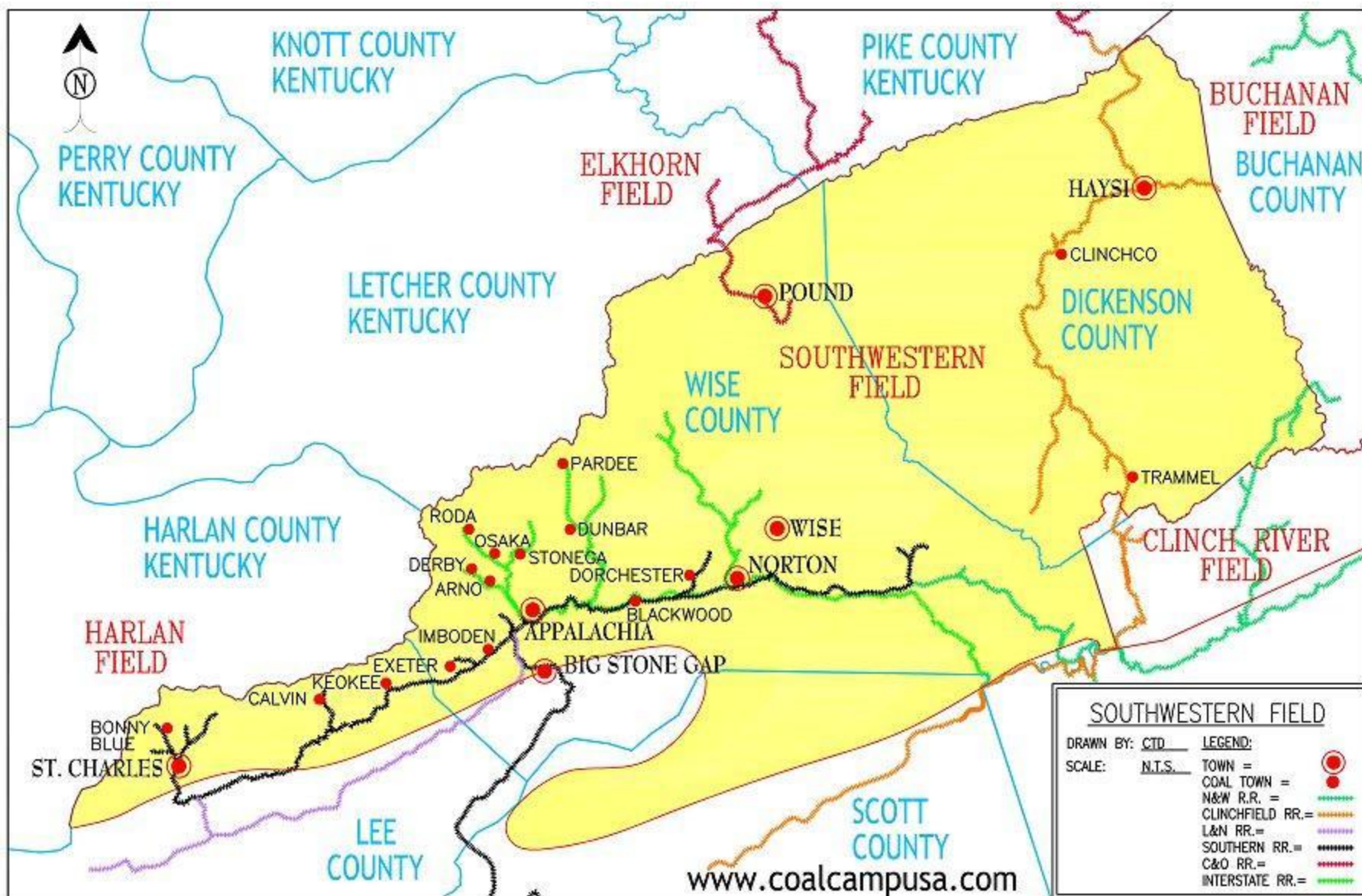


BIG STONE GAP (SOUTHWESTERN) COALFIELD

My vintage U.S.G.S. map of Virginia coalfields calls this the Southwestern Coalfield, but it is probably better known as the Big Stone Gap Coalfield. The coal produced here has been world class, and much of it would be classified as metallurgical bituminous coal. Without a doubt, the dominant company has been Stonega Coke and Coal Company. This outfit was absorbed into Westmoreland Coal Company in the 1960s. Westmoreland went bankrupt and exited the Southwestern Coalfield in 1995. <http://www.coalcampusa.com/swva/southwestern/southwestern.htm>





Coal tipple at Tacoma, Virginia. (Dec. 2008 image by author)



Former Keokee Coal and Coke Company store in Keokee, Lee County, VA. The coal company closed the store in 1930, three years after the last coal mine at Keokee closed. The beehive coke oven plant, probably the only one ever in Lee county, probably also closed at that time. And then most of the Keokee coal camp was demolished. (Jan. 2007 image by author)

But what is interesting about the town is the fact that Stonega Coke and Coal rebuilt the Keokee coal camp in 1947 to house the families of the miners of their newly opened Glenbrook mine. Though Stonega sold most of the homes, as opposed to renting them, they probably represent one of the last times that an Appalachian coal company constructed housing for its workers.



Photo of homes being constructed by Stonega Coal and Coke Company in Keeokee in 1946. (Image from Ed Wolfe's book "Coal Camps, Tipples, and Mines")

SOME OF THE LAST COAL COMPANY TOWNS TO BE BUILT IN APPALACHIA

1929-Clearco, WV

1929-Pitt Gas, PA

1930-Bishop, WV/VA

1938-Kopperston, WV

1940-Burson/Braden, PA

Early 1940's-Wharton/Barrett/Clinton, WV

1947-Munson, WV

1947-Keokee, VA (reconstructed)

1952-New Camp (Pound), VA

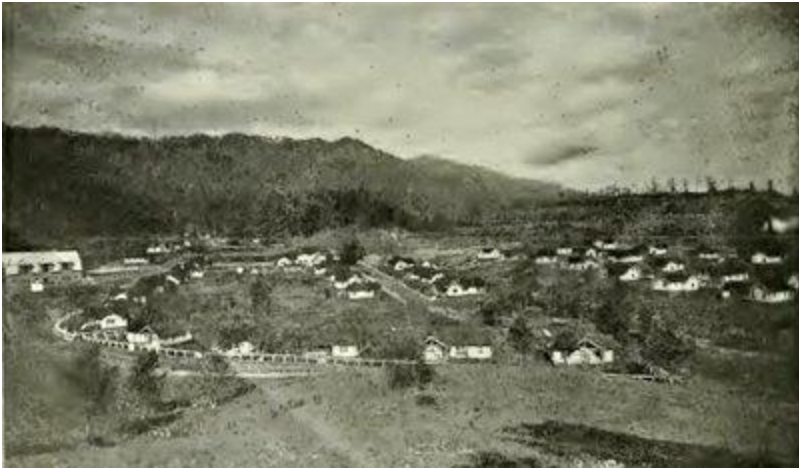
1981-Buchanshire, VA (Evidently Island Creek Coal never actually constructed this town that they planned to build.)



These attractive homes belong to the men who mine Glenbrook coal. As the mine was being developed the town of Keokuk was also laid out, graded and landscaped, providing all the beauty, convenience and healthful atmosphere of a suburban community, complete with stores, churches and school, amidst the delightful mountain terrain. These homes, typical of many more, are owned by the occupants and provide a self-governing community unique in the coal mining industry.



From a late 1940's brochure about the Glenbrook Mine. (Image courtesy of Everett Young)



The original Keokee coal camp before it was torn down and rebuilt. (From a Keystone Mining Catalog via Google Books)





Duplex housing on "Quality Row" in Stonega, VA. I'm not surprised to see this style of housing, which is so common to Pennsylvania coal towns, in Virginia. At least some members of the management of Virginia Coal and Iron Company, the predecessor of Stonega Coke and Coal Co., were from Pennsylvania. (Image courtesy of Brian McKnight)



The bosses row in Stonega, called "Park Place". (Jan. 2007 image by author)



Company houses in Lower Stonega - the White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant section of Stonega. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



Upper Stonega, the African-American section of the coal camp, has the feel of a ghost town today. Called "Red

**Row", the houses were probably built around 1896 when the Stonega coal mines and coal camp were first opened.
(Jan. 2007 image by author)**



This dilapidated bath house is still in existence at Stonega. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



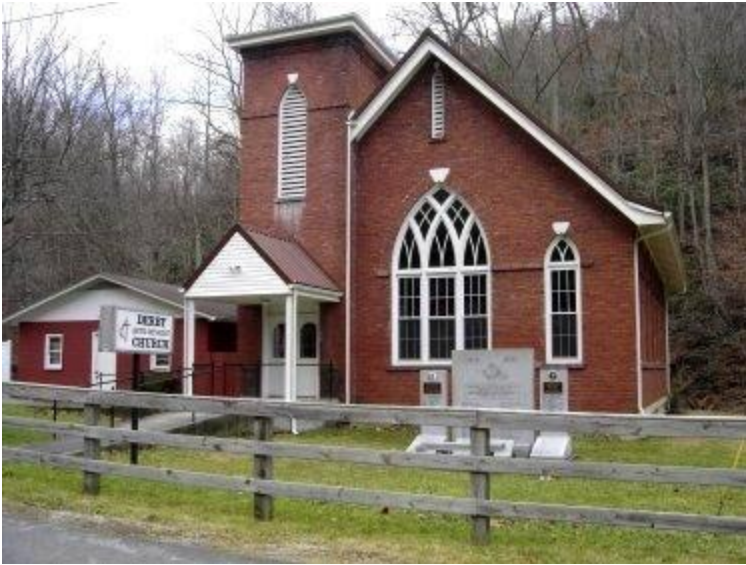
Stone foundations from the tippel (left) and the ruins of the machine shop (right) at Stonega. A beehive coke yard, built in the mid 1890s, used to be located here, but it was destroyed a long time ago. Only the wall that the coke workers stood on remains. This coke works was idled in 1953, a year after the last coal mine at Stonega was closed. A new coal mine and preparation plant, named the Wentz operation, opened in the 1960s at the edge of Stonega and in 2007 continues to produce. It is truly amazing that, after 110 years of coal mining, the coal reserves have not been exhausted yet. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



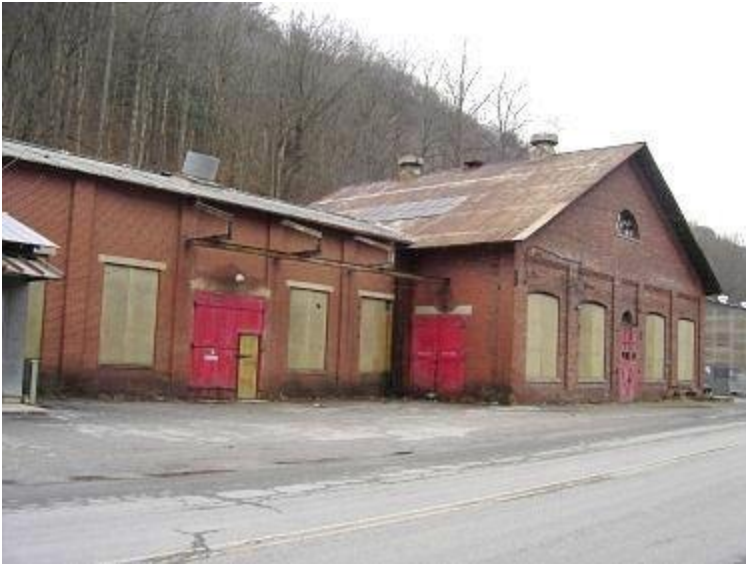
These red block company houses in Derby, VA represent the last coal town built by Stonega Coke and Coal (not counting their rebuild of Keokee in 1947). Derby was constructed in 1922- 23 and so named because the officials of the company stopped to tour their new town on the way to the Kentucky Derby. The "model" coal camp was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2004. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



A few "coal houses" still exist in Derby. The company would deposit the families' coal into the slots facing the street. The families in turn would pull their coal out of a door on the side facing the homes. One lifelong resident of the town told me that the teachers at Derby taught the kids the "three r's: reading, 'riting, and the road to Richmond." (Jan. 2007 image by author)



The church in Derby is still in existence, but none of the mining complex is. Coal was mined at Derby from 1923 until 1956 in four different mines in the Taggart and Marker seams of coal. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



The machine shop at Osaka, VA was originally located beside the old Osaka tipple. Stonega Coke and Coal opened the Osaka mine, coke ovens, and coal camp in 1903. The original mines were exhausted in 1927, but a new mine/prep plant named Prescott opened there in the 1950s. Prescott operated until the 1990s. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



Detail of the machine shop at Osaka. The old Osaka company store was tragically demolished in 1999. The store had been closed by Stonega Coke and Coal in the 1950's. They closed most of their individual company stores at that time and consolidated them into one mega company store, called the Andover Shopping Center, which was located in the railroad town of Andover, VA. When Westmoreland Coal Co. absorbed Stonega Coke and Coal they continued to operate the Andover Shopping Center until 1977, a very late date for a coal company to operate a retail store. (Coal companies operated a few retail stores in West Virginia into the 1980s.) (Jan. 2007 image by author)

A 1976 article about the Andover Shopping Center appeared in many newspapers across America. It said, "The company stores look ridiculous in the age of shopping plazas, and the only real competition between the company luncheonette and McDonald's is that both serve rubber on sesame seed buns.

"Still, there are in the nation obscure pockets which company store continue to pick. One reportedly is in the tucked-away coal region of the Virginia panhandle. There four locals of the United Mine Workers have filed suit against the Westmoreland Coal Co. in protest against the practices and philosophy of the company's stores.

"The miners have apparently been grumbling about the Westmoreland situation since the days when coal cooked the eggs of the nation, but the arguments have only recently been formalized. Attorney Strother Smith says at least one Westmoreland store, the Andover Shopping Center near Appalachia, Va., operates as if it was still acceptable 'for men to owe their souls to the company store.' Smith says he knows no other labor issue in the area as sensitive as this one.

"Like voices from the medieval past of the coal business, miners say the Andover store uses its credit and its services as an extension of company hostility towards them. Roger Barker, for example, a 28-year-old who irritates the company with endless safety complaints, says that he was fired for his militancy one time and within minutes his company store credit was revoked. He had a paycheck pending from which the store could deduct his charges, 'but all they wanted to do was hurt me as much as they could, in this case by denying me groceries.'"



Company housing at Roda, VA. Another company town of Stonega Coke and Coal Co., Roda opened in 1902-03. Mining of coal at Roda lasted from 1903 through 1957. The mines were reopened in the late 1960s, and coal was mined until the 1980s. The original Roda operations used two tipples. One of these wooden tipples was still being used in 1982, 80 years after it was constructed. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



Coal from Roda was marketed as "Roda Gas Coal", and it even had its own logo, shown here. The manufacturing of gas from coal was once a prosperous industry in America.



**These homes at Roda were originally the superintendent's home (left) and the company doctor's home (right).
(Jan. 2007 image by author)**



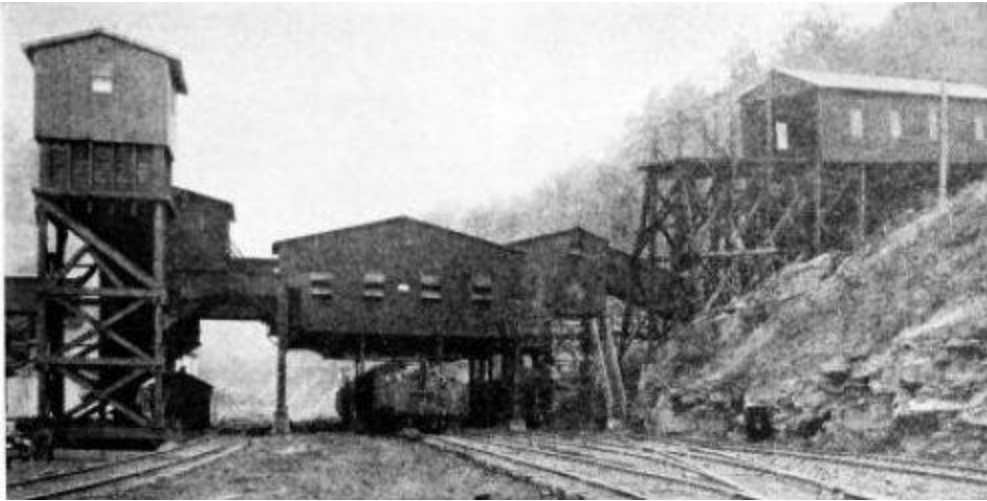
The church that Stonega Coke and Coal built at Roda still stands in 2007. A Methodist church, Stonega would have a minister removed if he didn't meet company approval. (Jan. 2007 image by author)



These homes built by Blue Diamond Coal Company are all that remains of Bonny Blue, Lee County, Virginia. Bonny Blue is described in Rex Bowman's "Blue Ridge Chronicles" as "... a string of small homes along a band of asphalt that quickly turns into two muddy ruts. Dogs, chickens and cats wander across the small yards in front of the houses and along a shallow creek that runs through the hollow. Bits of rusting iron scraps litter the landscape." (Dec. 2008 image by author)



Bonny Blue tipple and the bottom of the 3/4 mile long incline coming from the head house. Some of these collieries were really engineering marvels. The coal from Bonny Blue was marketed under the name "Blue Diamond Virginia Coal." (Circa 1926 image from *The Coal Trade Bulletin* via Google Books)



Elevation view of the Bonny Blue Coal Company's tipple, with shaker screens inside, loading booms for "lump" and "egg" coal, and chutes for "slack" coal and house coal wagons. (Circa 1926 image from *The Coal Trade Bulletin* via Google Books)



Coal miners in the Bonny Blue mine operating a Goodman Universal Control Shortwall mining machine. (Circa 1926 image from *The Coal Trade Bulletin* via Google Books)



Most of the original coke ovens in the Big Stone Gap Coalfield are gone, but a few are rumored to be still in existence at Keokee. However, the coke ovens pictured here - latter day coke ovens built in the 1940s at Pine Branch - can still be found. They don't look like beehive ovens, but rather rectangular ovens. (Probably 1990's image courtesy of George Torok)



Former Virginia Banner Coal Corp. company store in Trammel, Dickenson County, Virginia. (Photo courtesy of [Bluebird's Blog](#))



Former coal company houses still in existence at Trammel. (Image by others)



This larger structure at Trammel may have been the boarding house for single miners. (Image by others)



Idled coal loading facility near Pennington Gap, Virginia. (Dec. 2008 image by author)

Recommended literature:

"Coal Camps, Tipples and Mines" by Ed Wolfe (2005, HEW Enterprises)

"A Guide To Historic Coal Towns of the Big Sandy River Valley" by George D. Torok (2004 University of Tennessee Press) - The title is a misnomer, because there is an entire chapter titled "Harlan County and the Big Stone Gap Coalfields".

SOUTHWESTERN VIRGINIA COALFIELDS

APPALACHIAN COALFIELDS HOME