

## CHAPTER 1

### *Of Bellies and Hearts*

When I arrived at graduate school, my advisor presented me with the gift of a book called *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) by C. Wright Mills. The primary task and promise of social science, Mills argued, was to explore the intersection of individual biography, history, and society (6) in such a way as to distinguish between personal “troubles” and social “issues” while simultaneously recognizing the connection between the two (8). When I read Mills’s work, I had just begun to reinterpret my own experiences of marginality in light of a broader social and historical context. I had previously felt embarrassed by the ridicule my Appalachian accent often inspired, ashamed about my ancestors’ involvement in the Hatfield-McCoy feud, and uneasy about TV shows like “The Beverly Hillbillies” and movies like *Deliverance*. But books like Helen Lewis et al.’s (1978) *Colonialism in America: The Appalachian Case*, Henry Shapiro’s (1978) *Appalachia on Our Mind*, and David Whisnant’s (1983) *All That Is Native and Fine* helped me to see how mainstream America’s stigmatization of Appalachia and its people might be linked to a history of economic exploitation and political domination of the mountain region as well as the nation’s own fledgling efforts to forge a coherent cultural identity and consolidate its capitalist economy (see also Batteau 1990; Foster 1988). All of these books have influenced my work but Mills, in particular, has inspired chapters 1 through 3, which interweave the “history” of Harlan County with the stories of the Norton family and their friends, neighbors, and in-laws.

I have placed the word *history* in quotation marks to remind the reader that history, in this case, is nothing more than the representation of past experience and, as such, it is an important exercise in meaning-making that informs collective and personal identity. This particular history is based upon eighteen months of participant-observation and archival and oral history research in

two Harlan County coal-mining communities. In addition to hundreds of conversations and observations documented in my field notes over the period, thirty-seven locally collected oral histories provided the database for this project. These were supplemented and cross-checked with information available from the local newspaper, census data, the Harlan Public Library's genealogical collection (see especially Burns 1870), and histories and memoirs written by people who lived and worked in the area, including William D. Forester, Jim Garland, G. C. "Red" Jones, and George Titler.

In constructing the narrative shape and emphases of this particular history, I have tried to follow the leads of the Harlan Countians whom I knew and interviewed for this project. However, I have also interspersed my own observations and reflections, as well as a few preliminary analyses in these introductory chapters. This writing strategy, I think, more accurately reflects the dialectical nature of the ethnographic enterprise than would completely segregating "ethnography" from "analysis." In the interests of clarity, however, I have concentrated much of the analysis in the second half of the book, chapters 4 through 7. Let us now turn to the Norton family.



My primary daily connection to the Norton family was not through its patriarch, retired coal miner Ernie Norton, but through his adult daughter Cindy Norton Carson. Cindy and I met about three months after I moved to Harlan in 1985. We were introduced by one of her husband's friends, who had kindly invited me to go "four-wheeling" and picnicking with them in the mountains. She and I became close friends almost immediately. She was only five years my senior and could have been the sister I never had. We talked and laughed. We went "driving around town," shopping, and bowling. Sometimes we stayed up late watching videos and eating nacho cheese Doritos. After about six months, I moved to the community where Cindy had grown up and began regularly attending her family's church. That spring, we worked together on the Harlan Miners' Memorial Project, which is described in some detail in chapter 7. But if Cindy was like a sister to me, she was definitely an *older* sister, or perhaps an aunt. She was solicitous toward me, often pointing out what an easy life I had and how naive I could be. Maybe she "mothered" me because she was so used to taking care of her daughter, Julie. More likely, however, she

guided and protected me because I was an outsider, dependent upon her for knowledge, interviews, and social contacts.

Her parents played a similar role in my life. Her father, whom I had interviewed on a preliminary research trip to Harlan in the summer of 1984, helped me find an apartment in Ages when, after six months, I decided that my original residence did not provide the optimal base for the type of participant-observation research I wanted to do. Cindy's mother offered me home-cooked meals after church every Sunday. She was a good cook; I gained twelve pounds in the year I lived in Ages! In retrospect, I think my status as a single woman, with no children, contributed to my subordinate, dependent position. It seemed that the Nortons did not regard an individual, particularly a woman, as a full adult until they married. Even though I was 25 years old, living independently, engaged to be married, and gainfully employed, they thought I needed the guidance and protection of parents. Although I sometimes found their protective attitude toward me amusing and ironic, I did not consciously resent their solicitous attitude. After all, I really did need them to help me: to share information, tell me about their lives, introduce me to people, and give me directions when I got lost in the unfamiliar terrain of Harlan County.

The Nortons seemed to know a lot about Harlan County: the best routes to take to any destination, who the "movers and shakers" were, where to find the best food, which high school team would win on Friday night, which churches handled snakes, who was sleeping with whom, who was "no account" (lazy, dishonest, drank too much, took drugs, beat their wives and kids), and whom to consult on almost any topic. But they were sorely lacking in knowledge of their family's history beyond the grandparental generation. I encountered the same shortcoming among community college students when I asked them to complete a family genealogical chart and compile and analyze their family histories. Few could record more than two or three generations without consulting parents, grandparents, and family Bibles. While most people knew their first cousins quite well, all others were lumped together into an undifferentiated, nebulous category of "second cousins" or "some kin to me."

This should not have surprised me since I myself could not name each of my great-great-grandparents, much less remember where and when they were born. I also have the same mental block about cousins that plagued my students. I do my best to be specific,

however. Midge is my maternal grandmother's first cousin, I say. Or L. R. is my dad's first cousin. Nevertheless, I unreasonably expected more from my eastern Kentucky neighbors than I had from myself. Perhaps my misconceptions sprang from my highly selective reading of Appalachian ethnographies attesting to the social and personal salience of kinship. Perhaps I thought that the subjects of these ethnographies just reeled off lengthy family histories and complex kinship connections from the tops of their heads. Maybe I thought that this kinship data had leaped on to these authors' pages, fully assembled and articulated. My experiences in Harlan County disabused me of any such romantic notions. Yet even though compiling the Norton family history took more detective work than I had originally imagined, it was well worth the effort.



Ernie Norton's mother's paternal great-great-grandparents, Samuel and Rebecca (Niles) Brown, came to Harlan County around 1807, arriving with other Euroamerican settlers who settled the region in the post-Revolutionary War era. In this initial settling period, Harlan's communities remained small and relatively isolated. Travel in the rugged terrain was difficult and time consuming. Mule drivers brought supplies to local merchants from Hagen, Virginia, along the treacherous trail on Stone Mountain where Cindy and I first met "four-wheeling" and picnicking. But many of life's necessities were produced locally by subsistence farm families.

The county's first Euroamerican settler, Samuel Howard, arrived in Harlan County in 1795, five to fifteen years before the Browns did. All of the founding families—the Howards, Skidmores, Turners, Lewises, Smiths, Jones, Farmers, and Britains—had arrived in 1819, when the state legislature created the county from portions of Floyd and Knox counties. They named it Harlan, after Major Silas Harlan who died in the Battle of Blue Licks, one of Kentucky's Revolutionary War battles. Harlan was one of several Kentucky counties carved out of larger administrative territories during the nineteenth century. Mountainous terrain and lack of transportation networks account, in part, for the proliferation of Kentucky counties in this era. But other factors played a role as well. Most important among these were the political ambitions of early settler families. These "first families" sought to consolidate their political

power by creating new counties to command from administrative town centers that they already dominated (Ireland 1977, 140–50).

Until the 1910s, Harlan County's communities were composed of expanded kin networks, with households connected to another by blood and marriage ties. Many communities were named after the families that originally settled, organized, and dominated them: Smith, Cawood, Rosspoint, Jones' Creek, Hensley Settlement, and Holmes' Mill, where Cindy's ancestors lived, serve as a few examples of such kin-based, agricultural communities. Communities like these were relatively small, consisting of only a few hundred residents (*Census of Population* 1830). The population of Harlan County's six hundred square miles did not exceed 6,200 throughout the entire century, about ten people per square mile (table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1  
Population of Harlan County  
1820–1990

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>
1820	1,961
1830	2,929
1840	3,015
1850	4,268
1860	5,494
1870	4,415
1880	5,278
1890	6,197
1900	9,838
1910	10,566
1920	31,546
1930	64,557
1940	75,275
1950	71,751
1960	51,107
1970	37,370
1980	41,889
1990	36,574

Source: Census of Population, Harlan County 1830–1990.

Among these residents were members of the Brown family, a family that had done well for itself in those early agricultural days. By 1830, members of the Brown family were represented in 5 of the 308 Harlan County households engaged in full-time farming (*Census of Agriculture* 1830). Rebecca Brown had died in 1820, after having born Samuel five children. Together they had amassed over four hundred acres of land. Much of it was uncleared mountainside. The Brown family tended the flattest sections in cornfields and vegetable gardens and kept livestock in the hills. They planted corn as far up the slopes as they could. Several local jokes persist to attest to the difficulty of such hillside farming. Mountain farmers are said to have one leg longer than the other from plowing their fields. Or did you hear the one about the farmer falling out of his cornfield and breaking his collarbone?

All but one of the Brown children had married by 1832, when Samuel Brown deeded a plot of land to his eldest son as a wedding gift. He did the same for his second daughter. Two other daughters had married men from other nearby communities and had moved off the old place. And the "baby" of the family, George, stayed in his father's home even after he married in 1832. When Samuel Brown died, he left the original house and 120 acres of the best farm land surrounding it to George. George and his wife, Elizabeth, had seven children, three of whom survived to adulthood. Of them, only the eldest son, William, remained in the community to farm the land. The ultimate destination of the other two children is unclear. Both had initially headed for neighboring Letcher County. The family has not since kept up with these two branches of Browns.

William and his wife, Mary, had six children. This time the land went to their youngest child, Clarence, who married Cora in 1909, two years after his mother's death. The remaining descendants moved off the farm. Two became tenant farmers in the Holmes' Mill community.<sup>1</sup> One became a logger in Knott County. The fate of the other child is not known, but he seems to have left the state of Kentucky altogether. This pattern of geographic mobility does not appear to be unusual for either the region or the period (see Corbin 1981; Egerton 1983; Shifflett 1991), as Appalachian farmers sought better plots of land or were displaced from their land by debt, estate conflicts, inadequate farm land, unclear title, failure to pay taxes, lawsuits (see especially Waller 1988), and

pressure from land speculators and railroad, timber, and coal companies. As one Harlan County out-migrant recalled, "I was ready to leave Harlan County. We had lost our land, didn't get a dime for it. I couldn't see nothing to hold me in Harlan County. The way it all turned out, I never was sorry I left" (Egerton 1983, 86).

Ernie Norton remembered quite clearly the generation of his family that included his grandparents, Clarence and Cora Brown. He had spent a lot of time with these folks during his childhood. Growing up in the coal community of Ages, Kentucky, he had visited his Grandmother Cora almost every day when his mother was busy with chores and wanted keep him "out from under foot." When his parents temporarily separated in 1932, Ernie and his mother moved in with Clarence and Cora Brown. They were like "second parents" to Ernie, he recalled.

It was Clarence and Cora Brown, Ernie's fondly remembered grandparents, who made the transition from agriculture to coal mining. It was an important shift for this line of the Brown family. As Ernie recalled, his grandfather regretted this turn of events, although not bitterly. For many years, he struggled to make a decent living for his family. He always "came up short." He could not see how his increasingly infertile land could support his six children, so, finally, in 1924, he agreed to sell the land to a distant cousin, a Holmes' Mill storekeeper and part-time farmer. Even after he became a coal miner and moved his family into a coal camp, Clarence continued to tend a vegetable garden on the old Brown home place. His cousin, who was not farming the land, did not object. He was earning a healthy income from his store and the sale of timber and mineral rights. Financially more prosperous and independent than Clarence, this particular cousin proved to be an important source of support and refuge during the 1930s, when labor-management violence and economic decline threatened Clarence's family.

The Brown family's move, from farming to coal mining, was part of a local and regional trend during this period. From 1910 to 1930, the number of farms in Harlan County decreased from nearly 16,000 to 786 (Banks 1983-84, 90). By 1985, there were no full-time farms there. Farming provided only 0.06 percent of the personal earnings for Harlan residents compared to the 31.4 percent of the residents' personal earnings provided by coal mining (Bureau of Economic Analysis [BEA] 1991). By then, coal mining

had replaced agriculture as the mainstay of the local economy, providing the productive base for a host of related enterprises, from retail to construction to service industries. Accompanying this decline of agriculture was a general shift in the pattern of land ownership from county- to absentee-controlled, a pattern that was common throughout the mountain region (see Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force 1980).

A number of factors combined to push the Browns out of agriculture in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The steep terrain made farming difficult anyway; but by then erosion and decreasing soil fertility had decreased their yields. The situation deteriorated throughout the late nineteenth century, as the population increased and land was subdivided for each succeeding generation (see table 1.1). With so much pressure on the land, farmers could not leave fields fallow long enough to recover their fertility. By the end of the nineteenth century, the subsistence agriculture economy was in crisis (see also Arcury 1990; Kephart 1913, 35; Pudup 1990a; Waller 1988, 35–40).

Things were not always so bleak for Harlan County farmers, even though they worked in some of the highest, steepest mountains that Central Appalachia had to offer. In the early years, farmers sold livestock in lowland Southern markets to meet the demands of plantations engaged in commodity production. Mountain farmers, like others in Kentucky, were hampered by the state's unwillingness to invest in the construction of roads, canals, and railroads. Harlan County farmers, lacking a navigable waterway and failing to generate enough capital locally to fund transportation developments, eventually lost in a market competition with lowland producers, especially those in the Midwest (Pudup 1988, 23, 98–101). Although mountain agricultural communities were by no means identical in their adaptations or links to commodity markets (Arcury 1990; Blee and Billings 1992; Weingartner, Billings, and Blee 1989; Dunn 1988; Pudup 1990a), by the late nineteenth century, Harlan County had settled into a subsistence pattern that was to last well into the twentieth century (Eller 1979, 92; Pudup 1986 115–17).

In Harlan's 1860 census, for example, 32 men out of a total population of 5,371 claimed to be professionals. Among them were six merchants, four lawyers, two political officials (a sheriff and a jailor), one doctor, one teacher, ten clergymen, three blacksmiths, one wagonmaker, one millwright, one mechanic, one hat-



ter, and one basketmaker (Census of Population 1860). These professionals comprised only 3.8 percent of the male population; all of them farmed part-time. The situation had not changed significantly by 1880, when there were five merchants, one lawyer, three political officials (two court clerks and a jailor), one doctor, one miller, and one blacksmith (Census of Population 1880).

This relatively undiversified economy and undifferentiated occupational structure does not indicate that there was no social stratification in the area, however. Some Harlan families ultimately lost their land and either moved away from the county or were forced into tenancy or wage work (see also Dunaway 1993; Pudup 1988). At the other end of the social spectrum, however, there were merchants, lawyers, doctors, and politicians whose social status and wealth secured for them positions of dominance in local politics and society. Many of these people sought education outside the mountain region, where they formed business and political alliances through marriage and friendship. Starting small-scale businesses in timber harvesting and investing in real estate, commerce, and sawmills, this elite played a pivotal role in the industrialization of Harlan County (Pudup 1986, 216–17; 1989; 1991). When capitalist developers and speculators called, the elite was more than ready to answer.



Because of its isolation and inaccessibility, Harlan County's elite had to wait a long time, even by Appalachian standards, to reap the benefits of capitalist expansion. The process was begun in 1905, when the Kentennia Corporation, representatives of northeastern business interests, began acquiring land, timber, and mineral rights in Harlan County. Stockholders in the company included Franklin Delano Roosevelt's uncle Warren Delano. Franklin Roosevelt himself journeyed on horseback to Harlan County to assist in surveying. He wrote to his bride, Eleanor, of the harsh terrain, beautiful forests, and bountiful farms he visited in Harlan County (Caudill 1983, 88–89). Six local businessmen obtained seats on Kentennia's board in return for their investments and assistance in facilitating the company's operations. They were Marion Smith, Daniel Skidmore Farmer, William Watkins Noe, Arthur Blankenship Cornett, W. W. Lewis, and William T. Rice, all featured prominently in advertisements the company placed in the

local paper (*Harlan Daily Enterprise* [HDE] Supplement, 4 October 1908).

The tasks of surveying land and clearing property titles in Harlan County was complicated by competing claims, unclear boundaries, and inadequate record keeping. This worked to the advantage of land speculators. Unlike most local farmers, land companies could afford to hire surveyors and lawyers to document and research property titles. In many cases, they acquired a "cash poor" farmer's property in return for paying the "back taxes" he owed. Some farmers were in Clarence Brown's position, however: they saw no alternative to selling the farms that could no longer support their families. Others, like Clarence's cousin, chose to sell off their mineral and timber rights while retaining possession of the surface area.<sup>2</sup> Still others sold their land with the hopes of using the proceeds to purchase more-productive land elsewhere (Egerton 1983).

In addition to surveying and clearing land titles, early land speculators promoted the construction of railroads in the county. Unfortunately for Harlan County speculators, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) bypassed Harlan in order to construct a link to serve Middlesboro, an elaborate town constructed by the British firm American Association, Ltd. (see Caudill 1983; Gaventa 1980). In 1912, an impatient Dr. Thomas Jefferson Asher of Bell County, eager to take advantage of wartime coal demand, built his own twelve-mile railroad spur into Harlan County. The L&N followed his lead shortly thereafter.

Accompanying the new railroad were Ernie Norton's paternal grandparents, Henry and Mary Norton of Clark County, Kentucky (see figure 1.1). The Nortons were tenant farmers whose failed efforts to secure a stable livelihood farming had sent them to seek their fortunes as wageworkers. Henry's brother, an employee of the L&N railroad, had told them that Harlan County looked to be a promising place to start over. He was simply echoing the forecasts of other observers, for the mood of the times was optimistic. As one journalist forecasted, "One can scarcely predict the possibilities of Harlan—a primeval country, rich beyond belief" (HDE Supplement, 31 October 1906, 9–10).

Others joined them in the move to Harlan County. Some, like the Nortons, were farmers "down on their luck." Others had been encouraged, by state and corporate advertising campaigns designed to supplement the low supply of local labor. The stream of

FIGURE 1.1  
Norton Family Genealogical Chart

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	Samuel Brown = Rebecca Niles		
	1782-1835		1788-1820
	George Brown = Elizabeth Gilbert		
	1812-79		1820-99
	William Brown = Mary Skinner		
	1833-1901		1849-1907
Henry Norton = Mary Boone	Clarence Brown = Cora Jones		
1883-1958	1888-1943		1896-1951
1892-1963			
Will Norton	Jess Norton = Janie Mae Brown		
1906-87	1908-69		1914-89
Ginny Henderson = Ernest Norton	Daniel Norton	Edith Norton	
1934-	1930-	1933-	1935-
Ernest Norton, Jr.	Cindy Norton = Bobby Carson		
1958-	1955-		1953-
	Julie Norton		
	1977-		

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in-migrants included recently released convicts, Black tenant farmers and miners (mostly from Alabama), and European immigrants (primarily from Italy, Russia, and eastern European countries). Together, they accounted for the largest population increase in local history. Harlan County's 1910 population of roughly 10,000 tripled in just 10 years. By 1930, the population reached its peak of over 64,000 people (see table 1.1).

Much of the new population was involved, directly or indirectly, in coal mining. Coal production expanded from 17,860 tons, in 1911, to 14.5 million tons, in 1928 (Hevener 1978, 3); and the number of local coal mine employees went from zero, in 1910, to 11,920 in 1930 (Banks 1983-84, 91). The new residents brought an increased demand for public services, housing, and consumer goods, which local government and communities were ill-equipped to serve. Much of the burden fell to the coal companies themselves, ninety-two of whom constructed housing for their employees. In fact, they built entire towns almost overnight (HDE

Supplement, 28 February 1982, 2). These towns had many similar features but were not identical. They varied in the number, size, and quality of the homes as well as the types and range of services and amenities they offered. The small companies, most of whom sold coal on the "spot market" for heating purposes, built simple settlements with few amenities. However, large energy corporations and steel companies that produced coal for their own coking operations ("captive mines") had the capital to invest in more-elaborate accommodations to serve a larger pool of employee residents. U.S. Steel, Bethlehem Steel, and the Ford Motor Company, for example, built the larger company towns, complete with infirmaries, stores, opera houses, ball fields, clubhouses, and hotels (see figures 1.2 and 1.3).

Company towns, such as these, were built primarily to house the influx of workers into the county during the 1910s and 1920s. But newcomers were not the only ones to flock to company towns.



FIGURE 1.2

Site of company store building in Lynch, Kentucky, before construction commenced in 1917. Photograph from the Billups Collection at the University of Kentucky Photo Archives.



FIGURE 1.3

Lynch, Kentucky, after construction was completed, circa 1918. Photograph from the Billups Collection at the University of Kentucky Photo Archives.

Natives who had sold or were forced off marginal farmsteads also took up residence in company towns. These towns differed from the kin-based, agricultural communities that they had originally settled. For one thing, the residents in coal towns were a more diverse population than the original settlers. In 1910, for instance, Harlan County had only 9 residents of “mixed or foreign parentage” and no non-native whites. By 1930, however, there were 1,374 residents of “mixed or foreign parentage” and 822 foreign-born whites (Census of Population 1910, 1930). The proportion of African Americans had risen as well, from 5.3 percent in 1910 to 8.9 percent in 1930 (calculated from Census of Population 1910 and 1930). Race and ethnicity formed the basis for a pattern of residential segregation that continues today in Harlan County, where a dwindling African American population remains largely clustered around the towns of Benham and Lynch, where their ancestors were originally housed and employed. Segregation was common *within* the towns as well. “There were four distinct sec-

tions of the town, each determined by either race or job status in the mines," recalled a Benham resident. "These included 'Smokey Row' where the blacks lived, 'New Benham' where the common laborers lived and eastern European ethnics lived including one street named for the Hungarians called 'Hunky Street.' Another section ranging from about Poplar Street to Hemlock Street was called 'Middle Benham' where non-ethnics and middle-income families lived. 'Silk Stocking Row' was where the coal officials, foremen, superintendents, etc., lived" (HDE Supplement, 31 October 1986, 14; see also Herrin 1985; Shifflett 1991; Trotter 1990). Racial segregation and hostility, it seems, were only partly mitigated by the shared work experiences, political and economic interests, and unionization struggles of Harlan's miners.

In addition to cultural diversity, the industrialization of Harlan County introduced new cleavages between local farmers and workers, on the one hand, and the local elite, on the other. Professionals and politicians, who formerly owed their economic and political success to their "farmer cousins," switched their allegiance to the more powerful coal operators (Forester 1986, 147-91; Garland 1983, 129-30, 173, 189; Hevener 1978, 106-23; Jones 1985, 130-39; Titler n.d., 48-91). Construction of coal camps and investments in Harlan's communities further differentiated Harlan's towns. The county was no longer a network of relatively equal and autonomous farming communities administered from the county seat of Harlan. By the late 1920s, Harlan, Cumberland, and Benham-Lynch had emerged as major commercial and political centers while other communities either remained the underdeveloped, dependent camps of immigrants and workers, or were abandoned altogether (Census of Population 1920 and 1930). The Browns' former community of Holmes' Mill, for example, was one of the many settlements that languished.



The Brown family moved from Holmes' Mill to Brookside, a modest coal camp, in 1924. They did not think highly of coal camp life in these first years, and their reaction was not unique. Among the chief complaints registered against such towns was that the company owned everything in them and, therefore, had too much control over the miners and their families. If a miner was fired or hurt, for instance, he lost his job and his family was evicted from

their company-owned home. In addition, a company could force its employees to shop at its store by issuing their wages in "scrip" that could be redeemed only by the company.

Of course, some found company homes to be an improvement over their farmsteads, and many preferred the conveniences and excitement of town life over their previous existence. Still, they generally also recognized that moving from rural farmsteads to coal towns involved a trade-off. The overwhelming majority of those I interviewed thought the price of company-town life was too high.<sup>3</sup> "I was pretty lucky in one way," explained one miner I interviewed. "You see, my dad moved into a camp there, in Black Joe and, see, that's how come I didn't move into a coal camp. . . . The company had rules, at that time, that they wanted you to take out an order from the store to buy your furniture and different stuff. If you didn't, they'd lay you off or fire you or something; but, since I didn't live in their camps, they couldn't put me out of their 'house row.' I didn't get involved with having to take out one of their big store orders. That was one way I dodged a whole lot of trouble."

About three-quarters of Harlan County's miners were not so "lucky": they ended up living in the company towns (Bethell 1983, xxii). Joe Phipps's father, for instance, was told by his employer that he would be fired if he did not move into the company boarding house.<sup>4</sup> Phipps had been staying with his uncle in order to save money to bring his wife and children from Tennessee to join him. It was quite common for miners to become ensnared in a cycle of credit and debt at the company store. When payday arrived, many found themselves "in the hole," owing the company money for groceries, furniture, and work supplies bought in the previous month. In those days, miners had to purchase their supplies for work out of their paychecks; money was also deducted for rent and the services of the company doctor.

In a company town, the coal operator served not only as the employer, the landlord, and the merchant, but also as the government and the law. Operators hired assistants to direct, administer, and maintain order in their towns. They built their own jails, armed their own guards, and, in some cases, erected fences around the perimeters of the "communities" they had constructed (see also Portelli 1990). In times of labor unrest and union activism, companies placed machine-gun and surveillance towers around their

towns and expanded their cadre of private deputies (Hevener 1978; Jones 1985; Portelli 1990; Titler n.d.). Because they also owned and operated their own post offices, churches, schools, and other public spaces, operators were able to monitor communication around their towns. Mail could be opened and read before it was delivered. Guards could eavesdrop on conversations and spy on meetings. For that reason, most union organizing rallies and meetings of the 1930s occurred outside the confines of the company town.

Company control was not restricted to company towns, by any means. Even in the ostensibly independent towns of Harlan, Cumberland, and Evarts, coal operators put local democracy to the test. By 1930, the coal industry served as the driving force behind the local economy, providing the patronage and wages that kept local businesses afloat. Local businessmen-politicians could ill afford to alienate their wealthiest patrons. Some local politicians depended even more directly upon the coal operators: They were employed by the companies as doctors and lawyers; they held seats on corporate boards of directors; they had invested capital in coal companies; and, finally, some local politicians had become coal operators themselves. Coal companies, both large and small, endorsed candidates and provided much-needed campaign funds. Some said that operators "delivered the vote" more directly, by either providing their employees with a premarked ballot ("the company slate"), bribing voters, or, as last resorts, tampering with ballots and stealing ballot boxes (Forester 1986, 146-91; Hevener 1978). "They [the Harlan County Coal Operators' Association] did buy the elections," a prominent coal operator's daughter reported. "Yes, they stole the elections. They paid for 'em. They would give two dollars and liquor for their votes. . . . but I don't feel bad about it. I really and truly don't" (Sue Bassham Cudd by James Goode, SECC-OHP, 3 March 1984).

Wielding a formidable combination of political and economic power, coal operators obviously dominated the county, but not without encountering resentment and resistance from the "common folks." "They had better houses, clean and everything," complained one Harlan miner. "The workers and operators didn't have much to do with each other and their children didn't either. . . . They [operators] were treated with respect . . . because workers were afraid not to. . . . Harlan County was controlled by the coal



operators" (Cecil Stallard by Tony Sizemore, SECC-OHP, 2 April 1982). Local oral history interviews (SECC-OHP; Portelli 1990, 140–42) as well as autobiographical and historical accounts of the period (Dreiser 1932; Forester 1986; Garland 1983; Hevener 1978; Jones 1985; Title n.d.) include massive amounts of testimony against coal operators and the company town system. In a few cases, local miner-activists generalized their complaints to include not just coal operators or company towns, but the entire capitalist system. Song lyrics like "Which Side Are You On?" and "I Hate the Capitalist System" suggest that some level of class consciousness was achieved by Harlan Countians in the 1930s, even if it was held only fleetingly by a small minority.

Even during the pitched labor-management battles of the 1930s, miners were far from unified in their condemnation of coal companies. And it would be a gross oversimplification to claim that nobody in Harlan County had a single fond memory of company-town life. Alessandro Portelli (1990, 140–55), for instance, has collected a number of oral history narratives from Harlan County, praising coal camp conditions, in particular the quality construction of houses and company efforts to keep the town clean and well maintained. Some company bosses—Robert Lawson from the Louellen camp, for example—appeared as benevolent father figures in miners' accounts (140–46). Coal companies brought Harlan residents increased access to professional medical care, which many saw as an improvement. Likewise, many, including the Browns and Nortons, credited coal companies with expanding educational opportunities in the county, which in 1880 had no full-time schoolteacher. Four generations of Browns had been minimally educated in Harlan County. They could at best sign or initial contracts and deeds, and perhaps read a few words from their Bible or primary reader. After moving to the coal camps, however, the Brown children and grandchildren went to school at least through the eighth grade; most went through high school (see also Dotson 1943).

The wider variety of retail goods, although they seduced some families into indebtedness and financial hardship, relieved some of the burdens on local women, who had previously formed the backbone of the home manufacturing economy. Ernie recalled that his grandmother especially liked "store-bought" dresses, preferring them to the homespun and flour-sack dresses she had worn as a

child. "That woman never liked to sew—not even quilts!" Ernie would later chuckle in mock disbelief. Finally, it is important to note that coal mining compared favorably to tenancy and hillside subsistence farming in the eyes of many. Farming is strenuous and, sometimes, lonely work. Every family member worked hard on marginal hillside farms, like the Browns', and still they were barely surviving. Ernie Norton's uncle Will compared mining favorably to farming, when he observed: "Mining isn't so bad. It gets you out of the weather!"

In addition, company-town residents, in particular natives who remained in familiar landscapes and retained ties to their extended kin networks and to local churches and communities, could draw upon considerable social and cultural resources as they made the transition to life in company towns. More-specific discussions and clarifications of these resources constitute the primary goal of chapter 4, although it must be clear by now that the Browns were one such family. For the present, however, let us prolong our detour from the story of the Brown-Norton family long enough to trace some of the work-related sources of power, resistance, and collective identity that all Harlan miners shared, regardless of the racial, ethnic, and cultural differences that frequently divided them.



In those first decades after the Harlan field was opened (1915–1930s), the organization of mine work, particularly labor's central role in the production process, contributed to the individual and collective strength of local miners in struggles over the contested worksite terrain (Edwards 1979). When the Harlan field was first opened in the 1910s, mine work was not highly mechanized. Workers used dynamite, augers, and picks to dislodge the coal from underground seams. Then they loaded the coal with shovels into horse- or mule-driven cars, or gondolas, which transported the mineral to the processing plant, located outside the mine, where rocks, slate, and other impurities were removed (see figure 1.4). At this time, workers utilized strength, skill, and knowledge in conducting a variety of production activities. Since work took place in areas called "rooms" that were separated by rock walls and support pillars (timbers), close management supervision was difficult, and, for the most part, miners exercised a great deal of control over the



FIGURE 1.4

Coal miner, Harry Fain, hand-loading coal in 1946. This photo was taken by Russell Lee (Photo #12 from the Russell Lee Collection [79PA103] at the University of Kentucky Photo Archives).

speed, timing, and direction of their work. In this regard, the underground mines where they worked stood in stark contrast to the company towns where many of them lived. Miners at work could, to some degree, escape the scrutiny of their employers.

In the 1910s and 1920s, many Harlan coal companies subcontracted sections of their operations to a worker who could hire his own assistants. This miner supervised and coordinated his work team, often composed of kinfolk, neighbors, and friends. This is how Ernie Norton's father, Jess, and his uncle Will got their start in mining as teenagers. At the ages of thirteen and fifteen, they were hired by the father of a schoolmate to drive mule-driven carts of coal out of the mines.<sup>5</sup> As they grew bigger, stronger, and more experienced, they moved on to more-demanding work. While this arrangement freed companies from the cost of preparing a site for production and from supervisory duties, it also increased workers' control over their time and work.

It was common for miners in this period, for example, to stop working when they had loaded enough coal to earn them their target pay. They might leave work to hunt, fish, farm, recuperate from a hard night's drinking, or start drinking again. Supervisors did not approve of such practices, as they preferred a predictable, well-disciplined workforce who would maximize production. "Their [Appalachian miners] shiftless methods of living have not accustomed them to continuous and sustained labor and very little suffices," complained one mining engineer. "In short, they resemble the negro in their desire for frequent periods of 'laying off'" (Fowler 1904, 386-87). Similar observations were made by others, who noted that "It has been his [the mountaineer's] wont to rest during the unfavorable season, or while provisions are at hand" (Schockel 1916, 130) and "Every man is accustomed to be his own master, to do his own work in his own time. . . . He has little sense of the value of time" (Semple 1961, 581). The subcontracting system, the craftsmanship of mining, and in some cases the family's continued reliance on nonwage sources of subsistence fostered a sense of independence and solidarity among Harlan's miners (Dix 1988; Yarrow 1985).

Mine operators sought to circumvent miners' control over production processes and to increase labor discipline in a number of ways during this period. Some operations, for instance, implemented "cleanup system" work organization. According to the rules of this system, employees could not stop work until all of the dislodged coal had been loaded into cars and moved out of the mine. This was to prevent miners from cutting the work shift short or leaving when they felt they had earned a fair day's pay.

Employers also attempted to control leisure activities, particularly alcohol consumption, which they saw as a deterrent to work discipline. In West Virginia, David Corbin notes, "The miner did not need any special day or excuse to drink" (1981, 35). Corbin reports the following quote from a coal company official, "I am not a prohibitionist but saloons hurt coal production. The coal states, at least, should be dry. I believe the operators are unanimous on this question" (36). Over in Harlan County, Kentucky, the situation appeared to be comparable. In fact, the most common memories of the first "boom days" of coal mining in Harlan revolved around the violence and disorder of company towns where groups of men congregated to drink, gamble, and fight (see also Hevener