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Source: *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Feb., 1989), pp. 77-102

Published by: Southern Historical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2209720>

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From Peasant to Proletarian: The Migration of Southern Blacks to the Central Appalachian Coalfields

By RONALD L. LEWIS

SOON AFTER THE REPUBLICAN PARTY ABANDONED THE FREEDMEN'S cause in the 1870s, southern blacks began to stir. They moved west to places like Kansas and Oklahoma where land was cheap and abundant, and a few even left the United States entirely for Haiti or Liberia. Most, however, simply abandoned the plantations to seek a new life in nearby cities. For decades they continued to migrate primarily into southern cities; but the trek by some southern blacks to northern industrial centers, which would accelerate dramatically during World War I and become known as the Great Migration, had already begun in the 1880s.¹

The downward spiral in living conditions of southern blacks was symbolized in several political developments and natural events. Booker T. Washington's famous 1895 speech at the Cotton Exposition in Atlanta abnegating racial equality signaled the triumph of white supremacy in the South, and Jim Crow was sanctioned by the U. S. Supreme Court in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. Furthermore, the total collapse of the Populist movement in 1898 hailed the resurgence of the solid Democratic South. As if political events were not sufficiently discouraging, unusually serious droughts followed by heavy rains and a plague of boll weevils repeatedly destroyed cotton crops during this era. Injustice and economic disaster, "boll-weevil in de cotton . . . Debil in de white man," as a Negro ballad succinctly expressed it, combined to drive large numbers of blacks out of the region entirely. Some were attracted by work in northern industry, and, although demand for labor was intermittently interrupted by business slumps, expanding northern industries absorbed

¹ Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920* (Garden City, N. Y., 1975), 49-51.

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many of those blacks who fled the South. The demand for black labor grew dramatically during World War I as white Americans left for the battlefields and foreign immigration came nearly to a standstill.² Consequently, during the twenty years between 1890 and 1910, an estimated two hundred thousand blacks had already "fled to the North," but between January 1916 and mid-1917 alone the black migration mushroomed into an exodus of between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand.³

A substantial body of scholarship analyzes both the Great Migration and the racial problems generated by this large influx of blacks into northern cities. Much is known also about the formal and informal networks through which black migrants received information and assistance in making the move, as well as the major routes they traveled to reach their destinations.⁴ Almost entirely neglected in this literature, however, are the tens of thousands of blacks whose trek north was interrupted by a generational stopover in the central Appalachian coalfields, primarily in southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky.⁵ Emanating essentially from two sources, the mineral district around Birmingham, Alabama, and the agricultural sections of Virginia and North Carolina, this inflow began as a trickle in the

² *Ibid.*, 1, 51-52; *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (Stanford, Conn., 1965), 56. The quotation is found in Seth M. Scheiner, *Negro Mecca: A History of the Negro in New York City, 1865-1920* (New York, 1965), 11.

³ Henri, *Black Migration*, 51 (quotation); James McPherson *et al.*, *Blacks in America: Bibliographical Essays* (Garden City, N. Y., 1971), 185; Dean Dutcher, *The Negro in Modern Industrial Society: An Analysis of Changes in the Occupations of Negro Workers, 1910-1920* (Lancaster, Penn., 1930), 22; Abram L. Harris, Jr., "Negro Migration to the North," *Current History*, XX (September 1924), 922-23; Ray Stannard Baker, "The Negro Goes North," *World's Work*, XXXIV (July 1917), 319; and U. S. Department of Labor, Division of Negro Economics, *Negro Migration in 1916-17* (Washington, 1919), 156.

⁴ See McPherson *et al.*, *Blacks in America*, 185-88. For recent articles useful as statistical overviews on the migration see Carole Marks's two studies, "Black Labor Migration: 1910-1920," *Insurgent Sociologist*, XII (Winter 1985), 5-24; and "Black Workers and the Great Migration North," *Phylon*, XLVI (June 1985), 148-61. For two case studies of black migration as it affected a northern city and a southern town see Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana and Chicago, 1987); and Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community* (Philadelphia, 1981).

⁵ The basic definition of Appalachia used here is that advanced by the Appalachian Regional Commission, which also considers the "heart of Central Appalachia" to be the Cumberland Plateau, a subsection that contains the southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky coalfields. See "The New Appalachian Subregions and Their Development Strategies," *Appalachia*, VIII (August-September 1974), 10-27. Central Appalachia is composed of the following counties: (Kentucky) Bell, Breathitt, Carter, Clay, Elliott, Estill, Floyd, Harlan, Jackson, Johnson, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Lawrence, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Magoffin, Martin, Menifee, Morgan, Owsley, Perry, Pike, Powell, Rockcastle, Rowan, Wayne, Wolfe, and Whitley; (Tennessee) Anderson, Campbell, Claiborne, Morgan, and Scott; (Virginia) Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell, and Wise; (West Virginia) Boone, Braxton, Clay, Fayette, Kanawha, Lincoln, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, Nicholas, Raleigh, Summers, Webster, and Wyoming.



CENTRAL APPALACHIA

1880s, swelled during the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century, and crested in the early 1920s.

The emergence of central Appalachia as the nation's major coal-producing region attracted some blacks to this isolated setting rather than to industrial jobs in northern cities. In the 1880s vast uninhabited virgin forests still covered much of the region, and coal mining remained insignificant due to the lack of transportation facilities for moving the region's coal to market. The massive infusions of capital investment required to exploit the rich coal reserves came slowly at first in the 1870s and then accelerated rapidly during subsequent decades. Industrialization transformed the life and landscape of central Appalachia as coal mines, coke ovens, and railroads replaced mountain farms as the base of the rural mountain economy.⁶

Certainly there was plenty of coal to mine, for no other region in the United States was so richly endowed as the central Appalachian plateau. The railroads opened these fields for exploitation in the 1890s; coal production had trebled by 1900 and more than quadrupled again by 1930, thus accounting for nearly 80 percent of total national production.⁷

Industrial society advanced into the mountains behind armies of white, black, and foreign-born laborers who laid the tracks of three major railroad systems. The first, completed in 1873, was the Chesapeake & Ohio. The Pocahontas and Flat Top fields of Virginia and West Virginia, to the southwest of the C&O line, were connected to the national markets by the Norfolk and Western Railroad, which was organized in 1881 specifically to serve as a coal carrier linking Appalachia with the port of Norfolk and eventually the Great Lakes. The C&O and N&W developed central Appalachia from the east, while the Louisville & Nashville Railroad began constructing lines into the mountains of Kentucky from the west in a rush to dominate those fields. Finally, on the eve of World War I, the Kentucky River highlands were connected into the rail system when an L&N branch line was completed into Harlan, Letcher, and Perry counties.⁸ Thus

⁶ Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston and Toronto, 1962), Chap. 7; and *Theirs Be the Power: The Moguls of Eastern Kentucky* (Urbana and Chicago, 1983), 1-44; John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana, Chicago, and London, 1980), Chap. 3; and Richard Mark Simon, "The Development of Underdevelopment: The Coal Industry and Its Effect on the West Virginia Economy, 1880-1930" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1978), 85-96, 224-31.

⁷ Ronald D Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1982), 128. Chapter 4 is the best general survey of industrial development in this region.

⁸ Charles Bias, "The Completion of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad to the Ohio River, 1869-1873," *West Virginia History*, XL (Summer 1979), 393-403; Joseph T. Lambie, *From Mine to Market: The History of Coal Transportation on the Norfolk and Western Railway* (New York, 1954), Chaps. 1 and 2; Maury Klein, *History of the Louisville and Nashville*

BLACK POPULATION OF CENTRAL APPALACHIA
1860-1980

	<i>Kentucky</i>	<i>Tennessee</i>	<i>Virginia</i>	<i>West Virginia</i>	<i>Totals</i>
1860	5,814	2,175	3,405	3,769	15,163
1870	4,941	2,254	3,885	3,280	14,360
1880	6,734	2,570	4,242	5,781	19,327
1890	7,444	3,653	6,552	12,577	30,226
1900	7,602	3,609	7,056	21,584	39,851
1910	10,222	4,415	7,669	41,945	64,251
1920	15,692	2,943	8,953	60,488	88,076
1930	18,286	2,129	7,616	80,841	108,872
1940	18,662	1,918	7,709	85,465	113,754
1950	14,284	2,941	6,659	86,421	110,305
1960	10,240	2,884	4,083	64,613	81,820
1970	7,232	2,718	2,585	44,956	57,491
1980	6,506	3,253	2,688	42,277	54,724

SOURCE: U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of the Population* for the decennial censuses of 1860 through and including 1980. For the counties included in central Appalachia see note 5.

by the 1920s central Appalachia had been integrated by an elaborate, interconnected network of lines for transporting coal to the nation's industrial centers.

Central Appalachia's industrial development required coal companies to import a large proportion of their work force, which accounts for most of the increase in the region's population from under 200,000 in 1870 to over 1.2 million in 1920.⁹ The pre-industrial black population was quite small, totaling only 14,360 in 1870, but by 1890 that figure had more than doubled to 30,226 and had quadrupled to 64,251 by 1910. During the decade of the Great War, the number of blacks in the region continued to climb, reaching 88,076 by 1920 and 108,872 in 1930 when the immigration ended (see table). Most of this increase was associated with the rise of the coal industry. In 1870 only 36 percent of the black population of central Appalachia resided in the sixteen major coal-producing counties of the fifty-six-county region. By 1920, however, 96 percent of the blacks living in central Appalachia resided in those sixteen coal counties.¹⁰

Railroad (New York, 1972), 401-7; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 140-49, 152; and Caudill, *Theirs Be the Power*, 25, 32, 71.

⁹ Randall G. Lawrence, "Appalachian Metamorphosis: Industrializing Society on the Central Appalachian Plateau, 1860-1913" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1983), 51.

¹⁰ This data is derived from the decennial census of population volumes for 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930. The sixteen major coal producing counties of central Appalachia were: (Kentucky) Bell, Harlan, Letcher, Perry, and Pike; (Virginia) Tazewell and

By far the greatest increases in black population in central Appalachia were experienced in southern West Virginia, where 69 percent of the region's blacks (totaling 60,488) and 62 percent of the state's black miners (totaling 17,799) resided by 1920. Here the scope of industrial transformation was greatest, and, correspondingly, the demand for labor was strongest. Moreover, West Virginia was the only state in the region that did not follow the southern example of disfranchising blacks.¹¹ This alone provided strong incentive for many Afro-Americans to migrate to the West Virginia coalfields. As prominent black United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) organizer George H. Edmunds observed, these black migrants were "seeking a man's chance in the world; a chance to . . . exercise the right of the ballot . . ." In short, they were "looking for true American citizenship." Blacks of the Great Migration generally made the conceptual linkage between manhood and full citizenship rights. One recent arrival in New York, for example, declared that he left North Carolina because he "couldn't live there and be . . . treated like a man." Similarly a black minister in Philadelphia asserted that southern blacks came to northern cities because "they're treated more like men up here . . . it all gets back to the question of manhood."¹² Edmunds, therefore, was not expressing a view peculiar to black miners alone.

During World War I the competition for labor intensified. Appalachian coal operators responded by dispatching labor agents to the

Wise; (West Virginia) Fayette, Kanawha, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, Raleigh, Summers, and Wyoming.

¹¹ Lawrence, "Appalachian Metamorphosis," 51-52, 94. An industry publication for mine managers reported that "about 1100 new coal mines have been opened in the United States" between May 1916 and August 1917, stimulated by the increased demand for coal during the war. *Coal Age*, XII (August 18, 1917), 291. See also Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington, Ky., 1987), 152; and "Job Control and Race Relations in the Coal Fields, 1870-1920," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, XII (Winter 1985), 49-50. James T. Laing, "West Virginia Negro Miners and the Great Depression," *Opportunity Magazine*, XII (August 1934), 232-33. Price Van Meter Fishback argues that there was very little racial discrimination against black coal miners in West Virginia. See his "Employment Conditions of Blacks in the Coal Industry, 1900-1930" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1983). For a different view see Jerry Bruce Thomas, "Coal Country: The Rise of the Southern Smokeless Coal Industry and Its Effects on Area Development, 1872-1910" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1971), 177-89. The figure 17,799 is a total of all black miners in the state of West Virginia, and the percentage is derived from the total of black miners in the central Appalachian states. Nevertheless, nearly all black miners in these states were found in the central Appalachian plateau counties at that time.

¹² *United Mine Workers Journal* (Indianapolis), October 15, 1919 (first quotation); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York and Evanston, 1963), 22 (second quotation); Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line* (rpt. ed., 1964; New York, 1904), 133 (third quotation). The *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper founded to stimulate a black exodus to the North, is virtually replete with similar comments from migrants.

southern states with “pockets full of money” and offers of steady work at high wages. According to West Virginia attorney general Howard B. Lee, recruiters were “skillfully selected for their persuasive eloquence and conscienceless disregard of the truth.” Black recruiter “Bowlegged” Jones pitched a tent in the woods near the Alabama mine camps and handed out train tickets plus twenty-five dollars in cash to each man who signed on.¹³

From the spring of 1916 through 1917 the U. S. Department of Labor's Division of Negro Economics estimated that seventy-five thousand blacks, or about 8.3 percent of Alabama's 1910 black population, emigrated to points north. When the extent of the exodus became apparent, state officials ordered the strict enforcement of a recently passed, labor-agent licensing act. Agents caught without a license were fined up to five hundred dollars and sentenced to one year's hard labor.¹⁴ Columbus Avery, a black miner from McDowell County, West Virginia, who had worked briefly as a labor recruiter, recalled that the general manager provided the “train tickets and I would go South and pick up a bunch of colored men and put them on a train.” According to Avery, “If the law caught you with a bunch of tickets, you were gone. A couple of my friends were arrested. It was too dangerous for me, so I quit after a couple of months. The last transportation I pulled, I brought about 1,000 people to West Virginia and Kentucky.”¹⁵ The labor agent received as much as ten dollars per recruit, and all able-bodied men were accepted. In fact, agents were instructed to “pick workers with strong backs and weak minds, as they give the least trouble.” Nor was there any effort to screen out criminals or other undesirable elements. Indeed, many agents made arrangements with local jailers to empty the cells of those prisoners who agreed to emigrate.¹⁶ The imported men were charged for their transportation, and the money was deducted from their first few months' pay. When they arrived in the coalfields the “transportation” men frequently attempted to evade paying the railway fare by slip-

¹³ Howard B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia: The Story of West Virginia's Four Major Mine Wars and Other Thrilling Incidents of Its Coal Fields* (Morgantown, W. Va., 1969), 4–5. See also Homer Lawrence Morris, *The Plight of the Bituminous Coal Miner* (Philadelphia, 1934), 60–61; William Major Veasley interviewed by Keith Dix, October 27, 1976, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Collection (West Virginia University Library, Morgantown, W. Va.). The quotation is from Lee as cited.

¹⁴ Division of Negro Economics, *Negro Migration*, 51, 52–53, 62–65.

¹⁵ Tim R. Massey, “I Didn't Think I'd Live to See 1950: Looking Back With Columbus Avery,” *Goldenseal: West Virginia Traditional Life*, VIII (Spring 1982), 37. See also the testimony of Tom Gray in U. S. Congress, Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Conditions in the Paint Creek District, West Virginia*, Hearings, S.R. 37, 63d Cong., 1 Sess., Part 1 (Washington, 1913), 1136–40, and testimony of R. H. Anderson in Part 2, p. 1589.

¹⁶ Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 7.

ping away from their contractors to work for other operators to whom they were not obligated. At Stonega, Virginia, nearly 20 percent of the men brought in on transportation between 1905 and 1915 left without working.¹⁷

A large but indefinite number of black miners came to central Appalachia in this fashion, but the vast majority migrated on their own initiative. For example, Hilton Garrett traveled alone by train from Birmingham to Wheelwright, Kentucky; and after saving enough money from his wages, Garrett sent for his wife, who was accompanied on the trip by his brother and a friend.¹⁸ The promise of higher wages was the most important single reason blacks left the South for the Appalachian coalfields. Whereas Alabama operators followed the dictates of segregation and paid blacks a lower wage than whites for the same work, central Appalachian coal companies followed a policy of equal pay for equal work.¹⁹

Acting on orders from Attorney General Thomas W. Gregory in Washington, U. S. Attorney Robert N. Bell of Atlanta launched an investigation into the activities of three labor agents for Consolidation Coal Company operations in eastern Kentucky and one agent for two southern West Virginia companies, who were recruiting black workers in Birmingham and Bessemer. Bell's 1916 report to the attorney general concluded that the Alabama Great Southern Railroad Company had carried practically all of the 6,359 men (and some wives) recruited by the Consol agents between April and October 1916. Nearly all of the tickets were issued for destinations in the coalfields of Kentucky and West Virginia, but the largest consignments were for the Kentucky towns of Jenkins (1,379); McRoberts (728); and Fleming (354). The other agent possessed records for 1916 that listed 97 black migrants exported in April; the figure increased each succeeding month until it reached 1,446 in September before it slipped to 909 in October. The total number of black

¹⁷ W. P. Tams, *The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia* (Morgantown, W. Va., 1963), 61; Dean Andrew Herrin, "From Cabin to Camp: Southern Mountaineers and the Coal Town of Stonega, Virginia" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1984), 79; *Annual Report, 1915*, p. 10, Westmoreland Coal Company Records (Hagley Museum and Library, Greenville, Del.); National Endowment for the Humanities Report, *On Dark and Bloody Ground: An Oral History of the U.M.W.A. in Central Appalachia, 1920-1935* (Charleston, W. Va., 1973), 75.

¹⁸ See for example NEH Report, *On Dark and Bloody Ground*, 91, 117, 119; John Stealey interviews with Archie Reeves, June 28, 1967, and with Jerry Davis, June 6, 1967, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Collection; Hilton Garrett interviewed by Luther Frazier, August 8, 1973, tape 650, Appalachian Oral History Project (Alice Lloyd College Library, Pippa Passes, Ky.).

¹⁹ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 48, 143, 146; and "Job Control and Race Relations," 40-43, 56-57; and Fishback, "Employment Conditions of Blacks," 147-69.

migrants transported by this single labor agent came to 5,195.²⁰

Data compiled by the Division of Negro Economics show a similarly large emigration between November 1, 1916, and May 1, 1917. During this period, 7,780 tickets were issued at Bessemer and Birmingham to blacks bound for the coalfields of Kentucky and West Virginia, and the records were accessible to the division for only one of the five railroads serving these two points.²¹ The *verifiable* number of blacks emigrating from the mineral district to central Appalachia between April 1, 1916, and May 1, 1917, thus totaled 12,975. This figure would be much higher, of course, if the records for other labor agents, the number of blacks who left on their own, and the tickets sold by other railroad companies serving the Birmingham mineral district were available.

The departure of so many blacks from Birmingham and Bessemer during such a brief period did not go unnoticed in Alabama. Local officials worried over the causes behind the exodus, but U. S. Attorney Bell seems to have been correct in his assessment that in the late spring or early summer of 1916, crops in central Alabama were destroyed by storms, and farmers were unable to furnish provisions to their black farmhands. Forced off the land, these black workers converged upon nearby cities, especially Birmingham, where many availed themselves of the opportunity to emigrate, while others entered local mines "very cheaply." That "put some good miners out of employment," and in turn those displaced men sought work elsewhere, thereby opening up a prime field for the labor recruiters. Exacerbating the problem, Alabama coal companies employed workers indirectly through contractors, who then took a liberal payment for themselves out of workers' wages. At least some of the men who left Alabama for the Appalachian fields were union men opposed to such practices.²²

Like their counterparts in the northern cities, Democratic politicians in Kentucky and West Virginia suspected that the Republicans were importing blacks, who still voted overwhelmingly Republican, to swing the 1916 elections, and they conveyed their concerns to

²⁰ U. S. Attorney Robert N. Bell to U. S. Attorney General, October 25, 1916; enclosures "April last to October 12th, 1916," and "List of Names of Men Transported by Labor Agents Estes of Birmingham, Alabama, Oct. 3–Oct. 26, 1916," file 182363, General Records of the Department of Justice, Record Group 60 (National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D. C.).

²¹ Division of Negro Economics, *Negro Migration*, 54–55.

²² U. S. Attorney Robert N. Bell to U. S. Attorney General, October 25, 1916, file 182363, RG 60. A Tennessee Coal & Iron Company official claimed that 75 percent of the thirty-six hundred employees in that company's mines had come from the farms during the previous twelve months. Division of Negro Economics, *Negro Migration*, 63.

President Woodrow Wilson. As a result, Attorney General Gregory was directed to investigate charges that the coal companies, in particular, were bringing in blacks for political purposes. Irregularities did occur periodically, but voting fraud was not directly correlated with the black migration. Many mountain counties in central Appalachia had already earned deservedly poor reputations for electoral fraud, but the assertion that blacks were illegally voted was often repeated by state and local Democrats for partisan political advantage. U. S. attorneys in central Appalachia did not express concern about the possibility that coal companies would attempt to register black voters who did not meet the residency requirement.²³

Whatever their relationship to the ballot box, it is clear that thousands of blacks who came to the mining camps of central Appalachia did not consider themselves permanent residents or even permanent miners. Eighty-five percent of the southern rural black population in 1890 were tenant farmers or sharecroppers. This system bound blacks on all sides, immersing them in an endless cycle of dependency and debt. To help offset anticipated farm losses, many took temporary employment in lumber, longshore, domestic, or a variety of other nonagricultural occupations in order to sustain their families during difficult years. As the radius of the movement required by the temporary jobs increasingly widened to include the northern labor markets, the migrants' ties to the tenant and sharecropping systems became correspondingly tenuous.²⁴

The reluctance of southern blacks to leave home for employment had gradually worn down by World War I. The break was not so sharp for blacks working in the coalfields, however, as is suggested by Florette Henri's observation that the black migrants to northern cities

²³ Dr. H. L. Judge (Wellsburg, W. Va.) to Attorney General, October 20, 1916; U. S. Attorney Perry B. Miller (Louisville, Ky.) to Attorney General, October 23, 1916; U. S. Attorney William Barnhard (Charleston, W. Va.) to Attorney General, October 19, 1916; U. S. Attorney Stuart Wallace to the Attorney General, October 23, 1916; Asst. U. S. Attorney General Charles Fennell to the Attorney General, October 27, 1916; U. S. Marshal to J. M. Riddle, October 27, 1916; and U. S. Attorney Perry Miller to Attorney General, October 19, 1916, all in file 182363, RG 60. See also James Henry Jacobs, "The West Virginia Gubernatorial Election Contest, 1888-90, Part I," *West Virginia History*, VII (April 1946), 159-220, and "Part II," *ibid.* (July 1946), 263-311; Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans, 1865-1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1978), 124-41, 152; and Williamson (W. Va.) *Daily News*, October 17, 1916.

²⁴ The literature on tenancy and sharecropping is too voluminous and well known to list here, but one of the most recent studies is Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York and Oxford, 1986). For a discussion of seasonal migration see Thomas Jackson Woofert, Jr., *Negro Migration* (New York, 1920), 126-27; and Peter Gottlieb, "Migration and Jobs: The New Black Workers in Pittsburgh, 1916-1930," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, LXI (January 1978), 1-15, and *Making Their Own Way*, 22-33.

"must have been homesick for the South, but few went back."²⁵ Actually, many blacks who became miners seemed to grow beyond their southern agricultural roots, but they did so very gradually. The black miner could return home for visits quite easily and frequently did so, since the migration routes usually followed the railroad lines into the Appalachian coalfields. Blacks in the West Virginia counties of Mercer and McDowell, for example, were only one day's travel from the piedmont and tidewater sections of Virginia by way of the Norfolk and Western, and a branch of the railroad connected Virginia to Durham, North Carolina. Similarly, the Louisville & Nashville linked the coalfields of Kentucky and Tennessee with Birmingham, Alabama.²⁶

Probably because West Virginia received such a disproportionate number of those blacks who migrated into central Appalachia, it was the only state that attempted to chart the demographics of this movement. In 1921 the West Virginia Bureau of Negro Welfare and Statistics was established to carry out that responsibility. The following year the bureau reported that more than 75 percent of the black male wage-earning population of West Virginia were employed as coal miners and more than 60 percent of the black population had been born outside the state, primarily in the South.²⁷ Because coal and lumber companies owned most of the land in southern West Virginia, black migrants had neither the opportunity to purchase farmland nor the chance to work as farm laborers when they were not employed in the mines. During slack periods, therefore, many blacks returned South to do farm work.²⁸

The largest number of blacks in the coalfields of southern West Virginia who had been born outside the state were natives of Virginia. The migration from adjacent Virginia counties into West Virginia was a continuous movement that dated from Reconstruction. By 1920 the 29,315 West Virginia blacks born in Virginia and the 6,512 born in North Carolina outnumbered the 33,347 native West Virginia blacks living in the state. A significant percentage either owned farms in Virginia and North Carolina or had relatives who did. When work became irregular or wages declined substantially, they returned to these homes until work in West Virginia improved.²⁹ The Virginia migrants often used coal as a cash crop, viewing the

²⁵ Henri, *Black Migration*, 130.

²⁶ Lawrence, "Appalachian Metamorphosis," 133-34.

²⁷ West Virginia Bureau of Negro Welfare and Statistics (WVBNWS), *Report, 1921-22* (Charleston, n. d.), 12-13.

²⁸ "Industrial Relations and Labor Conditions," *Monthly Labor Review*, XVI (April 1923), 21-23.

²⁹ WVBNWS, *Report, 1923-24* (Charleston, 1924), 10.

mines as a way to maintain their hold on farms back home. A black minister described this annual cycle:

It used to be the common thing for men of my people to own farms in Virginia or North Carolina. They would go home and get the crop started and perhaps, having a son who would carry it on, the father would go back to the mining fields and work. On this account many of their children were born in Virginia or North Carolina when their fathers were really in West Virginia. Finally the son would not be content to stay on the farm but would insist on going to the mining fields with the father. So, the whole family would come at last.³⁰

As this description suggests, many black miners were able to become industrial workers and at the same time to retain their identity as farmers after arriving in the coal camps of Appalachia. In fact, the prominence of the land itself in the daily life of this rural-industrial occupation actually encouraged the retention of the agricultural frame of reference. As late as 1972 sociologist Kai Erikson, then in southern West Virginia conducting field research into the psychological effects of the 1972 Buffalo Creek flood in Logan County where a mine waste impoundment collapsed killing 125 people, was struck by the intimate relationship that prevailed between the residents of this coal mining hollow and the landscape. In fact, these mountain folk did not so much “live *on* the land as *in* it,” he observed, because “most of the terrain they see and relate to is either above them or below them, enveloping them on all sides.”³¹ Erikson’s description of West Virginians immersed in a culture sustained and nourished by the land also characterized the lives of miners in the region during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Many early coal towns actually resembled semi-agricultural villages. More than half of the black migrants who came to these coal-fields had been sharecroppers, and most of the European immigrants and local white mountaineers had been farmers as well. This accounts for the agricultural character of many Appalachian coal towns where gardening was extensive and raising livestock was widespread. In 1924 the West Virginia Coal Association estimated that a majority of the state’s coal miners cultivated gardens and raised livestock and barnyard fowl. The percentage was higher in the southern counties, where over 70 percent of the miners reportedly tilled gardens and raised livestock.³²

³⁰ Quoted from James T. Laing, “The Negro Miner in West Virginia” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1933), 126–27.

³¹ Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York, 1976), 130.

³² David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West*

Prior cultural baggage and economic realities coalesced in the coal camps to encourage the continuance of farming in this industrial setting. Wage-earning work for women and children was scarce in the coal mining villages, and little opportunity existed for them to supplement the family income as they had in the cotton South by working in the fields. In central Appalachia women and children reduced family expenditures at the company store by raising crops and animals for their own use, thus serving the same economic function by alternate means.³³

In "model" company towns, those in which the operator attempted to "uplift" the quality of life for coal miners and their families while retaining complete social control, gardening was not only encouraged but also rewarded. Cash awards for the best garden, free seed and fertilizer, and expert advice were supplied by some operators to instill the miners with values that buttressed the edifice of capitalist society, such as a personal improvement orientation and individual competitiveness.³⁴ The coal companies encouraged the cultivation of foodstuffs for several reasons, but the workers responded enthusiastically to this type of agriculture because it was an extension of previously acquired skills that they valued.

In this way many black migrants were able to retain more continuity with their past than was possible for their peers who moved to the cities. Miners could easily remain in close contact with friends and relatives back home as well. For example, the *McDowell Times*, published in Keystone, West Virginia, by and for blacks, regularly printed social news of weddings, funerals, sermons, illnesses, or festivals from eastern Virginia and North Carolina.³⁵

The new black culture that emerged in the coalfields was a transitional culture for the most part, a hybrid of southern rural-agricultural roots transplanted and adapted to a new landscape.

Virginia Miners, 1880-1922 (Urbana, Chicago, and London, 1981), 33; West Virginia Coal Association, "Gardens in Mining Towns," *West Virginia Review* (October 1924), inside cover; Nettie Pauline McGill, *Welfare of Children in Bituminous Coal Mining Communities in West Virginia*, Children's Bureau, U. S. Department of Labor (Washington, 1923), 52-54. The black-owned *Keystone (W. Va.) McDowell Times* frequently pointed with pride to the extensive gardens cultivated by black miners in the southern West Virginia coalfields. See for example the issues of January 30, 1914, July 13, 1917, and May 17, 1918.

³³ *United Mine Workers Journal*, May 28, 1896; Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 32-34.

³⁴ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 123. See also *Coal Age*, VI (August 15, 1914), 264, 273; (August 22, 1914), 311-13; XII (July 28, 1917), 166; (November 17, 1917), 845, 856. For model towns see Robert F. Munn, "The Development of Model Towns in the Bituminous Coal Fields," *West Virginia History*, XL (Spring 1979), 243-53.

³⁵ Lawrence, "Appalachian Metamorphosis," 133-34; *Keystone (W. Va.) McDowell Times*, November 28, 1913, December 18, 1914, October 15, 1915, June 23, 1916, June 15, 1917, and November 1, 1918. For examples of black migrants to the cities who retained close links with their home community see Bethel, *Promiseland*, Chap. 8.

Herbert G. Gutman has argued that workers retained their "preindustrial" traditions in order to resist the attempts of industrialists to remold them into a malleable and dependent proletariat. The earlier, preindustrial customs, he argued, permitted workers to maintain a meaningful identity in the harsh, impersonal environment of industrializing America.³⁶ Certainly most of the migrants who settled in the coalfields of Appalachia were from such a background. Even during World War I and the postwar twenties, when many migrants arrived from the Birmingham mineral district, most of them had been farm workers forced off the land and into industrial labor in Alabama. But the retention of agricultural customs in this particular industrial environment was a rational cultural and economic response, not merely an attempt to cling to the past. In fact, agricultural skills were functional in the transition to an industrial life. The continuity of certain aspects of farm life in the coal mining mountains, therefore, facilitated a gradual transformation from peasant to proletarian for these southern blacks. As David Corbin has noted, "The traditions and habits they preserved were traditions and habits that eased, smoothed, and aided their adjustment to an industrialized way of life and work."³⁷

Unlike the violent clash between cultural and work values that occurred when rural black migrants entered city and factory, there was much in the structure and relations of work in the coal mines that mitigated such conflict. Neither black nor white "peasants" who entered mining during this period were compelled to restructure their work habits radically in order to accommodate themselves to what E. P. Thompson called "new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively."³⁸

By 1925, when labor economist Carter Goodrich published his classic *The Miners' Freedom*, coal mining technology and the organization of labor had remained fundamentally unchanged from what it had been at the beginning of the industrial revolution in England. With decisions relating to work, discipline, and production controlled by the miner, work relations in coal mining remained nearly untouched by the forces of rationalization that had been revolutionizing American factory life for decades. In Appalachia, as in most American coalfields, work was not yet regulated by time clocks or time studies; supervision remained casual; miners controlled their

³⁶ Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, LXXVIII (June 1973), 558-61 (quotation on p. 561). On this point Gutman followed the lead of E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, XXXVIII (December 1967), 57.

³⁷ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 56 n47.

³⁸ Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 57.

own tools, their own work places, and the pace and number of hours they labored. Coal mining, in fact, still operated at the cottage industry stage of development.³⁹ Thus miners' freedom had become part of an established web of labor relations shrouded by centuries of custom and accepted by operators and miners alike by the time the arms of advanced capitalism reached out to embrace central Appalachia's natural resources. Management interference with the miners' prerogatives was fiercely resisted, prompting the editor of a professional management magazine to warn other industrial employers to avoid hiring the former coal miner, for he "resents all suggestion as to his working methods, resents all effort to compel continuous application, and assumes in general a hostile attitude to all supervision."⁴⁰

Professional managers found the miners' lack of servility objectionable, but many black migrants preferred coal mining because the miners' traditional independence resembled familiar work patterns on the farm. Like farming, traditional methods of coal mining called for alternate periods of intensive labor and rest and permitted miners, who were paid by the ton rather than the hour, simply to walk out of the mine when they had mined enough. Coal mining involved little direct white supervision during this era, an important consideration for southern blacks who had left the South to escape constant scrutiny by whites. This they could not do in the factories. One black miner from southern West Virginia informed Goodrich that he had worked a stint in a northern factory but returned to the coalfields because in the mines the supervisors "don't bother you none." Homer Morris, the Quaker social service worker, claimed in 1934 that the miners' freedom "appeals especially to the Negro," for it enabled him to escape some of the discrimination encountered in other occupations. One black miner informed Morris that he could be "his own boss" and did not appreciate someone pushing him to "hurry up" all the time.⁴¹

The economic system under which the typical company town operated also reflected a vaguely familiar industrial outline of the tenant farm system blacks had left in the South, but without some of its more

³⁹ Carter Goodrich, *The Miners' Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry* (Boston, 1925), and "Nothing but a Coal Factory," *New Republic*, XLIV (September 16, 1925), 91-93; *Coal Age*, XX (July 7, 1921), 13; Keith Dix, *Work Relations in the Coal Industry: The Hand-Loading Era, 1880-1930* (Morgantown, W. Va., 1977), Chaps. 1-2. For the resistance to loss of craft control among other workers see David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge, Eng., and other cities, 1979), Chap. 1.

⁴⁰ H. A. Haring, "Three Classes of Labor to Avoid: Prejudices and Habits Displayed by Men in Certain Occupations," *Factory and Industrial Management*, LXII (December 1921), 370-73 (quotation on p. 372).

⁴¹ Goodrich, *The Miners' Freedom*, 15-16 (quotation on p. 16); Morris, *Plight of the Bituminous Coal Miner*, 67 (second, third, and fourth quotations).

oppressive characteristics. Neither system functioned as a cash economy on a daily basis. Instead, economic exchange was based on a credit arrangement that enabled planters to assure that their fields were cultivated while at the same time allowing poor blacks (and whites) at least the trappings of the independent yeoman farmer, a system so familiar now that it needs no reiteration here. Black migrants readily identified the general outlines of the sharecropping system in the coal company town. If the migrant had virtually nothing but the willingness to work, the company provided a place to live and tools, work supplies, and food from the company store. The new miner was charged for these advances and the cost of transportation, when appropriate, against the coal he produced. The miner, therefore, often began his mining career in debt and, as with cotton, had to produce a sufficient amount to clear the balance sheet of these initial charges for rent and supplies as well as those charges accrued between pay periods. Paydays were, in effect, settlement days for many miners who, like tenant farmers, sometimes could not free themselves of credit dependency. The coal company store, like its plantation counterpart, has earned a historical reputation as a mechanism for exploitation.⁴² In fact, Ray Stannard Baker made a direct comparison between the two when he observed that the plantation store "corresponds to the company or 'truck' store of Northern mining regions."⁴³

Although the two systems paralleled each other in outline, the details of operation revealed very important differences to the practiced eye of southern migrants. For one thing, "settlement" time came much more frequently in the mine camps, usually once or twice a month rather than annually, and the pay was significantly better. In the mid-twenties, when agricultural laborers in the South earned no more than \$.75 to \$1.00 per day, and tenants too often finished the year in debt, unskilled urban black workers were earning \$2.50 or less per day. Black coal miners in central Appalachia, on the other hand, averaged \$3.20 to \$7.40 for an eight-hour shift.⁴⁴ Moreover, if the abuse became too overwhelming in one company town, the miner simply moved on to another camp. That escape valve, the freedom to move from one coal camp to another, undoubtedly proved exhilarating to black migrants from the Deep South and was a powerful attrac-

⁴² Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era* (rpt. ed.; New York, 1964), p. 75; Fishback, "Employment Conditions of Blacks," Chap. 7, analyzes and rejects the oft-repeated contention that the coal company store was an instrument of exploitation.

⁴³ Baker, *Following the Color Line*, 99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 75 (quotation); WVBNWS, *Report, 1927-28* (Charleston, n.d.), 16; Henri, *Black Migration*, 53; Fishback, "Employment Conditions of Blacks," 147-69.

tion in the movement of blacks from the South into the Appalachian coalfields.

Blacks liked the freedom from white supervision found inside the mines as well as the physical mobility above ground. Although they controlled their own labor, they did not control the rate of pay for that labor, and when they received less than they were willing to work for, blacks, like their white counterparts, simply left for another camp. One scholar claimed in 1909 that half of all the black miners changed residence once a year.⁴⁵

Black migrants, therefore, found a system of work and economic exchange that muted the shock of entering industrial life. The shock was further mitigated by the easy transplantation of traditional institutions to the coalfields. The most important of these was the family. During the early thirties, sociologist James T. Laing conducted the most exhaustive social survey of the black miner ever undertaken. Those blacks sampled in Laing's study lived in the southern counties of West Virginia where primarily first and second generation migrants from Virginia, North Carolina, and Alabama resided. Laing found that 76 percent of the black miners that he interviewed were married, and 81.6 percent of their wives were born either in Virginia (47 percent), North Carolina (12.5 percent), Alabama (11.2 percent), or other southern states (10.9 percent). Only 15.3 percent of the wives were born in West Virginia. The percentage of married miners was corroborated by Homer Morris, who surveyed unemployed miners in Kentucky and West Virginia and calculated that 85.7 percent of them were married.⁴⁶ The process of establishing families is reflected in the sex ratios, which showed a steady decline in the male imbalance from 145.8 in 1910, to 124.9 in 1920, and 114.3 in 1930.⁴⁷

Although the migrants believed themselves to be better off in West Virginia, they were, nevertheless, disillusioned with the hardships of coal camp life and unhappy with separation from the land of their birth and kin. Therefore, they tended to idealize memories of their former lives farther south, and because their wives shared those same images, the transition became more endurable.⁴⁸

Laing also found, however, that place of origin was an important source of division within the black mining community. West Virginia

⁴⁵ George T. Surface, "The Negro Mine Laborer: Central Appalachian Coal Field," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, XXXIII (March 1909), 116-17.

⁴⁶ Laing, "The Negro Miner in West Virginia," 326-27; Morris, *Plight of the Bituminous Coal Miner*, 44-45.

⁴⁷ U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, 1918; rpt., ed., New York, 1968), 150-51, and *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32* (Washington, 1935), 838-40.

⁴⁸ Laing, "The Negro Miner in West Virginia," 332.

and Virginia blacks tended to view their peers from the Deep South with condescension. Alabama blacks took "pride in being 'bad'" while those from the Virginias deemed such behavior unrefined. The more northerly blacks also considered Alabamians aggressive, mean, and foul-tempered and claimed that many of them carried guns. One woman declared that West Virginia blacks did not "mess with these Alabama people. They'll kill you in a minute." On the other hand, Alabamians regarded their upper South neighbors as haughty and "overbearin'." Such perceptions reflected a significant "clash of mores" within the race that drove both groups to associate with people of similar origin and resulted in each group's being "clannish."⁴⁹ This internal schism must not be overdrawn, however, for on issues involving the race, blacks quickly drew together into cohesive unity and showed a strong preference for adjusting problems internally without recourse to the white establishment.⁵⁰

The church was another transplanted social institution that helped to define black culture in the coalfields. Black migrants were overwhelmingly Baptists. Of the 542 miners Laing interviewed in southern West Virginia, 388 (71.6 percent) of them were church members, and 298 (76.8 percent) of those were Baptists. The state director of religious education and missions for the Baptist church in West Virginia, the Reverend J. J. Turner, claimed in the early 1930s that 80 percent or more of the blacks in the coalfields were Baptists.⁵¹ By contrast, Baptists accounted for only 20 percent of total church membership in West Virginia in 1916, the Methodists 36.5 percent, the Presbyterians 6.7 percent, and all other religious bodies (mostly holiness churches) claimed 36.8 percent of the total. The Virginia mountains reflected a very similar distribution, while Kentucky mountain counties showed 48 percent Baptists, 16.8 percent Methodists, 3.6 percent Presbyterians, and 31.6 percent all others.⁵²

The original Baptist churches in the coalfields grew out of small congregations of migrants who gathered on Sunday to hear fellow miners preach. These churches were then recognized by the denomination, which placed few restrictions on the creation of new churches

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 456-58; James T. Laing, "Social Status Among Migrant Negroes," *Social Forces*, XVI (May 1938), 564-66 (third, fourth, and fifth quotations on p. 565); Yvonne Snyder Farley, "Homecoming," *Goldenseal: West Virginia Traditional Life*, V (October-December 1979), 14-15.

⁵⁰ Laing, "The Negro Miner in West Virginia," 461, and "Social Status Among Migrant Negroes," 566.

⁵¹ WVBWNS, *Report, 1927-28*, pp. 65-67; Laing, "The Negro Miner in West Virginia," 424-25.

⁵² John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York, 1921; rpt. ed., Lexington, Ky., 1969), 172.

or on formal training for the clergy. As the churches grew, many of the preachers gave up mining to serve their flocks on a full-time basis. As the camps developed into towns, trained clergymen entered the fields to assume leadership of the churches and thus created a division between professional and self-trained clergy. The educated clergy also encountered resistance from congregations composed of rural southerners when they attempted to edge them closer to mainstream standards by concentrating more on social improvement and less on emotional, ritualistic expression and preparation for death. One frustrated clergyman informed Laing that the greatest resistance came from the southern migrants who “fought against me vigorously” and then “deserted and left me alone.”⁵³

It is likely that preferences in style of religious expression constituted another source of division between Afro-Americans from the Virginias, who tended to conform more to mainstream practices, and those from the Deep South, who adhered to practices more in keeping with their rural folk origins. Black historian Carter G. Woodson, a native of West Virginia who had worked in the mines as a youth, was convinced that the rural black church was “inherently different” from the mainstream church. Rather disparagingly, Woodson characterized the church of “backwoods Negroes” in the South as a static institution. Blacks saw no need for changes in their old-time religion; therefore, services often resembled séances, where people congregated for praising, preaching, and praying until they were moved by the Holy Spirit to emotional ecstasy. Whereas the rural church of the Deep South prepared its worshippers for life after death, mainstream churches functioned more as an “uplift agency” for this world and relied more on rational discourse with sound theological underpinnings than on emotion.⁵⁴ Coalfield blacks were, therefore, stratified according to church versus nonchurch membership, and, among the church members, social divisions occurred according to mainstream versus traditional religious expression.

The black church of either stripe served not only the emotional and spiritual needs of its members but also some of their social, recreational, and educational requirements as well. Suppers on the grounds, baseball games, and reading programs all were secular activities performed by the church. Black churches of the Deep South were so involved in such activities that southern sociologist Howard

⁵³ Laing, “The Negro Miner in West Virginia,” 425, 428, 433 (quotations).

⁵⁴ Carter G. Woodson, *The Rural Negro* (New York, 1969), 158–60 (first and third quotations on p. 159; second quotation on p. 158); Laing, “Social Status Among Migrant Negroes,” 566. See also E. Franklin Frazier, *Negro Church in America* (New York, 1964), 51–52.

W. Odum was prompted to observe in 1910 that social gatherings among southern blacks could be classified as "those which are held under the auspices of the church, and those which are not."⁵⁵ This tradition was transported to central Appalachia, and some twenty years later Laing claimed that the high level of participation in church affairs among black miners followed the "traditional leisure-time activity of the Southern Negro."⁵⁶

Other leisure-time habits and customs of the black migrants were easily transplanted to the coalfields as well. Informal recreational opportunities were restricted in both environments and tended to be informal open-air activities. "Time-killing" with gossiping, story-telling, arguing, and teasing on the porch of the country store in the Alabama black belt found its mirror image in the company store of the coalfields. The neighborhood barbershop as a social center for urban black males had its rural equivalent in the backporch barber found both in the Deep South and in the coalfields. Cards, checkers, and horseshoes were avidly pursued rural entertainments that the migrants brought with them to Appalachia. Hunting and fishing, also transported from the Deep South, provided rural recreation and food for the table.⁵⁷

Even though black miners received equal pay for equal work, the migrants did not escape segregation in Appalachia. The full complement of Jim Crow laws were enacted in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, and coal companies generally imposed these racial restrictions in social and institutional life. Although integration prevailed inside the mine, segregation ruled on the outside, and the separate facilities often were not equal. Negro sections, such as "Nigger Town" in Stonega, Virginia, usually were the least desirable in the camps. The company store generally served everyone equally, but the bathhouses, soda fountains, clubhouses, poolhalls, bars, and churches all were segregated. Some towns, such as Wheelwright, Kentucky, even employed black deputies to police the black section of town.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Howard W. Odum, *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* (New York and London, 1910), 228.

⁵⁶ Laing, "The Negro Miner in West Virginia," 411-12 (quotation on p. 412).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 392-94, 397, 404-7; Douglas Clyde Divens, "Hunting Squirrels and Leaving Home," *Goldenseal: West Virginia Traditional Life*, XII (Summer 1986), 7-8.

⁵⁸ Margaret Ripley Wolfe, "Putting Them in Their Places: Industrial Housing in Southern Appalachia, 1900-1930," *Appalachian Heritage*, VII (Summer 1979), 31; Herrin, "From Cabin to Camp," 60-61; Warren Wright interviewed by Laurel Anderson, n.d., tape no. 854; McCullom Cook interviewed by Clara Higgins, September 15, 1971, tape no. 107; Dewey Osborne interviewed by Patti Rose, June 29, 1971, tape no. 51; B. L. C. Ratliff interviewed by Charles Patton and Doug Hale, n.d., tape no. 190; Hilton Garrett interviewed by Luther Frazier, August 8, 1973, tape no. 650; and Marvin Gullett interviewed by Ron Daley, November 2, 1975, tape no. 1128; all in Appalachian Oral History Project.

The great majority of blacks in central Appalachia lived in southern West Virginia, where only miscegenation and integrated education were constitutionally prohibited. Nevertheless, segregation was practiced, and company policy, rather than state law, created parallel social structures in the coal camps, where more than 90 percent of the miners in southern West Virginia lived in 1925.⁵⁹ In addition to being the sole employer in the company town, the operator owned all public facilities and controlled all social services, which gave coal companies potent political power.⁶⁰

There were few blacks elsewhere in the state. Therefore, most black West Virginians came under the control of coal companies, whom they blamed for perpetrating racial discrimination. Company towns were not incorporated, so blacks could not use political muscle to desegregate life in the coal camps even though they had the right to vote.⁶¹ West Virginia miners generally followed the prevailing racial norms, but the color line was flexible. Blacks occasionally lived in the white sections of town, and vice versa; and blacks and whites visited the same poolrooms and bars, though these social centers usually were divided by service counters. Blacks and whites frequently crossed the color line in informal recreation, such as cards, checkers, and pickup baseball.⁶² The policy of equal pay for equal work and the rather flexible system of segregation practiced in central Appalachia, particularly in West Virginia where most blacks lived, encouraged open and cordial race relations compared with those in the Deep South.

Black miners experienced a relative equality on the job during the period prior to the Great Depression, but they did, nonetheless, encounter racial discrimination in the workplace. Supervision was almost exclusively a white preserve, and maintenance and machine-operator positions were generally restricted to whites, although not sealed off entirely. Afro-Americans did find ready acceptance in the general labor classifications inside the mines such as coal loaders, pick miners, and laborers. Between 1907 and 1932, the percentage of whites found in the inside jobs ranged between 53 and 80 percent of the total with a large percentage of them in machine jobs. On the other hand, between 77 and 92 percent of the blacks were represented

⁵⁹ *Senate Document*, 68 Cong., 2 Sess., No. 195: *Report of the United States Coal Commission*, Pt. 3 (Serial 8402-3, Washington, 1925), 1465-68.

⁶⁰ *Report of the U. S. Coal Commission*, Pt. 1 (Serial 8402-1), 169; U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Housing by Employers in the United States*, Bulletin no. 263 (Washington, 1920), 21; and Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 193-94, 197.

⁶¹ Obie McCollum to Walter White, October 17, 1930, Branch Files, Charleston, W. Va., Group I, Series G, Box 215, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.).

⁶² Laing, "The Negro Miner in West Virginia," 480-86.

in the inside jobs and in the harder, dirtier, and more dangerous jobs as loaders and laborers.⁶³

As the use of mechanical loaders spread throughout the industry during the 1930s and 1940s and an integrated machine production system began to move underground, reducing the demand for human coal loaders, racial discrimination became more salient. Blacks were disproportionately affected by the introduction of machines because they were concentrated in the handloading and unskilled jobs that could be performed mechanically. Further increasing the probability of blacks' losing their jobs was the common practice prior to the late 1940s of laying off miners according to job classification seniority rather than to mine-wide seniority.⁶⁴ As a consequence, the number of blacks in the industry slid from 55,142 to 30,042 between 1930 and 1950, a decline of 46 percent. In the central Appalachian states, which contained the largest concentration of black miners, their numbers fell from 31,534 to 19,380 during these same years, a decline of 38 percent.⁶⁵

Management was responsible for hiring, firing, upgrading, and training, and many employers simply believed that blacks were either mentally incapable of operating sophisticated machinery or were too unreliable to be depended upon. As labor demand fell, these inherently racist ideas were easily acted upon.⁶⁶ Although the union had always been open to blacks and a grievance system existed, the UMWA demonstrated little concern for protecting the interests of its black members against layoffs resulting from mechanization. At times this represented covert "discrimination by omission," as economist Herbert R. Northrup contended, and sometimes overt discrimination by white miners who refused to work with blacks when whites were unemployed. In 1944 Northrup declared that if blacks contin-

⁶³ Price Fishback, "Segregation in Job Hierarchies: West Virginia Coal Mining, 1906-1932," *Journal of Economic History*, XLIV (September 1984), 769-72; and "Employment Conditions of Blacks," 297 and 315 n43. See also Reginald Millner, "Conversations with the 'Old Man': The Life and Times of a Black Appalachian Coal Miner," *Goldenseal: West Virginia Traditional Life*, V (January-March 1979), 59-61; C. J. Fuetter, "Mixed Labor in Coal Mining," *Coal Age*, X (July 22, 1916), 137; and WVBNEWS, *Report, 1921-22*, p. 58.

⁶⁴ Darold T. Barnum, *The Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mining Industry* (Philadelphia, 1970), 29.

⁶⁵ U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the United States Population: 1930*. Fifteenth Census, Vol. 4: *Occupations by States* (Washington, 1933), Table 11; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *A Report of the Seventeenth Decennial Census of the United States: Census of Population: 1950*. Vol. 2: *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, 1952), Table 83 in Parts 17 (Ky.), 46 (Va.), and 48 (W. Va.).

⁶⁶ William Major Veasley interviewed by Keith Dix, October 27, 1976, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Collection; United Mine Workers of America, *Proceedings of the 35th Constitutional Convention, 1938*, Vol. I, 406; and Omari Musa, "Blacks Recall Three Decades in the Mines," *Militant* (April 14, 1978), 8-9.

ued to “bear the brunt” of technological unemployment, the UMWA could no longer boast of its vaunted equalitarianism and that the union’s reputation would confront its severest test during the postwar years.⁶⁷

If the UMWA’s equalitarian tradition is judged from the standpoint of evenhandedly protecting blacks from the adverse effects of mechanization rather than of its policy of open admissions, then the union failed miserably. UMWA president John L. Lewis committed himself to a policy of increased mechanization as a way to save the industry from its relatively constant state of economic depression, and he worked closely with large producers to mechanize in a way that would drive out of the industry those small, and often nonunion, producers who could not afford to invest in the modern machinery that would make them competitive.⁶⁸

The postwar period saw the industry “saved” by the introduction of the continuous miner, a technological marvel that integrated several stages of coal production from the face to the coal car into one machine. Although production was doubled, the work force was devastated, the total number of miners declining by 73 percent from 483,818 to 128,375 between 1950 and 1970. The effect on blacks was even more calamitous as their numbers fell by 88 percent from 30,042 to 3,673 during this same period.⁶⁹ Developments in central Appalachia paralleled these broader industry-wide trends, with the numbers of black miners in the region falling from 19,380 in 1950 to 2,242 in 1970, a precipitous decline of more than 88 percent.⁷⁰

The displacement of so many miners, black and white, produced an exodus from the coalfields, particularly from central Appalachia where few alternatives for other employment were available. Victor R. Daly, minority groups representative on the Region IV War Man-

⁶⁷ Barnum, *Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mining Industry*, 34–36 (quotation on p. 36); and Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York and London, 1971), 166–67, 169–71.

⁶⁸ “Continuous Coal Mining,” *Fortune*, XLI (June 1950), 118 and 127. See also Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York, 1977), 290, 496–97; and Curtis Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry* (Lexington, Ky., 1985), Chap. 5.

⁶⁹ Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 503; Joseph E. Finley, *The Corrupt Kingdom: The Rise and Fall of the United Mine Workers* (New York, 1972), 169–73, 176–77; Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole*, Chap. 4; and Barnum, *Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mining Industry*, 42–43.

⁷⁰ Seventeenth Census, Vol. 2: *Characteristics of the Population*, Table 83 in Parts 17 (Ky.), 46 (Va.), and 48 (W. Va.); U. S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population*, Vol. 1: *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, 1973), Table 184 in Parts 19 (Ky.), 48 (Va.), 44 (Tenn.), and 50 (W. Va.). The 1970 census does not tabulate occupation by race for counties. The data cited here are for the entire state and therefore reflect a slightly larger number of miners than actually existed in the counties represented in this study.

power Commission, reported in 1945 that black miners were “steadily drifting away from the industry in numbers far out of proportion to the total number of miners who have left the coal fields.” Numerous factors were involved, such as the close proximity of the Appalachian fields to major industrial centers such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Akron, where manpower was in short supply and work hazards were comparatively negligible. For the first time in their experience, therefore, black miners found an opportunity to earn a high wage with reduced risk in a place where wives and children also might find employment. Even though UMWA officials were aware of the problems confronting black miners, the union claimed to be powerless to provide a remedy. Consequently, it would be “well-nigh impossible to dam the flow of Negro miners out of the coal regions” in the future, Daly observed. It is doubtful that Daly fully realized the proportions that the exodus would assume.⁷¹

Most blacks did not come to the coalfields with the intent of establishing permanent residency but rather, according to Laing, viewed Appalachia “as a stopping place devoid of sentiment,” a place “to be endured but not loved.” Whereas migrants idealized life “back home,” their children, influenced by the dissatisfaction among the parents, failed to develop sentiments of affection toward the only home they had ever known. Not bound to the coal camps by deep emotional bonds, therefore, young blacks were already leaving the fields by the early thirties.⁷²

The same general dissatisfaction with coalfield life continued to propel black out-migration in the 1950s. A survey of black families in Raleigh, West Virginia, indicated that the children of black miners, 90 percent of whom had been born in the state, were migrating to northern cities in large numbers. The primary motivation for abandoning the coalfields among 80 percent of the young adults was their conviction that “they would make more and have a better chance in life doing work other than mining,” and a majority of black miners agreed with this assessment. Raleigh blacks, young and old alike, considered coal mining an undesirable way to earn a living because increasingly they were being restricted to dead-end jobs, and the young decided not to enter mining at all.⁷³ Joseph Haygood of Welch, West Virginia, expressed the view of most blacks when he informed a

⁷¹ Victor R. Daly, War Manpower Commission, “The Negro Miner in West Virginia,” typescript dated July 23, 1945, in the Ulysses Carter Papers. West Virginia and Regional History Collection.

⁷² Laing, “The Negro Miner in West Virginia,” 331–32 (quotations on p. 331).

⁷³ William S. Walker, “Occupational Aspirations of Negro Family Members in a Coal Mining Community” (unpublished Master’s thesis, New York University, 1950), 47–60, 133, 170, 202–3, as cited in Barnum, *Negro in the Bituminous Coal Mining Industry*, 50–51 (quotation on p. 51). All masters’ theses have been removed from the archives of NYU and returned to their authors.

reporter that he did not want his sons to become miners because they would make more "progress" in other occupations.⁷⁴ Unlike white natives of central Appalachia who left only under economic duress and returned home at the first employment opportunity, black migration from the region was more permanent.⁷⁵

Most blacks of the Great Migration left their southern homes in search of a better life, and certainly this was true of those who migrated to the central Appalachian coalfields, whether they were Alabama miners or piedmont farmers. In fact, there were many general parallels between the migration to northern industrial cities and the migration to the rural-industrial valleys of Appalachia. In both cases migrants followed established transportation routes to their destinations, while informal networks of family, friends, and acquaintances provided them with news about jobs as well as temporary transitional services. Both groups were composed primarily of low-skilled laborers in search of industrial work, and there were unfounded fears, common in both the mountains and the cities, that blacks were being brought in by local Republican machines to tilt the outcome of elections.

But there were important differences, too. For one thing, the relative scarcity of labor in central Appalachia lasted for several years beyond the war into the early twenties; and, therefore, all labor, whether native white, foreign, or black, found ready employment. As a result, the severe competition for available jobs and housing that generated so much racial conflict in northern cities did not occur in this region. The migration to central Appalachia also was less traumatic than the one to the cities. Most of the migrants to these coalfields were rural people, and, even though they came to perform industrial labor, Appalachia was still overwhelmingly rural. Moreover, these migrants were closer to home both physically and psychologically. The railroads that carried them into the mountains shaped the patterns of industrial and population development. The rails linked the coal camp migrants to their southern homes, whether

⁷⁴ *Our World*, VIII (December 1953), 25; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 182.

⁷⁵ Testimony of C. W. Davis, Executive Secretary of the Big Sandy-Elkhorn Coal Operators Association, Pikeville, Ky., U. S. Senate, *Causes of Unemployment in the Coal and Other Industries*, Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Unemployment, 84 Cong., 1 Sess. (Washington, 1955), 292. For the patterns of out-migration from central Appalachia see U. S. Department of Agriculture, Economics and Statistics Service, *Rural and Small Town Population Change, 1970-1980*, by Calvin L. Beale (Washington, 1981), 3; Lorraine Garkovich, "Kinship and Return Migration in Eastern Kentucky," *Appalachian Journal*, X (Autumn 1982), 62-70. A superb introduction to the statistical difficulties inherent in the study of this out-migration is Jack Temple Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," *Journal of Southern History*, XLIX (November 1983), 585-600, and his overview of the modern out-migration from Appalachia in *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge and London, 1987), 325-33.

they took the one- or two-day railroad trip home to Virginia or Alabama or waited for newspapers, letters, and friends to arrive by the same means.

The demand for mine labor first softened during the twenties, then collapsed during the Great Depression of the thirties; since World War II it has followed a precipitous downward slide as the technological revolution enabled companies to replace miners with machines. As a consequence, the mine work force today is a pale shadow of what it once was when coal was king, and this displacement triggered a black out-migration as descendants of the original migrants resumed the quest for greater opportunities. This generational stop-over in Appalachia was a significant variant of the Great Migration that left its imprint not only on the migrants themselves but also on the cultural landscape of Appalachia.