

Miners and Mentors: Memory and Experiences in Coal
Camp Schools in Appalachia

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There is a certain romantic allure to Appalachia that is embodied within its people, but also through their tumultuous relationships with the surrounding and undomesticated terrain. As an old traditional folk and bluegrass song states, “It's dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew, where danger is double and pleasures are few, where the rain never falls and the sun never shines, it's dark as a dungeon way down in the mine” (Travis, 1946). Coal mining’s powerful hold on Appalachia, both as an industry and as a mentality, began in the early nineteenth century and once produced two-thirds of America’s entire coal yield, which helped fuel the industrialization of America from an agrarian society into the modern industrial superpower that exists today. After the major railroad systems directly connected Appalachia to urban and metropolitan regions far removed from the mountains, boomtowns were erected to service the early coal mining industry and the miners who worked there. Lewis (2004) discusses these boomtowns in relation to the economic and logistic necessity of having a permanent base of operations for such a financially profitable endeavor. In fact, according to Lewis (2004), coal was Appalachia’s primary and most valuable natural resource in the early stages of industrialization and as profits rose, so too did the population. In fact, “the population of the central Appalachian plateau grew dramatically from less than 200,000 people in 1870 to more than 1.2 million in 1920” (Lewis, 2004, p. 65). West Virginia has over sixty major bituminous coal seams itself and, interestingly, approximately two-thirds of Appalachia’s coal is extracted via underground mining methods, whereas the remaining third is extracted through a combination of surface mining and mountaintop removal methods (Freese, 2003). So it is easy to

understand how one industry was able to monopolize such a large and isolated region, such as Appalachia, for so long.

History of Coal Industry in Appalachia

Stereotypically speaking, Appalachia is often misrepresented in popular depictions in an extremely homogenous and inaccurate manner with binaries such as “redneck” and “hick” being utilized to describe diverse people that live in Appalachia, which ironically could be anywhere from New York, West Virginia, or even Mississippi (Edwards, Asbury, & Cox, 2006)! More often than not, Appalachia brings certain, unflattering images to mind for outsiders who have never visited this region of America. Appalachia has become a powerful image in the American consciousness, which is steeped with inaccurate historical facts and misnomers about the diverse populations of people who live there (Shapiro, 1978). The American fascination with Appalachia as a region is one predominated with a sense of “otherness” because it is separate and apart from the mainstream narrative of American history, which is filled with stories of conformities and compromises, which are often not associated with historical narratives concerning Appalachia and its people (Shapiro, 1978). Appalachia is a vast region of the country that often exists within and outside of the collective understanding of what it means to be an American because of its complicated history and refusal to acquiesce to modern times. In particular, Richard Straw’s (2006) description of Appalachia as a “region rich in resources, yet a land of great poverty” is a compelling and unfortunately accurate one, in light of the larger economic issues facing the United States right now (p. 21).

Origins of Appalachian Coal Industry

Appalachia’s relationship to coal began in the nineteenth century. Appalachia in the late 19th century was a region shaped and influenced by the fallout from the American Civil War, as

the nation's expanding railroad system established a large demand and replacement for firewood as a source of energy (Freese, 2003). This desire for coal led to a significant increase in the number of immigrant miners, who flooded Appalachian coalfields in the pursuit of a decent job and wage. This new wave of Slavic, Hungarian, and Italian immigrants was greeted with open hostility from their English-speaking counterparts, as they were willing to work longer hours for less pay (Freese, 1993). However, John Mitchell and the United Mine Workers of America approached them in an effort to begin the unionization process of the coalmines, which was rife with corrupt coal barons and blatant exploitation of the hard-working miners. These wealthy and influential coal mining companies garnered real political power through their collective monopolization of the industry, as "the vast majority of the nation's anthracite and bituminous production continued to be controlled by the Reading Railroad and a handful of other railroads for decades" (Freese, 1993, p. 136). This political power was not centered in the communities and cities of Appalachia, but was instead centered in the most unlikely of areas, such as Philadelphia, New York, and London. Unfortunately, these coal barons ended up owning and controlling the entire towns in which the miners lived that sprang up around the mines (Freese, 1993). The growing concentration of power, both political and financial, which resulted from the extraction of coal impacted the lives of miners for decades to come.

Development of Coal Camp Settlements in Appalachia

During the early part of the twentieth century in American history, coal camp communities were a common phenomenon throughout Appalachia. Coal camps were small settlements in rural and remote locations that existed solely to provide residences for coal miners and their families while they worked at the company-owned mine (Shifflett, 1995). Interestingly, coal camps typically began as a collection of tents, boarding houses, or even shanties until

eventually more miners joined the company to begin working in the same mine. Eventually the mining company would employ enough workers to warrant the construction of the Company Store, which was typically the first permanent building established for any mining community because it “would become in a year or so the most essential structure in the town” (Shifflett, 1995, p. 35). Most of the other integral structures that would help support a town, such as schools and churches, would be built later in order to give the small burgeoning community to grow and establish itself both in terms of numbers of citizens, but also in terms of sustainability in the mines through coal extraction. If the mine proved profitable, then these structures would be expanded and financially supported by the coal company in an effort to truly transform these shanty communities into slightly more livable tenement structures (Shifflett, 1995). Life was extremely difficult for families living in these communities, but coal camp towns were a necessary existence in order for miners to support their families in such an economically homogenous region of the country.

The absence of all weather roads in rural Appalachia that lead to these coal mining towns, created the need for miners to live close very close to their employment. This also was further complicated by the fact that most miners were paid in a token system economy, in which the company’s owners decided to pay their employees with tokens or vouchers instead of the commonplace American currency. This system was more colloquially known as being paid via company scrip, which could only be spent in the company store and on products stocked for sale by the coal company (Shifflett, 1995). This unique scenario created a monopoly where miners were physically isolated from any other alternatives to the company store and could not afford a motorized vehicle that would more efficiently traverse the unpaved roads or grass paths than a horse-drawn wagon hitch might. This symbiotic relationship certainly benefitted the coal mining

companies more than it did the miners, as it would not be until the late 1920s when the United Mine Workers of America would start gaining significant traction in the southern West Virginian coal fields with their unionizing efforts (Freese, 1993). The coal camp school mentality and living experience had mostly disappeared by the mid 1960s, due to the fact that coal-mining sites were no longer remote, isolated locations, as they became central components to more industrious communities built around other commercial industries (Freese, 1993). In addition to this fact, coal towns are no longer monopolized by single-family owned coal operations via coal barons due to the conglomerate, internationally owned nature of the modern coal industry, although coal mining still remains one of Appalachia's primary occupations and exports.

Development of Coal Camp Schools in Appalachia

The coal camps of Appalachia also had to serve the miners' children, in terms of education and so schools were built to facilitate that goal. The isolationist nature of the coal camp communities means that there was also an interesting idea in the difference between schools in mountainous areas versus those in more urban areas and the experiences that students reported at their respective schools (Teets, 2006). One of the most interesting aspects of Appalachian education were the coal camp schools that originated as one-room schoolhouses in the early 1900s and lasted until the late 1960s. These schools became central hubs of learning and socialization for the miners' children and the educators who taught there (Teets, 2006). In addition to the coal camp schools, other schools were built to address the needs of adult learners. These were the folk schools, which taught life skills and integrated them into the curriculum. They illustrated the importance of "remedying adult illiteracy, but also providing training for high school students" (Teets, 2006, p. 125). These folk schools were based on the folklife of their Appalachian students and were distinct from the coal camp schools, which primarily taught

children in Kindergarten through the equivalent of a sixth grade education. The coal camp school's daily instructional period was typically comprised of a traditional, basic curriculum consisting of Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Biblical lessons, and Geography (Teets, 2006). This learning environment was owned by the local coal company, but was typically governed by the local Board of Education. Coal camp schools were also segregated, according to Jim Crow laws of the time. These schools have created strong memories for former students and teachers who learned and taught in them over the years.

Coal Camp School Interviews

As the number of the living former students and teachers who taught and learned in coal camp schools dwindle over the years, their memories and experiences will also fade with them, if not preserved for future generations of Appalachian students, educators, and scholars. This is where ethnographers and researchers, who utilize the anthropological principles established in the past, can work to debunk the stereotypes of Appalachian education and provide audiences with more accurate accounts of what life was actually like in this region of the United States.

The following interviews were conducted in an effort to do just that, preserve accurate accounts of Appalachian education in coal camp schools and schools similar to them from an educator's and a student's point of view. I interviewed my grandmother, Wilda Walden, who taught in a small, rural two-room schoolhouse during the 1947-1948 school year at McCommas Creek Elementary School in Dunlow, West Virginia in order to acquire the perspective from a former teacher who taught in a learning environment similar to that of a coal camp school. I also interviewed Dr. Stan Maynard, who attended two coal camp schools (Chafin Elementary School and Holden Junior High School) in Ragland and Holden, West Virginia respectively, between the years of 1948-1956. His interview allowed me the opportunity to explore the perspective

from a former student, who attended an actual coal camp school in Appalachia and then compare it to my grandmother's experiences, in order to view the similarities and differences, if any, between their accounts.

Over the course of recording and analyzing both interviews, there were five major reoccurring themes that emerged. First there was a vivid description of the local community that surrounded the schools that my grandmother taught at and the ones that Dr. Maynard attended over the years. Second, there was a strong emphasis on the different curricula for the schools that were discussed in the interviews. Next the daily routine and structure of the school day was discussed, right before both interview subjects elaborated on the student-teacher relationships that were created in this caring mentor dynamic. Finally, the success and legacy of the coal camp school mentality was discussed in order to stress the importance of the impact that this kind of school environment had on both interview subjects.

Local Community

The local community that surrounded the school at which my grandmother taught was called McCommas Creek in Dunlow, West Virginia. It consisted of approximately 200 citizens, whose families were employed in the industries of "farming, timber, coal mining, and blacksmithing" (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). In fact, McCommas Creek was very dependent on the blacksmith in the community, as he handcrafted most of the tools that be used to build the schoolhouse and many of the other important structures within the community. This shows that the community placed a high value on local artisanal skills and in a way education, as it certainly took a unique and highly skilled individual to create tools from hand that would be utilized to build important structures of the community, such as the schoolhouse. The schoolhouse in McCommas Creek was a central location of the community, as

it served instructional purposes for its students, but was also considered an important meeting location for religious services from time to time (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). The local community that surrounded the school contained many low socioeconomic families, as students often came to school hungry because they had no food at home. My grandmother said that she “could remember several students stealing lunches from others in the hallway, but would not punish them because she knew that they needed nourishment” and that she “would often share her lunch with them” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). This community, although poor, supported the school through fundraisers and religious ceremonies that were held there throughout the years.

Interestingly, the local communities surrounding the coal camp schools that Dr. Maynard attended were similar in some ways to McCommas Creek and very different in other ways. The local community surrounding Chafin Elementary School was Ragland, West Virginia and the community that surrounded Holden Junior High School was Holden, West Virginia. Dr. Maynard’s father was a manager for the Island Creek Coal Company, which operated out of Holden, and he transferred from Ragland to Holden and eventually to Huntington, West Virginia where he graduated high school from Huntington High School (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). The community of Ragland was described as a prototypical coal camp town that had no hospital or any of the other modern amenities associated with town today and had “the Company Store mentality where the management houses were all in a row and the miners all lived in small homes together” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). In contrast to the community of Ragland, Holden was “promoted as the quintessential coal camp because it had a hospital, a really good school, a movie theater, a drug store, and even a community church” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). The reason for the

disparity in the quality of the communities was the fact that Island Creek Coal Company's regional offices were located in Holden, so the company decided to allocate a great deal of its funds toward improving the community. This created a hub effect, as Holden was the hub of the wheel and all of the smaller, more impoverished coal camp communities that surrounded Holden were located in more rural, isolated regions that acted as spokes to the wheel.

Curriculum

The curriculum of the McCommas Creek Elementary School was relegated by the fact that it was a two-room schoolhouse in which my grandmother taught Kindergarten through third grade. The principal of the school taught grades four through eight on the other side of the schoolhouse, but she could not accurately recall his curriculum. Her curriculum consisted of "having Kindergarteners draw, color, learn virtues, and recognize their alphabet," whereas the more advanced students studied "spelling vocabulary words, addition and subtraction, reading, penmanship, a little geography, and science" (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). As each grade progressed, the skills became more rigorous with the addition of extra assignments. The grading scale was the traditional "A" through "F" scale and focused mostly on direct instruction and lecturing to students "sitting in long benches organized by grade and age" (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). While the students were sitting in the front benches, all of the other students were sitting in rows of desks doing homework or preparing for an upcoming test.

Dr. Maynard attended part of second grade through third grade at Chafin Elementary School and then attended Holden Junior High School for grades for through nine. The curriculum at Chafin was "pretty basic with things to learn like vocabulary, phonics, basic math and certainly nothing like today with problem-based learning initiatives" (Stan Maynard,

personal communication, July 2, 2014). Interestingly, Dr. Maynard's recollection of Chafin's curriculum is very consistent with the curriculum at McCommas Creek, as related by my grandmother. In contrast to that very rudimentary curriculum, Holden's curriculum was much broader and allowed teachers the opportunity to really engage with their students on a deep, personal level. In particular, the curriculum at Holden was "reading, writing, geography, and arithmetic," but it also "really did incorporate the history of the world, without the beauty of Google and the Internet, as books were the vehicles to foreign and exotic places" (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). So, teachers made the most of their resources and attempted to incorporate what is now known as differentiated instruction. For example, the book of *Robinson Crusoe* stood out because we looked up his deserted island on a map and discussed what the weather was like and what he would do for survival in the elements" (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). This caring approach to learning is very reminiscent of Ron Berger's (2003) concept of the mastery of learning in terms of making meaningful relationships with your students, regardless of the logistic limitations.

School Routine/Structure

The daily school routine at McCommas Creek Elementary School was very structured and regulated by the teacher with bells that signified breaks in instruction and directions from the teacher regarding the need to focus on instruction. My grandmother told me that the school had "two fifteen-minute breaks during the day with one before lunch in the morning and the other in the afternoon" and as far as a bell schedule went they had "a huge brass bell hanging from the top of the schoolhouse that rang twice a day, once to signal the beginning of instruction in the morning and another to call students back in from outside after lunch" (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). There was a great deal of control levied by the teacher and it

seemed as if my grandmother took great pleasure from that power dynamic between herself and her students, as she is a fairly demonstrative and authoritative person in nature. She grinned and said that she located “her desk inches away from the first row of benches in the classroom, so she could eat lunch at her desk and still be able to supervise them during ‘down times’” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). Also she made it clear that there was a paddle located on her desk in clear sight for everyone to see, which acted as a deterrent for bad behavior, although she claimed that she never had to use it. The daily routine consisted of “the morning bell being rung with everyone saying the ‘Pledge of Allegiance’ and no Biblical scripture, although we had the freedom to do so, if we had wished” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). This regulated system ensured that students would not only conform to the existing body of rules, but also that all of her 21 students would police one another in terms of discipline, so she would not have to.

In comparison, the daily routine for Holden Junior High School was also described as being very structured in nature. The teachers at Holden “were professional educators who dressed formally in what we might call business casual, but it was even a step higher than that with ladies wearing high heels and the principal wearing a suit and tie” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). This difference in eras was also emphasized, as Dr. Maynard made it clear to me that the dress of educators sets a tone, either professional or laid back, which students can pick up on as they progress throughout their academic careers, and in which the modern era of education is lacking in some schools across the country.

He also stated that the professional nature of their attire created a positive school-wide culture, which prevented an “us versus them mentality, even though some of the children were for mining families and others were from management families, when we all entered the doors of

Holden we were all Holden Hornets and felt equally valued” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). This is a sentiment also expressed by my grandmother when she discussed the idea of uniformity by conformity in her students, albeit her version was centered more in a power dynamic between herself and the class. Interestingly, there was also a religious component to Holden’s daily routine, as they “had an opening Lord’s Prayer to begin every day and then start the Pledge of Allegiance before instruction occurred” and that they even “had a drill in case we were bombed, as you would hide underneath your desk because of the coal fields in Logan and the chemical plants in Charleston” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). This was a very interesting scenario, as the teachers established a strict, yet caring and approachable dynamic for their students, which appears to be less present at McCommas Creek Elementary School where my grandmother taught. Instead of a bell system, a designated teacher would “ring their hand bell three times a day during recess, lunch, and then again in the afternoon to signal our release from school in order for everyone to hear it throughout the halls of that small school” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). So the daily routines for both McCommas Creek and Holden Junior High School were very structured and regulated in nature, but also had strong elements of care and thoughtfulness in their treatment toward their students.

Student-Teacher Relationships

My grandmother also discussed the student-teacher dynamic at McCommas Creek Elementary and her reasons for becoming a teacher in the first place. She said that she “always loved interacting with children and watching them learn and seeing young children interact every day” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). She wanted to make sure that I understood the fact that, although she had no formal educational training prior to entering the

classroom, that she walked two miles each way to work on dirt roads in order to instruct her students on a daily basis. She also attended “two Board of Education meetings in Huntington at Huntington High School in order to receive training and exchange ideas about instructional techniques with other educators in the field” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). It was through these annual professional development opportunities in which my grandmother was able to develop her teaching skills and really treat her students with the kind of instruction that she thought was appropriate. The joy in her statements was palpable, as she began to smile when she stated that she “enjoyed every minute of teaching my students, as I did indeed lecture to them, but I also allowed them the chance to speak their minds and encouraged them to use their skills and imagination” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). In order to account for the low SES students in her classroom, she encouraged student collaboration in learning in the back of the class when others were being taught at the front to foster a sense of tutoring and camaraderie amongst her classroom.

One of the strongest elements that was expressed during my interview with Dr. Maynard was the dynamic of the student-teacher relationship and the idea of the approachable mentor for many of the teachers at Holden. The first teacher that left an impact on Dr. Maynard was his fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Beard, and her ability to transcend the limitations of a rural education through a caring approach to teaching. Specifically, she “would use the intonation of her voice and captivated you by knowing exactly where to stop reading for the day, which left everyone wanting more” and if a student behaved particularly well they “were allowed to take a book home for the weekend and read ahead, which was one of the most prestigious things I can remember in order to be considered a ‘cool’ kid” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). Another educator who left a long-lasting impression on Dr. Maynard was Mrs.

Diamond. He told me that she “invited students to her home on Saturdays to have lunch, learn etiquette lessons for eating, but also to discuss students’ long-term goals and encourage them to follow their talents and dreams” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 16, 2014). This act was thought of as a true honor by Dr. Maynard, as Mrs. Diamond took the time to consider the wishes and hopes of her students and literally invite them to her home and discuss their academic and social progress with them over a lunch that she prepared.

A final teacher who impacted Dr. Maynard’s life was one of the Reese sisters who taught at Holden all of their lives. The hand bell that was utilized by Mrs. Reese to bring in students from recess also held a special meaning to the students who were allowed to ring it. Dr. Maynard recalled that “you thought you died and had gone to Heaven just to ring the bell every once in a while and although you knew you would not ring it every time, you behaved so maybe you could” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). Dr. Maynard reminisced about the power and significance that the bell still held, as he visited Mrs. Reese as a professional educator and she ended up giving him the bell. He said that “all of the lives that the bell touched still reside on the handle, all of the emotional DNA is still there, but that it meant that you, as a student, were good enough and showed her something over the course of the school year that she identified as positive” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 2, 2014). He viewed this practice as a strategic exercise in looking for success and that Holden as not only an educational institution, but also as a social incubator for student development, was ahead of its time and served its students well in terms of a quality education and preparing them for success in life outside of the classroom.

School Success

Despite the limitations posed by a low SES community and hungry students, my

grandmother viewed McCommas Creek Elementary as a success for the students and also for the educators involved. In discussing the harsh realities associated with the economy of the time, she said that “the only jobs that were available to graduating students were those that involved living off the land” and that she “never failed one student because they all wanted to learn due to the fact that they felt safe to discuss anything with me in an open-door policy” (Wilda Walden, personal communication, July 16, 2014). The school is also viewed as a success by her because it served as a feeder school to Wayne High school where “at least have of my students ended up graduating from,” which sounds low in comparison to modern standards, but was an achievement for the time because of the temptation to start working in the coal mines at a young age. She also discussed the fact that this was her first teaching job and that it was transformational for her as a professional and as a person to interact with her students in a very close manner.

Dr. Stan Maynard also viewed his educational experiences as a student at both Chafin and Holden as successes. In particular, he views his experiences at Holden in a positive light because “although I do not have any data, I know a lot of Holden students went on to college and were successful at Logan High School as well” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 16, 2014). In addition to the role that Dr. Maynard believed Holden played in shaping his life, he also placed a large amount of responsibility on parents and their ability to instill a sense of value for education in their children as they grow up. Also Dr. Maynard discussed a similar aspect of the coal camp school experience that my grandmother elaborated on, as Holden sent off many graduates to future academic endeavors. He said that “most of the kids that I graduated with from Holden Junior High School went to West Virginia University, Morris Harvey (University of Charleston), and Marshall University” and that they “did a fine job because their education in

terms of quality was comparable to most good schools of that time” (Stan Maynard, personal communication, July 16, 2014). The successes of these coal camp schools were not in fact hindered by the fact that they were owned by powerful companies, but could have been in a way enhanced through the allocation of funds and the acquisition of the best teachers available due to higher salaries than usual in comparison to similar positions offered at other schools. Also the coal companies allowed the local Boards of Education to run and govern the curricular and academic aspects of the school, while they maintained the hiring of faculty and staff to create a mostly positive school learning culture.

Legacy of Appalachian Education/Conclusion

The enduring legacy of Appalachian education and the coal camp school experience in particular has many implications for the modern public education system in America. In fact, Paulo Freire’s critical/liberation pedagogy provides a unique understanding for how Appalachian students have been viewed and treated by outside forces, such as federal politicians and policymakers. Freire’s liberation/critical pedagogy initially was created because of his experiences with the poor and illiterate citizens of Brazil during the junta’s military rule in the 1960s (Freire, 1970). In contrast to the passive apathy of the business model approach to education, which Freire argues is a result of the “banking approach” to learning, social activism in the community is emphasized and fosters a sense of empathy in students, as they encounter individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds struggling to survive in modern America.

This is in keeping with Freire’s idea that “human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which humans transform the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 88). Appalachian students have been oppressed, neglected, and misrepresented by the public school system over the years. In essence, the Appalachian education system has

recently been a composition for what Freire called the “banking approach” to learning, as it was described as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). However, the perspectives from my grandmother and Dr. Maynard show how meaningful and engaging instruction can be delivered by caring educators via creating lasting relationships with their students that have last a great deal longer than the coal camp schools did.

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