

A Remarkable Collection

The past is what you remember, imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember, or pretend to remember.

—Harold Pinter

A photograph, whilst recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen.

—John Berger

While conducting research in support of a doctoral dissertation several years ago at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., it was my good fortune to stumble upon a truly remarkable collection of coal-mining photographs. Numbering close to four thousand in all and covering an impressive range of topics, the collection had formerly belonged to the powerful Consolidation Coal Company. Some of the photos show commonplace mining features. Others were far less prosaic: deforested hill-sides, locomotive wrecks, striking workers, mine accident fatalities, and miners whose fingers and limbs appeared to be getting severed or crushed by heavy machinery. Images that plainly showed the separate status of African American miners and their families were particularly provocative.

According to the captions and album labels, most of the pictures in the coal company's archive were taken during the first half of the twentieth century. By far the greatest number were taken in Kentucky and West Virginia. Given my topic—the environmental impacts of coal mining in western Maryland—it was my intention to focus specifically on those images that would directly support my research. As I rummaged through

cardboard boxes and thumbed the pages of leather-bound albums, however, I could not help but be drawn in by the entire collection. Who took these pictures? Why were they made? How were they used? Of only one thing could I be certain—I had another research project waiting in the wings.¹

Uncovering the Past

Anyone who has ever studied people or events of the past knows the caveats attached to such work. A few years ago historian William Cronon remarked that conducting historical research was akin to telling “stories about stories.” Put another way, because scholars in the present are unable to truly experience the past, their historical curiosities must be satisfied by relying on a variety of problematic and incomplete data sets. As one might expect, the less reliable the data are, the more diminished is the researcher’s ability to interpret the past. According to geographer David Lowenthal, we also must bear in mind that the past can never be known or understood like the present and that there exists no absolute truth waiting to be uncovered. To make matters worse, our ability to understand the past is hindered by hindsight; that is, more is known about past events and circumstances than people of the past could ever have known at the time. That survivals from the past are always scattered, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory should not exclude the study of past places from the researcher’s agenda, however. Rather, a focus on available factual evidence and, in the words of geographer Cole Harris, an “unremitting effort to be accurate” should combine to provide an informed interpretation of past places and processes.²

While photographs offer us certain unique opportunities when it comes to “knowing” the past, they also present us with unique challenges. While much of what is contained in the photos that I studied would have been familiar to anyone associated with Consol’s operations at the time, to present-day observers the photos would not—indeed they could not—strike the same chord. Perusing the collection at the museum one day, I recalled a passage from Peirce Lewis’s chapter in a well-worn copy of Donald Meinig’s *Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*:

Architectural historians publish books full of handsome photographs of “important buildings,” artfully composed so that the viewer will not see the “less important” building next door, much

less the telephone wires overhead or the gas station across the street. The “important building” is disembodied, as if on an architect’s easel in a windowless studio somewhere. . . . So it is with houses and barns and lawns and sidewalks and any other “item” in the landscape: to make sense of them, one must observe them in context.

And so it is with the images in the Consolidation Coal Company archive. To make any sense of them at all, they must be situated in both historical and spatial context. This is particularly important given that they were company photographs taken to satisfy contemporary company needs. To interpret them in any other way—to view them as “neutral” windows on the past for instance—would be confusing at best and at worst, misleading.³

The Rise of an Industry Giant

First and foremost, we must remember that all the photographs in the Smithsonian collection exist because of coal or, more precisely, because of our demand for coal. Referring to the tremendous increase in the scale of mining operations that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, geographer Richard V. Francaviglia writes that this demand for minerals “was spurred by a rapidly growing population that consumed more natural materials as a consumer-oriented society was created; which is to say that our mining landscapes are a reflection of our growing affluence as a nation.” It follows then that the mining landscapes we create today are a reflection of our continued demand for and dependence on natural materials, as well as our desire to maintain a lifestyle based on high energy inputs. At a time when the coal industry’s future is the subject of spirited debate, particularly in places where controversial techniques such as mountaintop removal are being challenged by both environmentalists and local residents, we would do well to remind ourselves of a time when coal satisfied the lion’s share of our energy needs and our tolerance for environmental destruction was much higher than it is today.⁴

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of coal in fueling America’s industrial revolution. A cursory glance at production figures for the nineteenth century illustrates this point well. Between 1800 and 1832 production of coal in the United States increased from a mere hundred



Fig. I.1. "Block of Fairmont Coal." This photograph appeared in the *CCC Mutual Monthly Magazine*, April 1924, with the following caption: "Block of coal recently taken from Mine No. 22, W. Va., for shipment to Italy, where it will be placed on exhibition. This is one of the largest blocks of coal ever removed from a West Virginia mine. It is 8 ft. 6 in. high by 4 ft. 6 in. wide by 4 ft. 6 in. thick and weighs approximately 6½ tons."

thousand tons to over one million tons per year. By 1851 production had soared to 10 million tons, and by 1860 the figure stood at 20 million tons. The advent of coal-burning locomotives led to the extraction of 110 million tons in 1885 and 243 million tons in 1900, by which time the United States had become the world's leading producer. To put it bluntly, as historian Duane A. Smith has done, "Without mining—from coal to iron to gold—the United States could not have emerged as a world power by the turn of the century, nor could it have successfully launched its international career of the twentieth century." Historically, Appalachia's coal-fields contributed mightily to America's emergence as an industrial power (fig. I.1).⁵

The story of the Consolidation Coal Company, with which we are chiefly concerned, closely mirrors that of the coal industry in general. It is the story of the rise to prominence of one of America's industrial giants (fig. I.2). From its modest beginnings in western Maryland's Georges Creek valley in the 1860s to its emergence as the largest producer of bituminous coal in the United States in 1926, Consolidation Coal played a leading role in transforming America into an industrial power. While much scholarly attention has been directed toward Appalachia over the years, relatively little has focused on coal-mining landscapes and, more specifically, on the pivotal role industry titans like Consolidation Coal played in creating, shaping, and reshaping those landscapes. It seems that little has changed in the ten years since Margaret Mulrooney declared that "little attention has been given to the role of bituminous coal towns in determining the physical and social character" of our coal-mining regions. And yet these communities served as the focal points of the coal industry throughout much of this period:

Dependent upon natural geography and geology for their existence, these communities shaped not only the physical landscape but also the cultural identity of the region. . . . The region has historically been considered to have the most important deposits of coal in the United States. Of these states, Pennsylvania was consistently ranked as the leading producer of both bituminous and anthracite coal between 1880 and 1930. The Appalachian region produced 92 percent of the total amount of coal mined in the United States in 1925. Pennsylvania, alone, contributed about one-third.

Richard Francaviglia also acknowledged this lack of attention: "most of our mining history sites focus on metals: very few interpret coal mining, which is equally important, but less romantic in that it did not intend to make the individual prospector rich."⁶

Lack of romance notwithstanding, numerous sources are available to aid us in the reconstruction and interpretation of coal-mining landscapes. Clearly, the Smithsonian's photo archive of the Consolidation Coal Company is one of them. Between the end of the first decade of the twentieth century and the close of the Second World War, thousands of photographs were taken of coal company activities, property, and equipment in several states. Collectively, they yield a glimpse of life and labor in central Appalachia's coalfields. More specifically, they allow us to follow closely the construction and development of mines and company towns; to

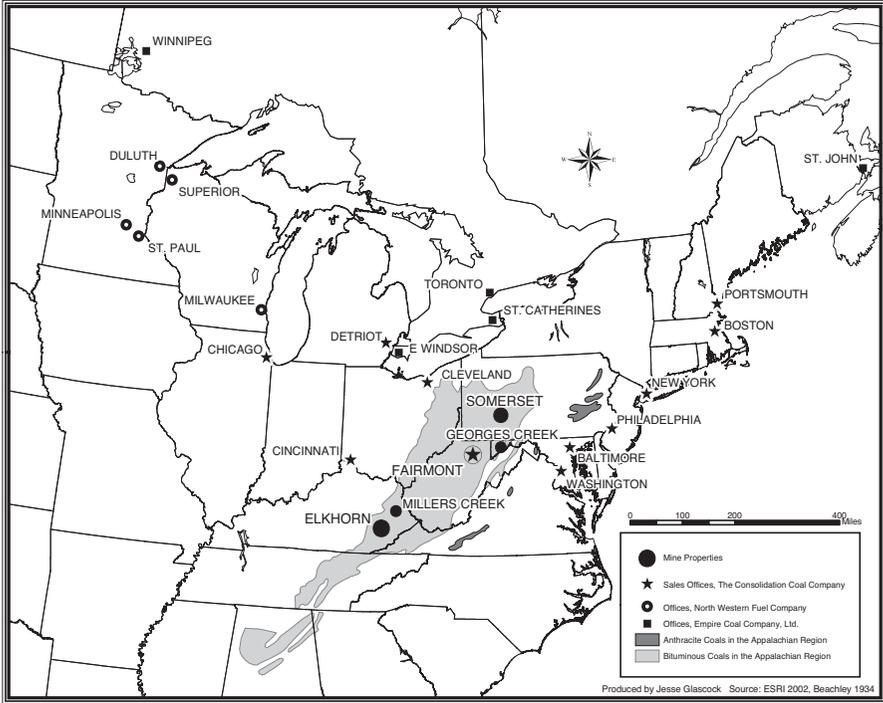


Fig. I.2. Location of mine properties and offices of the Consolidation Coal Company (after Beachley 1934).

inspect the work of miners; to track the technological advances that revolutionized the industry; to observe conditions in and around the mines and mining communities; and to speculate on social and cultural aspects of coal town life. Similarly, scenes of environmental devastation tell us much about the values and priorities that guided past use of natural resources.⁷

Another valuable source is the coal company periodical. According to historian John C. Hennen, “employee magazines” came into popular use during the early years of the twentieth century and were commonly used by coal companies to influence worker behavior and output:

The first such publications appeared in 1907 and proliferated dramatically between 1915 and 1920, when over four hundred companies published monthly or bimonthly journals. Designed to convince employees that the company was concerned about their individual happiness, goals, and successes, employee magazines sought to bind worker to employer in a consciousness of cooperation, trust, and affirmation of probusiness views of industrial relations. . . . The ideological currents of industrial Americanization, scientific management, anti-unionism, and the American Plan are well-defined in one of the most prominent coal industry employee magazines, the *Consolidation Coal Company Mutual Monthly*.

Between 1918 and 1928, approximately eleven thousand copies of the *CCC Mutual Monthly* were published monthly, and later, bimonthly, by the company’s Employment Relations Department. In addition to regular features, such as the health and safety column and the “company editorial,” the *Mutual Monthly* carried news from mining communities in each of the company’s divisions. Lodge meetings, announcements of various men’s and women’s clubs, ball games and tournaments, dances and box socials, birth announcements and death notices, weddings and anniversaries, job changes, religious revivals and Chautauquas, school news, first-aid meetings, local weather conditions, society gossip, and holiday celebrations—all were covered in the pages of the magazine. If there were newcomers to town or if someone purchased a new car, radio, or Victrola or had a particularly successful hunting or fishing trip, it was covered in the magazine. Most important for our purposes, the *CCC Mutual Monthly* served as a key outlet for many of the photographs in the Smithsonian collection, as well as for other images submitted to the magazine’s editors. That a single image could be reproduced eleven thousand times

and distributed to far-flung mining communities in several states speaks to the hidden power of the photograph to deliver messages on behalf of the company.⁸

As students of American economic history well know, coal's ascendancy and domination of energy markets was not destined to last. By the 1920s, it was obvious that all was not well with the coal industry. As one source put it in 1976:

From 1890 to the First World War, the coal industry resisted the considerable efforts of its operators to bring order to what was widely regarded, by government officials and mine workers as well as operators, as an excessively competitive industry. . . . This interstate competition reflected the wide availability of coal and the labor to mine it, the relatively low capital requirements for its development, and the ease with which one coal (or an alternative energy source) could be substituted for another. The result was a low-profit industry with chronic and growing excess capacity and an extremely low level of concentration.

Here again, the *Mutual Monthly* was on hand to provide updates on mine openings and closings, to supply information on coal car availability, and to furnish readers with the company's or coal industry's perspective on everything from the importance of personal hygiene to the evils of union membership. As we shall see later, the photographs in the museum collection offer no indication of the economic hard times that had settled in by the 1920s. This was simply not a message the coal company wished to broadcast to a wider audience, at least not through the medium of photographs.⁹

The Allure of Photographs

Rarely do we "receive" a photograph without any strings attached. Because of the many steps involved in their production and the manner in which they are packaged, we are usually forced, consciously or unconsciously, to interpret photographs at some level. If photos are examined uncritically and out of historical context, accurate interpretation may prove elusive. As Joan M. Schwartz, senior photography specialist at the National Archives of Canada, recently put it, images are not "found" but constructed. Therefore,

we must rethink the nature, production and purpose of photographs as documents in order to achieve a contextual understanding of their use by government, business, and individuals to convey government policy, communicate corporate ideology, construct national identity, shape collective memory, establish symbolic space, and define concepts of self and the cultural Other . . . photographs are documents, created by a will, for a purpose, to convey a message to an audience. To understand them as the product of actions and transactions, either bureaucratic or socio-cultural, we must return them to the action in which they participated. It is their functional context that transforms photographic images into archival documents.

All too often we assume photographs to be objective recorders of reality, “a mechanical and therefore neutral means of documentation.” Art critic John Berger explains that nothing could be further from the truth:

Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer’s decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen. If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless. A photograph celebrates neither the event itself nor the faculty of sight in itself. A photograph is already a message about the event it records. The urgency of this message is not entirely dependent on the urgency of the event, but neither can it be entirely independent from it.

“At its simplest,” writes Berger, “the message, decoded, means: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.*”¹⁰

Although the idea runs counter to what many of us instinctively believe, Schwartz cautions that optical precision is no guarantee of documentary neutrality. Perhaps equally inimical, we must recognize that the photograph itself is a complex document. It is “a representation willed into existence for a purpose and mediated by the persons concurring in its formation. Its message is embedded in the visual transcription of facts, but emerges only in functional context.” Both Berger and Schwartz submit that photographic production is a complex process, involving more than a photographer and a subject. It is a process mediated by editors and writers, sponsored oftentimes by governments or businesses, and influenced in

truck” (or at least one of the first) in Letcher County, Kentucky. Finally, the fence in the background suggests a property line of some sort, while its style indicates an abundance of timber in the immediate area. What more can we say about the image? Perhaps we could say that it commemorates the arrival of “modern” transportation to a rural area. Or that it celebrates the coming of a new industrial age to the Southern mountains. Then again, we might conclude that it immortalizes the first stage of an era of environmental destruction. Or that it symbolizes the end of a particular way of life for many of the region’s residents. In truth, without additional information, we cannot say much more.

As is so often the case when one begins to explore a new topic, we are left at the outset with more questions than answers. Why did the company elect to have this particular photograph made? What information was the company attempting to communicate? How did company officials intend to use the image? What was the company trying to accomplish in this part of Kentucky? To answer these and many other questions necessarily requires that we treat this image and all the others in the collection as texts that can be read and studied and, further, that we place them in their proper historical context, a process that unfolds over the course of the next several chapters.

The period when the Consolidation Coal photographs were taken was an extraordinary one for the coal industry. It was a period of economic prosperity for many coal operators and investors. A period marked by great technological advances and tremendous expansion of operations. A period that saw Consolidation Coal become the country’s largest producer of bituminous coal. Company-sponsored histories, promotional literature, and photographs published over the past century clearly reflect the pride Consolidation has taken in this storied past. Just as cultural anthropologist Allen Batteau, in reference to the literature of coal-mining development, once marveled at “how the dull prose of engineering takes off for rhapsodic heights when discussing the pioneering and progressive role of the coal industry in central Appalachia,” we shall see how Consol’s glowing interpretation of its own past compares with the interpretations others have forwarded. Truth be told, this was also a period that brought financial ruin to many associated with the coal industry. A period of struggle between management and labor. A period marred by social strife and environmental devastation. Indeed, at the other end of the spectrum, individuals not tied to the industry in some way have cast the

coal companies—Consolidation Coal included—in an altogether different light.¹²

My purpose here is not to write yet another history of coal mining in Appalachia. That task has been carried out ably by others. Nor is it my intention to excoriate the coal industry for its poor safety record, its abuse of individual liberties, its antiunionism, and its use of heavyhanded tactics during the first three decades of the twentieth century. No doubt these are valid criticisms, even if sometimes we have carried the generalizations too far. At any rate, that too has already been done. And it is certainly not my wish to portray miners as “destroying Huns” and to accuse them of “raping and pillaging” the land. The historical record simply does not support such an allegation. Rather, my purpose is to critically examine the photographs in the Consolidation Coal collection, place them in historical context, and try to understand why they were taken and for whom.¹³

With these goals in mind, I have divided the remainder of the book into six chapters. In chapter 1, I expand on the discussion of photographs already initiated in this introduction. After a brief review of the geographical concept of landscape, including its links to nineteenth-century American lithographs and other forms of visual representation, I survey recent scholarship on photographs to gain a better appreciation for them as historical documents, as opposed to illustrative props. I then touch on some of the ways photographs have been used in the past to promote tourism, win support for political programs, and advance the interests of private industry. Chapter 2 offers a detailed history of the Consolidation Coal Company. Starting with its earliest corporate antecedent, the Maryland Mining Company, I recount the key events in the company’s history, as well as the principle people and connections, that allowed it to develop into a major player in the industry, from its incorporation in Maryland in 1860 to its merger with the Pittsburgh Coal Company in 1945.

Chapters 3 through 5 are organized thematically. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on photographs relating to life in the company town. Images of coal towns, company stores, and miners’ gardens are featured, as are pictures that provide evidence of the cultural diversity that characterized these carefully planned and tightly controlled communities. In chapter 4, the emphasis shifts to work-related pictures. Images of men at work, mining equipment, and health-and-safety training figure prominently in this section. Here special attention is also devoted to themes not covered to any great extent in the photograph collection, chiefly unions and eco-

conomic depression. Images of environmental alteration comprise the bulk of those analyzed in chapter 5. In addition to scenes of forest destruction and stream degradation, the company documented the construction of many of their mines and coal-handling facilities. Thus we are left with a remarkable record of “before and after” shots that show the complete environmental transformation that took place in places like eastern Kentucky from the time the company acquired the rights to woodland farms to the point where the development of a mining landscape was well underway.

The final chapter has several functions. In addition to summarizing key points brought out in preceding chapters, it sheds light on the Consol collection by comparing its contents with that of other photographic collections, including portions of the Mary Behner Christopher Collection and the Farm Security Administration file.

A Note on the Photographs

Given the size of the collection, I had to be highly selective when it came to choosing photographs for the book. In making a final determination, I tried to select images that were either unique in terms of content or representative of major themes that run throughout the entire collection. Whenever possible I have provided the original captions, enclosed in quotation marks. In a handful of cases, the photographs were not accompanied by captions, in which case I have done my best to describe them. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History.