

THE JERSEYTOWN COAL MINE

Van Wagner

A few years ago while I was listening to bluegrass music at the Jerseytown Tavern, I heard stories about the coal mine of Jerseytown, PA. Several local patrons told me about their memories of the bicentennial celebrations in the summer of 1976, when they rode in a horse-pulled wagon to the site of the mine. Some people even remembered going into the mine. I left the tavern that Wednesday night wondering if this was a tall tale that locals tell as a gag, or maybe I had gotten into a bad batch of lager, or if perhaps there was indeed a coal deposit in Madison Township, Columbia County, Pennsylvania.

I received my Bachelor of Science degree from Penn State in 1998 and had taken several classes on the geology of Pennsylvania. Nothing I had ever heard or researched indicated any coal in the vicinity of Jerseytown. My curiosity finally got the better of me in 2004 when I began exploring Madison Township history in more depth. My friend Aaron Myers and I spent an entire afternoon exploring the area north of Jerseytown, which was the site of the supposed coal mine, with no luck whatsoever. We looked for any signs that would indicate coal or a coal mine. However, we found no mine tailings (dump piles of waste rock from mines), no acid mine drainage in the water (often orange in appearance), and no signs of coal anywhere. At that point, I was convinced the story was a myth.

In February 2005 I received new information from Edith Hess of Jerseytown. She gave me several pages of information about the “Jerseytown Coal Mine” compliments of the Madison Township Historical Society. The packet of information was titled “McMichael Coal Mine Near Jerseytown” and was put together by David Nichols in 1989. It is with the help of this document that I will attempt to tell the story of the Jerseytown Coal Mine.

The story begins in the 1800s when some residents dug wells in Madison Township and believed they found traces of coal in the rocks. A group of seven individuals thought this might be the case, established the McMichael Coal Company in 1903. They were: Dr. J. Elmer. Shuman, Bloomsburg (Chairman); William F. Crawford, proprietor of the Crawford Hotel, Jerseytown; Jacob E. Wintersteen, farmer, Jerseytown; Malin A. Berger, Superintendent of the Susquehanna, Bloomsburg & Berwick Railroad, Watsontown; and three people from Huron, South Dakota, Philip Lawrence, M. H. Lawrence, and M. Hoke. They decided to incorporate the company in South Dakota with Huron as the principal place of business. Unfortunately, information is lacking to discover a rationale for this rather unusual and odd decision.¹

¹ **EDITOR’S NOTE:** Little is known about the three individuals from Huron, South Dakota, and the circumstances surrounding their role with the McMichael Coal Company. The 1900 U.S. Census for South Dakota listed Philip Lawrence, born in England, age 58, as a resident in two cities, DeSmet and

Pierre, the state capital. He was the Assistant Secretary of State for South Dakota. The Office of Secretary of State issued the incorporation documents for the McMichael Coal Company. It is quite plausible that Philip Lawrence's role was to facilitate the process of getting the company incorporated in South Dakota. In Bill Baillie's book, *A History of Madison Township: Columbia County, Pennsylvania*, published in 2005, he speculated that the South Dakotans "had probably been just 'front men' to enable the company to be chartered in that state." The other Lawrence, "M. H.," was undoubtedly Philip's wife, Matilda Hannah Lawrence. According to the 1910 census, the Lawrences lived in Huron, thirty-three miles west of DeSmet, and he was in the real estate business. No information could be found to identify M. Hoke. It is still a mystery how these three individuals were connected to Madison Township and their relationship with the other company directors.

The group held their first business meeting on June 27, 1903, in Jerseytown. One of the first orders of business was to issue one million shares of stock at \$1.00 each. They also decided to set the length of term for the corporation at twenty years. Interestingly, at the this meeting, and after issuing the stock, the three individuals from South Dakota resigned.

Dr. Shuman agreed to gave the company his "right, title, interest owned by him" in return for 999,993 shares out of the 1,000,000 shares issued. This included several hundred acres owned by local persons. In other words, it appears Dr. Shuman had obtained mineral rights to mine in this area and then gave those mineral rights to the McMichael Coal Company in exchange for stock shares.



Stock Certificate of the McMichael Coal Company

The directors decided to dig two shafts in search of coal. They and some local residents undertook the work at the rate of \$1.00 for an eight-hour day. The company purchased supplies from local businessmen: lumber from P. Nick Beagle, picks and other supplies from George S. Lee, and lumber and carpentry work by Cyrus Hartline.

From the findings in the shaft, a decision was made to cut a tunnel into the base of the ridge.

William Ivey and William Holden agreed to dig a tunnel six feet high, five feet wide, and fifteen yards long and farther if the company so ordered. Their pay was \$5.00 per lineal yard. The company furnished the explosive powder and fuses, the timber props, and material for track. The two workers were responsible for installing a car and buggy. Work was to begin within ten days of the June 27, 1903, meeting. It was also agreed that if Ivey or Holden revealed anything to any persons, other than the McMichael Coal Company, or if they failed to drive the tunnel the required fifteen yards they would forfeit all pay due.

The final notes on record say, "Due to the quality of the coal and not knowing the amounts available along with a shortage of funds the company was discontinued in 1906."

This brings us to present times. I was now convinced that indeed there was a deposit of coal in the Jerseytown area. I figured it was either the far west reach of the Wyoming valley anthracite deposit, or perhaps an island of bituminous or lignite as seen in Sullivan County.

This feeling of confidence continued until February 2005 when I located the site of the McMichael "Coal" mine for myself. Upon extensive exploration and study I have not found one piece of evidence that the mine produced anything other than very dark slate. In addition, the U.S. Geological Survey classified the surface geology of that portion of Madison Township as part of the Hamilton Formation,² which does not contain coal deposits. Granted, I am not a trained, professional geologist. However, I did work for some time as an underground coal miner in Schuylkill County, PA. I have explored coal workings all over the state. In addition I now teach high school environmental science and am constantly working with coal in the classroom. I can certainly understand how people might have mistaken this black siltstone as possible coal, but in my opinion it does not and never did burn. The *Danville News* (May 13, 1980) reported "the mine never produced good anthracite, but rather a slaggy [*sic*], but burnable material that formed large fused clinkers rather than fine ash." I disagree with the claim that this substance burned at all since it is siltstone, not coal. During my research, I did hear some stories that the McMichael Coal Company may have "salted" the mine, or imported coal from an outside source and claimed it as coal from their mine. This has not been confirmed.

Was there a "Jerseytown Coal Mine"? Yes. How much coal did it produce? In my opinion it never produced even a tablespoon of coal. Although one million dollars of stock were issued in 1903, it doesn't appear that this was a racket scheme. Local people did have good reason to believe that a coal deposit may have been found in Madison Township. There is coal to the north, east, south, and even west if you travel far enough. I imagine there would have been great excitement in the area as speculation and rumors circulated. At this time in American history, coal was at the

headlines of every paper. The Great Anthracite Coal strike had just brought the nation to its knees in 1902. The nation was starved of its primary fuel source for 160 days until the strike was resolved only after president Theodore Roosevelt intervened. Under the circumstances, there was a tremendous demand for coal. The Jerseytown “coal” almost certainly had people very excited and even relived.



Entrance to the McMichael Coal Mine

Better off or worse off? In the year 2005, let us ask ourselves which would have been better; if coal had been found in Jerseytown or not. At one time coal brought a financial boom to many rural areas of Pennsylvania. However, many of these towns today are left with hard economic conditions and often environmental catastrophes. What were once streams teeming with native trout are now toxic rivers of acid mine drainage. Mountains which supported diverse Appalachian ecosystems are now covered in thousands of acres of acidic culm waste. Mining practices of 1800s and early 1900s have taken a terrible toll on the health of our people and places. Today Jerseytown is a beautiful picturesque scene of rolling fields and forests. Some of the best fishing and hunting can be found in these parts. Perhaps we should be thankful that all the McMichael “Coal” Mine ever produced was shiny black siltstone. Instead of hills of coal waste, today we are left with something more valuable, a beautiful community with an amazing history.

If you go -

The location of the McMichael Mine is in Pennsylvania State Game Lands 226 near Chuck's Archery. From State Route 44 travel west of Jerseytown. Turn right onto Swartz Road. In about a half mile or so, you will come to an intersection, with a road coming in from the right, a road dropping steeply to the left and a road in front of

you. Go straight, in less than a half mile, when the road branches, stay left of the farm. You should head for the signs that indicate State Game Lands and/or Chuck's Archery. This is the Coal Mine Road. The parking area is about a quarter mile down the road. From parking lot, travel on foot about 200 yards. Take a left onto a wagon road that travels down and crosses the creek. Now follow the creek upstream about 200 yards (no trail). The mine tunnel will be on the left shore of the creek. The mine is no longer open. However, you can see the mine tailing (dump piles) next to the creek where the mine entrance used to be. Please keep in mind you are on State Game lands. Please be safe and respectful.

SOURCES:

Mrs. Frank Allbeck, Millville, PA

Larry Allbeck, Millville, PA

Edith Hess, Jerseytown PA

Don Kline, "The Store of McMichael Hollow." *Danville News*, May 13, 1980

David Nichols, Jerseytown, PA

Van Wagner is an environment science teacher at the Pine Grove Area High School.

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