



**CHAPTER IX: TELLING THE STORY**  
**Oral & Written History**

There is a tremendous need to capture the oral history of this region before these stories become lost. This became very apparent at the first town meeting. Talking to Paul Bobrosky and his wife about what it was like growing up in Calvin, a coal camp in Lee County, made it come to life to all who were at the meeting. Many of these stories will not be found in history books. These stories are in the memories of those who actually lived the experience.

Capturing these oral histories now should be a priority because once these individuals are gone, so will be their stories. Others may not have actually lived it but have had stories handed down to them over the years that also need to be captured orally or on paper.

Below is a list of people either present at one of the meetings or mentioned by others during the process of developing the CMP which need to be interviewed. There are, no doubt, many others. Each has a story and, in many cases, multiple stories to share.

- Annette Belcher (276)865-5401
- Garnett Gilliam 276-523-2866
- Dennis Reedy (276) 865-5337 has a tremendous knowledge of the region on both coal and railroad.
- Members of Dante Lives On. Chairman is currently Bobbie Gullett – (276) 495-1042
- The Molinary Family who have owned the Riverside Grocery Store for three generations.
- Those in McClure and surrounding area who can tell the story of the strikes in the
- 70's and 80's including Gay & Mary (276)835-8774 and Rick Hall (276)495-9010
- Carl Rose on the history of the lumber industry in Dickenson County among other things.
- Dane Poe, Lee County Administrator has a tremendous knowledge of the coal camps in his area. (276)346-7714 and should be interviewed.
- Ron Flannery on Railroads and depots (276)431-2206
- Paul Kilgore on the depots in Norton
- Gaynell Thompson, historian for the Richlands area has a wealth of information and photos to share. 276-964-4807
- Ken Wysor, former mayor of the Town of Richlands also would be an excellent person to interview. 276-964-4198
- Kyle Fletcher, Mayor of St. Paul knows the history of St. Paul and historic Castlewood where he grew up. 276-762-5297
- There is also an interesting story about the Canty boys that needs to be told.

*Just one of many stories  
to be told....*

**KEOKEE'S FIRST SUPPLY CLERK**

Mr. W.S. Cochran was as close as they come. He could certainly show you where every dime went. I will never forget when they put a new drag line in the tipple and something happened to it.

They called a man from the factory, and he just walked up the dragline and pecked a little here and there. He told the operator to go ahead and try it. He pushed the switch in and it ran just like it was supposed to.

He left and a few days after that Mr. Cochran got a bill for \$250.00 and he liked to have blowed up. He sat down and wrote the company and told them that the bill was too high and he said the man just pecked a little here and there and it started right off.

A few days later he got a letter back saying \$150 was for the pecking and \$100 was for knowing where to peck!

- Story by Bradley Mullins



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- Louie Hilton knows everything about the history of St. Paul and has some wonderful stories to share.
- Robbie Robbins knows the history of Tacoma.
- There is also an excellent story of the moving of the Virginia City Presbyterian Church, c. 1895 and how it finally arrived back at its original site.
- Darris Hillman can tell the story of the log church in Dungannon.
- Kenny Fannon knows all about the tunnels, trestles and anything railroad related. His stories definitely need to be captured.
- Jim Carter can tell about the tornado that hit Rye Cove.
- Betty Jones was the first woman coal miner. She and her husband Thomas both worked in the mines and still reside in Wise County.
- Talk to Darris and Barbara Hillman about the Rikemo Lodge in Scott County
- Betty Flanary Salyer has a wealth of knowledge on the Flanary Historical site in Dungannon. (276)479-2426
- Danny Dickson and Bob McConnell can provide some background history on the death of Daniel Boone's son killed by Chief Bengé while enroute to join his father.
- David Buchanan (276)835-8775 and Tena Willemsma (540)869-6417 [twill5141@aol.com](mailto:twill5141@aol.com) should be interviewed about the strikes in the late 1980's.
- Another person to interview about the strikes is Reverend Don Prange ([coramej@aol.com](mailto:coramej@aol.com))
- CD on the oral history of Pocahontas which includes an interview with Edna Drosick
- And Larry Fleenor is a published historian for the region and could provide quite a bit of information on the area especially in Wise County.
- Obtain oral histories from both Peter Crow and Mae Boyels on Buchanan County.
- Interview Ruby Ratliff Hale on the history of Keen Mountain. She grew up in the coal camp.

Do keep in mind that many interviews have already been conducted. Research should be done to categorize everything so that as interpretive displays are developed, one can find the information they need without duplicating one's efforts.

- There is a 5 to 10 minute video on Haysi (*Dennis & Diana Reedy have a copy*)
- Mary Marlene with Ratford University conducted numerous interviews of those in the coal camps in Norton and Wise County.
- Excellent review of Buchanan's rich coal history in a special 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition of Virginia Mountaineer. It is on microfiche.
- The Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Museum in Big Stone Gap has a tremendous amount of photos, history and information about the entire region during the coal days. (*Excellent source of information is Garnett Gilliam but there are others as well who would be excellent to interview.*)
- There is also a tremendous amount of coal heritage research at Bluefield College and UAV at Wise as well as other colleges in the area.
- The Appalshop in Whitesburg Kentucky did interview video on Clinchco a number of years ago as well as other coal camp communities. (*Dennis & Diana Reedy have a copy*)
- And the Southwest Virginia Museum has compiled a wonderful library of oral history. (*Contact Sharon Ewing, park manager or Erin Brockman, educational director for the park.*)



Another interesting story which needs to be shared is the story of Pauline Mullins, a Dickenson County native who paid the ultimate price for her husband's fame as shared by Terry Ball of Haysi Virginia. Pauline was the wife of legendary sheriff Buford Pusser who inspired the 1973 hit movie *Walking Tall* and its 2004 remake, starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

*Pauline Mullins was born February 27, 1934 to the late Jack and Bertha Hill Mullins and was raised on route 710 near Haysi in the Big Ridge community of Dickenson County. After graduating from Haysi High, Pauline worked at the Hilltop Restaurant and Motel among other locations around the Haysi Community, eventually moving to Chicago for work.*

*While living in Chicago as a divorced mother of two from a previous marriage to Roman Vance, Pauline met Buford "The Bull" Pusser, a professional wrestler from Adamsville, TN (McNairy County). Pauline and Buford were married on December 5, 1959 and in 1961 were blessed with a baby daughter (Dwana).*

*In 1962 the Pusser family returned to Buford's hometown in McNairy County where Buford became Chief of Police. In 1964 Buford ran for and was elected sheriff of McNairy County. As sheriff Buford made enemies within the criminal element by waging war on moonshining, bootlegging, prostitution, gambling, and other vices committed by the "State Line Mob" and others. Buford's war on illegal activities was well known in McNairy County and was brought to national prominence when in the early morning of August 12, 1967 Pauline was killed in an assassination attempt meant for Buford.*

*Buford's biography titled, "The 12<sup>th</sup> of August", in reference to the day Pauline was killed was written by W.R. Morris and was a best seller in 1971 inspiring four "Walking Tall" movies (1973, two sequels in 1975, and 1977 and a 2004 remake). In the 1973 movie Pauline was portrayed by actress Elizabeth Hartman. Buford died on August 21, 1974 in a fiery car crash near his home while under contract with Bing Crosby productions to portray himself in an upcoming movie. Buford's funeral was attended by actor Joe Don Baker and Elvis Presley, among others.*

*Recommendation:* *Buford Pusser is a legend with world-wide recognition. A roadside marker or interpretive sign could be erected somewhere along the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail acknowledging Dickenson County as the home of Pauline Mullins Pusser. This would be of interest, not only to tourists traveling through our county, but to Dickenson County citizens as well.*



On the following pages are two individual's memories of coal camps and towns in Southwest Virginia. In conversations in the town meetings, most were shocked and amazed to hear that St. Charles, one of the stops on the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail, once had 75 to 100 taxi cabs operating in the community at one time. St. Charles also had three cafés, a movie theater, an ice cream shop, a bowling alley, a restaurant, a sportsmen's club, three grocery stores, a couple of hardware stores, clothing stores and shops plus numerous restaurants, hotels and pool halls. One would never realize this if they stopped in St. Charles today.

*Recommendation:* *There are many other stories such as the one above and on the following pages that need to be captured and shared through brochures, websites, wayside exhibits, storytelling, and other means so one can truly appreciate these communities as they once were and the interesting people who lived there.*



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#### AS I REMEMBER ST. CHARLES IN THE 1940'S

by Walter H. Wilson

*The following description is St. Charles as you approach from the lower end. I use the phrase "lower end" because I knew only two directions – up and down.*



*First were the Malcolm C. Williams Buildings: Mr. Williams owned the stone service station building on the left side of the street, and next door was the store his wife ran. The store sold general merchandise consisting of anything from groceries to hardware. And, by the way, we could trade our Blue Horse Notebook paper covers for two suckers.*

*Across the street the Williams ran a garage, and Del Stewart cut hair in the room on the upper end of the building. In the late 40's the Williams built a brick building on the same side of the street as the store. This building was used as a pool room and restaurant. Later the Davis family operated a modern dry cleaners in this building.*

*Across the bridge was the Christian Church and next to it was the "old school". This was originally the high school until the new high school was built. At that time the "old school" became the grade school. At the rear of the high school was the home economic building. I remember the library being in the home economic building and my mother was the librarian.*

*Across the street was Smitty's Esso Service Station. He had such a large volume of business that most of his gasoline was shipped in by railroad tank car. Smitty was a dealer in scrip.*

*Next door to the service station was the Southern Railroad Depot. The telegraph office was run by Mr. Clarence Price and Mr. Stallard took care of the freight depot.*

*The first building above the school was once a café, run by Mr. and Mrs. Andy Leady. Mrs. Leady made the chili that first made our town famous for its "hot dogs". The building later became a garage owned by Smitty and operated by Olin Rutherford.*

*Beside the café was the drug store, owned by Harry Kelly and later by Ed Parks. The next building was the City Café, also owned by Harry Kelly who later sold it to Cecil and Cora Terry.*



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*The next store was Kroger's, a high volume store. Big semi trucks delivered to the store late at night and in the early morning hours. Butch Stallard ran the meat section and Ed Duncan was a long-time employee.*

*Next to Kroger's was the Liberty Café operated by Mr. Rogers and later by the Tom Little family. Next door was a barber shop operated by Claude Myers.*

*The next building was the Virginia Theatre. As Dillard Ball, the manager in the 40's and 50's would say, "The best show in town". This location is near and dear to many of us. I worked there during and after my high school days. On Saturdays we opened at 10:30 a.m. and would not close until some time after midnight. Many times we would have a full house throughout the day. We received shipments of popcorn of ½ to ¾ ton at a time. How many of us took our first date to the theatre and bought that big 10 cent box of popcorn?????*



*Beside the Virginian, in what was about a 10 foot alley, was the Interstate Ice Cream Store which was later the new location for Andy Leady's Café. The café was later operated by Butch Stallard's wife, Minnie and was called the Sandwich Shop. This same establishment was later owned by Mrs. Randolph and others.*

*Next door was clothing store, operated by the Fugate family. Next, but not least was the bridge with its rails where many of us spent so many hours visiting and talking, day in and day out even into the early morning hours. On the other side of the bridge was our Sycamore tree. If it could have talked what a story it could tell!*

*Some time after the mid-40's, Butch Stallard built a building over the creek which contained two businesses – Butch Stallard operated a grocery store and his brother operated a Western Auto store. Later the auto store was replaced by a restaurant known as the Sportsman Club. Also, there was a Duck Pin Bowling Alley at this location. The Sportsmans Club was later operated by Ralph and Dot Lanningham.*

*The next building was a restaurant in the early 40's which I remember Mrs. Griffith operating. Next door was another restaurant which Mandy Rolland ran. Behind these buildings was a dry cleaners operated by the Griffith family. Joe Leigh later operated the restaurant originally run by Mrs. Griffith. Warren Roberts operated a beer joint at this location after Joe Leigh moved to his new restaurant along the creek just to the rear of his old establishment. The old building was torn down and Dr. Shown built a new building and operated a drug store at that location.*

*Next door was the Piggly Wiggly store, also a high volume grocery store. The Steelman Hardware and Furniture Store was next. It was later operated as the Pennington Hardware Store, owned by Mark Culberson and managed by Jim Smith.*

*The Fair Store was next door to Steelman's. It was a clothing store that was owned by the Steelman family. It was later owned by Tepper Department Stores, whose home office was in Cincinnati, Ohio. Next door was a clothing store called The Novelty Store, operated by Mr. Karp and Jack Pierce.*

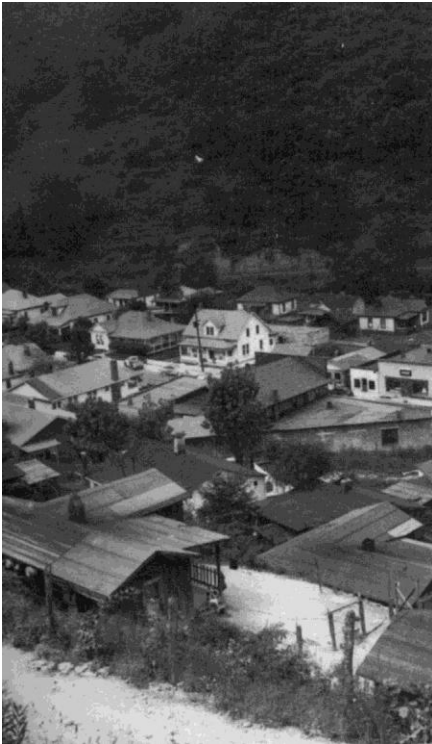
*In the early years there was an A&P Grocery store next door and beside it the grocery store owned by Mr. & Mrs. Whipple. I can remember Mr. Whipple with his white apron. The Whipplés lived upstairs over the store.*

*There was a barber shop and pool room, and a shoe shine stand operated by Barber Grayson. Gurnie Tester worked for him as a barber.*



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*Next door was a brick building in which Clyde Copeland had a funeral home. Later Curt Evans had a furniture store in the same building. Bill Boone, the postmaster lived upstairs and operated a rooming house.*

*Next door was the Blackie Gilley Restaurant and Pool Room. Upstairs was the I.O.O.F. Lodge Hall.*

*Next to Gilley's Restaurant was the Lee Bank & Trust Company, and upstairs is where we, the Ruby Wilson family, lived. Prior to that, my Aunt Kate Craft lived there.*

*There was a family residence next to the bank, where Mayor Sam Gaylor lived. This was the home of Damon Little during the late 40's.*

*Next was Red Owen's Shoe Shop and The Old Dominion Power Company office. In the late 40's Gurnie Tester built a new building and opened a barber shop and shower room.*

*The next and last building was the Shubert Shoe Shop and family residence. This is the last building on the right side of the street.*

*On the other side of the street at the corporation limit was Jim Haines' garage and in the mid 40's Jim took Creed Roop as a partner. The town's fire truck was kept at the garage. It was a 1927 LaFrance, the top of the line in its day. It was brought in on a rail car when it was purchased new. Jim Haines was the fire chief and the only person who could keep the truck running.*

*Next door was Evans and Bakers Grocery and Feed Store, owned by Carl Evans and Tom Baker. They had several employees and delivered groceries and feed around the area.*

*The next brick building was once used as a soft drink bottling plant. This building was used by Carl Evans as a grocery store prior to his moving to the Baker and Evans location. Cuma Hayes had a business in this building and later it was the E.J. Poe Hardware and Furniture Store. Earl Newman worked for Poe and later owned the store.*

*Next was a building in which Jim Haines ran a garage in the early 40's. I can also remember the building being used as a Church. It was the snake handlers. As a small boy, mother took me to the Church. They released the snakes and the place emptied real fast! The building was later a skating rink, run by Cowboy Barker. It then became a storage room for Poe's Hardware.*

*Next was the old Post Office which I am told was built as a company store for Black Mountain Coal Company. Later it was the company store for Kemmer Gem. Cowboy Barker turned the building into a residence and his wife, Hazel used the front room as a beauty shop. My mother moved in the residence and ran a collection agency for the Old Dominion Power Company and C&P Telephone Company.*

*Worley Gibson was located next door. He had a barber shop with a bath house for the miners in the rear, and a café. His residence was also at the rear of the building.*

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*There was a two story wooden building next to Worley's. There was an apartment upstairs and several different businesses in the two store rooms downstairs. The building was torn down and I.O.O.F. built their lodge at that location.*

*The next building was the Ikey Kauffman Hardware, which was bought by Cuberson Hardware who tore down the old building and built the brick building which is now the U.M.W. Hall.*

*Next was the old hotel and on the upper side was a small restaurant. I can remember a number of different businesses in that store room. Kate Craft had a restaurant, as did Ida Kirk, Mrs. Evans and several others. I can only remember the Tom Little family running the hotel. On the lower side was a little restaurant run by Hamburger Willie, who not only sold the usual sandwiches but also had more comic books than a kid could ever dream of. The Post Office now sits where the hotel building once stood.*

*Next door was s shoe shop. It was run by Mr. Woodyard, who had lost his leg but made a living even though he had to support himself with his crutches while he worked. The building was later a clothing store operated by Mr. & Mrs. Lon Lanningham. It is now a restaurant owned by Mr. and Mrs. Herman Britt.*

*The pool room was next door to the shoe shop. It was operated by Alan Jones and Harold Kirk. This was a very lively place. Ralph (Puggins) Bailey was the rack boy. Some of our first encounters with a telephone occurred at this establishment. We would dial a certain number and hang up and Puggins would answer the phone and, after several "Hellos" he'd realize he'd been "had" again and would teach us a few new cuss words.*

*Next was the People's Store, which was operated by Mr. Robinson for many years. Upstairs was a rooming house, run by Mr. & Mrs. Lee Reese. Later, Ralph Lanningham operated a restaurant on the first floor of the building.*

*Next door was the Miners Store, a clothing store operated by "Red Miner". The next store was the Post Office and next and last, but not in the least, "Jake's Place". A place where both grown-ups and children gathered. It was operated by Jake Smith.*

*The kids usually occupied the booths along the wall, where we would take a nickel and buy a 12oz R.C. or Pepsi and get 4 or 5 glasses and share it.*

*In the middle of the room were tables. The rear table was always reserved for Jake, Flo and friends. The other tables were for people eating meals. There was a bar and stools where the grown-ups and the beer drinkers sat. This was probably the largest meeting place in the area. It was a very busy place, but the most unusual thing about it was how, in one room, the activity was so varied and each group did not bother the other.*

*Last, but not least, was the taxi cabs. I have been told that at one time there were 75 to 100 cabs licensed for our town. Needless to say, with so many cab drivers in one small town, transportation was not necessarily their primary business in St. Charles. I can attest to this fact, having run the projectors at the theater and looking out the window on the taxi lot.*



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#### **HISTORY OF TOMS CREEK**

*By Edison S. Perry*

*Toms Creek is located in the foothills of the Cumberland Plateaus, two miles north of Coeburn, VA. It is snuggled in a cove of mountains refreshed by a small stream which is called Thomas Gist. The community was built along both sides of the creek. Under the beauty of the mountains was one of our greatest treasures, coal. In 1898 George L. Carter, from Hillsville, VA, started his coal empire and in 1902, he organized The Virginia Iron, Coal and Coke Company.*

*If you lived in Toms Creek in the twenties and thirties, you would have fond memories of the coal camps. The camps housed Italian, Hungarian, Negro and white laborers.*

*Most of the Italian immigrants originated from the southern part of Italy (Catanzaro). They were employed mainly in three different occupations; coke drawer operators, outside laborers, and miners. The section set aside for these people was called "Tally Town." The Italians attended the Catholic Church. Since the Italians were trained in working with the coke ovens, the need for their work became very much in demand when the coke ovens that Virginia Iron, Coal and Coke Company built became the largest in the world at that time.*

*The Hungarian immigrants came from Iron County in Budapest, Hungary. They lived in a section called "Hunk Town". This part of Toms Creek always had a wonderful smell of fresh bread. The Hungarians were excellent bread bakers. They had outside ovens, brought from their homeland, where you could buy fresh baked bread. The Hungarians also attended the Catholic Church.*

*The Negroes came mainly from Georgia and South Carolina. Although their labor was the same as others, there was still a sense of segregation of these citizens. One example was the separation of the Negro and white schools. The Negro children had a three room school in the back of Thelma store. The coal company built and gave to the Wise County School Board, a big six room building that had a full size basement, steam heat, and a large auditorium that seated at least three hundred people, and this was to be used as a school. Only the white, Italian and Hungarians could attend the school. Toms Creek had a Negro church for the Negro people, which was of Baptist denomination.*

*Another section which made up Toms Creek was called "Big Bug Row". This was where the bosses of the coal camps lived. There were about 35 houses. As a company benefit, as were kept with running water, picket fences and board walks. The largest houses belonged to the superintendents. "Hardaway Row" was another well kept row of houses. This was where the foreman of the company lived. This section of houses had only four rooms and was not equipped with running water and baths. A row of about 100 houses made up the community of "Pink Town". There were only white employees who lived there. These homes were built on the same style as the houses in "Hardaway Row." At one time it is said that all the houses in "Pink Town" were painted pink. Everyone in these communities took pride in keeping their yards nice, for each summer a prize was given by the company for the best kept and prettiest yard.*

*The coal boom attracted business within the community. The huge company store was built in 1911 and was said to be the most modern store this side of Roanoke. It included a butcher shop, a dry goods department, grocery department, and a furniture department. In the middle of the floor was a large round department where cigarettes, candy, ice cream and soft drinks were sold. This was called the "Ball Pen." Mr. E. S. Becker was one of the first store managers. The store also had delivery service. In the beginning they made deliveries with a horse and wagon, and later by truck.*



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*The hospital was a huge red bricked two-story building. Anyone who was employed by the company, whether they lived in Toms Creek or one of the company's other camps, could use this hospital. You could go to the doctor's office or he would make house calls for a fee of \$2.00 per month. This fee was held out of your pay at the company office.*

*There was a large two-story brick theatre building where public gatherings were held. Any of the employees or organizations were allowed to have parties, suppers, dances, or any kind of gathering without charges. Next to the theatre was the post office. Mr. Squire Tompkins was postmaster for several years. At one time the post office was called "Georgel" in honor of George L. Carter. Some of the other businesses within Toms Creek were a machine shop, electric shop, supply house, a large boarding house and a large stable where company horses were taken care of. George Stillwell was in charge of the stables.*

*The mining department of Toms Creek was vast in scope. This large organization helped to develop the small mines in Toms Creek. Some of the more important mines were Sexton, Coeburn, and Thelma mines.*

*Sexton mines was a well equipped operation. This mine had what is called the double entry system. This meant that the slope of the coal is such that the mine is mainly drained by gravity. The road beds were also good. Mr. Robert T. Hopkins was general foreman.*

*The Coeburn mine was also well equipped. Coal from this mine was primarily used for steam and domestic purposes. Mr. Conley Lyons was the general mining foreman for Coeburn mine at this time.*

*The large Thelma mine had coal averaging eight feet. Some mining mechanics were used in Thelma mine for cutting through the coal. Mr. W. A. Smith was general foreman. Swansea, Pine Run and Lee mines are some other well known mines within the community during this period. The Swansea mine output was very large. The road beds and ventilation was very good. The general foreman was Richard T. Akers.*

*Pine Run was one of the largest mines in Toms Creek. The coal was conveyed to the outside, around the mountain and the tipples. The drainage was good. This mine was equipped with a 20 foot, 200 horse power engine. The coal was used for domestic and slack purposes. The general foreman was D. R. Pippin.*

*The lee mine has a natural drainage and part of it was lighted by electricity. Its coal was primarily used for steam and domestic purposes. The general foreman was Mr. Pete Castle. The colleries of Lee, Swansea, and Pine Run mines were in charge of Mr. J. H. Garner, a native of Pennsylvania. He was an expert in the study of coal mining. Sexton, Coeburn and Thelma colleries were in charge of J. R. Bailey. He was at one time superintendent at Boissivan, VA.*

*During World War II, the mines in Toms Creek were in full swing. After the war, the coal supply began to run out in the deep mines. Homes began to degenerate and the people began to depart. Where once there was beauty, now there are coal tipples, loaded docks, washing plants and a huge silo.*

*Toms Creek may be only a lapse of times before,  
but for some, the memory still lingers.*