

# The Company Store

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

One of the most important businesses in a typical coal patch community was the company store. Company stores were usually owned by the coal company that operated the local coal mine, although for legal reasons direct ownership was often held by a subsidiary company. In the Montour area, Federal Supply and Champion Stores ran many of the company stores.

The store supplied the miners with all the items needed for daily living. Groceries, meats, dry goods, clothes, furniture and appliances were all available at the store. They sold everything, such as mine tools, picks, shovels, large crowbars, augers, brass checks for blasting powder, hard hats, guns, etc. At some communities the store also included the local post office.

Most company stores did not operate on a cash system like stores in towns and cities. Some used a scrip system, where paper or tokens were obtained from the coal company on payday. The miners were paid in the scrip, which could only be used at the company store or other approved businesses, thus keeping the miners from spending their earnings elsewhere.



A clerk attends to a customer in the grocery section of the Muse company store.

Other places used a credit system, where the price of goods purchased would be accumulated by the company store and taken out of the miners' paychecks before they were issued. Miners did not make any money in those days. Everything was sold on credit. A lot of paydays the miners got nothing. More was spent than they made. In fact, most miners in those days were in the minus column after working for the coal company for a while. The company could manage the miners' finances by working them only one, two, or three days a week, keeping them broke. It didn't take long to go in the hole.

Shopping at the stores was different than it is today. Customers did not roam up and down open aisles picking out items. A clerk would take an order, get the items off the shelves and bring it to a counter for the customer. The customer did not handle items until they were ready to leave the store. Since there were only one or two choices or brands for grocery items it was a much simpler system than today.

Many of the company store buildings in our area have succumbed to fire or demolition after the mines were closed. However, several remain and have been repurposed for other businesses. The Tandem Connection bike shop adjacent to the trail in Hendersonville was originally a company store for the Henderson Mine community. This wooden building was built around 1916, after the mine was opened. The three story structure housed groceries and meats on the first floor, clothes, dry goods and furniture on the second and appliances in the third floor attic space. A freight elevator was used to move goods to and from the upper floors. It was powered by a rope which led outside the building where horses or mules pulled or lowered the elevator. A railroad spur next to the building allowed goods to be delivered to the store.



The rear of the Hendersonville Company Store shows the dormer where a freight elevator is housed. A rope leading outside the building would be pulled by horses or mules to raise or lower the elevator. Bryan Seip photo taken 2011.

The company store in Muse at National Mine #3 was a brick building in the center of town, now being used by a printing company. It also included a separate service station building where gas, oil, tires and maintenance could be purchased for automobile owners.



The company store in Muse, 1937.

The company store in Library at Montour Mine #10 was built in 1940 by the Federal Supply Co. After closing in the mid-1950's, it was later reopened for use by several businesses under the Champion Plaza banner. This was also a distribution facility supplying other stores in the Pittsburgh Coal Company's store system.

Buildings used as company stores also remain in Lawrence (Hills Station), Westland and Imperial. These are mostly brick or concrete block buildings, as many of the wooden structures built over a century ago have succumbed to fires or disuse and demolition.

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