be heard in interviews with historians, governmental studies and newspapers. Coal trade journals and published periodicals reveal conflicts of culture and livelihood between coal companies and their employees. *Coal Age* is a journal written by a professional class and shows some of the ways in which coal company officials and overseers viewed the behaviors and lives of their workers,

with articles and columns discussing workers' backwards cultural attitudes to thinking of ways to combat alcoholism in coal companies and ensure proper sanitation of their workers' houses. Volumes of *Coal Age* during the early twentieth century are also invaluable in documenting company contests to reward workers for raising gardens and keeping them clean, and how company officials presented these contests as a form of welfare. Governmental studies by U.S. agencies such as the Department of Labor, Children's Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor bring qualitative and quantitative observations on the conditions of coal company towns, as do anthropological studies by James Watt Raine and Homer Morris. Much background and context for the research of the project is owed to an array of Appalachian historians: Ronald Eller, Paul Salstrom, Steven Stoll, Ronald Lewis, Donald Edward Davis, Janet Greene, David Corbin, Chad Montrie, Richard M. Simon, and Mary Beth Pudup. Finally, the paper situates the cases of struggle and exploitation in coal company towns within the theoretical frameworks of the "public" and "hidden transcripts" of resistance amongst subordinated groups and reproductive labor in the transformation to capitalist that have been explored by James C. Scott and Maria Mies, respectively.

Chapter 1: The Industrial Economy, Gardens, and Exploitation in Coal Company Towns

Toward an Industrial West Virginia

West Virginia's mountains, hollows, and waterways remained relatively untouched by American settlers until a population explosion in the mid-eighteenth century began to push settlers west of the Atlantic, with the thirteen colonies growing from 630,000 people in 1730 to 2,150,000 by 1770. While initial concentrations of settlers occupied the lands near the southern Potomac and along the disputed boundary of Pennsylvania, by the start of the Revolutionary War colonists had explored and settled all the way to the eastern border of the Ohio River. Groups of Shawnee lived along the Ohio River, which initially stifled plans for settlement along the waterway. However, with Shawnee defeats in 1774 by Virginian armies, land speculators began to look toward gaining ownership of large tracts of land in what would in 1863 become West Virginia. In the end, many land grants were given to former revolutionary war soldiers and land speculators under George Washington's direction, partially to accommodate the growing population in Atlantic cities.⁶ Appalachian land west of Virginia was often known as "wastelands", due to the difficulty of growing crops in the hills compared to the piedmont and coastal plain to the east. Pioneers and settlers who travelled across the state to live near the Ohio River did so knowing they would need to provide for themselves a means of getting by in an ungoverned territory.⁷

⁶ Paul Salstrom, "Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems: An Approach to West Virginia's Economic History," *West Virginia History* 51 (1992): 45-54.

⁷ Joseph T Lambie, *From Mine to Market: The History of Coal Transportation on the Norfolk and Western Railway* (New York: New York University Press, 1954), 38.

Early West Virginian settler families' quests to maintain a decent livelihood was predicated on a land competency: without the security of a robust and formalized political entity in the area or a way to purchase food or goods, having access to both productive land and natural resources like waterways, forests and game kept families in a comfortable living situation. While raising crops and livestock formed the majority of a settler family's work, living near a means to hunt and trap wild animals like deer helped supplement a family's competency when necessary. Not only would wild game provide an immediate source of meat, but their skins and furs could also be exported east in bulk, a trading practice that was a major source of income for many West Virginian households from the post-revolutionary days until the 1820s.⁸

While early efforts at carving pathways west aimed to establish postal delivery in the Appalachian region, prospects of inter-state transaction appealed to eastern states: the South Carolina legislature, for example, responded to the establishment of a wagon road into the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1800 by granting Gabriel Benson the authority to build a turnpike road to the North Carolina boundary as a means of improving state trade with Tennessee. While the practice of establishing toll roads, according to Donald Edward Davis, was considered generally "distasteful to the people" due to the high access costs, toll roads and turnpikes nonetheless sprang up around the Appalachian region in the early part of the nineteenth century. As Atlantic merchants and landowners began to look toward extending their commercial reach into Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia, formerly rough paths for foot or horse travel into the mountains became targets for these elaborate toll road-building projects. Sensing the economic incentive of cross-regional travel, the federal government eventually poured funds into the building of the Federal Road, a landmark toll road that in 1807 connected Nashville, Tennessee

⁸ Salstrom, "Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems".

with trade in Georgia by crossing through Cherokee lands. With the development of these toll roads over the next decades, including the Kanawha Turnpike in Southern West Virginia, Appalachians found new ways of buying and selling livestock, seeds, and agricultural supplies on southern and Atlantic markets. The implementation of new roads and the introduction of commercial goods and technologies certainly caused Appalachians in the antebellum era to, as Davis puts it, “[feel] the direct impact of the Market Revolution.”⁹ Still, while a limited number of sawmills, tanneries, and iron manufacturing sites popped up in the region, household agriculture remained dominant in Appalachian communities. The embryonic manufacturing technology and supply imports to the region instead worked to prop up local farming methods. As Davis shows, iron manufacturing supplied farmers with farming tools and improvements such as plows and wagon rims, while access to salt allowed preservation and transportation of beef over longer distances for sale.¹⁰

However, the eventual easing of access into the mountains and hollows of Appalachia did not gain agriculturalists in the region a productive advantage over midwestern farms. Appalachian settlement helped facilitate access to the West and over the course of the nineteenth century, production from the farms west of the Ohio River gradually met and overtook that of Appalachia. Already in 1850, the average combined value of a midwestern farm’s implements and machinery stood at \$82.53 compared to \$65.24 in West Virginia and by 1880 the disparity had grown to \$121.60 versus \$43.07.¹¹ While the emergence of roads like the Kanawha Turnpike had allowed farming instruments to reach West Virginia with greater ease, midwestern farmers

⁹ Donald Edward Davis, *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 129.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹ Salstrom, “Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems”.

used mechanical technology on their farms at a higher rate. Paul Salstrom has identified a divergence in labor philosophy at the heart of the shift in regimes of agricultural production. While the expanses of the Midwestern prairie offered farmers economic security to invest in technology that expedited and commercialized farming, Appalachian farmers enjoyed slower returns on the high investment of capital. While limited commodity exchanges gave most Appalachian farmers small-to-moderate amounts of money to work with, the high price of technological instruments often proved too steep of an investment for most to consider worthwhile with the transportation of mechanical goods into the state still relatively inefficient.¹²

The small pockets of iron producers across West Virginia similarly began to lag behind in productivity starting in the 1850s, when steamboat routes across the Great Lakes allowed streamlined transportation of cheap ore from Michigan and Minnesota into the Appalachian region. The later emergence of robust railroads across the state exacerbated this gap. While the mountainous geography of Appalachia had previously proved difficult to penetrate by railway, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century the region nonetheless became paved with tunnels, bridges, and railroads, with heavy investment from northeastern industrialists such as J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and E.H. Harriman.¹³ Where in 1850, less than two hundred miles of railway fell inside the eventual state boundaries of West Virginia, by 1880 seven hundred miles of track now crossed the state.¹⁴ Railroads allowed iron makers in Ohio and Pennsylvania—those with access to Great Lakes ports—to import and sell manufactured iron in West Virginia markets at lower prices than local producers could manage. The escalation of the

¹² Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path*, 23.

¹³ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 1.

¹⁴ Salstrom, "Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems".

inflow of these cheap manufactured goods into West Virginia greatly diminished local manufacturing over the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Yet railroad expansion into the mountains was not fully realized without a multitude of local critics. Opposition to railroad development amongst West Virginians, writes Ronald Lewis, was often born out of “Jacksonian attitudes toward monopoly and corporations.”¹⁶ To the Appalachian farmer, staying independent from the interests of businesses, industrial companies and land speculators was important to preserving the autonomy of the individual and the “freedom” of the market from those who would manipulate it to their advantage. Furthermore, modern industry went against the principles of self-sufficiency and working to produce for one’s own family that marked the agricultural tradition with honor. Others feared that nearby railroads would threaten their livestock or damage their land or property, culminating in public meetings amongst farming communities to oppose current construction projects. West Virginian farmers recognized, also, that they and their communities would bear a portion of both the expenses of railroad-building and the costs of damages to local land and property. As Lewis notes, courts that approved construction of railroads in the region would routinely protect railroad companies from being liable for destructive accidents, such as crop fields set ablaze or livestock run over by trains. Railroad companies also commonly relied on county finances to raise the capital necessary to complete construction. Lewis points toward a case in 1885-86, for instance, where an unpopular proposal pledged \$50,000 in county taxes from Pocahontas County to buying stock from the Chicago, Parkersburg, and Norfolk Railway company under the expectation that the

¹⁵ Salstrom, “Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems”.

¹⁶ Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 235.

community ought to finance the railroad's extension through their land.¹⁷ West Virginians understood the powerful economic consequences that came with a robust rail system into the mountains. As Lewis notes, a column in *The Pocahontas Times* read:

A farmer came to town the other day and ate dinner at a local restaurant. He spread butter from Iowa on bread grown in the Valley of Virginia; he put condensed milk from New York in coffee from South America, sweetened with New Orleans sugar. He ate corn bread from Ohio, a bacon from Chicago, and had beans, sweet potatoes, onions, and other vegetables from Michigan while the fruit was grown in California. He sweetened buckwheat cakes from Upshur County with Indiana corn molasses. By chance the potatoes had grown in Pocahontas soil. This, too, in a county where a few short years since every article on many a well laden board from the sugar and substantial to the rye coffee were produced at home. As for the farmer's horse, at a livery stable he was fed on Iowa oats and Michigan hay. Though we send much lumber and many fat cattle, sheep, and fowls to market, what doth it profit when so great an amount for food and fodder is sent to communities not nearly so richly favored by nature.¹⁸

Indeed, canned foods and farm instruments that had been traded and sold between and within communities for decades would eventually struggle to compete with products shipped in to be sold on local markets.

Still, even with diminishing opportunities to sell their goods in local and distant markets, West Virginian agriculturalists relied on their subsistence competencies to get them by. Family farms provided enough space for sustenance without needing to participate in the market economy, and procedural moneyless exchange in local areas formed what is known as an “informal economy”: families gave and took goods from others in their community, bonded by an expectation of reciprocity rather than legal contracts or moneyed exchange.¹⁹ Sometimes,

¹⁷ Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 237.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 261.

¹⁹ Salstrom, “Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems”.

repayment for material goods was forgiven until a time where it was convenient for both parties. Historian Paul Salstrom refers to this informal economy that formed the livelihoods of thousands of localities in West Virginia as a “subsistence barter-and-borrow” system. Where families found holes in their own subsistence capacity, such as an inability to keep livestock or yield failings of a certain crop, subsistence barter-and-borrow systems helped them get by. Reciprocity for West Virginia farming families was predicated upon geographical closeness with one’s community, but also upon access to land, even if not formally owned.²⁰ Family farms were large and took advantage of the varied qualities of land. By 1880, for instance, the average family farm in southern Appalachia comprised 187 acres, with a quarter of the land cultivated for growing, twenty percent left as open pasture for grazing livestock, and the remainder left as wooded land. As historian Ronald Eller notes in an interview, one of the qualities of the preindustrial Appalachian farm was a less prominent division of labor along gender lines than in spaces of waged labor:

There was very little separation between men and women together in that environment. Men occasionally would have gone off to work in timbering operations or gone off to trade goods and services, but men were very much at home and part of that environment and part of that community. There wasn't the kind of differentiation between men going off to work for wages as would be the case later on. Children were very important to the labor of the farm; children worked alongside parents in the woods and in the garden and the fruit trees and constructing houses and buildings, taking care of younger children. It was very much a family operation.²¹

²⁰ Salstrom, “Subsistence-Barter-and-Borrow Systems”.

²¹ WV History Film Project, Eller, n.d.

Corn was perhaps the most ubiquitous crop that grew relatively well on Appalachian land, often grown alongside wheat, rye, oats, and at times melons, squash, and beans. Some households kept gardens as well, where they would tend to potatoes, radishes and onions.²²

As Chad Montrie has shown, a West Virginian farm's connection with the woods served both a productive and an aesthetic purpose for agriculturalist families. While pigs—an important part of many families' diets, and valuable as an asset for bartering—were ideally fattened on corn, fruits and nuts of the forest known as “mast” helped also to raise the dietary or barter value of the animals. Wooded areas were home to wild game as well: for families who struggled to keep a serviceable number of livestock for their own consumption, squirrels, birds, rabbits, deer, and fish from the forests and nearby waterways helped to maintain meat consumption. The collecting, of ginseng root, coming to be known colloquially as “ginsenging,” became a valuable pastime for those looking to barter, due to perceptions of the plant's extraordinary natural properties. The significance of living amongst the “natural beauty” of woods, according to Montrie, was for West Virginians also rooted in an “ideal of interdependence and a life lived close to the natural world that was directly and perceptibly around them.”²³ When women on family farms were tasked with keeping ornamental gardens around their cabins, a wide range of flowers growing naturally in the forests often supplemented their efforts.²⁴

Casting a shadow over the communities of subsistence and semi-subsistence laborers in West Virginia, however, was a growing knowledge of the potential industrial capacity of the region. Geologists and statesmen had been acutely aware of rich deposits of coal in the hills of

²² Chad Montrie, *Making a Living: Work and Environment in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 73.

²³ *Ibid*, 74.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 3-74.

West Virginia since the late eighteenth century, with Thomas Jefferson writing in his 1785 *Notes on Virginia* that “in the western country coal is known to be in so many places, as to have induced an opinion, that the whole tract between the Laurel mountain, Mississippi, and Ohio, yields coal.”²⁵ However, the absence of a reliable way to transport coal left the fields relatively untouched for nearly a century: as Corbin notes, at the time of the American Civil War, 185 mines employed fewer than 1600 workers in West Virginia to extract coal for salt manufacturers and blacksmiths.²⁶ Indeed, eastern industrialists had coal in mind while funding the building of railroads across the state, and with transportation infrastructure in place by the end of the Civil War widespread coal mining had begun to look like a reality in West Virginia. The profitability of extractive coal mining became tied to intensifying industry in the post-Civil War economy: by 1880, for instance, around 56,500 steam engines around the country demanded coal fuel.²⁷

As Steven Stoll argues, the establishment of coal mining in West Virginia required significant land transfers to companies and speculators who would make moves to use the land for its extractive potential. At the outset of industrial development, many politicians stirred at the prospect of investment into railroads, industry and jobs. “Its governors, legislators, and members of Congress all acted to attract industry” writes Stoll. The position of ordinary settlers in West Virginia rendered them virtually powerless to resist these political moves. “Mountain people knew how to soldier and hunt, to track an animal or an enemy through the woods,” Stoll reflects. “But few of them could organize against an act of the legislature or to stop a clear-cut.” Yet, a lingering barrier to coal operations in West Virginia was the prominence of local sovereign

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the state of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1801), 57.

²⁶ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 2.

²⁷ Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 131.

power over atomized areas. West Virginia had been established as a state in 1863, and towns and counties had the power to, for instance, close a coal mine down if it was a popular policy or cut into the earnings of coal companies by taxing gains on coal extraction.²⁸ One of the most prominent political moves that allowed speculators and later coal companies to buy up large tracts of land and operate how they pleased on it was a court decision that shifted the power to check corporations away from local municipalities and into the hands of state legislatures. In 1868, Judge John Forrest Dillon held that a city did not have the power to prevent a railroading company from crossing a city with its track, and that only the state legislature would have that authority. This ruling, backed by the U.S. Supreme Court, came to be known as Dillon's Rule and streamlined the process of coal companies accessing the natural resources of land, setting up company towns with unfettered authority to mine coal in any location they could find it.²⁹ Coal companies often took the names of geographical landmarks to establish themselves in the state: Flat Top, Blue Stone, Crane Creek, Widemouth, Rich Creek, and Indian Ridge.³⁰ By the time the state congress began approving coal companies to move in on the state in the 1870s and 1880s, many of the land grants from the Revolutionary War remained in play in the state, albeit having been traded and sold between families or communities. Stoll shows that these deeds were soon undone by a new generation of judges that took to the state's courts starting in 1890, handing over areas of historically local control to extractive companies.³¹ In fact, in the industrializing years after the Civil War, companies often relied on individual politicians with vested interest in extractive industry to represent their interests. One of these was Henry Davis, co-operator of the prominent Davis Coal & Coke Company and U.S. senator from 1871-1873; in Stoll's words,

²⁸ Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 136.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 137.

³⁰ Lambie, *From Mine to Market*, 38.

³¹ Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 139.

Davis and his concurrent senator and Standard Oil stockholder Johnson Camden, came to “[embody] astounding conflicts of interest, acting as lobbyists for their own companies while occupying positions that allowed them to direct law and policy.”³² However, as Lewis shows, some West Virginians, particularly those experiencing significant poverty or failing to maintain an agrarian competency, also willingly sold their own land to speculators out of desperation. In doing so, they simultaneously contributed to the process of coal and timber industry building and, in many cases, resigned themselves to future lives of wage work as landless laborers.³³ West Virginia’s land was thus suddenly placed in the hands of absentee owners. As David Corbin cites, “by 1900 absentee landowners owned 90 percent of Mingo, Logan, and Wayne counties and 60 percent of Boone and McDowell counties. By 1923 nonresidents of West Virginia owned more than half of the state and controlled four-fifths of its total value.”³⁴

The sudden acquisitions of land and natural resources by coal companies in the 1880s was enough to push many families into pursuing waged mining jobs at timber mills and coal company towns, some voluntarily and some out of economic necessity. One reason was a general decline in the natural resources and land quality that affected families’ ability to maintain a competency in subsistence agriculture. With pigs often being sent to nearby forests and pastures to graze, the animals over consumed herbaceous plants and killed or ate forest plants, presumably preventing regrowth of many trees by consuming fallen seeds. The noise of expanding railroads often drove wild game away from settlements. And a constant trampling of cattle across forests and pasture, according to Davis, is speculated to have profoundly eroded the

³² Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 138.

³³ Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 133.

³⁴ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 4.

productive quality of soil in parts of West Virginia.³⁵ These soil concerns became more prominent in the years following the Civil War, as a need to resupply the country with meat after a large-scale loss of livestock in the war prompted West Virginian producers to raise cattle in larger numbers for increased profits. Finally, with the effects on American agriculture of the global “Long Depression” of 1873 came drastically reduced prices for crops and livestock for sale, even on West Virginia’s local markets. As Lewis notes, farmers often struggled with these steep falls in price—corn, for example, “fell from 88 cents per bushel in 1867 to forty- four cents in 1876.”³⁶ With the state gradually coming to codify land and property laws to a greater degree, farmers often faced foreclosure or immense debt by keeping their farms in operation.

Despite the profitability of coal by the last decades of the nineteenth century, early coal mining work in West Virginia faced issues in the production process that made levels of coal export inconsistent and unpredictable. Early methods divided coal mines up into rooms, in which one lone miner would operate all of the five steps of mining the “face” of coal in each room: supporting the roof of the room, cutting into the coal, drilling a hole into a piece of coal, filling the hole with gunpowder or dynamite and blasting it out, and finally lifting the coal onto a minecart for exiting. Other workers operated furnaces to ventilate air through mines, maintained minecart track functionality, and transferred coal from minecarts to a cleaning and weighing device outside of the mine, where it would then be deposited onto a railroad car.³⁷ These laborers, along with other higher-up employees that supervised mining work, referred to as “company men” or “foremen”, were paid hourly wages. Miners working on the face, comprising

³⁵ Davis, *Where There Are Mountains*, 133.

³⁶ Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 241.

³⁷ Richard M. Simon, “Uneven Development and the Case of West Virginia: Going Beyond the Colonialism Model,” *Appalachian Journal* 8, no. 3 (1981),166.

64% of the workforce in West Virginia coal mines until around 1930, were initially paid piece rate wages. The amount of coal that a worker could mine and load out of his room would determine his earnings for a day of work. As Richard Simon notes, two of the important features that shaped labor relations at this level of coal mining were a lack of a real division of labor and, due to the relatively small number of foremen in each mine, a lack of real supervision. Some miners would work for days without seeing a foreman, due to the sheer size that many mine systems occupied.³⁸

As Simon argues, these features of the production process prevented coal company authority from holding full control over the production process. With no hourly commitment to their coal work, miners could work only as much as they needed to each day, and ignore mining instructions given to them by foremen or abandon projects altogether when unhappy with working conditions or low yields of coal. It was difficult, therefore, for companies to tighten up production processes to improve their profit margins: these shifts were generally pursued by either extending the working day or by using industrial machinery in place of manual labor (in the case of coal mining, mechanization techniques including machine loading were made difficult by a need to reorganize the labor force into divided working groups, requiring intensified supervision). “The coal operator never attempted a reorganization of labor because the social and economic conditions, especially in the new coalfields of West Virginia,” writes Simon, “were more conducive to forceful control of the work force and increases in profits through wage reductions.”³⁹ In the absence of mining room supervision, company operators instead began both meticulously inspecting the quality of mining work and performing what

³⁸ Simon, “Uneven Development,” 166.

³⁹ Ibid, 168.

Simon refers to as “audacious robberies” on the piece wages of miners. Withholding wages from miners for periods of “deadwork”—time spent in mines that was not directly tied to coal production, including repairing mine room infrastructure or travel—became a common practice, as did deductions for large amounts of impure substances found in coal collections. Most importantly, company authorities began to commission foremen to weigh coal upon removal from the mines, routinely “shortweighing” miners’ daily collections by as much as a third and deducting wages accordingly or requiring miners to fill railcars past the brim to earn a standard wage for the car.⁴⁰

Living, Earning, and Gardening in Company Towns

Beyond instituting procedures that would limit wages, coal companies sought to maximize the profitability of mining work by monopolizing the labor of their miners. This required a tightening of company town authority to control every aspect of the lives of miners and their families. One way that companies did this was by keeping workers’ wages internal to the company town. Rather than paying miners in United States currency, companies printed unique papers and metal pieces known as “coal scrip” that would only be redeemable with merchants inside the company town, or in some cases with nearby allied company towns. Companies set up stores within their towns, aiming to provide mining families with every good they needed to get by. Company men would subtract expenses for rent and health services before giving miners their monthly earnings of scrip, and miners would use their remaining scrip to buy their necessities—food, clothing, appliances, and sometimes their mining picks or helmets—

⁴⁰ Simon, “Uneven Development,” 170.

from the store. Company stores commonly charged fixed prices for goods at as much as three times higher than market value, because the scrip was mostly unredeemable outside of the town and had no real value. At times, nearby towns would accept scrip from outside companies, but would devalue it. “Sometimes you'd get two days a week and you'd go down and get you two dollars script,” recalls Tom Chafin, a former miner at Mingo County’s Red Jacket Coal Company in the late 1920s who aimed to trade in scrip for merchandise at nearby merchants. “But come up to another store up Mate Creek or Beech Creek and you just got ... eighty cents worth of merchandise here for your dollar script.”⁴¹ Price manipulation allowed coal companies to extract profits not only from mining work itself, but also from the expenses and daily purchases that would be endemic to living in the company town. Historian David Corbin shows that in 1920, for instance, a coal company operating in Boone County failed to turn over a profit from coal trade—and in fact lost \$40,000 on the year—yet nonetheless came out on top due to company store profits.⁴²

As Corbin argues, giving miners scrip for their work also allowed companies to render any “increases” in wage meaningless, as company store goods and living expenses could be increased accordingly. Additionally, scrip systems allowed coal companies to create credit systems for their employees: when a mining family could not afford their rent, or incurred a sudden charge like a funerary expense, company men would withhold future scrip toward repayment of the debt, placing many families in cycles of debt peonage toward their employers.

⁴¹ Tom Chafin, “Tom Chafin Interview,” interview by Rebecca Bailey, 1989, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/collections/sc2003-135/mdcoralhen14.html>.

⁴² Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 10.

Merle Travis lamented the hopeless state of company town servitude in his 1946 song “Sixteen Tons:”

You load sixteen tons, and what do ya' get?
 Another day older and deeper in debt.
 Saint Peter don't you call me,
 Cause I can't go.... I owe my soul to the company store.

Jeanie Grimmett, growing up near the Red Jacket coal fields in the 1920s, similarly remembers people's indebtedness to the Red Jacket Company Store:

And you're living from day to day...you didn't have money to go somewhere else. You had to go to the company store. So, that's why that the companies owned a man; body and soul. He had no money. He went to the store—the company store—for food, for clothing, furniture, you rented your houses from 'em. And if you're lucky enough, which we wutn't enough to own any kind of a car, you bought your gasoline at the company store; they had filling stations. If you went to the doctor, it was took over by the company store.⁴³

As company towns like Red Jacket proliferated across West Virginia in the last decades of the nineteenth century and took over the land that had formed the competencies of many residents, the capacity for people to live fully agrarian lives diminished. However, as families moved into these settlements, many grasped on to some aspects of a traditional agricultural lifestyle. Where farming in preindustrial West Virginia had led settlers to sprawls of land near forests and waterways, and to spaces where vegetable rows could reasonably grow and thrive, the prospect of raising crops near coal camps demanded a different approach. Coal companies typically laid out their settlements in hollows a short distance from the mine: miners' homes would be adjacent to both the railroads that transported coal in and out of the company town, and to the ridges on which mining operations took place. In some areas, the rows of uniform

⁴³ Virginia Grimmett. “Virginia Grimmett Interview,” Interview by Rebecca Bailey, 1989, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/collections/sc2003-135/mdcoralbai21.html>.

company houses would only occupy the flat land of the hollow in between hills; in others with smaller valleys, houses would extend up into the lower portions of the hills on uneven ground.⁴⁴



Families used the marginal land behind their homes as productive farmland.⁴⁵

Even in the confined space of row housing in hollows, mining families used their limited land to plant and grow vegetables during their time in company towns. David Corbin calls on a letter to the editor of an 1896 edition of *United Mine Workers' Journal* by union leader P.M. McBride, who noticed the relatively financially secure positions of miners who kept gardens in Kanawha County, West Virginia. “There does not exist the hunger and suffering here that is

⁴⁴ Chad. Montrie, “Continuity in the Midst of Change: Work and Environment for West Virginia Mountaineers,” *West Virginia History* 1, no. 1 (2008), 11.

⁴⁵ *Back Yard Gardens in a West Virginia Hollow*, photograph (Morgantown, n.d.), West Virginia University.

found in ... [other coal fields]. Every available spot of ground seems to have received attention from the plow or spade ... This explains their comparatively comfortable position. They raise all the vegetables they require and this assures them that the wolf shall be kept from the door.”⁴⁶

McBride noticed a unique feature of the emerging colliery gardens: where traditional West Virginian farms utilized the spaciousness of the Appalachian landscape, colliery gardens adjusted to the tight spaces between and around company houses, sometimes squeezing in rows of crops on the marginal land of hills. A 1910 photograph of a West Virginia company town shows a row of houses, each with its own garden cultivated at a severe angle on the downward slope of a hollow and separated by wood fences.⁴⁷ Depending on a home’s proximity to a mineshaft, gardens also faced the possibility of being covered with coal dust or other industrial pollutants. With company town living, therefore, agricultural lifestyles did not disappear in southern West Virginia, but rather adapted and shrank in form to agree with the conditions of coal work: as Lewis shows, from 1880 to 1910 the total number of farms in Pocahontas County in eastern West Virginia grew from 682 to 1198, but the average size of farm fell by half.⁴⁸

On one level, mining families kept personal gardens because agriculture had been a meaningful and essential part of their lives for generations. Many miners had directly migrated from an Appalachian agricultural lifestyle, and perceived working with the land and resources one had around them to craft a competency—in this case, even the small block of uneven land behind one’s company-owned house—as a natural way to ensure one would comfortably get by. For some, gardening was also simply a respite from the grueling work of coal mining that alienated one from the cohesiveness of nature, and in fact an activity that made company town

⁴⁶ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 34.

⁴⁷ *Back Yard Gardens in a West Virginia Hollow*, photograph (Morgantown, n.d.), West Virginia University.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 251.

living more bearable. Chad Montrie argues that while United Mine Workers' involvement and unionization rates grew and the union gained leverage over the first decades of the twentieth century, the practice of keeping gardens in fact hindered initial campaigns by the union from taking off in West Virginia. "Combined with the relative freedom miners experienced underground—before new technology and reorganization of work subjected them to the control and supervision most factory workers knew", writes Montrie, "this continued connection with the landscape around them aboveground partly redeemed coal mining and life in coal camps."⁴⁹ Even with the difficulties of gardening that came with uneven or unclean ground, families were able to raise corn, potatoes, beets, tomatoes, beans, and sometimes melons or lettuce. If they could afford the space and cost, some families kept livestock as a part of their company home gardens as well. Cecil Roberts, whose family worked in Cabin Creek, West Virginia, recalls that her family kept a cow for a time, and "raised enough chickens to have our own eggs [and meat]" amongst a garden on any spot that was level enough.⁵⁰ Families could not farm every ingredient and variety of food they would eat—company stores could still be depended on to buy goods like sugar, flour, salt, and sometimes bacon—but many families came to grow a lot of what they ate.⁵¹ In 1923, the United States Department of Labor's Children's Bureau sent Nettie P. McGill to investigate the quality of life in Raleigh County coal towns, where she reported that seven in ten families kept gardens where they grew fruits and vegetables. A primary reason was that companies ended up denying miners an adequate amount of scrip income for their families' food and basic living expenses every month through one means or another, especially with company

⁴⁹ Montrie, "Continuity", 11.

⁵⁰ WV History Film Project. "Transcript of Interview with Cecil Roberts, May 5, 1993, for the Film 'West Virginia,'" 1993.

⁵¹ Richard Brewer "Richard Brewer Interview," interview by Rebecca Bailey, 1989, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/collections/sc2003-135/mdcoralbai19.html>.

stores inflating prices and company financiers manipulating or devaluing scrip on a routine basis. One could not be certain that a month of coal mining work would get their family by for a month, but a successful garden ensured that one's family would have an adequate stock of corn and beans for the upcoming winter.⁵²

While scrip was only redeemable at company stores, the products that came from keeping a garden—raw vegetables, recipes, and canned goods—gave mining families both a tool for bartering and trading and a way of engaging with the community in company towns. As a child growing up near Red Jacket coal company, Richard Brewer used his family's garden products as a means of collecting some cash on the side, in addition to coal work. "We raised a good field of corn and beans and we would take and take them beans and me and my older brother would ... peddle them beans over in Red Jacket and corn", recalled Brewer. "Sold the beans for .50 cents a peck and the corn for .50 cents a dozen."⁵³ Some families even ended up running a side business with the fruits of their garden work, acting as food merchants for other families in their coal camps or selling their products to the company store. Margaret Hatfield even remembers her family hiring an intermediary to sell their goods around town:

Well, my grandmother always had people workin' for her. She raised a lot of produce and sold it because at that time, you just didn't get fresh produce and had...there's an old black man who worked for us for years. His name was Charlie Bruce. He'd load it up in a wagon and take it to Red Jacket and either sell it through the camp or sell it to the company stores and maw sold a little bit of all kinds of garden produce. I've seen wagon loads of sweet potatoes and watermelons and you name it and you can claim it. Apples, pears, milk, butter, live chickens, what have you and if they didn't load it up and sell it people would come over there and buy it.⁵⁴

⁵² Nettie P. McGill, *The Welfare of Children in Bituminous Coal Mining Communities in West Virginia* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Labor, Children's Bureau), 53.

⁵³ Brewer, interview.

⁵⁴ Margaret Hatfield. "Margaret Hatfield Interview", interviewed by Rebecca Bailey, 1990, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/collections/sc2003-135/mdcoralohp15.html>.

Company towns gradually increased both their provisions and enforcements over the 1880s and 1890s, aiming to provide mining families with everything they might need while monopolizing their residents' consumption. Companies hired guards to police company towns, built playgrounds, and brought in pastors and religious figures to hold church. However, even experiencing elevated levels of social control by their employers, miners began to use gardens as a tool of leverage to exert their freedom over operators. As historian Ronald Eller notes, miners often abandoned mines or disobeyed assignments while on the job to contest industrial authority.⁵⁵

[Absenteeism] was only one way that the mountaineers rejected the industrial norms of the mine managers. By ignoring work schedules, mining routines, and other innovations which worked at cross-purposes with their traditional way of life, they sought to maintain their individualism and freedom from authority. In this manner, they hoped to benefit from the economic rewards of industrialization without sacrificing their long-held cultural values.

As informal and formal mining unions proliferated across Appalachia in the 1880s, miners across company towns communicated with each other, organized themselves, and absenteeism morphed into direct contest with companies where hundreds of mine workers would refuse to work for days or weeks on end.

In many cases, the relative economic security afforded to those with successful gardens allowed miners to leave their jobs and otherwise defy the orders of coal operatives without fear of their families going hungry. Scott articulates that dissenting acts that initially appear “offstage”—in this case, keeping personal gardens to protect one’s family against wage reliance—at times demonstrate social values that would “sustain more dramatic forms of

⁵⁵ Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 167.

rebellion.”⁵⁶ Mining families growing crops in the areas between and behind homes was an innocuous practice in the eyes of coal company officials, who did not require usage of the land at the margins of their jurisdiction for their own productive purposes. Scott articulates that disguised spaces of dissent are often critical to resistance amongst the subordinated, arguing that “neither everyday forms of resistance nor the occasional insurrection can be understood without reference to the sequestered social sites at which such resistance can be nurtured and given meaning.”⁵⁷ In this case, miners and their families planted the seeds of their future dissent in the limited spaces around their homes.

With the formation of the United Mine Workers Association (UMWA) in 1890, labor actions in coal camps became more organized, widespread, and deliberate, often with specific demands from the company or industry. On July 4th, 1897, for instance, a UMWA effort organized an estimated 200,000 coal miners to walk out on their jobs across the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Indiana, and Illinois to demand a more uniform piece rate wage across the industry of 69 cents per ton, according to a reporter in the *Philadelphia Enquirer*.⁵⁸ Personal gardens played a role in the economic security miners felt in participating in the July 1897 labor action. Participating in an interview with the *Duluth News Tribune*, United Mine Workers President Ratchford voiced his praise that West Virginia miners would come out in big numbers specifically, who were “receiving wages far below the scale and their condition is not any better than that of the miners in other states.” Ratchford was however unsure of the timeframe of the strike at the outset. “It will last several weeks at least. The miners are in a better

⁵⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 20.

⁵⁸ “Miners' Strike Commences To-Day over One Hundred Thousand to Go out in Pennsylvania, West Virginia,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 5, 1897.

position to withstand a long strike at this time,” voiced Ratchford, “as a great many of them have garden products on which to subsist and there will be no great hardships entailed such as would follow a strike in the winter.”⁵⁹ However, it was not always the case that miners could depend on their garden products to get them by while striking against their employers. Since coal companies privately owned the land, houses, and yards that mining families occupied, companies could force families to evacuate their houses and leave behind their possessions if the men refused to work. Jeanie Grimmett, who grew up near the Howard Collieries Company mines in Chattaroy, West Virginia, went to live in a “tent colony” near mines during a labor action at a point between 1920-1922. When a union formed at the Howard Collieries mines that her father worked at in order to secure contracts for coal miners, families like Grimmett’s were forced out of their company-owned houses to find a “level place up the mountain” to erect a tent. Grimmett’s family was only able to collect a few belongings before leaving. “And the furniture that we had, we couldn't bring it all out of the house, we just brought what we could use in the tents” remembers Grimmett. “Beds, and a chest to put our clothes in, and table, stove and a cabinet.”⁶⁰ In these periods, cut off from their food supplies, miners would either hunt for wild game that wandered into the hills, or, more often, rely on the financial support of the unions that organized the action; such was the case with Basil Hatfield’s family, who lived in tent colonies in 1920 outside Red Jacket coal camp during a union action. “We all got checks and it was a relief when everybody got a check so much a month ... if it hadn't been for that we would have went hungry,” Hatfield surmises.⁶¹

⁵⁹ “Big Strike Now on Two Hundred Thousand Coal Miners Quit Work Today,” *The Duluth News Tribune*, July 5, 1897.

⁶⁰ Grimmett, interview.

⁶¹ Basil Hatfield. “Basil Hatfield Interview,” interview by Rebecca Bailey, 1989, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/collections/sc2003-135/mdcoralbai22.html>.

Chapter 2: Gender and Social Reproduction in the Dwindling Competency

In 1924, James Watt Raine published years' worth of observational notes from his experience in the Appalachian region of the United States to create a comprehensive cultural study of its people. The resulting publication, *The Land of Saddle-Bags*, is significant in Appalachian historiography as an early anthropological text of the region's population. Watt Raine was a New York-educated ordained minister who had come to teach English in Kentucky's Berea College. Fond of studying regional culture around the country, especially musical culture, *The Land of Saddle-Bags* was Watt Raine's project to approach the figure of the Appalachian mountain community. Watt Raine understood that the image of the mountaineer was shrouded in mystery for much of America, and sought to help others understand Appalachian customs, cultures, and ways of making a living. His book caused scholars, statesmen and average Americans to regard Appalachian people with a condescending yet curious eye. He preferred to rely more on anecdotes than figures to demonstrate his points, travelling to Appalachian hollows, farms, and company towns in West Virginia and Kentucky, talking with people and observing the ways that they carried on in their daily life. Watt Raine varied the text with his own normative judgements and prescriptions for Appalachian society, often using descriptors to position Appalachian culture as stuck in the past. Indeed, modern readings of Watt Raine's study might identify *Saddle-bags* as more akin to Charles Darwin's notes on indigenous peoples in *Voyage of the Beagle* than to an anthropological study. He often portrayed Appalachians as lazy, indolent, and unclean. Watt Raine's narration spans the entire study without interruption or inclusion of Appalachian voices, and the study invariably relies on distant, detached observation rather than interaction, dialogue, or understanding. Nonetheless, Watt Raine sensed in his travels the profoundly devastating effects of rapid industrialization for

the region and its people. While he degraded their behavior, he offered pity for the situation that Appalachians has found themselves in. “The industrial invasion dispossesses the people,” wrote Watt Raine, “breaks down their old standards and usages, and grinds them down into a poverty not only of purse but of living, which their free and leisurely existence heretofore has peculiarly unfitted them to survive.”⁶²

While he perpetuated stereotypes, Watt Raine was not hesitant to identify a villain in his story— “industrial magnates, who have brought up priceless coal lands, paying sometimes as low as fifty cents an acre”—and recommend swift efforts to enact social change in the Appalachian region. Debilitating social issues were clearly apparent in coal company towns by the 1920s. This chapter will investigate some of these social issues, as well as the cultural effects of the social and economic structure that arrived in West Virginia in the early twentieth century. As the system of coal company towns further established itself in West Virginia during the early decades of the twentieth century, mining families continued to vie for independence from their employers, with the entire household taking part in the labor necessary to get by. In many cases, coal companies co-opted the garden form and exploited the willingness of mining wives to take part in their family’s subsistence, manufacturing poverty that would linger with the families of coal miners for generations. Children came to play similarly important roles in the company town as household laborers, but also experienced significant malnourishment and health deterioration as their families struggled to keep afloat in the contested spaces of company towns. Miners and their families challenged the dominant cultures of coal companies in the practices of

⁶² James Watt Raine, *The Land of Saddle-Bags: a Study of the Mountain People of Appalachia* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1924), 241.

liquor-drinking and religious celebration, practicing independence from company authority even as their ability to keep a competency dwindled.

Gardening and Coal Company Interest

By the first decades of the 1900s, many West Virginian coal companies began to encourage and reward the usage of personal gardens amongst families living in their settlements. Some companies gave farming tools or seeds as a starter for families to raise vegetables. As Cecil Roberts recalls, “the company we worked for, they was good enough to give us a mule to plow with.”⁶³ Other companies began to assign patches of land where gardens could be planted, all under company jurisdiction.⁶⁴ Montrie characterizes these efforts to promote garden ownership and maintenance as part of a larger pattern of “welfare capitalism schemes” that put a humanitarian face on exploitation and peonage.⁶⁵ Companies had been manipulating coal wages for decades, but increasing workers’ reliance on their own gardened products opened up the possibility for even lower pay. It was well worth the plow and mule. By making sure that gardens fell within company land jurisdiction, coal companies also protected themselves from worker organizing. If gardens fell within the boundaries, coal company men could harness their corporate power by legally restricting access to that food during labor actions; Steven Stoll treats this as a mode of exploitation by coal companies to “mask the violence they inflicted by depicting unions and strikers as acting illegally and indecently.”⁶⁶ A 1924 report by the United

⁶³ WV History Film Project, “Cecil Roberts,” 1993.

⁶⁴ WV History Film Project. “Transcript of Interview with Denise Giardina, May 6, 1993, for the Film ‘West Virginia,’” 1993.

⁶⁵ Montrie, “Continuity”, 7-8.

⁶⁶ Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 224.

States Bureau of Labor reported a de-unionization of the Fairmont Coal Field as a result of litigation protecting companies from “interference and intimidation” by organized groups of workers.⁶⁷ By claiming jurisdiction over their workers’ gardens and achieving legal support against worker organizing, the threat of hunger became a powerful disincentive to participating in labor unrest.

Company interests in the cultivation of gardens came to a head when authorities began to hold garden contests, a practice that spread across West Virginia company towns starting in the early 1910s. The trade journal *Coal Age* identified worker gardens and garden contests as a growing interest among West Virginian coal companies starting in these years, and in its periodical publications included photographs of recent notable gardens and information of the social and economic benefits of personal gardens to the quality of the company town. *Coal Age* was explicitly aligned with the interests of coal company operators, and it sought to make recommendations about what made company towns efficient, setting examples of the towns across Appalachia with the smoothest relationships between mining families and operators and rarely discussing the labor uprisings or class conflict that had become rife in the region. One 1912 edition of *Coal Age* showed that the United States Coal & Coke Company in Gary, West Virginia brought in a committee of academic and professional agricultural experts—the director of West Virginia University’s agricultural program, an agriculture expert from a railway company, and a rural superintendent—to judge the miners’ gardens, awarding \$10 to the best kept garden and \$5 to the best yard.⁶⁸ Two years later a 1914 revisit of the U.S. Coal & Coke company, as a part of the committee-led garden awards event that had now become an annual

⁶⁷ Boris Emmet, *Labor Relations in the Fairmont, West Virginia, Bituminous Coal Field* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1924), 6.

⁶⁸ “Colliery Yards and Gardens,” *Coal Age* 2 (1912), 201.

tradition, showed that total garden value in the company town had doubled in the last two years from an estimate of \$15,000-\$20,000 in 1912 to an estimate of \$40,000 across the camp in 1914. Over the following years, *Coal Age* showcased garden competitions all over the state, from the H.C. Frick Coke Co., National Mining Co., Elk River Coal and Lumber Co., and Gulf Smokeless Operations. Most garden competitions yielded cash prizes, although some awarded mining homes with seeds, flowers, decorative items like porch swings, or farming instruments.⁶⁹⁷⁰⁷¹

Garden contests also caught the eye of national news: a September 1913 column in *The New York Times* espoused the great successes of gardening at Weyanoke Coal and Coke, referring to the practice as a cure for “chronic labor troubles” and valuing the gardens collectively at \$4000 and the livestock at \$750. “The camp is now orderly and contented,” reads the column, “and with its increasing attention to flowers and the general aspects of the houses and grounds has almost become a model industrial community.”⁷² Apart from the economic incentives that motivated companies to encourage workers to keep gardens and hold contests, the nationwide approval that came with the publicization of these events—espousing both the generosity of company operatives and the harmony that company towns exhibited—protected companies from public critique or questioning. Scott notes that among the dominant group in a hegemonic system of social control, ceremonial presentations of harmony ensure that the “euphemizing” of hegemony is more plausible. Among coal company operatives, small concessions—in this case, gardening tools and supplies, as well as periodic contests—would likely be preferred over public dissension on the part of mining families. “The importance of

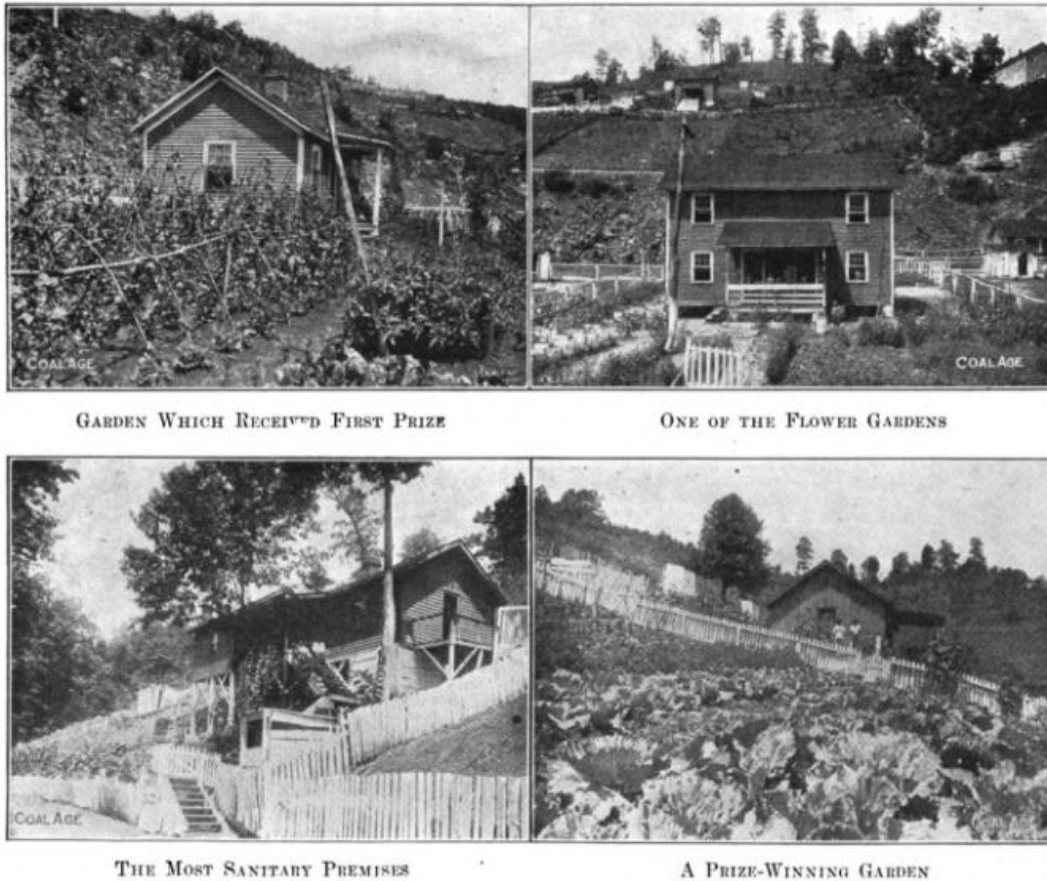
⁶⁹ “Weyanoke Gardens”, *Coal Age* 4 (1913), 389.

⁷⁰ “Free Course of Instruction for West Virginia Miners,” *Coal Age* 5 (1914), 858.

⁷¹ “Prize Gardens in West Virginia,” *Coal Age* 6 (1914), 272.

⁷² GARDENS CURE LABOR ILLS.: West Virginia Concern’s Prize System Benefits its Men and Itself.” 1913, *New York Times* (1857-1922).

avoiding any public display of insubordination is not simply derived from a strategy of divide and rule,” Scott argues. “Open insubordination represents a dramatic contradiction of the smooth surface of euphemized power.”⁷³



A Garden competition at Weyanoke, W.V. shown in *Coal Age* offers a prize for most sanitary premises.⁷⁴

In some coal towns, garden contests were just one part of company efforts to encourage food production at the household level. As a 1914 *Coal Age* article described a garden contest in Weyanoke, West Virginia:

⁷³ Scott, *Domination*, 56.

⁷⁴ “Welfare Work at Weyanoke, W.Va.,” *Coal Age* 6 (1914), 311.

R. D. Patterson, vice-president and general manager of the Weyanoke Coal & Coke Co., ever seeking to provide a means for increasing the returns to his stockholders, while raising the income of his workmen, has adopted the sound principle of providing playgrounds for the children, tennis courts and baseball diamonds for the young. At the same time he has stimulated an interest in vegetable gardening, flower gardening and sanitation among the miners and their families. Not only is this done by kindly words of advice, but by thoroughly competent lectures and personal instruction in gardening, and by furnishing, gratis, all seeds, lime and fertilizer desired. In order to stimulate a wholesome rivalry, substantial prizes, varying from \$20 in gold down to \$2, were awarded to the successful contestants.⁷⁵

In Weyanoke, investing in the comparatively small costs of garden furnishings, instructions and awards allowed Patterson to achieve higher profits for his company. Patterson's means of "raising the income of his workmen" was achieved by allowing them to fill in the gaps of their undercompensated coal labor with extra hours spent working in their own gardens. In the case of Weyanoke, it is notable that an award was given on the basis of a sanitary premises: Weyanoke Coal & Coke espoused a vision of orderliness and respectability in their company town by championing sanitation, an "interest" that *Coal Age* implied had to be deliberately instilled in miners and their families.⁷⁶

Women's Work in Company Towns

As West Virginian women transitioned from living on the family farm to living in the crowded row houses of coal company towns, their responsibilities shifted and expanded, taking on a new quality as their families became accustomed to wage work mining coal. Women in company towns simultaneously took on a multitude of responsibilities in their daily lives:

⁷⁵ "Welfare Work at Weyanoke, W.Va.," *Coal Age* 6 (1914), 311.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 311.

responsibilities of not only domestic maintenance, but also of an economically productive capacity. The first of these was critical to the process of coal production itself. Women worked to maintain the health and well-being of their husbands undertaking the strenuous and dangerous work of coal mining. This entailed cooking meals for miners at home and to bring on the job, periodically washing their clothes, cleaning the soot and coal debris from their clothes and boots, and sewing or repairing damaged clothing items when necessary. Shirley C. Eagan argues that women who came to live in company towns brought with them a sense of specific purpose and responsibility that had permeated life on West Virginian farms for decades, represented by a commonly used adage: “A man can work from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done.”⁷⁷ Janet Green agrees, characterizing “coal camps [as] the workplaces of women,” while men made meager incomes in the tunnels and room systems of coal mines.⁷⁸ Many company towns also lacked doctors and nurses, or called for travelling nurses sent from bigger cities in cases of medical need. In times of sickness or injury, women thus took on the role of nurse and caregiver for their husbands and families.⁷⁹

Maintaining a comfortable and sanitary home also significantly benefited a miner’s health. The proximity of company row houses to industrial work zones, especially those houses downwind from a coal extraction or collection site, often made this aspect of domestic work challenging. Janet Greene describes the universal experience of coal dust in the West Virginian company town:

Coal dust from coke ovens, steam engines, and coal cars settled everywhere.
Houses were crowded beside railroad tracks and around tipples. Burning slag

⁷⁷ Shirley C. Eagan, “‘Women's Work, Never Done’: West Virginia Farm Women, 1880s-1920s,” *West Virginia History* 49 (1990): pp. 21-36.

⁷⁸ Janet W. Greene, “Strategies for Survival: Women's Work in the Southern West Virginia Coal Camps,” *West Virginia History* 49 (1990): pp. 37-54.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

smoldered beside some of the homes. In the early twentieth century, some women recalled that the creeks were still clear, but after the mid-1920s the ground was black with coal dust. Children were covered with it; it sifted onto wet wash hanging on the lines to dry; at times it seemed to block the sun.⁸⁰

Women found themselves confronted with dust in the roads adjacent to their homes, in the creeks and pumps where they drew water, and in their gardens or flower beds. As Greene notes, no matter the color that row houses were painted, the onset of dust over time often turned the exterior of each to a uniform grey. The greasy quality of coal dust and debris on clothes, the home, and the surrounding area required application and reapplication of hot water for washing; in the absence of plumbing, women often made repeated trips twenty meters or more outside the home to a water pump to gather hot water for a bath, clothing wash or house cleaning.⁸¹ Sanitation and beauty efforts by women were received well by coal companies, who at times expanded garden contests to include competitions for sanitary premises or for elaborate flower gardens. As a 1913 issue of *Coal Age* points out, in a garden contest by the Weyanoke Coal & Coke Company, an “additional \$5 was given by the lady having the prettiest flowers, and a porch settee to the lady whose flower display was next in order of merit.”⁸² A 1914 issue of *Coal Age*, on the other hand, reveals efforts by the West Virginia State Mining Department and the state university to instill cleaning habits into mining communities. Organizing “training schools” to travel around to company towns across the state, the mining department used lantern slides and motion pictures to expose miners to work techniques, as well as methods of ensuring that mining camps “be made sanitary and attractive.” Choosing company towns near the Kanawha and New River fields for the

⁸⁰ Greene, “Strategies for Survival.”

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² “Weyanoke Gardens”, *Coal Age* 4 (1913), 389.

initial training session, the State Mining Department sought to “include such subjects as sanitation, first-aid-to-the-injured, [and] the raising of garden produce” to mining families.⁸³

Indeed, instilling the values of self-sufficient domestic maintenance and sanitation into mining families, especially women, served an important role in the coal production process itself. By keeping coal miners healthy, clean, and comfortable, wives performed the work that the coal company model neglected. Though they acted with state power, company towns themselves lacked the social safety nets and institutions—food distribution, health services, and sanitation, to name a few—necessary to maintain a functioning workforce. Unpaid labor for women’s housework thus became a central part of the industrial coal economy in West Virginia. Mary Beth Pudup, for instance, demonstrates that while larger numbers of West Virginian women began to identify as laborers in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is also significant that women “performed important economic roles ... outside the formal labor force” that simultaneously contributed to the region’s industrial development.⁸⁴ As Pudup notes, apart from facilitating the coal production process, wives—and the presence of the family altogether—also had a “sobering effect” on miners who might otherwise spend time drinking alcohol in excess.⁸⁵

Sociologist Maria Mies, who has written extensively on the development of international sexual divisions of labor that accompany the transition to capitalism, identifies the devaluing of women’s work—the “reproductive labor” of bearing and raising children, feeding and taking physical care of their families, and keeping the household area clean and comfortable—as

⁸³ “Free Course of Instruction for West Virginia Miners,” *Coal Age* 5 (1914), 858.

⁸⁴ Mary Beth Pudup, “Women's Work in the West Virginia Economy,” *West Virginia History* 49 (1990): pp. 7-20.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

integral to the capitalist's ability to accumulate the surplus value necessary to maintain and expand production. Even while the profitability of wage labor relies on the traditional work of women, of producing and sustaining life, Mies shows that capitalists skim greater surplus value from their working populations by distinguishing between the "natural" work of social reproduction and the "productive" work of wage labor:

I define [women's] exploitation as superexploitation because it is not based on the appropriation (by the capitalist) of the time and labour over and above the 'necessary' labour time, the surplus labour, but of the time and labour necessary for people's own survival or subsistence production. It is not compensated for by a wage, the size of which is calculated on the 'necessary' reproduction costs of the labourer, but is mainly determined by force or coercive institutions.⁸⁶

In performing the unpaid work of raising the future work force, cleaning the company town premises, and keeping their husbands in good health and hygiene, "superexploited" women thus played an important part in the continuing economic maintenance of coal company towns.

Women in coal camps also came to contribute significantly to families' basic income, goods, and supplies. While in preindustrial Appalachia, women had worked closely with their husbands in raising and harvesting crops and maintaining family farms, company towns produced a more plain sexual division of labor. While men worked in mines, their wives sought "strategies for survival"—as Greene puts it—to supplement their family's meager wage with additional income, cash or otherwise. One of the primary ways that women did this was by putting time and effort into their household gardens, of which they often became the primary caretaker. A study of women's employment in West Virginia over the years 1880-1960 demonstrates a rise of woman gardeners in the years following the rise of coal company towns in

⁸⁶ Maria Mies and Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 47-48.

the state. The total number of women reporting as “workers” rose from 11,508 in 1880 to 57,479 in 1920; only 341 women across the state identified themselves as either farmers or planters in 1880, with those identifying as farmers, dairy or livestock laborers, or working in gardens or orchards rising to 5669 by 1920.⁸⁷ These figures and descriptors reveal not only a rise in women’s roles in crop and livestock production in the industrial era, but also a willingness to identify with the labor that they undertook. Women understood the value that their work in the colliery gardens brought to their families.

When mining wages were threatened by company wage theft or labor action, women also found clever ways of making extra money for their families. A company town woman’s efforts to bring cash or supplies to her family often extended outside the home environment. As Greene shows, women often expanded their household work as services to their company town community or to earn cash for their families. Foods such as eggs, butter, and vegetables were often canned or otherwise preserved, and traded among the local company town community, sold to the company store, or sold to a travelling merchant to be traded to another company town. Flour bags could be sewn into children’s underwear for sale, and laundry services could be offered to households or company operatives. Some women took care of company officials’ children as nannies or worked as maids in their homes, cooking, cleaning, and making beds for the families. Others set up their modest row houses for boarding, taking care of travelers to make an extra income. Others worked as prostitutes in company town circles, or trafficked liquor across company towns as bootleggers.⁸⁸ Frances Hensley, who saw the effects of company town living on mothers growing up in a West Virginian mining family, recalls that women put under

⁸⁷ “West Virginia Women's Occupations, 1880-1960,” West Virginia Archives & History, n.d., <http://www.wvculture.org/history/teacherresources/wvwomenjobs.html>.

⁸⁸ Greene, “Strategies for Survival.”

pressure to supplement their family's cash income on top of their household work recognized the undue responsibility put on them as laborers, but simultaneously faced the constant threat of severe impoverishment if their work was unfinished:

It was a well-integrated, functioning family economy. And the participants, including the women recognized the economic value of that functioning because if they weren't there, if they ceased to function for some reason, there were economic consequences. But you don't find people talking about that; the kind of analysis we do of that today didn't exist. Women wrote about the chores they did; they wrote about the tasks they did; they wrote about how tired they were as a result of the hard work they did. But they never used that for a basis for making some kind of political claim, especially a claim like equality. It didn't arise.⁸⁹

In any case, women recognized that they played an important role in keeping their families economically afloat, even when their labor in the home and in the field was unrecognized or uncompensated.

Children and the Health Effects of Company Town Living

As women worked in their homes and gardens, they faced the added responsibility of bearing, raising, and taking care of the eventual future work force: their children. Having children and settling down with one's family was a source of pride for miners and their wives; as Greene mentions, the isolated quality of company town living lent itself to a more limited social life, and "the presence of a family [became] essential to keeping the mine workers in this region." Though it would increase the costs of living for mining families, coal companies often encouraged family settlement and having children to keep their miners grounded in a company

⁸⁹ WV History Film Project. "Transcript of Interview with Frances Hensley, June 17, 1992, for the Film 'West Virginia,'" n.d.

town.⁹⁰ In a well-established company town, some children attended a schoolhouse; however, in their efforts to maintain a competency amidst the economic insecurity of wage work, families often also used their children as domestic laborers, to which company towns did not object. Indeed, children often began contributing to their family's competency from a young age, often joining their mothers in raising and tending the vegetable gardens and maintaining the domestic sphere while their fathers mined coal. Jeanie Grimmett, who grew up in Red Jacket, for instance, remembers the process of learning her family's household work:

You learned real early in life, by watching. You used to have to carry the water bucket, to carry water to the family, you know, that would be a working. They couldn't quit and run to the house all the time to get...to drink some water. That was what we start-ed out with, carrying the bucket of water, and you learnt by watch-ing. And, then, by the time you're, uh...four or five, six years old, you started putting plants in the ground; pepper plants, set-tin' onions in a bed. And it was fun...if you liked to play in dirt, it was fun.⁹¹

However, even as they came to play an important role in helping their mothers to raise vegetables throughout the year, children growing up in company towns often struggled with dietary deficiencies. A small garden and a subminimal wage were not enough resources for many mining families to procure healthful meals throughout the year. While mining families could buy some food from their local company store, the stores sometimes sold only stored and processed foods such as sugar, salt, and bacon that had been shipped hundreds of miles to the company town. Agriculturalists and company town gardeners would sometimes sell their extra products to a local company store to be re-sold, but in seasons or locales without an abundance of crops, families that could not produce their own corn, beans, and other nutritious foods at home often went hungry or malnourished. Illness and struggles with proper growth and development often

⁹⁰ Greene, "Strategies for Survival."

⁹¹ Grimmett, interview.

followed. From her investigation of the quality of life afforded to children living in mining communities in Raleigh County, Nettie P. McGill's 1923 report shed light on the dire reality of food shortage in the Appalachian valleys. Encumbered with the requirement of growing a large quantity of their own food, 211 of the 604 families McGill engaged with reported that they had no access to meat, eggs, fish, or cheese; many others reported an inability to procure milk, with only one-third of families owning a cow.⁹² Of the 316 children that Children's Bureau physicians examined, 156 were reported as having "poor or very poor nutrition," and 201 had teeth in severe stages of decay. With limited food resources to work with, mothers were often forced to cut corners in their children's meals that resulted in nutrient imbalance. In the case of the 1923 report, a public health nurse had been previously engaged to teach mothers nutrition information in Raleigh County, but McGill reported that the nurse had not yet "entered her duties" at the time of the report.⁹³

In dry periods of coal work, unemployment threatened the family's health to a greater extent. Dr. Homer Morris saw some of these conditions firsthand in his study of coal communities: at the request of the federal government's President's Organization on Unemployment Relief, the American Friends Service Committee undertook a three-year project in 1931 to feed miners' children in 690 schools, with Dr. Morris serving as Field Director. In his firsthand work, Morris studied the effects of unemployment on mining communities.⁹⁴ Interviewing 956 unemployed miners in West Virginia and Kentucky, Morris found that 90 percent of the men were married, with 84.8 percent also supporting children or other

⁹² McGill, *The Welfare of Children*, 53.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 54.

⁹⁴ Homer Lawrence Morris, *The Plight of the Bituminous Coal Miner* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), 5.

dependents.⁹⁵ Of these families, 42.3 percent supported between five and ten children. While no childhood death occurred in 45 percent of families with children, the average death rate for the remaining families was 1.9 children per family.⁹⁶ In a secondary program to feed miner's children in 304 coal communities in Kentucky and West Virginia in the winter of 1932-1933, Morris reported that in physically examining children 47.4 percent came out as undernourished, or more than ten percent underweight for their height and age. Lack of a proper diet had caused illness and diseases such as pellagra, rickets, defective teeth, diseased gums and tonsils, and tuberculosis. Some children became nauseous upon receiving food because of their shrunken stomachs; one hungry girl told the program's administrator that she could not go home to get a meal because "this is sister's day to eat."⁹⁷ As Morris points out, bad economic situations tended to appear most pronounced in children, who "almost invariably perpetuate the low living standards of their parents."⁹⁸

Manufactured poverty in company towns was invariably a threat to a mining family's morale and mental wellness as well. The scrip system of payment left unemployed or underemployed miners with little savings; if out of a job, their families would soon run into economic trouble. As Morris demonstrates, the prospect of hopelessness left some mining families struggling mentally to bring themselves to maintain their premises. "We used to keep things clean around the house and yard and had a cleanup every spring, but it's no use now—we can't put our hearts in it," one miner remarked. "There ain't no future here now and it ain't worth while to do any work in the yard."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Morris, *The Plight*, 44.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 45-47.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 107.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 104.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 103.

Liquor in Company Town Life

While coal company officials fomented class conflict by skimming their miners' wages, artificially inflating or deflating the value of company store scrip, employing police forces, or removing families from their company homes during strikes, they simultaneously carried out cultural campaigns against the lifestyles and social practices of their workers. The circumstances of company town living, which impoverished miners and subjected them to the grime of coal mines, perpetuated the stereotypes of poor hygiene in the eyes of company operatives. A central theater of this cultural conflict the subject of alcohol production and consumption. For decades before the establishment of company towns in the late nineteenth century, West Virginian farm families had bought or moonshined their own liquor, to be bartered with or consumed.

In the era of the company town, liquor came to serve a multitude of social, economic, and palliative functions. Miners continued to moonshine their own liquor in private, but as company towns established their permanence, saloons and pubs also found it profitable to open near mining communities, coming to represent a core portion of the social activities of working men in the nearby towns. As Corbin notes, miners went to the pub to drink at the end of a workday or gathered on Saturday to drink and sing songs. The prospects of continuing poverty, indebtedness to the coal company, and the taxing nature of coal work made alcohol a psychologically soothing option for miners.¹⁰⁰ Believing that indulgence in alcohol or general drunkenness made their workers lazy and inefficient in their work, initial aversion to drinking on the part of coal companies came in the form of

¹⁰⁰ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 35-36.

incentives for sober households. In 1911, the Donahoe Coke Company began the practice of giving the best company houses to the families with “the lowest beer record.” If a family’s beer record was low enough, the company would allow the household to receive “sod for their yards, lumber with which to construct sidewalks, fruit trees, flower seeds and things necessary in preparing and making gardens.”¹⁰¹ An unnamed general manager of a large anthracite company spoke to *Coal Age* on the issue in the same year, reflecting a willingness to concede other forms of social welfare and investment in the company town to prevent liquor use:

We know there are entirely too many saloons and that the use of liquor seriously affects not only the operation of the mines but also the welfare of the men and their families. ... It is said that the men need a place to visit for recreation and for social purposes. The base-ball field, Y.M.C.A. rooms, pool and billiard rooms without the liquor attachment, and the garden will give a man all the recreation he requires.¹⁰²

In other cases, companies hired social workers to teach cooking and planting techniques to miners, hoping that reducing a working man’s dependency on alcohol for calories would increase his productivity.¹⁰³

Whether in the saloon or in the company town home, liquor-drinking among groups of miners represented a moment of respite from company authority. Scott identifies the importance of taverns, pubs, and other drinking spaces among subordinate groups as a site of resistance against hegemony. “Here was ... a privileged site for the transmission of popular culture—embodied in games, songs, gambling, blasphemy, and disorder,” Scott writes, “that was usually at odds with official culture.”¹⁰⁴ The saloon was

¹⁰¹ “Liquor Problems in Mining Communities,” *Coal Age* 1 (1911-1912), 258.

¹⁰² “Liquor Problems in Mining Communities,” *Coal Age* 1 (1911-1912), 192.

¹⁰³ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 121.

¹⁰⁴ Scott, *Domination*, 121.

temporary freedom from the deference that would be expected in the face of company authority, a non-surveilled space where the dominant culture could be explicitly challenged and disregarded.¹⁰⁵



Stills were a primary target of moonshine raids by state police.¹⁰⁶

Conflict over liquor consumption came in full force, this time with an authoritative backing, starting in 1919, when American states ratified the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to prohibit the “manufacture, sale, and

¹⁰⁵ Scott, *Domination*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁶ *Moonshine Stills Confiscated by State Police, Greenbrier County, West Virginia, 1926-1928*, n.d., photograph, n.d., West Virginia State Archives.

transportation of intoxicating liquors for beverage purposes” across the country.¹⁰⁷ While coal company officials in the past instituted consequences or withheld benefits from miners consuming liquor, they could now call on state power to enforce their cultural attitudes toward workers. Over the next decade, state and company town police cracked down on communities accused of moonshining. Moonshining relied on the availability of a “still”, a device of tube-connected basins that facilitated the twin processes of fermentation and distillation. The ensuing “still hunts” during the prohibition era saw police focus on confiscating stills from households to prevent future production. As Corbin notes, one particularly devastating series of “still hunts” during a 1919 strike saw police confiscate several dozen stills in Raleigh, Mingo, Logan, and Boone counties, including one sixty-gallon still. Corbin emphasizes that state enforcement of the prohibition laws primarily tightened up during periods of strike, when state police or even U.S. soldiers were called down to keep order and miners evicted from their homes made easy targets for raids. The production, sale, or bartering of moonshine was a strategy mining families and unions used during striking periods, in order to gather cash or goods that would serve to supplement the meager strike rations. According to one miner Corbin spoke to, “making moonshine was the only way we had of making money during slack runs and strikes.”¹⁰⁸ Cracking down on moonshining allowed companies to deny striking miners an alternative means of making ends meet when they were evicted to tent colonies, giving company officials leverage over their disgruntled employees.

¹⁰⁷ “Prohibition: the 18th Amendment, the Volstead Act, the 21st Amendment,” Prohibition: the 18th Amendment, the Volstead Act, the 21st Amendment § (1986).

¹⁰⁸ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 37.



Getting established in a tent colony.

EVICTED MINERS IN WEST VIRGINIA

Mining families evicted to tent colonies would sometimes form their own robust communities during extended labor actions.¹⁰⁹

Subsistence Struggles and the Hidden Transcript across the States

In many ways, the experiences that former West Virginia farming families found themselves thrust into beginning in the late nineteenth century—wage work, land dispossession, and overbearing structures of power controlling their labor—were felt around the country in the period as industrial and agricultural capitalism arose and solidified. In the antebellum period, beginning around 1832, southern planters cleared the land hugging the Mississippi River Delta and set up locales along the waterways, using

¹⁰⁹ Morris, *Plight*, 138.

enslaved people to clear forests and plant cotton on the newfound plantations. Chad Montrie notes that setting up plantations in the area was a large investment for planters due to the terrain altering that was necessary in the region, and slaveowners in turn enforced more intensive work quotas for the enslaved and forced them to work longer days.¹¹⁰ River Delta slaveowners, similarly to coal company town officials in Appalachia, recognized the value of allowing laborers to undertake subsistence agriculture.

Enslaved people cannot be considered “proletarian” workers as company town miners can. The coercion that brought a West Virginian farming family into the employment of a coal company relied on incentivizing men to sell their own labor by stripping the family of the land on which that they had previously produced a competency, leaving them with little options other than to earn a wage. The enslaved African American plantation worker, on the other hand, faced a system of hegemony that left them with very little autonomy or privacy in their lives and labor inalterably forced upon them. Still, as Scott shows, enslaved communities have exhibited hidden transcripts of resistance that dictated their relations to slaveowners.

While enslaved people did not earn wages, subsistence labor represented a supplement to the meager slave rations, but also promoted the maintenance of social stability in the plantation. With this in mind, slaveowners often “allowed their slaves to work small plots of land and keep a few chickens, hogs, and cows, work that was relatively free of coercion.”¹¹¹ While slaveowners found advantage in allowing subsistence work, enslaved people also found themselves characterizing their survival strategies as means of resistance against their circumstances:

¹¹⁰ Montrie, *Making a Living*, 38.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 39.

By engaging in independent production, making their living more freely from the natural world around them, [slaves] partly repaired the estrangement from nature at the heart of plantation cotton agriculture. In their garden patches, which slaves viewed as land that belonged to them either as property or by usufruct rights, they worked the soil to grow vegetables that nourished their bodies. . . . Likewise, in the woods or at streamside, spaces slaves seemed to have viewed as part of a commons, they edged toward the perimeter of their masters' control and proprietary claims over parts of the earth.¹¹²

Scott recognized that these domains external to the control of the plantation—the garden and livestock plots, in this case, but also the relative “commons” of the woods and streams—embodied the safety of distance that would allow the hidden transcript of the enslaved to emerge. Scott argues that these secluded spaces allowed “full-throated expression” of the situation of domination between those who were mutually experiencing it, but also allowed “expression in folktales, dress, language, song, and religious expression.”¹¹³ As Montrie points out, hunting and fishing in these areas provided psychological benefits for enslaved men. Often denied the opportunity to provide for their wives or their children, because of constraints by their masters, hunting wild game allowed men to feel as though they were fulfilling their gender roles as fathers.¹¹⁴

Scott's idea of the hidden transcript of cultural and spiritual resistance echoed in coal company towns, where coal miners and their families brought with them strong convictions of religion and spiritual appreciation for the beauty of the natural world. Watt Raine characterizes the religion of company town society as widely Presbyterian, with many debates and theological dialogue between people covering the subjects of

¹¹² Montrie, *Making a Living*, 42.

¹¹³ Scott, *Domination*, 120.

¹¹⁴ Montrie, *Making a Living*, 41.

predestination, free will, and sinning. “The attention of the mountain people is largely caught by the mysterious or the magnificent”, Watt Raine described. “The unexpected approach of Death, the accurately detailed horrors of the Judgement, the somewhat sentimental satisfactions of Heaven, these are favorite topics.”¹¹⁵ In fact, Watt Raine noticed that the event of death provided the basis for most sermons in Appalachian communities. He found that Appalachian Christianity was most apparent in elderly people no longer “in the heyday” of their lives, and that religion was a far more personal than public affair.¹¹⁶

While bodies would be buried immediately after death, formal memorial services would often be withheld until early Autumn, on an occasion with pleasant weather, low water height in creeks, and the completion of crop cultivation, with gravesites decorated with flowers. The custom of “preaching funerals” involved a preacher reading a biblical text chosen by the deceased for their funeral, and a choir singing hymns—Watt Raine notes that the choir at a funeral might very well be arranged only for the current occasion.¹¹⁷

Even with the former commons and family farms of a past West Virginia sold and transformed, the connections that that West Virginians forged with the landscape around them points toward residents feeling a unique sense of belonging that rooted them to their land. Bobby McCoy found these thoughts instilled in him from a young age:

As a child, the mountains—we never owned any of these mountains, no one hardly does. It's owned by coal companies, but you could go anywhere in them. My mother used to take me up in the mountains and she would take me to places that her mother and father had taken her in the mountains and where my grandfather had a garden one time in the

¹¹⁵ James Watt Raine, *The Land of Saddle-Bags*, 198.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 204.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 203.

mountains when times were tough. And as a child, my friends we played in the mountains. I guess they were ours and they weren't ours. The mountains belonged to anybody. I haven't really given it a lot of thought, but it's a strange thing how I feel those mountains belong as much to me as anyone anywhere, I think.¹¹⁸

The modes of resistance borne by the hidden transcript, as these cases demonstrate, are not limited to discussions of deceit, deception, or planned rebellion that would ignite action against authorities. West Virginian mining families, much like enslaved Mississippi Delta plantation workers, resisted the social control of company authorities by privately finding spiritual meaning in life and death and forging connections with the natural environment that endured the dwindling independence that came with company town life.

¹¹⁸ WV History Film Project. "Transcript of Interview with Bob McCoy, June 10, 1992, for the Film 'West Virginia,'" 1992.

Conclusion: Contested Legacies of the Coal Economy

The years of the Great Depression are traditionally thought of as the start of the death of the coal industry in Appalachia. As the profitability of mining and shipping coal diminished, many coal companies shut down their mining operations, abandoned or closed their company towns, and sold the land that they had built on—albeit not to the people who had once used it commonly. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, capitalists had made major investments into the Appalachian region, including West Virginia. Coal companies had come to the state, privatized and bought the land, and left the population with little choice but to sell their own labor to make a living. Once the profitability of extracting coal had dried up and companies had left, former coal miners and their families found themselves with a simultaneous dearth of land to build one's competency and an inability to find a market to sell one's labor. While the companies had invested small amounts of coal profit into infrastructural projects in West Virginian towns and the improvements of company town provisions, the majority of profits had been pumped out of the state over the course of mining operations. West Virginia thus struggled to achieve or maintain the robust industrial or service economies that other parts of the country built over the course of the post-New Deal twentieth century to secure jobs. Mining families facing unemployment had similarly little to work with: since a large portion of them had been paid in scrip during their careers in the mines, many were left with savings too small to buy land, establish oneself in a career, or relocate one's family.

Poverty thus lingered in West Virginia, as it did in the former coal territories of Appalachia. Over the course the twentieth century, Americans—academics and policymakers alike—periodically revisited the topic of Appalachia, and the struggles of the people who lived there. In seeking to explain their lasting poverty through the decades, many fell into the same

trap as James Watt Raine, in pathologizing Appalachian communities as being somehow stuck in the past. These proposed “cultures of poverty” were not limited to the descendants of mining families in Appalachia; rather, African American families in the United States and families living in the slums of Mexico City were accused of exhibiting the symptoms of regressive culture.

Among these were cultural decadence or backwardness, a sense of powerlessness or hopelessness, and a sense of community or ethnic inferiority. The “culture of poverty” model initially came to the eye of public policy in 1965, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan under President Lyndon B. Johnson published *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. Often known as the Moynihan Report, the document claimed that cultural behaviors observed in black communities in U.S. cities were socially regressive and gave rise to continuing poverty. One specifically tragic result of these cultural behaviors, according to Moynihan, was the dwindling of nuclear families and the rise of single-mother black families. In the same year, Jack Weller wrote on “mountaineer” culture in *Yesterday’s People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia*, claiming that nostalgia fueled poverty and indolence in Appalachia:

The mountain man has a “regressive” outlook, for he does not look forward to tomorrow with pleasant anticipation ... but backward to a yesterday which was remembered, perhaps nostalgically, as being happier than today. ... The existence oriented society is geared toward achieving only the very basic goods needed for survival—food, clothing, shelter, and minimum of comfort. ... Satisfied when his survival goals are achieved, the mountaineer seldom looks beyond them.¹¹⁹

James David Vance took a similar approach when describing his own family from Kentucky in his 2016 New York Times bestselling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, claiming that his family’s poverty had less to do with their economic situation and more to do with the hillbilly culture that had taught them violence, alcoholism and drug use, and social backwardness.

¹¹⁹ Weller, Jack E. *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia*. (University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 35.

West Virginia's history, however, tells a different story than Watt Raine, Weller, and Vance. The material conditions of life after coal created many of the social conditions that these thinkers attributed to regressive culture. At the same time, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as the forces of capital changed their lives and livelihoods, West Virginians actively opposed the negative effects of capitalist transformation that brought these material conditions at every turn. Dispossessed from their land, mining families—men, women, and children—instead fought to maintain their competencies using the natural resources of the hills and hollows of the company town. They resisted company town economic power and culture, not only in tent colonies during strikes, but also in saloons, burial sites, and the household gardens that emerged across company town communities. Targeted by company systems of control that sought to permeate every aspect of their lives, mining families organized in their households and their communities to protect themselves against wage theft and poor working conditions. David Corbin quotes a Mingo county miner's poetic call to collective action:

Why should we toil while bright earth greets the skies,
And let every sneaking thief rob our guts who tries?
We learned our lesson- and we learned your lies,
Before we had the brains to O-R-G-A-N-I-Z-E.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 246.

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