

# Sources for Social History

## A Case Study of a Local Community

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IN APRIL 1980, the United States Department of the Interior funded a historical and archaeological study of Buxton, Iowa. The grant allowed for an in-depth historical study of Buxton, a former coal mining community, which proved to have considerable significance for Iowa history. The project allowed for a study of groups that deviated from Iowa's traditional agricultural population with its northern and western European background. In particular, the study provided for a better understanding of Iowa's black population, which up to that point had received limited historical attention. The study provided, moreover, for the research of social history topics, including family, women, ethnic groups, immigrants, labor, and community. Up to now, these topics have received limited attention by Iowa historians, but they are areas vital to a fuller understanding of the state's nonagricultural, industrial, pluralistic populations.<sup>1</sup>

Before the Buxton project was undertaken, only a general understanding of the community existed. Previous scholars had estimated Buxton's population, determined that a high degree of racial harmony existed there, and had partially evaluated the

1. Project personnel, all from Iowa State University, included the authors, Dorothy Schwieder, department of history, and Elmer Schwieder, department of family environment, and also Joseph Hraba, David Gradwohl, and Nancy Osborn, all from the department of sociology and anthropology. Professor Hraba is a sociologist and Professor Gradwohl is an archeologist. At the time of the project, Ms. Osborn was a research associate in anthropology. Dorothy Schwieder served as project administrator. The authors wish to thank the Bureau of Historic Preservation of the State Historical Society for administration of the grant and also former director of the Iowa State Historical Department, Adrian Anderson, for his enthusiastic assistance and support of the project. We also acknowledge the funding from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, which underwrote the main cost of the study.

role of the parent company, the Consolidation Coal Company. But even with this knowledge, Buxton still remained a shadowy image. Certainly it existed in the minds of former residents and their descendents, but the public image, resting mostly on what had been published in several short historical pieces, remained vague. And many misconceptions existed within that public view. With the historical data gathered between 1980 and 1982 using oral interviews, census data, newspaper surveys, photographs, and government documents, a far sharper image has emerged; the broad outlines have given way to a far more detailed understanding of the community, both physically and socially.

To explore questions relevant to the new social history, the Buxton study employed sources often overlooked by traditional historians, particularly oral history and census data. In fact, in an effort to get at the less visible happenings in Buxton—the day-to-day activities of women and children, possible hidden discrimination against blacks, and interaction between blacks and other ethnic groups—nontraditional methods were essential. The combination of these different sources has added to their individual value, thus enhancing the total understanding of this once flourishing, long-remembered coal mining community. This approach provides the opportunity, then, to present a case study of the methodologies and types of data used, the advantages and shortcomings of each, and, of considerable importance, the manner in which the different types of data enhanced the value of other data to provide for a more complete recreation of Buxton society.

IN 1900 the coal mining community of Buxton came into existence, located in Bluff Creek Township in Monroe County. During the next two decades of the twentieth century the coal mining industry developed rapidly there as well as in the nearby counties of Appanoose, Mahaska, and Marion. As a result, Buxton was surrounded by smaller coal mining camps. Like most coal communities, Buxton was company owned and controlled. The Consolidation Coal Company, a subsidiary of the Chicago & North Western Railroad, established Buxton and carried out the daily supervision of both the coal mining operation and the community's general activities. While Iowa had many

coal camps in the early 1900s, most included about one hundred to three hundred inhabitants. By contrast, Buxton at one time had almost five thousand residents. Buxton also differed from other Iowa camps because it contained a high black population. In its early years Buxton had a majority of black inhabitants. Most black males worked as miners, but a small number occupied professional positions. Buxton contained several black medical doctors, two black dentists, several black teachers (including a principal of schools), and several black ministers. Black men and women owned and operated many of the community's business establishments.<sup>2</sup> Buxton also contained a wide variety of ethnic groups other than blacks. Swedes constituted the largest white ethnic group, while the town also included Slovaks, Italians, English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish. Many social and economic institutions were racially and ethnically integrated, but some, such as the churches, were segregated. Whites as well as blacks had their own fraternal lodges.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout its twenty-three-year life span, Buxton provided coal for the Chicago & North Western Railroad, but by the early 1920s, coal fields around the community had been nearly depleted. Company officials then looked westward for new coal deposits. In 1923 Consolidation moved its headquarters to Haydock and Bucknell (both still in Monroe County), which then housed most of the company's workers. In 1925 Consolidation's mines were sold to the Superior Coal Company, which continued to produce coal for the Chicago & North Western Railroad. Superior remained active in Iowa until 1927 when a national strike closed down their operation. The company then moved all management personnel to Illinois and permanently closed its Iowa holdings.<sup>4</sup>

2. *Iowa State Census, 1905 and 1915, Manuscript Population Schedules for Bluff Creek Township, Monroe County.* See Dorothy Schwieder, *Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa's Coal Mining Communities, 1895-1925* (Ames, 1983), chapters 3, 4, and 5, for a discussion of coal camps in Iowa.

3. *Iowa State Census, 1905 and 1915.*

4. Consolidation Coal Company Minutes, Volume 2, Stockholders special meeting, 23 November 1925, Chicago & North Western Railroad Headquarters, Chicago, Illinois; and *Biennial Report of the State Mine Inspectors, 1928* (Des Moines, 1928), 3. Interviews with numerous former Buxton residents also indicated that the company had closed down its operation in 1927. At the same time, not a single interviewee mentioned the sale of the mines to

THE BUXTON PROJECT provided us with innumerable historical areas to investigate. Of major importance, the project offered the opportunity to research areas associated with social history. During the past ten years important changes have taken place in research methodology and research materials used by some American historians. Many of these changes have been accompanied, if not mandated, by the emphasis on what historians call "the new social history." As American historians began to study areas of family, women, ethnic groups, community, and immigration, they realized that traditional sources such as newspapers, private memoirs, presidential papers, and the *Congressional Record* were not sufficient for exploring social topics. Traditional sources provide information on public policies and public figures; in addition, public figures often leave legacies of correspondence and memoirs. In many areas of social history, however, the subjects were not in positions to record their experiences. For example, in the field of immigration, historians have been traditionally concerned with government immigration policies and the dynamics behind these policies. Often they have emphasized the impact of immigrants' labor on American industrial development. Historians have also traditionally studied the nexus between immigrant groups and the American political process. For American historians interested in social history, however, the concern was to get at the private side of the immigrant experience. What particular experiences did immigrants have in America? How did these experiences differ among immigrant groups? How did immigrants perceive these experiences? In many ways, social historians are concerned with history from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.<sup>5</sup>

The historical materials that we used in the project were varied. The three major types of data were oral interviews with former Buxton residents, state and federal census data, and Buxton material found in the Iowa State *Bystander*, a newspaper

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Superior Coal Company in 1925. We believe that although the company's name changed, the management personnel remained the same and the total property remained a subsidiary of the Chicago & North Western Railroad.

5. See James Gardner and George Adams, eds., *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History* (Nashville, 1983), for an excellent discussion of the new social history as it applies to ethnicity, race, women, agricultural and rural life, family, labor, and urban history.

published by black Iowans for the state's black population. Each of these three major sources provided specific data that could not be obtained elsewhere. But at the same time, the evidence found in each source supplemented that found elsewhere to provide for a more complete understanding of the community. Public records, including state mine inspectors' reports (published annually or biennially since 1881), city directories, and state atlases, were also helpful. In a project such as the Buxton study, business records should have been important in determining company policies and procedures. Unfortunately, we were able to locate only a few business records for the Consolidation Coal Company. Interview information, newspaper accounts, and archival data helped to fill the void.

All types of data were used in two general ways: the first and major way was to gain further specific information on various aspects of community history, with each separate type of evidence contributing to a fuller and more complete knowledge of the subject studied; at the same time, however, the different types of data were used for verification, which is particularly important when working with oral histories. We recognized that informants were being asked to remember events that had taken place over sixty years before. Although the ability to recall past events accurately varies from individual to individual, people tend to remember the more pleasant aspects of their lives and block out the unpleasant. We recognized, therefore, that while the oral histories could be valuable in supplying information on all aspects of community life, we also needed to verify that information whenever possible. The most significant verification came through the oral histories themselves. When we heard informant after informant relate the same details about various conditions in Buxton, whether related to work, to company policies, or to social activities, we realized that this information was sound. Repeatedly, for example, informants, both black and white, praised the Consolidation Coal Company for their progressive, fair practices, which promoted racial harmony and eliminated racial segregation. Comments about wages and types of work could be verified through census data. A surprising number of times information could be verified through photographs. The *Bystander* provided yet another source for verification of much interview data.

THE GREATEST AMOUNT of information on Buxton was gathered through oral histories. We interviewed seventy-five individuals; approximately half were black informants. Oral history has evolved into a widely used, well-accepted historical methodology; interested persons can find innumerable books, articles, and even journals covering all aspects of the subject.<sup>6</sup> Even with helpful sources, however, oral history is a highly personalized form of research. Although studies give basic information about technical aspects such as tape recorders and basic procedures such as interviewing, each project calls for its own individual approach. The first step, after becoming familiar with the topic, is to prepare an interview guide. This is a time-consuming process, but will ensure that all areas of inquiry are covered. The Buxton interview guide asked the following questions of each informant: occupation, religion, education, ethnic background, ethnic activities, place of birth, place of parents' birth, and number of siblings. Informants were also asked questions of a less personal nature, including their remembrances about housing in Buxton, general educational facilities, medical practices, leisure activities, household procedures, labor disruptions, law and order procedures, and their general perception and evaluation of Buxton. Informants were also asked about their parents' occupations and general life style as well as their own early life experiences. The last part of the interview guide contained questions about the informant's life after leaving Buxton.

We had originally hoped to interview far more than seventy-five people and to be able to select both a social and economic cross section of Buxton residents. We quickly discovered, however, that the number of people who had lived in Buxton and who had good memories of that experience was limited. We also discovered that some of this group remembered little: some had moved from Buxton when they were five or six years old; some former residents were quite elderly and their recall was limited; a few former residents had lived in Buxton for only a few months. We were also limited in travel funds, which meant we

6. For a recent discussion of oral history, see David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Nashville, 1985). For an older, but informative, listing of oral history articles see Michael Gibson, "A Selective Bibliography of Oral History," *Annals of Iowa* 44 (Spring 1979): 654-57.

could not travel to Milwaukee, Los Angeles, or Detroit, where many former residents now live. Because of these conditions—and the fact that Buxton ceased to exist over sixty years ago—we believe that we were quite fortunate to interview seventy-five former residents, most of whom had excellent recall and who cooperated enthusiastically with the project.

The information obtained from the seventy-five interviews was voluminous, with some interviews running more than twenty pages of typed transcription. Of primary importance were the informants' remembrances of Buxton itself. While informants' recall did not always allow for specific descriptions of business and social institutions, their remembrances did provide the type of information not obtainable in public records. Informants were able to give their personal views, including attitudes toward the town, the company, and company policies; their recall of possible discriminatory actions against blacks or other ethnic groups; and their motivations for coming to Buxton and their motivations for leaving the community.

Interviews disclosed that almost without exception, black former residents regarded the community as nearly perfect. They had high regard for Ben Buxton, the general superintendent of Consolidation Coal Company (1896 to 1909) and founder of Buxton. They believed that the company had treated them fairly in regard to jobs, wages, housing, and within the community generally. Many black informants expressed deep regret that Buxton no longer existed.

On the other hand, white former residents often did not remember Buxton in the same euphoric terms as blacks, although they did remember Buxton as a good place to live. Many enjoyed their residency there because of good housing, excellent shopping facilities, and numerous social opportunities. Whites reinforced the testimony of blacks that Buxton was mostly without racial prejudice and discrimination.

The oral histories also provided specific details that were unavailable in most traditional sources. For example, studies of Iowa coal mining communities indicate that some women, particularly foreign-born and black women, preferred the services of midwives to those of male physicians.<sup>7</sup> Since neither federal

7. Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 107.

nor state census takers listed women's part-time work outside the home, it was not evident from the censuses whether women in Buxton worked as midwives. The oral histories, on the other hand, indicated that Buxton had both a black and a white midwife. Interviews also indicated that Lucy Mealy, the black midwife, tended to work with black women, while Mary Chambers, the white midwife, delivered mostly white babies.

Oral histories with black women provided ample material on black family life patterns that was not available through other sources and that black women themselves had not recorded. Many black women remembered the child-rearing practices followed by their parents. They specifically recalled that their parents were strict disciplinarians. Blacks insisted that their children obey their parents, as well as all other adults. One man recalled that if he misbehaved at the neighbors, not only did the neighbor woman punish him, but she told his mother, who punished him again once he got home. A black woman related that in Buxton there was something of a communal responsibility for all black children; as a child, she did not dare "sass" anyone in town, because any adult might assume the role of disciplinarian.

Interviews with blacks also allow for better understanding of social interaction between blacks and whites. Many blacks, both male and female, remembered playing regularly with white playmates, and some black informants recalled spending the night with white friends. All black informants stated that they had good relations with white residents, while a limited number remembered close personal friendships with whites.

Yet another feature of oral histories is that of providing life-long perspective on informants' lives. Census data provided a view of residents at one point in time; the interviews allowed for information dealing with peoples' entire life span. While we were particularly concerned with informants' remembrances of Buxton, the entire story could not be told without knowing something about the informants (or their parents) before they came to Buxton. Also, we needed to know something about the informants' lives after they left Buxton. If the blacks' view of Buxton as a near utopia was to be understood fully, then we needed to know what they had experienced both before and after Buxton. The oral histories were the only source that pro-

vided those longitudinal data. Most blacks had previously lived in the South where they had little money or property. Many stated that their parents or grandparents, often ex-slaves, had worked in agriculture, presumably as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. With this information it was clear that Buxton presented black people with far better employment opportunities and better housing than they had known before. Perhaps most important, Buxton provided them with an environment that was nearly devoid of racial discrimination.

Interviews indicated that a sharp contrast also existed between informants' lives in Buxton and in communities where they later settled. Many blacks stated that they had not experienced racial discrimination until they left Buxton. For many, "hard times" described the later period as well. Perhaps Vaeletta London Fields's experience best typifies this situation. Fields's parents, Minnie and W. K. London, had been prominent Buxton citizens, frequently mentioned in the pages of the *Bystander* as well as in other newspaper accounts. Minnie London, in particular, held a prominent position in Buxton, being both a classroom teacher and later principal of the Buxton public schools. London insisted that her children, Hubert and Vaeletta, attend college; both graduated from the University of Iowa, where Hubert received a medical degree and Vaeletta earned a B.A. in English and botany. Vaeletta taught one year in Petersburg, Virginia, and then returned to Iowa to marry Milton Fields, a graduate of the University of Iowa Law School. The couple settled in Waterloo, where they believed that a substantial black population would ensure Fields a good law practice. Vaeletta Fields explained that her husband did have a large black clientele, but unfortunately, they had little money. Vaeletta soon realized that she would have to find employment outside the home to help support them. Although she had a college degree, she knew that she would not be hired as a teacher in the Waterloo public schools (which up to that point had only white teachers). She spent many years working as an elevator operator and a cleaning woman; in her later years she worked for the YWCA. For Vaeletta Fields, life in Waterloo was mostly devoid of the comfortable social status and economic well being that her family had known in Buxton. Perhaps another black former resident,

Marjorie Brown, stated it best: "Buxton was something else. You can imagine how we grieved for it."<sup>8</sup>

WHILE ORAL HISTORIES provided subjective data for the project, census records served as the best source of objective data. We used the Iowa state censuses of 1885, 1895, 1905, and 1915 and the federal censuses of 1900 and 1910. The Iowa state censuses of 1885 and 1895 and the federal census of 1900 provided information on Muchakinock, a Mahaska County coal camp that Consolidation had controlled before they developed Buxton. Since many of the Muchakinock residents moved to Buxton in 1900, we believed that the study should include some information on Muchy, as the community was commonly known. Census data included each resident's name, sex, race, date of birth, places of birth of both parents, years in the United States, years in Iowa, marital condition, citizenship status, and status as a renter or home owner (if the latter, value of home or farm). The Iowa state censuses also listed religion and, in 1915, income and months of unemployment. The federal censuses included an especially useful set of information on women by giving the total number of children born to them as well as the number of children living. Further, the federal censuses identified each person in relationship to his or her household role. In other words, husbands were identified as heads of household while nonrelatives might be identified as servants or boarders.

The use of census data allowed for significant revisions of earlier views of Buxton. Former residents had long estimated that the town included between six and nine thousand residents, and that blacks composed about 90 percent of that total. Former residents also indicated that Buxton remained a predominately black community throughout its entire existence. Although contemporary newspaper accounts indicated that Buxton's population began to drop around 1910, that point was rarely made in later published accounts of Buxton.<sup>9</sup> The Iowa state census of

8. Interview with Vaeletta Fields, Waterloo, Iowa, 7 and 16 July 1981; interview with Marjorie Brown, Waterloo, Iowa, 19 and 20 August 1980.

9. The following publications and articles either deal with Buxton exclusively or contain information about Buxton: Leola Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1969); Hubert Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa* (Des Moines, 1965); Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*; Robert Rutland, "The Mining Camps of Iowa," *Iowa*

1905 reported that Buxton contained 4,921 residents. By 1915 Buxton's population had declined slightly to 4,518. These figures show that Buxton was far smaller than many people remembered. After 1900 several small mining camps developed around Buxton, including Fraker, White City, Lockman, and Maple. Conceivably, estimates may have been based on both Buxton and surrounding coal camps. Nevertheless, the estimate of nine thousand put Buxton's population far over its actual number.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, census figures brought a revision in the number of blacks there. In 1905 Buxton contained 2,700 blacks and 1,991 whites, with blacks accounting for 54.8 percent of the total population. But by 1910 the federal census reported that Buxton blacks were 42 percent of the total population. By 1915 the number of blacks had dropped even further to 40.4 percent of the total population. While 40 percent of any population is sizeable, clearly the community was no longer predominately black.<sup>11</sup>

Old assumptions apparently lingered, however. In 1910 Buxton was still viewed as a "black man's town." In that year Stanley Miller, editor of the Mt. Pleasant *Free Press*, visited Buxton with a contingent of state newspaper editors. Following the visit, Miller wrote a long account of his trip, claiming that "Buxton is absolutely the colored man's town." Nearby residents also retained the view that Buxton was inhabited primarily by blacks. Area newspapers expressed the same view in articles on the community. Accounts like Miller's and population estimates in area newspapers help explain why people continued to think of Buxton as mostly black.<sup>12</sup>

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*Journal of History* 54 (January 1956); Stephen Rye, "Buxton: Black Metropolis of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 41 (Spring 1972); Dorothy Schwieder and Richard Kraemer, *Iowa's Coal Mining Heritage* (Des Moines, 1973); Beverly Shiffer, "The Story of Buxton," *Annals of Iowa* 37 (Summer 1964); Jacob Swisher, "Mining in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History* 43 (October 1945); and "Rise and Fall of Buxton," *Palimpsest* 26 (June 1945).

10. *Iowa State Census*, 1905 and 1915.

11. *Ibid.*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of United States, 1910*, Manuscript Population Schedules for Bluff Creek Township, Monroe County, Iowa. The information from the 1910 federal census was collected after the grant was terminated. The number of blacks (2,700) and whites (1,991) does not add up to 4,921 because the race was not given for all residents.

12. Stanley Miller, "As Others See Buxton," Mt. Pleasant *Free Press*, December 1910.

Census data also provided information on residential patterns of blacks and whites. In some Iowa coal camps blacks had one small section of the camp assigned to them, which in effect, produced racially segregated housing. To determine if that was the case in Buxton, and to verify oral history data that indicated that housing was not segregated, we again consulted the census data. In looking at instructions for census takers, we assumed that these individuals moved through towns in an orderly fashion. In other words, enumerators started at one end of a street and walked the length of that street rather than zigzagging back and forth across the street or skipping from one street to another. If the assumption about the orderly movement of census enumerators is correct, the census data indicate that there were several residential patterns in Buxton. In dozens of instances black and white families lived side by side. In many cases, clusters of black and clusters of white households formed a checkerboard effect. Blacks formed a major segment of the population in several sections of town. The same pattern appeared among Slovaks and Swedes. In fact, the Swedes congregated in two separate areas known as East Swede Town and West Swede Town. Overall, however, the residential pattern was sufficiently varied to support the oral history information that housing in Buxton was not racially segregated.

Although census data proved to be invaluable in providing objective aggregate data and basic demographic data, they also have some drawbacks when used for historical studies. For example, census data presented difficulties when used to determine women's wages. Unfortunately, census takers did not typically list the income of women who worked out of their homes or who took in boarders. As both Joan Jensen and Glenda Riley have pointed out, census takers were often instructed not to record women who took in boarders as "gainfully employed." As a result, we know that the census income figures do not include the money earned by Buxton women who did take in boarders. Interviews revealed that women from all ethnic groups followed this practice. In some cases women had three or four boarders at the same time. Studies of other Iowa coal mining communities show that in at least a few cases, women made as much or more from their boarding activities than did their husbands working as miners. Interviews also revealed that women sold garden pro-

duce, dairy products, chickens, and eggs, which was not listed as work or wages.<sup>13</sup>

The 1905 state census also presented problems. Because Buxton was founded in 1900 (but too late to be included in the federal census of 1900) and because oral history data and newspaper accounts indicated that the black population was largest in the early years of the community, 1905 was the only census that could validate these claims. Unfortunately, a part of the 1905 census had been destroyed by flooding. Moreover, in 1905 Iowa census officials changed the method of recording data by going to individual cards for each resident. Although the cards contained personal information such as occupation and birthplace, there was nothing linking residents to a particular household. The card method made it extremely difficult to reconstruct households in Buxton in 1905. However, the census aggregate data did provide the total number of residents in 1905 as well as the racial composition of the community.<sup>14</sup>

THE THIRD MOST SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL SOURCE for the Buxton study was the Iowa State *Bystander*. Beginning publication in the early 1890s, the *Bystander* provided excellent coverage of Buxton's general development and of the town's black residents throughout the community's entire existence. Between 1900 and 1910, the paper included several "Buxton Souvenir Editions," which included detailed descriptions of Buxton's layout, public buildings, and businesses. From time to time the *Bystander* carried lengthy stories on prominent Buxton blacks. The longtime *Bystander* editor, J. L. Thompson, made an annual trek around Iowa, visiting Iowa communities with black populations. His annual trip to Buxton, as a part of his general tour, provided for yearly observations, noting changes that had taken place over the previous year.

13. Joan Jensen, "Cloth, Butter and Boarders: Women's Household Production for the Market," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12 (Summer 1980), 15; Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames, 1981), chapter 3. Also see Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, chapters 3 and 4, for a discussion of boarding practices in Iowa's coal mining camps.

14. The manuscript portion of the 1910 federal census (which contained specific information such as names, age, sex, race) did not become available until after the Buxton study had been completed.

One of the great values of the *Bystander* was that it provided detailed accounts of daily life in Buxton. Most issues contained a lengthy Buxton news column, including who was ill, who was traveling, who was moving into town, and who had been injured in the mines. The *Bystander* was literally a treasure-trove of information about blacks' social life in Buxton, revealing that blacks had more than forty social and fraternal organizations. The *Bystander* accounts indicate that these groups were active and provided residents with a full social schedule. At the same time, the newspaper reported on violence, such as stabbings, knifings, and street brawls. The newspaper also provided insight into the reasons for a population decline in 1914 by reporting several fires in the community and the fact that by that date Consolidation had established the coal camp of Consol, located several miles west of Buxton.

At least four newspapers were published in Buxton, including the *Buxton Advocate*, *Buxton Breeze*, *Buxton Eagle*, and *Buxton Gazette*. It is not known when the newspapers were published or for how long. Unfortunately, only a few copies of the *Buxton Gazette* could be located. Other copies of these newspapers undoubtedly exist, tucked away in some former resident's attic, and we hope they will aid some future researcher. We did locate a single clipping taken from a 1905 edition of the *Buxton Eagle*. The clipping was an editorial highly critical of several of Consolidation's policies, including bringing in uneducated blacks from the South and refusing to allow the community to be incorporated. In effect, the editorial accused Consolidation of shutting Buxton's residents off from the outside world and literally holding them hostage.<sup>15</sup> Newspaper editors residing in Buxton would no doubt have had a better understanding of company policies and community attitudes toward those policies than outside editors such as J. L. Thompson.

Photographs also constituted an important historical resource. Altogether, we collected over 250 pictures of public buildings, private businesses, and houses. The photo collection also includes at least ten photographs of the town, taken at some

15. This clipping is in a scrapbook in the possession of Donald Gaines, rural Albia, Iowa.

distance, which provide a general perspective of Buxton's layout and appearance. Also collected were around forty formal portraits of Buxton's residents.

TAKEN TOGETHER, the oral histories, census data, *Bystander* accounts, photographs, and other records made it possible to recreate the community physically, numerically, socially, and occupationally. While any recreation is just that—a recreation—the major historical sources have provided an understanding of the community's social life, business activities, and racial interaction. At the same time, historical materials have allowed us to understand family life, including household size, number of children, and total family income. It has also been possible to put together biographical accounts of both professional and working-class residents as well as to gain an aggregate knowledge of various groups there.

While each separate historical source served a distinct function, the interface produced by simultaneous use of all materials should also be noted. In many instances, information from one source could be used to validate or further explain information from other sources. All together, the different historical materials filled in the broad strokes that provided the general characteristics and overview of the town as well as providing the specific details that allowed for greater description and interpretation. An understanding of religious life in Buxton is an example of this process. Interviews indicated that Buxton's black and white residents worshiped in segregated churches. Those statements were supported by *Bystander* accounts, which over the years identified at least eight black churches. The two largest were St. John's African Methodist Episcopal Church and Mt. Zion Baptist Church. *Bystander* articles and oral history interviews indicated that the churches, particularly the black churches, served as major centers of social life for many Buxton residents. Census data provided names of ministers, which when coupled with *Bystander* material made it possible to associate ministers with specific churches.

A major question relating to organized religion in Buxton had to do with the role of the Consolidation Coal Company. Coal mining companies in states east of Iowa took an active role in church life, often building the church (frequently only one),

hiring the minister, and, in effect, using the minister as a mouthpiece for company policies.<sup>16</sup> This was not the case in Buxton. While it is not known if Consolidation contributed to the support of local churches, or contributed to their construction, the company clearly did not hire the ministers. Interviews with several former Buxton residents indicate that the district superintendent of the white Methodist church assigned ministers to Buxton (and later to Haydock), a practice followed in Methodist churches nationwide. The congregation provided housing for their ministers and their families by renting company houses. According to *Bystander* accounts, Buxton's black congregations also selected their own ministers, apparently without company involvement.

The blending of interview and census data proved to be especially helpful in reconstructing occupations and determining wages. The Iowa state census of 1915 included the categories of income for 1914 and months unemployed in that year for persons listing occupations. Both categories were particularly helpful for coal mining populations. In Iowa many miners did not work twelve months each year. Rather, many local (non-shipping or non-railroad) mines shut down in the spring and did not reopen until October. This was done because while most Iowans purchased coal for heating homes and businesses in cold weather, Iowa contained few industrial operations that required coal all year. It was presumed, however, that Consolidation's mines did not shut down during the summer because they were shipping mines: they sold their coal directly to a railroad which needed coal year around. The Buxton census data show that although Buxton miners were not out of work as long as most other Iowa coal miners—usually about three or four months—many were unemployed for one or two months. In regard to wages, census data show that Buxton miners, on the average, made about fifty dollars more each year than other miners in the state.

The availability of several types of data was crucial in determining total income. If only the head of household's income was used, the average income of Buxton's coal mining families was

16. See David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana, 1981), 68-70.

\$480 to \$499 per year. We knew from both interviews and census data, however, that unmarried offspring typically remained in the parental home until marriage, often remaining there well into their twenties. Offspring who did not marry often remained in the parental home until their parents' deaths. Among black families it was common for sons to turn their wages over to their parents (their fathers collected their wages from the company paymaster) until the young men reached their twenty-first birthday. Some black households had three or even four sons under age twenty-one, all working as miners, clerks, or teamsters. Many households also had daughters working outside the home, usually as teachers or store clerks. When all wages in these households, including father, sons, and daughters, were added up, the income could reach as high as \$3,000. It is instructive to note that \$3,000 was the annual income listed for one of Buxton's physicians.<sup>17</sup>

Census and interview data also provided for more detailed knowledge of the incomes of Buxton families. According to the 1915 Iowa state census, the Charles Erickson family had four wage earners. These included the father, Charles, at \$500; a son, Alex, at \$300; a daughter, Agnes, at \$600; and a daughter, Dena, at \$360. In 1915 none of the Erickson offspring was married. Alex and Charles were both coal miners, while Agnes and Dena were listed as clerks. The income of Alex and Charles was the same as many other miners in Buxton. The income of the oldest daughter, Agnes, however, raised some questions: Why did she make double what her sister, Dena, made when both were listed as clerks? In 1980 we interviewed Agnes and Alex Erickson as part of the oral history project. Agnes related that she had started working as a clerk in the company store, but company officials soon transferred her to the pay office, where she worked as a bookkeeper. Dena, meanwhile, continued to work as a clerk in the company store. The change in jobs explained why Agnes earned twice as much as her sister. It is also noteworthy that Agnes, a female, earned twice as much as her brother. Census data indicate that it was highly unusual for women to earn more than men. In fact, the average income of all employed males in Buxton in 1915 was roughly twice that of women. In total, the

17. *Iowa State Census, 1915.*

Erickson family made \$1,760 in 1914. This combined income made it possible for the family to have a far more comfortable life style than if the father's income had been the only source of livelihood. These data also cast doubt on any study of household income where only the head of household's income is included.<sup>18</sup>

While information created by use of several types of historical data could be used in direct ways to verify church activities or to determine total income for mining families, there are also indirect ways in which the information can provide documentation. One claim made repeatedly by oral history informants was that racial discrimination did not exist in Buxton. Even though most informants reiterated that point, the fact remained that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, blacks throughout the nation faced difficulty in finding jobs and housing, and often experienced even intimidation and physical violence, so we were naturally skeptical of statements disclaiming any racial discrimination in Buxton.

Although informants' statements about racial harmony could not be directly verified, except by other informants' views, the 1915 Iowa state census did offer two categories of data— income and months unemployed—that might indicate if the company was practicing subtle forms of discrimination against black employees. By looking at wages paid to blacks and whites, we could determine if white miners were making more than black miners. Even though the census data showed that black and white miners made comparable wages, there were still questions about the validity of the data. The major problem was that blacks were employed overwhelmingly as miners or diggers, rather than as company men. Company men were hired for specific jobs such as trackmen, electricians, or mule drivers and were paid a specific daily wage. Coal miners, on the other hand, were paid for the tonnage that they loaded out, resulting in some variation in miners' wages. One miner might find himself in a room where the coal seam was relatively free of rock and dirt while another miner might find himself in a room where the coal seam contained sulphur and rock. The first miner was going to load out more coal and receive a higher wage, while the second

18. *Ibid.*

miner, through no fault of his own, would load out less coal and receive a lower wage. For example, some miners, like Alex Erickson, made \$300 in 1914, while at least a few miners listed an income of \$1,200 for the same period. Because of the variation in rooms and personal working habits, it was difficult to use wages only as a method of verification. On the other hand, the 1915 census also included the category of months unemployed, which might serve as an indirect check on company's policies towards blacks. Conceivably, the company could have exercised more subtle discrimination against blacks by giving them longer seasonal layoffs than whites and by not assigning new rooms to them as quickly as they might to white workers. Assigning new rooms took place when miners had "mined out" their old rooms, or had taken out all of the coal in that vicinity. Sometimes miners waited two or three months before being assigned to a new room. During that time they did not work and were not making any money. Even in this category, however, there was no meaningful variation in the months unemployed between black and white miners. Even less direct checks did not reveal that Consolidation Coal Company differentiated between black and white employees.

Photographs were also used to verify or further explain other types of data. Photographs of company houses documented descriptions in the *Bystander* and in oral histories, both of which claimed that Buxton company houses were larger and better built than houses in most other Iowa coal mining communities. Photographs also verified that houses were not placed close together, but rather were spaced about one-half acre apart. And photographs documented the economic well being of many Buxton residents as reflected in expensive, fashionable clothing and in the ownership of automobiles in the first decade of the twentieth century. Photographs also support oral history testimony and *Bystander* accounts that Buxton's elementary schools were racially integrated; several photographs show elementary classes composed of both black and white children.

Photographs proved vital in documenting the housing of mine superintendents and in substantiating the view that there were widely separated social classes in Buxton. Ada Baysoar Morgan, daughter of mine superintendent E. M. Baysoar, was one of the oral history informants and provided us with two

photographs of the superintendent's house. Morgan vividly remembered the spaciousness of the house as well as its layout. Other informants, including the son of the superintendent's gardener, also provided detailed information about the house. The house was located about one-half mile northwest of the company store, which set it distinctly apart from the rest of the community. In addition to providing the physical description of her home in Buxton, Morgan also talked about the social activities of her family there. She did not shop in the company store a single time; she and her mother shopped in Albia or took the train into Chicago on a monthly basis. As a teenager Ada Baysoar Morgan played tennis at one of the company's tennis courts, but always with the wives or daughters of professional men or other management personnel. Morgan stated that at the time she lived in Buxton, she did not realize that Consolidation pursued liberal employment practices or that their policies provided for a racially integrated community. Both photographs and interviews provide information that the mine superintendent and his family as well as other management officials such as the paymaster and his family, moved in an exclusive social circle within Buxton and traveled to other communities for their shopping needs.<sup>19</sup>

In assessing the historical data gathered through the Buxton project, particularly in regard to verification and interfacing provided by a multitude of sources, the general outlines of the community have come into sharper focus. For example, rather than stating that Buxton had one long main street, we are able to locate individual businesses along First Street, the town's main business area. At the same time, company houses have taken shape, collectively and individually, with descriptions of both the interiors and exteriors. Families in Buxton have been placed within the context of their daily lives, and social institutions have been recreated. We now have physical descriptions of churches, gathered through oral histories and photographs as well as knowledge about religious and social activities. Even church personnel have been identified, including pastors, choir directors, and the young people who came to worship. The same historical data have allowed for a more solid understanding of the YMCAs, complete with a knowledge of the physical layout

19. Interview with Ida Morgan, Peru, Illinois, July 1981.

of the buildings as well as the programs sponsored by "Y" officials. Through the *Bystander* we know who the young black males listened to when they trooped, sometimes three hundred strong, into the YMCA auditorium on a cold, blustery Sunday afternoon. We also know from the *Bystander* that these same speakers often talked about the need for young blacks to work hard, to attend church regularly, and to lead what the speakers perceived to be moral, Christian lives. Through interviews, we can share some of the excitement of Buxtonians who attended the Buxton Wonders baseball games. And finally, we can sense the anguish of a wife and mother when notified that her husband had been killed in a mining accident. Through the historical sources an entire generation of people have reemerged, and we can know, at least partially, their hopes, joys, and aspirations. In short, to paraphrase the title of a recent book on American social history, we now know far more about Buxton's "ordinary people and their everyday lives."<sup>20</sup>

As with any historical project, however, research is never finished. Myriad opportunities still exist for historians and social scientists who wish to examine further the social and economic components of Buxton's society. But for the present, the Buxton project demonstrates that a work of this nature can be done only with the use of many different historical sources, and, in particular, sources that lend themselves to the new social history.

20. Gardner and Adams, eds., *Ordinary People and Everyday Lives*. The details of the everyday lives of Buxton's ordinary people are more fully elaborated in Dorothy Schwieder, Joseph Hrabá, and Elmer Schwieder, *Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community* (Ames, 1987).

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