

EARLY CENTRALIA: TWO LETTERS

*In conjunction with the upcoming Commonwealth Speakers presentation on **The Other Centralia Fire**, featured here are two Letters to the Editor from Bloomsburg newspapers describing the community of Centralia in its early days as a coal-mining center. The first letter, dated 1868, complains about the low wages of miners, too low to support a single man and much too low to support a family. The conditions of the mine families were grim indeed.*

In contrast, the second letter from a year later describes the joyous community gathering on the occasion of laying the cornerstone for Centralia's St. Ignatius Catholic Church. Despite the miners' poverty, people from a wide region came together – including 3000 by train from Shamokin – to help Centralia Catholics celebrate their first sanctuary. The church structure, completed in November 1869, featured beautiful pillars of imported Italian marble and elaborate murals on walls and ceiling.

Centralia, a town built by coal, was destroyed by coal also. A 1960s mine fire led, after two decades, to a government buyout of almost every structure. Today only about a dozen residents remain in Columbia County's southernmost community. The unusually ornate St. Ignatius Church, after serving the community well for over a century, was razed in 1997; former Centralians still inter loved ones in the St. Ignatius Cemetery..

[The editor is grateful to previous editor George Turner for supplying the following transcripts.]

*From **Columbian**, May 15, 1868:*

[To the Editor:] Centralia, April 28, 1868

A man in America should at least receive living remuneration for his labor, but it is otherwise here, the work is steady enough but the wages are too small. The living of man compared with the times is such that even the most casual observer can hardly refrain from letting it come before the public. The state of things is very depressing; gloomy, and discouraging to the poor; for the wages of each working man average some where in the neighborhood of nine dollars per week. If he makes what we call full time he receives \$40.54 there being 27 working days generally in a month, but here we allow nothing for accidents which are well known to be no strangers to collieries and the like. Most of the men come or call it a good month if they make 24 days, and for this they receive \$36. This is all his income now for his outgoes. To show how depressing this are we will give the living and conditions of the single and married man separately. We have seen above that a man receives \$36 per month, he pays \$25 for board, ten dollars for a pair of working boots, and three and four pairs of these in a year, because the work on them is very heavy and rough, together with the sulphuric water acting on them which gnaws them away like gangrene with the flesh. Now we find him left with only one dollar to meet all other demands. Is this a living salary? Also it is called a very good year if he works nine months. Now for a view of the married man. It is here we find the awful chasm of starvation. He is surrounded with helpless care, shivering with the cold winter's blast and crying for food. The winter is approaching fast on many a poor family in this glorious and free American, and he has not 100 pounds of breadstuff to meet it. Here is a question that is no way intricate: Can a married man live and support his family on \$35 per month? This man is most

likely to have five or six helpless responsibilities depending on him for livelihood, together with the monstrous operator and his disinterested store-keeper (by the way who extracts every penny that the sweat of his brow may provide.) Each operator generally has a great many houses (called Company houses,) very good no doubt, in one respect, and the married men that work for this operator are required to live in his houses, and pay him the rent he pleases to ask, for it's the first that is stopped out of his wages. Next, he is required to deal in the store that is connected with the Colliery either directly or indirectly. It makes but little difference how they may have it arranged between them, we find the logical conclusion to be that the slave has to have the greater part of his wages therein. And besides that, they set their own prices for their goods, viz: from 3 to 6 cents advance per pound on groceries, and the same in proportion on dry goods. And if they do not comply with the wishes of these men, they are discharged. Many families, I have heard say, while dealing in these stores, they could hardly keep themselves in bread and molasses without running in debt. So it is hard to say whether they are any better off than were the slaves, except in the selling and voting line. We have Irish landlordism here. The Government would perform a charitable duty by reversing the Freedmen's Bureau and sending it to the poor of the North, and let the so-called white freemen have a suck of the tit. The cause of these times is known by nearly all, and I will not dare to offer a remedy, I will leave that for more influential and wiser heads. All I wish to give a slight view of the comparison of the times and the conditions of the poor man.

J. J. C.

Columbia County Democrat, July 23, 1869:

Centralia, July 19, 1869

Mr. Editor:--The Corner Stone of the Catholic Church in this place was laid on Sunday the 18th inst. First Mass was read by Rt. Rev. Bishop Shannahan of Harrisburg and second by our worthy Pastor Father M'Diarmid. At one o'clock the Sunday School met in the School house and after receiving the necessary instructions from the teachers, formed in line to receive the different delegations. The members of the congregation wearing green crosses, under the Marshalship of James Kealy Esq., assembled on Rail Road Square for the same purpose. At this time the Ashland Cornet Band arrived and took its place at the head of the whole delegation which marched up town to meet the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society of Ashland. This society deserves particular notice and under the Marshalship of Martin Monahan and Lawrence Harman Esqs., is in a very flourishing condition. The men looked well and all throughout behaved with remarkable respectability. At two o'clock P.M., the first excursion train arrived from Shamokin with about three thousand people. It contained the Shamokin Temperance Society, Patrick Dearney Esq., acting Marshal, also the Locust Gap St. Joseph's Temperance Society; the Junior Sons of Temperance of Locust Gap, also the Daughters of Temperance from the same place, P. F. Dillan Esq., Marshal and John M'Donald assistant Marshal.

These societies formed in front of the Priest's residence and were duly received. The procession marched up the main street to the head and then turned back to Weidensaul's Hotel then down the road leading to Mt. Carmel to the Lehigh Valley R. Road, and passed in review before the Bishop, Priests and other distinguished Catholic gentlemen visitors on the occasion.

The Temperance Societies looked well and under the management of P. F. Dillan, John M'Donald, Patrick Carney and others they cannot fail to be successful and of great benefit to the

community. The different Sunday Schools looked well; one thousand children at least were in the procession all dressed in white with green sashes. About 4 o'clock P. M., the whole procession marched from Father M'Diarmid's house towards the Church followed by the Bishop and several Priests dressed in the habiliments of their order. At this time the scene was beautiful beyond description: the large and well regulate procession; the great concourse of people as they walked slowly but eagerly in the one direction. The faint glimmering of the sun at this moment as it cleared away the clouds and cast its beams over the landscape was truly beautiful.

“There the Painter and the Poet might gaze,
Paint scenes sublime and Pen immortal lays.”

After the laying of the Stone and other necessary business according to the rules and regulations of the Catholic Church Rt. Rev. Bishop Shannahan ascended the platform erected for the occasion and preached a very impressive sermon.

The Reverend Bishop is a first class speaker and hard the heart indeed to which he would fail to carry conviction. To even attempt a synopsis in this place would be superfluous; it was full of learning and wisdom, and all that heard him must have derived great benefit therefrom. The Catholics of Centralia and vicinity may well be proud of the result, it was a day never to be forgotten amongst them. There were at least nine thousand strangers all cheering them on by word and deed to build a place of worship to Almighty God. There were the Protestant fellow citizens aiding them by their influence and money. On the whole it was a magnificent affair and will never be forgotten by your correspondent.

Daniel W. Lenihan.