

Transcribed Excerpts from “Back to Buxton,” July 1, 2009

Excerpt 1 (pg.7)

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.

Excerpt 2 (pg. 8)

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."

Excerpt 3 (pg. 14)

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.