

A
COMMUNITY
STUDY
ON
WHEELWRIGHT KENTUCKY

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WHEELWRIGHT COAL MINING TOWN

It takes two basic elements to make a coal mine-----coal and men. The women, children, schools, churches, stores and troubles just seem to appear.

Many years ago the coal mine came first as the vast black coal seam that seems to crawl through the Appalachians in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky.

The hollow now known as Wheelwright used to be called Otter Creek. The people who first settled there knew little book learning but knew the lore of the mountain forrest and stream. He lacked society graces but possessed rugged virtues of fearlessness.

The first remembrance of Wheelwright of the people of now is the date of 1906 when Mrs. Lee Hall at the age of 56 walked 45 miles to Prestonsburg to see her son on trial for murder. Two of her sons now, Sill and Lee tell of their father taking a wagon to White House, Kentucky to get salt for all his neighbors and himself. This was about 140 miles away and the corn he took to feed the oxen weighed more than the salt.

Communication, as we know today, practically did not exist. Months may pass before news got around. The fact coupled with an almost oriental reverence for their dead, gave rise to the mountaineers interesting manner of celebrating funerals. As families intermarried and acquired more and more kinsfolk, many of them remote, it took a long time to send news of a death or funeral, and the word of it sent out. Meanwhile the body was put away temporarily. When



the day drew near there would be baking and preparation of delicacies. After the proper funeral rites it turned out to be a family reunion.

Wheelwright is a mining camp. They, the people, still call coal towns by that name, 'camps': and really that is exactly what they are. By the time the coal is gone the town will be gone either moved bodily to a new mine or left to rot---a ghost town.

Opening up the coal seam brought undreamed of affluence to the mountain people. They knew how to work and they were trained. William Branham and his boys walked several miles over the mountain every morning to start work at 7 o'clock at a nearby mine, and quit work at 5 o'clock to walk home. Branham prospered and later deeded each of his children a piece of land with a home on it. His son Silas, is a well to do merchant, with a thriving store in Branham Hollow, which is located at the top of the valley of Wheelwright.

By 1900, life in these pastoral hills has changed little, in its basic pattern, since 1800. It was about 1900 that the outside world became interested in the regions' coal. -- An Industry came to these Kentucky mountains, to change the whole character of mountaineer existence.

Stimulated by World War I actual mining of coal at Wheelwright began in July, 1916, when the first drift mouth was opened by the Elk Horn Coal Corporation. Lee Hall was foreman of 15 men. They worked ten hours at wages of $17\frac{1}{2}$ cents an hour for the men and 25 cents for the foreman. The town was incorporated at that time.

The town began as a tent camp. Tents were succeeded by floorless

frame shacks lined with building paper. These shacks were soon replaced by better buildings. Many of the sturdy frame houses on post foundations, erected at that time and later remodeled are still in use as the miner's houses.

Water for the miners houses was provided by open wells. Sanitation----well it was outside toilets and open sewage into the creek. Such facilities have always been and are today common to nearly all coal mine towns.

In 1930 Wheelwright was in general a typical coal town, yet, considered above average and was looked upon as a good town.

In 1930 Inland Steel came to Wheelwright.

Inland Steel purchased the town of Wheelwright, about 1,500 acres of land and every building on it., The mine plant and all equipment, the tippie, track, cars, tools ,, and leased over 14,000 acres of coal lands. The coming of Inland Steel was a good omen for Wheelwright.

The first task that Inland undertook was to rehabilitate the mine, to achieve operating efficiency and safety underground.

In 1931 a new steel and concrete tippie replaces the wood one.

A miners bath house was built with adequate shower bath facilities individual lockers, and separate quarters for the white and the colored.

The miners began attending a safety school and learned that avoiding accidents is chiefly a matter of education of teaching men

the vital importance of being careful.

Wheelwright mine is the basis, the economic core, as well as a desirable place to live, a growing Community.

If you were to make a trip through the eastern coal country, the chances are that you would avoid the coal towns. It is the popular idea that coal towns are good places to avoid unless you are getting material for a Doctor's degree.

Granting that most coal towns are unsightly and depressing, there is a natural, simple reason for that fact, which should be recognized. Basically, a coal town exists only because of the mine. Probably it will cease to exist when the mine is worked out, as inevitably it will be. It seems hardly worthwhile, therefore, to bother with permanent urban niceties in what is essentially a temporary camp.

As for the conditions of poverty so often identified with coal towns, it is not unlikely that most coal towns just from the nature of things look poorer than they actually are. It can be argued with a good deal of justice that coal mining has gone far to relieve poverty in these mountains, rather than to contribute to it.

Certainly the economic lot of native mountaineer families has been much improved. In a discussion on that very point, Lee Hall, Senior, father of the Hass Brother, is quoted as saying that if he could have back again the 'good old days' plus a guaranteed income of \$200 a month, he would without hesitation choose Wheelwright.

Wheelwright's valley is about two and one-half miles long- a

narrow, twisting crease in the hills. Near the upper end, Otter Creek splits. Looking south up the valley to the right hand branch goes on to Branham Hollow. The left branch swings east into Hall Hollow, and on the other side is Seventy-Nine Hill. Where the branches join is the center of town. Here stand the office building and club house, community building, stores, and theatre, church and hospital, bath house and other familiar symbols of downtown.

In early Wheelwright these various buildings were substantial frame structures; nothing fancy- just good utilitarian designs. The single street was unpaved and likely to be a morass in wet weather. Each house had its outside toilet, and each yard its piles of coal and ashes. Garbage and refuse were collected and hauled to "Garbage Hollow". A coal mine town, yes- but, even so better than most.

When Inland took over Wheelwright, things began to happen. The number one improvement was a water system, and the town was piped for water. The system included an adequate water supply, and a modern filtration plant. When first installed the system provided yard hydrants with one outlet in every eight houses.

Next came pavement of Wheelwright's singular street. Generally speaking there is just one street in Wheelwright, a phenomenon attributable to Kentucky's narrow valleys. There isn't enough room for more than one street.

With improved roads leading down the valley, Wheelwright has access to the world.

A gas well on the property was cleaned out by the company; and

gas has been available to all the miners houses. Gas for cooking has been a real blessing to Wheelwrights housewives, especially in summer. It did away with the unsightly piles of coal and ashes in the tiny yard.

Wheelwright's accessibility became complete with the installation of an automatic telephone system.

Finally came the sewage system and the going away, for good and all, with outside toilets. That one step is to me somehow a symbol of Wheelwright's freedom of decency and wholesomeness. The sewage system and sewage disposal plant promptly put an end to the epidemic of diarrhea which attacked Wheelwright every summer. It took eight miles of sewer line to complete this system. At most places the narrow valley has barely room for the creek, a railroad which now is being removed and a very narrow road. Some sections of main lines of sewer was laid under entire rows of houses.

Wheelwright now has about 475 homes and it is very difficult to see where any more could be put. The clean up was completed when a modern garbage and trash incinerator was erected and regular collections were established.

With the sewage system came other changes. Every house was plumbed for water and the minimum improvement called for a kitchen sink, a hot water heater and tank, an inside flush-type toilet, a shower or a tub.

At this time a general plan of home reconditioning was mapped out. This included enlargement as much as possible, addition of closets and a pantry.

Typical miners houses are frame cottages of three and four or five and six rooms. A few have seven rooms. The houses are now on brick foundations. Typical rent for these houses range from \$22.50 to \$30.50. The utilities are extra. The rent and utilities are cut from the miners pay each month.

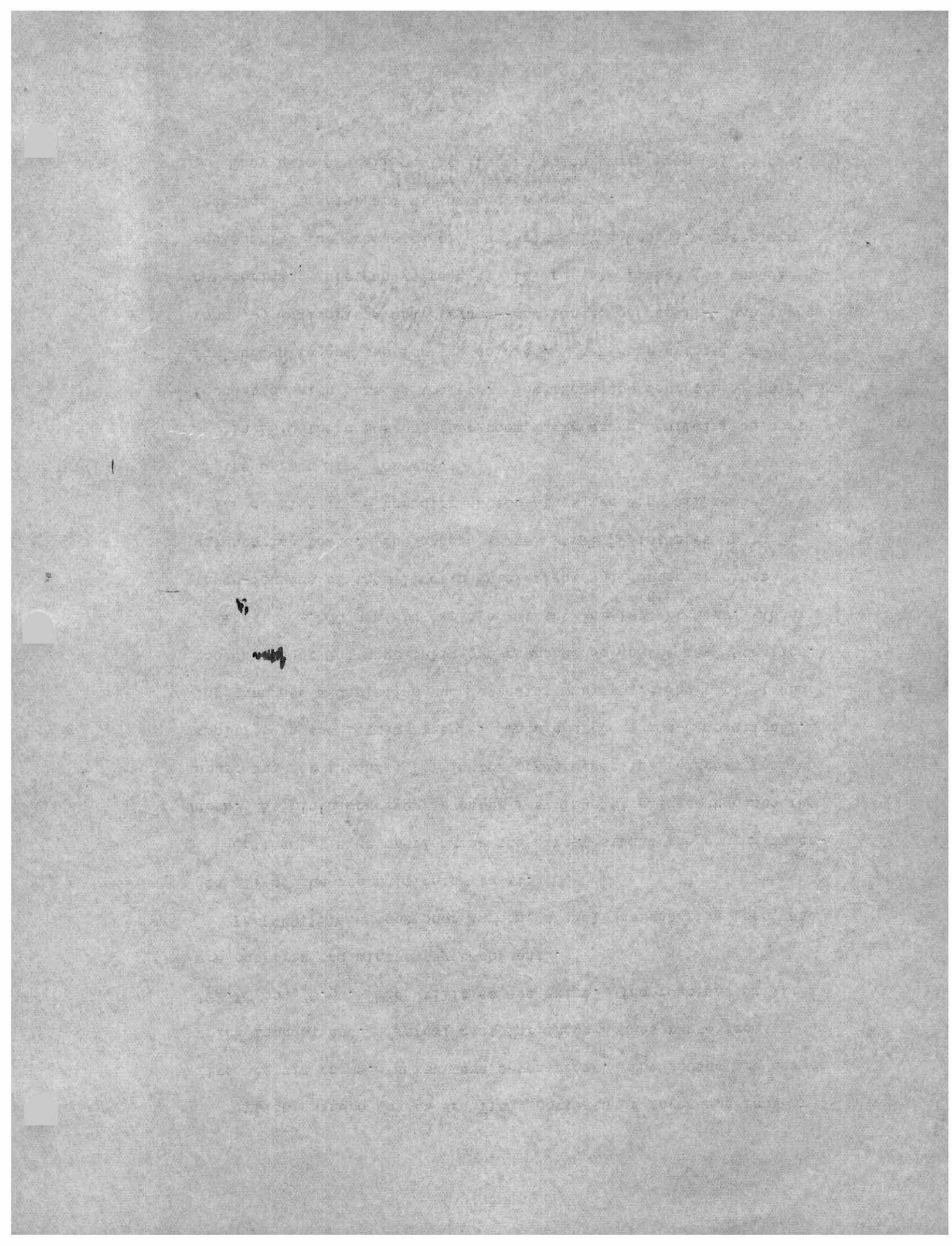
In 1940 Inland took over Burton, a small neighboring town, and did all of the reconditioning to it.

On the hillside overlooking the street stands the community church. At 6 o'clock every evening its pleasant chimes announce the hour; and for the next 15 minutes organ music is broadcast from an amplifier in the little steeple. This church is non-denominational. The town has a Christian and Methodist minister. The baptist and The Church of God have their own churches so do the few Catholics.

About 2,000 men are employed at the Wheelwright mine. About three-fourths of them live in Wheelwright and Burton or other neighboring towns. The others travel varying distances up to 50 miles or live in a boarding house. These men are all members of the United Mine Workers.

In 1930 there was one four room frame school building on post foundation with outside toilets. Now there are four school buildings for the white and two for the colored. They have a total of 46 rooms, 3 auditoriums and 2 gyms--one large, one small-- and three cafeterias. Thirteen years ago Inland established two annual scholarships for graduates of Wheelwright High School. These are based on character and all around leadership.

They have a small public library which grows from day to day.



A small hospital but with good equipment, three physicians, a technician, and two nurses. Miners and their families are vaccinated yearly for typhoid.

Many factors keeping Wheelwright a wholesome community are the recreation facilities. There is the Southern Colonial community building which houses the post office, barber shop, a restaurant and a soda fountain. The second floor provides an excellent dance floor which may be used by the colored and the white. The club house as I was told, the design, came from Williamsburg, Virginia, in here is a rooming section, a club room, air-conditioned dining room with inside doors leading to the library and an Appared Shop.

In the club house basement is the bowling alley with four lanes, two pool tables and an excellent lounge and rest room. A theater is air-conditioned. They have a swimming pool, a play ground, a golf course and a tennis court.

There is a Scout building with a tennis court and a hand ball court. A beauty shop with all modern equipment.

If you add all these together and you have a pleasant community which is no longer looked on as a dirty minning camp.

Typed and written by

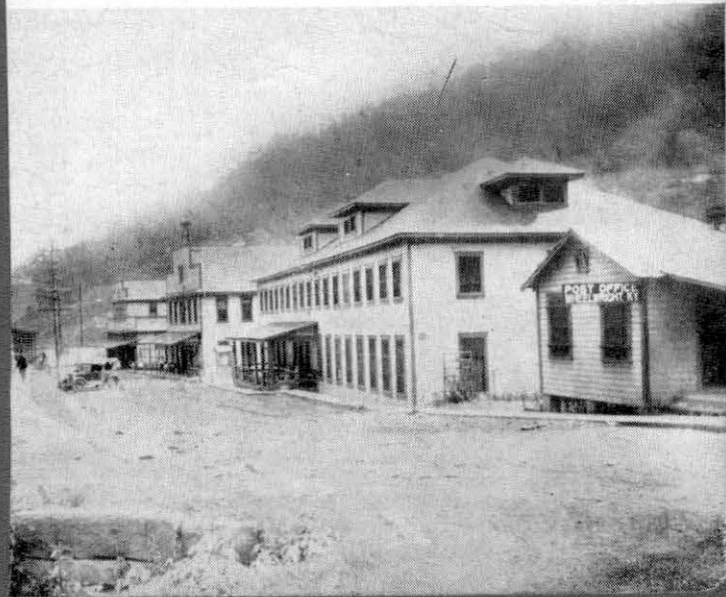
Geneva Tackett Bryant.

Taken from a large group of
Uniter Miner Workers Journals
and Phamphlets put out by the Inland Steel Company

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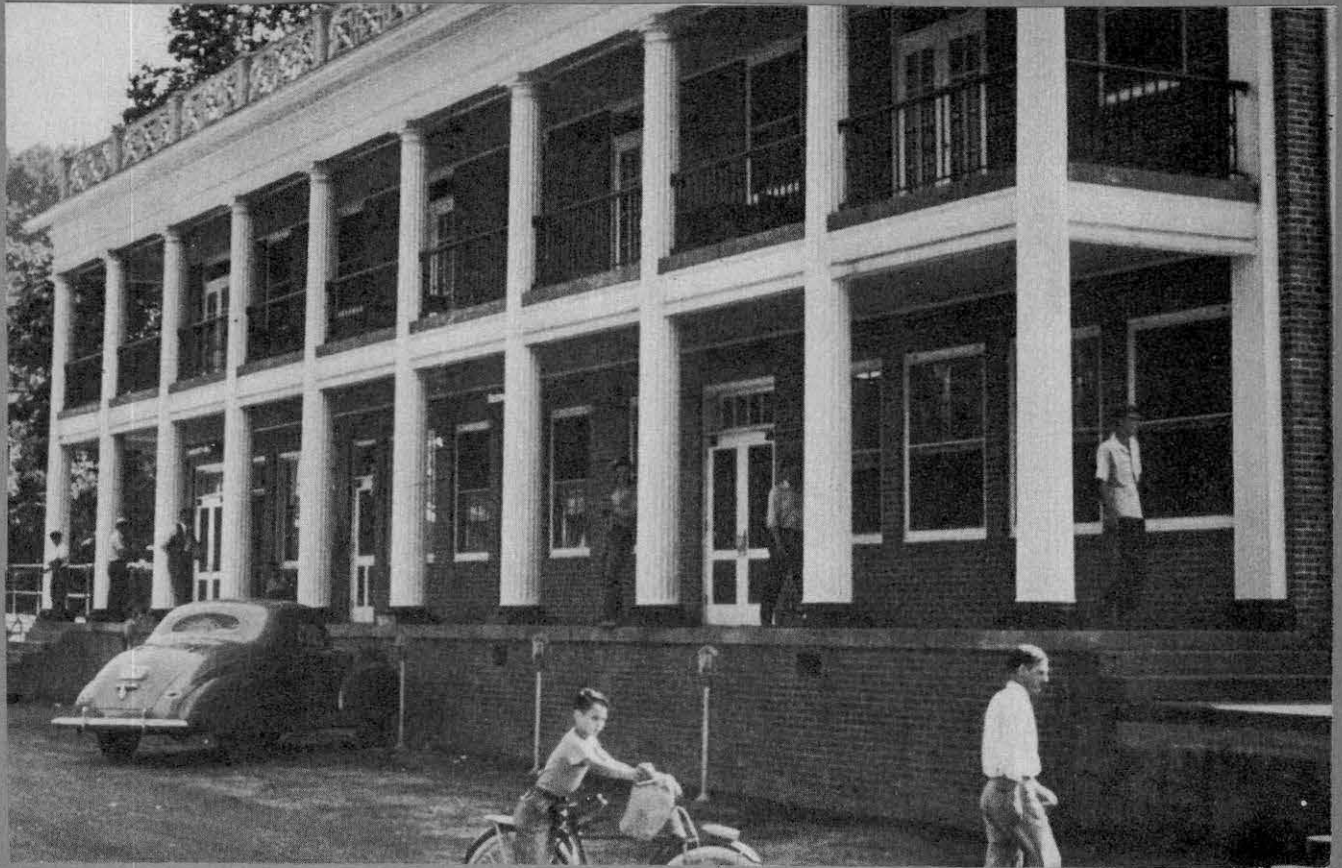
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This view of Wheelwright is taken from an old photograph which shows what the town looked like before Inland took over.



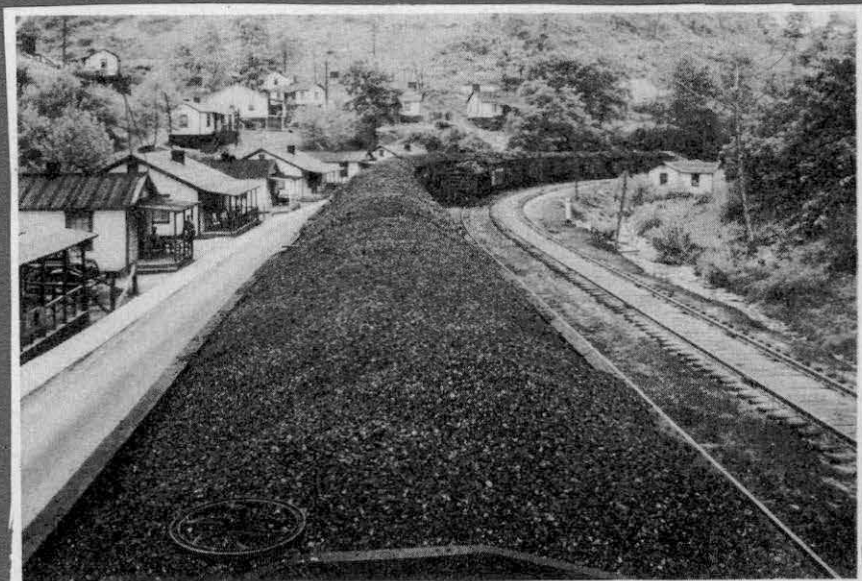
Main Street of Wheelwright About 1906

The Community Building

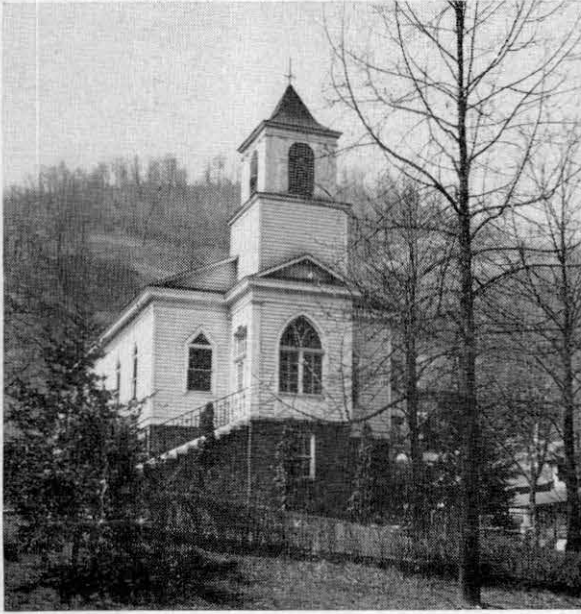




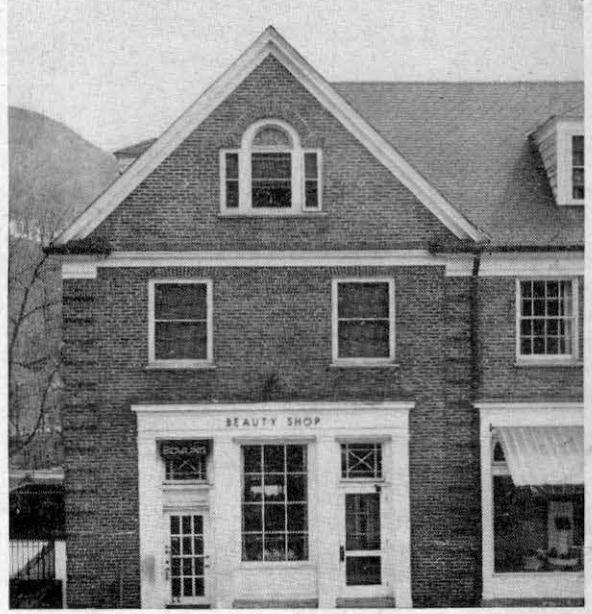
Residence Houses



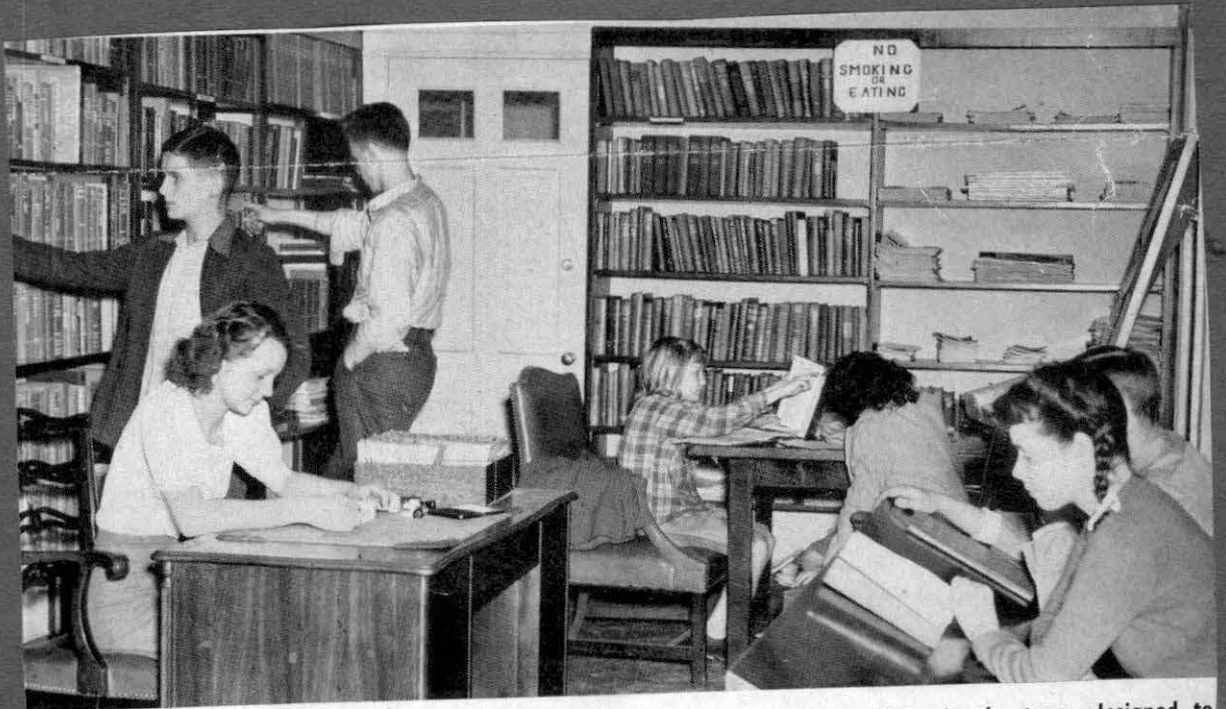
Coal ready for movement to the Inland Plant at Indiana Harbor, Indiana. Because of its low sulphur and ash content, as well as its unusually good "coking" qualities, the Elkhorn No. 3 coal produced at the Wheelwright Mine is considered one of the finest coking coals in the steel industry.



Church in Wheelwright belongs to the community. It is nondenominational and serves all faiths and denominations.



The desires of women are not forgotten at Wheelwright as this view of the beauty shop indicates. Below the beauty shop is a bowling alley.



Interior view of library at Wheelwright. This is one of the many cultural facilities in the town, designed to build a better community.

Bowling alleys in the clubhouse.



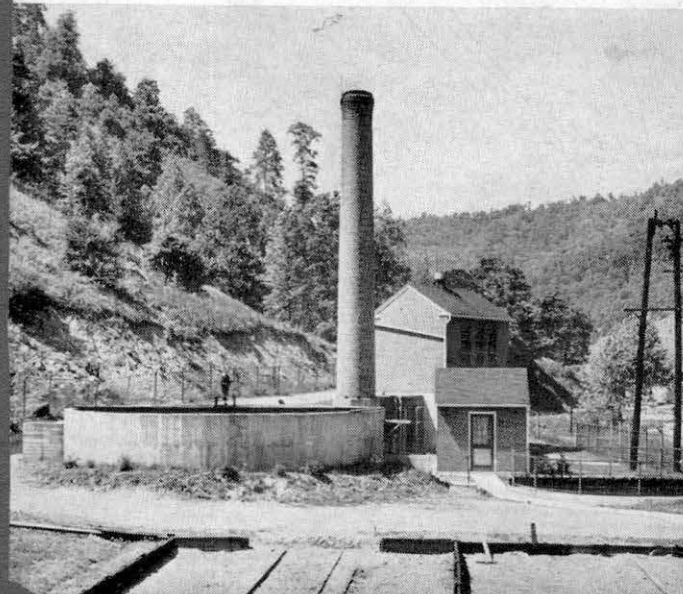
Another inside view of the mine showing "mechanical loader" loading coal into the waiting mine cars.



Inside of Wheelwright coal mine, showing mine locomotive transporting coal to the outside. Rock dust is sprayed on exposed surfaces of mine to reduce combustible coal dust particles.



Sewage disposal plant built by Inland, which improved "primitive garbage disposal" facilities and eliminated diseases caused by improper garbage disposal.



The Swimming Pool



The Play ground.

