

“I Owe My Soul to the Company Store,”

Southwestern Pennsylvania is famous throughout the country (and the world) as being a major center of the mining industry. It was here, in the early twentieth century, that the world's largest coal mine was operated under the management of the Jones & Laughlin Steel Company. In its first month of operation alone, the 1,400 Vesta #4 miners produced a remarkable 174,338 tons of bituminous coal, which is the equivalent of 6,000 to 7,000 tons per day. The region surrounding California, Pennsylvania quickly became dotted with patches of coal towns, including Daisytown and Richeyville, which were company towns built to house workers of the Vesta #4 mine (*New York Times* 14).

Despite the prestige and jobs that the mining industry brought to this area, life in the mines was notoriously difficult. Miners frequently returned home after a full day of back-breaking labor with a pittance of money to feed their hungry families. This was a result of the pay-per-ton wage system that was practiced in the early days of the mining industry, which paid miners only for their tonnage and not for the “dead work” that was necessary to unearth the coal or make the mine safe for use (Ciervo 37). Unionization as a means of improving the life styles of the miners was strongly opposed by the company; coal police, or “yellow dogs” as they were referred to by the citizens of the company town, were kept on duty at all times to “keep miners from organizing unions and to protect company property (Ciervo 53).”

Every aspect of a miner's life was controlled by the company: his work, his home, and even the food he ate. All shopping in a mining town was done at the company store. Miners' wives could pay with cash, credit, or scrip (both of which were subtracted from the miner's paycheck), and were usually allowed up to one dollar and fifty cents per day in charges (Ciervo 77). Generally, the company store is seen as an instrument of oppression against the miners and their families: “We always owed the company store money. My dad once went three years without getting a penny in his paycheck,” said the daughter of a Richeyville miner (Ciervo 77). During the Great Depression, however, the company store was one of the most important instruments of aid to the miners and their families.

“[The company stores] poured out credit beyond reason to homes without income or hope of income. They handed out foodstuffs and other merchandise without question...tens of thousands of dollars worth,” read an editorial in the *Brownsville Telegraph* in July 1935 (Ciervo 88). Proud miners who refused to accept government charity took advantage of the endless credit that the stores were dealing out to feed their families and survive the worst of the depression. The ugly underside of this *generosity*, though, was the deep hole of indebtedness that resulted from the constant borrowing of money.

This paper, “I Owe My Soul to the Company Store,” will explore both of these positive and negative impacts that the company store had on the mining towns of Southwestern Pennsylvania. It will examine the effectiveness of New Deal welfare programs in comparison to store services, as well as the cultural importance of the company store to the community. Most importantly, the paper will strive to weigh the short and long-term effects of the services, and show in what way the miners *owed* their souls to the company store.

Works Cited

Ciervo, Arthur Vincent. Always in a Hole. Camp Hill, PA: Plank's Suburban Press, 1996. Print.

"World's Biggest Coal Mine." *New York Times* 23 Sep 1907: 14. Online. 18 Mar. 2010.

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