

Barren Fork Coal Camp

*A small town legacy
McCreary County, Ky.*

The rise of coal in eastern Kentucky

In the late 1800s, railroad companies built main rail arteries through eastern Kentucky where none had existed before. Many short rail lines and branches followed, which laid the foundation for an explosive growth in coal mining.

The mining that followed the railroads soon changed the face of the land. People began to leave their family farms to work in the mines. For adequate production, the coal mines needed lots of miners, and many came to find work. The region's population quickly grew.

Dinkey engine, about 1919. Left to right: George M. Taylor and sons Alvin Harrison Taylor, and Abe Lincoln Taylor. Photo from Bill Taylor.



Coal camp house, about 1920s. Photo from Loretta Sumner.

With most mines occurring in remote locations, the coal companies built hundreds of camps and towns for miners and their families. These new communities were called company towns, where the corporation owned the mines, the land and everything on it.

Though they came in all shapes and sizes, the company towns shared certain features. They usually lacked landscaping and paved roads. The houses mostly looked alike - framed structures with tarpaper roofs and porches on all but the smallest. Few houses had running water or indoor toilets, but some in larger coal towns had electricity. This modern convenience alone lured many from their farms to company towns.

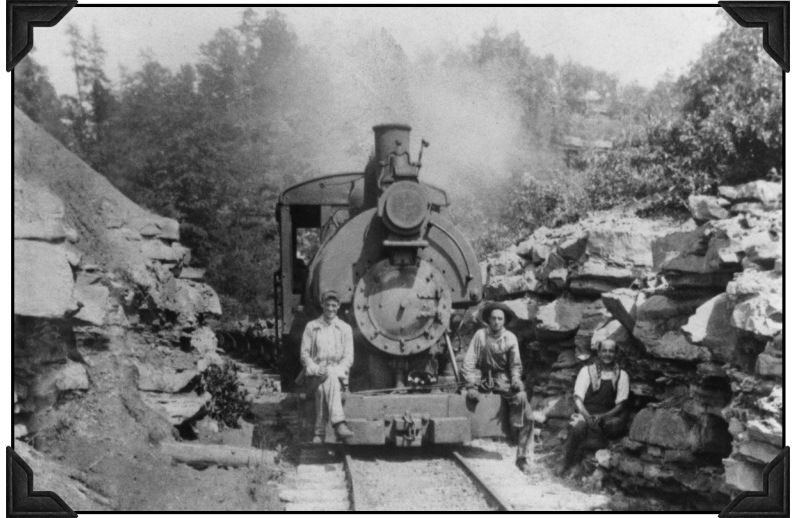
Bringing coal to market

During the 1870s, the Cincinnati Southern Railway's construction of a main line through southeastern Kentucky connected a once remote region to the industrial world.

In 1879, the Lexington Stave and Mining Company purchased land in the Barren Fork drainage. The company name would later become the Barren Fork Mining and Coal Company, and afterwards, the Eagle Coal Company.

The construction of a private rail system into Barren Fork opened access to a large underground bituminous coal seam. During the early 1880s, on the heels of railroad development, mining at Barren Fork and other nearby locations began.

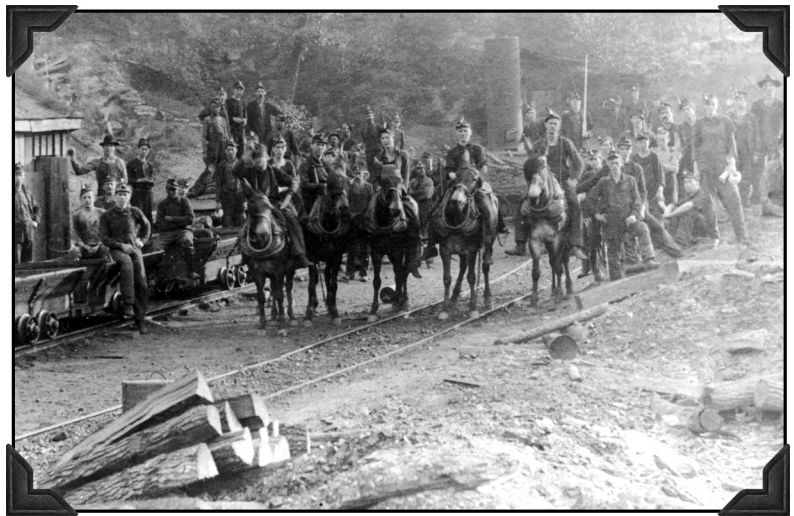
The Barren Fork Coal Camp was established along a creek that the railroad company named Railroad Fork. Both stream and rail entered the camp from the east.



Dinkey engine, about 1909. Photo from Reba Perkins.

Mine shaft openings were created within the camp, occurring along a steep slope at the camp's southern margin. Mine openings were also developed at several spots along Railroad Fork for at least three miles east of camp.

A steam-powered incline, built with piled-up slag, moved coal up the steep slope of the ridge. The coal was then graded by size and dumped from the tippie into waiting railcars on top of the ridge.



Railroad Fork, about 1912. Photo from Reba Perkins.

In 1912, the camp location was moved to an adjacent, relatively flat ridgetop south of Railroad Fork. The community, now larger, overlooked the stream.

During the late 1920s, after steam boilers that powered the incline blew up, Barren Fork started using electrical power supplied by the Stearns Power Company.

Barren Fork's Early Days

In the 1920s, the Barren Fork Coal Camp was bustling with life and activity. The camp community included a school, church, cemetery, company store with a post office, coal tipple with scales, and a baseball field.

At least 40 houses were developed at Barren Fork. Most homes were located on the ridgetop, along with some scattered along Railroad Fork and Pumpkin Hollow. Like other eastern Kentucky coal towns, most of the homes were modest one-story structures with four rooms. At Barren Fork, several homes were built of logs, or at least had one or two log rooms.

A wagon road circled the coal processing operation on the ridgetop and connected homes to the camp center. The railroad track was located along Railroad Fork, just north of the camp at the base of a steep slope. The camp residents used two cliff rockshelters in this area for social gatherings. The Barren Fork residents enjoyed amenities that many smaller coal camps lacked, such as the company store, school and baseball field, but larger coal towns in the region were more developed.



John McPherson holding Rushin in front of Barren Fork Coal Tipple, about 1913. Photo from Reba Perkins.

Lynch, Jenkins, Benham and Middlesboro had public industrial buildings made of brick, including a theater, hospital, city hall, firehouse, and a wide range of housing. Unlike these larger coal towns, Barren Fork Coal Camp had no electricity except in the mines.

Barren Fork was a self-contained community. The company store was a source of goods for the day-to-day necessities of its workers and residents. The people may have bought what they needed at the company store because it was convenient or because they could not get to a store elsewhere. In most cases, however, they probably lacked cash money to buy goods.

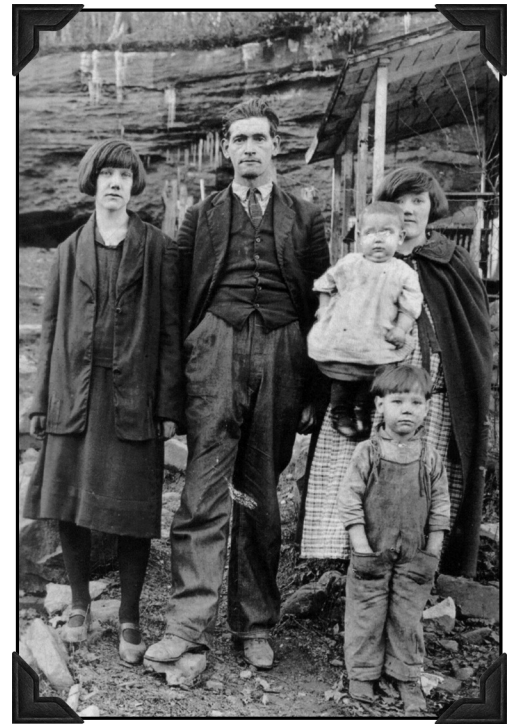
Often the coal company did not owe the miners a cash balance at the end of the month because they had charged purchases on credit at the company store. The store also issued scrip to its customers to use like cash. Because Barren Fork was one of the larger companies in the area, some local stores outside the camp accepted their scrip.



School students at Barren Fork, 1932. Photo from Marguerite (Gilreath) Kennedy. (Teacher pictured is Marguerite's father, Butler Gilreath).



Vitatoe Clan, early 1900s. Photo from Betty Worthington.



John Lynch with nieces and nephews, about 1923. Photo from Arnold Hansford.

The People of Barren Fork

According to a 1910 federal census, 464 out of 514 Barren Fork residents listed Kentucky as their birth place. Others came from the surrounding states of Tennessee, West Virginia, Ohio and Indiana.

Many of the camp's residents were the coal miners and other company employees, such as supervisors, mine foremen and timekeepers. With the use of mules and other draft animals at the mines, teamsters, a stable boss and a blacksmith lived there too.

Engineers, brakemen, trackmen and a track foreman maintained the railroad that took coal to waiting markets and brought in store goods for the community.

Other jobs unrelated to mining were needed at Barren Fork to support the community structure. Some residents were farmers or lumberers. A salesman was required to work at the company store.

Three women listed their occupation as "laundress." Undoubtedly, these women would have stayed busy doing laundry for so many coal camp laborers.

In the larger coal towns, the residents were segregated based on race, ethnic background or skill. At Barren Fork, however, local informants indicated that social and economic differences were minimized in the camp.

Some of Barren Fork's earliest residents were African American. They likely came to McCreary County in the 1870s to help build the Cincinnati Southern Railroad. Some stayed on to build the Lexington Stave and Mining Company's railroad and work in the Barren Fork mine.

In 1910, six of the camp's 105 households were African American. This made Barren Fork Coal Camp unique among its contemporaries, since minorities rarely lived inside the coal camps. By the 1920s, all African Americans had moved from Barren Fork.

The gradual decline

By the late 1920s, mining became less lucrative due to a fall in coal prices and attempts by Kentucky miners to unionize. The Great Depression had gripped the nation, which also forced many mining companies to close. In some cases, mining towns disappeared completely as the companies salvaged their structures for use elsewhere.

In 1935, after miners voted to join the union of the United Mine Workers of America, the Eagle Coal Company closed Barren Fork to mining. At that time of its closing, Barren Fork and the larger Stearns mine nearby were among the few mines that remained operational in the area.

The U.S. Forest Service bought the camp and the land on which it stood in 1936. Former residents still occupied nearly half of the existing houses, but they all left within a few

THE BARREN FORK COAL COMPANY

SOLE MINERS AND SHIPPERS OF

Barren Fork Coal Bright Fire Coal

Keeping Old Friends - Making New Friends

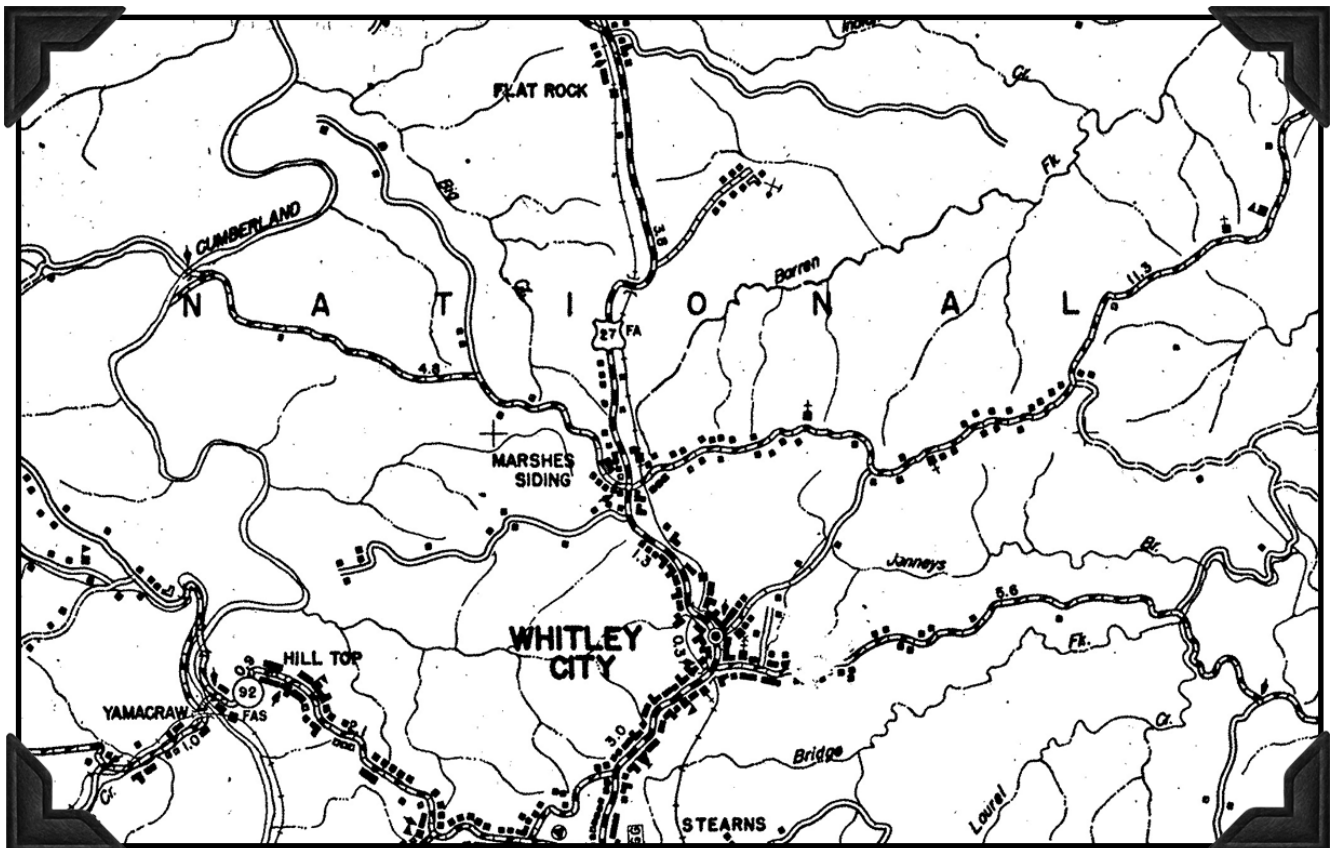
Since 1881

Barren Fork logo. Courtesy of Mark Vanover.

years of the sale. The Forest Service sold all usable mining equipment and removed the buildings.

The Barren Fork Coal Camp, a vibrant mining community for more than 50 years, disappeared almost completely. While the camp's existence is hardly visible today, its historic evidence remains intact and unspoiled below ground. The Barren Fork Coal Camp was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

1937 map of area.



Present day at Barren Fork

Today, the land where Barren Fork Coal Camp once stood is part of the Daniel Boone National Forest. The camp's two-acre cemetery is the most visible remnant that remains. With many family roots tied to this former mining community, the local people continue to use the cemetery.

If you look closely, you can see other traces of the coal camp along the ridgetop. An interpretive walking trail was developed for today's visitors to Barren Fork. The trail follows much of the old railroad from the tipple to the pond and is accessible to people with disabilities.

The concrete basement foundation of the company can be seen upon close inspection. Fragments of a concrete pad, large drain tiles, and slag piles that would have surrounded the weigh station and coal tipple are further evidence of this land's historic use.



Barren Fork Accessible Heritage Trail.

Where the building once stood that served as both a school and church, visitors can see a large cistern and a row of maple trees planted in honor of early students and residents. Pier stones and bricks, water wells, ornamental vegetation, and scatters of artifacts on the ground are all that remain of the houses.

Although weather-beaten and covered with vegetation, the incline used to move coal to the tipple still stands. Several mineshaft openings remain scattered along Railroad Fork near the center of the earliest camp. Mine openings in the hillside and the old railroad bed are visible east of the camp.

As you walk through the forest where Barren Fork Coal Camp once stood, take care to protect and appreciate this special place as part of Kentucky's coal mining history.

For your safety, never enter an underground mine. These areas pose the danger of roof collapse and exposure to carbon monoxide.



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