

Himler, Himlerville, and a Historian's Quest



The new immigration, due to a lack of sources, is a topic that has not been widely studied by Appalachian historians. In the following article, Professor Cantrell relates how he became aware of and interested in studying the new immigrant groups that came to the hills and hollows of the Appalachian South to mine coal and generally make a better life for themselves in industrial America.

As a teenager during the 1970s in the hills of Southwestern Virginia, I never dreamed that reading an article in a local newspaper would launch a 30 plus year quest to learn more about Martin Himler and Himlerville, a cooperative coal mining community established in Martin County, Kentucky in 1919. On a lazy weekday sometime around 1974, with nothing better to do, I perused the *Richlands (VA) News-Press* and noticed an article about an Italian community that once existed in the Jewel Ridge, Virginia Coal Camp.

Having been born and raised at Whitewood, VA, which was only a few miles from Jewel Ridge, and having a grandfather who worked in the coal mines at both Jewell Ridge and Jewell Valley, I read the article because I, like most Appalachian youth of my generation, mistakenly believed that all Appalachians were descendants of 17th and 18th century migrants from Northern and Western European Countries (England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany). Appalachia, or so I believed, never received immigration from Italy and other Southern and Eastern European nations.

Yet, here was an article in a local newspaper documenting the presence of Italian immigrants in Buchanan County. At the time I read the article, I filed it away in my memory and thought nothing about it. Several years passed, during which I graduated from Richlands High School, attended Berea College (the first member of my extended family to attend college) and took degrees in History and Political Science, studying Appalachian culture and history under the tutelage of Professors Richard Drake and Loyal Jones.

After leaving Berea I decided to attend graduate school at the University of Kentucky, where Harry Caudill was teaching at the time. Professor Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* was one of my favorite books and I desperately wanted to study with him.

During my first semester at U.K. I took an American Reading Seminar with immigration expert Humbert Nelli. One day in class, Dr. Nelli, rather than having students discuss reading assignments, began questioning the six or seven students enrolled about what topic they were going to write their dissertation on.

As a new student, I had no idea what I was going to write on and in fact, had not given a topic much thought. Not wanting to let my classmates think I was a slacker and did not know how graduate school worked, when my turn came to tell what I was going to write on I suddenly remembered the article about the Italian colony in Jewel Ridge that my local paper had carried and that I had read nine or ten years ago, and wanting to impress Professor Nelli, I blurted out, "immigrants in Appalachia."

Since Professor Nelli was U.K.'s expert on immigration and was a child of Italian immigrants himself, he began to gush about my topic, took me under his wing and insisted that he direct my dissertation. Because I wanted to study with Harry Caudill, I agreed to let Caudill and Nelli co-chair my graduate committee. For the next several years, I spent much time searching various libraries for any documents they might contain on immigrants in the southern Appalachian coal fields. From that day, I made an academic career researching about, speaking about, and writing about various immigrant groups that came to southern Appalachia to build railroads and mine coal.

In the course of conducting research on immigrants to the Appalachian coal fields, I ran across two or three sentences in Ron Eller's *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers* about Himlerville and Martin Himler. Himlerville was unique because it was the America's (and probably the world's) only cooperative coal mining company. All the Hungarian immigrants who worked at Himlerville owned stock in the Himler Coal Company, and unlike in other Appalachian coal camps where the company owned worker houses, these immigrants owned the houses in which they lived.

Not only did they earn wages for mining coal, but they received dividend payments according to the number of shares of stock they held in the Himler Coal Company. The evils that existed in other company towns, such as making miners shop at the company store, firing and evicting them for listening to union organizers, and debt peonage, did not exist in Himlerville. Martin Himler treated his worker/stockholders with respect, and there was always a waiting list of immigrants who wanted to move to Himlerville to work.

I discovered that prior to opening the Himler Coal Company, Martin Himler had been a journalist in New York, where he founded a newspaper for Hungarian immigrants called *The Hungarian Miners Journal*. I figured that this newspaper, which I learned was published at Himlerville during the time the Himler Coal Company was in operation, contained much information about the coal community that so fascinated me.

I searched high and low for the better part of two years looking for copies of *The Hungarian Miners Journal* but was never able to find any library that housed the publication. Practically every

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day, I ventured to the M. I. King Library on U.K.'s campus and searched through various reference works that catalogued different library holdings, hoping to find a listing for Himler's paper.

Eventually, I discovered the newspaper's Hungarian name (*Magyar Bányászlap*) and decided to try looking under that name. Lo and behold, the first library catalogue that I looked in under *Magyar Bányászlap* indicated that the publication was housed in a library in Chicago. I immediately went to the interlibrary loan department at King Library and ordered newspapers for all the years that Himlerville was in operation.

Eagerly, I awaited the arrival of the newspapers. On the day interlibrary loan called to inform me that the publication had arrived, I immediately rushed to carry the newspapers to my office on the 17th floor of U.K. Patterson Office Tower. Since the bound issues of the newspaper were so large and since I had about ten years' worth of them, I had to make several trips between the library and Patterson Office Tower, carrying a few volumes at a time.

After dumping the last load on the floor of my small office, I eagerly picked up a volume to begin reading about Himler and Himlerville. To my surprise and utter dismay, practically all the articles were written in the Hungarian language (sources that had mentioned the newspaper indicated that it was written in both English and Hungarian, which turned out to be mostly incorrect). Of course, a poor mountain boy like myself could not read Hungarian. I then contacted the foreign language department at U.K., hoping that they taught Hungarian and that I could find a graduate student who might be interested in translating the newspapers into English for me. Unfortunately, U.K. did not teach Hungarian, but did inform me that the department secretary was Hungarian and might be willing to help with the translation.

Taking one of the bound volumes with me, I approached the secretary. She read a couple of headlines from the newspaper and then informed me that she would translate the newspaper at the rate of 20 dollars per page. As a graduate student subsisting on slightly less than a \$500 monthly stipend for teaching undergraduate classes at U.K., I could not afford to get much translation done.

I then approached the Graduate Dean, who agreed to give me a small grant to get about 10 pages of the journal translated into English. Reluctantly, I accepted the fact that I would not be able to make much use of *Magyar Bányászlap* and had to return them to their permanent home in Chicago within a few weeks. To say that I was heartbroken is an understatement. To this day, I am certain that there is a trove of information about Himlerville lying unread in *Magyar Bányászlap*.

Despite the inability to read Hungarian and the lack of funds to translate *Magyar Bányászlap* into English, by 1992 I had gathered enough material to write an article for a refereed historical journal (*The Filson Club History Quarterly*) published in Louisville. This article, which was entitled "Himlerville: Hungarian Cooperative Mining in Kentucky" garnered me gigs as a featured speaker on the topic for the Kentucky Humanities Council Speakers Bureau. For a year or so, I traveled throughout Kentucky, talking about Himlerville, Martin Himler, and new immigrants in Appalachian coal counties.

As a result of the article's publication, readers from around the nation began to contact me with more information about Himler and Himlerville. As a result of reader vigilance, I discovered that I had included several factual errors in the article. For example, one reader sent me copies of scrip used by the Himler Coal Company to show that a statement I made in the article that the Himler Coal Company did not issue scrip was false.

Other readers sent me additional information on Himlerville. A reader from Los Angeles, CA mailed a copy of Himler's death certificate, and a Michigan reader sent me a copy of a newspaper article Himler had written. Another California lady called my home one Friday evening wanting to

know if I would have breakfast with her to talk about Himlerville as she was in Kentucky on vacation and wanted to visit the remains of the town. Of course, I met her, took her to my office and shared my file on Himlerville with her. The publication of the Himlerville article also opened opportunities for me to write entries on Himlerville and other immigrant groups for the Kentucky Encyclopedia and the Encyclopedia of Appalachia.

The next step in my journey to learn more about Himler and Himlerville was involvement with Cathy Corbin and publication of Himler's autobiography and efforts to restore the Himler mansion, which had fallen into disrepair since I first saw it in the mid-1980s. Out of the blue, Cathy phoned one evening informing me that she was editing Himler's autobiography and wanted to speak with me since I had written and spoken about Himlerville.

Cathy and I would spend several hours on the phone, telling each other what we knew about Himler and Himlerville. As a result of these conversations we both decided that we desperately wanted to preserve the Himler House and, through Cathy I began working with the Himler Project group to raise funds to restore the mansion to its former glory. As part of this project, Cathy provided me with a copy of the Himler autobiography.

While the autobiography did not provide much new information about Himlerville, it filled in many gaps in my knowledge about Himler. I discovered that he, like most immigrants of the day, worked at many jobs, including as a coal loader in a mine, as a laborer in a steel mill, as a general laborer building a tunnel in New York, as a push cart salesman, as a pack peddler where he visited numerous immigrant communities in Appalachian coal camps, including the area in Southwest Virginia that I grew up in, selling merchandize from a pack that he carried on his back, as a cobbler and operator of a shoe store, and at various other occupations.

I also learned that Mr. Himler enlisted in the American military during World War II and was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services (the forerunner of the modern CIA) where he interrogated Nazi war criminals, sending many of them to face trial and execution in Hungary.

One Saturday evening in the summer of 2014, while watching a PBS show on the local Kentucky Educational Television station called "Kentucky Life," I had a brainstorm. What a wonderful segment for "Kentucky Life," I thought, the story of Himler and Himlerville would make.

The next day, I looked up the "Kentucky Life" website and sent a general email to the show's producers, asking if they would be interested in doing a segment on Himler and Himlerville. Several weeks passed and I had largely forgotten having contacted "Kentucky Life" before I received a call from the show's producers wanting more information about Himlerville.

Happily, I provided the producers with the name and contact information for Cathy. In October of 2014, Cathy, Mandy Young, and I were filmed for the television show, which aired on KET stations in February 2015. Hopefully, the show raised awareness about Himlerville and will bring the Martin County Historical Society closer to the goal of raising sufficient funds to restore the Himler mansion and making it a center for the study of Hungarian and Appalachian culture in eastern Kentucky.

My journey to find out more about Himlerville, Martin Himler, and other immigrant groups in the southern Appalachian coal fields continues and probably will not stop as long as I am alive. Himler and the cooperative coal mining community he established in the hills of eastern Kentucky continue to fascinate me, as that community seems like an ideal solution to problems that often exist between capital and labor in a capitalistic society.