

Coal Heritage Trail

A Maryland State Scenic Byway

Part II — Garrett County

The Spring issue of *Mountain Discoveries* described the trail from its origins in the Cumberland Narrows to the town of Westernport at the confluence of the Potomac River and George's Creek. Part II highlights Garrett County's segment of the Coal Heritage Trail from Route 135 in Westernport to the terminus in Oakland, county seat of Garrett County.

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*Restored coal car located in
Kitzmiller, near the Post Office.*

Ghosts of the past—their economic significance disappeared but their historical importance remains.



1910 Dodson Baseball Team. The small mining town of Dodson looked forward with enthusiasm to the baseball games played against other communities in their area and gave great support to its team. Front row, far right is James Madison Brady, grandfather of Kitzmiller resident, George Brady Jr.

The coal that was mined in the George's Creek basin extended into the upper Potomac region where the north branch of the Potomac River served as a boundary between Maryland and West Virginia. Coal was king in the valley by the early 1900's. Small towns sprung up along both sides of the Potomac River from Bloomington MD to Kempton MD, each one dominated by the coal industry and related logging operations. Today many of those towns have virtually disappeared as their reason for existence ended when mines closed and timber was removed. Cement foundations, collapsed coal tipples, traces of roads, and other relics keep the communities alive in our collective memory. Although these ghost towns have lost their economic significance, their historical importance lives on.

Vindex, Dodson, and Gleason were communities located upstream from Bloomington near the town of Kitzmiller. Immigrant laborers from Lithuania, Italy and eastern Europe countries blended with the already resident Anglo-Saxons and Germans to develop the coalfields for commercial use. The community of Vindex hides its busy past in thick vegetation that has reclaimed streets. Concrete stairs to the old company store and traces of houses along hidden lanes reveal some of the town's past. Abandoned railroad beds trace the route of the Western Maryland Railway's Shay locomotive that serviced the mines until the end of coal operations in 1950. While vegetation has reclaimed much of Vindex, several county residents recall the town's heyday. Kitzmiller Road resident Jim Lipscomb mined coal there during the 1930's and neighbor Fred Sharpless in the

1940's. Both miners remember the town when hundreds of residents called it home and coal employees called it their job. Mr. Lipscomb fondly recalled purchasing his first radio at the Johnstown Coke and Coal company store in the center of town. Two churches, a school, a post office and the company store provided Vindex residents with basic needs and services.

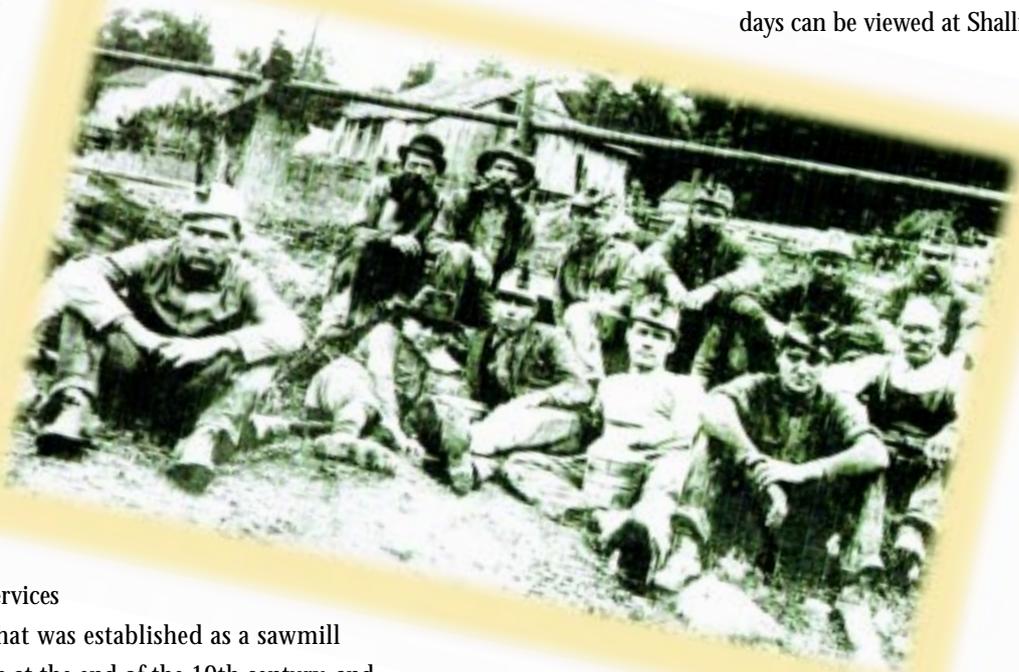
The town of Dodson hosts a lone and abandoned coal company house. It was also a thriving mining community complete with a store, a small school, and Methodist church.

Mine closings in 1920's and 1930's marked the beginning of the town's demise. Dodson's neighboring community, Gleason, suffered a similar fate. Today its most visible landmark is the brick powerhouse that stands silently along the West Virginia side of the Potomac River. Gleason was even more remote than Dodson, and this enabled coal companies to require residents to "live accordingly," as miner Harrison Hamlin recalled. Once a person was situated in a remote company town, employment opportunities were usually limited to coal company offerings. Scrip, or company money, was used as currency along with cash, and was commonly referred to as "flicker" in Vindex and nearby towns; while further upstream in the town of Kempton it was called chinky-tink. Scrip was a medium of exchange redeemable only at the coal company store.

Many other coal-mining towns upstream from Gleason are also inaccessible today. Wallman and Hubbard were almost as difficult to access during their operational days as they are today. Fortunately, the Western Maryland Railway offered flag stop service as an alternative to walking miles toward population centers. Steyer was connected to roadways and survives today as a result. Approximately a dozen residences and the concrete foundation of the Western Maryland Railway station remain.

While the ghost towns are not accessible by vehicle, Kitzmiller remains a viable town of over 300 residents, the largest one of the former coal mining towns along the upper Potomac. To visit Kitzmiller, one must travel southwest from Westernport along MD Route 135 to the intersection of MD Rt. 38 on Backbone Mountain. The Maryland Scenic Byway Coal Heritage Trail sign is posted at Route 38, directing motorists to turn left toward the river valley at Kitzmiller. Banks, a theatre, hotels, clothing stores, a school, and other services were provided in the town that was established as a sawmill center. Coal was mined there at the end of the 19th century, and while Kitzmiller was definitely influenced by coal production, it was never a company-controlled town. Kitzmiller recently received a grant from the Maryland Historical Trust to stabilize and develop the Johnstown Coal and Coke Company store on West Main Street. Also in town is the Kitzmiller Coal Mining Museum, established by the Mayor and Council. The museum is an excellent source of information about Kitzmiller and nearby Shallmar. Oral histories of Jim Lipscomb, Fred Sharpless, and other local residents interviewed during the Cultural Survey of the Coal Heritage Trail, are available there. Copies of Dodson photographs are also available. The museum is located in the former Presbyterian Church on 3rd Street. Visitation can be arranged by calling Town Hall at 301-453-3449 or George Brady at 301-453-3280. A restored coal car, recently reclaimed from an abandoned mine, is on display near the Post Office.

If one continues along Kitzmiller's West Main Street, he will pass the school and head in the direction of Shallmar. Its interesting name was derived from the coal company owner, Mr. Marshall, who reversed his two-syllable name. Shallmar was a company town, complete with an electric powerhouse, store, school, and several hundred residents. George Brady, who grew up there and worked in the Wolf Den Coal Company store, recalls that Shallmar residents took great pride in the appearance of their town. Trees were whitewashed and bushes trimmed. Another source of pride for Shallmar was its baseball team. Mr. Brady explained that each town along the river played spirited contests on Sundays and large crowds would cheer their favorite team. An important historical feature of the coal mining days can be viewed at Shallmar.



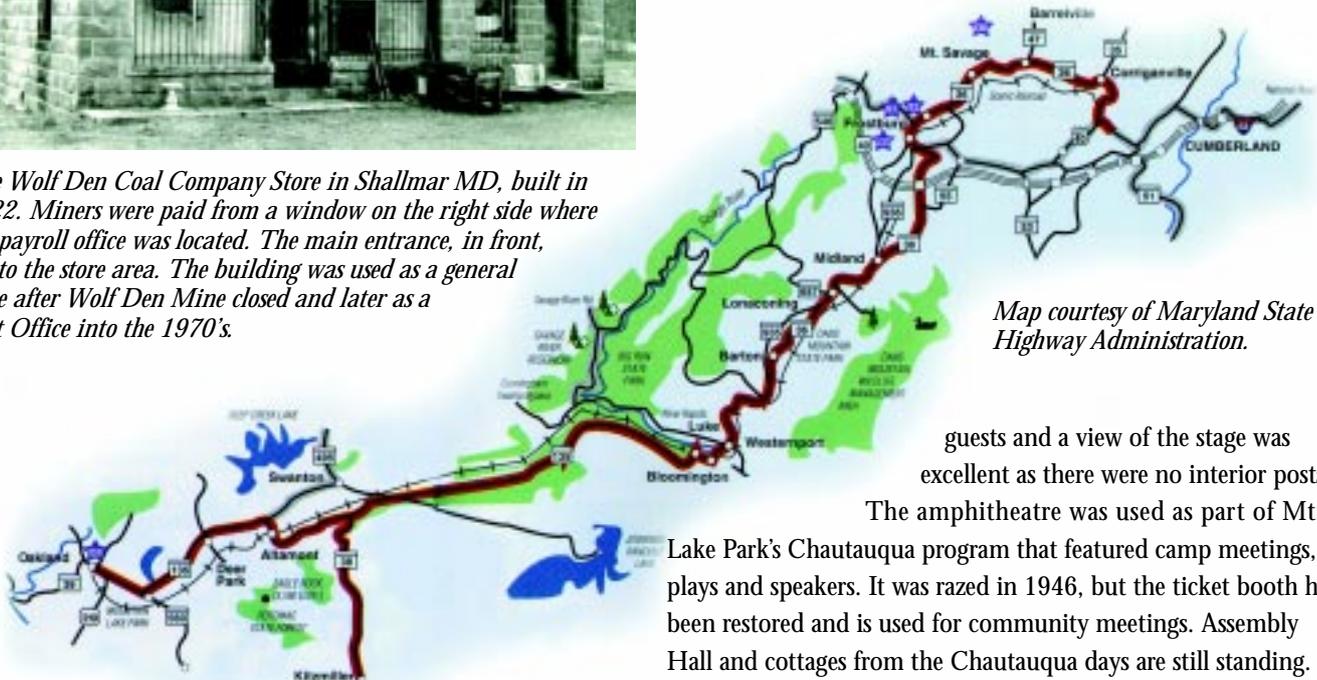
Area miners, shown here in the early 1900's, lived in a rugged environment. Oil-type lanterns on their helmets indicate the time period—carbide lamps did not come into use until later. Photo courtesy of Cora Blank.

The Wolf Den Coal Company store stands in the center of town near the abandoned baseball field where Mr. Brady played. Skilled Italian stoneworkers built the store in 1921 using locally cut stone. Mr. Brady witnessed miners lining up at the side window for their pay. Shoppers could use “flicker” or cash at the store that offered “everything but tombstones.”

The public road in Shallmar ends near a small creek that divides it from Dodson. To continue along the Coal Heritage Trail, one must return to Route MD 135 by ascending Backbone Mountain on Route MD 38.



The Wolf Den Coal Company Store in Shallmar MD, built in 1922. Miners were paid from a window on the right side where the payroll office was located. The main entrance, in front, led to the store area. The building was used as a general store after Wolf Den Mine closed and later as a Post Office into the 1970's.



Map courtesy of Maryland State Highway Administration.

guests and a view of the stage was excellent as there were no interior posts.

The amphitheatre was used as part of Mtn.

Lake Park's Chautauqua program that featured camp meetings, plays and speakers. It was razed in 1946, but the ticket booth has been restored and is used for community meetings. Assembly Hall and cottages from the Chautauqua days are still standing.

West on MD Route 135 to U.S. 219 is the town of Oakland, population 1,800 and the county seat, established in 1849. Baltimore and Ohio rail service enabled the town to prosper as a resort destination prior to the development of air conditioning and automobiles as residents of eastern metropolitan areas sought a cooler summertime climate. The beautifully restored Queen Anne style train station, designed by E.F. Baldwin, still witnesses rail service by CSX as it transports coal from nearby mining operations to eastern markets. Oakland's Main Street program has revitalized the historic district and hosts events throughout the year including the Autumn Glory Festival in October. Oakland's history is preserved at the Garrett County Historical Society Museum on Second Street. Publications of Garrett County's history are offered for sale. Staffed by volunteers, the museum can be reached at 301-334-3226. Town events and general information about Oakland can be acquired by contacting the Mayor's Office at 301-334-2691.

The Maryland Historical Trust Cultural Survey of the Coal Heritage Trail, Part I, is available at Allegany College in Cumberland, George's Creek Public Library in Lonaconing, and at Frostburg State University, Frostburg, Maryland. Part II of the Cultural Survey will be located at the Ruth Enlow Public Library in Oakland. Both surveys are available at the Maryland Historical Trust in Crownsville, Maryland.



Not all the communities along the Coal Heritage Trail were so closely connected with coal mining and timbering. Deer Park was affiliated with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and its President, John W. Garrett. The B&O constructed an elaborate Swiss Alpine style hotel and associated cottages beginning in 1872. It was an elaborate complex designed to appeal to wealthy metropolitan residents who could escape summertime city heat by traveling the rails to Deer Park. Twin swimming pools, an 18-hole golf course, bowling alleys, billiard rooms and every possible amenity greeted guests who ranged from U.S. Presidents to foreign heads of state. Presidents Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison used Deer Park at times as the Summer White House. President Cleveland's Cottage still stands and is marked accordingly. Deer Park also gained national recognition for its spring water, featured on B&O passenger trains. Although the Deer Park hotel has been razed, many of the cottages remain.

The next historical community along Route 135 is Mtn. Lake Park. Founded by Methodist ministers who were attracted to Garrett County's summer climate, a resort was established in 1881. The community had a moral tone from the beginning as card playing, alcohol, dancing, and gambling were forbidden.