



Janet Steele Holloway is shown as a child with her mother. A 1935 photo of Omar is in the background. In photo at right, her father, left, is shown with a mining coworker.



JANET STEELE HOLLOWAY SUBMITTED PHOTOS

## Coal camps and the mountains<sup>©</sup>

By Janet Steele Holloway

**T**he mountains in Logan County, W.Va., were close, as close as light to shade. Only creeks and rivers, hardtop roads and occasional wide, loamy bottoms and coal camps could force their way between them. Just wide spots in the road, my dad always said.

Halfway between the county seat of Logan and Granny Bill's Pioneer Beer Garden in Sarah Ann, the space between the mountains widened to make room for the unincorporated town of Omar, a coal camp built by West Virginia Coal and Coke, later owned by Island Creek Coal.

Coal camps: where coal was exhumed from the hollows that cut into the narrow valley; where the company owned everything in sight; where railroad tracks were laid for long trains carrying coal to the cities,

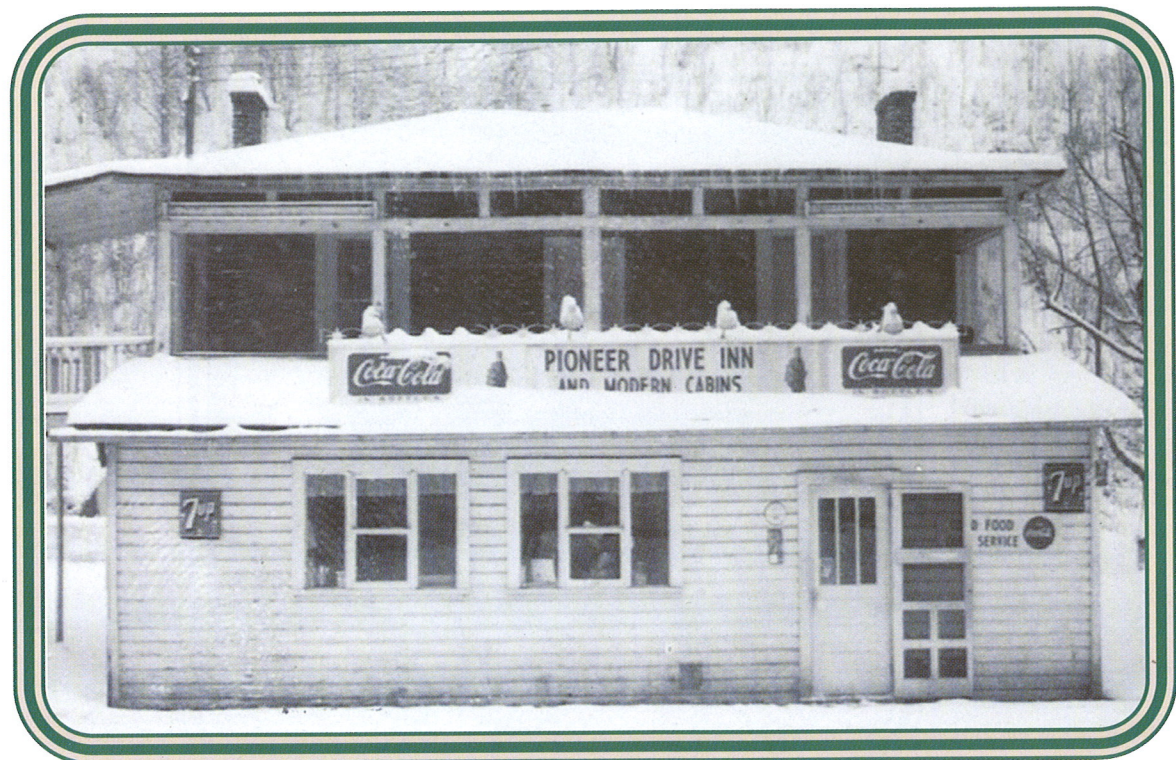
to rivers and barges. Logan County was notorious for the civil uprisings between miners and company detectives on Blair Mountain in the early 1920s, and, in the '40s and '50s, was one of the most productive coal mining areas in the state. The demand for coal was more than locals could fill, and coal companies resorted to recruiting men as they got off the boat at Ellis Island.

Hungarians, Polish, Italians and more had come for a better life in this country. The company put them all on trains and buses and sent them into the isolation of West Virginia. They brought their rich cultures and customs and language into the hills. They also crawled into the open mine faces, lay on their backs and sides, and used pick axes to loosen coal from the seam, only to have it shoveled onto low, flat railway cars by the men behind them. Going deeper, following the seam, counting on each other to keep it safe, most of the

men's lives were spent in darkness. Color made no difference in the mines. Not color, not nationality, for the men all depended on each other for their lives.

Coal camps: small, unincorporated towns in the meager flat land, where everything is built, owned and run by the coal company — schools, churches, stores, theaters, and homes available for rent. Coal camps like Omar connected to other unincorporated towns by a single blacktop road that led to the county seat. Wide spaces like Crystal Block, population of about 80 in the 1930s and '40s, with a company store and post office; Sarah Ann with two beer gardens, a grocery store and Freewill Baptist Church for the few residents; Delbarton, home of a well-established red-light district, near the town of Williamson, with approximately 79 residents. All experienced the boom

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Janet Steele Holloway's grandmother ran the Pioneer Drive Inn, near Omar.

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and bust days of the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

Away from the tracks, in the main section of Omar, were the spacious homes and yards for the supervisors' and managers' families. Many were Catholic and attended what we called fancy churches in downtown Logan, whereas most workers' families attended Freewill Baptist, Church of God, or Community Methodist Churches in the camps. Children in the miners' housing developments were generally free to play together despite differences in race and national origin. The bigger dividing line was between miners' children and those of the company management. With few exceptions, these children were sent away to private schools in the fall, and we'd see them on their spacious porches only in summertime. Omar, like all of West Virginia, had features in common with both the North and the South in the way it treated race. Segregated schools and public facilities, including the movie theater, the restaurant and pool hall, were a fact of life.

But life underground was something else.

My family spent many years in one coal town or another, relying on the company doctor when one of us was sick or buying our clothes and groceries with scrip at the company



The Pioneer Drive Inn was one of two beer gardens in Sarah Ann. Holloway's mother added the white tablecloths to the establishment and took down the beer garden sign.

store. Scrip was advance pay that could be spent at company-owned stores and deducted from the miner's paycheck on payday. For a dime I could see my favorite cowboys chase each other on the movie screen. Blacks, upstairs; whites, downstairs. Besides the company store, Omar had a post office and small restaurant; a couple of churches, and two schools: one for whites, one for blacks. Not much more.

Along lower Main Street, fronting the tracks, were the small five-room,

identical stucco duplexes set aside for section bosses' and miners' families. Black dust blew off the coal cars as they passed, putting down layers of gloom everywhere: on the shared, small porches and windows of these duplexes, on the clothes hanging on the line, on toys left out overnight. It irritated my mother to no end. We were always scrubbing the windows and porch floor but made little progress for long. An alleyway ran behind the duplexes, then another row of houses, where my best friend, Mildred, lived. The alleyway where we played was our main escape from parents.

Across the road and railroad tracks, cut into sides of the mountain, were long and narrow wooden shotgun houses where black residents lived; the houses lined up in rows with outhouses to the side.

Life in Omar was organized, with days assigned to major housekeeping chores. This seemed to be an unspoken agreement. If it were Monday, women did laundry and hung the clothes out to dry. Tuesdays, all the laundry had to be sprinkled down, rolled up, and placed in a basket with a heavy towel covering it. Wednesday was for ironing, lest clothes get musty-smelling or mildewed. Being something of a perfectionist as a housekeeper, my mother swept the kitchen, vacuumed the entire house, and shook out the rugs every day of the week except Sundays. My mother

was an impeccable housekeeper; she'd threaten my brother and me with a spanking if we stepped on one of the shag rugs after she'd cleaned. We were supposed to walk around them. She also insisted that my dad go straight upstairs and shower the minute he walked in the door. No time for hellos or "how was your day?"

On Saturdays, everyone dressed up to go to town. Children polished their shoes; men wore hats; and proper women, like my mother aspired to be, wouldn't be seen without their white cotton gloves or nylon stockings. We always ran into someone we knew at the Dime Store or Franklin's Drug Store or the Piggly Wiggly.

While Mom and I shopped, Dad spent Saturday mornings at The Smoke House, drinking coffee and talking with other miners and supervisors who did the same. The Smoke House restaurant was the informal political headquarters for local gentry and men affiliated with the mines. It's where my dad traded

stories with mine officials in hopes of keeping his job as section boss or, better yet, moving up to a position of federal safety inspector. The Smoke House catered to men, and gossip was rampant as to what took place upstairs, on the second floor.

Granny's half-sister, Pauline, had the inside, true story. She worked as a waitress downstairs for many years and knew what the lawyers, judges, and mine officials were headed for as they climbed the worn stairs to the second floor of the restaurant. A few games of Saturday poker, some shots of whiskey, political deals, and heavily made-up women in tight dresses left little to the imagination. Just another day in Logan County, according to Aunt Pauline.

Evenings, after a couple of beers, Pauline would have us all gasping and giggling at her stories about Logan County's so-called elite and pious church-goers. Granny encouraged her talk, as she knew best how and when to use this information to get what she wanted. Yes, just another day in a wide spot in the road.



A 1959 graduate of Logan High School, Janet Steele Holloway writes with affection about the coal camps and the mountains in her recently published memoir, "A Willful Child." She

graduated Marshall University in 1963 with a teaching degree in English and Spanish. Her interests and work eventually took her to Detroit, then New York City, and finally, to Lexington, Ky., where she now lives and writes. At the University of Kentucky, she ran Small Business Development Centers for nine years, then left to found a non-profit, Women Leading Kentucky Inc., that creates opportunities and college scholarships for women in Kentucky. She has published several profiles of successful business leaders in Business Lexington, Entrepreneur Magazine, Kentucky Monthly, and, most recently, in Cake & Whiskey. She was recognized as a finalist in the Best Writers Competition in 2008 and again in 2011, in the Harriet Rose Legacy Competition, both sponsored by the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning. E-mail: [janetholloway251@gmail.com](mailto:janetholloway251@gmail.com)

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