

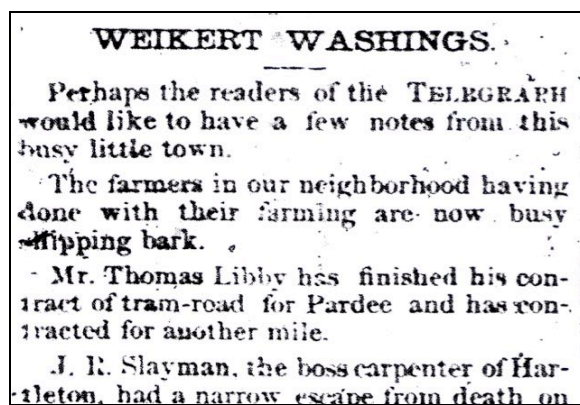
Taming Union County's Back Country

by

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While the American West had multiple mass migrations of settlers seeking new opportunities for prosperity, the western end of Union County had its own westward migration. The West End is a natural resource hot zone. While coal was king and not found in Union County, lumber was clearly “queen” and this county had miles of virgin timber. Pardee and Laurelton both became home to important logging operations bringing jobs and immigration to the quiet and sparsely populated region of Penn's Woods. This article provides an opportunity to step back in time and into the shoes of the men and women who made Pardee, Laurelton and Weikert an important chapter in the story of the American industrial era and ultimately what it is today.

The peopling of the western end of Union County is a storied history. The earliest settlers migrated there and began staking their claim to land. In the 1814 Assessment there were 97 householders in what is now Hartley Twp. Even at that time there were numerous farmers, ten employed by sawmills, three in gristmills, six were



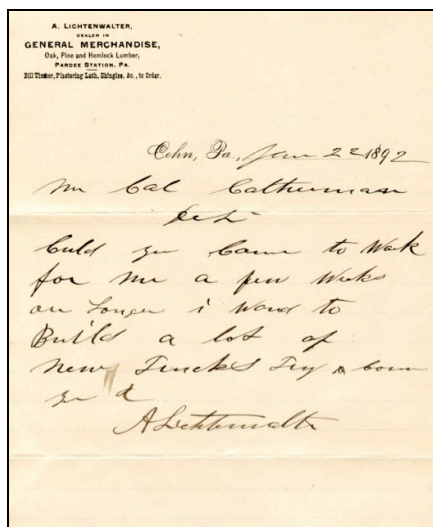
Local residents practiced a variety of jobs, as illustrated in this excerpt from *The Mifflinburg Telegraph*, Dec. 19, 1883

weavers, four were distillers, four were leather workers and four were shoemakers. There were also several carpenters, blacksmiths and coopers. The earliest names include Boop, Braucher, Catherman, Cook, Corl, Dorman, Frederick, Glover, Hoffman,

Galer (Kaler), Heise, Hendricks, Keister, Gleckner, Klingman, Lincoln, Miller, Reed, Rote, Roush, Royer, Ruhl, Schnure, Shively, Showalter, Smith, Spigelmyer, Stitzer, Voneida, Wise, Weiker, and Zimmerman.

A common discussion point among West End locals is the “Maine Men”. They suggest that there was an influx of laborers from Maine who came to Pennsylvania and settled in western Union County to work for the lumber companies in the late 1800s. Yet in a review of census documents a slightly different picture emerges. It is necessary to mention a few notable “Maine Men” including the Libbys, Rotes, Marstons, and Fessendens. However, the vast majority of the Maine migration occurred in the early 19th century when hard-working laborers settled in Williamsport and Selinsgrove. Besides settlers originally of Maine, there were those from Germany such as Philip Blazer and Benjamin Cohn as well as Thomas O’Hare from Ireland.

As mentioned earlier, the lumbering industry was a focal point for employment. Once again, census documents suggest that a significant portion of working adults were farmers or day laborers. Men needed to support their families and this sometimes required multiple means of income. Farmers were also day laborers and both of these occupations were intertwined within the lumbering industry. One clear example is in correspondence in 1892 from Albert Lichtenwalter, superintendent of the lumbering



“Jan 22 1892 Mr. Cal Catherman Could you come to work for me a few weeks or longer I want to build a lot of new trucks ...”
A Lichtenwalter

operation at Pardee, to Mr. Calvin Catherman. Albert wrote to ask Calvin to build him more logging trucks. In another document Harvey Boop described his dad's work to include work as a stonemason, fishing, trapping to sell furs, selling maple candy he made, and providing butchering services.

Both men and women worked to provide for their families and put food on the table. There are photographs of log trains loaded with huckleberry pickers eager to



Pardee Lumber Company Climax 121 at Pardee Station - Local residents took advantage of the tram trains to go on blueberry picking excursions.

capture the harvest of this natural fruit that was plentiful in the clear-cut regions of the mountains. In an interview (date uncertain) by Louise Goehring Scott, a family reports that they gathered a lot of food including huckleberries, elderberries, dewberries, and fox grapes, producing maple syrup, alcohol in the form of hard cider, and blackberry wine. They also made their own vinegar. The creek provided bountiful fishing opportunities including eel fishing. Meals were from the creek or the woods.

Rise of Mills

When western Union County was first settled in the late 18th and early 19th century, farming was the primary means of subsistence, as the region was isolated from

the resources and markets of the larger towns and cities. To meet the needs of the farmers and to utilize the harvests various mills were built that provided a destination for the farmer's products. Michael Shirtz built a grist and sawmill along Laurel Run near the Seven Mile Narrows. Then in 1800 Adam Wilt took over the business and added a hotel. This larger operation was subsequently sold to Henry Roush who enlarged the enterprise to include a store and distillery. This was considered the principal enterprise in western Union County until 1839 when George Braucher built the Free Mill in Slabtown, in the present day Laurelton. The Free Mill was a three-storied building and since it was closer to Penns Creek this mill was able to outperform Roush's operation. Other mill owners included Thomas Fredrick, David Smith, Jesse Hendricks, and John Galer.

With surplus grain available, distilling of whiskey became an important industry. According to one description, "This article was in daily use by nearly all the male inhabitants. It was supposed to furnish the motive-power in all undertakings that required severe physical exertion. A harvest could not be cut or housed, a log cabin raised or an ark turned without its invigorating influence. At all public gatherings, such as venues, militia musters, elections, etc., it was freely used and its exhilarating influence found vent in the fights which were common on such occasions."¹ In 1829, there were twelve distilleries within Hartley Township.

Penns Creek was declared a public highway as early as 1771 and by 1792 the declaration was extended to Spring Mills. Before the railroad, Penns Creek was used as the primary means of transportation to float logs cut from the western reaches of Union County down to a sawmill near Selinsgrove in the 1850s. Arks were also utilized to transport goods from the farming communities down to cities along the Susquehanna River and even to Baltimore. R.V.B. Lincoln stated "John Fisher was a man of

¹ Ellis, F., & Hungerford, A. N. (1886). *History of that part of the Susquehanna and Juniata Valleys: Embraced in the counties of Mifflin, Juniata, Perry, Union and Snyder, in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Vol. 2). Philadelphia: Everts, Peck & Richards.

enterprise and a leading man in the community. He ran arks down Penns Creek laden with wheat, flour, whiskey, butter and other productions of the county.”²

Railroads and Tram Roads

When the Railroad arrived to Millmont in 1875 and then Spring Mills only two years later, the opportunities and way of life for Western Union County saw a revolution. The railroad provided a more reliable and less expensive means of transporting lumber, iron, grain and people to and from this remote section of the



Weikert RR station. William McColm and George W. Sholter

Commonwealth. In conjunction with the railroad, so too did the logging industry blossom. The Laurelton Lumber Company was officially formed in 1890. Whitmer and Steele also began in 1890 while the Pardee Lumber Company began a few years earlier in about 1886. It is without a doubt that Laurelton profited more from the lumbering era than Pardee, Weikert or Laurel Run. Laurelton was the site of blacksmith shops, saddler's hop, foundries, shoemaker, flouring mill, general stores, drug stores, a school, churches, other businesses, and a physician.

This industrial revolution was not without destruction of both men and buildings. Fires ravaged various mills while the professions were inherently dangerous and led to many deaths, amputations, and career-altering injuries. The logging industry was likely

² Ellis, F., & Hungerford, A. N. (1886). *History of that part of the Susquehanna and Juniata Valleys: Embraced in the counties of Mifflin, Juniata, Perry, Union and Snyder, in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Vol. 2). Philadelphia: Everts, Peck & Richards.

the most dangerous of the industries in central Pennsylvania. Clear cutting of the mountains south of Penns Creek began when the railroad arrived and provided a means of transportation for equipment and the wood products harvested from the wild areas. Rail access extended from Lewisburg up to Millmont in 1875 and continued to Spring Mills by 1877.

Three major logging companies, Laurelton Lumber Company, Whitmer & Steele Company and the Pardee Lumber Company were each responsible for clearing thousands of acres of forestland. These companies used narrow gauge tramlines which weaved their way over mountains and through gaps, sometimes running through streams and in other places utilized elaborate trestle systems to satisfy a need to haul logs down to their mills. The Laurelton company had approximately 38 miles of tram lines while the Pardee Lumber Company was responsible for over 80 miles which were jointly used by the Whitmer & Steele Company as well as for their own use. These tramlines and the act of ‘wildcatting’ which was the use of a small wooden cart with a handbrake to control the speed of loaded log trains returning by gravity back to the mill was the source of many injuries and deaths. The articles in local newspapers do not leave out many details. The article published in the *Mifflinburg Telegraph* around January 22nd of 1892 indicates that William Jordon was “almost instantly killed, having had his breast caved in and head mashed.” Only a few months later, Lincoln Smith’s death noticed in the same paper indicates he was thrown beneath the train and ground to death by the wheels. By September of 1892, there were at least 4 deaths on the Pardee Tram system.

Fortunately, there was a calmer side to Taming the Back Country. The late 1800s was a time of development and enterprise. Those early developments have already been described. However, once the railroad came to town, a new wave of business sprang up. By 1888, The Mercantile Appraisal published on April 30 in the *Mifflinburg Telegraph* shows four stores in Pardee under the ownership of William Johnson Jr, Benjamin Cohn, William Harman, and Albert Lichenwalter. Weikert was home to two others while Cherry Run had a store under the ownership of D. C. Johnson.

As the logging companies began to close down due to lack of resources and financial challenges, the economic prosperity also began to change. The hard-working men and women rather suddenly found themselves without outside income and their

ability to help sustain numerous retail establishments quickly vanished. Over the first two decades of the 20th century, Laurelton, Pardee and Weikert saw a contraction in their growth. But, this would not be the end of these communities.

The Great Depression is not remembered for prosperity or flourishing small businesses. Yet, in Pardee there was a rekindling of opportunities and enterprise. As part of the Federal Government's programs to resolve the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) was created to provide jobs to men.³ As part of this program the men would be housed in camps often located in more remote areas since the goal was to create or improve parks and the infrastructure associated with our natural resources. One such camp was located at the present day Union County Sportsman's Club. Since this is only a very short distance from the village of Pardee, the men of this



Tharps Beer Garden in the village of Pardee. Photo appears to have been taken in the 1920s or 1930s

camp would journey over the Pardee on the weekends to enjoy their time off. Tharp's Beer Garden was a common destination and well known throughout the region as the place to go on a weekend night. The re-energizing of Pardee did not last very long and once again the village began to fade back into the wilderness and revert to a small quiet lane lined with cabins and only a few permanent residences.

The development and economic improvements to western Union County, which peaked during the late 1800s, brought about prosperity, hardship, and death. With any

³ For more information on Weikert's former CCC camp see *The CCC Camps of Union County (1933 -1942)* by Tony Shively; *Heritage*, Vol. 28, Union County Historical Society, 2003

rise comes a fall. Since the time of the Great Depression, employment opportunities within the West End have dwindled and the region is slowly returning to a calm, quiet corner of the Buffalo Valley.



Entering Bald Eagle State Forest - Caption could read: While the logging industry brought people to the West End, the formation of the Bald Eagle State Forest has allowed this region to remain accessibly wild and continues to provide endless opportunities for outdoor recreation and exploration of the natural world.

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