

# The Busy Blacklick Valley

## A Section of Earth Whose Industries Are Bound to Cut a Considerable Figure

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Ebensburg, Jan. 23 – Few people who have not been in the Blacklick Valley recently would be able to recognize the wilderness that it was a few years ago. Prior to 1893, when the Pennsylvania Railroad Company extended the Ebensburg & Cresson Branch to Vintondale, the country which the road traverses was wild mountain land. No effort had been made to till the soil along the Blacklick and miles and miles could be traveled without seeing a single habitation. The extension of the railroad, as if by magic, transformed the valley into live, hustling communities and busy hives of industry. Sawmills were created to turn the giant trees of the forest into lumber. Many coal mines were opened, so that the Blacklick region might yield up its vast mineral wealth to the busy mills and factories of the East. New towns and villages sprung up, as if by the magician's wand, to house and care for the many workmen and artisans who found employment among its inhospitable hills.

To-day thousands of tons of coal are being shipped from this prosperous valley, the people are happy and contented, and no more promising coal region exists in Pennsylvania. And it is only in its infancy.

### **A Modern Aladdin's Work.**

But if wonderful improvements have taken place between Ebensburg and Vintondale, even more important improvements have been made between Vintondale and Blacklick Station in Indiana County, to which point the Pennsylvania Railroad has recently been extended. If the improvements in the east end of the valley show evidence of the hand of the magician in their creation, then surely nothing short of an Aladdin and his wonderful lamp could have brought about the remarkable transformation in the other end of the valley. And it is to the lower end of this valley that the writer would call the special attention of the reader.

Beginning at a point about one mile northeast of Vintondale, along the route of the P.R.R., on the north side of the railroad, a big coal operation is being put in which promises to be one of the most extensive along the Blacklick Creek. Last summer a corporation known as Cambridge Bituminous Coal Company, under the direction of an Eastern capitalist named McGinnis, of Frackville, Schuylkill County, started to open two slopes. These slopes are now about ready to be worked. The mines as opened will afford much room, and will be standard mines in every particular. They are now being equipped with what is known as the "endless rope haulage system," which will be employed to bring the coal to the surface, where the cars will be attached to an electric motor and hauled to the tipples some distance beyond. The entrance to the slope is about 3,000 feet from the railroad, and a very fine specimen of trestle work has been erected over which the cars will be hauled to be dumped. Mr. McGinnis states that as soon as the weather moderates a little the work of laying out a substantial town will be proceeded with. Even at the

present time a road bridge has been constructed and the place has taken on the appearance of a hustling community. The location is unquestionably an admirable one for the rearing of an ideal coal town.

The next town along the route of the railroad is Vintondale, and as so much has been written of this prosperous place, the writer will pass it by, merely stating that here the Vinton Colliery Company operates one mine, a drift, and the Lackawanna Coal Company operates two mines, known as No.1 and No.2, from which much coal is taken and which adds considerable to the prosperity of the town.

### **Modest “No. 3.”**

Continuing down the valley for a distance of about a mile and a half, the traveler comes to another extensive coal operation of the Lackawanna Company, known as “No.3.” Although lacking a more pretentious name, this point is one of the most hustling and important along the route. With its splendid brick engine houses, machine shops, and boiler house, one is led to the belief that it was very modest in its selection of a name. On the side of the hill just north of the works, standing like sentinels over the operation, are long rows of houses which are inhabited by the employees of the busy village. Now and then a long train of cars emerges from the mines loaded with the mineral wealth of the valley. Later this coal will be hauled from the mines into an immense coal crusher and washer, now in course of construction, where it will be crushed to the required size and later washed free of sulphur and other objectionable substances, fitting it for coking, and transported to market.

### **The Jewel of the Valley.**

From “No.3,” passing down the valley another mile and a half, Wehrum, the jewel of the Blacklick Valley, is laid before the visitor in all its splendor. This model town is the pet and ideal of the Lackawanna Coal Company. And before continuing with our description of the town, it may be well to remind the visitor that every foot of ground in and about Wehrum is the property of the Lackawanna Coal Company, and the Superintendent Mr. Claghorn is, like Robinson Crusoe of old, “monarch of all he surveys.” There is not a man in the neighborhood who does not, directly or indirectly, owe fealty to Mr. Claghorn for the position he holds to-day. The only hotel, the only bank, the only store, the only meat market, and the only blacksmith shop in the town are owned by the company and managed by Mr. Claghorn. No other enterprises can locate here without the consent of Mr. Claghorn for the company owns all the ground. No dictator of ancient Rome, no Czar of all the Russias, was clothed with more authority than Mr. Claghorn in his own little principality. His authority is absolute – there is no appeal. But, although an autocrat in his way, it is but just to say of him that he exercises his authority for the good of the community and its people, and it is largely through his benefactions that the valley is a Mecca for thousands of contented workmen and their families.

### **Country’s Biggest Coal Crushers.**

The great coal crusher and washer at Wehrum is the center of attraction. It stands like a mighty tower a short distance above the Pennsylvania Tracks. In height the washer is 113 ½ feet and

when running in its full capacity 3,000 tons of coal pass through its maws each day. This crusher and washer, together with two others of the same type, located at “No.3” and at Claghorn, are the largest in the United States.

The mine at Wehrum is a slope and is operated jointly by a shaft and a slope. At what is known as “No.4” a large shaft with two large buckets attached to a cable, is operated in bringing coal to the surface. When a loaded bucket comes up the shaft an empty bucket passes down.

Another point of interest to the visitor is the fine brick plant operated a short distance above the washer. This plant makes what is known as “wire-cut” brick, turning out many thousands each day, all of which are consumed by the Lackawanna Company in its building operations at different points along the creek. An immense battery of boilers, encased in brick, also attracts the sightseer and is awe-inspiring in its effect. All boilers used by the company are of the very latest upright type, and each boiler is a great machine in itself. All are of large horsepower, and many of them reared up together is not an uncommon spectacle. A big engine house is another attraction worth looking at. In it are housed the engines used to operate the plant. Shooting in and out, and winding all around the mammoth works laden with cars of supplies are a number of dinkey engines.

### **A Model Narrow Gauge.**

And right here it may be in order to call the attention of the reader to the narrow-gauge railway that the company operated between upper Vintondale and a point west of Wehrum. Some think that this road is a makeshift for the present only, but after walking over it one is impressed with its solidity and the high class of construction. No section of the Pennsylvania Railroad is better ballasted and kept than the Lackawanna narrow gauge. A force of men is continually kept at work repairing and bettering the road. At Vintondale its path is up high on the side of the mountain, many feet above the creek, and it winds in and out, passing through the works at “No. 3”, until the big Wehrum plant is reached. Later all coal from the Vintondale plant will be hauled to either “No.3” or Wehrum, to be run through a crusher and washer before it is shipped to its final destination at Buffalo to the plant of Lackawanna Steel Company, of which the Lackawanna Coal Company is a constituent part. The narrow-gauge road is also used to carry supplies of all kinds to the different operations, such as mine props, machinery, brick, etc. Each morning and evening a regular passenger train runs over the route to carry the employees to and from their work. Many of the latter who work for the company at the “No. 3” and Wehrum plants live in Vintondale, and the company provides them with free transportation.

### **Wehrum a Substantial Town.**

Wehrum now has some very pretty residences, one beautiful hotel structure, and a substantial brick bank. The principal street in the town is Broadway, and along it the finest buildings are erected. Supt. Claghorn lives in a palatial residence on the cap of the mountain on the opposite side of the creek from Wehrum, which to reach one passes over a footbridge swung across the creek near the works and by a series of steps and paths winds around the mountain until the top is reached. Mr. Claghorn travels about Wehrum either in his automobile or a carriage drawn by a handsome team of coach horses.

After leaving Wehrum the next village along the route is Buffington, just two miles below. And three miles below Buffington we come to Dilltown, the point from which the last extension to the Pennsylvania Railroad is started. Buffington and Dilltown are each little country settlements, and their importance consists principally in the beauty and rustic elegance of their surroundings. The country about each place is calculated to cause the traveler to pause and view its acres in admiration. Dilltown is the more important of the two places, and will doubtless yet see the day when its population and importance will increase many fold with the development of its hidden mineral treasures. A standard coal operation has been put in by Irish Brothers, the well-known Eastern coal operators. The operation, tipple, and all equipment are now in readiness, awaiting the day when the railroad company will put a draft of cars on their siding to be filled. The operation will remain closed until the railroad company is ready for business.

### **Some Difficult Railroad Building.**

From Dilltown to Blacklick Station the work of building the extension to the railroad was let in two contracts, with a view of expediting the work. The upper half, or that portion of the road extending from Dilltown to Heshbon, was built by McMenamin & Sims, the Philadelphia railroad contractors. The lower half, extending from Heshbon to Blacklick Station, was built by D.H. Keenan, another Philadelphia railroad contractor. In each section almost insurmountable obstacles were overcome by the methods of railroad construction employed to-day. There are several fine specimens of stone and bridge work along the line. Immediately after leaving Dilltown there is a fine steel bridge spanning the creek. At Buena Vista there is another fine specimen of stone and bridge work where the creek is again crossed. Each of these bridges has fine stone piers and presents a handsome appearance. Near this same point there is a cut through the mountains which represents one of the most difficult pieces of work on the entire road. The cut is long and in some places is about ninety feet in depth. Its sides show where the almost solid wall of rock was broken away to make a passage for the iron horse. The route of the extension is historic and its scenic aspect is as grand and beautiful as painted Sierras. In many places the mountains and valleys are clothed with the same garb they wore a hundred years ago, and the wildness of the scene is impressive.

### **The Valley's Fertile Part.**

The valley begins to widen out after leaving Buffington, and from that point until Blacklick Station is reached it takes on a different aspect from that about Vintondale and Wehrum. At Blacklick Station a broad expanse of fertile farm land is spread out to the traveler. Fine farms begin to appear, and the soil presents the appearance of richness and high cultivation. The glistening waters of the Blacklick, which is now more of a river than a creek, skirt in and out around the mountains and, with the railroad traversing their banks and cutting through the great hills, a scene is presented which is altogether beautiful and romantic.

Passing on from Dilltown for a distance of three and one-half miles, our next stop will be made at Buena Vista. And this Buena Vista, like its namesake in Mexico, although it can hardly be called a village, is a place to be admired for its surroundings, and when traffic over the railroad is begun Buena Vista will not be forgotten and left to blush unseen.

## **Claghorn and Heshbon.**

Just three miles below Buena Vista we come to another of those towns that are the pride of the Lackawanna Company, Claghorn, which takes its name from that big-hearted gentleman, Supt. Claghorn, into whose keeping the development of the valley and its prosperity and happiness has been committed. To form a true picture of Claghorn one must see Wehrum-its well-laid-out streets, its big operations, its big washer and crusher, and the many other evidences of prosperity. The topography of the country will make Claghorn the most beautiful town on the Blacklick. The town is well situated and it is plainly evident that the company is doing everything in its power to advance Claghorn. It is located on the opposite side of the creek from the railroad and two bridges have been built across to the town-the one is intended for the railroad and the other for wagons and pedestrians. The town has an immense coal washer and crusher, mines equipped with the very latest machinery, and, in fact, everything that goes into the make-up of a model town. Its streets are wide, and along them good buildings are being erected. There seems to be little room for disputing the assertion that Claghorn will be the best and prettiest town in the Blacklick Valley.

There is at present some talk of extending the narrow-gauge road down from Wehrum, but no definite decision has yet been reached in the matter. It is believed that such an extension of that road is unlikely to be made.

One-half mile below Claghorn is located the pretty old farming village of Heshbon, such a village as one would expect to find in the heart of a scattered farming community. Some distance before entering the village there is an iron bridge, with two stone piers in the creek, near the old millrace.

After Heshbon is passed three and one-half miles we cross the fine stone-arched culvert at Evans' Run, which will be another station along the line.

The next run of three and one-half miles brings us into Blacklick Station at the end of the new extension to the railroad. There is a large iron bridge across the creek just before Blacklick Station is reached. At present the village has about 200 inhabitants, but in its horizon there appears every sign to warrant the belief that it is soon to be a place of considerable importance. In support of this prediction, it may be well to take into consideration its railroad facilities. Blacklick Station will be the western terminal of the recently extended branch of the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad. The Ebensburg & Blacklick Railroad will enter that town, and the Indiana Branch also runs into its station. It will not only be in the heart of the greatest coal field in Western Pennsylvania, but it will have the advantage of three lines of railroad entering its limits from three different directions.

## **B. R. & P. – P. R. R. Compromise.**

It was originally the intention of the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad to extend its line to Wehrum, but a compromise was effected with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company by which the former company is to have track rights to Vintondale. This will enable the Lackawanna Coal Company to transport its coal over the Pennsylvania Company's tracks to Blacklick Station, and

from there it will be transported directly to the Buffalo plant of the Lackawanna Steel Company, its final destination.

There has been a great transformation in this section of the country, especially in the way of improvements of an industrial character, and before long the valley will be one of the most prosperous communities in the country. Schools and churches have sprung up, all showing that the people have the cause of education and religion at heart-and this indicates the character of the people who are building up the valley. The day is not far distant when the Blacklick Valley and its industries will cut no inconsiderable figure in the business world.

The iron has been laid on the new extension and the tracks connected for several weeks. The work of levelling is now being pushed as rapidly as possible. Up until a few weeks ago this work was being done from the Vintondale end of the line, but since then the construction train, carrying cinder, which is used in levelling the road, has been making its headquarters at Blacklick Station. The road will be ready for operation early in April.

The Ebensburg & Cresson Branch, as now completed, used in connection with that part of the Indiana Branch between Blairsville and Blacklick Station, gives the West Penn Railroad a through line over the mountains from Allegheny City to Cresson. From Cresson the roadbed of the New Portage has been utilized for a new road down the eastern slope of the mountains by way of Hollidaysburg to Petersburg, in Huntingdon County. It is said that eventually the road will be extended through the length of the State, and this will give the Pennsylvania another trunk line. Later on, in order to avoid using the Indiana Branch, a cut-off will be constructed from Social Hall, on the West Penn, to Blacklick Station, thus materially reducing the distance and making the new line independent of the Indiana Branch.