

# **Kenvir Coal Warms the South Pole**

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Presented 7 March 2013

Among the thousands of narrow, winding streams that flow from the hollows and steep ridges of Black Mountain lies a small community known as Kenvir. It is situated on Yocum Creek in the extreme eastern corner of Harlan County, Kentucky, less than five miles from the Virginia state line. Kenvir takes its name from the first three letters of Kentucky and the first three letters of Virginia.

The name Kenvir did not apply to the area for many years. The early pioneer families came from over the mountains in Virginia and Tennessee. They made their homes on Yocum Creek and its many tributaries. Yocum Creek flows into Clover Fork at Evarts, then joins Martin Fork and Poor Fork to form the Cumberland River at Harlan. Yocum Creek was named after George Yocum, a Revolutionary War veteran, and founder of the pioneer fort known as Yocum Station in the Powell Valley area of Virginia. Kenvir in the early days was known simply as Farley's Settlement, named after one of the early settlers. From the years following the Revolutionary War to about 1915 the people subsisted on small farms, raising mostly what they ate and taking wild game from the surrounding mountains as needed. Water, of course, came from the pure mountain streams. Their homes were of hewn logs with a stone chimney for cooking and heating. Their transportation consisted of a horse or mule, or more often, their own two feet. While a few people resided in places like Farley's Settlement, many lived in remote hollows near small streams. There was little change in the day to day living. It was remote, it was isolated. Any change in this daily tedium would be a major event. In 1910 the change began.

America was moving rapidly into the Industrial Revolution and needed fuel to feed the nation's iron and steel furnaces. The needed fuel was coal. In 1910 surveyors and land agents arrived to test for mineral deposits and introduced something the mountain people had seen very little of ... cash. Cash money. They also introduced something else the people had never heard of ... the broadform deed. This simple, infamous document, with the scrawl of an "X" basically robbed the original land owners of the nation's richest and finest bituminous coal seams ever to be discovered. Many people signed their "X" without any opposition, thinking it was a really good thing. As someone said, "Hey, they want to pay me for this stuff in the ground called coal."

By 1916 much of the farm owned by the Jesse Farley family had been purchased outright, and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad was extending track from Evarts up Yocum Creek to the mine site at Kenvir. Between 1917 and 1918 the original families watched in amazement as over 500 four-room frame camp houses and various other buildings were erected. There was more to come.

The company consisted of a corporation of stockholders with the Peabody Coal Company of Chicago as the principal stockholder and going by the name of the Black Mountain Corporation. The seam of coal at Kenvir was named Darby Seam Number 5. It was located about halfway up the mountainside from the valley floor. It was an exceptionally fine quality grade of coal which burned with a very high BTU and produced very little ash or waste.

A coal processing tippie was built to process and load coal which came from two different openings high up in the side of the mountain. Coal mined inside the mountains was brought outside to the openings, then moved to a conveyor line which transported the coal down to the tippie where it was separated by size. Non-coal and waste materials were removed by hand. Then the coal, according to size, was dropped into railroad cars waiting below the tippie. The mining operation had various support buildings and personnel. There was a mechanical shop, repair shops for various mining components, an electric repair shop, a parts warehouse, a bath house, and a general office. Peabody gave this mine an identification number --- number 30. With the promise of work, men and their families began arriving from areas of Virginia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and other states.

In 1926 Peabody opened another mine just a couple of miles farther up Yocum Creek. This mine was named #31. It had many of the same components as #30, but on a slightly smaller scale. The coal was taken from the same seam as mine #30, the Darby seam Number 5. This seam ran for two, perhaps three, miles up the valley of Yocum Creek and into Virginia. In a ten year span the Black Mountain Corporation transformed a small, isolated village of no more than 15 mountain farms, just barely producing enough food to survive, into a booming coal operation of gigantic proportions. In that ten year span there were jobs for thousands of men, hundreds of houses, running water, electricity, access to store bought goods, and more.

The valley was narrow with little room for widespread construction, so houses were built where space permitted. Camps were built along the valley with names and locations like New Camp, Number 1 Camp, Doctor's Office Camp, Colored Camp, Coal Bin Camp, 12-Spot Camp, Upper and Lower 31 Camp. Official Hollow, commonly called "fisher holler" at Lower 30, was reserved for the superintendent, engineers, bookkeepers, and other office employees. The company maintained a general office, a general store which stocked everything from groceries to hardware, clothing, and more. There was a separate meat market and post office. There was a gasoline station that did nothing except sell gasoline. There were two restaurants, a barber shop, a beauty shop, a doctor's office/clinic, a hospital, and a movie theater. Just across Yocum Creek there were two private enterprises --- a drug store and the Black Mountain Pool Hall and Beer Garden.

In 1922 Kenvir miners began seeking better wages and better, safer working conditions and voted to join the UMWA, United Mine Workers of America. Peabody and the Black Mountain Corporation refused to recognize the union, and miners went out on strike. After several months of conflict the company and many other mines signed the UMWA contract. It was a milestone as UMWA local 4493 at Kenvir became the first union in Harlan County. Even with the union contract there were many turbulent times, but Kenvir miners remained under UMWA contract throughout the operation of the mine.

In the 1930's President Franklin D. Roosevelt became interested in exploring the polar regions and perhaps claiming the area as United States territory. At his urging congress enacted legislation funding a four year period of scientific exploration and research on the Antarctic continent. Rear Admiral Richard Byrd was chosen to command the expedition. Admiral Byrd had already accomplished much research in two previous, privately-funded expeditions. Byrd immediately began assembling a group of men and gathering the vast supplies that would be needed to sustain the men who would serve with him.

The one item that was an absolute necessity was coal, but not just any kind of coal. In an area where temperature often falls to 80 degrees below zero the coal used here had to be of the finest quality. It had to have an extremely high, efficient BTU output and at the same time have a low ash content. And it also had to be solid enough to withstand the travel of thousands of miles without breakage.

A search was made throughout the United States for coal to meet these criteria. The coal selected came from the Darby Seam #5 of the Kenvir mines, #30 and #31. The coal even had a trade name --- Great Heart Coal. For years Peabody had sprinkled millions of small, red, heart-shaped decals on the coal carried out by train to various parts of the country. The name Great Heart came from the name of a thoroughbred racehorse owned by company owner, F. S. Peabody.

The coal for the expedition was hand-loaded at mine #30 and carefully placed into 4,000/100 pound sacks. (That's 400,000 pounds or 200 tons.) These were heavy, white canvas sacks with a large red heart logo with the words "Great Heart Coal United States Antarctic Service 1939-1942." The sacks of coal were stacked on wooden pallets to await shipment. Company officials came from Chicago. union officials and county and state officials also attended the event.

The L&N (the Louisville and Nashville Railroad), sometimes known as the "Old Reliable", got into the act by being the railroad that got into the initial transport of coal out of Kenvir. Th 4,000 sacks were loaded onto five private boxcars and pulled by L&N steam locomotive Number 1467. The engineer was G. W. Cannon. The December 1939 edition of the L&N magazine called the cargo "The aristocrats of coaldom". Peabody Coal Company referred to it as "the best coal in the world." The coal departed Harlan County on September 25, 1939, bound for the U. S. Navy yard in Boston, Massachusetts. Upon arrival the coal was loaded aboard the ship USS North Star for its final journey to the south pole. The United States Antarctic Service was scheduled to remain in the Antarctic region until sometime in 1942, but the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, changed that. The group of explorers left the site, and much of the unused coal and other supplies remained at the south pole. In the early 1950's a private expedition occupied the former Byrd Antarctic site and used much of the Kenvir coal that had been left behind. It was reported in 2009 there was still some Kenvir coal remaining, and the site was preserved as an historical site under the United States Park Service.

The decade of the 1940's was a prosperous time for the Kenvir mines and people. In the early 40's World War II brought a need for coal to fire the industrial plants producing war equipment. And the end of the war in 1945 created another prosperous period as plants and factories converted to

producing the great variety of products for the civilian population that was looking forward to new cars, ovens, stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, and more. It seemed as though the boom years would go on forever. It was estimated that there was at least 70 to 100 years worth of extractable coal available from the Darby Seam #5, but change was on the way.

By the mid 1950's the smoke and ash belching steam engines used to haul coal out of the mountains were being replaced by more powerful and efficient diesel engines. And industry began using other types of fuel. Coal companies were looking for more efficient and cheaper methods to extract their product. Since its beginning, Peabody had operated only underground mines. Now surface mining was becoming more popular and more economical. Peabody's older mines in Illinois, Indiana, West Virginia, Virginia, and, yes, even the great Darby Seam #5, mines #30, #31, and #32, in Kentucky, would face closing down as the company sought cheaper and more efficient ways to get their coal out of the ground.

In 1955 Peabody Coal Company merged Sinclair Coal Company of St. Louis. While Peabody had always been a deep mine operation, Sinclair was well into and experienced at surface mining. The newly formed company turned their sights on western Kentucky where coal was abundant and easily mined using surface mining techniques.

The inevitable finally came in late March and early April of 1958. Peabody closed the mines at Kenvir. Permanently. A 40 year chapter in history seemed to end as quickly as it began. A skeleton crew was kept on long enough to dismantle and move all the machinery and inventory to other working mines. The railroad tracks were removed. Not a trace of them exists. Most of the buildings have been removed. You can drive the stretch from mine #30 to mine #31 and never guess that once upon a time two of the richest producing coal mines in the country were right here. Of all of the company buildings at mine #30, only one remains. It houses the post office. At mine #31 there is nothing. Oh, yes. There is something. A horse ranch. The camp houses were sold to those interested in buying one or even more. Harlan County historian William Forester titled the last of his four books, "From Riches To Rags In 10 Years". This book dealt with the decline in mining jobs and population during the period from 1948 to 1958. Some of the miners followed the company to western Kentucky to settle and work. Some moved on to Western states where Sinclair had a strong presence in surface mining. Some moved north for good-paying, less dangerous jobs in the

automotive factories and other industrial plants. Some chose to remain and work in the small truck mines at less pay with more dangerous working conditions. And some chose to retire, buy one of the better camp houses, fix it up, and live out their remaining years in the mountains they loved.

Today Kenvir is a quiet village. Perhaps the most exciting event is the annual Kenvir reunion which takes place each Labor Day week-end. This celebration evolved from the annual Everts High School reunion, a time when Everts High School graduates from all over the country converge to meet and reminisce about the good old days and what they are doing now. The old high school building is open from 9 am to midnight on Saturday of Labor Day week-end for meet and greet. Hundreds of graduates attend. On Sunday many of the local communities hold their own neighborhood reunions in a central place. Kenvir has an event every year attended by hundreds.

In 2004 an historical marker was placed in Kenvir commemorating the shipment of Great Heart Coal for Admiral Byrd's use in Antarctica. In 2006 an Antarctic explorer, familiar with the Kenvir Great Heart story visited the old Admiral Byrd site on Stonington Island, Antarctica. He retrieved several pieces of Great Heart coal and remnants from one of the Great Heart coal sacks. They were sent back to New York, and eventually some of the pieces were returned to Kenvir.

#### AMONG THE MEMORIES:

- \*The climb up the mountain to get to the mine entrance
- \*The man trip to take you through the mine to get to your work place
- \*The 3:15 whistle that signaled "quittin' time"
- \*The miners who had a great sense of humor, who loved to tell jokes and funny stories and play practical jokes on each other
- \*The company store that supply almost anything. And at higher prices than most places. And they would be happy to charge it to your paycheck.
- \*The meat market that always had a good selection of meat
- \* The two gasoline pumps that served the camps
- \*The post office with combination locks. Box #38. 8 right. 24 left. 16 right.
- \*The Confectionery served limited menu of sandwiches and ice cream treats and sold small gift items and cosmetics
- \*The restaurant. From simple sandwiches to huge steak dinners
- \*The beauty shop that served the ladies' hair care and manicure needs

\*The barber shop where Bill Buckner held forth with his tales of humor and politics and became state representative

\*The doctor's office and clinic where people could walk in for treatment any time

\*The hospital on the hill that treated people with more serious problems

\*The movie theater where there was a different movie every night. Sunday-Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday and Thursday. A big double feature on Friday and Saturday nights. When the movie was over and people poured out of the building, people hanging around outside noticed that, "Well, looks like the show broke." An expression I often use today when I'm in my car and traffic will not allow me to get out in the mainstream of traffic. "Well, looks like the show broke."

\*The old drugstore owned by Dr. Pete Pierce, the only private business in Kenvir and his mint condition 1936 Buick coup

\*There was one other private business ... The Black Mountain Beer Garden and Pool Hall. Here one day as a sophomore I was playing pool with Bill Van Pelt. The state police and county police raided the place and told us if we wanted to drink a beer, we had better get it now because they were going to take everything out

\*The old cow pasture alongside Yocum Creek where the Evarts High School football team practiced, The site is now occupied by a very large, modern elementary school

\*No more Kenvir boys feeding the Evarts athletic teams or the girls ruling the cheerleading teams. As someone once remarked, "Oh, yes. Those Black Mountain girls."

Yes, gone forever are the sights and sounds of those historic years, but the memories, the memories linger on. For more information just Google Kenvir Kentucky or Kenvir.com.

## SOURCES

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