

# ForumJournal

VOL. 32, NO. 4

## Intangible Heritage



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation  
Leadership Forum**

# Working-class Intangible Heritage from the Pennsylvania Coal Fields

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**T**oday many of the mid-19th century workers' houses in the former company towns of the Northeastern Pennsylvanian anthracite coal fields are undistinguishable from mid-century suburban homes, down to the manicured lawns and two-car driveways. But even just 60 years ago when these houses and the shaft mines they served were still integral to the coal industry, these landscapes were radically different. The landscape was optimized for production not beauty. Simple, ad-hoc plank fences encircled house lots that were covered with subsistence gardens, fruit trees, storage sheds, and little else. Life was difficult and dirty. Grey culm (waste) banks of mining refuse stretched out from the edges of towns like a lunar landscape, releasing a constant cloud of dirt and dust into the air. The sounds of processing coal at nearby coal breakers and washeries created a consistent, deafening rumble. In maps and depictions of the built environments of these towns, it becomes clear that in these landscapes of production, there was no space for enhancing people's lives, only spaces for labor.



It is only through intangible heritage that the tactics working families used to survive and thrive within these highly controlled environments become clear. This article provides a glimpse into the intangible cultural heritage of working-class families in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania,

**Andrew and Loretta Berish working in a garden in Pardeesville, Pennsylvania, circa 1940s.**

PHOTO COURTESY GINA ROMANCHECK

thereby highlighting the parts of the historical lived experience that are lost when a purely tangible approach is taken to defining heritage.

The vulnerable social and economic positions that migrant laborers found themselves in meant that they were often forced to resort to informal and ephemeral ways of ensuring their needs were met. Intangible forms of knowledge enabled these populations to persist for generations under adverse conditions. Therefore, preserving the intangible heritage of the working classes not only captures a perspective on history that would otherwise be lost, it is a form of social justice that helps to restore power to marginalized communities by ensuring that their stories receive as much representation as the people who constructed and controlled the built environment.

### **PRESERVING WORKING-CLASS INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE**

Understanding the relationships between working-class families and their industrial environments is important because identity and place are inextricably intertwined. In industrial contexts, the often-ephemeral nature of the architecture combined with its purpose-built function and aesthetic has meant that these communities have had to [fight for preservation and recognition as heritage](#) on both national and international levels. Although industrial, and increasingly post-industrial, sites are receiving recognition as heritage that is worthy of preservation, the human stories that give these places meaning have historically been overlooked or diminished in favor of interpretations that explore the mechanical processes that took place in there.<sup>1</sup>

Documenting and preserving intangible heritage is an approach that has [gained substantial recognition](#) at an international level only in the last two decades, but is rapidly gaining traction within heritage management, including for the preservation of mining heritage. Despite this increased interest, industrial sites in the age of deindustrialization are particularly at risk for demolition as the process of economic transition “threatens to eradicate not only regional and national economic sectors but also their tangible and intangible remnants”.<sup>2</sup>



**Left:** Former company town resident Joe Michel talks to Dr. Paul Shackel and University of Maryland students about growing up in a company town.

PHOTO COURTESY CAMILLE WESTMONT



**Right:** A row of identical company houses on Main Street in Eckley, circa 1915.

PHOTO COURTESY ECKLEY MINERS' VILLAGE MUSEUM

## **COMPANY TOWNS OF NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA**

Anthracite coal was documented by European settlers on the banks of the Susquehanna River in the 1760s in the area today known as Wilkes-Barre, in Northeastern Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley. However, due to the isolated and rugged terrain, it was not feasible to ship the coal to market until river and canal navigation in the early 19th century provided an economical means of transportation. The introduction of railroads to the area in the 1840s, which further reduced the time and cost of transportation, brought new waves of investment and new mines to the Wyoming Valley. In 1854 the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a law granting companies the right to construct and manage towns on mineral lands. This act led to a rapid expansion in company towns throughout the region but also to greater control by mining companies. Mine owners could now legally act as sole employer and landlord for laborers and their families. Some chose to pay their employees in scrip that could only be spent at the company's store, where prices were inflated to trap workers in debt peonage. Because the towns were private property, owners could block labor organizers from entering or evict workers who objected to dangerous working conditions and low pay. Company towns were designed to be hierarchical and anonymous. Worker housing had a uniform

outward design with no options for individual expression, reinforcing the sense of corporate order and control over an interchangeable, undifferentiated workforce.

Despite these circumstances, the anthracite region became home to thousands of migrants from Wales, Ireland, Eastern Europe, and Southern Europe throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Workers and their families successfully tolerated these conditions in a variety of ways, including through undermining corporate appearances of control and finding places within the landscape to exert autonomy and increase self-sufficiency.

### THE ANTHRACITE HERITAGE PROGRAM

As the number of those who remember life in the anthracite region when mining was still a major industry continues to decrease, opportunities to understand how the industrial landscape was defined and used by workers slip away. In 2009 the University of Maryland’s Department of Anthropology established what would become the Anthracite Heritage Program to record, honor, and share this heritage.

The program has run an archaeological field school since 2012 and a historic preservation field school since 2017 in coal company towns outside of Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Most recently, the Anthracite Heritage Program has partnered with [Eckley Miners’ Village](#), an open-air museum that interprets life in anthracite company towns. Graduate students associated with the program have worked with community members to record oral histories about life in these



“patch towns.” Through the hosting of the field schools and a parallel community

**A coal breaker at Eckley, circa 1915.**

PHOTO COURTESY ECKLEY MINERS’ VILLAGE MUSEUM



**Woman hauling coal in Pardeesville, Pennsylvania.**

PHOTO COURTESY THE DELORENZO FAMILY

archaeology project, researchers with the Anthracite Heritage Project have been able to document the architectural landscapes of these company towns as well as the material and social realities of the people who lived and worked within them. This has brought a deeper understanding of working-class life in the Pennsylvania anthracite fields and provided a new perspective on working-class history.

Incorporating oral history interview data and public collaborative outreach into the Anthracite Heritage Project's research design has not only fundamentally shifted our relationships with the communities in which we work but has

also dramatically reshaped our understandings of the landscape and the embedded processes of power, inequality, and resistance. Oral histories and local lore have revealed that families undertook a variety of strategies to circumvent the oppression of the coal companies and redefine the industrial landscape according to their needs. This article will focus on two themes specifically related to socioeconomic strategies for survival: the informal resource economy and efforts towards self-sufficiency.

### **INFORMAL RESOURCE ECONOMY**

Working-class families in the Pennsylvania anthracite region relied heavily on the informal resource economy to meet their needs throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Oral histories and printed newspaper accounts reiterate the importance of “found”

resources. Wild berries and building materials represent two forms of discarded or found materials that working-class families became experts at exploiting. Knowledge of where to find these items and how to procure them without company awareness was a class-derived cultural practice. Although some of these informal resources are visible in the archaeological and architectural record, most of the working-class strategies associated with the exploitation of found goods only come to light during conversations and interviews with long-time residents of the coal fields.

The churned, acidic soils created through coal mining damaged existing ecosystems but created opportunities for other types of vegetation. The mined soils of the anthracite region proved to be especially welcoming for species of the *Vaccinium* family, including blueberries and huckleberries. Women and children from working-class families turned culm-bank berry-picking into a secondary source of income. Joe Falatko of Eckley recounted in 1970 that as a child in the 1930s and 1940s, he had daily summer huckleberry picking chores with the berries selling for upwards of 4 cents per quart. To increase his berry haul, Falatko learned to hitch rides by jumping onto coal train cars.<sup>3</sup> Interviews with working-class families in other towns recount similar experiences, with one woman relating that during the summer, a man with a truck would pick up a group of women from her town, drive them to the berry-bush stands, drop them off, and return at dusk to pick up the women and pay for the berries they had picked. Working-class families successfully exploited the landscapes created by industry, thereby acquiring a source of income independent from the coal companies.

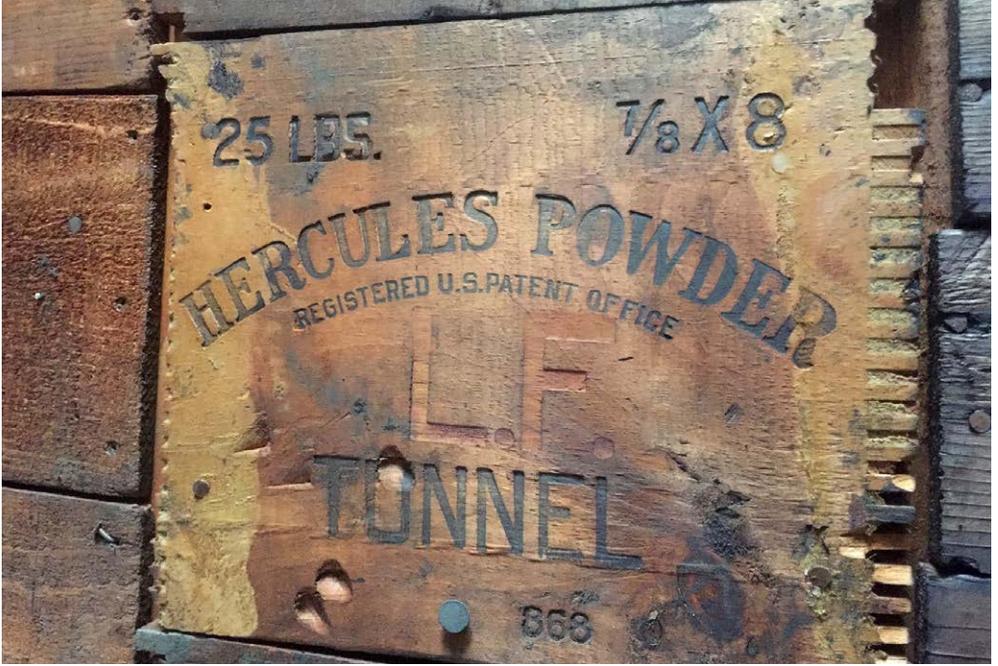
Another resource that working-class families took advantage of was the coal company's junk or trash piles. Families pilfered and reused an astounding array of items, many of which are still visible in the tenant-built outbuildings behind the company houses. Hinges, doors, iron coal size sorting screens, sheet iron, dynamite boxes, and scrap lumber were acquired and reused to build outbuildings and fences, to enclose the ceilings of attics and basements, and for insulation, amongst other purposes. Many of these reused and adapted pieces are still visible in the houses and backyards of

company towns today. However, an architectural review of the presence of these materials misses the role of working-class families in acquiring and reusing discarded or second-hand materials as part of a way of life. Being able to access these supplies allowed workers to cheaply and quickly erect or modify structures for their own purposes. This ability to shape their environments for their own purposes is a departure from company town architecture that was built and maintained according to the interests of the company.

### **EFFORTS TOWARDS SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

Families also developed ways to establish self-sufficiency through the modification of their environments, such as the region-wide practice of soil improvement. The majority of the anthracite region is covered in poorly formed, unfertile soils, hampering mining families who relied on subsistence farming to supplement poor wages. Families adapted to this reality by creating informal, long-term soil improvement projects. Families incorporated organic household refuse directly into garden topsoil and encouraged their children to collect manure from cow pastures outside of town for fertilizer.<sup>4</sup> Improving garden soils was a constant, ongoing project that represented both self-sufficiency and worker rebellion: The more productive a garden was, the less a family had to rely on the company store and traveling vendors for groceries, enabling families to break free from corporate control to some degree. Improved garden soils held both social and economic worth. Oral histories about former company towns reveal the importance of these soils: One family dug up their garden topsoil and took it with them when they moved, while another family reported that a man stole the topsoil of their neighbor's garden.

Families also gained self-sufficiency by picking coal fragments from company waste piles or digging their own “bootleg” coal mines in the yards behind their company houses. Some families had their children collect coal at the same time that they collected wild berries.<sup>5</sup> In other families, women used large metal buckets to haul coal from company waste piles back to their houses. Because this activity was technically theft from the company, families in the



Dynamite box end and scrap wood being used to enclose exposed roof beams in a house in Eckley Miners' Village Museum.

PHOTO COURTESY CAMILLE WESTMONT

19th century had to dodge the Coal and Iron Police, private company-hired police forces with a reputation for brutality. For those who dug mines in their own property, the risks were as great as the rewards. It is estimated that 5 to 10 percent of all coal sold in the United States between 1932 and 1934 originated from the bootleg mines of out-of-work miners during the Great Depression. Bootleg miners could sell coal they didn't need for less than market price, driving up demand for bootlegged coal during the 1920s and 1930s. Yet because bootleg mines received no safety oversight, miners would have been at greater risk for ceiling collapses, explosions, suffocation, and other causes of injury and death than miners working in official mines.

These practices, which had been in effect for decades before the Great Depression, provided families with additional income and additional resources in an otherwise tightly controlled industrial environment.

### **CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EVERYDAY PRACTICES**

Grassroots knowledge about the location of potential resources, including wild berry patches and scrap building materials, helped

families reframe their environment from an economic perspective. Intergenerational knowledge about soil improvement helped families reshape their physical environments to support success, while strategies to illicitly obtain coal provided working-class families with a means of becoming more self-sufficient. These systems and others were practiced and exchanged between community and family members for generations. They were adapted into different forms but ultimately became a way of life for families in the region. These traditions were unique to the working-class communities in the area and served as a major factor in enabling working-class livelihoods.

Reliance on the informal resource economy as well as on methods of self-sufficiency developed into community and regional practices that are still carried out in parts of the anthracite region today. These methods demonstrate examples of adaptive behavior that enabled families to undermine corporate control and develop greater autonomy over their situations.

While berry picking, scrap reuse, soil improvements, and coal collecting may seem like ordinary, unremarkable activities, they represent lifeways that enabled families within the anthracite region to successfully cope with the deprivations of industrial working class life for over a century. Without these and other forms of class-based intangible heritage, our understandings of life in the anthracite region and of the anthracite industry as a whole are incomplete.

### **THE PLACE OF INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN LABOR HISTORY**

Exploring the intangible heritage of the local community has provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the lives of workers and the cultural role of the built environment in coal company towns. Without considering these instances of intangible heritage set within and defined by their proximity to industrial landscapes, the lessons of survival, adaptation, ambition, and creativity remain hidden, and the real meaning of buildings—the spaces where peoples' lives are lived—are lost. The capitalist factors that created the mines and the mining towns in the

anthracite region also shaped the social relationships of the people that lived and worked within them. Preserving the mining towns without capturing the methods working-class families used to alleviate the social and economic pressures of their circumstances presents a one-sided perspective on labor history. Intangible heritage can be the key to re-integrating human experiences into discussions of industry and labor. Acknowledging these class-based tactics of survival as important and worthy of preservation also provides new opportunities for uplifting a historically marginalized population and presenting a fuller version of history. FJ

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### TAKEAWAY

For additional information about the lives of miners in the Anthracite Region of Pennsylvania, visit Eckley Miners' Village Museum, a restored 19th century coal company town.

- 1 <http://whc.unesco.org/document/102409>
- 2 <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/22/3/49>
- 3 <https://www.standardspeaker.com/news/my-town-and-now-it-belongs-to-everyone-1.2352305>
- 4 <https://books.google.com/books?id=-qZKAQAAMAAJ&dq>
- 5 <https://www.standardspeaker.com/news/my-town-and-now-it-belongs-to-everyone-1.2352305>