

# *The Boom Days of Coal Volume I: Life in the Coal Camps*

## *Introduction*

*By Shannon E. Bell*

Through a partnership between the Kanawha Valley Health Consortium of the West Virginia Rural Health Education Partnerships and Riverside High School in Southeastern Kanawha County, a twelfth grade English class engaged in a place-based educational program during the Spring of 2005. All students at Riverside High School are required to complete a “senior project” in their English class before graduation. Students research a topic that interests them and write a six- to eight-page paper. These projects often end up being the same types of reports year after year, focusing on issues about which students have already formed an opinion before engaging in the research. The students in Peggy Alexander’s English class, however, did something a little different for their senior projects. These students’ research topics were centered on aspects of coal history pertinent to the area in which they live. “The Boom Days of Coal” Oral History Project became a focal point for their research.

At the beginning of the semester, Ms. Alexander’s students were assigned *Storming Heaven*, a novel written by West Virginia native Denise Giardina that is a vivid portrayal of life in the coal camps during the unionization movement of the early twentieth century. The book captures the struggles and pains of working for the coal industry – the industry that has shaped much of West Virginia’s history and people.

After reading the book, the students each selected topics relating to life in the coal camps in the early-to-mid-1900s. In the eleven-person class, topics included such aspects of coal camp life as music, clothing, food, mortality, health care, coal company stores, union leaders, and immigrants. Nursing students completing clinical rotations within the Kanawha Valley Health Consortium were each assigned one or two Riverside students to assist throughout the duration of the project. Community members Owen Stout and Robin Stewart, both of whom have a large interest in preserving the rich history of the area, recruited older adults who grew up in the coal camps during the 1930s-1950s to be interviewed. The class agreed upon a set of generic interview questions that all of the interviewees would be asked, and then each team developed a second set of questions specific to the team members’ senior project topics. Each of the six teams was responsible for conducting two interviews. The ninety-minute interviews occurred during

two separate English class periods within the same week at the high school. Written consent was gained from each interviewee to digitally record the interview.

In order to augment the students' learning experience, Owen led the students on a community tour of Cabin Creek, the community in which most of the interviewees live. Cabin Creek has a rich history relating to the Mine War of 1912-1913. Owen took the group to see machine gun bunkers dating back to the early days of coal mining, (the bunkers were used by the coal companies to keep miners from unionizing) old graveyards buried beneath decades' worth of weeds, and to the top of Kayford Mountain to see one of the current Mountain Top Removal operations taking place in Cabin Creek. Along the way, Owen told stories of growing up as a youth in Cabin Creek and the ways in which things have changed over the past fifty years.

The information that the students gained from their oral history interviews, the community tour, *Storming Heaven*, and additional research was used to write their senior papers. As indicated in written reflections about the project, the students gained much more through the place-based aspect of this project than simply more information for their papers. They benefited a great deal in terms of their own personal knowledge and through building connections to their community and their roots.

It is our hope that this oral history project can be continued in future years, possibly expanding into other classes at the high school. There is a great deal of history to capture in the Upper Kanawha Valley, and even more personal growth and learning to be gained in the process.