

## The Story of Buxton

Beverly Shiffer

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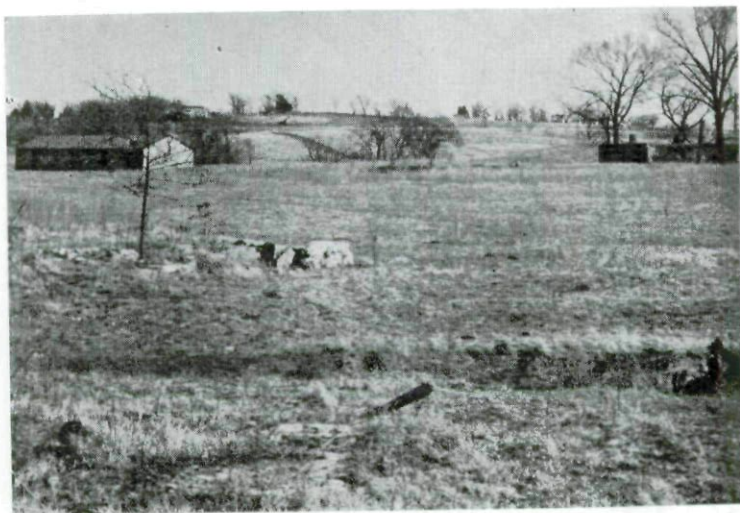
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## The Story Of Buxton

BY BEVERLY SHIFFER

Buxton officially is a ghost town. Only remnants of old foundations and two buildings, crumbling with age, mark the spot where a once bustling community of 9,000 people lived, worked, and played. But Buxton is not dead. It lives in the minds of the few people still living today who had a part in its brief existence.

Cows graze among these foundations and wander along the tree-studded, winding creek. Lush pasturelands and low rolling hills are dotted occasionally with a modern farm, and belie the fact that here, there were once thousands of houses and large business establishments, containing every possible modern convenience known at that time.



LOOKING NORTHEAST—FOREGROUND, BED OF OLD UNDERGROUND RAILROAD; BACKGROUND LEFT, WAREHOUSE; RIGHT, REMAINS OF PERKINS HOTEL.

Buxton had its beginning 100 years ago at the town of Muchakinock, now also a ghost town, five miles south of Oskaloosa, in Mahaska county. Here, one of the earliest and largest coal mines in Iowa was opened, and prospered under the management of H. W. and W. W. McNeill, locally known as Big Mac and Little Mac. The coal was transported from

this mine by the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad on tracks that ran from the main line at Belle Plaine, southwestward to What Cheer, and finally to Muchakinock and Lakonta.

For two years, the mine output was tremendous and was rewarding for the owners. But, in 1875, labor troubles developed. A strike was declared and the mines at Muchakinock were at a standstill for the three years following. The McNeills then decided to sell their interest to the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad at an agreed price of \$500,000.

The railroad promptly named their new company the Consolidation Coal Company, and appointed Mr. J. E. Buxton as superintendent, to develop and organize new working methods, in order to attract labor. Miners were needed, and agents were sent south to Kentucky, Alabama, and other states to comb the plantations and cities for unemployed Negroes, and persuade them to come north to work in the mines. They were promised \$20 per week plus keep until they learned the mining trade. The agents were successful in acquiring 3,000 laborers and business proceeded.

Nine different shafts and slopes were mined in the vicinity of Muchakinock, but a few years later, the production and output of the mines gradually began to falter. J. E. Buxton then decided to run railroad tracks further southward to Monroe County to better territory.

In 1900, the railroad purchased 8,600 acres of ground in Monroe County and 1,600 acres in adjoining Mahaska County for the sizable sum of \$275,000. Additional land in the vicinity was leased for mineral rights. Then, the entire population abandoned Muchakinock and moved to the woods and hills of Monroe County, where they began to build the town they named after their superintendent. Shortly after, J. E. Buxton retired and the management of the company was left to his son, Benjamin. Ben was just 25 years old at the time, but he had his father's mining knowledge and leadership.

The newly acquired ground was rich with coal. The company had at its command, over 30,000 acres of coal lands, stretching west of the town, and south toward Chariton. In

1906, the Regal Coal Company, the Ackens Coal Company, and Mines # 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 of the Consolidation Coal Company were all located near the town of Buxton.

The company started immediately to build accommodations for the workers. Comfortable frame houses, each having 5 or 6 rooms and  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre of ground were soon occupied by the families of the miners. Schools were built and before long three 4-room school buildings were full of students, with twelve competent and devoted teachers to teach their charges until they reached high school level. The children then went to Albia, Des Moines or other larger cities to further their education. Later, within 10 years after the founding of Buxton, a large, efficient high school was completed, and the older students were then able to live at home and go to high school.

The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad alone used all of the coal hoisted from the mines of the Consolidation Coal Company to run its operation. Taxes paid by the railroad for this averaged over \$35,000 per year. Thousands of dollars each year were spent in purchasing the latest in mining equipment, and repairing the existing machinery. Hundreds of men were employed in the machine shops, and large railroad crews were maintained. The company spent an average of \$1,000 per day on timber for mine props. Wages were good and during World War I, when the demand for railroad services reached an all-time peak, the miners were earning a remarkable sum of \$10 per day, a salary unheard of before that period for coal miners.

Business was flourishing, and more mines were opened up as time went by. In 1913, the company completed the opening of Mine No. 18. This was to be the largest mine to operate in the state of Iowa. An engine room  $\frac{1}{2}$  block long filled with dynamoes, steam turbines, and hoisting machinery was used to operate this one mine. Eight boilers were needed to furnish steam to the mine.

In 1903, the company completed work on a Y.M.C.A. building at a total cost of \$20,000. This was the first and largest Negro Miners or Industrial Y.M.C.A. to exist in the United



BUXTON—LOOKING EAST ACROSS BUSINESS DISTRICT AND MINERS' HOMES.

States, and proved to be the center of activity in the growing community. There were daily social functions in the large 3-story building, and each evening, at least 300 young men would be in the building enjoying its many facilities; attending secret lodge meetings, roller skating, reading in the large, well stocked library, attending night classes, watching movies, working out in the completely furnished gymnasium, or playing billiards in one of the game rooms. On the second floor was an auditorium, seating 1,000 people, where famous speakers and entertainers of the day made frequent visits. Among them were Hallie I. Brown, Blind Boone, Rosco Conklin Simmons, and various minstrel shows, road shows, and musicals. Booker T. Washington was once guest speaker and at least 100 people had to be turned away for lack of standing room in the auditorium. The building was steam-heated, had electricity generated from the town's own power plant, and like many other places in the main district, was a participant in the large telephone communication system.

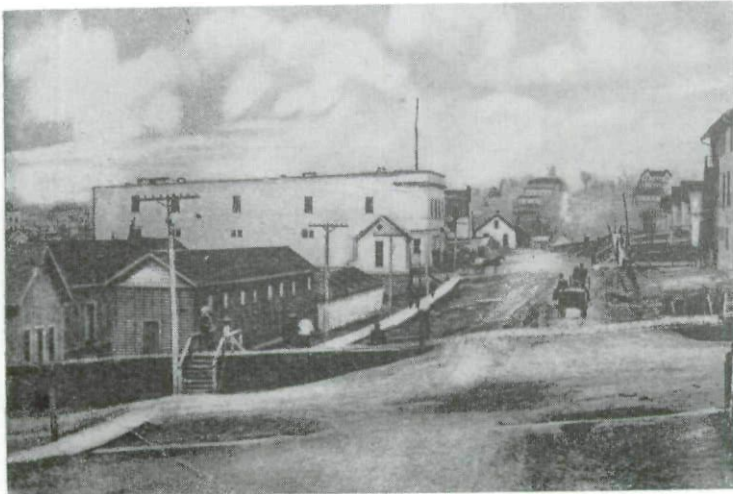
Not far from the Y.M.C.A. building was the Monroe Merchantile Store which was owned by the coal company. One hundred and thirty-five clerks were needed to run the big store, with its line of merchandise including everything "from caskets to safety pins." An elevator-escalator was installed, and a unique central bookkeeping system added to the efficiency of this outstanding "company store." Expert buyers were kept in New York, Chicago, and other big market places around

the country to buy for the families of Buxton and surrounding communities.

The business district of Buxton contained restaurants, a bank, meat markets, a lumber yard, bakeries, two general stores, drug stores, undertaking services, an underground railroad, beauty shops, barber shops, and livery stables. By the train depot, a hotel owned by Anderson Perkins and Son advertised "good meals, first class service, and rented rooms for \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day." During the life of Buxton there were three weekly newspapers published at different times. These were the *Gazette*, the *Advocate*, and *The Bulletin*.

Buxton at its height was abundant with Negro professional men. There were doctors, lawyers, teachers, business men, ministers, pharmacists, undertakers and a Justice of the Peace.

One of these men was Dr. Edward Albert Carter. Dr. Carter was the son of a coal miner in Muchakinock, and worked in the mines at one time with his father. But his thirst for knowledge inspired him to complete his education through high school and then enter the State University of Iowa to study medicine. After eight years of hard study, he graduated with honors in Liberal Arts and Medicine. He then returned to his home in Buxton to assume the position of first



BUXTON'S MAIN STREET—COMPANY STORE, WHITE BUILDING AT LEFT.

assistant to the medical doctor and was later promoted to Chief Surgeon for the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad company and the Consolidation Coal Company. He was active in the social functions of the town, and was State Vice-President of the National Medical Association, which was the national association for Negro physicians, dentists, and pharmacists. He was also interested in the activities of the Y.M.C.A., was director of the boys department there, and was their Lecturer in General on Physiology and Hygiene. He practiced medicine in Buxton for 12 years. In 1919, he moved to Detroit, Michigan, where he was a prominent physician and surgeon for many years.

Mr. George H. Woodson practiced law in Buxton for over 20 years, and was so well known that he was nominated by the Republicans for the office of State Representative. He was the first Negro so honored in Iowa by a major party.

The pride of Buxton was its baseball team. Known widely and appropriately as the "Buxton Wonders," they challenged visiting teams from Chicago, St. Paul, Kansas City, Nebraska, and any other team who wished to try their luck at beating the Wonders. Traveling around the state, they drew crowds of spectators unequalled in size as word of their talent spread among sports fans.

Music was an important part in the daily life of Buxton. In 1902, Prof. A. R. Jackson was appointed bandmaster of the famous Buxton Negro Concert Band, which at that time had only 31 members. Later the musicians numbered 50, and had numerous engagements around the state. Among these were several appearances at the Iowa State Fair. But the heart of the band was in their home town, where they played for weddings, dances, baseball games, and any other event that called for music. When a member of one of the secret lodges of the Y.M.C.A. died, the hills resounded as the band turned out in full regalia, playing the funeral dirge and leading the way to the cemetery.

In the summer, ice cream socials were commonplace. Fresh cream from their own cows was put into a hand operated churn and carefully and slowly turned by a younger member

of the family, under the watchful eye of the hostess. She knew just when to stop turning the creamy frozen custard, then fold in the fresh-sliced fruit so that none of the flavor would be lost. Scooped out in generous portions and served with fresh home-baked cake, this dessert afforded the ladies of the various social circles in Buxton a delicious treat during many quiet summer afternoon gatherings.

The men were transported to and from the mines by three trains, called "work trains," each having 12 to 15 coaches. Each evening as the trains rolled into town from the mines, at least 2,000 men would hop from the trains, troop through town, making their way to their own homes, where a typical dinner of juicy fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn pone, hot biscuits, vegetables from the garden, and apple or mince-meat pie awaited them.

Times were prosperous for the people of Buxton. The men were paid in gold and silver, and it was not unusual to see a \$20 gold piece dangling from the watch chain of one of the local men.

Around the town were several small communities, such as Coopertown, named in honor of one of its two druggists, Mr. B. F. Cooper; and area called Sharp End, referring to the sudden termination of the residential district south of town; Hayestown, near the east edge of Buxton, named after a Mr. Hayes, who owned most of the houses in that area; East Swede Town and West Swede Town, named for the Swedish emigrants that came later to work in the mines and made their homes in the east and west sections of Buxton; and an area mysteriously called Gobbler's Nob.

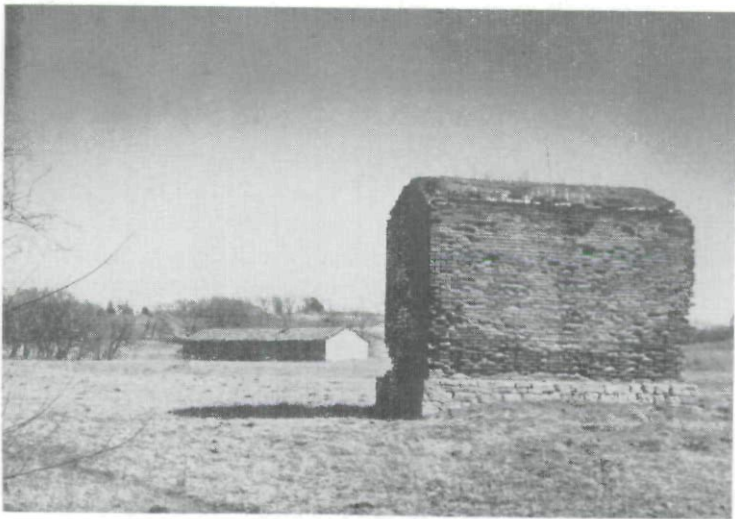
Buxton was never incorporated, and became known as "the biggest unincorporated town in the United States." There was never a mayor, nor city council, no law enforcement body, no city officials of any kind. In Coopertown, money flowed freely from the pockets of some of the citizens, as vices and rackets flourished. Knifings and murders were not uncommon. One observer remarked, "Coopertown, a section of Buxton, was once the toughest town east of Dodge City."

Yet, Buxton had more churches than any other town of



similar size in the country. Religion was a vital part of their everyday life.

Soon, the inevitable started to happen in Buxton. The coal in the mines was nearly gone and production lessened. The shafts and slopes could no longer give forth their usual amount of coal and for the first time in almost 20 years the men found themselves idle. Families had to move from Buxton in search of work, leaving their houses as they stood never to return. Mines # 18 and # 19 were the only ones still open in 1925 and this was not enough to keep so many men employed. On March 15, 1927, #18 closed, its last harvest of coal hoisted from the ground. The final blow came when just 15 days later a strike was declared at Mine #19. The men never returned and 2 years later there were still 100 cars of coal waiting at the bottom of the shaft.

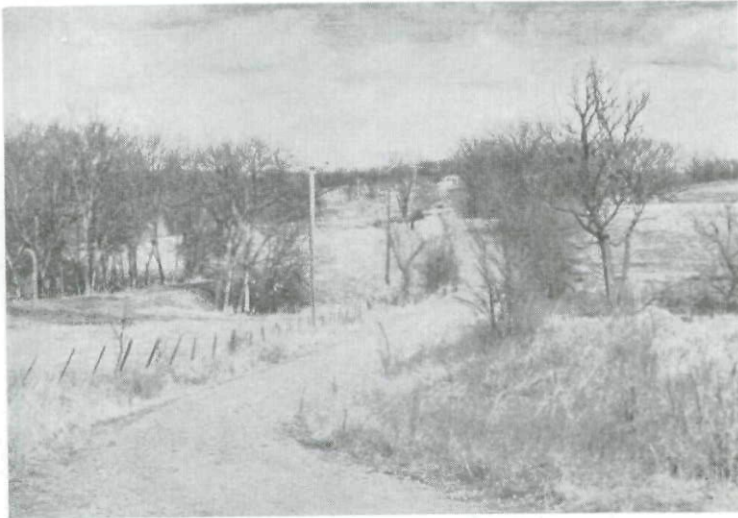


BUILDING IN FOREGROUND WAS ONCE HOUSED IN THE PAY OFFICE, AND SERVED AS A "KING-SIZED" VAULT FOR THE GOLD AND SILVER USED FOR PAYING WAGES. IN BACKGROUND IS WAREHOUSE. THESE TWO BUILDINGS ARE THE ONLY ONES STILL STANDING.

As the population began to slowly drift away, the bank and businesses of Buxton closed their doors. The buildings were torn down and the houses sold for \$50 each.

In 1944, the Hercules Powder Company from Chicago, came to the site of Buxton, set 12 pounds of dynamite at the base of the 155-ft stack of Mine #18, and lit the fuse. With a terrible roar, the big mine was leveled and the last remains of what was Buxton seemed to settle into the earth with the dust.

Buxton is now a ghost town. However, every year the former residents and their descendants have a gala reunion which is the bright spot of the summer for many of the old-timers, as they recall the stories of their childhood and the grand old times they had in "Old Buxton."



LOOKING NORTH—THIS ROAD ONCE WAS MAIN STREET AND ENDED AT COOPERTOWN. SLIGHTLY RAISED STRIP OF GROUND AT LEFT WAS THE MAIN TRACK OF THE C. & NW RAILROAD, NOW ABANDONED.



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