



key stills, and preached the old-time fundamentalist religion.

The hill people saw little need for schools and built practically none. When land agents from Philadelphia and New York began buying Appalachian minerals in the late 1800s they dealt with an illiterate people who virtually gave away the riches of the Big Black and its foothills. On Jone's Fork some tracts were "sold" for ten cents per acre. A mountaineer thought he had driven a shrewd bargain when he deeded 1,000 acres of Black Mountain land to a Mellon for \$500.

There was little for the mountaineer to buy with his little hoard, but this soon changed as railroads were driven up the valleys in the twentieth century. Half a hundred "coal camps" sprang up in Harlan alone and in each of them the company store occupied the most prominent place. Its displays of enticing wares soon separated the mountaineers from their "coal money." When the money was gone, men and boys of counties in Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama, and West Virginia came thousands of other highlanders to join them, and Harlan's mining era began.

For a brief while during and after the First World War, wages reached a decent level, but by the mid-Twenties, Harlan faced serious trouble. There were too many miners and orders declined as hydroelectric plants and the oil industry attracted coal's customers. Coal had long been sick when the stock market crashed in 1929.

Coal prices commenced a relentless erosion. Miners had never been much for joining, and unionism had taken little hold. The United Mine Workers of America, the principal "brotherhood," was--as it still is--unimaginative and ultraconservative. Its fumbling organizing efforts were undercut by the miners' knowledge that a UMW representative seldom talked to a miner before he had seen the boss. The Great Depression found the miners divided and leaderless, while the operators were tightly united in the Harlan County Coal Operators Association.

In the coal glut of the 1930s mining companies fought desperately to stave off bankruptcy, and always they resorted to the same weapon--cost cutting. Economies

could be effected in only three areas: reduce electric power consumed by machinery, lower prices for the machinery, and lower wages. They were helpless to enforce either of the first two, so they embraced ever-diminishing wages as their salvation. From \$5.00 a day in the middle Twenties, pay scales were systematically slashed to about \$1.25 in 1931-32.

Both the "Report" and McAteer document the madness which engulfed the hapless county. Though the market was awash with steadily cheapening coal, the companies could survive only by selling more; so they slashed wages and ordered their half-starved miners to the pits. The workday rose from eight hours to ten, twelve, and even fourteen. The men were put on "piece work," in which they were paid 30 cents or 35 cents per ton produced, reimbursing the company out of that pitiable sum for all the costs they incurred in the process. They were hired on condition that they do all their buying in company stores, where prices were routinely double those in the nearby towns. Desperate miners entered the pits before daylight and emerged after dark, bone weary and gaunt with hunger. In their deteriorating shacks they found wives nearly always pregnant, and swarms of hungry children. The appalling "grub" on which they subsisted was potatoes, pinto beans, cornbread, and "bulldog gravy" made with flour, salt, water, and a little grease. Milk, butter, and fresh meat and vegetables became receding memories.

The towns fell into squalor as painters and trash collectors stopped making their rounds. Hospital staffs were pared, and the captive population wallowed in poverty and disorder.

In their indigence and disunity the miners and their families slipped into abject peonage. Not since the Middle Ages has a population been so dependent on its barons. Babies were born in company hospitals run by company doctors and nurses. As they grew up they attended company schools taught by teachers chosen by company managers. The only employment was in company mines. They traded in company stores, walked on company streets, and carried "scrip" (a form of company money) in their pockets. When they died a company undertaker carried their bodies to a company graveyard and the company supplied a modest tombstone.