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Continuity in the Midst of Change: Work and Environment for West Virginia Mountaineers

Chad Montrie

For many people living in the United States, the nineteenth century was a time of rural to urban migration. Between the start of industrialization in the 1820s and the second industrial revolution after the Civil War, millions of Americans removed themselves from one part of the country to another, pushed and pulled by a variety of factors. This shifting brought change not only in the kind of labor they did but also in the relationship they had with the natural world. And the movement continued, with the same implications, during and following the two world wars of the twentieth century. Even more people left the land then, often for urban industrial work, feeding a demographic and social phenomenon that waxed and waned with the expansion and contraction of the economy.¹

Still, the transition from agricultural labor in the country to factory labor in a town or city was not always a sharp break from one life to another. Many native-born white residents of southern West Virginia, for example, skipped their way from rural farms to urban assembly lines, only incrementally losing control over their labor and its products and only gradually separating themselves from the land. There was continuity in the midst of change, a mix of persistent practices and ideas, making the long process of migration something less than a dramatic cleavage from another way of life.

In the decades after the Civil War, most West Virginia mountain families still made their living by mixed subsistence farming. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, male heads of households began to supplement this agricultural labor with seasonal wage work cutting timber or mining coal. Later, they moved their families to company towns and went into the mines on a more regular basis, but even this was not an immediate wholesale change in their circumstances. A substantial amount of pre-industrial life lingered in the coal camps. The men had a considerable amount of autonomy as miners, maintaining an “individualistic independence,” as David Corbin puts it, one that squared with the freedom to which they

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were accustomed as subsistence farmers.² They also continued to hunt on company land and fish in local streams, and nearly every family maintained a large garden and kept livestock.

Over time, coal mine operators in southern West Virginia and other parts of Appalachia established a repressive guard system to police company towns, and they adopted factory discipline as well as new labor-saving technology underground. This provoked militant battles by miners for unionization, sometimes successful and sometimes not, and often forced the miners to rely on access to woods, streams, and open fields to keep their families fed during strikes. When the coal industry began to decline in the 1920s, however, and especially when production for the war in the 1940s enticed Americans to the urban factories, mountain people responded with out-migration, leaving for Akron, Cincinnati, Columbus, Detroit, Chicago, and other industrial cities. In these places resettled miners encountered a new, more potent combination of labor exploitation and alienation from nature.

Farmer to Miner

As late as 1880, the average farm size in southern Appalachia was 187 acres, typically with 25 percent of the land cultivated, another 20 percent cleared pasture, and the rest left wooded. In the main fields, mountain residents planted corn as a staple crop, supplemented by wheat, rye, oats, and buckwheat, sometimes as part of a polyculture that included beans, melons, and squash. Male heads of households prepared the soil with simple tools, usually a bull-tongue plow, and other family members wielded hoes to help care for crops to harvest. In gardens, more clearly the work space of women, aided by children of varying ages, the family grew vegetables like onions, potatoes, and radishes. Most homesteads also had an orchard, with apple, pear, plum, cherry, and other fruit trees, and a beehive for honey.³

Around and beyond their homes, farm families practiced animal husbandry, integrating livestock into their varied way of making a living from the land. Some of the corn a family grew was meant to fatten hogs, unless they were marked and let to roam the woods for mast, and those animals provided an important food source or, in some cases, an alchemic means to trade surplus crops and the wealth of the woods. Mules or oxen were kept to provide traction in the fields, and a horse or two might be kept as well to carry people along ridges and through hollows. Near the house was a poultry yard, with chickens for eggs and meat and geese for down to fill bed ticks and pillows. Beyond the homestead, sheep scoured the rocky

hillsides and milk cows grazed in the cleared pasture. Wool from the sheep was carded, dyed, spun, and woven into homespun or turned into carpets for floors, and milk was usually churned into butter.⁴

The considerable woods and many streams in an area were reliable storehouses of provisions for people too. Roots like ginseng were gathered for barter while berry bushes and nut trees added to the mountaineers' tables in season. Deer, rabbits, squirrels, quail, and other game, along with fish from local creeks and rivers, were generally unfailing year-round sources of meat for families as well, at least before the passage of fish and game laws. And the woods satisfied a desire for beauty complementing mostly women's efforts to spruce up the area around their cabins. "The mountain home had its flower garden, daffodils, lilies, dahlias, and sunflowers," historian Ronald Eller explains, "and in the spring nature provided a floral mosaic of dogwood, redbud, flag-lilies, larkspur, devil-in-the-bush, and hundreds of other wildflowers."⁵

Settled on a hillside or nestled in a hollow with access to bottomland, mountain residents grew, raised, gathered, and caught their subsistence as part of family production units, based on an ideal of interdependence and a life lived close to the natural world that was directly and perceptibly around them. There was a division of labor, including by gender and age, but family members had a sense of their place and function, and their work was meaningful. When families owned their own land, as was often the case, they could be nearly self-sufficient, and the products of their labor belonged to them, without an intermediary claiming a right of possession. Ultimately, however, this way of making a living was not sustainable. Farm families were large because children contributed essential labor and because kin mattered so much in the mountain culture, yet having so many children could not be reconciled with the demands of partible inheritance. In the years after the Civil War, the region's continued high birth rate began to increase the population beyond remaining arable land, spelling doom for reproduction of an agrarian independence.

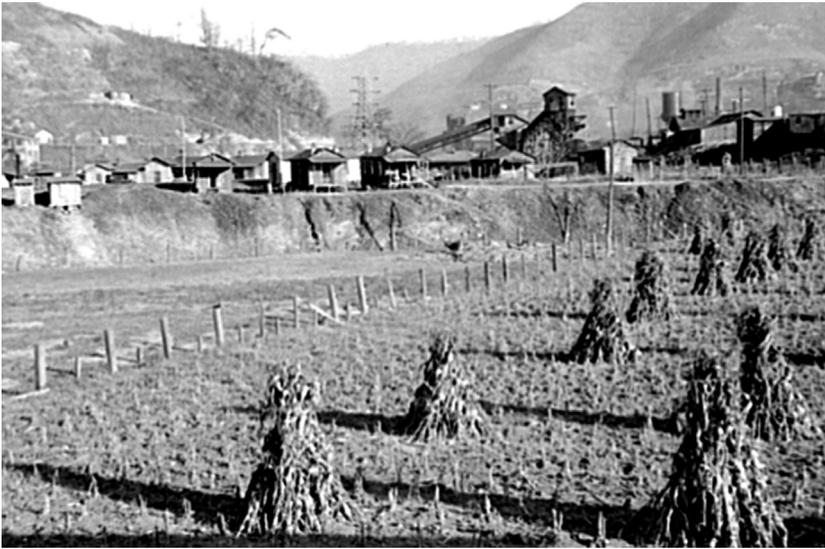
The demographic imbalance that became evident in the postbellum era was one of a number of factors that led to the spread of industrial wage work in the region, adding to the reasons for landowners to sell parts or all of their farms and forcing older male heads of households as well as their sons into wage work. On the one hand, speculators found many willing sellers for land and mineral rights among the increasingly strapped population, which then facilitated the process of railroad expansion and subsequently the advent of wide-scale commercial logging and coal mining. On the other

hand, mountain men became the labor force for the new extractive industries, cutting timber and digging coal at least initially as part of a strategy to stick with farming. They hired themselves out on a seasonal and temporary basis, not with a mind to suddenly and permanently make a separation from their preferred way of life, but this wage labor allowed capitalism to more fully penetrate the region and to begin its irreversible transformation.

In southern West Virginia, between the Tug Fork and Kanawha Rivers, the industrial era was launched by construction and expansion of two major railroads, the Chesapeake and Ohio and the Norfolk and Western. This development was key to removing the natural resources of woods and coalfields, although an extensive network of rail lines was late in coming to Appalachia in general and this part of the region in particular. In the immediate postbellum years, mining in the lower section of the state was still largely confined to Kanawha County, where the wide Kanawha River facilitated slow shipment of coal to salt manufacturers and blacksmiths for at least six months out of the year. The lumber industry, too, had advanced only as far as major waterways and modest streams allowed rafting cut timber to local sawmills or distant railheads.⁶

The Chesapeake and Ohio started the process of industrialization in 1872, when the trunk line was finished and opened up the New River Field, including Fayette County. Within a decade that county had at least forty mines in operation and became the first in the state to produce more than a million tons of coal. By 1910, it had reached a prewar peak of more than 10 million tons. In the meantime, a branch line was built to adjacent Raleigh County in 1901 and the Guyandotte Valley extension in 1904 opened Logan and Wyoming Counties to mining.⁷ The Norfolk and Western Railroad was also finished in 1893, running parallel to the C&O between 60 and 100 miles to the south, and it facilitated shipments from the coalfields along West Virginia's southern border, in Wayne, Mingo, McDowell, and Mercer. Between 1889 and 1910, in fact, McDowell County became the largest coal producer in the state when its production increased from 246,000 tons to 12 million tons.⁸ Concurrently, the main-line railroads, feeder lines, and hundreds of smaller logging railroads opened forests to intensive commercial timber operations, which reached their peak by 1895. Yellow poplar, black walnut, chestnut, and other trees fell before the ax and saw, greatly shrinking what had been a large stretch of virgin growth across West Virginia from 10 million acres in 1870 to a mere fifth of that by 1910.⁹

Behind all of this feverish railroad building, timber cutting, and coal mining, of course, were land purchases as well as acquisition of timber and



Williamson, West Virginia, 1935.

Source: Photo by Ben Shahn

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC

mineral rights. By 1900, according to historian David Corbin, absentee owners had secured claim to 90 percent of Mingo, Logan, and Wayne Counties and 60 percent of Boone and McDowell. In 1923, he writes, “nonresidents of West Virginia owned more than half of the state and controlled four-fifths of its total value.”¹⁰ But the logging and mining were sustained by the flow of labor into those operations as well, which ironically happened primarily because native mountain residents had a desire to continue making their own living from increasingly scarce land. Many of the men who felled timber or dug coal for a wage, at least initially, saw it as an accommodation to the realities of demographic imbalance, rising property taxes, and debts, or as a way to purchase land they had lost or never had. When they performed this labor it was a temporary means toward a more permanent end, and, if they had farms to return to, their wage work was intermittent.

Well into the twentieth century, mine owners complained that native-born mountain residents were often an unreliable labor force because of their tendency to come and go according to a seasonal cycle. Although

many local farmers took up a pick and shovel in the winter months, they left the mines for their fields in the spring and summer months, and again for harvesting in the fall. “[T]heir shiftless methods of living have not accustomed them to continuous and sustained labor,” historian Ronald Eller quotes one mining engineer as saying, and adding a telling racial comparison that “they resemble the Negro in their desire for frequent periods of ‘laying off.’”¹¹ From the other side, however, the “shiftlessness” made some sense. For most farmers and their families, actually, it was not an inherent indolence that kept them tied to the fields. They preferred a rural agrarian life and were attempting to preserve it through periodic bouts of wage work.

Crandall Shifflet argues that if agrarian mountain life had been appealing, farm families would not have left it. He lists the ways in which homesteads and the work there failed to measure up to coal camps and mining, and insists that farmers willingly made the switch. “Mostly,” he writes, “[farm] life was a cycle of endless labor. Roads, railroads, towns, stores, electric lighting, indoor plumbing, weekly garbage pickup, better medical and dental care, and other forms of ‘modernization,’ especially jobs, would have been welcomed by farm families to relieve the isolation, laboriousness, and misery of mountain life and work.” This begs the question, however, of why so many mountain residents attempted to have it both ways, farming most of the year and working in coal mines only for a season.¹²

To be sure, various aspects of early mining did make that work less objectionable than it might have been and eventually became. Although digging at a coal seam in the dark and dank underground was significantly different from cultivating the soil in the open air, until the 1920s there was a certain amount of continuity in the organization of labor, particularly in terms of the autonomy allowed. Although companies supplied prop timbers and track, miners owned their own tools and bought their own lamp oil, blasting powder, and other supplies. Underground, they had little or no supervision and developed a proprietary interest in the “room” they worked, retaining rights over it even when they were absent for a considerable amount of time. They controlled the length and pace of their workday too, paid on a piece-rate basis, and that meant they could quit when they had made enough money, a privilege they exercised with enough frequency to irritate production-minded operators.¹³ For the first few decades after the advent of coal mining in Appalachia, before the adoption of mechanical loaders and rationalization of work according to scientific management principles, miners retained an independence that squared with the freedom they enjoyed as farmers.¹⁴

Other aspects of mining also partly redeemed its industrial character. Even when mountain families finally left their homesteads or rented land, moving to one of the many company-owned settlements strung out in hollows, they did not necessarily leave an agrarian experience behind. Herbert Garten's father, for example, farmed for a living while working "quite a bit in timber" and some in coal mines, and then around 1912 he moved the family from Summers County to Terry. "[T]here was better money in the mines," Garten explained, "and he had worked in the mines, off and on, you know, before he decided just to go in the mines."¹⁵ Once in the coal camps, families like the Gartens perpetuated aspects of a traditional way of life by cultivating patches of land, keeping various livestock, as well as hunting and fishing. Much like the miners' work underground, this mix of tasks was generally self-directed and autonomous. Unlike mining, however, the work aboveground involved members of the entire family and provided regular contact with the daily and seasonal cycles of nature as well as a more direct experience with the ecological relationships between living things and the environment.

While the number varied over time and from county to county, a large majority of coal-camp residents supplemented mining wages by cultivating a garden. Even in the mid-1920s the West Virginia Coal Association made the conservative estimate that 50 percent of the state's miners grew at least some of their own food, and a Children's Bureau survey found a greater number in Raleigh County made part of their living that way. Seven-tenths of the families interviewed had gardens, Nettie McGill reported, producing a variety of vegetables and fruits. Most families grew corn, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, and cabbage, she said, and a few also planted beets, onions, lettuce, watermelon, and cantaloupes. Some mining families cultivated orchard crops as well, including apples, peaches, plums, and cherries, mostly for canning and making wine and cider, and women planted flowers around their houses or in separate gardens.¹⁶

As part of welfare capitalism schemes, a few coal companies encouraged gardening by allowing use of available land, providing stable litter and lime fertilizer and, at some mine operations, giving cash rewards for the best gardens and yards. In the summer of 1912, for example, the United States Coal & Coke Company in Gary paid a premium of \$10 for the best garden and \$5 for the best kept yard. "The vegetable patches," explained the (operator-friendly) trade journal *Coal Age*, "are almost invaluable to those who tend them for they assure them of fresh vegetables throughout the greater part of the year."¹⁷ Companies ran the garden and yard contests,

in part, because miners' gardening enabled them to keep wage rates down and yet still make a claim to benevolence. It was also a way to encourage beautification of the coal camps. Contest criteria often mentioned "neatness," in addition to "the kind and quality of crops raised" and "the natural advantages and disadvantages of the location," and judges made their awards in June and July, before gardeners would be harvesting significant amounts of produce. "The dull, gloomy look of the usual mining town disappears," *Coal Age* editors (perhaps wistfully) noted in writing about a McDowell County contest, "and in its stead rises the fresh, bright, sweet-smelling flowers; and the beautiful green lawns replace the clay and coal dirt."¹⁸

Although not every coal camp promoted gardening and yard upkeep with a contest, most mining families grew some of their own food and kept their yards tidy, even without the encouragement, and in practice they followed at least a nuanced and mixed gendered division of labor, adapted from previous lives on farms. Men, it seems, were largely responsible for tilling the soil and then taking care of staple crops like corn, infrequently assisting other family members at times with morning or Sunday work in the rest of the garden. Recalling his boyhood, Fayette County miner Robert Forren explained how he and his father would come home in the evening, eat supper, "and go to the cornfield and hoe until nine and nine-thirty at night."¹⁹ Women on farm homesteads had worked gardens, helped by children, and this continued after families moved to the coal camps as well. One miner, according to David Corbin, boasted that his wife and daughter "worked harder in the fields than any man ever did and that's why we grew more stuff in the [company] towns than the farmers on their farms."²⁰ Young boys and more than a few girls were expected to contribute in this way too. "Every spring in Grays Flats my father planted a large garden to keep food on the table for our growing family," Robert Armstead recalled, and in the summer the children weeded and hoed. "I swatted flies and sweated hours of my childhood away," he said, "battling every kind of weed known to man."²¹

Animal husbandry was marked by even more mixed responsibility. Care of chickens, hogs, and cows fell to men and women as well as to children. Robert Armstead, who came from a large family, remembered that the "boys fed hogs and chickens, cut wood, and piled coal up for winter," while their sisters "made beds, washed dishes, and helped with laundry." Robert Forren, who explained that only 30 to 35 percent of Fayette County coal-camp residents had their own hogs, recalled children just released from school "visiting the different homes that did not have hogs, a'picking up the scraps from the tables and so on . . . to bring home to the family that did

have a hog.” Yet Concho resident Ada Jackson insisted that women fed the various livestock in the evening, and “mostly the husband would feed them in the morning, because he would be up earlier.” Among the tasks that filled her day, Jackson listed housework, taking care of children, sewing, cooking, feeding chickens and hogs, and working in the garden.²²

Hunting and fishing, on the other hand, were almost entirely if not exclusively within the male domain. Ada Jackson’s husband and his fellow miners, for example, caught blue cats and other fish from the New River, although she never joined them. “I’d go to the river every day,” she recalled, “but I didn’t fish.” Likewise, Robert Armstead remembered only the males in his family fishing. “I saw men and boys standing next to Paw Paw Creek in all kinds of weather,” he said, “some with just a stick and a string, trying to hook a few fish for dinner.” Ames resident Annie Kelly also recalled her brothers maintaining a “trot-line,” a line that ran across the river, baited alternately with worms, stiff “doughballs,” and fatback bacon pieces. In the fall, these same boys and their father, as well as nearly all the other male coal-camp residents in the region, hunted for rabbit, squirrel, pheasant, deer, and bear. During time off or a slack period at a mine, they ventured out with shotgun or rifle in hand, and often a dog or two by their side, to take wild game on land that might have been owned by a railroad, coal, timber, or land company, but which local people treated as a commons.²³

Coal miners and their various family members kept gardens, raised livestock, and hunted and fished in part because it was what they knew, particularly if they had migrated from a native homestead. Working the soil, caring for domestic animals, and taking parts of their subsistence from the woods and streams, the miners had one foot still firmly planted in the preferred life they had left behind. At a very basic level, these subsistence activities were also essential, supplementing low wages and carrying mining families through the inevitable slow periods in an industry marked by an unchecked capacity for overproduction as well as fickle market demand. And this worked both ways, helping the miners as well as mine owners.

At one and the same time, providing access to land could be a way for coal companies to establish miners’ dependence on them as well as a means for those same workers to carve out a realm of independence. The latter was particularly important for miners in southern West Virginia, because nearly without exception they were required to live in company-run camps, take their pay in company scrip, and buy provisions in a company store.²⁴ In some places there were independent stores, but miners needed cash to shop there and companies only changed scrip at a discount.²⁵ Either way,

over-reliance on the company system would not necessarily keep a family well fed and could quickly lead a family into debt, so almost everyone made an effort to provide a good deal of their own subsistence. "We had to buy flour, sugar, salt, and stuff like that," remembered Ernest Levie Carico, "but the rest we just raised."²⁶ For those who did not work so diligently at making their own living, or due to a variety of circumstances could not, they could always buy the eggs, chickens, hams, potatoes, apples, cabbage, and other meats and produce mining families raised in surplus and sold to a store for credit, which at least improved their lot.

With some exceptions, then, mining families did not rely exclusively or always heavily on miners' wages. The fact that coal camps generally allowed for persistent remnants of the agrarian life that many native-born mountain residents supposedly left behind when they moved had implications for labor organizing. Between the opportunities for satisfying their own subsistence needs while working at a mine and the ability of some residents to return to homestead and farm during slack times or exasperation with mining, many miners were reluctant to contemplate if not averse to struggle for unionization. David Corbin relates that, when he toured Kanawha County in 1896, union organizer P. M. McBride associated much of his difficulty in generating interest with the capacity miners had to take care of themselves. "Every available spot of ground seems to have received attention from the plow or spade," McBride wrote, and this explained their comparatively comfortable position. "They raise all the vegetables they require and this assures them that the wolf shall be kept from the door."²⁷

It was not only the basic fact of having an alternative means to satisfy material needs, however, which hindered United Mine Workers' (UMW) campaigns in southern West Virginia. By gardening, keeping livestock, and hunting and fishing, miners and their families also minimized the degree of estrangement from nature required by the shift to industrial wage labor. They might have left their farms, but they did not have to separate completely from work on the land to sever a relationship that fed them in more ways than one. Gardens provided vegetables in the winter months and, just as importantly, explained Children's Bureau agent Nettie McGill in a report on Beckley-area coal camps, miners spoke of "the enjoyment which they derived from working in their gardens, especially as a change from work inside the mines."²⁸ 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—this continued connection with the living things and landscape around them aboveground

partly redeemed coal mining and life in coal camps. That made the men less willing to take the risks and endure the hardships of forming a union, demanding recognition, and securing a contract.

Yet changing circumstances demanded mining families' attention and prompted male heads of households to take collective action. For one thing, the fit between agrarian life and coal mining was never seamless and the disjuncture worsened and became more obvious over time. Persistent traditional subsistence practices began to run up against swelling populations and deteriorating housing in the coal camps, increasingly plagued by congestion and afflicted by inadequate or nonexistent systems for sewage and garbage disposal. Settlements were usually built in narrow hollows, between two ridges and on both sides of a railroad line and stream running through the valley, and there, among the hills, all manner of problems started to arise. When the mines were active, the influx of native-born residents, southern blacks, and immigrants was steady, and coal operators focused more intently on profits, living conditions in the settlements declined. Although there were numerous experiments in benevolent capitalism to point to, those efforts did not always live up to their promise, and many companies simply balked at the large investments livability would require. Coal could not be mined economically that way, operators claimed, and anyway they had the right to use their property without interference.²⁹

Throughout southern West Virginia, in every coal camp, families living close to the tippie were routinely showered with clouds of coal dust, "which turned everything a somber gray and frustrated the cleaning efforts of even the most meticulous housewife."³⁰ Garbage and refuse also accumulated, because companies did not make provisions for collection and removal. Some of it could be fed to hogs, but a good deal of it inevitably ended up dumped along roadsides or in a nearby waterway, along with human sewage, tainting the creek for drinking and fishing. "In some settlements," Nettie McGill wrote in 1923, "waste matter entered the creeks flowing through the center of the town, privies were tumble-down, and incredible amounts of garbage and rubbish lay on the ground." Wandering chickens, ducks, geese, and hogs, although important to miners for making a living, added "to the general disorder and unwholesomeness." Many families preferred to use water from shallow wells or springs, like they would have on their homestead, but in the company-run towns these were often polluted by privies situated above and "by chickens and stock, or by dishwater, drainage, and garbage."³¹

Belowground, the mining technology and the organization of mine

work also underwent significant transformation in the first three decades of the twentieth century, changes that miners did not generally appreciate or welcome. Machines to undercut coal were introduced by operators as early as the 1880s, and at the turn of the century a quarter of the nation's coal was mined this way. In West Virginia, miners' picks were fast disappearing by 1905. There were only 141 cutting machines in Kanawha, Fayette, McDowell, Marion, and Tucker County mines in 1900, but five years later there were 1,158, and nearly 2,000 by 1910.³² In terms of impact on work organization, however, this wave of mechanization had relatively little impact. Even after introduction of electric drills, better blasting powder, more efficient haulage, as well as the undercutting machines, miners still worked alone or with a partner in isolated rooms with a claim of proprietorship. They still set their own pace of production and determined the length of their work days, and they were still paid according to how much coal they loaded.³³

What truly transformed the labor process and allowed for making mining more like factory work was the introduction of machine loaders. There were only a few of these machines scattered about the state's southern coalfields in 1910, but, in the years that followed, operators installed Myers-Whaley, Jeffrey, and other loaders in much greater numbers. The hand-loading era came to a quick end then and, by the middle of the 1920s, West Virginia led all others in the production of machine-loaded coal.³⁴ Consequent to this change, operators implemented scientific management techniques and miners lost the control they once exercised over the production process. Machine loaders addressed the problems caused by hand loaders who slackened their pace or decided to quit for the day, heralding the switch from piecework to a day rate of pay and adding some dependability to output. They concentrated operations too, allowing closer supervision of the workforce, reorganized into small crews under the watch of a foreman.³⁵

Over time, as the quality of life in coal towns eroded and the freedom of mining was circumscribed, miners and their families became more receptive to unionization, though not without initial hesitation. Until the second decade of the twentieth century, the United Mine Workers had made little headway in southern West Virginia. They established a foothold in Kanawha County during a 1902 strike, but miners there returned to work on a nonunion basis after another strike two years later. The union suffered another reversal in 1907 when they attempted to reorganize to fight a wage cut. During the years that followed, the UMW poured a considerable

amount of money into regaining the lost ground, with scores of organizers spreading the union message, yet most miners failed to join and those that did pay dues only did so grudgingly.³⁶

What seems to have tipped the balance in the southern West Virginia coalfields was the operators' introduction of a guard system which, ironically, they thought they needed to stop agitation. By 1910, Baldwin-Felts agents were present in nearly every company town in the state, and their brutish and arbitrary methods backfired, fueling miners' determination and willingness to act. When thousands of workers in Kanawha and Fayette County mines finally walked out in the spring of 1912, their demands in order of importance were recognition of the union, abolition of the mine-guard system, reform in the docking system, a check-weighman hired by the miners, the right to trade with any store they pleased, cash wages, and only lastly an increase in pay. They won their fight for recognition, and received a modest improvement in wages, but failed to remove the guards from their towns, maintaining the conditions for continued organizing and resistance.³⁷

Several years later, World War I fanned the flames of unionism, by injecting the idealist rhetoric of fighting autocratic rule and saving democracy, sentiments that contrasted sharply with the reality of repression in company towns. With this inspiration, organizing efforts spread beyond the heart of the New River field to Raleigh, Boone, McDowell, Mingo, Logan, and other counties, although without much lasting success. After the war, operators began to systematically break the UMW's tenuous hold in the region, starting with the defeat they exacted on miners at Blair Mountain in 1921. As a result, the share of union-mined coal in the southern West Virginia fields dropped from 65 percent in 1922 to 23 percent in 1927.³⁸ At the same time, demand for coal began to decline precipitously and many of the smaller operations started to close, years before the rest of the country was battered by depression. "By 1930," explains Ronald Eller, "unemployment, destitution, and despair stalked the coal fields."³⁹

Still, miners were not without recourse to other means of subsistence. During the pre- and postwar labor battles as well as during the depression, they relied on persistent farming skills and access to land to feed themselves and their families. In 1919, David Corbin relates, one Kanawha County miner wrote to UMW President John L. Lewis that "we're not worrying about strike benefits . . . because we are killing hogs and gathering corn and other crops and squirrel hunting."⁴⁰ Usually, during a strike, miners were put out of their company housing and denied access to garden plots,

but even then there were mountain residents who had never relinquished their homestead or given up farming for mining, and they could help with land or provisions. There were still nearly 1,500 farms in Fayette County in 1920, many of which were located close to tracts of open range, and other counties had even more residents occupied exclusively by agriculture.⁴¹

Ellis Bailey's family had the best of both worlds, since they owned and farmed bottomland in Clear Creek, and he had a reliable cash income from digging ginseng as well as working in a UMW mine three or four days a week. On the farm they grew potatoes and corn and kept an apple orchard, and they willingly gave food to the miners caught up in the wildcat strikes near Cabin Creek after World War I. "When we got over there to sell our stuff," he remembered, "there was a Baldwin thug, and all the working men sitting out in the road with their furniture throwed out." Bailey and his father saw some hungry children, too, and they started to pass out what they had brought, not expecting payment but taking it in kind, some of the mattresses and other household items the displaced miners no longer needed. Observing their actions, the Baldwin-Felts agents came over and told them to leave, threatening to shoot them if they looked back as they traveled down the road. Later, miners came to them. "Every miner [who] wasn't working," Bailey recalled, "they'd come up here and I'd give them \$10 every time they come, and they'd take about two wagon loads of grub."⁴²

During the Great Depression, as the early decline of the coal industry stretched into another decade, miners who still had access to land also survived by relying on farming.⁴³ Herbert Garten's father, for example, lost his position at the Terry mine and "went back up to the farm," the homestead they still owned near Clayton. Ernest Levie Carico's father was laid off from a mine too, yet he managed to provide more than enough to eat for the family by working a patch on the old homestead. "He'd always raise enough to do us," Carico remembers, "and then what he had left over, potatoes and stuff like that, he'd just have to dump them out to the hogs or anything that would eat them. He couldn't sell them . . . I saw him throw away several bushels of potatoes during the spring." Likewise, James Harlan Edwards had six children by the 1930s, but he could not recall any of them going hungry during those years. He cultivated three or four acres of ground, "making corn, beans, potatoes and everything," raised "an old calf or two" to sell for beef, and took to the woods to hunt the plentiful squirrels and trap groundhogs.⁴⁴ "Although the amount of land in farms remained relatively stable from 1930 to 1940," historian Ronald Eller explains, "the number of farms rose significantly during the depression years."⁴⁵

Miner to Factory Hand (and Miner Again)

Not everybody could or did respond to the coal industry's decline by reverting to full-time farming, however, and with the start of production for World War II, there was the added enticement of jobs up north to get people to leave. This marked another important change in the shift from farm to mine to factory labor, with correspondent changes in labor exploitation and alienation from nature, although this second part of the shift, like the first, was somewhat incomplete. In the latter half of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s, native-born mountain residents sometimes left Appalachia only to return as job prospects brightened and dimmed. They were, as Phillip Obermiller calls them, "shuttle migrants." Later, with the onset of war, a considerable number of southern highlanders began to leave for good, nearly seven million of them between 1940 and 1960.⁴⁶ Even these migrants returned for frequent visits, though, for weekends, holidays, vacations, funerals, reunions, and hunting seasons.⁴⁷

Among the millions who left the mountains following the depression years, 750,000 of them were from southern West Virginia, at least half of which went to Ohio, and a good portion of those found their way to Akron. Recruiters for the rubber industry had been luring mountain residents to northern Ohio since the turn of the century and many had come seeking the promised high wages, to save some money before returning home. By the 1920s, at least 80 percent of the employees at Goodyear were native born and the number of workers who hailed from West Virginia and Kentucky was nearly equal to the number from Ohio. Like the coal industry, though, the rubber industry was "sick" even before the depression, which caused a precipitous drop in employment at Akron factories and a brief period of reverse migration. Then war brought another boom, jobs in the city increased 41 percent, and West Virginia migrants made their way to the rubber center once more.⁴⁸

Yet much like coal operators' perceptions in the late nineteenth century, rubber plant management did not always have a high regard for southern highlanders, particularly when they brought a disposition toward autonomy and self-determination to the shop floor. They lacked a familiarity with regular oversight, one industrial observer wrote in 1921, which created habits ill-suited to factory work. "The ex-miner resents all suggestion as to his working methods," he said, "resents all effort to compel continuous application, and assumes in general a hostile attitude toward supervision."⁴⁹ No doubt, when the tire and rubber goods' manufacturers adopted new

technology and scientific management methods, the regimentation and expectations of factory discipline clashed as much or more with the men's "individualistic independence" as it did in the coal mines back home. That explains, in part, why Akron saw so much labor upheaval in the 1930s, including the first sit-down strike. A large number of former miners stayed in the city during the rubber industry's downturn, rather than return to the mountains, and they played key roles in organizing the United Rubber Workers. They drew on a general experience and set of values from working the land and mines of southern Appalachia, as well as a more particular experience and array of attitudes from dealing with recalcitrant operators and Baldwin-Felts thugs.

West Virginia migrants went to Akron and other northern industrial cities for the opportunities promised there, but they did not always look favorably on what they found. Organizing unions was one expression of this sentiment, a response to the labor exploitation they encountered inside the rubber plants. Outside the factories, in the increasingly crowded streets and ever-inadequate housing, conditions were also poor, yet this was something they could do little to change. Before World War I, many Akron residents lived in neighborhoods of modest, single-family homes, with land enough for vegetable gardens, chickens, and cows. Consequent to a construction boom, however, neighborhoods were transformed and newcomers lived in cramped apartments, plagued by traffic, street noise, and refuse. Escaping these conditions, without leaving town, became increasingly difficult. Workers in the city spent twice as much as the average American for recreation, the Bureau of Municipal Research claimed, "because of the limited opportunities afforded by Akron for free or inexpensive recreation, such as parks, playgrounds, and free band concerts."⁵⁰

The West Virginia migrants' urban destinations did not always compare favorably with their coal-camp homes, but there were trade-offs both ways, compelling reasons to move and nearly equally compelling reasons to return. "In a city you can get some money," recalled one of the new rubber workers, and "back there we got no money." The possibilities for making a living and the lack of opportunity in the mines were the deciding factors in his family's case. "I love the mountains," he said, "but look what goes with the mountains."⁵¹ To make the choice to stay more agreeable, migrants developed other ways to escape the urban-industrial environment. By the post-World War II era, for example, more and more industrial laborers were taking to the woods and streams with gun and rod in hand, filling the ranks of a burgeoning community of working-class sportsmen. They found places

for hunting and fishing within driving distance of Akron, Toledo, Detroit, and Chicago, and they began to join conservation organizations as well as form their own clubs to expand their options. Many of them also lived their old lives vicariously. This is the time, Chad Berry argues, when country music “began to include more songs of lonely migrants growing tired of urban life and lamenting Mom and Dad, and a lost way of life.”⁵²

Even in the mid-twentieth century, though, as the stream of migrants from southern West Virginia coal camps to northern factory towns became a flood, there were still people who decided to go back to the mountains. This was the story of Henry Garten, who left Terry for Toledo, Ohio, in 1953, to work on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. During that time he returned to his home state frequently, for long stretches, when the lakes froze and the younger workers were furloughed. In the end, he stayed in the north only three years. “It got to where I didn’t get that time off, to where I had enough seniority to hold on year round,” he explained, “so I had to make a decision.” All the mines had long “panel lists,” a line of laid-off ranked workers, but a friend of his acquired a small mine at White Oak and offered him a job. “I was waiting” Garten said, “for something like that.”⁵³

The irony is that men like Garten came back to a coal industry in flux, marked by corporate consolidations as well as organizational and technological changes that made mining still more destructive to the regional economy and local environment than it had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the 1950s and 1960s, large coal companies and energy conglomerates gobbled up small operations while operators in various parts of Appalachia introduced “contour” and “auger” methods of coal extraction. Rather than dig a tunnel down or into a mountain to get at a coal seam, they ripped the “overburden” from a hillside to expose a seam of coal relatively near the surface and used bulldozers and giant drill bits to loosen and break it up for removal. This “strip mining” significantly lowered labor costs because it required many fewer miners per ton of coal mined, which exacerbated the technological unemployment that plagued the region. It ruined area farmland and groundwater as well, sending acid “spoil” down mountainsides to cover fields, orchards, and sometimes homes, burying whole streams or polluting the waters to make them unfit for aquatic life, and destroying large chunks of wildlife habitat. With little or no regulation, and poor enforcement of the few restrictions that states did impose, strip operators were able to displace responsibility for these environmental consequences and the costs of reclamation onto the general public.⁵⁴

With the spread of strip mining across Appalachia, the mid-twentieth century saw the rise of protest, although the coal industry sometimes pitted mountain residents against one another. Many deep miners recognized what was happening and complained to coal operators, state legislators, and their own union leaders, arguing for the need to protect jobs as well as the environment. In southern West Virginia, these concerns were important in building an insurgency to end years of mismanagement and corruption in the UMW, and it was no coincidence that Miners for Democracy won control of the union by electing Boone County deep miner and strip-mining opponent Arnold Miller as president in 1972. Yet even Miller was forced to temper his demands for abolition of surface mining by the growing membership employed at strip operations, most of whom adopted the same rationalizations for their work as the operators.

Wayne Keith, for example, defended surface coal mining as good for miners, the local economy, and even the land. He had left Wise County, Virginia, to work in a Sandusky, Ohio, foundry in the late 1960s, but returned to a job at a surface mine. "It gives people work," he said, "and the land that we strip is in 50 percent and a lot of times 100 percent better condition than it was when we came in there." On one job, he explained, they paid a man to mine a part of his property that "wasn't worth a plug nickel," leveled it off flat and sowed grass all over, "and now he's got a pasture out there." Other operations had created flatland for a college and an airport, which Keith believed was better land use. He also posed the classic "jobs versus environment" dilemma, wondering what mountain residents were supposed to do for work if strip mining was disallowed. "If you're going to say that you've got to quit strip mining because you're tearing up the land what's people going to do?" he asked rhetorically.⁵⁵

By the mid-twentieth century, then, for those who stayed in the strip coalfields of Appalachia, or for those who left but returned when the cities did not suit them, life was something different from the values, concerns, and experience of nineteenth-century subsistence-minded mountain farmers. To most strip miners, at least, the earth was there to be scraped away and dumped in a "valley fill," while work was wage labor, under someone else's control, merely "a job" which left no room for stewardship of the woods, fields, orchards, streams, and other parts of the landscape. This transformation in attitude and experience did not come suddenly, and it was always somewhat incomplete in the rural industrial context, but the struggle to make a living had entailed a changed relationship with the natural world, both in thinking and in practice.

Notes

1. Common peoples' changing relationship with nature, which was fundamentally about changes in their work, is only just now getting some attention from historians. See Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-85; Richard Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Scott Dewey, "Working for the Environment: Organized Labor and the Origins of Environmentalism in the United States, 1948-1970," *Environmental History* 3 (Jan. 1998): 45-63; Robert Gordon, "Shell No!: OCAW and the Labor-Environmental Alliance," *Environmental History* 3 (Oct. 1998): 460-87; Chad Montrie, "Expedient Environmentalism: Opposition to Coal Surface Mining in Appalachia and the United Mine Workers of America, 1945-1977," *Environmental History* 5 (Jan. 2000): 75-98, and *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Benjamin Heber Johnson, "Conservation, Subsistence, and Class at the Birth of Superior National Forest," *Environmental History* 4 (Jan. 1999): 80-99; and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
2. David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 38.
3. Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 16-18.
4. *Ibid.*, 19; Donald Edward Davis, *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 126.
5. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 19.
6. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 2; John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 112; Jerry Bruce Thomas, "Coal Country: The Rise of the Southern Smokeless Coal Industry" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1971), 30-31.
7. Phil Conley, *History of the Coal Industry of West Virginia* (Charleston, WV:

- Education Foundation, 1960), 209-10, 250; J. T. Peters and H. B. Carden, *History of Fayette County* (Fayetteville, WV: Fayette County Historical Society, 1926), 298.
8. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 5.
 9. Ronald Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 46; Williams, *West Virginia: A Bicentennial History*, 112.
 10. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 4.
 11. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 166-67.
 12. Crandall A. Shifflet, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 7-8.
 13. Keith Dix, *What's a Coal Miner to Do?: The Mechanization of Coal Mining* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 5-7, 13.
 14. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 38.
 15. Herbert Garten, interview by Paul Nyden, Sept. 6, 1980, Written Transcript, C290, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV (hereafter cited as WVRHC).
 16. Nettie McGill, *Welfare of Children in the Bituminous Coal Communities in West Virginia* (Washington, DC: Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 1923), 53; Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 33; Ada Wilson Jackson, interview by Paul Nyden, Dec. 13, 1980, Written Transcript, C312, WVRHC; Lula Lall Jones, interview by Paul Nyden, Dec. 13, 1980, Written Transcript, C313, WVRHC.
 17. *Coal Age* 2, no. 6 (1912): 201.
 18. *Coal Age* 3, no. 15 (1913): 580; *Coal Age* 12, no. 20 (1917): 856.
 19. Robert Forren, interview by Paul Nyden, Sept. 24 and 25, 1980, Written Transcript, C294, WVRHC.
 20. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 33.
 21. Robert Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust: The Memories of an African American Coal Miner* (University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 23.
 22. *Ibid.*, 24; Forren, interview; Jackson, interview.
 23. Jackson, interview; Armstead, *Black Days, Black Dust*, 24; Annie Kelly, interview by Paul Nyden, Oct. 23, 1980, Written Transcript, C301, WVRHC; E. H. Phipps, interview by Paul Nyden, Oct. 16, 1980, Written Transcript, C299, WVRHC.
 24. "Numerically and proportionally (94 percent), more miners in West Virginia

- lived in company towns than did miners in any other state. Since the percentage figure includes northern West Virginia, where many miners lived in commercial towns, the proportion for southern West Virginia was probably about 98 percent.” Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 8.
25. Phipps, interview.
 26. Ernest Carrico, interview by Ray Ringley, Dec. 6, 1973, Tapes 62 and 63, Transcript No. 79, Appalachian Oral History Project, Emory and Henry College Oral History Collection (hereafter cited as OHP-EH); Jackson, interview; Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 34.
 27. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 34.
 28. McGill was actually talking about the few mining families who were able and allowed to live on the outskirts of coal camps, but the sentiment applies to camp residents as well. When combined with the fact that mountain residents overwhelmingly preferred farming to other ways of making a living (even in the late 1920s, according to her report, some miners still left in the summer to work homestead land), it's clear that people were getting various forms of satisfaction from agricultural labor. McGill, *Welfare of Children*, 76.
 29. Thomas, “Coal Country,” 304.
 30. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 138.
 31. McGill, *Welfare of Children*, 10, 15; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 185-86.
 32. Dix, *What's a Coal Miner to Do?*, 6-7; Conley, *History of the Coal Industry of West Virginia*, 36-37.
 33. Dix, *What's a Coal Miner to Do?*, 77-79.
 34. Conley, *History of the Coal Industry of West Virginia*, 37.
 35. Dix, *What's a Coal Miner to Do?*, 82-83.
 36. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 49-50.
 37. *Ibid.*, 50, 32-33, 116-17.
 38. Testimony of Percy Tetlow, acting president of District No. 17, United Mine Workers of America, before the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Conditions in the Coal Fields of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio, 70th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1928), 1445-46.
 39. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 157-58.
 40. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 34-35.
 41. J. T. Peters and H. B. Carden, *History of Fayette County*, 303.
 42. Ellis Bailey, interview by Bill Taft, 1974, Written Transcript, C163, WVRHC.

43. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 238-39.
44. Garten, interview; Carrico, interview; James Harlan Edwards, interview by Ray Ringley, Oct. 1, 1973, Tapes 180 and 181, Transcript No. 77, 8, OHP-EH.
45. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 238-39.
46. Phillip J. Obermiller, Thomas E. Wagner, and E. Bruce Tucker, eds., *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), xi-xii.
47. Carl E. Feather, *Mountain People in a Flat Land* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 3.
48. Susan Johnson, "West Virginia Rubber Workers in Akron," in *Transnational West Virginia: Ethnic Communities and Economic Change, 1840-1940*, edited by Ken Fones-Wolf and Ronald Lewis (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2002), 299, 305-11; Obermiller et al., *Appalachian Odyssey*, xi-xii.
49. Quoting H. A. Haring, "Three Classes of Labor to Avoid" from *Factory and Industrial Management* (1921), in Johnson, "West Virginia Rubber Workers in Akron," 304.
50. Quoted in Daniel Nelson, *American Rubber Workers & Organized Labor, 1900-1941* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 73.
51. Quoted in Johnson, "West Virginia Rubber Workers in Akron," 299.
52. Chad Berry, "Southern White Migration to the Midwest, an Overview," in *Appalachian Odyssey*, edited by Obermiller et al., 14.
53. Garten, interview.
54. See Montrie, *To Save the Land and People*.
55. Wayne Keith was a son-in-law to Robert Hamm and was present when Hamm was interviewed, interjecting at times with his own views about coal mining in southwestern Virginia. Robert W. Hamm, interview by Ray Ringley, Sept. 30, 1973, Tapes 186 A & B, Transcript No. 81, 7, OHP-EH.