

Black & White Fine Art Photography Magazine

ADORE NOIR

Beauty that
Transcends the
Physical

WILLIAM
ZUBACK

Lost
Places

TIZIANA
BEL

Coastal Florida

JASON
HENTHORNE

Severe Romantics

AURELIJA
PAKELTYTE



Gauchos
of the
Calchaqui
Valleys

POLLO
DIGHERO

Appalachia USA
BUILDER
LEVY

By Timothy B.
Anderson

Labyrinth
DAN
HAYON

APPALACHIA USA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Builder Levy



Appalachia USA by Builder Levy Interview by Timothy B. Anderson

I'm a picture guy. The first time I pick up a book like Builder Levy's *Appalachia USA* I look at all the pictures first. I don't like anything to inform me about what an image might mean before I look at it. I want the image to become part of me. Next it is the

foreword and any other notes about the book itself, like those on the inside of the cover flap.

With all that information at hand now, it's time to read the captions. In Levy's newest book, reading the captions is a book in and



Mt. Olive Baptist Church

of itself. It is a very unique experience when the captions carry almost as much weight as the images, especially when those images are displayed in brilliant black and white, spot varnished tri-tones, which aids greatly in reflecting the quality and intensity of the original prints. There is nothing wasted in *Appalachia USA*.

TA: In an article published in the *New York Times Lens Blog*, and written by David Gonzalez, you mention a recording you used to listen to, “Which side are you on?”, that talked about changing the world. What was it about this record that inspired you?

BL: The piercing melody and powerful words written by a miner’s wife (Florence Reece) and sung by Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie about the life and struggles of the coal miners of Harlan County (in the 1930s), were very emotional and stuck in my subconscious memory. It wasn’t till much later, when I was looking for a photography project that would allow me to see America outside New York City where I was raised and had done most of my photographing that I decided to visit, explore and photograph what I felt was a significant yet little understood and often overlooked region of the United States, coalfield Appalachia.



a new consciousness, in and of the world. In the darkroom, I could further intensify and complete the process in the making of a photographic print. I have been inspired by the many great photographers who, for more than a century, had been creating work grounded in realism infused with an intense humanity, among them Eugène Atget, Lewis Hine, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paul Strand, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, W. Eugene Smith, Roy DeCarava, and Robert Frank. I have striven to be a part of and contributor to that continuum.

In early 1955 my father took me to see the *Family of Man* exhibition at MOMA. The photographs (by many of the world's greatest photographers) left an indelible impression on

me. In August of that year, fourteen year old Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago, was abducted, lynched, and his body mutilated in Mississippi, for whistling at a white woman. I turned thirteen that September. In December of that year Rosa Parks, the black seamstress, who refused to give up her seat near the front of the bus to a white lady, sparked the thirteen month Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in which Martin Luther King played a leadership role.

TA: Much has been written and visually documented about the plight of the coal miner. The disease, the poverty, the violent deaths, the bent and broken human spirit and the rapid decline of the coal industry. What have you seen and experienced in your visits to coalfield



Appalachia in the last forty-plus years that has served to fortify your belief in the enduring humanity of the miners, themselves.

BL: My experience was a bit different from the stereotype that has been imprinted on the region (mostly by outside “experts”). Most people were receptive to me, opening their hearts and homes, sharing their stories, and allowing me into their lives. I have been inspired by an Appalachian heritage of independence seekers, amongst the earliest settlers escaping the British colonial rule, a strong tradition of abolitionism in the 19th century, and the heritage of a multiracial collective union struggle for a better life for miners, their families, and their communities. And, since the new millennium, local environmental activists are organizing to save the mountains, their communities and the

creeks and rivers in the hollows and valleys from destruction and pollution. One of the most well known struggles, “The Battle of Blair Mountain,” fought by more than 10,000 miners against coal company gunmen, and the sheriff of Logan County and his deputies, for the right to join the union and fight for a better life, almost a century ago, still lives as an inspiration in the collective memory of the people of the region, and also in mine.

TA: Most of us have seen the Farm Security Administration pictures and those images by other photographers (Hine, Lange, Strand, Bresson, DeCarava, etc.) that depict the harshness of poverty, and the seeming invisibility of those who worked in the fields or in the mines, mostly for scraps of change that barely kept them fed. I see those same faces that were depicted from the early twentieth



Kermit, Mingo County, WV

century in the images of your contemporary book. Has much changed, or has much remained the same?

BL: Black Lung Disease has come back as a problem. There was a recent ABC special exposing the current problem. Companies flout the regulations to keep dust down, to keep the mines properly ventilated, to repair equipment etc., to save a few bucks. Enforcement was weak, and fines low. There are far fewer union mines and union miners today in Appalachia than when I started photographing there forty-six years ago. The unions help enforce safe conditions in the mines. They can even stop production if they deem conditions too unsafe to work. Beginning with Ronald Reagan,

and intensifying in the 1990s, Appalachian coal companies made a concerted and largely successful effort to get rid of the union from many of the mines. The Upper Big Branch Montcoal methane explosion killed 29 miners on April 5th in 2010, (the worst mine disaster in 40 years) and there have been numerous other mine injuries and deaths before and since.

Because of the proliferation of large coal slurry impoundments and coal slurry injections into abandoned mines, and the many poisonous chemicals used, water pollution in recent years is bad, if not worse. Since my *Appalachia USA* was published I received the following email:



Brushy Fork Impoundment, Marfork Coal Co

Greetings! I have received your book from Linda. The photographs are lovely. One of my favorites is the Red Robin Inn (my dad repairs music instruments, so I found this appealing) and of course, the photo of the preachers.

I work for a small law firm, Thompson Barney, out of Charleston WV. For years, we operated in Williamson WV. In 2004, a lawsuit was filed against Massey Energy and Rawl Sales and Processing (Sprouse Creek), by the people of Rawl, Merrimac, and Sprigg for the contamination of their wells via slurry injection. The injection of the coal waste into the aquifers started in approx. 1977. The firm and the clients had a long hard fight,

and in 2011, the case settled. There are more specific details about the case online, if you are interested. The people of these “forgotten communities” - a name they gave themselves, are some of the strongest, most resilient people I’ve met. When I first met the community members in 2007, I knew that I wanted to work for their cause, and have ever since. These same communities fought for better working conditions on the eve of the Battle of Blair Mountain [in 1921-BL], fought for their rights during the union busting in the 1980s, fought for clean water for their families for decades and are fighting for their pensions, among other issues currently.



Preparing to Shoot the Coal

I was so happy to see your collection in book form. I have an arts background, and have personally always been wary of the potentially exploitative nature of portraiture and Walker Evans-esque documentary photography in Appalachia. It is evident that you handle the subject matter of your photographs with care and respect. Having seen plenty of filmmakers and photographers come through here in such a short time period, I'm glad to see someone who has really made a commitment to the area by returning year after year, and following up with community members you've worked with. The memorializing of this unique region over the past few decades is so important, especially with how increasingly homogenous the country seems to become.

Thank you for your work, it's beautiful.

Melissa

Today large areas of southern WV and the eastern KY mountains have had their mountaintops flattened by Mountain Top Removal (MTR).

A number of mountain hollow communities are gone, for example, the large coal camp of Stotesbury, Raleigh County, WV where I made the photograph *Oglesby Bedroom* in 1982 was down to about three houses by 2009 and is probably completely gone by now. Similarly, the place where I made the photograph *Coal Camp* no longer exists.

The population has decreased due to many factors, water pollution has gotten worse since the new millennium, underground employment has decreased and many mountaintops have been obliterated.

TA: Many of your images could have been

taken in any of several decades, and yet they look the same today as they must have then. In the image *Mount Olive Baptist Church* (plate 8) there is nothing shown that tells us when the picture was made, it could have been 1916 or 1957 or 1999. Was that a primary purpose in the structure of the book and the project, to make the images timeless?

BL: With *Mount Olive Baptist Church* I had been looking to photograph a Walker Evans-like white wooden church next to a coal mine tippie. Instead, during a trip from Williamson to Morgantown, I found the Mount Olive Baptist church adjacent to the Wheeling Steel Corporation preparation plant. The church, on Old Route 119, was run by and for African-American coal miners and their families.

The purpose of the book is to give a sense (perhaps my vision) of America through one of its little understood, often overlooked yet significant regions. Also, I wanted to give a sense of how I, as a social documentary, street, and artist photographer work.

Finally, I wanted to give back to the people (named and un-named) and the region, who, by allowing me into their lives, have so enriched mine.

TA: I have seen semblances of the children depicted in *The Church Family* (plate 20) shown by several other photographers. They could be any kids in any town in the 20s, 30s or even the 60s, and yet there is always one boy or girl who has those defiant eyes, that assertive stance of someone not of that place. He or she seems to dare you to photograph them.

BL: I spent a while talking to the Church family sitting on the porch before setting up

my cumbersome 5x7 Deardorf view camera to make the photograph. That hot, dusty summer day I invited Kelly Cueball Buchanan, one of the retired miners I had met and spent time talking with and photographing the day before, to ride with me as I went exploring the mountain hollow roads outside Matewan in Mingo County. He had been active in the 1968 wildcat strikes throughout the Appalachian coalfields to demand passage of a comprehensive national mine health and safety law in response to the methane gas explosion in Consolidated Coal's Mannington number 9 mine explosion that killed 78 miners that year. Usually I travelled solo, but Kelly wanted to ride with me and I accepted his help. In this particular situation he helped me break the ice

with the Church family.

How do you photograph an individual, and even more, a family group without a sense of self-consciousness among some, or all the participants? How do you have the background not interfere, distract, or detract from the subject, and at the same time add something that tells about the life of that family? How do the people relate to each other physically and emotionally? How can I make a portrait or group portrait so that the people appear to be living their lives rather than posing for the camera, the photographer, or a wider audience? How can I find unforgettable faces? How can I create a photograph of a group that has an internal unity and wholeness, and that will hold



The Church Family

the interest and eye of the beholder? How can I negate the intrusion of me, the photographer, to achieve a feeling of the individual and/or group subject living their life/lives? How can I not negate a person's humanity and dignity without being artificial, stilted, boring, romanticizing or glorifying? Can I create a portrait of an individual or a group with beauty, yet maintain humanity and realism? These have been some of my concerns when making a family group or individual portrait. In 1973 when I lived with Paul Strand in his Lower East Side NYC apartment for ten days, we talked about making portraits. Paul liked *The Church Family*, which I had made in 1970 and a few others I showed him. Strand's *Luzzara Family*, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, and Lewis Hine's Italian immigrant family group at Ellis Island are among my favorites for their aesthetic unity and enduring human qualities in a family portrait.

TA: What do you see as the future of coal mining? With the advent of mountaintop removal surface mining, where tons of coal can be dragged off mountaintops in a single motion, do you feel that the industry's days are numbered?

BL: Appalachian MTR mining is destroying the water as well as mountain communities and, of course, the irreplaceable mountains, the most bio diverse in North America. Patriot Coal Corp is phasing out MTR mining and probably the other companies will do so if the regulations to protect the water are enforced. Underground mining will be around for a while—how long, I do not know. Powerful multinational energy corporations are still making millions and don't yield profits easily. Fracking for natural gas poisons the drinking water. Appalachian underground mining will be around because it is a good source of

high quality low sulfur coal needed for steel making.

We must find good paying jobs for workers in central Appalachia to replace MTR mining jobs, and perhaps retraining those workers for infrastructure construction jobs, the building of educational and cultural institutions, medical facilities, bridges water purification plants, etc. The long-range future for energy has to be solar, wind, and possibly nuclear.

TA: In your interview with Gonzalez (mentioned at the front of this article), you said, "I feel like I've done something right." Tell us about this.

BL: I feel like my *Appalachian USA* work is finished, and makes a unique statement and contribution. However, by no means do I think it is all inclusive, or covers everything, completely. I am proud of what Vanity Fair said in its February 2014 review: "Photographer Builder Levy's *Appalachia USA* (David R. Godine) does for today's coal miners what Walker Evans did for sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the Dust Bowl."

TA: Have you learned all there is to learn or, as you say in the *Lens Blog* interview, "The more I get into these places, the more I learn there is more to learn."

BL: Yes, the latter.

TA: You also mentioned in that article that you have received some good feedback from some of your subjects in the book. If you reconnect with any of them, as I know you hope to do, what would you say to them?

BL: Thank you. I want to send them a personally inscribed book. When I tried calling

Nathan Coleman (boy in first grade on first day of school at Bartley Elementary School), the telephone was no longer in service. I have lost touch with Lucious Thompson (I had given him his photographs awhile back). I haven't been able to find the family of Adrienne Moore, a ninth grader at West Side High school in Wyoming County. Thomas Allen, from Chattaroy, who had given me the names of Cecil Perkins and his good friend Toby Moore, is no longer there. I would like to find out who the Tipple man is and I would also like to be in touch with B. L., the *Kneeling Miner*, and the men exiting the mine in *End of Shift*, all the miners in the miner photos.

TA: You close your book with several pictures depicting protests. What is the hope in the near future of any of these protests coming to fruition in a positive manner? Would it take the demise of the industry to save the workers, their families, and the surrounding environment?

BL: The EPA ruled against MTR but it is being fought by the operators and state governments in the pockets of the operators. Patriot is one of the largest mountaintop removal operators in the region.

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) 11/15/12 –by Vicki Smith: Bankrupt Patriot Coal Corp. agreed Thursday to become the first U.S. coal operator to phase out and eventually stop all large scale mountaintop removal mining in central Appalachia under an agreement reached with three environmental groups that sued over pollution from several West Virginia operations companies and state governments. The continuation or expansion of large scale surface mining is no longer in Patriot's best long-term interests, President Ben Hatfield told the judge, "Patriot Coal recognizes that

our mining operations impact the communities in which we operate in significant ways," he added that the agreement will reduce the company's environmental footprint.

TA: You've come a long way since your initial trip in 1968 to Appalachia in your 1966 VW convertible. What's next for Builder Levy?

BL: I want to continue work on my *Developing Nations* project, and I want to make a book of my extensive work in New York City that began in 1961 or 1962.

I also want to get this *Appalachia USA* work out to the widest possible audience and what I have lined up so far is: Beginning in June 2015 it will open as an exhibition at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, and from there it will travel to several museums within the state over the next couple of years.

Sir Elton John recently acquired several of my Appalachian photographs for his important collection of photographs. ♥

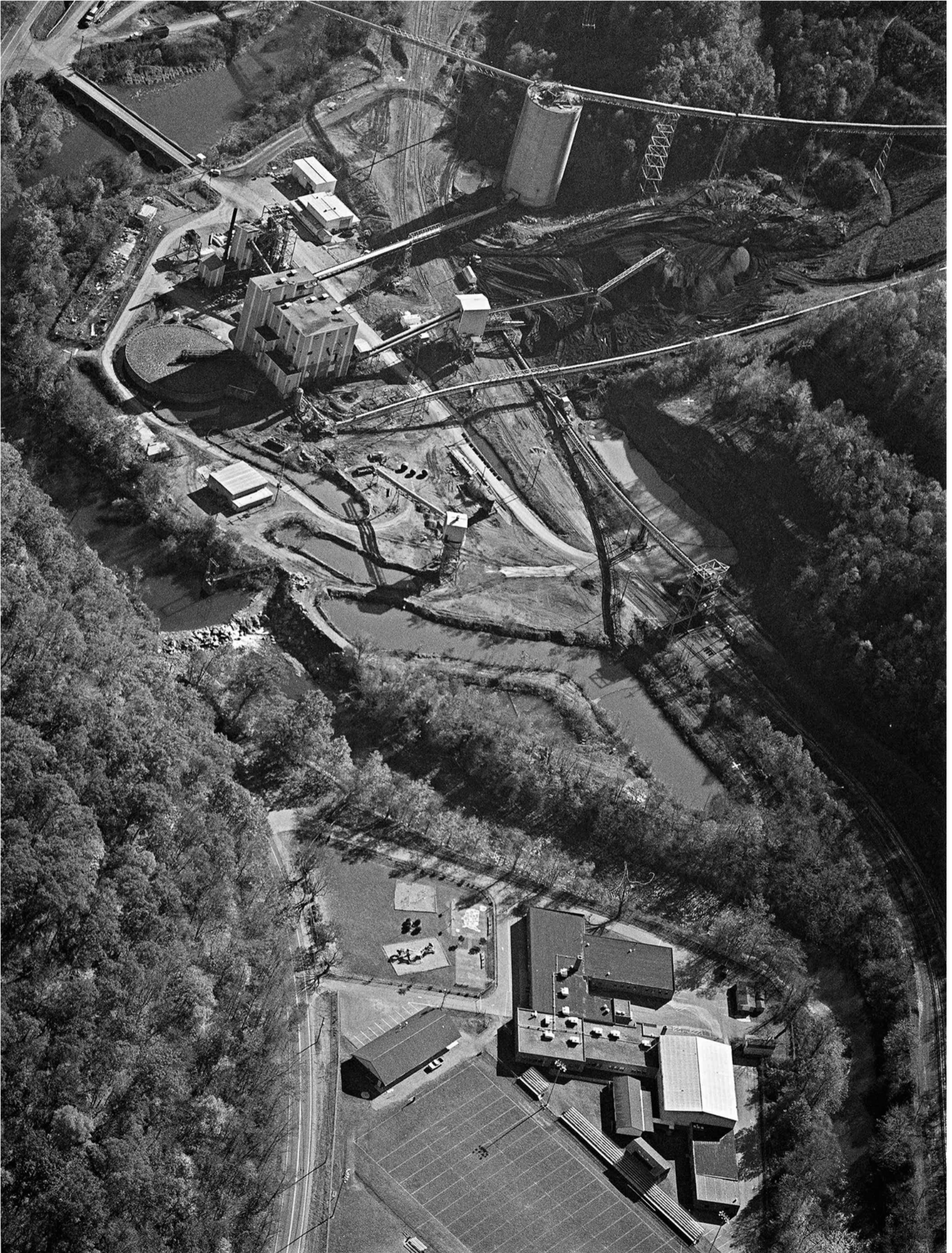
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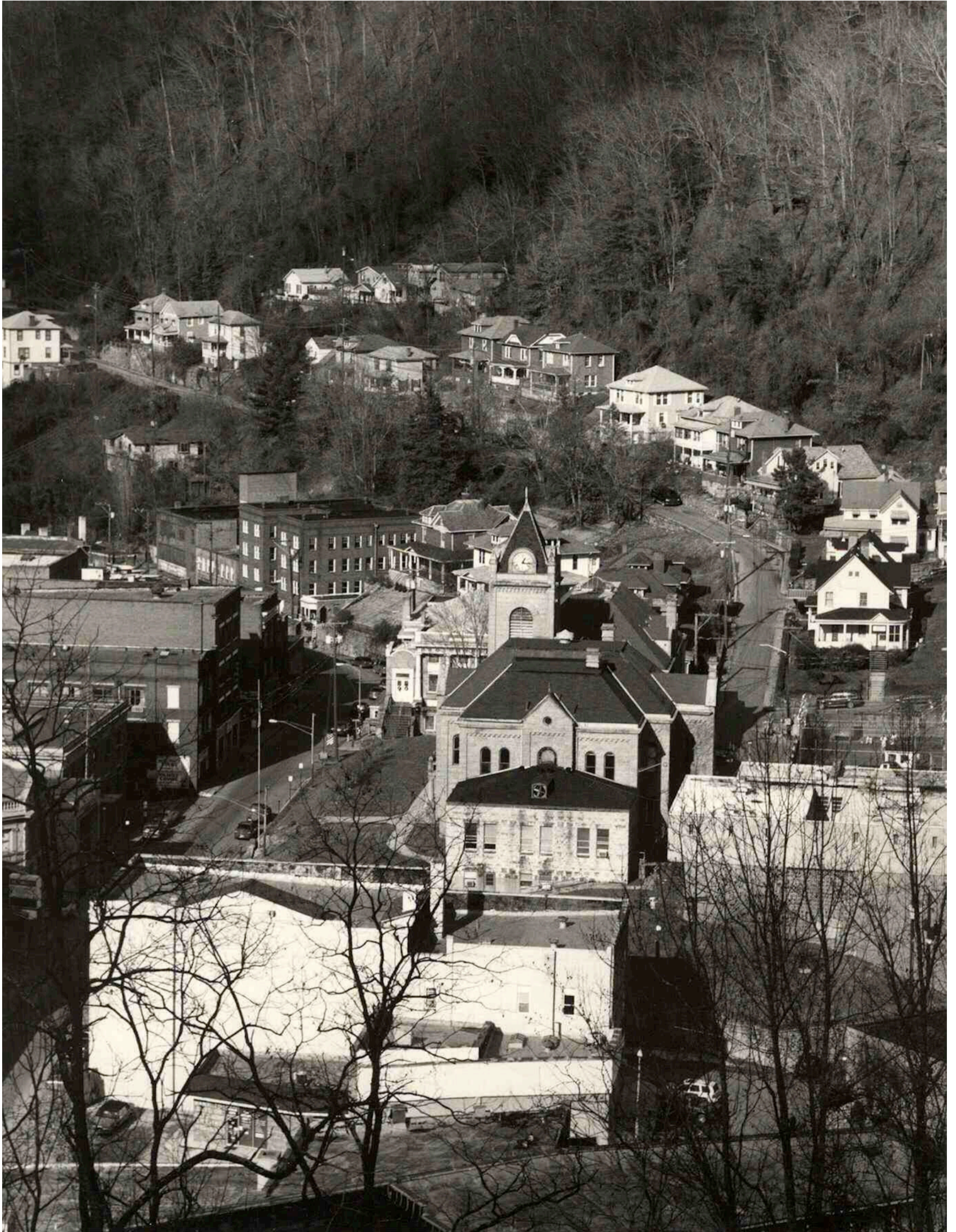
Coal Camp



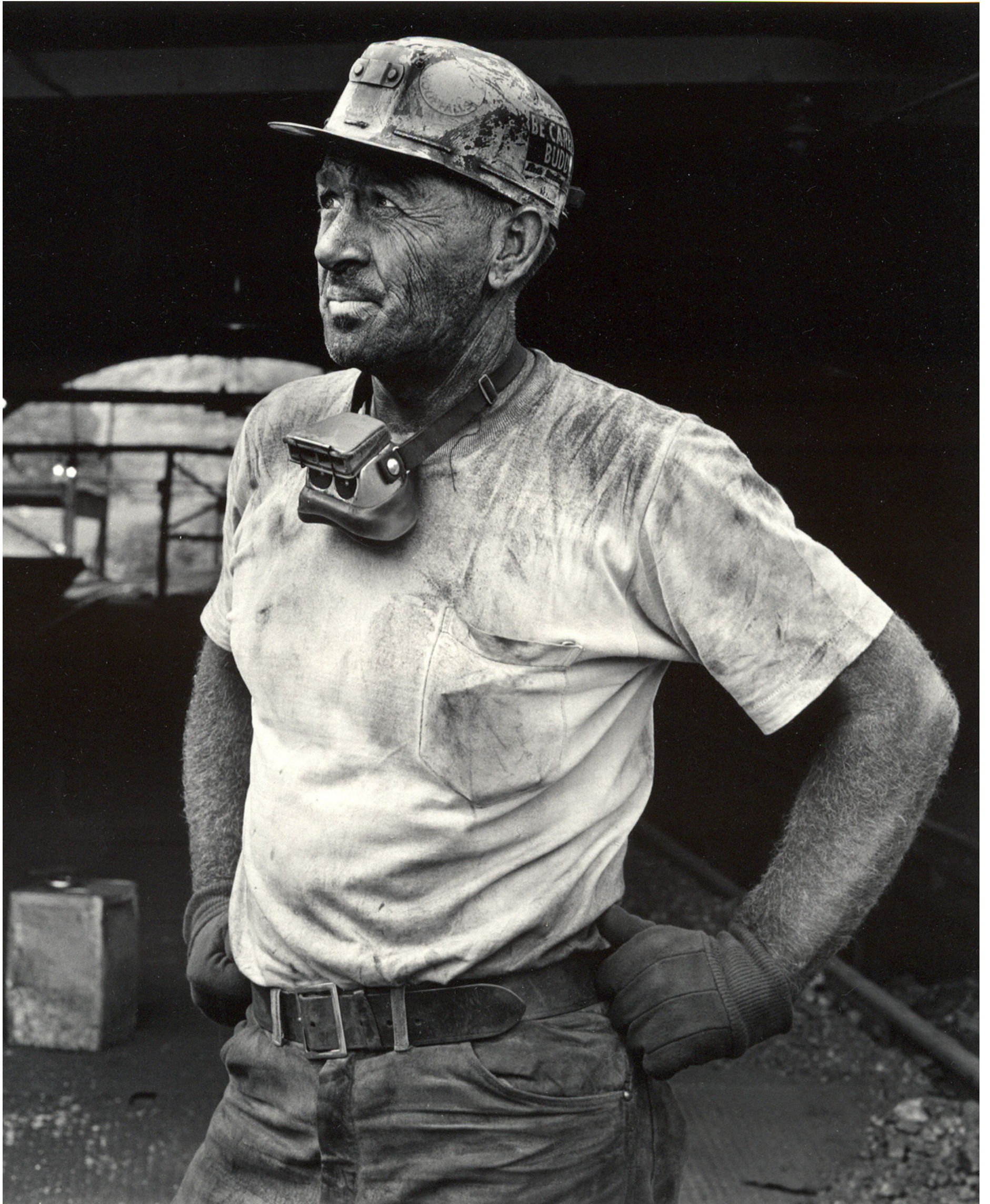
Donna Muncy



Preparation Plant, Coal Silo, and Elementary School



Welch, McDowell Cty WV, 2006



Tipple Man



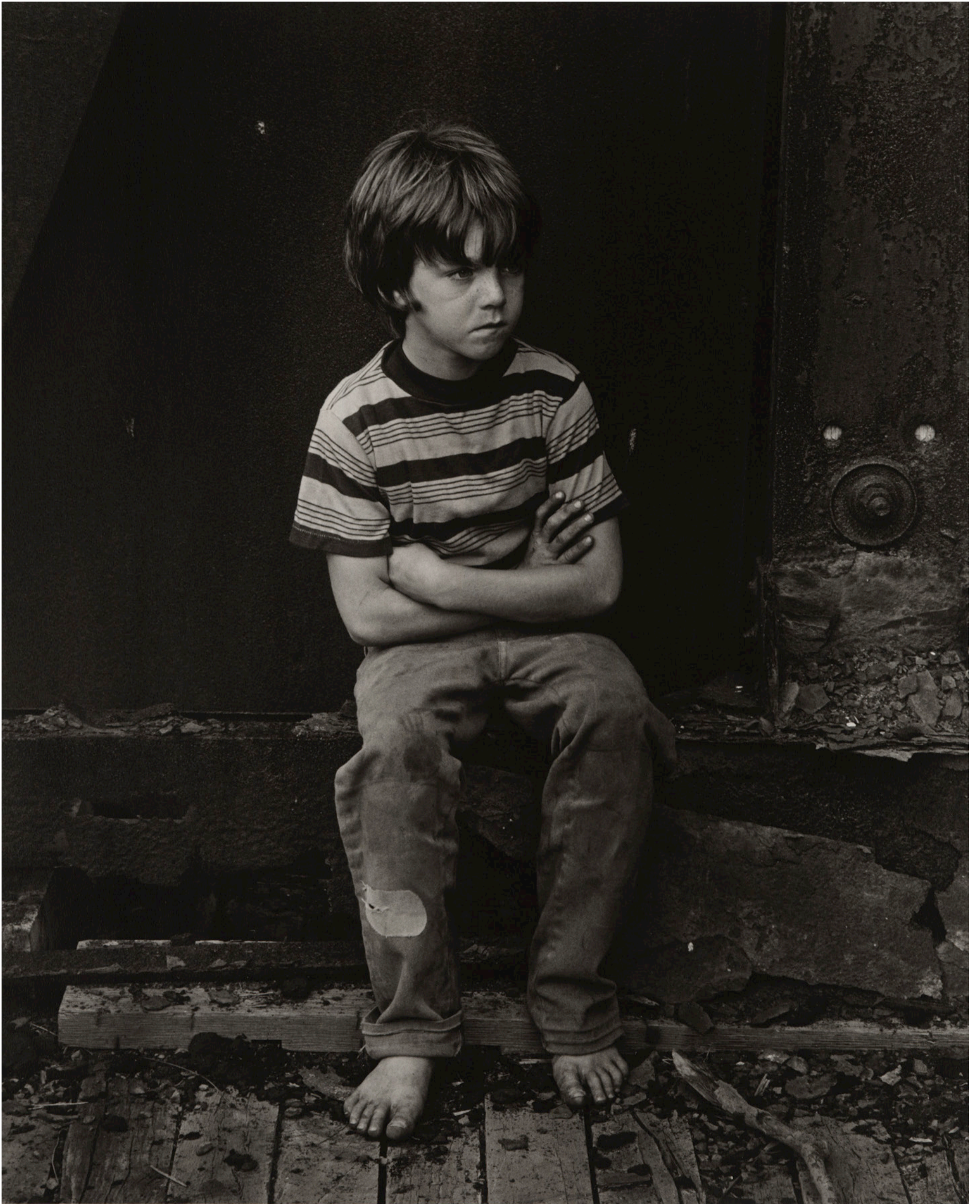
Osage Window, Scotts Run, Monongalia County, WV, 1970



Lula Shepherd



Oglesby Bedroom, Stotesbury, Raleigh County, West Virginia, 1982



Mark Callum (Boy at Abandoned Tipple)



Brenda Ward