

Life Away from the Mine in Oklahoma's Coal Towns

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When Oklahoma's coal industry began in the early 1870s, the towns that developed around this industry were the private fiefdoms of the coal barons. For decades the mine operators controlled nearly every facet of life in these communities. Only after years of bitter struggle against such conditions were the miners and the other residents of these communities in this system, but political, economic, an able to gain a measure of control over their own lives and towns. The miners' union produced the first cracks d social changes also undermined the semi-feudal nature of Oklahoma's coal towns. By the 1890s independent business developed as the mine owners' grip on these communities weakened. But it was not until the 1920s that the company-town system faded away, replaced by a competitive economic system.

The communities that developed in association with southeastern Oklahoma's nascent coal mining industry in the early 1870s were classic company towns. Few amenities existed in these company towns designed to provide only for the miner's basic needs. The two primary institutions in Oklahoma's coal mining communities were the company house and the company store.

The typical Oklahoma coal town was little more than an "appendage to the coal mine." The company owned all buildings and houses, built on land leased from the Choctaws in the territorial period. It was not until after the watershed agreement of 1903, in which the union won recognition and many other concessions from the operators, that the strength of the company town diminished. Statehood pummeled the company-town system further, but it did not die out completely until the 1920s.¹

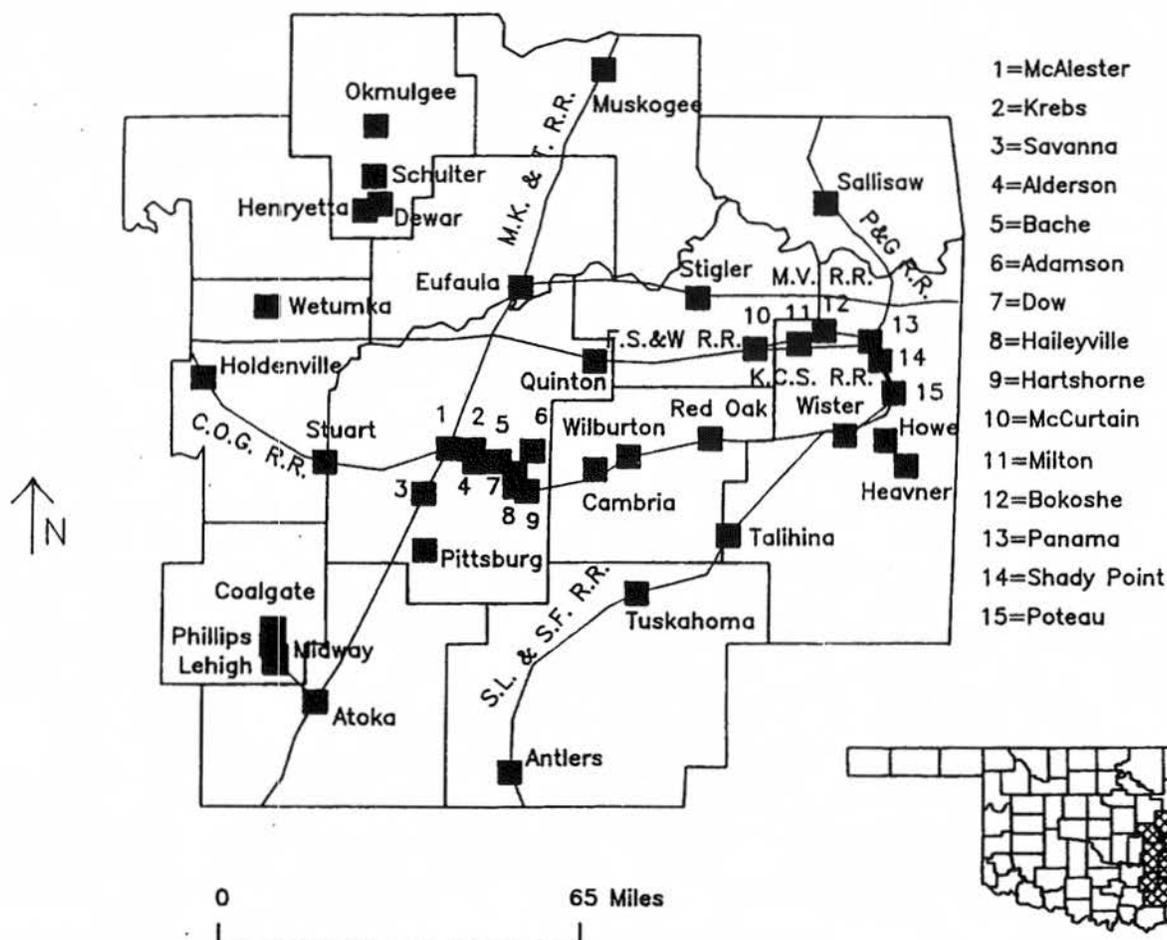
Coal company towns were devoid of aesthetic qualities. All architecture centered around function; little, if any effort was put into a "city beautiful" movement in these communities. Dying when the vein played out, these towns lacked a sense of permanence, instead exhibiting crude exploitation that betrayed their primary reason for being. Oklahoma's coal towns owed their existence solely to the mineral resource that lay beneath them.²

The mining companies typically built and rented nearly all housing in the early years of a coal mining community. Company houses were uniform in every manner. Usually painted a dull red, the standard company house had two to five rooms. Built with inexpensive local lumber, each house cost as little as \$50 to construct. Company houses rented for \$1.80 to \$2.00 per week. Operators deducted rent from wages and often withheld income for "damages" when the miner moved out of the house.³

Company houses betrayed the fleeting nature of the coal towns. Lacking solid foundations, most rested two to three feet above the ground on piles of stone or brick. When a particular coal town's economic viability waned, operators often moved the town to a new location. The Atoka Coal and Mining Company moved its entire operations at Savanna, including 135 houses, after a coal dust explosion there in 1887 that killed eighteen miners. Not surprisingly, company housing was usually better in towns than in remote coal camps and miners quickly turned to private housing when and where it became available.⁴ When company housing was scarce, miners often built their own two-room box houses.⁵ In the most primitive coal mining communities, "most of the miners lived in tents."⁶

The row after row of identical houses in these isolated communities only reinforced the uniformity of company towns such as Krebs, Lehigh, and Savanna. After a rain, the dirt streets quickly became nearly impassable. Company houses had a minimum of amenities. The dwellings, for example, seldom had sewage systems. Outhouses were common, and

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typically four house clusters shared a water well. The water drawn from these wells was often laden with minerals. An unidentified miner remarked that at Krebs, "the water is so hard that when you want a drink you have to break off a piece and then pulverize it with a sledge hammer before drinking it."⁷

Despite the austerity of Oklahoma's coal towns, miners took pride in their communities and engaged in boisterous booster battles with nearby towns. Lehigh and Coalgate were heated rivals, as were the "twin cities" of Hartshorne and Haileyville. One resident of Savanna in 1884 listed among the town's attributes, "two drug stores, three finishing stores and three grocie [sic] stores . . . four bar shops, two black smith shops, [and] two fancy ladies houses." The local booster even viewed the "two fancy ladies houses" as an asset to the community. In 1904 the local newspaper in McCurtain declared the community the "best town on the Fort Smith and Western, between Guthrie and Fort Smith [Ark.]." When "a first class man" arrived, local leaders were "glad to see the San Bois Company's houses fill up with this class of family." But one miner noted that

"the coal diggers were a rough lot, living poorly in company shacks."⁸

The other principal institution in Oklahoma's coal towns was the company store. The company store functioned as a department store, offering numerous general merchandise items for sale. Mine owners often paid their employees in scrip, forcing patronage of the company store. These stores charged as much as 20 percent more than independent retailers. Operators fenced and guarded coal camps to fend off commercial interests such as the local farmers who attempted to sell their produce to the miners. Consequently, these monopolies proved quite profitable for the mining companies.⁹

Even though operators paid miners in cash and scrip, they gave advances in scrip alone. By issuing scrip, operators strengthened their control over the miners. Advances often led to the infamous "bob-tail" check on payday. A "bob-tail" check resulted when advances and deductions totaled more than earnings, leaving the miner with no paycheck and in debt to the company. One miner, A. F. Rush,

recalled that "a lot of people never saw any money at all." Scrip could be used in some stores and banks not owned by the coal company, but at a discounted value. Operators sometimes replaced scrip with non-transferable coupons to counteract the use of discounted coupons at non-company establishments. As a result, the discounted coupons were often used for less savory practices such as gambling and drinking.¹⁰

Merchants who competed with the company stores for the miners' patronage found the use of scrip a difficult obstacle to overcome even though the non-company stores charged less for their merchandise. One competitor in Coalgate lamented that "it would be better for miners to economize a month, then with the money go to Elzey and Perry, where they get \$1.25 on the dollar, instead of trading on scrip worth 95 cents on the dollar." Elzey and Perry Mercantile of Coalgate went on to advertise that "a dollar in cash, will buy more staples . . . than a dollar and a quarter at any company store in town. Cash is the true test. Try it and see."¹¹

In the 1880s and 1890s nearly all coal companies either operated their own stores or awarded "company store privileges" to "independent" stores in exchange for a percentage of the receipts. One independent operator, Dr. D. M. Hailey, received "company store" privileges as part of his payment when he sold out to the Gould interests. Businesses with "company store" privileges frequently offered credit to the miners. The coal companies then deducted the money owed from the miners' wages. As a result, local mine operators exercised great control over these nominally "independent" stores, which in reality were little more than components of the company-town system.¹²

As early as the 1890s the company-town system showed signs of weakening. Independently owned barber shops, clothing stores, drug stores, and warehouses began to dot the coal towns. One dry goods merchant in Hartshorne did business from a tent, displaying his wares on the sidewalk. In 1890 Hartshorne had five businesses - a company store, two general stores, a meat market, and a drug store. By 1904 Hartshorne was a "booming little mining town" with a grocery store, the "Palace Meat Market," the "City Meat Market," a hardware store, cotton gin, and a lumberyard. Hartshorne, an important coal mining community, also boasted of having a bank, newspaper, and a "big wooden opera house."¹³ The development of a thriving Syrian merchant community further illustrates the decline of the company-town system. The Syrians, who numbered about 150 residents, did business "through the mining camps" of the region.¹⁴ At the same time local farmers brought in wagons of

wild hogs that sold for five cents per pound.¹⁵

After 1900 the coal barons steadily lost their economic monopoly in the coal towns. It was not that the coal companies' institutions disappeared - they survived into the 1920s. Yet after 1900 economic competition rather than company monopoly characterized commercial life in Oklahoma's coal towns. Livery stables, confectioners, jewelers, clothing and furniture stores, and many other businesses competed with or replaced company services.¹⁶

Schools were also important institutions in the coal towns. The earliest non-Indian school was a subscription school established in McAlester in 1876. By 1881 the Presbyterians in McAlester had founded a mission that doubled as a school. In Hartshorne in the late 1890s the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad built a four-room schoolhouse for the children of its employees. Miners who worked the railroad company's coal mines financed the school's operation, the cost being deducted from their wages. Married men paid one dollar per month into the education fund and single men fifty cents. Non-miners paid \$1.50 per month to send their children to the school. By 1904 schools in Hartshorne no longer charged for tuition because the community began taxing to finance its school system.¹⁷

As the coal towns grew they attracted many immigrants. Both the railroad companies, who controlled many of the mines, and the miners themselves recruited immigrants to Oklahoma. From the earliest days of the industry the Kansas, Missouri, and Texas Railroad and other railroad companies had actively recruited foreign nationals. They often advanced the cost of passage to the immigrants, later deducting this expense from their wages. Miners also wrote glowing letters to friends and neighbors in the "old country," which led to further immigration. Because of these overseas connections, the communities of southeastern Oklahoma were ethnically diverse. In 1900, for example, 26 percent of the workers in the coal mines were immigrants. By 1911 more than 3,300 immigrants worked in Oklahoma's coal mines, representing 55 percent of the workforce.¹⁸

Italians were the largest group of immigrants, comprising more than one-third of the coal towns' non-American population. In the coal mines Italians made up 42 percent of the workforce. By 1910, ten thousand Italians resided in Oklahoma's coal mining communities. Their presence strongly influenced the cultural life in many of the communities.¹⁹

Among the most successful of the Italians was Joe Fassino, who moved to Krebs in 1891 to open a store to sell food his "countrymen wanted." Fassino also



Saints Cyril and Methodius Russian Orthodox Church in Hartshorne, Oklahoma. (Courtesy, Steven L. Sewell)

smuggled in specialty foods such as cheese, figs, and chestnuts. Maintaining a thriving business, Fassino opened a macaroni factory in 1897. Other Italians entered the grocery business so that by 1905 there were seven or eight in the Krebs area.²⁰ Italian commercial successes suggested that upward mobility was a strong possibility for many immigrants in the coal towns.

Numerous other nationalities came to work in Oklahoma's coal mines. English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish miners, in particular, came to Indian Territory in large numbers to ply their trades. They were among the most experienced miners in Indian Territory. Lithuanian, Russian and Ukrainian residents numbered in the hundreds at Hartshorne, Lehigh, and Coalgate. Poles drifted into the coal fields in 1876, and by 1911 around eight hundred such nationals lived in the region. There were small Belgian, Bulgarian, Dutch, French, Mexican, Magyar, and Slovak neighborhoods as well. After 1890 a sizeable African-American population had also migrated into Indian Territory coal towns.²¹

Lasting vestiges of the ethnic diversity in the coal towns remains to this day. In Krebs, St. Joseph's

Catholic Church, as well as the numerous Italian restaurants and grocery stores around the area, remain as indelible symbols of the impact of the Italians in the region.²² At Hartshorne stands the Saints Cyril and Methodius Russian Orthodox Church. Built in 1917 by Carpatho-Russians who worked in the mines near Hartshorne, the bright red-brick structure, complete with white spires topped by three blue onion-domes, stands in vivid contrast to the less colorful churches of the community. The church's architecture situated the congregation facing east in accordance with Orthodox tradition. Decorated with icons and stained glass, the house of worship was the center of culture for the Orthodox faithful in Hartshorne.²³

In response to the dangerous working conditions, the immigrants formed mutual aid societies. At first the mining companies offered no form of accident or death benefits, so miners created their own institutions to meet these needs. In addition to life insurance, these mutual aid societies provided compensation to disabled miners for up to a year following an injury. Italian immigrants created the La Minature,

Vittorio Emanuel II, and Christiforo Colombo fraternal and beneficial societies. Another ethnic group, the Slovaks, established the First Catholic Union. Mexicans organized the National Beneficial Society, and the Poles founded the National Polish Society.²⁴ Carpatho-Russians at Hartshorne joined the Russian Orthodox Brotherhood, an organization that provided aid to disaster victims.²⁵ Miners also joined the Woodman of the World Lodge and other fraternal orders, including the Masons, Knights of Columbus, Odd Fellows, and the Rebekahs. Besides providing aid and solace following accidents, these institutions organized social activities such as picnics, dances, and barbecues.²⁶

Medical treatment for those injured in Oklahoma's coal mines was woefully inadequate from the 1870s to the mid-1890s. Miners usually received medical care from the company doctors. The companies deducted \$1.00 per month from each miner's wages to pay the doctor's salary. Until the 1890s, the coal towns lacked adequate hospitals. Hokey's Drug Store, established in Krebs in 1885, for example, doubled as a make-shift hospital. Hokey's Drug Store stocked supplies necessary after a disaster, including vaseline, iodine, and linseed oil.²⁷

The horrendous disaster in Krebs at the Osage Coal and Mining Company's Mine Number Eleven in 1892 overwhelmed Hokey's Drug Store, revealing the abominably inadequate medical facilities in Oklahoma's coal mining districts. In this disaster a coal and dust explosion killed one hundred men and injured two hundred more. Responding to the need, Bishop Francis Key Brooke of the Episcopal Church appealed to the community for funds. After an anonymous donor contributed the necessary money, Bishop Brooke established All Saints Hospital in McAlester.²⁸ Beginning as an emergency measure capable of caring for about a dozen patients, the hospital grew to a hundred-bed facility by 1900.²⁹ As early as 1896 a local newspaper, with unabashed boosterism, proclaimed that "South McAlester . . . has the finest and best hospital . . . in the Territory."³⁰

Miners engaged in various pursuits during their leisure time. Customarily ceasing mining operations at noon on Saturday, miners and their families enjoyed band concerts, circuses, dances, bicycling, and going to the local opera house. Every coal town fielded a baseball team. McCurtain claimed to have "the best baseball team in the Choctaw Nation."³¹ Betting on the horses was another favorite pastime for the miners. At Lehigh a "saw-backed mare" was famous for being "transformed into a streak of lightning." One conniving individual trained his horse to fake a limp that miraculously disappeared during the race. Those not

knowledgeable about these shenanigans frequently were on the losing end of betting associated with these horse races. One miner recalled years later that the contestants used "trickery of all sorts" to gain an advantage over their opponents.³²

Holidays were major social events in the coal towns, providing a brief respite from the rigors of daily life. Every January 25th Scottish miners celebrated the birth of Robert Burns. Locals recited the poet's work, while other Scots played bagpipes, and still others performed Scottish folk-dances. On St. Patrick's Day, all residents in the coal camps became "Irish" for a day. Welsh miners celebrated Saint David's Day. Fourth of July celebrations amalgamated the various ethnic groups. After a picnic, miners listened to the reading of the United States Constitution, then they heard political speeches.³³

While at leisure, miners consumed their favorite beverage, "choc" beer. A drink of the Choctaws, "choc" beer was a concoction made from barley, hops, tobacco, fishberries, and a small amount of grain alcohol. Local Choctaws also used fishberries as a paralyzing agent to disable fish, suggesting that "choc" was an especially potent beverage. Another recipe for "choc" called for boiling malt, oats, corn, and hops. Later the brewer added yeast and sugar. After an ample period of fermentation, the Choctaw beer "afforded a drink that had a wallop comparable to the kick of a mule."³⁴

Miners considered "choc" essential for good health. Because local water supplies were frequently disease-ridden, they claimed "choc" counteracted the "deadly malaria mosquito." Many argued that "choc" was a tonic, not a beverage, and local doctors agreed. Miners also complained of "gyppy" water and that converting it into "choc" was the only way to make it palatable. As part of their domestic chores, women manufactured and distributed "choc" beer, producing large quantities: the *South McAlester Capital* reported in 1895 that "Choctaw beer is again as plentiful . . . as strip pit water." Irked by the illicit trade, in 1894, the Indian agent labeled the women as "troublesome" for their role in brewing the beer.³⁵

Miners who preferred "store-bought" whiskey to the home-brew could order it through the mail even though trade in alcohol was illegal. Mail order grocery shopping alleviated the disadvantages of isolation in the coal camps. Orders included a gallon of whiskey, carefully packaged to look like legal groceries, and strategically placed in the center of the crate to avoid detection by the United States Marshals. The Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad commonly shipped in whiskey marked as "freight"

for its employees in the territory, and instructed their station agents to forestall police efforts to inspect the shipments.³⁶

Proto-speakeasies also dotted the Choctaw Nation. The *South McAlester Capital* reported in 1894 that "the beer dives on the West side of the track are becoming a nuisance to the residents to such an extent that should be abated. . . . If the half that is told of them is true, they should be wiped out of existence."³⁷ At the same time bootleg whiskey peddlers operated throughout Indian Territory, appearing out of the night and announcing their arrival by firing two pistol shots in rapid succession. But bootleg whiskey was expensive, two dollars a pint.³⁸

Over time Oklahoma's roughly-hewn company towns became stable communities. By the 1920s the company house and the company store had become part of the past. At the same time schools, churches, hospitals, opera houses and a multitude of independent businesses sprang up alongside "fancy ladies houses" and "beer dives."

This dramatic change from a company-town system to a competitive economic system was due to several reasons - union activity, augmented by political, economic, and social changes. A central demand of the miners in the 1894 and the 1898-1903 strikes was elimination of the company-town system. By 1900 many company houses and stores had disappeared from Oklahoma's coal towns. These great changes were codified in the watershed agreement of 1903, which significantly reduced the feudalistic powers of the coal barons.

When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, it meant the owners' mining leases were no longer their private fiefdoms. The owners had made the most of a unique political situation in the Choctaw Nation, a situation that made them nearly sovereign on their own leases. Statehood eliminated this advantage enjoyed by the mine owners.

At the same time the general political tenor of the nation was changing and this affected Oklahoma's coal towns. The mining barons and their monopolistic practices had flourished in the laissez-faire Gilded Age, but by 1890, Progressive Era sentiments, including anti-monopoly views, were sweeping across what was soon to be the state of Oklahoma. The state's very progressive constitution illustrates how wholeheartedly Oklahomans had embraced the values of Progressivism.

While these macro-political forces worked to undermine the company-town system, so did micro-economic forces--the many small independent businesses that developed in the 1890s across Oklahoma's coal belt. While the macro-political forces dealt staggering blows

to the company-town system, the numerous small blows inflicted by these independent commercial interests may have had a greater impact. The company store prospered in a monopolistic environment; it simply was not viable in a competitive economic arena.

Finally, the diversity of Oklahoma's coal towns furthered the demise of the company-town system. Each ethnic group preferred their own culture, their own food, their own institutions. As a result, each ethnic group developed their own institutions to provide for these needs, further weakening the company-town system.

These forces--the miner's union, assisted by political, economic, and social change, combined to create an environment in which the company-town system could no longer exist. By the 1920s, the conditions and circumstances that had led to the development of the company-town system in the 1870s were gone. The result was the demise of the company-town system in Oklahoma's coal towns.

NOTES

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4. "Bituminous Coal Mining," 64-65; Aldrich, "Coal Industry in Oklahoma," 182.
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6. *Ibid.*, 99: 165.

7. *Ibid.*, 26: 218-219, 27: 361; "Bituminous Coal Mining," 64-65, 72; *The Coalgate Nonpareil*, 18 May 1894.
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11. *Coalgate Nonpareil*, 4 January 1895.
12. Ryan, *Rehabilitation*, 35-36; *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, 106: 6.
13. Ryan, *Rehabilitation*, 37; *Indian-Pioneer Paper*, 27: 361-366, 70: 60.
14. "Bituminous Coal Mining," 109.
15. *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, 22: 58.
16. *The McMaster Publishing Company's Gazetteer and Business Directory of the Indian Territory*. Buffalo, NY: McMaster Pub. Co., 1901, 102-1-3, 143-144, 217-229.
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18. Stanley Clark, "Immigrants to the Choctaw Coal Industry," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 33 (Winter 1955-1956), 440; Ryan, *Rehabilitation*, 22-23, 28; *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900. Special Reports: Occupations*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Office, 1901, 274; "Bituminous Coal Mining," 16, 23.
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26. Betty Poe, ed., *History of Coal County, Oklahoma*. Coalgate, OK: George B. Hill, n.d., 72; Clark, "Immigrants," 445.
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29. Francis Key Brooke, *The Missionary District of Oklahoma and Indian Territory*. Philadelphia: Avil Printing Co., n.d., 1; Clinton, "The First Hospital," 221.
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33. *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, 84: 281-282; 101: 185.
34. Angie Debo, *Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*. 2nd ed. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1961, 228; Aldrich, "Coal Industry in Oklahoma," 201-202; *Indian Pioneer Papers*, 105: 430-431.
35. *Ibid.*; *South McAlester Capital*, 25 April 1895. The topic of "choc" beer is one of the most colorful aspects of Oklahoma history and certainly warrants further study.
36. Debo, *Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, 189.
37. *South McAlester Capital*, 12 July 1894.
38. *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, 105: 431-432.