

Up-and-Comers

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“They Say in Harlan County, There Are No Neutrals There”: The US Coal and Coke Company Photograph Album and the Preservation of Appalachian History

By Emma Johansen, Collections Assistant, The Filson Historical Society

*earth works
thick brown mud
clinging pulling
a body down
hear wounded earth cry
bequeath to me
the hoe the hope
ancestral rights
to turn the ground over
to shovel and sift
until history
rewritten resurrected
returns to its rightful owners*
—bell hooks, “Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place”

bell hooks (1952–2021), a celebrated author, professor, and activist from Hopkinsville, Kentucky, uses the terrain of Appalachia and the long history of Appalachian labor as a means of connecting with the past, of remembering her ancestors, and of staking claim to a diverse, complex Appalachia that exists today and has existed for centuries. Her portraits of Appalachia—bursting with sweeping, unmoving mountains and grieving ghosts in dirt roads—showcase the intimate, nuanced bond hooks has with her Kentucky roots. In her poems, hooks also dives into the weight of history: the legacy of white colonization, the enslavement of Africans, the genocide of Indigenous peoples, and the labor exploitation of coal miners. Appalachia is a place where history lies on top of more history; layers and layers of ghosts pile on top of each other like rings on a tree or the height of a mountain.

Today, Appalachia is miscategorized as a scattered run of ghost towns. Those left standing are assumed to be occupied by unemployed coal miners, backward hicks, and hillbillies. While the decline and outsourcing of coal mining has left many of these communities

economically devastated, there are still rich cultures in these areas—as there have been for centuries. We at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville, Kentucky, can now document and exhibit the intriguing origins of a particular coal mining town through a recently acquired photograph album from Harlan County, Kentucky. This town would foster one of the largest coal mining communities in the state during its prime and would become the epicenter of a labor movement that shook the entire country into action. The history of Appalachia cannot be told without the history of Harlan County, and the history of Harlan County begins with the US Coal and Coke Company Photograph Album.



A worker standing on a coal mining belt, surrounded by the Appalachian Mountains, page 27. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

The Appalachian Mountains are older than dinosaurs. The Appalachian Mountains are older than bones. Millions of years ago, while the continents were still clustered together as Pangea, what would become the Appalachian Mountains was connected to the Scottish Highlands. While the tectonic plates shifted, the fossils of plants decayed and hardened on top of each other. The heat and pressure of this process slowly produced a soft, black rock that would become more useful than diamonds in millions of years' time:

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coal. Many Indigenous peoples and nations settled in the resulting mountains 16,000 years ago, most primarily the Cherokee Nation, but also the Iroquois Nation, the Powhatan Confederacy, and the Shawnee Tribe. There were fewer Indigenous people in the mountains compared to the prairies of Kentucky and Ohio, but the challenging terrain and altitude of the mountains would become a key asset in resisting European colonization. As fur traders and European “explorers” demolished Indigenous settlements looking for a route out west, the African people they enslaved would greatly influence Appalachian culture. The cultural exchange between Indigenous peoples, African peoples, and European colonizers would solidify itself as Scottish Irish and German immigrants began to settle permanently in Appalachia during the late seventeenth century. In a way similar to the American Southwest, the Appalachian Mountains harbored complex social networks among a myriad of cultures.

By the mid-eighteenth century, rural settlements harvested timber for most of their economic export, which was used in manufacturing, building construction, and ship construction. But, as the United States pushed itself to industrialize in competition with European countries, the trees would pale in comparison to what was under their roots. In the Industrial Revolution, coal became the most valuable export from the mountains, and entire towns were built just to sustain families of coal miners. The town of Lynch, Kentucky, was no exception. Lynch, deeply nestled in the valley of Harlan County, Kentucky, was built in the 1910s to 1920s by the US Coal and Coke Company, a subsidiary of US Steel. Lynch was named after Thomas Lynch, the president of the US Coal and Coke Company. It was considered the “Cadillac” of coal mining towns in its prime, as the town was completely self-sufficient with its own bathhouse, hospital, movie theater, and department store. New details of the construction of Lynch and the economic settlement of Harlan County, Kentucky, are revealed through the US Coal and Coke Company Photograph Album. The Filson Historical Society purchased this album through its Historic Acquisitions Fund at auction. There is little to no provenance recorded for this collection, and we have no idea where this album was housed before going to an auction house. There is no information

on the compiler of the album, but it can be argued that its creator was most likely an executive of the US Coal and Coke Company. Photographs included in the album document the construction of key features in Lynch, including company-owned residential homes, a massive coal mining belt, a power plant, and a hotel for visiting company executives. The Lynch Hotel, specifically, is well represented in this album; the fully furnished rooms and massive front balcony overlooking the mountains would have been very attractive to US Coal and Coke executives. One of the largest structures in the town, aside from the hotel, was the company commissary store, topped by a massive electric American flag. Many of these structures are still standing in Lynch today, including the bathhouse and the post office.



The front balcony and staircases to the hotel in Lynch, meant for visiting company executives. In this photograph, the front balcony is under construction, page 32. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

While most of this album records the construction of major operations in Lynch, its real treasure lies within the intimate portraits of its residents. Down the dirt roads and among the small homes built from freshly cut wood, you can find the citizens of Lynch cooking on their back porch, riding on horseback, or even feeding a bear cub. Many residents were recruited to Lynch straight from Ellis Island, leading the Appalachian Mountains to become a mix of immigrating cultures and peoples once again. When flipping through this album, you can see a community take shape in real time; the first lines of manmade trenches and narrow railroads stretch into well-attended schools, homes, and offices.



A resident of Lynch feeding a bear cub outside of a log cabin, page 17. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.



Three women talking atop building materials and partly constructed houses, page 16. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

The album ends with scenic views of Niagara Falls, a seemingly random addition that may allude to company executives wanting to implement hydroelectric power production in Lynch. The album ends in 1920, but the town of Lynch only grew over the years, reaching its prime in the 1930s and 1940s. This era would fortify Lynch as a site of radical unionizing and labor organizing among the working class in America, and the homes, schools, and businesses seen in this album would foster a community of trailblazers fighting for workers' rights across the country.



A man, presumably an executive from the US Coal and Coke Company, standing on a ledge at Niagara Falls, page 43. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

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An album page with four photographs documenting residential homes in Lynch from a variety of angles. The top left photograph includes a woman cooking on her back porch, page 21. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

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Three visitors overlooking Niagara Falls from a scenic viewpoint, page 44. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

By the 1940s, Lynch had grown to a population of about 10,000, and the residents of Harlan County had solidified into a unified community that fought back

against unfair wages and dangerous working conditions. The Harlan County War, also known as “Bloody Harlan,” was a series of bombings, strikes, and police raids that terrorized labor activists from 1931 to 1939. In 1931, in response to the 1929 stock market crash and other financial losses, the Harlan County Coal Operators’ Association slashed coal miners’ wages by 10 percent to cut costs. Workers in Harlan were already impoverished, and any workers attempting to unionize or strike against the US Coal and Coke Company were often fired and evicted from their homes. These conditions pushed the community to organize alongside the United Mine Workers of America (UWM) and the National Miners’ Union (NMU). With these national organizations representing the community, the story of Harlan could now be heard far from Appalachia. The organizing and activism during the Harlan County War, specifically in Lynch, formed a backbone for union initiatives and social justice movements for years to come.

As Harlan County was a powder keg of the labor union movement, popular culture had spread the events of “Bloody Harlan” across the country and solidified Lynch as a staple in a number of civil rights movements. The protest song, “Which Side Are You On?,” popularized by Pete Seeger, was written by Florence Reece of Harlan. Reece wrote the song in 1931, when she and her husband, Sam, were union organizers for the United Mine Workers of America. Sam Reece was terrorized by Sheriff J. H. Blair and his union-busting policemen, and he fled the town for his safety while the police illegally rooted through the Reece home and harassed the family. The lyrics of the song directly reference Appalachia: “They say in Harlan County / There are no neutrals there. / You’ll either be a union man / or a thug for J. H. Blair.” Variations of the song have been sung at labor, environmental, and civil rights protests for decades. Lynch was also the subject of an award-winning 1976 documentary, *HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.*, which covered the aftermath of the Harlan County Wars and the continued economic oppression people in Harlan face at the hands of coal companies. Furthermore, Dr. William H. Turner, scholar and sociologist of Affrilachian (African and Appalachian) studies, recently published a memoir on growing up Black in Lynch, titled *The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Towns*. The decline of coal after World War II made

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A group of residents photographed on a front porch with a horse, page 1. Courtesy of The Filson Historical Society.

way for automation, pushing many immigrants and Black people out of Appalachia to find work in other areas of the South and Midwest. Today, the population of Lynch is just over five hundred.

As we have fully digitized this album, we hope to make this collection and the origins of Lynch more accessible to historians, archivists, and students in Appalachia first and foremost, then to scholars in the South and Midwest. The coal mined in Lynch, Harlan County, Kentucky, no doubt fueled the nation. The availability and preservation of this collection are crucial to recognizing that most people who lived during the early days in Lynch were first-generation, working-class immigrants who established a happy, tight-knit community in the Appalachian Mountains. This album can be used to combat the classist, essentialist stereotypes of Appalachia and Kentucky. Eastern Kentucky has been a place of radical labor politics for decades, and Lynch is not an empty, desolate ghost town. Many in Lynch still experience systemic poverty, especially at the hands of the coal companies that continue to exploit their labor. Though the community of Lynch is small, its people are proud of their

Appalachian roots and continue to resist wage cuts in remembrance of the fighters before them.



Emma Johansen is collections assistant at the Filson Historical Society. They recently graduated from the University of Louisville with their bachelor's in history. They specialize in digital humanities, archival work as an activist tool for social justice, and LGBT history in Kentucky.

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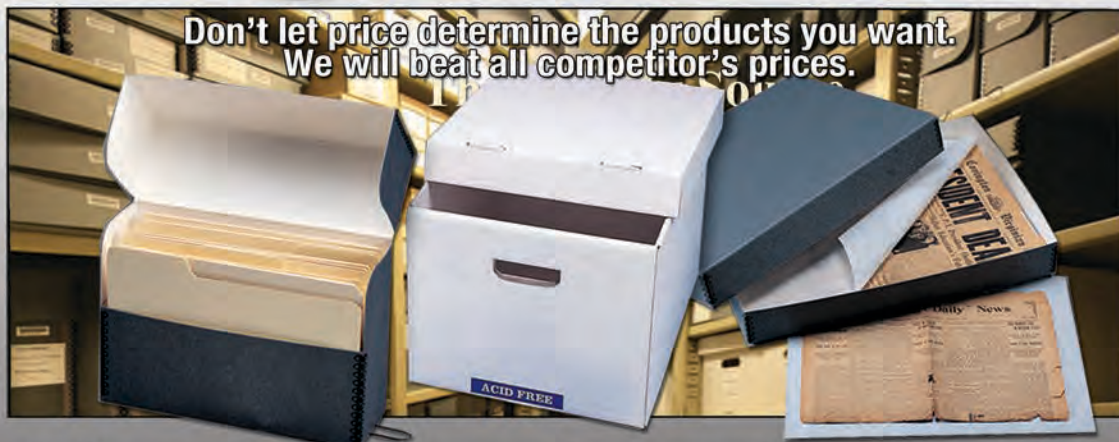
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