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THE FUTURE OF APPALACHIA

THE CANARIES IN APPALACHIAN COAL MINES WERE BLACK

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Four of the last black coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky (2000). Photo by author.

*"You live in a company house
You go to a company school
You work for this company,
according to the company rules.*

*You all drink company water,
and all use company lights,
The company preacher teaches us
what the company thinks is right."*

Carl Sandburg
The Company Towns

In 1946, when I was born, the technological advances in underground coal mining had advanced to the point where the practice of using a caged canary to detect “bad air” became obsolete; the feathered friend of mineworkers replaced by sensors. Between the start and end of the Great Depression, my father, William Earl Turner, born in 1916, and two of his older brothers, followed their father into the depths of the land where they were born, the land they loved.¹ In 1938, at twenty-two, with eight years’ experience under his mining hat in mines near his home in Wise County, Virginia (Coeburn)—where he first saw a coal mine canary; in nearby Grundy, Virginia, and in Matewan, West Virginia—Dad arrived in the “world’s largest coal camp,” in Lynch, Kentucky, which had been opened in 1917 by U.S. Steel. “The Company,” as it was almost always called, provided housing, schools, churches, health care, and recreational facilities, while maintaining patronizingly tight control over all aspects of the politics and economics of the—*their*—town.²

At peak times, Dad worked with 4,000 other men on the same job—three shifts a day. Nearly 60% of the members of the United Mine Workers of America nationwide were black when my Dad came to Lynch. Families in our company town had to have fathers and mothers who were married—a company requirement for housing, for social stability. Dad, married to our mother for forty-eight years, the father of ten, died in Lynch in 1987, after four decades working in the mine, ending as a supervisor, *after* filing an employment discrimination suit through the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights in 1970. My first job after college (1968) was with the Commission.

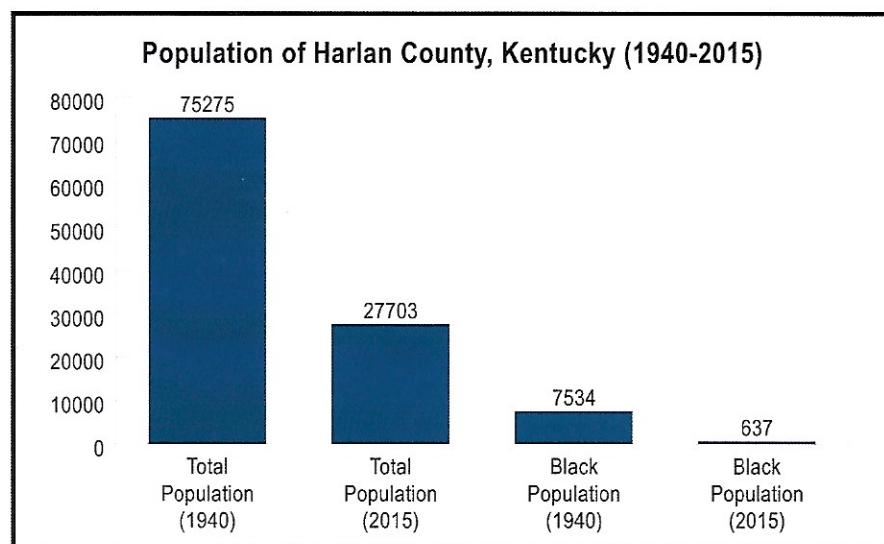
Ours was a very typical black family, in a “model coal camp.”

Figuratively speaking, black coal miners—when the mechanization of mining hit the fan, so to speak—were human canaries: theirs was the story of what was then the future, the bad air; they were the first to be removed, swept away by the changing winds that swooped through coal mining in Central Appalachia.

Black coal miners in the area’s once-booming coalfields were replaced, starting around the time of my birth, by the high-speed advances of other technological advances in mining such as joy loaders and continuous mining machines, not then to include strip mining and mountaintop

become the economically stressed Rust Belt—a region to which many blacks (and whites) migrated in the past fifty years. In fact, had the out-migration of whites in the West Virginia coalfields over the past half century matched that of the blacks, there would be no people at all in The Mountain State.³

The impact of the mechanization of the industry that supplied *the* energy source for the nation’s heat, light, and power, began to be felt in the immediate post-WWII period. While modernization adversely affected *all* miners, since black miners held the jobs that were hardest hit by automation—unskilled hand loading—its effect was harshest on them. By 1960, just as had occurred a half century



Population data courtesy U.S. Census Bureau.

removal. From the Pocahontas fields centered around places like Gary, Keystone, and Welch, in southern West Virginia; the eastern coalfields of Kentucky, traversing Bell, Harlan, Letcher, Perry, and Pike counties; and in the Big Stone Gap coalfield in far southwest Virginia, in a manner unlike canaries, black coal miners began to “fly off” to futures in what has

earlier, when their grandparents left the Deep South (primarily Alabama) for the improved life that the coal industry in Central Appalachia offered, the exodus of blacks from the coalfields began anew, this time for cities in the Midwest, North Central and East Coast states. People my age who were born and raised in coal camps like mine remember—in the sense



A look down Church Street, a black neighborhood in Lynch, Kentucky (1995). Photo by author.

of archeological memory—the substantial company-owned structures near the mine openings, the commissaries and the well-stocked company stores, and, for some of us, the more-than-adequate company-provided housing, such as the 1,000 homes U.S. Steel built in Lynch.

As a pre-teen in this isolated coal camp without a point of reference, I assumed that *everybody* lived in a multiethnic, multiracial world like my hometown, where there were people who were Spanish, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, English,

German, Welsh, Irish, Scottish and Italian. My Dad's mine mate, Mr. Tony Stagnolia, distinguished for me when I was ten years old the difference between what we called a gondola—the coal cars that clanked in and out of the hollow twenty-four seven—from the boats that plied the waters of his father's native Venice.

Up to the immediate post-*Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the mid-1960s, what were uniformly called the “colored schools” that dotted the hills had outstanding faculties and the graduation and

college-going rates of blacks were amazingly high. Self-help organizations, churches, mom-and-pop stores, community and civic clubs, and all manner of institutions and organizations flourished in these autonomous black social spaces: all affirmations of a living and dynamic sense of community that flourished, roughly, up to 1960. I grew up in a community—all things racially-segregated considered—which I would wish on any black child whose parents did not finish high school. For a critical mass of us then-considered *disadvantaged* black folk, now baby boomers, life in the well capitalized Appalachian coal camps, 1900 through the middle of the last century—its structure and provisions for steady employment for our father—made our futures bright with hope.

Throughout Central Appalachia's coalfields, for blacks, mountain life and mining work was not a crystal stair during the era of legal segregation that lasted up through the mid-1960s. Racial and economic disparities were pervasive in education, job promotion opportunities, and private enterprise. All-black or all-white sections of coal towns existed until fairly recently, and the supervisors and company administrative officials' jobs were held solely by whites. All of the coal town country clubs were whites-only venues, and schools, dancehalls, and churches were racially exclusive.⁴ No big deal then, we didn't know any better, we not only knew what life was like in Harlan County, Kentucky, we knew what was going on in Harlem—New York City—for people with whom we had much in common. *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines—now defunct, for all practical purposes—kept us in touch with other blacks around the world.

The coal seams in Appalachia's central highlands became the

source of enormous wealth over the past century for the few who owned and managed the mines, but most who worked in the mines over the past century were economically hard-pressed. On most quality of life measures, some of the nation's poorest and sickest people live within a one-hundred mile radius of my hometown, and the future of coal mining—as a growth industry—is bleak indeed. A good case can be made that being in Appalachia's forgotten coal camps at the present time is not a good prospect, and even more so in the case of people of color. Not only are the jobs that brought them to the region not likely to return, there are other profound challenges for the few blacks who remain in coalfield towns: welfare and

drug dependency, an increasingly alt-right political dynamic, and the opportunities for them to find jobs and to own businesses in a future not dependent on or dominated by the coal mining industry.

Some questions about the future of blacks in former Appalachian coal towns have been raised: What will happen to these communities in the future? Will they just disappear like those old canary birds, or fly away to new lives in other places? Is death for these communities inevitable? What can change agents and grass roots leaders and policy makers do to change that destiny? If these communities are declining, will a future Appalachia be less diverse than the old Appalachia (that would be ironic wouldn't it)? How can (will) the

voices of black Appalachia be heard in a new, changing Appalachian future?⁵

Those blacks in Central Appalachian coal camps today who choose to or *have to* remain—and those who return—have a rich history on which to rely; a history deeply rooted in a dogged determination to stay alive and thrive despite the odds and challenges over which they have no control. In a way, *all* people in Appalachia's former coal camps are canaries now. The legacy left by the blacks who kept their hopes alive by working the mines of Central Appalachia is deep. They breathed a lot of "bad air," but they survived—and many thrived—by drawing in courage and faith and exhaling hope to the future generations. ❖

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