

# How Mining and Railroads Shaped Wythe County, Virginia

As told by Wytheville Youth Digital Curators  
Wytheville, Virginia

## Introduction:

The communities of Wythe County, Virginia, have a wealth of mining and railroad history. In collaboration with the Town of Wytheville Department of Museums and the Edge 4-H Club of Wythe County, *Stories: Yes* program students explore this centuries long story, from the industrial past to the modern reinvention of the area as a historical tourist destination at the New River Trail State Park.

Youth curators include Aaliyah Reynolds, Chase Arnold, Chloe Arnold, Coyote Edwards, Elizabeth Gravely, Jackson Denti, Joseph Dye, Kylei Smith, Lucas Corvin, Madison Dye, Mitchell Denti, Nathan Beaver.

The project mentors were Amanda Gillman, Debbie Moody, Frances Emerson, Jacob Spraker, and Shawn McReynolds. Project partners included Wytheville Community College and the New River Trail State Park.

## Story Narrative:

**Speaker 1** Wythe County, nestled in Southwest Virginia, boasts a rich history of mining. It all started in 1790, with the discovery of lead.

**Speaker 2** Mining wasn't just pickaxes and iron carts. It was more than just a necessity of resources. Most people thought these communities would perish with failing industries, but instead, those resources were converted into a tool to set the tone for a new chapter in our history.

**James Early:** Well, I guess that was started with the old iron furnace, mainly. And they mined iron ore, open pit, they'd just dig a hole.

**John Davis:** In Wythe County, there were 14 furnaces, and eight of them were in Cripple Creek, or close to Cripple, within walking distance, basically. Well, the furnaces stopped producing. The big furnace, biggest furnace in the county, is Noble, which is a mile from my house, and it's last blast was in 1884.

**Sam Sweeney:** But for years and years, it was iron ore. They brought out zinc and other chemicals, and other minerals and stuff that can be utilized in different manufacturing processes.

**Dean Taylor:** You had a lot of the iron ore, copper, there was different varieties of clay that they would use for paint pigments, colorings and stuff like that.

**Daisy Rudy:** They made a shaft where you went into the mines, and they got the lead and the zinc out of the mines.

**Sam Sweeney:** Now, one of the other things that people don't realize is that carbide plant used to be in Ivanhoe, as well. And, of course, they made the gas and the carbide for the lamps for miners, and other stuff down there.

**Sam Sweeney:** But they also had iron mines there. And, of course, again, part of the iron ore industry years and years ago.

**Speaker 8:** As mining developed more and more, railroads and trains became a large influence in the mining business.

**Speaker 2:** The map pictured shows the railroad that trails from Cripple Creek into Pulaski, Virginia.

**Sam Sweeney:** There used to be as many as 100 homes up through this valley, and they were all tied to the railroad, to the hotel, and to the iron ore industry.

**Tommy Duncan:** The railroad is an excellent position. It has wonderful benefits.

**Speaker 2:** As the demand for resources grew, people saw an opportunity to make a difference.

**Speaker 8:** New Jersey Zinc was another mineral extracting powerhouse in the 20th century.

**Speaker 1:** So, New Jersey Zinc was definitely a benefit to Wythe County, and surrounding areas. People came from surrounding counties, and also a lot of the management came from up North, New York, and New Jersey, and stayed at the boarding house.

So, for somebody to be willing to leave their family to come to work in little Austinville, a rural community, for a company, I would say that company was a good company to work for.

At its peak during the 1950s, New Jersey Zinc employed approximately 650 workers.

**Speaker 2:** New Jersey Zinc produced 2,400 tons of zinc per day.

**Kay Early:** Actually, they was ... New Jersey Zinc was the cause of everybody's wells going dry, it was the reason that they had to put the water tanks in.

**Speaker 8:** National Carbide was one of the biggest mineral companies back in the early-to-mid 20th century.

**Harry Pope:** National Carbide was a plant in Ivanhoe, Virginia. To my knowledge, was built in 1917, and open for operations in 1918.

**Speaker 1:** National Carbide was a mineral extraction company that fused limestone and carbon to produce carbide.

**Speaker 2:** Carbide is used as acetylene gas, lighting carbide lamps, and for the making of steel products. Some may think these corporations didn't care about their employees, but each person was just as important to their vision for the company as a whole. From health benefits to life benefits, the big businesses affected their workers in many ways.

**Betty Wingo:** It was the biggest employer. It was the job to have.

**Speaker 8:** New Jersey Zinc even donated valuable time and resources to building recreation centers for their own employees because their employees' happiness was just as important to them as their profits.

**Betty Wingo:** There were lots of businesses there that depended on the workers from the carbide plant. There were grocery stores, and general merchandise stores, and mortuaries, gas stations. The Tea Room was there. There was a hotel.

**John Davis:** I grew up in a wonderful environment. In those days, Cripple Creek school had almost 100 people in it. So, there were, within ... There were five stores in Cripple Creek, four which sold gasoline. You could even at Christmas, order your Christmas through one of the stores.

**Speaker 1:** As these communities grew, their economies became more diversified in order to fulfill the increasing social and economic needs of a growing population.

**Harry Pope:** That was an excellent job for the area. The pay was very good, although the work, at times, was hazardous. So, you were lucky if you had a job at National Carbide Company in those days. It reached a high capacity during the war years of 642 employees.

**Speaker 1:** But when companies closed and moved away, these communities were left without the employment and basic services they needed. They lost schools, they lost doctors, they lost their identity.

**Speaker 8:** And then everything started closing.

**Speaker 2:** The mines at Austinville and Ivanhoe ran for 225 years. On November 13th, 1981, New Jersey Zinc shut down.

**Speaker 1:** After nearly 50 years of operation, National Carbide closed in 1966, just before Christmas.

**Debbie Moody:** Well, the economies were devastated. The population of Ivanhoe dropped from 2,000 people to 550 residents today. So, you can see what a devastating effect it had.

**Harry Pope:** They were in shock, they were in deep shock.

**Speaker 1:** The mines have shut down.

**Debbie Moody:** To leave those communities ... To find work, they had to leave those communities, and that meant driving outside of their close-knit community. Several employees found work at the Radford Arsenal, were fortunate enough to find work at the Radford Arsenal. But there was nothing to draw people to these communities anymore.

**Speaker 8:** With the mines gone, fear and hopelessness reigned. People needed jobs to support themselves and their families. They had a choice to either give up the land of their fathers and leave in search of better employment, or band together with their persistent ingenuity and find another option to their looming problem.

**Speaker 1:** They discovered that the mines, once a source of income, could be used another way. The history made it a popular tourist attraction.

**Speaker 2:** The railroad was abandoned and donated to the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1986 to create a State Park for tourism.

**Sam Sweeney:** When the different mining companies started to ... industries started to dry up in terms of the amount of use that they were putting on the railroad, eventually the railroad was no longer profitable down this line into Galax and to Fries.

**Sam Sweeney:** When that happened, they basically proceeded to go ahead and close this line. And when that happened, the Norfolk and Western got in discussions with New River Trail or in the DCR Department of Conservation and Recreation about the formation about a rails-to-trail park. And from there, December 1986, they bequeathed their rights to the railroad bed and the properties to the Department of Conservation and Recreation for what they would call New River Trail State Park. And we were the first rails-to-trail park in our system.

**Sam Sweeney:** One of the things that we are hoping to do is to create a museum at our railroad depot here in Foster Falls. And we're hoping to tell about the mining operations here, and tell some of the story about the people that were here, and what was mined, and the benefits for the area during that timeframe, as well as some of the other mining operations, like at Hoover Color Corporation.

**Speaker 8:** Mary Jo Babbitt is just one important member in the town of Wytheville's Department of Tourism. She specializes in bringing group tours to Wythe County.

**Mary Jo Babbitt:** It's wonderful when a group arrives here. 50 people are going to be here all day, go to the dinner theater that night, spend the night. That's big because we want those tax dollars. Their first visit here is great, and we love it. But when they return, that's an even bigger compliment.

**Speaker 1:** The New River Trail has generated new tourism-related businesses, providing services for trail users and other visitors. An example is the Draper Mercantile restaurant and bike shop.

New things are happening with old mining companies, such as the Austinville Limestone Company, which continues to build and improve its efficiency. For ten years, the company shipped 150,000 to 170,000 tons of aglime per year.

In 2006, the owners decided to expand into the lawn and garden limestone business. Recently, the company set aside 182 acres along the New River Trail as a conservation easement.

**Speaker 2:** Local mining was once fundamental to the immediate community life. When the mining industry ceased in these local communities, a seemingly unfillable void was created. These communities thought they were done for until tourism opened a new chapter, a second chance, a new hope.

In all of our communities today, we face hardships, some seeming impossible to face. It is our duty to learn from those who have walked the path before us, and to use the same ingenuity and determination to take a chance and to change the world.

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**Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution**