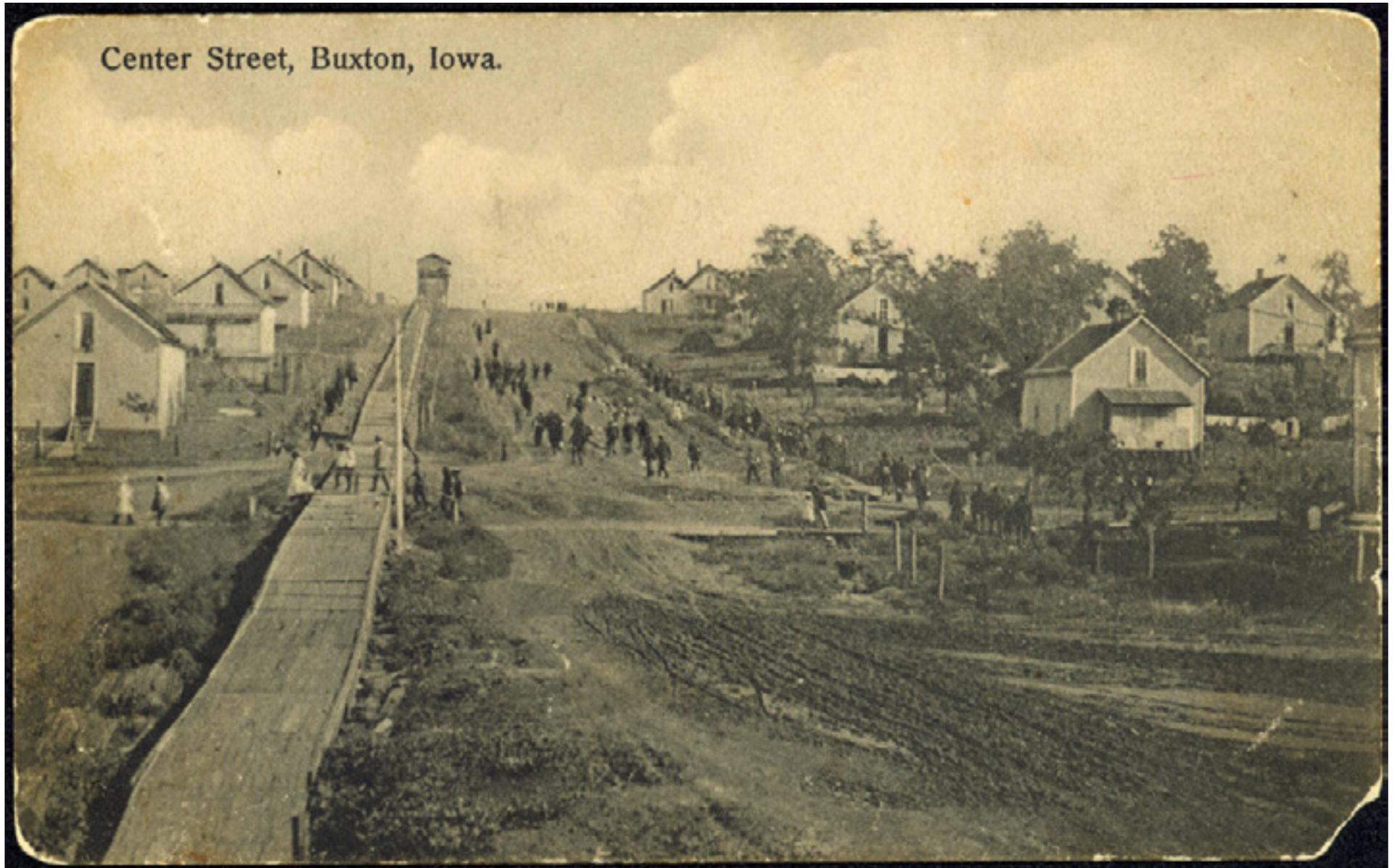


**Benjamin C. Buxton, Founder of Buxton, Iowa,
Date Unknown**



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Date Unknown

Postcard View of Center Street in Buxton, 1908



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1908

Panoramic View of Buxton, 1910



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Flanders, 1910

Postcard Showing Buxton Coal Bank in Shaft of #12 Mine, 1910



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1910

Postcard of Miner with Mule-Drawn Cart in a Shaft of Buxton's #12 Mine, 1910



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1910

Monroe Mercantile Company Opening, 1911



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911

Monroe Mercantile Company Interior, 1911

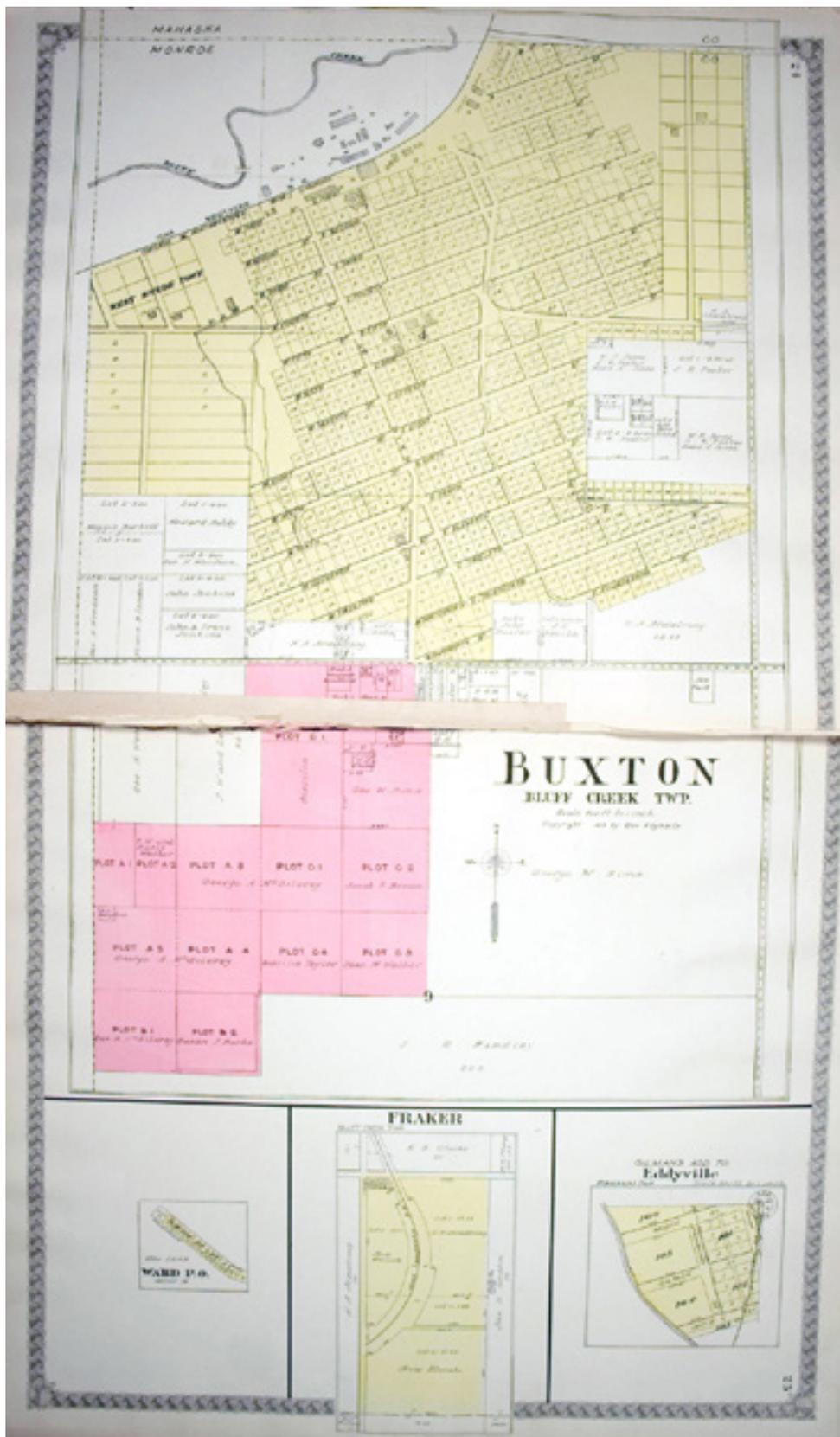


Monroe Mercantile Company Employees, 1911



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911

Map of Bluff Creek Township (Buxton), 1919



“Standard Atlas of Monroe County Iowa,” Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1919. [Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives](#)

Buxton Wonders Baseball Team, 1915



Osborn, Nancy, "Buxton Wonders Baseball Team," 1915. [Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives](#)

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 1)

May 26, 1992

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT May 13, 1992

Paul Wilson, who was born in Buxton, Iowa and grew up there before moving with his family, to Haydock, Iowa and subsequently to Des Moines, Iowa where he spent the rest of his life.

This interview was done by Francis Hawthorne, Project Director for the African American History Project, financed by the Iowa Humanities Board, and done on Thursday, May 13, 1992.

Frances Hawthorne: "What was it like growing up in childhood, in Buxton, Iowa...? what were your earliest memories of being there, as a child, not only as a child or at school, or what was it like on a general day? What did you do for passing the time?"

Paul Wilson: "It was very exciting! We had a fellow, by the name of Walter Hutchinson, who was the secretary of the Y.M.C.A., I don't know whose place he took when he came there. He told me that he wanted me to have a Boys Glee Club and he had me to go out and look for boys I could get to come and be in the glee club. I got quite a few. Two of the fellows where of that group, Charles Taylor and Nathaniel Atchinson, (he's dead now). He had a sister that lives in Waterloo, Iowa. I got all the fellows together and

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 2)

they made a lot of good music, but the most embarrassing thing that happened, was that I was the only one that couldn't sing. All I was doing was hollering and they thought I was doing good. I did this to keep them from thinking I had made a mistake."

"We came up to Des Moines, and I use to go to the summer camp, (the Crocker Branch, Y.M.C.A.). At camp we use to do singing.....what they called 'community singing'. One of the members was named Claude. He had a brother that use to sing that lived in Chicago, Illinois. "Do you remember George Dewey Watson?"

Frances Hawthorne: "I've heard of him."

Paul Wilson: "Dewey was to be singing with Horace Height, out at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, (on the north side), and had gotten into the 'spirit, but the wrong spirit' and was unable to sing, so he got Claude to sing. I was surprised to know him, but I was a friend of Claude and his brother Harold. (Harold lives in California now).

We were out to a camp and singing, and this big fellow was singing, and Harold touched me by the arm and said, 'if you will keep quiet, the rest of us won't get off key.' I knew that I didn't drink, and I couldn't understand that statement." (I don't know if the group had voted to get rid of me or what, but I

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 3)

know that I stopped singing.)"

Frances Hawthorne: "Was that the group that sang in Buxton,
Iowa?"

Paul Wilson: "No....that was the group that sang from the
Crocker Branch Y here in Des Moines. Singing with the
group maybe was a reminder or fact for me to recognize
that I couldn't sing. But nobody wanted me to sing!"

Frances Hawthorne: "One way of saying, "stop singing."

Paul Wilson: "Yeah, yeah."

Frances Hawthorne: "You were telling me that your dad, Jacob
Wilson was agent for the company."

Paul Wilson: "Yes, the Buxton Coal Company. I don't
know if that's what they called it or not, but Buxton
is the one that sent him out to get workers to come out
and work in Buxton and mine the coal, and he did. He
got a lot of people."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did he go out of state to do that?"

Paul Wilson. "Yes. I don't know where he was in the south, but
he went through the south to get workers.
On one trip he got a man to commit himself to come (and
that same night....or maybe it was the next night), the
man told him that "they were planning to do bodily harm
to him, because he was taking the cheap labor out of
the south." Dad cancelled his plans, got some women's
clothes, and that was the way he got out. He dressed
up in women's clothes and got out of the south." (don't

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 4)

know when it was, and I don't remember where, but this is what he told me.)"

"I have a brother-in-law of mine, Tommy Mitchell. I was telling him this story one day; (about dad putting on women's clothes). He said, 'your dad brought us out of the south', and I don't know where they came from."

Frances Hawthorne: "You are talking about the Tommy Mitchell's family?"

Paul Wilson: " Yes. Tommy Mitchell's family."

Frances Hawthorne: "So, your dad went down south, and a whole family would come back."

Paul Wilson: "Yes, they would put money into the bank, (now I didn't see anything, but I was told it was \$50,000 and that was a lot of money in those days) but that was to take care and for bringing a family and their belongings, on the train. I don't know if any men came out of the south and then sent personally for their families, but dad went prepared to bring them all up. It was quite a thing!"

"My nephew was asking about, 'how in the world could his grandfather have \$50,000, in the bank, in his name, to bring laborers out to work in the mines, and died without a penny in is pocket.(they talk back and forth about this in the family.... they're strong!) That's where I got that story, but dad didn't tell me anything about that \$50,000."

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 5)

Frances Hawthorne: "That would be a tremendous amount of trust, wasn't it?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes. But you see in Buxton, (and I guess that's why I am so hippped up about it) 'if your word isn't any good, then forget about the rest of it.' Now they did that! Dad didn't have anything, but they put that amount of money into the bank (in his name) for him to bring out the families, (and didn't know how many,) but he was to bring them up north, and that was to face the white miners. They had a union, and they already had threatened to stop work or something, so these people already had black workers then; but there weren't enough of them to make any difference. So, when they start bringing all the black families to Buxton, and the company had 200, maybe 500 or 600 acres ... they gave you about half a acre, or something like that, for you to have a garden, so you can grow your own garden. This lady, Mrs. Tate, called me, (till her dying day,) 'her boy'. She had beans, and she needed bean poles. She put me into business when she told me she needed some bean poles. I went down into a reservoir and cut down those willow trees, came back and sold them to her for bean poles. And of course she told others that I sold bean poles, so...'I was in business at an early age.'"

Frances Hawthorne: " That's great!"

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 6)

Paul Wilson: "I think that is one of the things that stuck with me, because one of my strengths' is in selling. I like selling! I was selling at a very tender age, bean poles, newspapers and magazines. I believe the magazine was at that time called, 'Liberty Magazine.' That's been a long time ago. I was always able to sell these things."

Frances Hawthorne: " Did they have a newspaper then, with reference to.....?"

Paul Wilson: "yes, there was a family there by the name of Baker, and I think they published a paper, but I don't remember if they had a paper or not. It was printed elsewhere, (just like the Bystander). I sent it to Brother Wilkinson; because I was working then with them trying to establish their history in the background; (my brother-in-law is one of the founders of the NBA.) There was a paper, that had a story in it (of a girl here,) stating that she was the first black woman pharmacist in Iowa, but she wasn't."

Frances Hawthorne: "Who was it?"

Paul Wilson: "I can't think of it now, but this article was in the paper, and she was the black pharmacist in Buxton, Iowa."

Frances Hawthorne: " So, you are saying, the lady in Buxton, Iowa was the first black pharmacist?"

Paul Wilson: "That's right!"

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 7)

Frances Hawthorne: "Yes, I've seen that, but don't ask me where, but I said, 'my goodness, it was very impressive. A woman pharmacist at that time!'"

Paul Wilson: "But the thing, well, I guess... is when I look at a lot of things happening now... we had three schools schools there, and we had black teachers in two schools, and two black principals, and here in the capitol city, you couldn't get one black in the schools at the lowest grade. You see, that didn't make sense."

Frances Hawthorne: "So, technically, they would be considered as the first 'black teachers in Iowa?'"

Paul Wilson: "I would think so, as I don't have anything to back me up on that. But when you go back then, (the high school burned down in 1907), and they had some black teachers there...."

Frances Hawthorne: "And did they replace them?"

Paul Wilson: "No. ... they didn't replace them."

Frances Hawthorne: "What happened to the students?"

Paul Wilson: " I guess they had gone to Oskaloosa or Albia, I really don't know. But then they say..... that... they had three grade schools, one high school. They had two grade schools where they had black teachers, principal and one white school. They had a lot of Swedes that came in, and they settled in a certain area. They wanted a school, but they didn't stop the blacks from entering there. One

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 8)

or two went to the school, because it was convenient where they lived."

Frances Hawthorne: "Where there many of the differences in where stores were operated and owned by blacks?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes. . .They had a drug store, 'Thomas's Drug Store', but that was owned by whites. I don't remember having but one drug store. No, in Coopertown, they had a black drug store, and I'm almost sure it was Cooper's." This was a little area they called , "Coopertown."

Frances Hawthorne: "You said, that your dad was an agent, do you remember how long he was, also that meant he was away from home a long time, is that right?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes.... that must have been...(I was pretty young and dad was sick most of the time while I was growing up), as if that was the time they were getting ready to move, as the coal mines in Muchikanock was playing out, as they had used up most of the coal. That could have been one of the reasons the union had decided to set up some requirements for the company. I knew that dad was made an agent and they put this money into the bank for him, and he went out and brought in blacks."

Frances Hawthorne: " In other words, even tho the union set up requirements, they still couldn't staff a black man in that position?"

Paul Wilson: "That 's right! Because this kind of order of

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 9)

plans, they didn't have the company over the barrel.... because if they wanted to work, they would 'have to straighten up and fly right.' They had enough blacks coming in there, and that's why you will find in many instances, there were more blacks living in Buxton than whites. Not to stir up any problems, the whites were in a very awkward position, because slavery hadn't been too far behind everybody. Then, living with the blacks 'don't start nothing, because they had nothing to lose.

Frances Hawthorne: " Did you have anyone besides the company officials who where in charge of the town, or did everybody work together so well that they weren't needed?"

Paul Wilson: "No, they didn't have anything going for them, other than, you doing what they told you to do, (then) in the mines, so everybody acted accordingly." They had 'constables' in town ...black and white. Ed Peterson, was the last constable I remember, (he was white)"

Frances Hawthorne: "Were any black constables?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes, there were black constables."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did they do much of the patrolling, and solving problems.?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes. They were also, the 'justice of the peace.' I don't remember if they had black 'justices of the peace' or not."

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 10)

Frances Hawthorne: "Was that before the days we had radios,
or did you have things like that then?"

Paul Wilson: "No. I don't remember having those things either.
But when I came here from Haydock, having one of those
little.....(can't remember what they called it) but
wait a minute.... they did haveEdward Peru had
a small portable radio, that was operated by batteries.
We didn't have any at the time, but... back then in
1925 we had a little thing called....."

Frances Hawthorne: "Was it like a gramophone?"

Paul Wilson: "No, it was like a 'crystal phone set'.

Frances Hawthorne: "Now-a-days, Iowa is known for its tornado's.
Did you have anything like that then, and what did do?"

Paul Wilson: " Lord yes! We tried to stay in the house. They
tell the tale of, 'the cooking stove being in the sky'
and I didn't see anything like that. However, they
tell me of (and I don't remember it, because I was
pretty young) of this cooking stove!"

Frances Hawthorne: "Going back to Buxton, and I know you are
quite proud of your dad, being an agent....what other
things in Buxton you can say you were really proud of
and looking back, you were glad they happened and etc."

Paul Wilson: "Well, what I see today, I was proud of everything
that we had in Buxton.
I couldn't believe it, my brother Joe, worked very hard
trying to get black teachers down there. He talked to

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 11)

a fellow, (who was white) who he worked with and went to the show with. They came here in Des Moines, and decided they were going to go to the show, and was shown a sign telling you where you set at in the theater. Now, that didn't make any sense....no kind of sense at all!"

Frances Hawthorne: "I remember you saying, 'if you got the people from Buxton, they would fill up a theater and there wouldn't be any place for the white folk to sit.'"

Paul Wilson: "In Buxton, there two ladies, they called them the 'Landlord Sisters' (both French).... and they ran the theater...and had everything on the second floor of the Y.M.C.A. When you go in there, whites and everybody else went in there, and didn't interfere with you. It would have been a nice thing if they had brought the KKK into Buxton."

Frances Hawthorne: " Why do you say that?"

Paul Wilson: "They wouldn't be around today. Never! Never!"

Frances Hawthorne: " What ...would you have done to change them or gotten rid of them, or what?"

Paul Wilson: "Well....."

Frances Hawthorne: "When you were living in Buxton, around the year 1900 and 1923... there were riots happening in other parts of the United States, was there any special reactions with people in Buxton?"

Paul Wilson: "Not unless they came to Buxton. We didn't have any

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 12)

time to get out of line in Buxton. Those people were so appreciative of the fact that they were permitted to live a normal life....."

Frances Hawthorne: "What kind of hours did the people work then, any set hours?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes, I don't remember. They had a train (because the mines wasn't in Buxton.... in another area) that picked up the miners at certain times, dropped them off and brought them back. I don't remember what the hours were. They were regular...(like you go down and work so many hours and ...you could that if you wanted too) but you wouldn't have any transportation until that given time, because it was too far to walk."

Frances Hawthorne: "So no matter how long you worked, they kept track of the amount of coal you had mined?"

Paul Wilson: " Oh yes! They always taken an empty mine car to the entrance rooms where you mined the coal. If you wanted to sleep all day,.. you could sleep all day, but then... you did not get any money. It wasn't like giving you so much money if you were there. You made the money yourself, depending upon the amount of coal you had dug. Some of the fellows would go in and use the dynamite, put it in the wall, and that would blow the coal and slate out too. The company was paying you for the coal, not the slate."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did they wear a mask or anything?"

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 13)

Paul Wilson: "No. I never heard of any of them wearing masks.

It was dusty, but you were not in the mines when they set off the dynamite (that was usually done at night). They were called the 'night firemen', or the like, and they would go in and blow out the coal, and the next day when you went in, that's when you would do the mining. You wouldn't have too much dust to contend with, then you would start digging into the wall with a pick."

Frances Hawthorne: "I recall you saying, your mother didn't want you to work in the mines. Did you work in the mines some, or did you just happen to hear your father talk or someone else talk about what went on?"

Paul Wilson: "That's right. All the miners and others, would come in and tell you about what had happened. Back in the days when I was living in Buxton, we didn't have family conferences like we today. We had 'family directions.' You were told early enough; (in your childhood, for you to understand), 'you were to be seen, and not heard.' Don't you break into an adult conversation, because you didn't have to be in line with 'Fallworth' to get hurt, they hurt you right there. They didn't always look for a room that they could take you. (to do whatever they had to do), so whenever you made a mistake, they would back it up! Yes, they would tell you, 'be seen and not heard.'"

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Frances Hawthorne: " Where there any there any accidents, and if so, how often were they?"

Paul Wilson: "Oh yes. The accidents were mainly where slate had fell upon the workers. Then, they had the mule drivers sometimes they would fall off and cut their ankles. They tell me that the mule drivers had nothing to help them but their hands. He had 'one hand on the rump of the mule, and the other hand on the coal car.' If the railment went bad, then you were in bad shape. In 1925 or 1926, I had a book called, 'Colossal' but mother with her education, (which was very limited) she brought it to the table one night. As I recall, it cost \$25.00 or \$35.00, (which was a lot of money in those days)."

Frances Hawthorne: " Do you remember a book written by your brother-in-law, Attorney S. Joe Brown? I've reference to it once or twice, not knowing if it's a book or a booklet you'd call now, and I thought it said it was written around 1900 or shortly after. It was mentioned that he had written about 'Blacks in Des Moines."

Paul Wilson: "I do have a book here that has (my sister) Sue in it, and the history about her, but that book doesn't have anything about S. Joe. That could possibly be it."

Frances Hawthorne: "It is amazing of how the photographer worked and what they had to use of the old pictures for them to come out as well as pictures today.. ..detailed and

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all. On this picture, (Hotel Buxton, where they are standing) is it owned by whites or black?"

Paul Wilson: " Blacks! If I recall, that was the hotel that James had, I'm not sure."

Frances Hawthorne: " I notice a fellow on horseback, was that the way they were traveling, or just coming from somewhere on horseback, or is he a 'constable you think?"

Paul Wilson: "No. They had horses, as that was their only mode transportation, basically. There were some that had cars, but not many."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did they have buggies or wagons, then?"

Paul Wilson: "They had white fellow they called "George Ross", and he would go to Hamilton and get the mail. If some one had come in on the train, he would bring them over to Buxton. 'George Washington's Hack', that's what they would call it."

"They talk about throwing things away, but this is a picture of Gertrude North! She was Brandon Hyde's sister."

"Here is something! They didn't have electricity in the home, but they had electricity.. at such places as the store, Y.M.C.A..

We had a lunchcar. I was the last to operate the lunchcar (I wasn't but about 13 year old) but I had a good rapport with the students, and I would open up the lunchcar in the backyard, and sell hot dogs to the

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 (pg. 16)

students. This niece of mine, (from Chicago), would come down and look, and I would put one hot dog on a bun, and she would say, 'you know this isn't right, the hot dog doesn't fit'... and she would bite off the end of it."

Frances Hawthorne: "Your father was named Jacob, wasn't he?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes...and the white's, called him uncle Jake!

I recall, somewhere dad had bought a horse for one of my older brothers.

Dad didn't work in the mines,(he had 'miners asthma' as he had to stop working in the mines)."

“Back to Buxton,” July 1, 2009 (pg. 6)

Writing Public Culture **Back to Buxton**

Eula Biss

Poroi, 6, 1, July 2009



Each of us has certain clichés, I suspect, to which we are particularly vulnerable, certain songs we are compelled to play over and over again, certain words that undo us with their simple syllables. For years now I have been unable to think clearly if the lyrics of “Sweet Home Alabama” are within my hearing, or “Take Me Home, Country Road,” or even “Long Walk Home.”

Not long after I began college, when it was dawning on me that, having left my family, I would never again feel as essential, as integral as I had once felt among them, a friend of mine said, “You know, you can never go home.” Because I did not yet recognize that phrase as a cliché, the truth of it rang through me.

And that was even before I really, truly left home — before I moved from the familiar landscape of rural Massachusetts to New York City, and then to San Diego, and then to Iowa City. Iowa City, where I would eventually find myself sitting alone in a small windowless room in a big university library, crying while I watched, for the second time, the videotape of an Iowa Public Television documentary titled *You Can't Go Back to Buxton*.

Buxton, Iowa is now just a stack of bricks and a small flock of grave stones in a farmer's field, but was once an unincorporated mining camp of five thousand, an integrated town with a majority black population in the mostly white state of Iowa during the Jim Crow era. Buxton was built in 1900, and it was a ghost town by 1920, but it continues on in books and songs and folklore and public television documentaries as a myth and a specter and, as I came to see it, a kind of promise. But before I understood Buxton's significance in that way, I understood it as I did when I was sitting in the library among boxes of documents waiting to be archived, leaning towards the small television where old folks in faded living rooms spoke of Buxton in that deeply wistful way that is reserved only for The Place You Came From.

I came, at one time, from a place by a river, where we lived under the flight path of an airport and I could see the bolts on the bottoms of the passenger jets as they passed overhead. It was a place of unmown fields and sand pits and back waters where I rode my bike with boys whose houses were flooded by the rising river every spring.

“Back to Buxton,” July 1, 2009 (pg. 7)

Now, the road through that place has widened by several lanes, and is lined with K-Marts and Walmarts and a mall called Latham Farms, which sits on land where there were once, in my childhood, actual farms. The airport has sheared off the tops of trees for greater visibility, the next-door neighbor who used to give me books about Sodom and Gomorrah has died, both of my parents have moved away, and I will never live there again.

On the evening of my first day in Iowa, in a humid darkness full of the purring of cicadas, I finally went down to the river, where I had been waiting to go all day, ever since I first saw the water from the car as I drove into town that afternoon. When I stepped onto the bridge over the Iowa River and stood looking out across the water, I knew I was home. I was wrong about that, as it turns out. And I know now that my certainty was based on a series of troubling misconceptions, but it would be years before I would lose the comfort that certainty gave me. At that moment the air over the river smelled thick and slightly fishy and sweet with grass and leaves, like all the Augusts of my childhood. And as I looked down into the water where some tremendously huge carp were swimming against the current, I thanked God for bringing me home.

Buxton was a company town, owned and operated by Consolidated Coal. Located equal distance from three mines on a gently sloping hill, Buxton was more carefully planned than most coal camps, which were often roughly built, poorly drained, temporary barracks next to the coal tipples. The houses Consolidated built for its workers were bigger than in most coal camps, and they were set far enough apart to allow for gardens. The miners in Buxton were not required to buy their goods from the company store, and thus not required to go into debt to the company. Buxton had two roller skating rinks, a swimming pool, and a YMCA sponsored by Consolidated Coal. Buxton was larger than most coal camps and it would thrive for twice as long, but like any other camp it would last only as long as the mines. When the town began to empty after a fire and the collapse of one mine, it emptied very rapidly, so that by 1919 there were only about four hundred people left in Buxton.

Initially, the population of Buxton was just over half black, and it would eventually drop to just under half black. Some of the black miners in Buxton might have originally been recruited by Consolidated to break a strike in an all white mine at Muchakinoek, Iowa. When that mine shut, most of the miners there, many of them black, were relocated to Buxton. It was common, during that period, for companies to pit one racial group against another.

“Back to Buxton,” July 1, 2009 (pg. 8)

Sugar cane planters in Hawaii hired Portuguese workers to break the strikes of Japanese workers, the owner of a shoe factory in Massachusetts broke a strike of Irish workers by hiring Chinese immigrants, and the Central Pacific Railroad in California considered bringing ten thousand blacks across the country to break a strike of Chinese workers. Some historians have suggested that we have early capitalism to thank for the traditional animosity in this country between racial groups who vied for jobs. But that animosity didn't take in Buxton. The management of the mine was actively recruiting black workers from the South until at least 1910, but those workers were not breaking strikes in Buxton or working for lower wages than the white workers. And they were not, for the most part, locked out of the most desirable or the most lucrative jobs in the mines. Both black and white miners in Buxton belonged to the United Mine Workers, a union that demanded equal pay for equal work.

The editor of the *Iowa State Bystander*, an African American newspaper, described Buxton as “the colored man’s mecca of Iowa” and the “Negro Athens of the Northwest.” Buxton had integrated schools and an integrated baseball team, the Buxton Wonders. Both blacks and whites operated independent businesses in town. There was a black dentist, a black tailor, a black midwife, black newspaper publishers, black doctors, black pharmacists, black lawyers, black undertakers, a black postmaster, a black Justice of the Peace, black constables, black teachers and principals, and black members of the school board.

In Buxton, Dorothy Collier’s family had a green plush sofa and a new cookstove. Marjorie Brown’s family had a carpet and a piano in the parlor. “In Buxton,” Bessie Lewis said, “you didn’t have to want for nothing.” It was a prosperous place. But more than that, it was a place that enjoyed unusually good race relations. And this is why former residents would describe it as “a kind of heaven.” This is why they would continue to return for picnics forty years after Consolidated Coal had dismantled the last of the houses there. And this is why three scholars from Iowa State University would set out to study the town in the early 1980s, to determine if it had been as racially harmonious as it was rumored to have been. Their results were not the results one might expect from such a study. After interviewing seventy-five former residents, black and white, after analyzing payroll records and census records and company records, after reading decades of local newspaper accounts, after looking for evidence of discrimination in housing and schooling, they determined that, yes, Buxton had been “a utopia.”

I enjoyed, when I first arrived in Iowa City, a kind of giddy, blind happiness. By then I had moved often enough not to have the usual illusions about a clean slate or a fresh start or a new life. I knew

“Back to Buxton,” July 1, 2009 (pg. 9)

that I could not escape myself. And the idea of beginning again, with no furniture and no friends, was exhausting. So my happiness then is hard to explain. I am tempted now to believe that entering the life one is meant to inhabit is a thrilling sensation and that is all. But I am haunted by the possibility that I was happy when I arrived in Iowa at least in part because of my misconception that I had come to a place where the people were like me.

At the time, I am sure I would have denied that race had anything to do with my sense of belonging, but I would not have denied that certain everyday actions, like walking to the grocery store, were more comfortable because I was not in a place where my race was noticed. A friend of mine once described reveling in the anonymity of Harlem after having grown up on Cape Cod, where his family was one of only a few black families. In Harlem, he told me, he was invisible for the first time in his life. And another friend of mine, a black woman, once described to me her experience walking through a Walmart in rural Iowa, where she was stared at until she could not bear the attention any more. Her husband suggested that she take off her glasses so that she could not see the stares, and that, she said, helped.

There are plenty of things, I now know, that I value much more than invisibility. But at the time that I moved to Iowa City I longed for it. I was tired of being seen, and, worse, of seeing myself be seen. I was tired of that odd caricature of myself that danced in front of me like a puppet as I walked through the streets of places where my race was noticed. In those places I saw, as I imagined everyone else did, my whiteness, dancing there, mocking me, daring me to try to understand it. And I tried. But by the time I arrived in Iowa I was frustrated by the effort, and ready to remove my glasses.

If invisibility was all I expected out of Iowa City I would never have become disillusioned there. In the end I suffered not for lack of anonymity, but for lack of a community to which I belonged in some essential way. Iowa City was a town of writers, a town where the waitresses and the bartenders and the guys who changed the oil in my car were writers, and it was a town of scholars, a liberal town, a town, in other words, full of people like me. But belonging, I would learn there, is much more complicated than that.

It was in the late nineteenth century, Lewis Atherton writes, that people in the towns of the Middle West began to lose their sense of belonging to the larger communities in which they lived. And so began what he calls the “twentieth century cult of joining.” In Buxton, a town of only five thousand, a town a fraction of the size of Iowa City, a town in which members of almost every family worked,

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in some capacity, for the mines, there were dozens of social clubs and secret societies. There was the Odd Fellows lodge, the Masonic Order, the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, the True Reformers, the Ladies' Industrial Club, the Sweet Magnolia Club, the Fidelity Club, the Mutual Benefit Literary Society, the Etude Music Club, the Self-Culture Club....

I don't belong to any clubs, and haven't since I was a child. I don't go to church, I don't play any team sports, and I pay my union dues without attending meetings. Not being a joiner, I am forced to believe, even at this late date, one hundred years after Buxton, in community. And so I am forced to be frustrated by the many forces that thwart communities. One of those being, in college towns, the fact that the majority of the population is transient and un-invested and somewhat displaced. And then, of course, there is the fact that college towns are company towns, towns owned, more or less, by institutions, towns polluted by the same problems that plague those institutions.

During my last year in Iowa City, the University released a lengthy report written by the Diversity Action Committee. It was, to me, a troubling and contradictory document. It began with a series of recommendations for recruiting more minority students to the school, followed by some disturbing findings, particularly that many minority students were not especially happy at the University. "Once minority students arrive at the University, many report feeling alienated and alone," the report stated. "Some express frustration that the depictions of the diversity of the University community and Iowa City found on the University's website and in its printed materials are misleading, and some students are shocked to find the minority community — currently 2,678 students of a total student body of 29,642 — so small and so dispersed."

The point at which I began to cry during the documentary about Buxton was the interview with Marjorie Brown, who moved from Buxton to the mostly white town of Cedar Rapids when she was twelve. "And then all at once, with no warning, I no longer existed.... The shock of my life was to go to Cedar Rapids and find out that I didn't exist.... I had to unlearn that Marjorie was an important part of a community."

This was not a comfortable invisibility — this was obscurity. This was, in her words, the loss of her self. And this is what goes unspoken in many of the stories of integration that are told now as stories of heroism and triumph. This is what I heard in the voice of a man on the radio, who, when asked what it was like for him to move to an all white suburb of Chicago in the sixties, explained that

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he had children, and that he could put them in better schools there. He wouldn't say, exactly, what it felt like, but he implied it was a sacrifice.

During the years that my cousin worked as an oral historian, she spent quite a bit of time interviewing people from what she calls “the generation of firsts.” These were black people who were the first in their families to go to college, or to become professors, or to become professionals — to integrate white institutions. Her father was part of this generation, the first in his family to leave Jamaica and go to Harvard, and she says she saw, as his daughter, what that cost him. When I ask her what it cost him, exactly, and what it cost others of that generation, she will not say at first. She is, she says, uncomfortable saying. After a long silence she says, finally, “My first thought was that it cost them themselves. But I don't think that's fair. I don't think that's a fair thing to say.”

“I remember the very day that I became colored,” Zora Neale Hurston wrote of the day she left the all black town where she grew up. “I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl.”

Hurston refused to be cast as “tragically colored.” And so this new identity was, she maintained, simply a change in consciousness, at worst a discomfort. “No,” she wrote, “I do not weep at the world — I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

Perhaps it is only through leaving home that you can learn who you are. Or at least who the world thinks you are. And the gap between the one and the other is the painful part, the part that you may, if you are me, or if you are Zora Neale Hurston, keep arguing against for the rest of your life — saying, *No, I am not white in that way, or, No, I am not black in that way.*

I used to say that I did not realize I was white until I moved to New York City, but that is not true. I knew full well by then that I was white. What I realized in New York was what it feels like to be an outsider in your own home, and that is not what it means to be white in this country.

“Nobody knows me,” I cried to my mother on the phone during that first year in New York. My days were infused with the isolation and the paranoia of an outsider. I remember, for instance, my persistent suspicion that the little boys in Fort Greene Park peed when they saw me coming. At my most clear-headed, I understood that the boys just happened to have a pissing game and that I just happened to walk through the park while they were at it. But still, I

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was nagged by the possibility that the pissing was a message to me, a message that I was unequipped to interpret as an outsider, but that I guessed meant, “We piss on you and your whiteness.”

Along with several boxes of documents about Buxton, there are, in the archives at the University of Iowa Library, a series of oral histories documenting the lives of women from Latino communities in Iowa. Some of these communities date back to the 1880s, to boxcar towns next to railroad yards. And some of the oral histories read, in their incomplete form, because they have not yet been typed by someone who understands Spanish: “My father was born in XXXX in Mexico. His name was Jose XXXX. His mother was XXXXXX.” Some include summary: “After fifteen years in Iowa, Carmen feels that she has achieved the community’s respect.” Some ache: “I came here without my family, without my climate, without my mountains and without my culture.”

The town of Cook’s Point was a small Mexican American community near the city of Davenport, Iowa. It was next to the town dump, on land formerly occupied by lumber mills and owned by a “liquidation corporation.” By the 1940s the place was considered a blight and an eyesore, and when the land was sold to an industrial developer, the town of Cook’s Point was bulldozed. One old woman remained rocking on her porch as the bulldozers approached, and another family remained in two rooms of their house even as bulldozers ripped off the other half. After paging through a box of documents about Cook’s Point, I returned it to the archivist, who in her friendly way remarked that many of the interviews with former residents of Cook’s Point revealed a deep nostalgia for the place. This, despite the fact that there was no running water there, no heat in winter, raw sewage in the streets, no drainage or pavement, and entire families living in boxcars and tarpaper shacks. She could understand, the archivist told me, the feelings people had for Buxton, because they had had a good life there, but she could not quite understand why people loved Cook’s Point.

A sense of home is, it seems, worth more than any other comfort. And one of the questions I want to answer now, for myself, is what makes a place feel like home. I know that it is not so simple as living where people speak your language and look like you and have lost what you have lost, but there is a kind of comfort in that, too.

The box of documents about Cook’s Point revealed, among other things, that the people who lived there were probably not as poor as their conditions might have suggested. The average income in

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Cook's Point was very close to the national average. Some families there had savings in the bank, and life insurance, and health insurance, and a number of families owned cars. The people of Cook's Point did not have access, because they were squatting on land they did not own, in a place that was not formally a town, to municipal utilities like running water and electricity, but after Cook's Point was bulldozed and the people who lived there were forced to integrate into Davenport and Moline and Silvis, many bought homes and led middle class lives. What they lost in the process is recorded in the oral histories that baffle the archivist.

“I had been raised in a white surrounding,” Lola Reeves said of moving to Buxton from a town where her family was one of three black families. “Going to Buxton with all the people of my own race was a great experience for me.... I could exercise my feelings, my potentials, my talent and my social life and I think Buxton brought a whole lot of joy to me, just to be able to live, a colored girl, in a colored area, feeling like I was one of them and I was happy.”

And perhaps this is part of why integration in this country remains as troubled and as incomplete as ever. In 1955, Zora Neale Hurston was among those who opposed the Supreme Court decision to integrate public schools in the South. “The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people,” she wrote. “How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?” The forcible integration of schools on the grounds of offering a better education to black students was, she felt, an insult to black teachers. “It is a contradiction in terms,” she wrote, “to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association.”

What integration seems to mean to many white people is that a very small number of other people will be accepted into white communities and institutions where they will be “tolerated.” I suspect that Hurston, an anthropologist, a collector of culture, understood the implications of this. Assimilation is the unspoken end. But I would like to believe that this country is capable of a version of integration greater, more ambitious, than that.

I found myself wondering, as I read the report on diversity at the University of Iowa, who this particular version of diversity was serving, and who it was intended to serve. For who's sake, I wondered, does the University want to increase the number of minority students from nine percent to ten-point-nine percent. It did not seem to be for the sake of those students, for the sake of their education, or for the sake of their selves. I suspected that it was more for the sake of the institution, so that it could appear

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properly progressive. Or perhaps it was for the sake of the white students, so that they might be exposed to a limited degree of diversity and thus be made more worldly. This might help explain some of the disappointment of the minority students who arrived at the University only to find that they were in service to the education of others.

One of the mysteries of Buxton is why Consolidated Coal so actively participated in creating and maintaining a substantially black town in Iowa. The scholars who studied Buxton could not answer this question. The most cynical explanation, that Consolidated wanted to divide its workforce to undermine their collective power, is contradicted not only by the fact that all the miners were unionized, but by the experiences of the people who lived in Buxton. Many of them believed that the company actively discouraged discrimination, both public and private, and that a man could lose his job for spitting on another man.

Whatever the explanation, there was coal to mine in Buxton but there were also lives to lead, and somehow both undertakings turned out alright for awhile. It is naïve, I think, to suppose that Buxton was truly a utopia. But I would still like to believe what one man who used to live there said, decades after he left, “I’m not so sure, I’m not so sure you can’t go back to Buxton.”

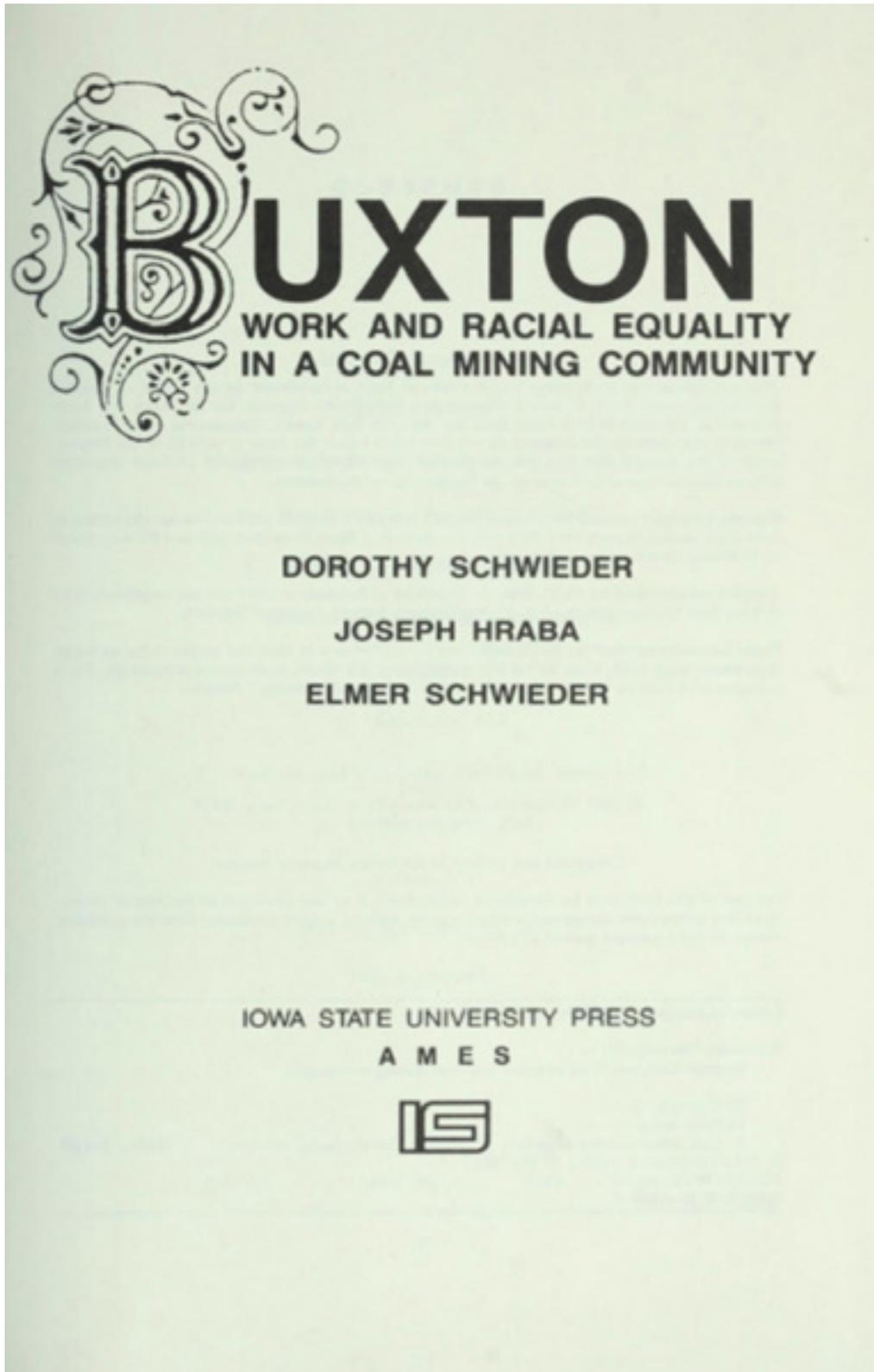
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Aftermath of Explosion in Buxton's #12 Mine, Date Unknown



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Date Unknown

Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community, 1987 (pg. 1)



Schwieder, Dorothy, "Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community," The Iowa State University Press, 1987.

Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community, 1987 (pg. 2)

Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community, 1987

Excerpt 1: Table 3.2, p. 73

Annual Income of Selected Workers, Buxton, 1914

| Occupational Group | Worker and Wage |
|---|--|
| Professional and semiprofessional | Physician, \$3000; lawyer, \$1600; dentist, \$1200; secretary of YMCA, \$1100; minister, \$980; teacher, \$490 |
| Business | Merchant, \$1060; restaurateur, \$1000; manager of telephone company, \$900; store clerk, \$700 |
| Artisan | Blacksmith, \$925; carpenter, \$712; shoemaker, \$632 |
| Coal production | Top boss, \$1500; mine engineer, \$960; mule driver, \$900; miner, \$499 |
| Transportation and communication | Railroad worker, \$1162; mail carrier, \$1000; telegraph operator, \$700; section hand, \$400 |
| Service work | Cook, \$675; barber, \$355; midwife, \$250 |
| Laborer | Machinist, \$795; teamster, \$603; day laborer, \$462; laundress, \$375; domestic, \$201 |
| Agriculture | Farmer, \$900; farmhand, \$260 |
| Source: Iowa, Census of Iowa, 1915, Manuscript Population Schedules for Bluff Creek Township, Monroe County. Note: Where categories included more than one worker, the reported income figures were averaged. | |

Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community, 1987 (pg. 3)

Excerpt 2: p. 190

Two years after experiencing long layoffs and a sizeable loss of population, Buxton suffered another economic setback in the form of several fires. In October 1916 fire destroyed B.F. Cooper's drugstore in Coopertown. Without either a water supply or fire extinguishers, local residents were unable to put out the blaze until it had burned down more than half of Coopertown's* businesses. Buildings destroyed included the Buxton Hotel (Buxton's major hotel), the Cooper Drug Store, a grocery store, the Masonic Hall and several other lodge halls, the Buxton Cigar Factory, the Granberry Tailor Shop, and an amusement hall. The fire also burned several private residences. In total, local residents estimated the loss to be around \$14,000, and because of an inadequate water supply, business people had been able to insure their businesses for only one-sixth of their total value. Buxton also experienced two fires in 1917 that together destroyed a grocery store, a dance hall, a garage, a bakery, and a private residence.

*Coopertown was a suburb/neighborhood of Buxton.

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“As I Remember” by Minnie London, 2003 (pg. 2)

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*Photographs Courtesy of the Iowa State Historical Department, office of
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“As I Remember” by Minnie London, 2003 (pg. 3)

In the early spring of 1891 I went as a bride to what was once old Muchakinock, an Indian name that was derived from a nearby creek meaning, I was told, “hard to cross.” It was a mining camp five or six miles from Oskaloosa, the county seat.

The camp, as it was called, had formerly been inhabited by white miners. When they went on a strike the Chicago and Northwestern Coal Company, who owned the mines, brought in colored miners and their families from Staunton, Charlottesville, and other towns in Virginia. These colored men knew nothing of mining but were taught coal-mining by men hired by the Company. Besides the colored people there were also a goodly number of Swedes.

Overshadowing the town to the south was a huge pile of smoking slag, which when fanned by the wind would burst into a flame looking like a small mountain.

A branch of the C. and N. W. Railroad ran west through the town, which was often used as a street especially in muddy weather.

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2.

The coal company not only owned the mines but owned and operated a General Merchandise store, which had a system known as Order Days running, say, from the first to the fifth of the month according to the number of people and the division of the town. On these days the miners or their wives would order groceries, etc., supposedly to last a month or until the next Order Day. To the clerks it meant work and more work, for many times they would have to work all night putting up orders with no extra pay. To the women it was like a great social gathering where they could get together and visit or learn the latest news of the town, perhaps the death of a miner caused by falling slate or the birth of twins having been brought into the world by Old Lady Ross, the midwife of the town, who in her black and white apron was usually kept busy.

The store used the check system, checks ranging from one to ten dollars, and as small purchases were made the clerks would punch the check according to the amount of the purchase, so no money was used in exchange. The amount of the checks would be taken out of the miner's pay check before the next pay day.

After a time the Superintendent suggested a Colony, an

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3.

organization whereby the single men by paying 75 cents per month and the married men \$1.50 per month could have medical attention in case of sickness without being a probable burden on the county.

The new camp was named Buxton, after the Superintendent of the Mines, a name that was destined for more than a score of years to take its place among other towns of the state. It carried with it all the traditions of the old town, yet it attracted many people from various towns and cities of Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri, in fact from everywhere.



A view of Buxton from the south (Iowa State Historical Department, Division of Historical Museum and Archives, *Annals of Iowa* photograph collection).

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4.

I am sure I am safe in saying that when the town, Buxton, was at its height, no other town in Iowa could boast so many professional and business people of our own group. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, druggists, pharmacists, undertakers, postmaster, Justice of the Peace, constables, clerks, members of the school board, and what have you were all there.

H. A. Armstrong who owned and operated the meat markets in both camps acquired considerable wealth, and I might say was a man of strong convictions and advocated that the solution of the race problem could be accomplished by inter-marriage and in his own life practiced what he preached.

The following persons were prominent at some time in the camp and the positions they held: Dr. E. A. Carter now of Detroit, Michigan; Dr. C. G. Robinson of Chicago; Dr. Williams; Dr. H. H. London, and Dr. Taylor; Lawyers, Geo. W. Woodson and Jas. Spears; Druggists and Pharmacists, B. F. Cooper and Ike and Hattie Hutchinson; Undertaker, S. Billings; Postmaster, Ed Mills; Dentist, L. R. Willis; Music teachers, Cora Thomas, Josie Meadows, Mollie Tibbs, Mrs. Will Lee, and Mrs. Dumond (wife of the Congregational Minister); Justice of the Peace, E. A. London; Constable,

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5.

Tom Romans. James Roberts manufactured Cuban Hand Made Havana Cigars and did a wholesale and retail business.

The Granberry Bros., manufacturers of tailor made clothes, satisfied the most discriminating customer.

Peter Abington, the caterer, kept his wagon on the street all day long selling ice cream, pies, bread, butter, and eggs.

There was a newly constructed General Merchandise Store with the same old and newly added clerks.

The Buxton Savings Bank occupied one end of the store building with Mrs. Lottie Baxter, the daughter of H. A. Armstrong, as cashier.

Among other business ventures in Buxton that stand out in my memory are: Lewis Reasby with his hamburger and hot dog stand across from the company store and in front of the Y.M.C.A. His comical manner of crying his wares would attract passers-by, who would stop and listen to him, then find themselves thrusting their hands into their pockets and saying, “A hot dog please.”

London and London, the business of E. A. and W. H. who dealt in sewing machines and musical instruments, was located in the Thomas Block.

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6.

Yes, Buxton had a newspaper too, namely, the “Buxton Advocate.” It was a weekly edited and owned by R. B. Montgomery.

The Y.M.C.A. was a large three story structure built diagonally across from the company store. It was built expressly for the colored miners, and when they seemed reluctant to take advantage of the opportunity, the Supt. indicated that he would turn it over to the white people. Our people, after reconsideration, pledged cooperation and then a very efficient secretary in the person of L. E. Johnson was engaged.

The first floor of the building contained offices and recreation rooms. The second a spacious auditorium with stage and dressing rooms. The third floor was occupied by rooms for the many secret orders. To the north of the large building was a smaller building containing a swimming pool for the younger group with their own secretary.

The Langlois sisters, better known as the French Women, displayed moving pictures every night, which afforded a very enjoyable recreation for the miners and families. Road shows as well as moving pictures were featured in the auditorium. Among

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7.

them East Lynne and the Count of Monte Christo.

Among the many noted Negroes who entertained packed houses were: Hallie Q. Brown, Booker T. Washington, Blind Boone and Roscoe Conklin Simmons.

I must not forget to relate to you about the roller skating rinks and the added recreation it afforded the younger folks, and I might add some older ones too. You ought to have seen how these boys and girls did skate! The jolting jitterbug of today was a mild comparison.

Various parts of Buxton were named for the leading citizens of that section, thus: Coopertown town took its name after B. F. Cooper, the leading Negro druggist there, or in fact, the leading druggist in the state at that time. Gainesville was named for Reubin Gaines, a well-to-do man in the community.

There was one part of the camp in which we lived that was known as “Gobbler’s Nob.” Why, I never knew, but I do know it was an elevation at the foot of which was a ravine that could be reached by a foot bridge in rainy or muddy weather.

“Sharp End,” I suppose, was the sudden termination of the town to the south, and located in this area was a drug store

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8.

owned and operated by Ike Hutchinson, whose wife Hattie was the registered pharmacist.

Following the road a little farther west was a grocery store managed by J. W. Neely, who also was a pharmacist. By all means we must not forget H. D. (Hustler) Williams looking out for business.

Near the depot Anderson Perkins and Son operated a hotel and confectionary. They advertised good meals and first class service. Hotel rates \$1.00 and \$1.50.

A. G. Rhodes owned a shoe shop and did repairing while you waited, he also sold foot form shoes to order.

If you desired an old-fashioned meal and did not wish to go home or bother to cook on a hot day, all you had to do was to stop in Jeffer's Restaurant, run by Andy Jeffers and his wife, Maggie.

The hair dressing, manicuring, face massage, and chiropody was all done by Madam Ella Yancy. She was an honor graduate of the New York College of Hairdressing. Madam Yancy was Buxton's best specialist in scalp treatment. "If your hair won't grow, won't straighten, all you have to do is to see Madam Yancy and find out the reason and get a remedy"; and "If your wrinkles

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9.

won't leave and your cheeks won't fill out, see Madam Yancy"; and "If your corns bother you and just won't stop hurting, see Madam Yancy."

Rev. Lucas operated an up-to-date bakery and kept the town supplied with fresh bread.

Manie Lobbins had a livery barn in the Sharp End, and since this was in the horse and buggy days no one was required to take Hobson's choice.

If you wanted coffee like your mother made, you would go to the Rising Sun Restaurant in Coopertown, operated by Mrs. Anna Lobbins. She would serve you a hot lunch or a complete dinner at reasonable prices.

Peter Carey's barber shop was also in this section, located across from Cooper's Drug Store. He was always in whenever one wanted a hair cut or shave.

The schools took the name of the streets, if we may call them streets, on which they were located or the section of town. Thus we had a Fifth Street School, an Eleventh Street School, and a Swede Town School. They were two story buildings of four rooms, each thus employing twelve teachers.

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11.

pageants, and drills were always greeted with cheers and enthusiasm.

I now remember some things concerning the store. Two things one could not purchase were revolvers and alcoholic patent medicines, the kind in which alcohol was so prevalent that it became a cheap grade of whiskey. At one time a certain patent medicine was withdrawn from the stock when a miner was found drunk with two bottles, empty, in his pockets.

The store at night after the miners had cleaned up and eaten their supper was like a large auditorium where the miners gathered to trade, smoke, and visit. There was no comment on loafing. The manager considered it far better to have them pass their time in that manner than in the nearby saloons. One proprietor of the store said at one time that he had within a three year period cause to remove only one drunkard from the building. The store was a boon to the town and the miner's friend always.

About 1921 many of the pioneers were destined to be moved to another coal field as the mines at Buxton were just about worked out. The new camp was called Haydock, still in Monroe County about eighteen miles distant over hills and valleys.

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12.

Fewer still were willing to follow up the unstable life of a miner and so many continued to go to various cities. The camp had already been populated by many white miners and their families, mainly from Illinois, thus there were less colored people and very few business ventures.

The Buxton Wonders, a ball team of the camp, enjoyed an enviable reputation for being one of the best teams in the state. Some of the boys on this team were: George Neal, Cliff Wallace, and Skinny Wilson.

Some intimation at times endeavored to decry the law-abiding attitude of the camp owing to the fact that two or three crimes were committed. When we think of the duration of the town and the diversity of its population - say 4000 or more - few indeed were the tragedies.

The churches of the new camp were about the same type structures as the ones in the old town, perhaps somewhat larger with different interior arrangement. There were in the life of the community two Baptist Churches, one Methodist, a Congregational Church, and the Church of God. The Congregational services were held in the Y.M.C.A.

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13.

I think I never saw church members so spiritually imbued. I recall a revival at the A.M.E. Church with an eleven year old evangelist, Lonnie Dennis. Well, grown-ups were converted in that meeting that I am sure that as long as they lived, putting it in the words of James Weldon Johnson, “were true to their God and true to their native land.” Truly a little child led them.