A Brief Look at Windber Mining Community

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Very good maps.

The Mines of Windber
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History of Windber

Windber mining community was located in Somerset County in Pennsylvania and was founded in 1897 with the coming of the Berwind-White mines. The Berwind brothers started off as a small-scale company in the 1860's and 1870's until it became incorporated into Berwind-White Coal Mining Company in 1886. Though Berwind-White held many more mining sites besides Windber, Windber was chiefly responsible for the wealth of the Berwind family. The head of the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company was Edward J. Berwind.

Coal mining first became prominent in Somerset County in the 1880's, but the industry grew incredibly with the building of Berwind-White's thirteen mines in the Windber area. The Berwind-White mines of the Windber area continued to be the highlight of the county's coal industry in the future years and peak production of these mines was attained between 1910 and 1913 with nearly 4 million tons produced annually. Throughout the 1920's Berwind-White continued solid production of coal, and when combined with the coal production of the Reitz Coal company, an affiliate, around half of the coal produced in the state's 24th bituminous inspection district was accounted for.

The Berwind-White mines in Windber started in 1897 and were numbered 30-42. In 1897, Number 31 and Number 32 began production and were followed by Numbers 32-35 in 1898. The next year only Number 37 opened and in 1900 only Number 36 opened. The remaining mines, Numbers 38-42, were completed between 1902 and 1908. With the growth of the mines in the area, the number of
employees of Berwind-White increased as well. Between March 1898 and October 1898 the number of employees (as listed in Berwind-White's payroll) increased from 550 to 1,600, while the number of daily carloads of coal increased from 50 to 160. The number of employees continued to increase in 1900 to around an estimated 3,000, which continued to increase in the subsequent years.

The official founding of Windber occurred in September 1897 and the first company houses were completed as well. Berwind-White maintained complete control of the town in just about every aspect of life considering it had a monopoly on land ownership, housing, and jobs. In addition to these aspects, it also dominated the political offices of the town. The company gained even more control between 1900 and 1910 with the establishment of the Windber Trust Company, the Windber Hospital, the Windber Building and Loan Association, the Windber Heating Company, and various new branches of the Eureka Stores (the company store). All of these establishments were under the complete control of Berwind-White.

By the urging of James S. Cunningham, the Superintendent, Windber received borough status on July 3, 1900, through Judge J. H. Longnecker's grant. In the first borough election on July 14, 1900, in which 423 votes were cast, it was established that ordinary working people were to be without political representation. This gave the company much more control over everything than it ever had. The company of Berwind-White essentially was the borough of Windber. The upper class of Windber honored Judge Longnecker at a banquet in
December 1900. At this time and in the future years, all of the leaders of the town and the upper classes were white, male, American-born, and Protestant.

With the organization of the United Mine Workers Association closing in on Windber, it looked as if some changes would have to be made in the company, but it undermined the support for the United Mine Workers Association through timely wage raises. The company announced three separate wage increases between April 1, 1899 and January 1, 1900. The timely wage increase on April 1 was the same day that Chris Evans announced the formation of a new local of the UMWA in Windber. At this time Windber had paid its miners much less than the companies in the surrounding area. Therefore, when it announced its wage increase, it was announced as an eight percent increase, which sounded much higher than it would have been if it was announced in amount in dollars. Berwind-White was also helped at this time by a smallpox outbreak in Windber, which caused the town to be closed off so that no work for a union organization could be made in the area for another two months.

Berwind-White faced some conflicts with the UMWA over the next few years, but it avoided any big confrontations and it always got good press from the local newspapers, the *Windber Era* and the *Windber Journal*. However, the *Journal* turned against the company in 1903 when a story about Ben Stevens, a 22-year old American spragger, came out. Stevens had died on the job in Mine 35 on October 24, 1903. His fellow workers took a half-day in order to tell Stevens’ parents of his death even though the company would not let them. When they returned to work on Monday, they found that they had been
suspended. The *Journal* was outraged at this oppressiveness and published the story in a stand against the company. The *Journal* along with the *UMWA Journal* also tried for the unionization of the workers at Windber. This effort however did not immediately succeed, but it helped in the strike of 1906.

On Monday, April 2, 1906, about a thousand miners on strike from places just outside of Windber, attempted to gain support from the miners in Windber. The group, led by Joseph Genter, a national UMWA organizer, succeeded and 3,000 out of the 5,000 local miners joined in the strike to gain a contract and a new wage scale. The majority of the Windber miners stayed out of work until July and all the while faced violence from the company, nativist attacks, evictions, and armed suppression from the state police. Included in these violent acts is the massacre on April 16, in which three foreign-born men were killed and a ten-year old boy was mortally wounded by Tanney Agency detectives in the employ of Berwind-White. They were part of a crowd that protested the arrest of eleven or twelve individuals who were then in jail. The deputies who had shot the innocent, unarmed people were taken to jail, but almost immediately released. These events led to the repression to break the strikes in all areas. On April 24, 1906, deputies began to carry out conviction orders of 146 strikers due to Judge Francis J. Kooser's permanent injunction against them. Throughout the rest of the month and the following months, many strikers were arrested and taken to jail on a daily basis. On May 4 in an arrest, the union president and the secretary of the Windber local, along with eighteen others, were arrested and taken to the Somerset County jail. The company deputies claimed that they had
seen the president of the strike, Charles Shank, in the vicinity of a company house that had burned down and charged him with arson. His bail was set at $1,000, which like the bail of all other arrested strikers was extremely high. While union lawyers attempted to have the men released from the prison, the miners in the area were in constant terror. Many recalled that troops randomly shot at strikers without reason and broke up any kind of organization of strikers, which included three or four standing with each other on a street.

The situation in Windber looked bleak for the miners, especially after the Buffalo and Susquehanna Company and the Morris Run Company settled with the UMWA on June 28, 1906. Other companies followed suit, but the newly organized miners of Berwind-White in the Windber area were not included in any of the contracts. Therefore, in July miners started going back to work in large quantities. The UMWA on the district and national level paid legal fees and court costs as well as borrowed money to pay the debts owed to the local merchants by the strikers. When it was all said and done, the workers did not attain the right to organize, their main goal, but there still was much significance in this rebellion, considering nothing like this had yet happened in the area.

The next major event that affected the workers at Windber was World War I. The immediate effect was the halt of immigrants into the mining community. As expected, the war heightened the socioeconomic depression that already existed at Windber and the rest of the coal industry. First of all, the time that the miners worked was cut in half. The coal market was depressed because Berwind-White could not export to places such as Germany, where much
business had gone before the war. These and other causes led to outmigration from Windber to places such as munitions factories, which provided more lucrative jobs at the time. The war also led to many immigrants making their permanent home in the United States instead of just a temporary workplace.

However, a revival in the industry did occur just before the United States entered the war in 1917. The need for growth in the labor movement occurred due to the end of the depression of 1914 and 1915, a labor shortage, and a new demand for munitions, coal, and other products. With the increased demand for the mine workers, unions tried to negotiate new contracts and many nonunion workers went on strike for union recognition. The advances of the labor movement benefited the Windber's nonunion workers because Berwind-White set wages and hours to compete against the unionization of its workers. The wages and hours reflected the strength or weakness of the regional union. Despite Berwind-White's attempts, many miners still wanted to form a union, and a step in that direction was taken on April 1, 1918, with a letter written by a miner, Edward J. Robinson, to the UMWA district president, John Brophy. The letter asked for help in setting up a union at Windber. Robinson wrote another letter two weeks later after not hearing from Brophy. This time Brophy wrote back and set up a meeting with Robinson for April 21, 1918 in Nanto-Glo. The scheduled meeting did not work out and on May 13, 1918, Robinson informed Brophy that he had been discharged and blacklisted. Robinson found a job in a small mine and continued to push for unionization. In November 1918 the Windber Citizens' Association was formed in order to fight Berwind-White. Instead of having just
miner support, Robinson also had the support of businessmen because they needed the unionization of the workers in order to break the monopoly that Berwind-White had. On December 20, 1918, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson received a petition from the Windber association for a request to investigate the situation that was occurring in Windber. The petition was signed by the officers of the association: President, J.W. Kelly, merchant; Vice-President, H.M. Habeeb, merchant; Secretary, E.M. Berkhimer; and William H. Bolopur, barber. A second petition was sent on January 13, 1919 signed by eighteen members including a group of people with a variety of different trades. On January 15, 1919, Kelly met in Washington with members from the Labor Department and was assured that someone would come to investigate the situation. On January 28, Frederick G. Davis, a Commissioner of Conciliation, met with the association members. Davis completed his investigation on February 18, and in a confidential report to the Labor Department, he concluded that the association was correct in its charges. However, all that was obtained from this was the order for the miners that had been discharged to be reinstated. The association continued to try for unionization, but it was to no avail.

The discontent of the mine workers at Windber led to the joining of them with the national bituminous coal strikes in April 1922. The strike went on for seventeen months with the one goal of obtaining unionization. Following the strike, many hearings were held in which Berwind-White along with other companies fought the UMWA over the right to organize. Berwind-White also fought the strike by evicting families with no allowances for ill children or women
about to give birth. Despite this long hard fought strike, the miners did not win
the right to unionize. The workers went back to work on an open-shop policy.
Berwind did not even promise the reinstatement of all workers. The workers still
did not give up the hope for unionization.

The strike of 1922 marked the end of Berwind-White's prime in Windber.
In 1924 the Windber mines were working only two or three days a week. The
highpoint of the company's employment in the 1920's was reached in 1921 with
the employment of 3,498, and the low point occurred in 1929 with a total work
force of 2,353. This pushed many young people and miners to move to the big
cities such as New York. Berwind-White tried to keep its work force and remain
competitive by giving the nonunionized workers the wages that the union
negotiated on. However competition between nonunion companies increased
and when the nonunion companies of the district lowered wages to the rate paid
in 1917, Berwind-White did the same. In 1926 there was a wage increase, but
this was short-lived due to a cut in the wages back to the rate that they were
before the increase of 1926. In 1927 the miners walked out on strike. This strike
however only lasted three days and, as expected, it failed. Many of the young
workers that had been fired for striking, did not even want their jobs back and left
for the city.

With the stock market crash in October 1929, things at Windber only
worsened. From 1929 to 1933, local mines operated only two or three days and
the people were extremely bad off. The reporters from the Industrial Workers of
the World went to Windber in August 1932 and reported emaciated children and
hunger throughout the community. With Roosevelt's New Deal, Windber finally received its organized unionization. Windber's local obtained its charter on July 22, 1933. On September 21, 1933 John L. Lewis, who had been instrumental in bringing unionization, won Roosevelt's approval for the NIRA code. This covered all soft-coal districts, stabilized wages, guaranteed the eight hour work day, abolished scrip, ended compulsory trading at company stores, outlawed child labor, and secured the checkoff and the miners' right to elect checkweighmen. Finally, the workers at Windber successfully fulfilled their tasks for unionization and rights.
The Make-up of the People of Windber Community

A major portion of the work force at Windber was made up of immigrants of four nationalities: Slovaks, Magyars, Poles, and Italians. In a poll taken in 1910 of the work force at Windber, these groups comprised 84 percent of the entire foreign population and 38 percent of the general population. The most numerous were the Slovaks, followed by the Magyars, then the Poles and Italians. Though the vast majority of the immigrants were Roman or Greek Catholics, the religious makeup of the different immigrants did vary. There were a good many Jews, Slovak Lutherans, and Hungarian Reformed Church members.

Considering the fact that mining was "men's work," the initial influx of immigrants was predominantly male, but even thirteen years after Windber was founded, the proportion of the town's population was 59 to 41 with males comprising the 59 percentage. The majority of the male population that originally entered Windber were married. The ratio between the married men to single men found by the Dillingham report was 56 to 44. A census taken in 1910 found that of all the foreign men that were married, approximately one-third had wives that lived elsewhere.

As expected, the town of Windber was predominantly working class. In the 1910 census, it was found that 78 percent of the working class were unskilled manual laborers. Eight percent were employed in various trades, four percent worked in white-collar clerical, bookkeeping, or sales positions, and the
remaining ten percent worked in the traditional middle-class occupations, which were business, the professions, or management. The Americans held almost all the professions in Windber. All dentists and druggists were native born, and two-thirds of the physicians and 88 percent of the teachers were native born. All of the legal offices, such as lawyers, judges, and enforcement officials were of Pennsylvania origin. The Americans even comprised half of the clergy. Forty percent of the businessmen were Americans and they made up the majority of the positions in the important enterprises. Therefore the foreign born people, who made up close to half of the whole population, did not comprise anywhere close to half of the jobs outside of the unskilled, manual laboring jobs.

There was not a whole lot of work for women in the area outside of the house. In the 1910 census, it was found that 85 percent of the women were not in the work force. Of the ones that were in the work force, 18 percent were clerical, sales, and kindred workers, 17 percent were professional workers, 23 percent were domestic service workers, 29 percent service workers, 9 percent were operatives and kindred workers, and 3 percent were proprietors, managers and officials. Child labor at Windber was commonplace in the first quarter of the century even though there were laws against it. Many boys got illegal working papers by going to school officials that would falsely certify the child’s age. Families would take their children to work because they needed the extra money, or in some cases, women whose husbands had died needed money in general.
The Company Store

In Windber as in most other mining communities, the company-store symbolized the tyranny and oppressiveness of the company. From interviews with most every person came the notion that one had to shop at the company store. This gave the company store a monopoly and complete control over the miners in what was supposed to be a capitalistic society. A number of laws had been passed against the company stores, but these were either ignored or bypassed by one way or another. E.J. Berwind had both the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company and the Eureka Supply Company, Ltd. in Windber. He put his brothers and comrades on the board of directors for the store, thus he could deny that he owned company stores when questioned by the Industrial Relations Commission.

The Berwind-White company stores served the employer extremely well because since the company store could supply credit, the company already had an advantage of recruiting prospective miners to that area than to an area where the store could not supply credit or did not have a company store. Then, once the workers owed credit to the store, the company can keep the workers because they are unable to leave due to their debt. The company stores also lacked the risk that independent stores had when providing their customers with credit because they had control over the wages and jobs of the people.

The Eureka Supply Company at Windber carried nearly almost every necessity. Therefore, almost all money that was not spent on food was spent in the company store. When Berwind-White hired new workers, the workers were
required to sign a contract that allowed the company to deduct Eureka store purchases from biweekly wage statements. Therefore the miners had no choice but to trade on credit on their advanced salary. Moreover it was found by the Dillingham report of the Dillingham Commission that people that were not employed by the company were charged less for items than the workers of the company.

There were many ways Berwind-White secured the people to shop at the store besides the credit of the store. Because there was only one way in and out of the town, the company could regulate what was brought in the town and they could make sure that independent items were not brought in the town. Many tried secretly to shop elsewhere, but it was rarely successful. If one did purchase independent items and the items were spotted, the next day those exact same items were brought to the people from the company store and were charged to that person’s account no matter if they wanted the items or not. Many times if the company did not think a miner was spending enough money in the company store, they would tell the miner that if he did not spend more money in the company store he would be in danger of losing his job. These tyrannical methods not only hurt the miners, but the business people and other potential competitors were also hurt because they could not compete with the situation at hand. The failure of the community to break the company’s monopoly and diversify industry in the town set the stage for the ongoing struggle for unionization.
Conclusion

By looking at mining communities such as Windber, we are able to better understand what went on at Longdale. It gives us insight to such things as the oppression of the company store, the lifestyle of the people, and the harsh labor they underwent. However, no mining community is the same and things could have been much different at Windber than at Longdale.
Bibliography
