

Life in a Coal Camp

by

Kimberly Sparks

The topic which I have chosen to write about is coal camps. I have chosen one coal camp in particular to discuss. This coal camp was known as the Black Star mining company located in Harlan County Kentucky. This company was founded in the 1930's. The majority of the men who worked for Black Star worked for Black Star until they died.

Ancil Hall now a Kentucky State Police officer helped me gather the information I needed for this paper. His grandfather, father, and three of his father's brothers also worked for Black Star for 20 or more years during the time span between the late 1930's and the early 1960's. His father as well as two of his uncles drew black lung checks. In the early years of coal mining black lung was very common in mining camps due to the poor safety and environmental laws. During the 1940's through the early 1960's MESHA was not as effective as it is today. Coal mining companies did not pay attention to the laws like they do today. This caused mine safety to be very poor. Mr. Hall could remember two or three rock falls during his stay at Black Star. He also could recall his father and other men talking about mine explosions which occurred in the early 1940's that killed seven or more miners.

The coal company owned the whole town. They owned the commissary, restaurant, beauty and barber shop, doctor's office, service station, and boarding house. Most of the miners lived in homes which the coal company had built and owned. The miners paid a small rent and the company kept the homes in good conditions. The company hired a carpenter who went around to the homes to see if they needed any repairs such as new roofs or floors. Some of the men drove into work from neighboring towns such as

Bell and Knox Counties. When the weather got bad some of the men would board in the boarding house due to the bad conditions the roads were in. Not many of the men who worked in the camp owned cars. The state highway ran into the coal camp so that much of the road was in pretty good condition but the road directly in the camp was very poor they were of gravel of plain dirt. The coal camp also owned the schools. The elementary as well as the high school was located in the same building. The teachers who were hired were usually members of some ones family who worked in the camp.

The coal miners were usually paid every two weeks in cash and Black Star was no exception. They also had a credit system based on script. If a miner ran short of money between pay days all he had to do was go to the script office which was located in the commecary and request the amount that he needed. The amount he borrowed would be deducted from his next pay day. Script was made out of copper and it came in all sorts of values just like real money. The script had the camps logo on printed on it. This script could only be used in businesses which were located in the Black Star mining camp. Black Star had a problem with their miners who wanted to drink to much. For the company this was not such a big deal. The company had hired a constable to patrol the camp but he was not known for his eagerness to have any one put in jail. Mr. Hall could also recall men who on pay day would fight in the streets and he could not remember anyone ever going to jail over these fights or any one going to jail for anything for as much as he can remember.

The coal company hit it's peak in the 1940's. At this time their were possibly as many as 1,500 people liveing in the town. During this time deep mining was what was commonly used during the 40's. Auger mining became popular in the 1950's and 60's.

The coal camp owners lived in better houses then the miners. The coal camp dumped their sludge in the creeks surrounding tne mines. The water in these creeks became blackened by the sludge. The coal company had put up hydrants in between the homes of the miners to give them fresh clean water. The mining homes had running water installed in the late 1950's.

Black Star was bought buy a paper company out of North Carolina in 1958. The company then closed the mine down in July 1, 1960. The Peabody company offerered the miners the option of buying their homes after they had closed the mines down. some of the men bought their homes and moved them else where. Some bought their homes and lived their. while others left their with their own belongings to never return. Mr. Hall's father was one of the men who left the mines with his belongings and his family to relocate in Barbourville on July 4, 1960 just three days after the mines was officially closed down.

Like most miners during this era Mr. Halls father had a difficulty time trying to collect his black lung. He was not alone their were thou- sands if not hundred of thousands of miners who fought to get what was rightfully theirs. They gave their lives to the mountain of coal which was their lively hoods during this time and the government made

it as difficult as they could for them to collect what was and is still today their rightful dues. Their rightful dues consist of a check which they have worked hard for their whole lives and now need due to falling health

health.