

A Look in to the Past: Life of One Early 20th Century Coal Mining Camp

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for Advanced Composition, ETSU, April 2010

*“Old John, with white hair,
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.
They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say,
‘Such, such were the joys
When we all – girls and boys –
In our youth-time were seen
On the echoing green.”*

- William Blake

The “echoing green” of my family is fondly remembered as Black Star, Kentucky. The memory of this long-past coal mining camp that was once home to my family has been passed down over the years. Even my generation has heard so many stories about Black Star Coal Mining Camp that we can easily look past the overgrown ruins in Harlan County, Kentucky and imagine the lively town that our family came from.

I can remember almost every year as a kid coming with my parents and my brother up to Kentucky and traveling the twisting roads into Black Star. My mother’s family, the Tiptons, would have a family reunion at Black Star Baptist Church: one of the few remaining buildings that preserve the name of Black Star.

Black Star Baptist Church is a fairly new building (I think it caught on fire once and was rebuilt), and next to it was a large covered area with picnic tables. Running behind the church is a shallow creek spotted with rocks of various sizes.

I can remember while all the “old people” stood around remembering “better times” and telling stories from the past, my uncle would take the younger generation on an adventure down the creek. That annual adventure was always the highlight of my trip.

As I traveled through the cold waters, I couldn’t help but to notice my surroundings. If you looked closely through the overgrown foliage, sometimes you could see the remaining foundation of a ruined building. Once, when I was younger, my mother and her siblings went exploring and looked for other ruins like you could see off the banks of the creek. They came back with an assortment of mason jars, rusted and broken silverware,

and other little odds and ends that were left behind when the camp closed.

I believe that even after the generations of my family that lived and worked in Black Star are long gone, the stories about their life will remain. Although many coal mining camps of that time period were not known for education and livelihood, through Black Star I know that idea is just a stereotype.

Black Star Coal Mining Camp

Tucked in a little corner of Alva, Kentucky was the county of Harlan. Hidden inside Harlan County was Black Star: a quaint coal mining camp that had a great effect on those residing within its boundaries.

Around 1920, Black Star Coal Company, Inc. began running water lines to the back of a valley in Alva of Harlan County, Kentucky. By 1923, the Black Star coal mining camp was born. The company originally employed around 400 workers who worked under the Black Star Coal Company's name until 1928 (Kentucky Foundation). These workers moved their families to the middle of what was originally a valley that was enveloped in "total blackness" (Warfield). Not a lot of information about official ownership is available about the time in-between, but in 1939 ownership of the company was in the hands of the Black Star Coal Corporation, who ran the camp until 1958 (Kentucky Foundation).

(Aerial View of Black Star Coal Camp)



Branching off from the main camp-area of Black Star were four smaller sub-camps: Little Field Hollow, Bare Tree Hollow, Sawmill Hollow, Rice Hollow, School House Hollow, and Lee's Fork. These camps contained most of the residential areas, which combined contained around four hundred homes (Arnett).

Daisy Warfield Tipton, who was born and raised in the Black Star Community, remembers that there was prejudice in the camp. All the residents of Black Star were white; black people especially were not accepted or allowed to live and work within the community.

Public Services

Residents of the camp were lucky enough to have many amenities available to them.

Black Star was quite large compared to other coal mining camps of its time period. The camp featured a central area with smaller sub-camps branching from it. The large central hub was called the Commissary. It featured a large building that housed services to those living in Black Star. These services included a place to buy groceries, a furniture store, a clothing store, a butcher, and even a small restaurant (Tipton).

If someone was in need of appliances or other essentials of the home, the furniture store was a very good place to go. The store kept many of the brand names of the time in stock. If what someone needed was not currently available, the furniture store would order in and have it sent into the camp by train. Those buying furniture and appliances had the option of a payment plan. The whole amount of the purchase was not taken out of someone's paycheck all at once; a small part of the total was taken from one's paycheck each month, with his/her balances printed on the paystub.



A doctor's office was available to everyone. People were able to get necessary shots and medicines without having to travel to the city.

(View of the Commissary)

There were two churches in the camp, one of them being a large brick Baptist church and the other was a Holiness church. Black Star even had its own school system (Warfield).

There was also a large well that ran water through the camp. There were

hydrants stationed in certain areas where people could go to pump water to bring back to their homes. Eventually people were able to run their own water to their homes directly from the hydrants (Tipton).

Many people walked to where they needed to go, but there were a few people who possessed automobiles. There was also a railway system running through the camp that transported coal wherever it was needed.

Ways of Life

Employees of the camp and their families rented houses, which were located on the grounds, from the coal company. Nancy Louise Hooker, who has contributed to newspapers numerous articles about her experiences growing up in Black Star, writes that "[o]ur rent, for as long as I remember, was \$14 a month for three bedrooms, living and dining room, kitchen, one bathroom, and an enclosed back porch."

The payroll of the working men of Black Star was kept in an office attached to the Commissary. If a person needed to buy something they would draw out a money-substitute called "script" and use it in the Commissary. Twice a month was payday. Men would line up at the office and draw out in cash the part of their paycheck that they had not spent already. A lot of people would spend more than others and would not get as much back on their paycheck. If one was a good money manager, however, he or she could save quite a bit to use later (Tipton).

Those living in Black Star were lucky enough to live in actual houses, not shacks like many coal mining camps of the time period. Houses had three, four, six, or eight rooms. Indoor plumbing was provided to all residents.

Families had no problem leaving their doors unlocked at night. One might see someone at night with a flashlight outside of their house. It was not likely a person breaking in, just someone walking up the hill on his way home. No one had to be afraid of anyone walking in on them. No one had to be afraid of walking clear across Black Star alone at two in the morning (Tipton).

Growing up in Black Star

Growing up, children spent much of their free time playing games outside with their friends. Some of the games they would play included names like knock-can (also known as kick-can), Red Rover, Scatty-Go-Sheepy, jump rope, and hop scotch in the dirt road that ran through the camp.

One of the games, Scatty-Go-Sheepy, was played with a large group of children. All of the kids would divide into two groups, each group having its own home base. The goal of the game was to get to the other team's home base first without getting caught. Groups would try to be super sneaky by taking twists and turns

between the houses, trying to cover or mix their foot prints as they went.



(Two Children)

School-age children had many activities available to them. The school's extracurricular activities included a baseball, tennis, basketball, and football team. Also, the school had its own marching band (Byrd).

The restaurant in the Commissary sold only sandwiches, hot dogs, and hamburgers. Groups of kids would get together there so they could play music on the jukebox and do dances like the "Jitterbug".

Schools had very good teachers who were hired from outside of the camp; most teachers were graduates from the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Students who came from Black Star High School were well educated. Many ended up in important careers such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers (Tipton).

Modern Memories

In 1961, after many had lived in Black Star for decades, Black Star ran out of enough coal to support itself and had to shut down. With little notice, everyone was forced to move away. The mines shut down and all the houses and buildings were demolished (Author).

Many people from Black Star have all tried to stay in touch with each other over the years. People who lived in Black Star still try to get together to see each other. They used to hold a reunion every Labor Day but changed it to mid-August or early September. The reunions started out just for graduates from Black Star High School, but eventually broadened to anyone who had lived there. The graduates became committee members and would organize the events. People would buy tickets to go to it. Those in charge of the reunions would have a program set up and would so stuff like have entertainers there to sing, but many people got to where they just would want to sit around and visit with each other and eat a big meal. Sometimes college students would come and help with the events (Hall).

Daisy Warfield Tipton says that looking back on life in Black Star was nothing like what other Appalachian camps were made out to be. Everyone felt really lucky to live in such a good mining camp. Back when she was growing up, she remembered camps being just like any other town. She is appalled by what she sees now with run-down camps where people are living in broken-down trailers with trash everywhere. She believes that present-day camps give all of them a bad name.

Bibliography

Arnett, Robert. Black Star, The Early Years 1921-1923. Year unknown.: I chose to use this piece because the author grew up in Black Star and uses his personal experience along with facts and other information.

Author, Unknown. "Between Us (Thoughts of a Country Editor)." Lexington Herald (Unknown Year). : This article from the Lexington Herald interested me because I was able to look into the corporate world of Black Star and learn about who owned the camp at what times.

Byrd, Colon C. "Black Star, A Company Town In Harlan Co. Now Only a Memory." The Kentucky Explorer (2006): 58-59. : This article shows an outsider's perspective of the world of Black Star. The author is informed about the structure and shares information about the camp with the reader, but also shows his perspective of looking at someone who feels strongly about where she grew up.

Hall, Ancil. Black Star Coal Mining Camp. 22 March 2010. 23 March 2010

<<http://www.blackstarcoalcamp.com/firstpage.htm>>. – I chose this website because it is considered the Black Star "home page". Many of the people who grew up in Black Star have contributed photos and information to this page. (*Note* Photos obtained from this page)

Kentucky Foundation. Kentucky Coal Heritage - Harlan County, Kentucky Coal Camps. 19 September 2007. 15 March 2010

<http://www.coaleducation.org/CoalHistory/coaltowns/coalcamps/harlan_county_coal_camps.htm>. -- I chose this page because it lists ownership information about many coal mining camps of the early 20th century.

Powell, Nancy Louis Hooker. "Growing Up At Black Star: A Coal Company Town in Harlan Co." The Kentucky Explorer (2006): 58-61. : I liked this article because the author gives the reader multiple scenarios of life growing up in Black Star.

Steele, Sharon. Nanna and Papaw's Journal. Unknown Year. : This is a personal interview-journal compiled about two people who grew up in Black Star and were married in their youth.

Tipton, Daisy May Warfield. Interview: Life in Black Star Britny Lawhorn. 14 March 2009. : I interviewed my great-grandmother in March of 2009 about her life in Black Star.

Warfield, Sylvia F. Love is the Tie That Binds: Memories of the Early Black Star Mining Community. Year Unknown. : Warfield is a master's graduate from the University of Kentucky and grew up and taught school in Harlan County for 14 years. Her points of view on different topics about Black Star ways of life were interesting to read.