

Mining our history for prosperity and posterity

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

When the Glen Lyon coal breaker was destroyed by fire on Oct. 31, 1974, the town lost its identity. It didn't matter that the Susquehanna Coal Company had closed the operation years before. As long as that breaker stood, the town had a sense of self-esteem and humility; qualities that had been forged by a rich anthracite heritage.

The European immigrants who settled in Glen Lyon at the turn of the century were no different from those who



William C. Kashatus

relocated in the other small coal towns of the Wyoming Valley. All of them came in search of the American Dream. They were ambitious, hard-working people who proved to be the backbone of labor in this country. They taught their children that self-respect, a good education, and plain, honest hard work would enable them to rise above their humble circumstances and become a "somebody."

At least two generations learned the lesson well for they produced a remarkable share of physicians, lawyers, and school teachers. All the while the breaker stood in the background, seemingly reminding each and every one of them: "Don't ever forget where you came from or what your family did to help you achieve your dream." Sadly, that reminder no longer exists for the current generation.

Today the Wyoming Valley is in danger of losing its history. Not much is left of the Valley's rich anthracite heritage. Many of the ethnic social halls, the mansions of coal barons as well as the company homes in which miners lived, and the more impressive-looking break-

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ers have been razed or renovated beyond their original design.

While organizations such as the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission which operates the Eckley Miners' Village, have done an admirable job of preserving what remains, they do not possess the financial resources to address some of the most pressing needs: to restore and preserve important sites like Concrete City, the DL&W's once-innovative housing project in the Hanover section of Nanticoke, and the Huber Breaker in Ashley.

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Yet the only firm commitment the federal government has made to preserving that history came in 1986 with the establishment of the Steamtown National Historic Site in Scranton. Because that site concentrates on the role of railroads in the 20th century development of the Eastern United States though, only a part of the anthracite story is told. More recently, the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority embarked on an ambitious preservation project that will not only document remaining structures and sites of the coal mining industry, but identify four anthracite-related properties as possible national historic landmarks. Of course, these properties will be in Lackawanna County and will greatly enhance the

value of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum and the Lackawanna Coal Mine tour.

Luzerne County's public officials should take heed of the example. Attracting the attention of the federal government would not only generate more tourist dollars for the Wyoming Valley, but would provide more jobs and an invaluable historic resource for residents.

Having worked for the National Park Service, I am aware of the stiff competition for federal dollars for historic preservation.

However, the significance of the anthracite coal industry to American labor history, the real need to integrate the story of coal mining into the National Park system, and the fact that many of the most important anthracite properties in the nation are located in Northeast Pennsylvania can only serve to increase federal interest in the region.

To be sure, the Wyoming Valley's uniqueness lies in its rich anthracite heritage. The Valley can either build on that strength by preserving its past or succumb to the historical indifference that has become all too common throughout our country. The choice is there to make, but time is running out. If local, state and federal authorities act wisely, the dividends will be great for ourselves and for posterity.

William C. Kashatus teaches school in Philadelphia. A native of the Wyoming Valley, he spent nearly a decade working for the National Park Service in southeastern Pennsylvania.

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