INTERNATIONAL
STORYTELLING CENTER

Profit & Power: Company Towns and the Exploitation of Appalachia Transcript

(Please note: This transcript was created from closed captions and as such may have errors in spelling, grammar, and mechanics.)

>> Alicestyne Turley: Good afternoon. Happy Valentine's Day weekend to all of our viewers and followers. I'm Alicestyne Turley Director for the Freedom Stories Project for the International Storytelling Center. Welcome to today's discussion, "Unearthing the Black Heritage of Appalachia". As always, we are happy to be able to bring you this program based on funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities that's made this program possible. As always, today's program is recorded and can be found on the International Storytelling Center web page, Facebook page and YouTube. I would encourage our viewing audience to join us in the discussion by texting, if you have questions for the panelists or for me, please text us on our Facebook page. We'll get to as many of you questions as possible and as time allows. Our next public discussion is scheduled for this time and on the same media outlets for Saturday 13th. To keep up with what the discussion I will involve, that information will be on the International Storytelling Center website. We are happy to begin with storytellers, well-known artists and musical performers. Both Rhonda and Sparky. Sparky and Rhonda Rucker deliver uplifting presentations of toe-tapping songs spiced with humor, history, and tall tales. Their music includes a variety of old-time blues, Appalachian music, slave songs, and spirituals as well as originals, and they accompany themselves with fingerstyle picking and bottleneck blues guitar, old-time banjo, blues harmonica, piano, spoons, and bones.

Sparky's research on the African-American ballad tradition culminated in the highly acclaimed recording, Heroes and Hard Times. Rhonda is an author, and her third book, Welcome to Bombingham, is a historical novel set against the backdrop of the Birmingham Children's March during the civil rights movement.

Over several decades of performing, Sparky and Rhonda have performed at the Kennedy Center and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as well as NPR's On Point, Prairie Home Companion, Mountain Stage, and Morning Edition. Their recording, Treasures & Tears, was nominated for a W.C. Handy Award, and their music is also included on the Grammy-nominated anthology, Singing Through the Hard Times. The duo's most recent recording is Down by the Riverside. We are joined today by Rhonda and Sparky Rucker.

>> Sparky Rucker: Thank you. The storytelling aspect of African-Americans in the southern Appalachian Mountains sort of took a change after slavery. A lot of the stories came out of the songs. There was one legend when they were building the railroads through West Virginia and Virginia and up into Ohio to take out our precious resources of coal and timber was about the building of the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad. There was one legendary man named John Henry. The song is going to give you the legend. Maybe we'll talk about the fact later. With when John Henry was a baby, didn't know his man. That big bend tunnel on that road, it is bound to be the death upon me, lord oh. Bound to be the death upon me. Well, the captain said to John Henry, "Going to bring that old steam drill of mine. Going to bring that old steam drill out, going to walk that old steel right on down. I'm going to walk that old steel right on down." Well, John Henry hammered on the right. That steam drill, so I let that old steam drill beat me down, going to hammer my fool-self to death. Lord, lord. Going to hammer my fool-self to death. Well, John Henry said to his captain," cap, you think you are mighty fine." John Henry drove over 14 feet of steel that old steam drill on the main line. Lord, lord. Well, John Henry stepped out on the mountain and he looked out on the other side. Now, the only work that that poor boy did speak I want a cold drink of water before I die, lord, lord. Want a cool drink of water before I die. What did he want? He wants a cool drink of water before I die, lord, lord. I want a cool drink of

water before I die. Play it, Rhonda! You know they carried John Henry to the White House. And they buried him under the sand. Now, every locomotive kept on steaming right on by saying yonder lies a steel-driving man. Lord, lord. Yonder lies a steel-driving man. What did he say? Yonder lies a steel-driving man. Lord. Lord. Yonder lives a steel-driving man. Oh, yeah! John Henry. But, you know a lot of people confuse John Henry with another character that came out of West Virginia. They built a spur line from Bluefield, right between those two areas was a company called Shawnee Coal Company. This happened 20 years after John Henry, John Henry was a real man. These folks would gamble money away. Well, this fellow named John Hardy got cheated by Thomas Drew. He said there ain't going to be no more cheating in this town. He laid his gun on the table. The man blew him away. Back in those days, it was against the law to kill folk, not like today. So, they had the last public hanging in Welchel, West Virginia. The day of his hanging, they brought his mother down so she could see her baby one more time. They gave her a rocking chair to sit in. That morning they took him down to the river, baptized him, bought him a new suit, got his a white Stetson hat. You can see just before they hanged him, he took off the hat and sailed it out over the crowd. That's style. John, he was a desperate little man. Carried two guns every day. He shot that man on the West Virginia line. You ought to have seen John Hardy get away. John ran to a big, long town, Charleston, to make his getaway. Then up jumped the sheriff and grabbed him by the arm, he said, "Johnnie, come and go with me. Johnnie come and go with me." John Hardy had a pretty little wife. Said she worried it was blue. You know she went down to the track and she

never did look back. He said Johnnie I have been true to you. Oh, boy. Johnnie, I have been true to you. John Hardy had a mother and a dad. Sending them to do his bail. But will ain't no bail for murdering a man so they put John Hardy back in jail. They put John Hardy back in jail. You know I have been to the east and I have been to the west. Been this whole world around. You know I have been to the river and I have been baptized. Now take me to that hanging ground. Take me to that hanging ground. You can take me to that hanging ground. You can take me to that burial ground.

>> Sparky Rucker: They say John Hardy wrote that song before he died.

>> Alicestyne Turley: Well, my toes are still stomping. Sparky and Rhonda, thank you for that. We are happy to be joined today from company town Professor Baskin, who is an Adjunct Professor at Kentucky's only HBCU, Simmons College of Kentucky in Louisville, teaching Western Civilization and African American History courses.

Baskin has taught General Studies core courses required of first-year students and African American Studies courses throughout most of his career, in addition to directing African and African American Studies programs. He received his M.A. in American History from Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia and a B.A. in History from Berea College, Berea, Kentucky.

He served as editor of The Griot: The Journal of African American Studies, official organ of the Southern Conference of African American Studies, 1986 to 2018 and is a former member of the Lincoln Foundation Board of Trustees for two different terms and former member and Chairperson of the Kentucky Humanities Council. He currently serves as Chairperson of the Publishing Board of the General Association of Baptist in Kentucky, since 2015.

Our second guest is Dr. William Turner. He is best known for his ground-breaking research on African-American communities in Appalachia. William Turner, PhD

Director of Education, Appalachian African American Cultural Center. Is the fifth of ten children, was born in 1946 in the coal town of Lynch, Kentucky. His grandfathers, father, four uncles and older brother were coal miners.

Bill has spent his professional career studying and working on behalf of marginalized communities, helping them create opportunities in the larger world while not abandoning their important cultural ties. He is best-known for his ground-breaking research on African-American communities in Appalachia, but Bill's work is universal. As an academic and a consultant, he has studied economic systems and social structures in the urban South and burgeoning Latino communities in the Southwest. What he strives for on behalf of his clients and their communities is what we all want: prosperity, understanding and respect.

Co-edited the path-breaking textbook Blacks in Appalachia and thematic essays on Black Appalachians in the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, and the Encyclopedia of Appalachia.

Research associate (1979-1991) to Roots author Alex Haley, who said, "Bill knows more about black people in the mountains of the South than anyone in the world."

Chair, Department of Social Sciences, Winston-Salem State University.

Center for the Study of Civil Rights & Race Relations, Duke University. Ford Foundation-sponsored post-doctoral fellow. John Hope Franklin, Adviser.

Formerly Dean of Arts and Sciences and Interim President, Kentucky State University, Vice President for Multicultural Affairs, University of Kentucky; and Distinguished Professor of Appalachian Studies and Regional Ambassador at Berea College.

At the time of his retirement in late 2017, Turner was Research Scientist Leader at the Prairie View A&M University College of Agriculture and Human Sciences, where he led the collection and analysis of data on underserved Texans, the economically insecure, and long-term impoverished.

>> Alicestyne Turley welcome, Bill, to today's discussion. Thank you for joining us.

>> William Turner: My pleasure

>> Alicestyne Turley: Sparky and Rhonda will be joining us in the discussion. There is so much to cover when we talk about company towns. I thought I would start with Professor Baskin and Dr. Turner and ask this question. Your opinion of a company town. Tell us the positives and the negatives. You grew up in a company town Professor Baskin.

>> Andrew Baskin: Thank You for this opportunity. I didn't think about it being-- I would say the Alumina Company of America. It was segregated. As I look back upon that time period from when I lived there from 1951 to 1969. I would look at it as a contained community. We had our homes -- in other words, we were not there from 1939 when Alcoa was building a community. Coming in 1951, by then the Alumina Company of America was allowing individuals to buy their own homes. We had churches. We had the cemetery which the company had given to the African-Americans in the community. We had the pool. We had the baseball field. We had Charles and Paul High School. What I'm saying is where we grew up, when I grew up in Alcoa, I did not see all the negatives that I have heard talked about by other company towns and that might be because Alcoa was not as isolated as when we talk about the places in West Virginia or eastern Kentucky. Always in Alcoa, at least when I grew up there, was a four-lane highway that went through. The natives of Alcoa called it the 13 streets where African-Americans lived. Some people called it the hall community. That four-lane highway would carry traffic from Knoxville to the Great Smoky Mountains. There was not that isolation. The best example I can give you is a few years ago I worked on a project with CD J. Three community members. Dorothy Mitchell Kincaid, Joe Davenport and Charles Pride. They started a company called Black History as Told by Those Who Lived It. The one thing you'll find when you talk to African-Americans, even in my generation, when it comes to desegregation and desegregation of the schools going from Charles and Paul to Alcoa High School or the other schools. African-Americans were very content with what they had in that community. They were very content with Charles and Paul. There is still a lot of pride

in Charles and Paul now. I would say, when it comes to this discussion, a broader discussion about what segregated communities were like, somebody needs to talk to the black people who actually lived there. You will find in the 1960's, what they were asking for, quite often, was not necessarily to go to the white school. But they were just asking for equality. I think many people in Alcoa would have talked about our childhood in the 50s and the 60s, we were very happy. The best example I give before I turn it over to Dr. Turner is for six years age 12 to age 18 I carried the newspapers every morning for six years. I only missed two weeks out of the six years. Everybody knew when they got paid I was going to be going around to collect money for the newspaper. Of course, to pay me. In that six years, everybody paid me. When I left at the age of 18, nobody in you have Alcoa owed me a penny. Never in that six years did I worry about carrying money in that community. What I'm saying to you, in my experiences, I did not see the negatives in Alcoa that I heard in other company towns. Yes, it was segregated, but we had so much. Now it comparable to the whites? No. We had a sense of community. My generation that lived in Alcoa still talk about the community.

>> Alicestyne Turley: Wow! Bill. Does Lynch that that same story

>> William Turner: Let me go back to my grandfather on my father's side in Wise County, Virginia. Not too far from where my dad was born in Appalachia. My uncle John helped build railroads. Born in 1914. None of this stuff is too cinematic for me. It has nothing to do with what I read. It has been a life lived. When you think about the first part of the video that pointed out how did a 95 years ago, 1826, in Lowell, Massachusetts was the first planned community in this country. They wanted to make textile. That meant they were tied into enslavement in the south because they brought the cotton to Massachusetts to manufacture. That's where Harvard and Yale and a lot of places got all the endowment from the southern money out of slavery making slave all the way to Massachusetts. Similarly, I looked this morning -- there is still about 12 -- what they call company towns you ought to visit. My hometown, Lynch is on the list. Although your video says they have shutdown. I talked to one of my home boys this morning at 8:00, I think it is still there, actually

>> Alicestyne Turley: No, no, I said they were abandoned as company towns.

>> William Turner: The company left, yeah, yeah. There is still a town on the south side of Chicago called Pullman. Pullman built all these cars. That was a better part of the civil rights movement. The way the porters went up and down the line. The sweetest place in America was a town called Hershey, Pennsylvania. I had a Hershey bar about five minutes ago. The man who made pianos, part of Queens, New York City. A place called Coltville, not the beer but the gun. Colts were made in Connecticut. Company towns are nothing new in the United States. Even today when we see places like Mountain City, California where all of the people from Facebook and what we call the Silicon Valley, my mom was born in Bennett in 1924. It was owned by International Hollies Ter.

>> Alicestyne Turley: They are still living off that money

>> William Turner: My wife, for example, grew up in Concorde, North Carolina next to a company town called Kannapolis. Her mom worked in textiles for 40 years. In our family, this is in our blood, those towns were always built by these industrialists because they wanted to have a stable workforce. And wouldn't a stable workforce make a nice place for them to live. Things were very orderly. In fact, so orderly, in my town, I grew up in a gated community. Lynch had a gate in the early 1900's. They printed their own money. It was very orderly. It was very routine. So much so, that I think that's where we got a lot of productivity out of people because you have to remember when my grandparents came into Harlin County in 1920, they were fresh out of the farms and the sharecroppers in Alabama and Georgia and Mississippi. Then we were all born. As I mentioned a while ago, my brother's child lives in a company town in California. It is all going in a full circle. I think he makes slightly more money than our grandfather. Things were very orderly. I think that's what Andrew meant about the orderliness of it. When I was 20 years old, before I left home, I went to

Lexington College in Lexington, Kentucky. I looked around and said these black folk grew up around horse farms in central Kentucky. I thought they were better off than we were, until I got there and saw them. They were no better off than we were as working-class people. My cousins who grew up in Harlem in New York City -- I used to think I had never went anywhere. When I went to visit them they had never been to the empire state building. They were growing up in this big city like a country cousin and city cousin. In our little towns, they were self-contained but I said this before, if I had known then what I know now, I never would have chosen to be born in Kentucky. My mom was born and my dad lived there. That was the life we could live. They did well to raise ten of us. We were able to go to college. The colored school I went to probably produced more PhDs and doctors and lawyers than any state. We had the best teachers money could buy. I said it before, as Andrew said, that the college going rate went down after they closed the color school because they ran all the black teachers off. I don't want to just unhinge, but it was a company town

>> Alicestyne Turley: Well, you bring up several good points. Especially when we are talking about black labor and what that looks like today. I have heard both you and Andrew mention two very important things. Number one, sense of security and safety. And place. Having a place. Knowing your place. Knowing your neighbors. So, this idea of community and company towns. So, let's talk a little bit about what happened -- Alcoa is still going strong even though the company doesn't technically, what I think I heard you say, Andrew, the company doesn't really I own the town anymore, correct?

>> Andrew Baskin: Correct

>> Alicestyne Turley: But they have a large presence there

>> Andrew Baskin: The largest employer in the county is no longer Alcoa. It is a Japanese country that probably Sparky and Rhonda know that is in Maryville. Alcoa is still going strong. There is a sense of community. Part centers around the pride that comes from athletics. Alcoa High School has one the most football championships in the State of Tennessee. There is still a sense of pride. Bill and I have a lot in common. One branch of my family came to Lynch, Kentucky from Bullet County in Alabama. One came from Alcoa and one came from Lynch. There was a sense of pride in the community. When we talk about segregation, in the media the picture is negative. I think, for the people who lived in, there was -- it is when you leave there that you find out yes, it may not have been what the whites had. But you had something else they didn't have, that's sense of community. Our schools were important. Charles and Paul was important. Even if you drive through Alcoa right now, you still see Charles and Paul. If you ask people from my generation who lived on the 13 streets, they will talk to you about the Charles and Paul endeavors. It is important

>> Alicestyne Turley: So, something -- and this brings up the issue was segregation a positive -- I have had this argument with others about the power of desegregation. How much did we gain? How much did we lose? Were African-Americans losers in the integration battle? I know you made a comment about people not wanting to lose their neighborhoods, they just wanted equality. But instead of equality, integration was substituted. And so, integration substituted, but it seems from what I'm hearing from both you and Bill, a lot was lost. Would you agree or disagree?

>> Andrew Baskin: As I tell my students I don't use the word integration. What we have is desegregation. Yes, we lost something with when we lost the schools. Just because you do not have the same textbooks and so forth does not mean that you cannot learn. I learned in Charles and Paul. I think Bill learned in Lynch. And that gave you a foundation to help you be successful when you left that community. It is like anything else, there are positives and there are negatives. I'm just saying to you that the company town of Alcoa, the 13 streets, may have been segregated, but it was not always negative because we had that sense of community. We had our schools. We had our churches. We had our pool. Put it this way, as when I teach now at Simmons College in Kentucky, the difference between many of the African-American students at

Simmons versus Berea; in a black community you can be unapologetically black. You do not have to code switch. I think, when I lived in the 13 streets, we didn't worry about having to please or try to please whites when we were at home, when we went to church. Now, maybe when you went to work was one thing. But when you got in that community you could be you

>> William Turner: I would add, in terms of my book. I have a chapter that I had to work with the editors about. I have a chapter called "integration has done more harm to our community like a kick in the ass by an Alabama mule. I hope you can bleep that out. But the fact of the matter is we traded the kind of autonomy in our community for integration. And here we are 70 years later and we have neither. It is not integrated. In fact, the greatest challenge in most American schools is what they call the achievement gap. Now, one of the things they say would solve this achievement gap is if these students had more teachers that looked like themselves. Now, I went for 11 years before they integrated the school in my senior year of high school. All the teachers lived in our community. They knew us. Heck, I never knew the first names of some of the kids I went to school with until we got to the white school and they called the roll one day. They called everybody's name. At the black school t teacher new everybody. She didn't have to call. She'd tell your momma that you were not in there. The first thing they did is they could not have a black coach and a white coach for a football team. So, guess who didn't get to be a coach? They couldn't have a white principal and black principal. Guess who got to be the principal. In Lynch our principal, Dr. John D. When they integrated the made the principal a man Lonnie jack Isaacs. He was 27. Mr. Coleman was 49. I have a chapter about Mr. Isaacs in my book. They chased him out of town. And went to Lexington to be the principal at Henry Clay High School. A lot of things had to do with community cohesiveness that segregation forced us into. That's okay. I learned a lot about civic engagement. My father belonged to the UMWA. Mom and dad had a picture in our living room of John L Lewis and Jesus right beside each other. I'm telling you, it was in our house, John L Lewis. It is still on the wall. The east star the Prince Hall Masons, the Elks. We have all these things -- when kids didn't have two parents, you had a community and it moves along. It was so impactful to us that most of us that left home starting 50 years ago, some people in our community, when they moved to work at a car company in Cleveland they got together and formed Eastern Kentucky Association. There Is a chapter in Atlanta, Houston, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Los Angeles. They come together every Labor Day because we have recreated these communities back in the places where we moved. I have at least 15 friends here in Houston, where I live. And I grew up with them. We see each other all the time. So that conscious -- what it meant to us growing up together, all of our mothers were homemakers and our dads worked in the coal mine. It carried through across to generations. So, you just really can't recreate that the way those communities that was so self-contained had pressed upon the sense of interconnectedness. That's what my book is about, it is not about my home family as much as it is about the commonality of our families in Lynch, Bent Line, Blue Hill, Keystone and Geary, West Virginia. You close your eyes and go to one and it is like being in the other. My brother is married to a woman

>> Alicestyne Turley: Olinger’s were my neighbors.

>> Andrew Baskin: I didn't teach Betty. Let me give you an example. We didn't have the Eastern Kentucky Social Club but every year until COVID came around, the alumni of Charleston Hall have a reunion. In 1969 to 2019, which was our 50th reunion, my class, which was the first one that had to go to Alcoa High School. Charles and Paul had closed. We had to make a decision of whether or not we are going to participate in the Charles M Hall reunion. Which we didn't graduate from but we spent ten or 11 years there. Or if we were going to go to the reunion of our classmates at Alcoa High School for the 50th anniversary. All of us, all of us -- sorry, maybe one, all of us chose the Charles M Hall reunion because that was the community. Not Alcoa High School. As one of my classmates said when I interviewed them for the project for CDJ Media at Alcoa High School we felt invisible. We were just there because at that time the government said you have to desegregate and we are going to close the black school and you have to go there and we were invisible. At Charles Hall we were visible. We were visible. We knew each other. The teachers lived in the community or

they came from Knoxville. They knew our families; they went to church. We went to church together. And all of that disappeared when we desegregated. I know we may be going off the subject, but I'm saying there were some advantages to that self-contained community in a company town. All company towns, like everything else, will not be the same. I'm very proud of coming from the 13 streets in Alcoa, Tennessee

>> Alicestyne Turley: I can't leave Sparky and Rhonda out of this discussion. Were either of you in a company town? Did you grow up in a company town?

>> Sparky Rucker: I grew up in Knoxville, which was a sports rival to Alcoa High School

>> Andrew Baskin: That's right

>> Sparky Rucker: Listening to Andrew and Bill, it occurred to me that growing up in the black community in a mixed town, such as Knoxville, as opposed to growing up in a company town where everybody is black, if you are walking around the town late at night in a white -- all of a sudden you have gone into the white community, you are automatically a suspect. So, you had the disadvantage of always being the one they would call the police on because you happened to be in the wrong neighborhood. I know that the black -- the Edward Cox swimming pool in Knoxville, which was the black pool, was way below what you guys had in Alcoa. We always tried to go to Alcoa because it was better yet. One of the disadvantages of growing up in Knoxville and living in the projects that were built during Roosevelt's administration and one was built later in Truman's administration. They were rat infested, bug infested, just horrible places to live. You go into the schools, we would get the second, third and fourth generations of those books. They were already marked up and whatnot because the white schools got them first. We would get them after they got the new books, we got the old books. I was thinking of the disadvantaged of living in a mixed community at that time.

>> Alicestyne Turley: Wow. And you are telling a story that I want us not to let anything get away. In our conversations you shared with me, the research you have done on John Henry. I cannot let that go by. I had this discussion even when teaching, I was told John Henry was a myth. Now you have done your research on John Henry, share that before we get too much deeper in this conversation because it was a wonderful song. Can you enlighten our viewers as to the real John Henry?

>> Sparky Rucker: Well, I'm one of a long line of people who did research. There was a man named Guy B Johnson some of you may have seen the books when Odom and Johnson did collections of black music and whatnot. He got the lower billing because he was the black -- at that time -- getting his masters. Once he got his doctorate, he did some research on John Henry. The thing is Guy Johnson and later on Lewis Chapel did research. Scott Williams Nelson has done the best research to-date. I'm one of those people that no matter what you bring me, I have to do my own research. I have a mind -- here's a fact that comes along and it stays there in my head. All of a sudden, maybe years later, something that relates to that comes and they line up inside my brain. All of a sudden, it goes oh, wow! This lightbulb comes up. That's what happened with me with this John Henry research. I'm going to drop back for a second. Back in 1972, a fellow that I met when I was working for the counsel in the counsel in the southern mountains. I was sent to Charleston, West Virginia, to help out with the garbage worker's strike. I met a guy named Mickey Lassiter. There was a white musician named John -- oh my gosh -- doesn't matter. He got a big grant to put on ten festivals in West Virginia. He came to me and he knew me as a musician and said, "would you be willing to take this money and do a festival concerning John Henry?" Mickey Lassiter and I got together. Two years in 72 and 74. We put on these festivals. The one in 74 was a huge festival. Everybody in the country came to it because it was run by black people and talking about black heroes on whatnot. All these musicians that I knew that never got to play together, because if they did a festival, they would be the black act invited to be at this festival. I said," hey, we can't pay as much as other festivals. If you come down you'll play with Johnnie Shines and Louis Blew Y. The man on my hat. Guy Johnson Was There I got to meet those people. Ed came to me and said, "I don't want to see the festival die. Let's continue the festival." I said you have to deal with the and

politicians and I'll bring the musicians in. One of the later ones in Morgantown, is when I met Scott Reynolds who had done the new research. He said," let's forget about thinking at the Big Ben tunnel in all of the songs". He found out there was a tunnel built in West Virginia going through Lewis Mountain. It Was the Tunnel Built Before They Built the Big Tunnel in West Virginia. The Rock They Were trying to drill through had slate and shell. He came into West Virginia he put all this money into helping build the railroad. They said you have to finish it by this date. Well, all of the hired people that -- the people digging the tunnels they said, "we can't work in this tunnel. All this soot is getting in our lungs." It was worse than what they dealt with as miners, in terms of getting the coal dust. They refused to work. What did they do? They said," let's get prisoners who can't refuse to work." They sent down to Virginia for the Virginia State Pen to bring a prisoner. One of the prisoners happened to be a young fellow who had come back south from New Jersey where he escaped from slavery to New Jersey, came back down to work in the -- when they were trying to dig up all the bodies that had been buried after the Civil War and wanted to ship them home. The Friedmann's bureau was involved. He got

into trouble and ended up being sent to the penitentiary in Richmond, Virginia. Well, when they sent for these workers to come -- the chain gang to come dig in the tunnels.

This young fellow, 19 years old, John William Henry, was his name. And they say that he was not the big person. What they needed since they were working in a confined space, muscular people but small. Like snow white and the seven dwarfs. Small but muscular to work. They said I don't want to work in the steam drill that's causing all this air in this tunnel. They said this young fellow was a good worker. Everybody was proud he would work. But the silica killed him. They didn't bury him at the site. Because the deal they had with the prison was they had to ship the bodies back to make sure that -- if you don't ship the bodies back, we'll assume they escaped and you will owe us money, talking to the railroad. They had to ship all the people who died working in that tunnel back to Richmond. There at the prison there was a huge, white structure that everybody called the White House. That's why in the song it said they carried John Henry to the White House. There was a railroad line that ran right by the White House. When they destroyed the old Virginia state pen, they started digging around that railroad track and they found this huge, mass grave where they had buried all of these chain gang people. That's why in the song it said they buried John Henry at the White House. They buried him under the sand. Every locomotive that goes by says yonder lies a steel-driving man

>> Alicestyne Turley: Has that site been commemorated?

>> Sparky Rucker: So, Scott Nelson found a program of a man named John Wilson Henry -- at the tail end of the war, he was working with the union army, they were doing reconstruction. He was a servant for some of the union troops. Well, the black codes that went into effect right after the Civil War, the black codes, the things -- what do they call it? Jim Crow laws that were in effect from the time of the Civil War to when all of us graduated college. The black laws that had black people sitting in the backs of buses, not being able to eat in restaurants, not being able to stay in motels, even if they were doing business. You couldn't stop at the restroom as you traveled interstates, you had to sneak off behind the trees and whatnot. So, this story seems to be true that this is the John Henry. In fact, after Scott Reynolds Nelson's research, I started researching and I found the 1870 census records with John Henry's name in it. That was the group that had been sent up to work on the railroad. I found two other pictures of John Henry. Now, there are these three pictures of the real John Henry that exists.

>> Alicestyne Turley: He was a real man. Is the John Henry at the tunnel -- I know at one time there was a monument there. Is that still there?

>> Sparky Rucker: The next tunnel built after the Lewis Tunnel then Big Ben Tunnel. The people that worked at that tunnel, they are the ones that made up the song. People talked about, do you remember that

guy, John Henry? He was really a strong worker. All of a sudden, his name was put in the song saying he was there at the Big Ben Tunnel.

>> Rhonda Rucker: There Are Markers There

>> Sparky Rucker: There Are Markers There Talking About John Henry being there. He died in Virginia. All the people working there knew who John Henry was. All the people that did the research, they were able to interview people who had known John Henry

>> Alicestyne Turley: So, you are going to publish all that, right, Sparky?

>> Sparky Rucker: Who knows? I have made -- what do you call those things you ran at the start?

>> Rhonda Rucker: PowerPoints

>> Sparky Rucker: I want to run a PowerPoint. I was going to send it to you

>> Alicestyne Turley: Please. We can always use it in our toolkit. I'd be happy to have that. John said this is the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Nimrod.

>> Sparky Rucker: He Was a Character. He Was a Retired Coalminer That Lived a Month After His 99th Birthday. Smoked Like a Train. Had Black Lung. I said if he hasn't smoked, he would still be alive today. Lived to 99 years old. He was a wonderful singer, ballad singer. That was another white town. When they went on strike, they brought in the Italians. They got the Italians to join to the strike then they brought in black workers. There was truly an incident in trying to unionize people against the coal mining companies. They wanted to exploit. In fact, John McCutchen that called, he is a wonderful folk singer himself. He was the one that told me about a place called Coal Creek, Tennessee. It Was Called Lake City but Now It Is Called Rocky Top. That brought in chain gang workers to break the strike. There was a song called "buddy, won't you lower down the line?" That came out of that. It is 50-something miles from where Louis blue y lived. His people worked in the mines. He wanted me to talk about Nimrod. He was a character. He could do the miner squat. I bet Bill knows what I'm talking about where they wouldn't let them have any place to sit down while they were working. They could actually squat down almost sitting down with their knees up in the air resting the arms and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and singing songs and chewing tobacco, because you weren't supposed to smoke them cigarettes in the mines because you could set off that methane gas and have horrible things happen. Were there problems that happened any mines and whatnot there in Lynch?

>> Alicestyne Turley: Are you asking Bill?

>> Sparky Rucker: Were there any mining accidents that happened some of the mines to the people that lived in Lynch.

>> William Turner: Sure. Sure. In fact, in the early 70s the last mine was Scotia mine. When I was 11 we waited outside ten hours. His dad was involved in a mine cave-in. It broke one leg, several ribs, one arm, knocked all his teeth out. I was ten or 11 years old. He said I'll be just fine. There was nine of us at the time. Dad went back in the mine less than a year later. I think -- somebody sent it to me the other day -- the last mine somebody was killed in 1996 from a coal mine. There was so many people I knew who had like one thumb or missing digits somewhere because it was just so common. But it was also one of the safest mines compared to what they used to call dog hole mines. My father, for example, before he came to Lynch in 1937, his last stop before coming was in Lake Vine. He worked in --

>> Sparky Rucker: Did you know Bill Worthington? When I worked -- Clint Wood was from the white workers

>> William Turner: Earl Gilmore was in there

>> Sparky Rucker: When the counsel moved down there, there was no place for me to live. Because there were no motels or if there were no houses I could rent. They didn't want me living in Clintwood. This one woman let me rent a house on the road at Georgia's fork there. Fortunately, her son lived next door to me and her nephew lived across the street. Those are the friends I had because I didn't -- and this is in 1972 -- because I didn't live in the prescribed place that black folks live, my life was in constant danger all the time. In fact, everybody threatening to kill me. The only time I owned a gun was I bought a shotgun when I lived there. I said, "I'm going to take a few with me." When they started talking about using dynamite, I said," I think it is time we quit."

>> Alicestyne Turley: Bill and Sparky and Professor Baskin, question we have from our audience has to do with what happens to the company towns when the companies pulled out? Did they strip the resources from the town?

>> Andrew Baskin: I would say with Alcoa, what's the phrase? Location. Location. Location. I think there was probably -- I had left Alcoa in 69 when I graduated. I would go back periodically to visit families. Yes, when the plants began to close and there were three plants originally in Alcoa. There will be economic profits. Fortunately, because of where Alcoa is located is I tell anyone, when you fly into the Knoxville airport, you have flown into Alcoa. If anyone's been to Knoxville and to the airport, you have visited Alcoa. It is where Alcoa is located. That means that economically, as they moved away from depending upon the Aluminum Company of America you have people driving to Bridge. You have people driving to Knoxville. You have people working in the company in Maryville. Iconic Steel is there. The community where I lived called the 13 streets. Now you have more desegregation. You have whites living in the community. You have Hispanics living in the community. It is still primarily black. But I think the key difference between Alcoa and many other company towns in Appalachia is its location. That main highway that I talk about Hall Road that will take you from Knoxville to the Great Smoky Mountains has always been there. Alcoa has not been as isolated. Yes, there have been problems economically. I do not feel you will find the economic depression you see in other company towns in Appalachia because of where Alcoa is located.

>> Alicestyne Turley: If you are living in an isolated, rural community, not so fortunate. Bill, Lynch is not white. How would you characterize what happened in Lynch?

>> William Turner: Well, in 1984, I think it was. My father was still alive. United States Steel decided okay, we have been here 90 years. We are out of here. They sold Lynch to a major mineral company out of St. Louis called Arch Minerals. They sold Lynch for a million dollars in 1984. Prior to that, most of these company towns would not allow people to own their homes. We did not own the home that we lived in. All of us were born and raised in that little house. We still have it. They sold it to mom and daddy when I was in the tenth grade for $780. When you think about the relative sense of what it meant. There is the whole idea of what happens to a company town when the company leaves? We saw it in Detroit. Detroit used to be one of the largest ten cities in the United States. When the auto industry moved to Mexico and when the cars started coming out in droves out of Japan, the footprint in Detroit shrank. A lot of our people that left for Detroit to work in the 40s and 50s, Detroit shrunk. In my part of the town today, they took the lightbulbs with them. However, in Lynch what they left was the skeleton of that industrial plant. It was a big industrial plant. So, with all of that, when the train stopped coming -- it used to be said a train would leave there every morning full of coal and the train will come back every night full of money. It went that way for 95 years and all of a sudden it stopped. For example, I hear people talking about getting their shots and the thing Bernie Sanders called healthcare for all. When we grew up, the company provided the best healthcare you could image. Believe it or not, I was born in Notre Dame Hospital in Lynch, Kentucky. That was stressful because the Catholic church came into many parts of Appalachia. People don't understand how they came and educated people in the mountains through Catholic services in the United States. They owned the hospital

where my brothers and sisters were born. We lived in a kind of place that was an internal colony and then the colonies left one day

>> Alicestyne Turley: When they left, did they strip the resources? For instance, did all the coal mining equipment?

>> William Turner: They had taken all the coal out. Seams were bare. The equipment they sold for a million dollars. Those people began to understand there is a more efficient and profitable way to mine coal, rather than going under the mountains to get the coal, which my father did for 50 years. They went to the top of the mountains, called mountain top renewal. They stripped the mine. The creeks we used to fish in and swim in, you could hardly walk in them because they were filled with all kinds of chemicals -- heavy chemical residue that came from strip mining and mountain top removal. So, yes, Lynch was at the base of -- Black Mountain was the highest mountain in Kentucky. When they began to want to take the top off of Black Mountain, a group called Kentuckians for the Commonwealth they stopped that. God forbid you go into West Virginia; 5,000 mountains were decimated over a 30-year period. I think the greatest loss was the loss of people. The people that left. As I said earlier, I grew up in a town where a fourth of the people and sometimes a fourth of other people were black in the hollers around Jenkins and Fleming Neon and Hazard and Floyd County and Pike County. Now Harlem County has become the black bear capital in Kentucky. You are more likely to come across a black bear than a black person in Harlem County

>> Alicestyne Turley: This is very, very true. And they populate quickly. I have questions from a viewer. What kind of advice would you give to people today that don't have the town experience? What advice would you give them?

>> Andrew Baskin: I would tell them to have respect. Respect for your elders and gain knowledge about what they did to survive to put you in the position that you are in. I would say that you need to learn. You do not have to have someone to teach you and to give you an education. The best education that a person can provide is what you give yourself. I would say back to respect, have respect for yourself, respect for your community. I would say to that person to prepare themselves for life. Because they do not know where they are going to end up. At the end of this month, God willing, I'll be 70 years old. I'm not sure when I stepped on the Berea College Campus in 1969 That I Knew Where I Would Be 51 Years Later. Hopefully, I Laid a Foundation for Where I Am Now. I Would Say to that person focus and the future and be prepared. Also, you have to have faith. Faith has carried our people for a long ways. I know that there are problems quote unquote with the black church. Just as there is with any other entity. You want to say they are hypocrites? Yep, they are hypocrites. But that black church helped us to survive. I know when I go to Lynch I'm going to Greater Mount Baptist Church. I know where many of the people will have. I know Reverend Hampton is one of the most respected people in the community. I always stop by See Cedar Lawn Cemetery to say thank you to my parents. Then I'm going back to the church. That's my foundation. You have to have foundation and pride. You prepare yourself for life. You don't know where you are going to be. You have to remember, that's all you can do. If God leads you back to the mountains, that's fine. But if God doesn't lead you back there, that's fine, also.

>> Alicestyne Turley: Bill, your advice?

>> William Turner: What I think Andrew said is a global, cultural issue that I agree with. On specific levels, as a group of young black people in southwest Virginia called Black Appalachia Youth Rising. They coalesce with a group called Stay. Which is an organization that came out of work between Apple Shop and the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee. There is the African-American Appalachia Center in Virginia. Emily Hudson Jones who runs Southeast Kentucky African-American Museum and Culture Center. There Is Wayne Reilly in London, Kentucky. There Is Vaughn Scott in Keystone, West Virginia. There are groups that have taken the place of the Federation of Appalachia Housing what does Peter run out of Berea?

>> Mason

>> William Turner: Mason. Yeah. I don't know if my e-mail or contact information -- but if anyone young out there wants to know those individuals, I live in Texarlacha. Good people doing good things in Kentucky State. There is people at Marshal University in West Virginia. There are a lot of people out there. I tell kids who can stay in the mountains -- there is a lot of people in the mountains doing some things with the new green economy that will be prevalent for these young people. They do not have to come and live in a big city like Houston if they can stay in Kingsville, Johnson City, Morganville. It is the new economy. The key is get yourself an education. Get yourself an education. Get yourself an education

>> Alicestyne Turley: That's going to have to be our last word, Bill, Andrew, Sparky and Rhonda, we are out of time. We still have questions. If we didn't get to your question, we will answer them online. I want to thank all of our viewers and listeners to join us for today's discussion. It was wonderful. Hopefully, everyone received what they needed from it. Check the toolkits, which will be online. And the resources, Bill's book, I had a question about it. It is called Harlem Renaissance, a Memoire of Black Lives in Coal Towns. It Is with West Virginia Press.

>> William Turner: It will be out in 2021. Maybe you can preorder it

>> Alicestyne Turley: On behalf of International Storytelling Center, keep coming back. Keep telling those stories. Thank you.