

## THE MINING CAMPS OF IOWA: FADED SOURCES OF HAWKEYE HISTORY

*By Robert Rutland\**

Some day the story of the coal-mining industry in Iowa is going to be fully related, and it will make grand reading. Iowans are now reminded of the past grandeur of that industry within their state only when an excavating crew runs across a thin seam of coal, or when they pass by a crumbling relic that once represented jobs, fuel, and capital to thousands of men. But it was not always so, and in view of the rapid decline of coal mining to the status of a dying industry, it is difficult to realize that at one time there were optimistic predictions that coal would outrank corn as the state's chief source of income.

Iowa coal production was noted in the 1840 census at Davenport. Commercial production, which began in earnest following the Civil War, was centered in the Des Moines River Valley as far north as Boone. By the 1870's Iowa coal was attracting eastern capital and miners from Wales, England, Scotland, and from eastern coal-mining states. Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, Albia, and Des Moines were Midwestern supply points for the soft Iowa product which had a value of \$2,507,453 in 1880. The peak of production was reached in 1918, during World War I, when mine operators were even able to sell slag piles — according to one version — because of the desperate need for fuel.

After the war Iowa operators began curbing their output. It was cheaper to mine elsewhere, and the quality of Iowa coal caused buyers to prefer the Illinois product. The last spurts of activity were halted by the Great Depression, so that after 1935 the Iowa coal fields were no longer an important factor in the national fuel picture. Although Iowa coal reserve surveys

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are now jealously kept secret by the several railroads and individuals who own them, the inroads made by petroleum and natural gas have made further exploitation of the Iowa beds unprofitable. Barring unforeseen developments, it is safe to assume that another decade will see the virtual abandonment of even the slightest coal-mining activity in the state.

The facts and figures, and the dismal outlook, tell but a portion of the story. For over forty years, Iowa coal and the men who mined it were an important part of the social and economic fabric of the state. Two of the greatest labor leaders ever to stand before miners — John P. White and John L. Lewis — both got their initial organizing experience in Iowa. The prolonged coal strike at Des Moines in 1877 was one of the first large-scale outcries of the Midwestern laboring man against alleged injustices committed by owners and operators. The merger of two rival Iowa coal miners' unions in 1894 was a large milestone in Midwestern labor history. The once-famous District 13 of the United Mine Workers of America grew out of this merger, contributing richly in personnel and money to the national growth of the UMWA for over a generation. Iowa coal miners were among the first American laborers to enjoy the eight-hour work day when it was conceded by the owners in the 1890's.

There are other facets of the coal-mining story of equal importance. Iowa coal operators formed their own organization for bargaining purposes, hiring as their first executive secretary the former leader of the miners. Large fortunes were made in the Iowa fields, much of the money remaining within the state and used to build fine residences in Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, and Des Moines. The old Redhead mansion at Des Moines was such a showplace, built in part by the profits Wesley Redhead gained from his investments in Polk County mines.

Generally speaking, the Iowa miner was distrustful of his boss and the mine owners. During the "cash stringency" in the panic of 1907, when there was a contraction of currency, and paper money was hard to locate (even in Iowa banks), the owners asked the miners to take promissory notes for their weekly wages until the crisis passed. Union contracts called for cash payments as an antidote to the earlier "company script" that was passed in the company store and hence an anathema to the miners. Rather than give an inch, many Iowa miners walked out of the shafts and waited until the financial snarl was corrected. They preferred to hurt themselves rather than do the owners a favor.

No chapter of the Iowa coal-mining history has appeared more intriguing to this writer, however, than the Iowa coal camps. These towns mushroomed in growth, thrived lustily while the mines were in operation, and then disappeared within a few years after the mines closed. In some cases the towns managed to survive only as corner crossroad meeting places, and as such are still on the census rolls. Others vanished completely. Before their demise, however, the mining camps were the scene of much social history. Unless interested scholars undertake the preservation of that story now, a colorful and important phase of Iowa history is going to be lost forever.

Monroe County was in the center of the final activity in the coal fields, and it is there that the researcher into the Iowa coal-mining history must look for the remaining scraps of information. There, in the county seat at Albia, the District 13 headquarters building of the UMWA still stands. President and Secretary-Treasurer Frank D. Wilson remains as the sole union official in the one-story building which once represented a nerve-center for thousands of miners. Within a distance of thirty miles from the doorstep of this historic structure stand the remnants of the camps at Haydock, Hiteman, Hocking, Lovilla, and Consol — and the site of the Buxton camp, the biggest, rowdiest, and proudest of them all.

Buxton flared into prominence in the second decade of this century, faded in the third, and was nonexistent by the fourth. Built by miners on land owned by a railroad, it was located in northwestern Monroe County. The population was, at the peak, around 5,000. Most of its residents were colored people, many of them Negroes brought to Iowa from the South, with no previous experience in mining but a strong desire to make the comparatively high wages then paid. Morning trains picked up the miners, carried them to their jobs, and returned each dusk with their grimy passengers. Although accidents in the shafts were frequent, cheerfulness was the keynote on the Buxton trains, and the good humor of the miners as they returned to their camp was reflected in much joking, kidding, and horseplay on the company trains.

The Buxton residents, once established in frame houses that were furnished by the companies, organized several churches and a YMCA. The Buxton baseball team was the toast of the community, and games with neighboring teams provided a source of pride and pleasure on Sunday afternoons. Whole communities made a mass exodus on excursion trains for

these baseball games that saw Buxton, Hiteman, and other camps sending their best player-miners into competition.

Another feature of Buxton community life was the town band. With the talent that seems natural to many Negro musicians, this band provided hours of relaxation for the community and received invitations to play concerts in nearby camps.

Law enforcement in Buxton and the other mining camps was desultory. They were unincorporated towns, and there were no means of providing regular policemen or deputies from the county sheriff's office. After the passage of the eighteenth amendment and the coming of prohibition, the liquor problem was a constant source of concern. Miners often obtained "booze" by patronizing the "blind tiger" shops that operated covertly — the odd name coming not from the brand-name of the item sold but from the practice of buying the liquor through a partition door that kept the purchaser and buyer from seeing each other. Millard Tate, an old-time miner who still lives at the site of the Consol camp, recalls that more than a few miners supplemented their income by working with the "blind tiger." Usually, he adds, the deputy caught up with them, and they had a few days in the county jail to reflect on their profits.

Liquor was one of the greatest enemies of the miner, according to James Hupton, Welsh-born miner who has retired to his home in Albia. Hupton admits the dangers of the shaft but says that more miners were injured by drinking than by falling timbers or the dreaded "black damp" (noxious gases). Hupton's opinion is seconded by T. C. Chapman, state mine inspector now living at Albia, who also spent many years in the Iowa fields. Chapman says drinking was a major problem in the Iowa fields; and this judgment is further reinforced by dozens of newspaper clippings from the mining era that tell of violent acts by miners following drinking bouts.

While there was probably no WCTU organized in the camps to combat the effects of excessive drinking, the religious influences present doubtless had some effect. Chapman reports that while church buildings were scarce in the camps, religious services were often held in the familiar Miners' Hall (most camps had one of these central gathering places) or the local school. He recalls that Buxton had several church buildings, and Hupton remembers that as a youngster at What Cheer in 1887 his immigrant family found "religious life already established." "After about two years we moved to Mahaska County to a new camp where nothing had been done in that line,

so it was up to the people themselves to find ways of getting together for worship and also for schools for their children," he adds.

Baptist and Methodist church groups seem to have been particularly strong in the camps. Catholic churches were eventually opened in some of the larger camps, and at practically every camp there was a period when the evening air was filled with singing and preaching from revival tent meetings.

Next to the Bible, McGuffey's Reader was among the most important books in the camps. As Hupton indicates, schools and churches were organized at an early period. The difficulty came when the youngsters had acquired the basic learning, for then there was the pressure to put the twelve-year-old boy into the pits, while his sister could stay at home to help mother wash (a job of considerable magnitude in a miner's home), sew, cook, and perform other duties. Supplementing the regular school was the traveling lecturer, a carryover from the Lyceum days when famous men carried their message to the hinterlands for a fixed fee. Occasionally a miner would make great sacrifices to further his own education. Frank D. Wilson recalls that John T. Clarkson began his brilliant legal career as a combination butcher and miner at Morgan Valley. Clarkson would walk to Ottumwa to read law in Dan Steck's office on week ends; there he gained his first knowledge of the field where he later excelled as a champion of the miners' rights.

For entertainment the camps usually turned to music and, in the summertime, to baseball. Buxton's baseball team was regarded as Iowa's best amateur nine by many observers. "All mining towns of my knowledge had good baseball teams," Chapman reports. Hiteman and Buxton were in competition not only on the diamond but at the bandstand. Both camps had outstanding brass bands, probably appropriately uniformed in the style of the day. From the Welsh element came the notable eisteddfods, remembered as singing festivals of great importance by Hupton and other miners with Welsh ties. Hupton says he remembers his first eisteddfod in 1889. "At that time it was held in Oskaloosa, then to Ottumwa, and then at Albia," he recalls. "Other towns besides the mining towns took part and the same spread, not only over Iowa, but over the United States," Hupton writes, adding that "there were many talented men and women who took the lead in that work and contributed to the success of a work that brought a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment to all who took part and also those

who listened to them." Besides singing, the eisteddfods included declamatory contests that gave local orators a chance to practice for the heated discussions that sometimes arose in the union halls.

Motion picture houses were another source of entertainment in the camps. Chapman says he saw his first film emporium at Buxton about 1908, and adds that the celluloid antics of William Farnum, Pearl White, and other early stars were great sources of enjoyment. Sunday, of course, was the only day the miners had for recreation until well into the twentieth century; many miners looked forward to the Sabbath afternoons when they could hunt or fish in the surrounding area.

Life was not easy in those Iowa mining camps, and human associations were dearly held. Hupton mentions the evening meal with particular warmth. "In the early days of long hours of labor and travel, there was only one meal except Sunday that a man enjoyed with his family, which was the evening meal. The whole day was spent toward making that a pleasant reunion, and after the dirt and grime were washed away the little family would gather, with thanks, for another day passed in safety." He further recalls that when sickness or an accident struck a family, whole neighborhoods joined to make up for the lack of hospital facilities with volunteer nursing and donations of food, clothing, and money. "In the event of death, the whole camp would rise as one for help and comfort to those who needed it," Hupton remarked. Most medical care was usually provided by a single doctor who served the entire community, Chapman noted, but where money is always in short supply, home nostrums were preferred.

The few remaining photographs of the Iowa mining camps give the impression that the homes were uniform, soot-covered, and somewhat drab. Miner Hupton refutes such an impression, however: "One idea prevailing amongst outsiders was that mining camps were slums and this was a false idea for if there was one thing the miner's wife and daughters took pride in, it was their little homes and they took joy in good housekeeping, and quoting from a lady from one of our large cities she said that she got the surprise of her life when she visited these homes and found them little palaces."

Those miners who moved up the economic scale would in time acquire a horse and buggy. Chapman says that most of the miners he knew had a "rig," and when automobiles came on the scene they were gradually moved

into the sheds and the buggies moved out with a "for sale" sign attached. Strong legs carried the men from their homes to the company trains each morning, however, and tired legs brought them back each night. The development of better forms of transportation is credited by Chapman as presaging the end of the camps. He says that the automobile and good roads meant that men could get to the pits while living in larger towns. Certainly the coming of the automobile helped hasten the end of the heyday of mining camps.

Since the mining camps were ordinarily one-company affairs, they were essentially paternalistic. This led to some friction between the employer and the miner, but perhaps nothing was more disagreeable to the men than the often-cursed "company store." These general merchandise concerns were owned by the companies, and they sold on credit to the miners. A common grievance of the miners was that they hardly had tobacco money left on payday, after their company store debts had been balanced against their earnings. Naturally, many of the men claimed that the company store charged higher prices than merchants in nearby towns, thus profiting exorbitantly from their monopoly.

Constantly under fire from the men, these company stores were in time attacked by the United Mine Workers organization and were grudgingly abandoned by many owners. In these circumstances, it is quite likely that mail-order catalogs were among the most-read pieces of literature circulating in the camps.

Outside of the mail-order catalogs, it is certain that the area newspapers were thoroughly perused by the Iowa miners. Despite its size, there appears to have been no newspaper published at Buxton. Consol and Mystic also did without local newspapers. The explanation probably lies in their nearness to the larger communities with newspapers that had long served the area. Chief among these were the Centerville *Iowegian*, Albia *Union* and Albia *Republican* (merged in 1922), Oskaloosa *Herald*, and Ottumwa *Courier*. Until 1926 the Melrose *Bell* rang out with news of interest to the mining community. The news columns of these journals recorded the vital statistics of the nearby mining camps along with the violence and the other elements of the human drama that make up a part of the daily news grist. Taken as a whole, these newspapers represent the best record of the Iowa mining community.

These impressions of the Iowa mining camps seem to indicate that a rich

and full story has been overlooked. What appears to have been a grimy and rather unpleasant place to live apparently was not so regarded by those who actually lived there, and their lack of comforts and conveniences was compensated for in warm family associations and a friendly neighborhood spirit. To historians who would touch upon a field that promises rich rewards, both in information and human understanding, the Iowa mining camps stand as challenging as the slightly opened door to a dimly-lighted, mysterious room. But the historians must hurry, as the door will soon be closed to those who want information from the miners who made this history.