Windber, PA & The Berwind-White Coal Company

“Then there was the whole concept of coal mining, which is a culture unto itself...” – Martin C. Smith
Part I- Introduction and a Brief History of Windber

A town that is over a hundred years old wouldn’t be classified as “new” by anyone’s standards. One would expect it to be thriving and economically stable to have lasted that long. But when you drive down the streets of Windber, PA; this is clearly not the case. Driving through many areas in the town feels like driving through an ancient and heavily depressed town. Windber is the perfect example of many things- a coal company town, an exceptionally diverse immigrant community, and a Rust Belt town that still shows the aftereffects of ended coal production.

Windber was found in 1897 by the Berwind-White Coal Company. Although it was not the first company town built in the Northeast, it quickly became the archetype of one. Windber was built on around 1300 acres of what had previously only been farmland. Within only a few years of its founding, the town grew to hold hundreds of houses, churches, and recreational areas for the workers of Eureka mines 30-42. Once all of these buildings were established, immigrants from all over Europe flooded to the area to live and work. By the time Windber was three years old, the estimated number of Eureka mine employees was between 4,000 and 5,000. As Mildred Allen Beik writes in her book The Miners of Windber,

“In three short years, then, “Berwind” had in fact become “Windber.” A modern, nationally prominent coal corporation with absentee owners had set up a company town in a sparsely populated rural Pennsylvania setting in order to enable it to get the valuable coal deposits that underlay it.” [Beik 25]

And for a period of time, Windber truly was a “model mining town.” Hotels, restaurants, and other businesses soon began to spring up in the area. Each of the 12 Eureka mines grew to hold their own community of company houses, schools, and a few even had their own branch of the
Eureka company store. Berwind-White eventually opened a bank, an electric company, and the Arcadia Theater in the downtown area. For all intents and purposes, Windber was booming.

However, when the Industrial Era of the Northeast reached its finale, Windber was one of the towns that felt the impacts and aftereffects the hardest. By the end of the 1960's, all coal production in Windber virtually ceased, which left lasting impacts on the region. What happens to a coal town when coal is no longer present as a driving force? Berwind-White began to reclaim some of its holdings in the area, including company houses that were still home to former mine workers. Many of the area churches, having been largely funded by Berwind-White, sought to get changes made to their deeds. People began leaving Windber en masse, and by 1990, the population had plummeted to below 5,000.

Part II- The Social Impact of Berwind-White

At the turn of the century, European immigration to the states was at its peak. Many immigrants were drawn to the Northeast, especially, due to the surge in steel and coal production. Those that flooded to Windber were predominantly from Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Italy- 85% of the mine workers came from just these four countries. While these groups of people were all working in the same industry, many of them were split off into the different communities of the various Eureka mines. The various Catholic churches built in and around Windber were all for a specific nationality, and worked to serve that population. Social clubs and fraternal organizations were established by and for many groups, such as the Slovak Political and Education Club and the Italian-American Citizens’ Beneficial Association. These groups helped to maintain the sense of ethnic communities for much longer than non-mining towns tended to.

With all of these ethnic groups living in one area, tensions ran high. Rather than assimilating, the existence of the aforementioned churches and fraternal organizations helped to keep ethnic traditions alive. This also meant continued prejudice by the “old” immigrants- English,
Irish, and Germans. Many laws and restrictions were put into place, including denial of liquor licenses, attempts at closing the social clubs, and in an extreme example, the massacre of April 16, 1906. In this case, three foreign born men were killed after a meeting discussing a strike. Even in the mines, nationality played into the balance of power. Very few Eastern European immigrants were placed in positions of leadership or skilled labor.

There was not only a dynamic between the various immigrant groups that came to Windber as well as one between the Americans living in the area and the new residents. While the Americans held almost all of the white collar and management positions rather than working in the mines, they were still Windber residents. In fact, Railroad Street, located in mine 35, was named because of the railroad constructed to keep the immigrants away from the natives. However, the highest ranking officials for Berwind-White lived on “The Hill”, which rises above the business buildings and company houses.

Part III- The Economic Impact of Berwind-White

Economically, Berwind-White controlled every facet of a coal miner’s life, from their home to the store where they bought their goods. The most extreme example of this lies in the Eureka Stores. This eventually came to be one of the biggest driving forces when miners attempted to unionize against Berwind-White.

The first Eureka store was built at mine 30, in Paint Township. However, when I asked my dad about Eureka stores, he referred me to the large flagship one located in downtown Windber. The building, to put it simply, is massive. It was originally constructed as a place for workers to purchase food and the other goods they needed. However, prices were ridiculously high for the goods that were offered, and many families soon found themselves buying things on credit and owing massive debts to the store. There have been some cases reported where non-miner customers would be charged lower prices than the miners, just to keep the system intact. Almost a
quarter of Berwind-White’s profits came from the Eureka stores. Additionally, shopping anywhere other than the Eureka stores was greatly looked down on, and in some cases even resulted in termination:

“If you buy stuff from other stores, they give you a warning... the second time they just fired you.” –Joe Popp, miner and blacksmith.

Eventually, satellite stores were added in many of Windber’s other mining communities. Some of these are still in existence and house modern-day businesses. Despite the iron grip the company stores held on much of the local economy, some smaller businesses were able to open, many of which are also still in operation by the descendents of the founders. Examples of these are the Windber Hotel and many smaller markets and local restaurants.

In addition to controlling the consumerism of the miners, Berwind-White also controlled the Windber Electric Company, the Windber Trust Building, and train and streetcar stations in the town. All of these buildings are located within spitting distance of each other in the downtown area. Essentially, Berwind-White controlled every aspect of the miners’ lives.

**Part IV- The Political Impact of Berwind-White**

In Windber, Berwind-White virtually ran the show. They cleared the land, they built the houses, they paid the workers- they called all the shots. However, in a few notable cases, the workers did attempt to unionize and came to eventually strike on several occasions.

The strike of 1906 was the first “big one”. Many factors went into the strike. Firstly, Windber miners became made aware of the benefits unionized miners received; for example the 8 hour work day instead of the 10 hour one that was more common in Windber, the fact that they paid large amounts of their paychecks to keep the hospital running yet had no say in its operations, even to the extreme case of discharging patients who spoke out against the way the hospital was
treat them. Eventually, 3,000 of the 5,000 miners of Windber joined miners from neighboring area in striking. After the walkout on April 2nd, production in the Windber mines ceased and reportedly only 200 men went back to work while the majorities were on strike. Berwind-White didn't make things easy for the strikers, though. Since almost every public building in town was owned by the company, strikers had to meet in woods or fields to discuss strategy. A greater problem arose when families started being receiving eviction notices from company housing. The United Mine Workers of American leased land and began setting up tents for the families that would be leaving their homes.

After the previously mentioned massacre on April 16th, 1906, Berwind-White admitted that they had a strike to deal with and began arresting strikers. The company hired troops to keep the strikers under control, and would break up groups of people anywhere that they saw them. The company store was denying credit to the strikers and their families, who soon began relying on the generosity and willingness of local business owners to grant them credit. Eventually, by the end of the summer, the miners were back to work, although many were dissatisfied with the results and UMWA found themselves almost forty thousand dollars in debt.

After WWI, similar events occurred which culminated in the strike of 1922. The workers wanted to be paid for the actual loads of coal they were hauling and be recognized by the union. This time, even the women and children of the town took to the picket lines, and many were evicted and ended up in tent villages on the outskirts of town. This strike ended in 1923, just as unsuccessfully as the last one. It took until 1933 for UMWA to successfully organize the miners.

**Part V: Environmental/Economic Impact of Berwind-White**

Many of Berwind-Whites former mines have fallen into disrepair, but this is not to say that you can't tell they were there. When you drive around Windber, you still see an abundance of rock dumps and ponds that are composed of coal refuse. The whole construction of the town was a huge
environmental force, since what was originally an agricultural valley had now become a small thriving industrial community. However, the mine at 35 is still in production, though not by Berwind-White. My uncle is currently employed by one of the Windber mines. Since the production of coal has stopped, the area has never been able to fully recover. Poverty levels are higher than the state average, and incomes are well below. The younger generation has been pouring out of the area due to lack of opportunities within. While the hospital is certainly both stable and thriving, it will take a major force to give Windber an economic overhaul.

Part VI: It Doesn’t Have to be This Way

Other towns in the Rust Belt have been able to pull themselves out of depression, so why can’t Windber? The best example I can think of is the neighboring city of Johnstown. Even though steel production ceased downtown, the area hasn't come close to being as desolate as things sometimes are in Windber. This is because other industries have moved in to take the place, and thus provide jobs that Windber does not. The best thing that can happen to Windber is to expand upon the hospital’s reputation, and to set themselves up as a center for research and other medical services.

Part VII: Berwind-White and Collapse

Windber can be contrasted with the Bitterroot Valley in Montana in the respect that people aren't moving into Windber, they're moving out; and also because Windber hasn't really suffered environmentally because of the coal production. It's not that in Windber they mined the ground to within an inch of its life, the demand for coal simply dropped post WW2. Also, while the Bitterroot Valley is pretty, and people with lots of money want to move their because of its aesthetic benefits, Windber just isn’t that pretty. It’s frankly a depressing place to be.
Conclusion

In the final analysis, this project taught me a lot. It taught me more about where my family came from, more about immigrant and union relations, and more about coal than anyone would ever want to know. While I always grew up listening to my Dad joke about how Windber was a ghetto, and not anywhere you would want to live, I didn’t really understand the impact the absence of the coal industry had made on the area until I started driving around and talking to people. Things aren’t looking that great for this little town, but with the presence of the Windber Research Institute and potentially wind farm construction in the area, Windber may just get a second chance.