The Big Sandy

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For Bob, who taught me to love Kentucky
Preface

THE BIG SANDY is a river and a watershed and a place where yesterday, today, and tomorrow exist together in haunting harmony. While the Big Sandy River and its Levisa and Tug forks drain parts of West Virginia and Virginia, this work is concerned primarily with the river’s role in the history of Kentucky. Lying in the easternmost section of the state, the Big Sandy River Valley encompasses the Kentucky counties of Boyd, Floyd, Johnson, Lawrence, Martin, and Pike and the eastern edges of Magoffin, Knott, and Letcher. Life in the valley has been somewhat like the fickle river—always changing, filled with upsets, surprises, disappointments, and occasional pleasures.

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to give, within the limitations of a compact format, an accurate account of the history of Kentucky’s Big Sandy River Valley; and second, to acquaint the general public with the development of a part of eastern Kentucky too long the subject of stereotypical generalizations. It is hoped that the scope of this study will give every reader some information, a modicum of entertainment, and a partial understanding of a fascinating region of Kentucky.

While many Big Sandians have unselfishly shared their knowledge of eastern Kentucky with me, a few must be singled out for particular thanks. The late Wallace Williamson III gave much encouragement to a non-Kentuckian by birth, and a “brought-on” to boot, in the research and writing of this work. Nora and Henry Scalf opened their home and their extensive collection of Big Sandy materials to me. Harry Campbell and Dave Zegeer kindly arranged a tour of underground and surface mine sites. Julius Mullins gra-
ciously granted me hours of conversation on the eve of the 1977 United Mine Workers of America-Bituminous Coal Operators Association (UMWA-BCOA) contract negotiations.

The librarians at the Kentucky Library of Western Kentucky University and at the University of Kentucky libraries and the staff at Alice Lloyd College have been extremely helpful. The Louisville and Huntington districts of the Corps of Engineers and the Kentucky Department of Mines and Minerals have shared their extensive records. Lyn Adams, Ron Daley, Sam Johnson, John Preston, Leonard Roberts, Jean Stephenson, Jerry Sutphin, and a host of others have shared their time and expertise with me. The Western Kentucky University Faculty Research Committee extended the financial assistance that made much of my travel in the Big Sandy Valley possible. My husband Bob Carraco and colleagues Nancy Baird and David Lee offered much encouragement. I wish also to express my great obligation and sincere appreciation to Professor Lowell Harrison for his patient assistance and persistent prodding, without which this work would never have been completed.
THROUGH A RIVER THRESHOLD

Roll on forever, Sandy waters roll!
   Jesse Stuart, “Leaves from
   Plum Grove Oak”

With the Big Sandy River Valley of Kentucky as our destination, B.C. and I left my family’s northeast Georgia home and wound our way up the southern Appalachian chain to Blacksburg, Virginia. While such a route was a roundabout way for two central Kentuckians to reach the eastern section of the commonwealth, we wanted to start out near the headwaters of the Sandy where many of the area’s first explorers and settlers began. Thus Blacksburg, once the Draper’s Meadow where Shawnee captured pioneer heroine Mary Ingles, serves the modern traveler admirably as a jumping-off point.

To the west and northwest of Blacksburg is the Big Sandy River Valley, approximately 190 miles long and 80 wide. Shaped like a cornucopia, it is located between the Blue Ridge Mountains on the east and fertile Bluegrass region of Kentucky on the west. The basin is drained by the Big Sandy River and its two tributaries, the Tug and Levisa forks. Here in the Appalachian plateau where the borders of Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky come together lie the headwaters of both forks. They rise no more than twenty miles apart and both flow in a northerly direction on paral-
The terrain is rugged and the traveler is confined, for the river dictates the way one must travel. Over most of the area the main streams and their many tributaries flow in deep, narrow, sinuous valleys between steep, winding, forested ridges. Ribbonlike roads coil up the valleys and over the hills, railroads cling tenaciously to the riverbanks, and houses and mobile homes are perched on high hillsides.

In fact it was this ruggedness that gained the territory between the forks for Kentucky. Instructed by their respective governors to establish the main fork as the boundary between Virginia and Kentucky, a joint commission met in Louisa in 1799 to determine which was the larger tributary. Far from home in an almost unpeopled wilderness, wet and weary as darkness fell, and warmed only by the potent spirits they carried in abundance, the commissioners agreed that the eastern fork, the Tug, was obviously the larger since it was deeper and wider than the Levisa.

During the rainy night the Levisa, having a greater tributary plain, expanded to its actual proportions, dwarfing the Tug Fork. Arising the next morning, the group was greeted by the sight of the larger, rampaging west fork. But, according to Big Sandy historian Henry Scalf, like true Kentuckians and Virginians they chose to ratify while sober what they had agreed upon while drunk. Thus Kentucky gained approximately 1,300 square miles of territory. Big Sandy humorists persist in saying that if the commissioners had remained sober, Prestonsburg would today be in West Virginia, as would all the east bank of the Levisa Fork. In this light, while Kentucky might have been spared years of fraudulent land claims, the commonwealth would have lost numerous valuable mining sites in Pike County and much severance tax revenue.

Likewise the rugged topography was a major factor in the location of game trails and Indian routes through the valley. Not far from the Big Sandy headwaters were the Warriors' Path and its branches—the Big Sandy Trail and the Shaw-
nee Trail. Over these, generations of Mound Builders and their warrior brothers hunted, traded, and raided in days gone by. After them the white hunters and early settlers slowly pushed into the valley, groping their way in a strange and often hostile wilderness.

Today an extensive network of two-lane roads covers Kentucky's Big Sandy region, and railroad transportation is provided along the main stream, two forks, and principal tributaries by the Norfolk and Western Railroad and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. But even so it would take half a summer to see the region and still there would be many hidden hollows and unsuspected valleys.

A three-hour car trip over U.S. 460 from Blacksburg through the vicinity of the headwaters brings B.C. and me to Kentucky proper. Our trail is a mountain road which twists and turns, climbs sharply, and drops abruptly. Our admiration for those early people grows with each mile. Densely wooded mountain slopes crowd in on both sides of the road. The aura of the past permeates our thoughts. In 1799 the Kentucky General Assembly created Floyd County, and from this base all or parts of eighteen Kentucky counties have since been carved. Very little effort is needed to imagine this land as virgin territory, unchanged since America's early youth.

We are romanticizing, of course, for the land is not that remote. There is the paved highway itself to keep one's perspective firmly in the twentieth century. Basketball goals adorn many of the trees along the sides of the road. At various twists in the highway are coal tipples and surface mine sites. Railroad coal cars pulled by diesel engines carry the "black gold" north to Catlettsburg, Ashland, and beyond. Rolls Royces, Cadillacs, and expensive sports cars share the road with coal trucks. Smoke stains the sky as the funeral pyres of junked automobiles and piles of discarded coal and slate burn fiercely. Even this far-eastern section of Kentucky is not totally deprived of civilization's mixed blessings.

While we cannot see it, to the northeast is the Big Sandy's Tug Fork, which for ninety-four miles forms the boundary
between West Virginia and Kentucky. Tug Fork's major tributaries are the waters of Pond, Big, Wolf, and Rockcastle creeks. All of these have headwaters not far from the Johns Creek tributary of the Levisa. Approximately 100 miles of the Tug was navigable in years gone by, but the navigation season was shorter than that of the Levisa. Not only did the east fork rise more quickly after a rain, but it also ran out more quickly, leaving little time for steamboat and pushboat activities. Along the banks of the Tug, the hills are high, rocky, and steep, many of them unsuited for cultivation.

Along our car route, the Levisa Fork's winding course has a network of fourteen tributary streams each with a drainage area greater than fifty miles. Just to the southwest is the most important tributary, Russell Fork. Following a winding course, it has carved out a gorge through the Cumberland Mountains and created the Breaks. This tortured serpentine channel is over five miles long and 1,600 feet deep with craggy rock walls. In the gorge the river falls 450 feet in a succession of frothing rapids, pools, and bends. Tradition has it that Jonathan Swift's fabled silver mines were located in this area. Today Breaks Interstate Park counts the silver of the tourist trade.

Soon after Russell Fork breaks through the mountains near Elkhorn City, it is joined by Elkhorn Creek, which heads at Pound Gap, the scene of John Fox's *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. The mining town of Jenkins, once considered a Consolidated Coal Company model, is on Elkhorn Creek. Below the mouth of Russell Fork, Shelby, Island, and Mud creeks flow in from the south. A bit to the east is Fishtrap Lake, a 1968 flood control project of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, with an abundance of bluegill, black bass, and trout.

U.S. 460 takes us to Pikeville located in a horseshoe bend of the Levisa, which is being redirected to give the town growing room. Here four important highways come together to form a crowded prosperous hub where the traveler finds it difficult to get overnight accommodations because
representatives of coal and oil interests have inundated the region. Pikeville, today a town of many coal millionaires, became famous before the turn of the century because of the notorious Hatfield-McCoy feud. A few miles east of Pikeville is the Blackberry Fork of Pond Creek where the cabin of feudist Randall McCoy stood. Continuing across the dividing ridge, another crooked road descends Hatfield Branch to the Blackberry Creek of Tug Fork and the Hatfield country of West Virginia.

In Pikeville our road merges with U.S. 23, the Mayo Trail named for the local coal magnate and philanthropist John C. C. Mayo. This road, which bisects the valley from north to south, has long been the major artery of the area, and once in the days before the superhighways it was considered the shortest and most direct route between the Great Lakes and Florida.

We wind along its two lanes between a cordon of low hills to Allen, where Beaver Creek pours its waters into the on-rushing Levisa. While Beaver is a short stream, its two main tributaries, Right Beaver and Left Beaver, reach like long slender fingers into and on beyond the southern portions of Floyd County. On Otter Creek, a feeder to Left Beaver, is the mining town of Wheelwright. To the west on the Caney Fork of Right Beaver stands Alice Lloyd College at Pippa Passes. Here on the fringe of the Big Sandy is one of the most unusual and successful experiments in Appalachian education. Alice Geddes Lloyd, with her “right hand,” June Buchanan, and others have fashioned a school where the ironclad rule of admission is desire to learn, not ability to pay. Today this small junior college is becoming known for its excellent collection of Appalachian materials gathered in its oral history project.

B.C. and I follow the Mayo Trail northward through Floyd County. Branching off from the paved highway squirm narrow gravel roads. If one penetrates them deeply enough, the mountains grow wilder, houses disappear, and the country is nearly deserted. But deer hunting is good, and ruffed grouse and squirrel are plentiful. Bears and wildcats
may still roam these hills. Although difficult to reach, this area affords ideal conditions for hikers and backpackers.

Another bend in the river, and the road brings us to Prestonsburg, the oldest town in the Big Sandy and the scene of tremendous activity during the steamboat era. At the beginning of the Civil War the town was a rallying point for eastern Kentuckians who sided with the Confederacy; later, for a short while, Union Colonel James A. Garfield made it his headquarters. Nearby are the battlefields of Ivy Mountain and Middle Creek. To the southwest of Prestonsburg, clinging to the side of a deep ravine, is the mining town of David. Before coal days it was a salt lick, and here Daniel Boone spent his first winter in Kentucky in 1767-1768.

Continuing north from Prestonsburg toward Paintsville, the road follows the narrow bluff along the river bank as the Levisa is joined from the east by Johns Creek and Millers Creek. As the valley widens, we pass the Blockhouse Bottom, site of Mathias Harman’s first lodge built in 1755, almost twenty years before a similar construction was erected at Harrodsburg. To this same site and a later stockade, Jenny Wiley followed her dream to safety. A few miles to the east is Jenny Wiley State Park adjoining the Corps of Engineers’ Dewey Lake. Built for flood control in 1949, the 1,100 acre reservoir, abounding with bluegill and crappie, offers excellent recreational facilities and is easily accessible from many places in Kentucky.

As we travel through Floyd County, B.C. points out numerous small family cemeteries located on the tops of hills in order to conserve the level bottomland for agricultural purposes. Occasionally the private graveyards include small roofed structures resembling bandstands. There are not a great number of them, and they are unique to the mountains. B.C. reminds me of an Indian summer afternoon spent on Mare Creek in the home of contemporary Big Sandians Henry and Nora Scalf and their story of Aunt Alice’s August Meeting. Near the Scalf’s home is a family cemetery where a memorial service for “Aunt” Alice Scalf’s husband (Henry Scalf’s father, William) has been held for
the past sixty-six years. Each year since 1912 the service has begun with the hymn “A Twelfth Month Has Rolled Around Again/Since We Last Met to Worship on This Ground,” which is followed by a sermon. The service concludes with a large family dinner.¹

Heading on northward, we come to Paintsville, where a historical marker attests that Dr. Thomas Walker reached this site on June 5, 1750. He called the tranquil green river the Louisa, for the Duke of Cumberland’s wife, but time and common usage corrupted the name to Levisa. On the bank of the river Walker found evidence of an abandoned Shawnee village site and of the prehistoric Mound Builders’ tenure in the valley. He must have been amazed to see the red and black symbols painted on the barkless trees. In 1938 archaeologists from the University of Kentucky excavated on the property of the C & O Railway in Paintsville and found the mounds to be burial places containing bones and copper bracelets belonging to the Adena Culture which flourished between 800 B.C. and 800 A.D.

Soon we arrive at Louisa where the Levisa and Tug forks come together. Here an abandoned old jail bears a historical marker stating that it was the birthplace of Supreme Court Justice Fred Vinson. Through Louisa to the east traveled Confederate General Humphrey Marshall in his retreat from Kentucky. The remains of the Union fortifications are still to be seen on top of Fort Hill overlooking the town. A unique bridge connects Louisa with West Virginia. The structure was once featured in the old Ripley “Believe It or Not” column because one can get off and on it in the middle since it crosses both the Levisa and Tug forks. It was billed as the only bridge in the world that spans two rivers, connecting three bodies of land, two states, two cities, and two counties.

Outside Louisa the highway does not follow the river, but winds through the hill country where green stalks of corn surround the neatly painted farmhouses in the bottomlands. Along the sides of the road coal-filled railway cars wait to move on to their destination. For twenty-seven miles the Big
Sandy forms the dividing line between Kentucky and West Virginia. Many small tributaries and one large stream—Blaine Creek, which furnished a large part of river commerce in pioneer days—join the river along the route.

As we near Catlettsburg, smoke from the Ashland Oil and Refining Company fills the air. Catlettsburg, today a sleepy little town, was once a busy trading post with the greasy odor of rawhides a familiar smell on the waterfront. Following the Civil War, the timbering industry soared, and Catlettsburg roared. Front Street consisted almost entirely of saloons. Now the wharf is only an expanse of mud bank. The flood wall practicallyobliterates the main street, and the citizens have resigned themselves to living in a virtual suburb of Ashland. But here is the mouth of the Big Sandy, and here the river loses itself in the course of the Ohio. Along with B.C. and me, a deserted picnic area and small boat landing are the only observers of the end of a journey that began so many tortuous bends to the east—the only ones to "hear today the Sandy River laughter."²

In the course of the trip through mountains and hills the Big Sandy and her two forks, the Tug and the Levisa, along with a maze of tributaries, have drained a land basin of 4,283 square miles. As America's historic rivers go, the Big Sandy is definitely in the small range. But like all rivers the Big Sandy flows through time as well as space. And her time journey has been incalculably longer and more devious than any map can show. In fact the Big Sandy serves as a microcosm of much of the fluvial culture of the United States and a mirror of events in the commonwealth of Kentucky.
KENTUCKY'S LAST FRONTIER

God Almighty, what a place
for a man to live in!

Saul Pattern in
Harlan H. Hatcher,
Patterns of Wolfpen

Like the ribs in a papaw leaf, the Big Sandy River with its Levisa and Tug forks and tributary creeks veins the easternmost section of Kentucky. The river is both inviting and forbidding, inescapable and beautiful. The spring rains swell it beyond its banks and send it muddy and churning over the countryside. The summer droughts calm it into a drowsy rivulet of lazy green tranquility. The valley of the Sandy is an isolated area. It is penned in on the west and east by rows of rugged hills, guarded on the south by the Cumberland ridge of the Appalachians, and protected on the north by the lure of the great Ohio River and its level land. As the surrounding territory was conquered and cleared, the Big Sandy River Valley preserved its pocket seclusion until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Explorers, hunters, and late-arriving pioneers directed the development of the fluvial culture of this area, which Henry Scalf fittingly enough called "Kentucky's Last Frontier."

There have been numerous claims made, most without documentation, concerning the first white man to enter the Big Sandy. While some have said he was a sixteenth-century
Spaniard, it is more likely that he was a Frenchman or an Englishman, caught up in the western interior exploration movement of the seventeenth century. In 1674 Gabriel Arthur of Virginia, while traveling with a Cherokee war party, must have crossed the Big Sandy near its mouth to reach a Shawnee village on the southern shore of the Ohio River. In 1699 colonial New York Governor Richard Coote, the Earl of Bellomont, must have had access to scouting reports in the area, for he made reference to the Toteroy Indians on the Big Sandy River of Virginia. Almost half a century later, in 1742, John Peter Salley and the two Howard brothers had to float past the mouth of the Sandy on their Kanawha-Ohio-Mississippi water route to New Orleans. But the significant early contacts were the ones sponsored by two Virginia land companies, for these led to further exploration and settlement of the region.

Employed by the Loyal Land Company, Dr. Thomas Walker, a graduate of the College of William and Mary and an experienced surveyor, entered Kentucky in 1750. With five companions he came through Cumberland Gap and then proceeded in a circular route across the waters of the Cumberland, Kentucky, Licking, and Big Sandy rivers. On June 6 the Walker party crossed the middle waters of the west fork of the Sandy and spent almost two weeks exploring the valley.

Walker’s route, an old Indian trail, led them from present-day Salyersville to the swiftly moving Paint Creek. Crossing it, they went on until they reached a river “about 100 yards over” which Walker named the Louisa. The flooded stream being “so deep we cannot ford it,” the party camped there for two days before continuing across the river and over the rough dividing ridge between the Big Sandy’s forks. Hindered by drenching downpours, fallen trees, and clinging ivy, Walker moved southeastward until he reached the Tug Fork source before returning to his Virginia home.¹

The next year Christopher Gist, a North Carolina surveyor, explored the lower Ohio Valley grant of the Ohio Land
Company. Leaving the Shawnee villages at the mouth of the Scioto (the site of Portsmouth, Ohio), he came southward into Kentucky. On April 1, 1751, according to his diary, Gist finally crossed from the Kentucky River to the head of Elkhorn Creek, a tributary of the Russell Fork of the Big Sandy. Having crossed the rugged valley of the Elkhorn, he then stood below the Pound Gap of Pine Mountain. From this southern periphery of the Big Sandy Valley he, too, went back across the mountains to report his finds.

Gist’s trip had taken almost seven months, while Walker spent but four in the land of the western waters. Of the two explorations observers have usually credited that of Gist with being more valuable to his company because the North Carolinian had reported the location of desirable land. Walker missed the fertile area that lay only two days to the west of his route, and the rugged land he found was not coveted by the Loyal Land Company. Yet tales of his experiences and the abundance of game must have aroused great interest among his neighbors. In two days while in the Sandy Valley, Walker and his companions got numerous turkeys, “Bears and a large Buck Elk,” and the whole journey’s kill counted “13 Buffaloes, 8 Elks, 53 Bears, 20 Deer, 4 Wild Geese, about 150 Turkeys, besides Small Game.”

Fortunately Walker and Gist completed their explorations without being attacked by Indians. While no tribe actually occupied the area, the Wyandot, Miami, Delaware, and Shawnee roved the Big Sandy Valley and its arterial waterways. To them the valley was both a game preserve and a colossal fortification with a door on the north through which to strike later at the whites on the Ohio and a side gate on the east through which they could raid the Virginia settlements. When the French and Indians defeated General Edward Braddock’s British and colonial forces at the battle of Fort Duquesne in 1755, western pioneers were left unprotected. Soon the Shawnee began to move against the white man’s encroachments, making their way from their Ohio villages over the war trails leading through the Ohio, Kanawha, and Big Sandy valleys. They ambushed outlying
Virginia settlements, burning the cabins, scalping some victims, and carrying others off into captivity.

In July 1755, the Shawnee attacked Draper’s Meadow and took as one of their captives Mary Ingles, the wife of a prominent settler. The Virginia woman was taken by the Indians to Big Bone Lick in Kentucky. Weeks later Mrs. Ingles and an elderly Dutch woman escaped. Traveling several days along the southern shore of the Ohio, they reached the Big Sandy, becoming the first white women known to have penetrated the region. Unable to ford or wade the flooding stream, they ascended the river. Somewhere near the Forks, they found a huge drift of river debris that formed a hazardous bridge. The two women crossed, returned to the Ohio, and then followed the Kanawha southeastward. Forced to abandon her demented companion, an exhausted Mary Ingles reached home some five and one-half months after her capture.

The attack on the Ingles household did not prove to be an isolated affair. Other bloody events followed. Mary Ingles’s return with information on further Shawnee restlessness undoubtedly contributed to Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie’s decision to send out the Big Sandy River (or Sandy Creek) Expedition, the only military foray of the French and Indian War to reach Kentucky soil. Commanded by Major Andrew Lewis, a veteran of Braddock’s campaigns, and composed of some 400 frontiersmen, Cherokees, and Chickasaws, the force set out in February 1756.

They planned to march down the Big Sandy to the Ohio River and to destroy the Shawnee villages there. Limited provisions, heavy seasonal rains, and scarcity of game disheartened and disorganized the men, some of whom even ate their horses. The crisis came on March 13. Having descended the Tug for some sixty-five miles almost to the mouth of Rockcastle Creek, the men refused to go on. Conditions were so bad, according to the Draper Papers, that “any man would have ventured his life for a supper.” Lewis gave the signal to return, and the slow retreat upstream began. The ill-fated expedition stopped at the Burning
Spring (Warfield) where the men broiled strips of buffalo hide, called tugs, for food. On leaving this area they scattered through the mountains, attempting to reach Virginia. Many perished; they froze or starved to death, or were killed by the Indians. The failure of the Sandy Creek foray not only was a sad blow to the settlements in Virginia but provided great encouragement to the Shawnee, who increased their savage attacks on the border settlements. The Big Sandy Valley became a land where few whites dared to venture.

The story of the Big Sandy Valley in the two decades after the collapse of the Sandy Creek Expedition is a fascinating blend of fact and legend. Rumors abound relating to the silver mines of the English fur trader Jonathan Swift, and to the land surveys of the young Virginia colonel, George Washington. Jonathan Swift, likely a veteran of Braddock’s western campaign, and several companions were said to have mined silver in eastern Kentucky in the 1760s. Tradition has it that Swift first came to the Forks of the Sandy in 1760. Going up the Levisa, he built furnaces and mined around the Breaks of the Sandy. Miners came to the area for the next nine years, ceasing either because they had satisfied their greed or because the years on the frontier had taken their toll. Swift’s “personal record” claimed a great cache of silver was buried in the wilderness of eastern Kentucky: “We left between 22,000 and 30,000 dollars and crowns on a large creek running near a south course.”

Unfortunately, Swift’s adventures seem to be mostly myth. Although he is said to have kept a journal, the original has disappeared and only copies of copies are now extant. Moreover, geologists have yet to find evidence of large silver lodes in any part of the Appalachian coalfield, much less in Kentucky. If indeed Swift was real, he may well have been a pirate, preying on the Spanish silver ships. His silver then could have been booty carried into the western woods to be minted as coinage.

Contemporary with the last years of Swift’s purported mining ventures, Colonel George Washington explored the
region adjoining the Ohio, lower Kanawha, and Big Sandy
rivers for the veterans of the French and Indian War. His-
torian Lewis Collins stated, with no documentation, that in
1770 Washington surveyed a 2,084-acre tract of land on the
Big Sandy, including the site of the city of Louisa, for one
John Fry. The tract had a cornerstone marked “G.W.” Also,
it is a tradition that Washington surveyed for “John Savage
and others” a tract containing 28,627 acres, “beginning at a
small elm marked GWS [S standing for surveyor] standing
on the bank of the River Ohio directly at the point between
the said river and mouth of lower or Big Sandy Creek.”5

The initials “G.W.” are the basis for the belief that the
surveys were made by George Washington. Greatly prized
in some eastern Kentucky families are pieces of furniture
made from trees bearing this mark. So sure are the owners
that Washington carved the letters that they refuse to accept
any evidence to the contrary. “G.W.” could mean George
Washington, but it is known that deputy surveyors used the
same letters when marking tracts of military lands for the
French and Indian War veterans. It is possible that Wash-
ington surveyed the Fry land and the Savage grant, but his
name does not appear in connection with any of these grants
in records of the Virginia Land Office. Nor does the young
colonel’s diary make any mention of Sandy surveying.
George Washington may have come to the Big Sandy, but
evidence is too fragmentary to be conclusive.

Through the middle decades of the eighteenth century
most of the region west of the Appalachians remained the
preserve of the Indians. Although they frightened settlers
hastening to central Kentucky, the presence of the red men
did not discourage a colorful breed of hunters from entering
the Big Sandy. Clothed in coonskin caps, soft leather shirts,
leggings, and buckskin moccasins, and equipped with rifles,
hatchets, and hunting knives, the hunters came across the
mountains. The availability of game acted as a magnet. A
backwoodsman with few supplies could survive on meat,
fowl, and fish for an indefinite period without returning to
civilization.
Who were the hunters? Some were hunter-explorers like Simon Kenton in search of the fabled canelands of Kentucky. Others like Mathias Harman were “a hungering for land.” Some like John Graham were spying out the land with a surveyor’s calculating appraisal. Others like Samuel Brown were just hunters whose ruling passion was the hunter’s life. Some like Daniel Boone and Henry Skaggs were the drifting product of a restless border who had a yen for strange places.

Foremost among the hunters of the Big Sandy was Mathias Harman, a Virginia veteran of the Sandy Creek Expedition. For years he roamed the rugged hills of eastern Kentucky, and in the beautiful bottomland near the mouth of Johns Creek he built a cabin in 1755. This structure served as headquarters for future hunting trips and settlement. A few years later in 1767 Kentucky’s most famous hunter, Daniel Boone, came to the Big Sandy. Accompanied by the adventuring William Hill, he left his Carolina Yadkin River home, crossed the mountains, and reached the headwaters of the Levisa. Following the stream, they pushed on westward, making a winter camp at a buffalo salt lick (David) on the left branch of Middle Creek. Boone spent his first Kentucky winter here, exploring, hunting, and trapping. Discouraged by the rough nature of the country, and not knowing they were only days distant from the level lands of central Kentucky, Boone and Hill returned across the mountains with the fruits of a winter’s hunting and many tales of the new land.

While individuals often were forgotten, the hunters as a group were remembered. They were active in the 1770s and 1780s, and wherever they went, they left a legacy of colorful names to the places through which they passed. In 1775 while on a hunting trip, James Fowler discovered a salt lick (Hueysville) on a then unnamed stream, but in every direction he looked, he saw furry-tailed beavers. With little hesitation Fowler named the stream Beaver Creek, and thus it is known today. On another occasion the Harmans were hunting along Johns Creek when they came upon three bi-
son—a bull, a cow, and a calf—at a fork. The hunters pur­sued the animals up and down Buffalo Creek’s branches, giving the streams names associated with the chase. The mother bison fell on Cow Creek; the calf died on Calf Creek; and the hardy male gave up the race on Bull Creek.

The hunters remembered such incidents and told and re­told their personal adventures around their campfires. The stories were too interesting to be forgotten, and the hunters too vocal to allow them to die. Thus various place-names came into existence as the hunters followed the Indian trails that crisscrossed the valley. Later when the area opened to settlers, the hunters provided indispensable information. They were intimately acquainted with the bends and curves of the Big Sandy and its tributaries; they knew the trails and the location of salt licks; and they were well aware of where the lands best suited for agriculture lay.

As the pace of history across the mountains quickened and the American Revolution broke out, the hunters played an additional role in the development of the Big Sandy. They served as revolutionary borderland spies on the Virginia frontier, keeping a constant vigil for a back-door attack by Indians allied with the British. Many future Big Sandians, like Samuel Auxier and James Fraley, first glimpsed the valley while on a spying mission.

Dramatic and exciting as it was, the day of the hunter was brief. The settlers waited impatiently. After the Rev­olution, Virginia gave out land in vast amounts as she sought to reward her soldiers and to encourage the pioneer and the venturesome land company. Numerous Big Sandy grants can be found in the musty records of numerous land offices in Virginia and in eastern Kentucky. For example, Stephen Austin received two grants, in 1783 and 1785, totaling 15,000 acres, and William Alexander was granted 21,000 acres in 1783. After Kentucky became a state in 1792, the General Assembly continued Virginia’s encour­agement of settlement by making more grants. It has been estimated that these Big Sandy grants totaled over 4,000,000 acres. Since no such immense area existed in this section of
the Kentucky mountains, the grants portended trouble for
the future.

Amity with England by way of the Treaty of Paris did not
bring peace and security to eastern Kentucky, for the red
men still claimed the Big Sandy as their private preserve.
Danger menaced, but the settler came. One by one they
found the valley's entrances: the fertile land of the Sandy's
mouth on the Ohio River, the steep-walled water gaps at the
heads of the Tug and Levisa, the 1,000-foot gorge in the
Breaks, and the 2,500-foot gap at Pine Mountain. Each east­
ern door proved to be an Indian trail along lanelike creeks
which led fork by fork to the full stream of the Big Sandy
which, like a broad highway, stretched to the Ohio. The
valley was open at both ends with no less than five gateways
to those who would risk the perils.

In the late 1780s Mathias Harman with a party of twenty
returned to the Sandy Valley determined to make a settle­
ment near his old cabin at the mouth of Johns Creek. Unfor­
tunately their camp was located on a frequently traveled In­
dian trail, and a band of scouts attacked the tiny outpost.
Several braves were killed, and in reprisal the Indians
turned east and fell upon the outlying Virginia settlements.
Not knowing the exact location of Harman’s homestead
there, they mistook Thomas and Jenny Wiley’s cabin in
Abb’s Valley for that of Harman and perpetrated the Wiley
massacre on October 1, 1789. After killing four family mem­
bers, the Indians captured Mrs. Wiley and an infant, re­
turning with them by a southern route to the Big Sandy Val­
ley.

Having anticipated such retaliatory action, Harman and
his companions hastened home but arrived too late. A
search party led by Harman set out immediately. He was
determined to rescue the captives if possible, and if not, to
establish an outpost in the Sandy Valley which would dis­
courage future depredations. After following the Indians for
several days, the searchers lost the trail in the flood waters
of the Levisa Fork and were forced to stop. Unable to rescue
Jenny Wiley, Harman set about building a station. On a site
about one-half mile below the mouth of Johns Creek, and some 100 yards back from the east bank, he erected a log fort which became known as Harman’s Station. Eastern Kentucky’s first blockhouse fort was, according to William Connelley, “twenty feet square and two stories in height” with an “oaken door six inches thick.”

After staying with the Shawnee for some months, Jenny Wiley managed to escape. She waded down Little Mud Lick and Big Mud Lick creeks and reached Paint Creek into which she plunged, wading until she came to the mouth of a rivulet which became known in her honor as Jennys Creek. Exhausted, she lay down, and while asleep she dreamed of the route to safety, which Scalf called “the path in which have fallen the chips from the white man’s axe.” Awakening, Jenny resumed her journey along a chip-strewn trail. A few hours before sunrise she reached Harman’s Station and safety. In later years Jenny Wiley became a folk heroine as the story of her capture and escape was told and retold by pioneers. In 1800 she and her husband Tom established their home in the Big Sandy Valley. Today they both are buried on a shady hill near Toms Creek and the tiny town of River.

On the fateful day of Mrs. Wiley’s arrival at Johns Creek, Mathias Harman was absent. He had gone, according to the Draper Papers, to the fledgling fort of English merchant Charles Vancouver at the Forks “to drink whiskey.” Just as in central Kentucky where the first two settlements were close together both in location and in date of establishment, Harman’s Station and Vancouver’s Fort were founded not many months or miles apart in eastern Kentucky. After advertising his acreage benefits for settlers in the Kentucky Gazette, Vancouver erected three connecting cabins and some log pens in 1789, about forty miles from Harman’s Station.

In that same year Robert Leslie of Virginia established himself at the mouth of Pond Creek (South Williamson). He and his party cleared land and planted corn before retreating under continual Indian harassment. The next year his
father, William Robert Leslie, raised a cabin near the Brushy Fork of Johns Creek on land shown to him by Daniel Boone. Thus for a short time early in 1790 there were three settlements in existence in the Big Sandy, but all were short-lived. Vancouver’s men were driven off by Indians in April 1790, and probably during the same month Harman with his people escorted Mrs. Wiley back to Virginia. Only Leslie remained, and he, too, soon abandoned his first homesite and relocated at the mouth of Sycamore Creek (Gulnare). Tradition has it that he lived in a giant sycamore tree and protected himself from the Indians with a rifle swapped him by Boone.

Despite the Indians, migration into the upper Sandy slowly continued. Within a year or two Harman reestablished his station, John Spurlock built the first permanent house at Preston’s Station (Prestonsburg), and the Sellards settled on Buffalo Creek. But in the lower valley and at the Ohio River junction the Shawnee made it impossible for settlers to gain a foothold. In 1793 travelers passing down the Ohio River found no inhabitants at the mouth of the Big Sandy River. The Indian threat remained until Mad Anthony Wayne defeated the tribes at Fallen Timbers near what is now Toledo, Ohio, in August 1794. Wayne then negotiated the Treaty of Greenville which opened the Ohio Valley, and with it the Big Sandy, to white settlement.

The news of the end of Indian troubles brought a great rush of settlers from the western parts of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Pennsylvania into the Sandy Valley. This tide of immigration came in the late 1790s and early 1800s, more than two decades after the first settlements in central Kentucky. Typical representatives of this migration, separated by a twenty-year span, were Samuel Auxier and Frederick Moore, who entered the Big Sandy Valley by two very different routes. In 1795 Auxier and his family came overland from Virginia through the rugged mountain terrain to the site of Harman’s Station on Johns Creek. Once there they built two blockhouse forts which soon gave the area the name Blockhouse Bottom, as Harman’s Station was rele-
gated to the history books. Frederick Moore of Pennsylvania is said to have come down the Ohio from Pittsburgh to the mouth of the Big Sandy in 1815. He then traveled by poplar dugout or pushboat to the Forks of Sandy where he established a store.

Like Auxier and Moore, most Big Sandy pioneers came either overland through the gaps or down the Ohio by riverboat, then dugout or pushboat. Whatever their route, the objective was the same—"Ask these Pilgrims what they expect when they git to Kentuckey, the answer is Land." They settled in the broad fertile bottoms of the Big Sandy proper, the Levisa and Tug forks, and their larger tributaries. The settlers claimed the level land that could be cleared and tilled profitably. The steep mountainsides were left for hunting bear, squirrel, turkey, pigeons, and the other game that abounded there.

The Big Sandy settlers, however, soon found their valley to be a maze of haphazard surveys. As early as 1787 Colonel John Preston of Virginia had gathered title to untold thousands of acres of Sandy bottomland, but having little interest in his holding he allowed his agent, Harry Stratton of Ivel, to fritter away the vast estate to a succession of owners. When Kentucky became a state in 1792, some of this same land was issued by the Kentucky legislature, and from 1792 to 1799, while the eastern boundary of Kentucky was in dispute, Virginia and Kentucky both issued patents to Big Sandy land.

On two different occasions the Auxiers paid off old claims to hold on to their Blockhouse Bottom acreage. But the most notorious land struggle in eastern Kentucky was the Walcott swindle. In 1795 Alexander Walcott gained dubious title to 650,000 acres of land which included all of present Martin County as well as segments of Lawrence, Johnson, and Floyd counties. Since the land lay in the disputed boundary area, Virginia was able to issue Walcott a patent on the survey in 1800 with a semblance of legal jurisdiction. Walcott sold off some of the land in large tracts, but meanwhile homesteaders in Kentucky surveyed tracts of land covered
by the Walcott patent and obtained other patents from Ken­
tucky. The Kentucky claimants prevailed in extended litiga­
tion, and other settlers quickly took the remainder of the
Walcott patent.

The Walcott grant lay in obscurity for several decades un­
til in the late nineteenth century two land speculators,
armed with deeds, maps, and copies of an erroneous opinion
of title, sold some 400,000 acres of the Walcott patent to the
general public. Claims and counterclaims to the contested
lands raged in the valley’s courts until they were laid to rest,
it is hoped, by a 1955 decision of the Kentucky Court of Ap­
peals, declaring them void. Today “Walcotter” has become
a term of reproach for anyone claiming land with a dubious
title of descent from a Virginia grant.

Overlapping land surveys were not the only problems ex­
perienced by the Big Sandy settler. The men who surveyed
the land often marked their boundaries by natural objects,
but over the years streams changed their courses, trees were
cut down, rocks rolled away, and markers rotted in the
ground. Worse still, the minds of men failed when years
later they tried to identify old landmarks. Establishing land
boundaries became torture. Old men gave countless deposi­
tions, telling what they remembered from decades earlier—
“about the year 1788 or 1789 he was first acquainted on
Sandy and had never heard of any other creek up that way
by the name of Lick Creek.”9 Hopeless boundary confusion
often resulted when efforts were made to establish lines
which may never have at any time existed clearly.

Despite the problems associated with securing clear land
titles, the pioneer saw the Big Sandy Valley as a land of
promise. The average temperature was fifty-four degrees
Fahrenheit, with a six-month growing season; rainfall
amounted to forty-four inches per year. Fertile land, good
hunting, and tender cane shoots for the animals abounded.
The river was there, playing a vital role in the settler’s life.
It marked location and provided transportation while its
current turned gristmills and later sawmills.

To the first settlers who came through the mountains, the
Big Sandy must have appeared as a thin line of placid blue, carving a course through the wilderness of trees and cane. At places it was obscured as the overhanging limbs of mighty elms met over it. This semihidden and intriguing body of water, called Michechobekasepe—River of Mystery—by the Shawnee, revealed itself at intervals solely by the absence of trees and cane. It was only in the lower valley that the Big Sandy became a broad waterway with banks 300 and 400 feet apart.

Several factors made navigation difficult. The upper river was narrow and crooked with an unpredictable flow. In the heart of summer the water was too shallow to float a canoe; at other times there were dangerous floods. Trees continually crashed into the water creating “snags” of half-sunken logs. In some places there were rocky obstructions, and in others, shoals. The Levisa and Tug forks descended over 1,600 feet from their upper reaches to the confluence at Louisa. Pushboats (a catchall term for keelboats and flatboats) floated easily downstream, but the return trip required long push poles and much muscle. The lower river, while broader and less crooked, was dependent upon the Ohio River for an adequate water level. Backwater floods and ice floats on the Ohio drastically affected the Big Sandy.

The pioneers did little to alter or control the river for their own convenience. To cross it, they looked for a shallow place or sandbar, or cut logs for a primitive bridge. For the first two decades after settlement, birch canoes and dugouts were the only vehicles of river transportation for the settler. Perhaps there was no need for any other as little trade entered the upper reaches of the valley, and the Lower Sandy was still unsettled. However, by the turn of the century, trade had begun to grow. Furs, chiefly bearskins demanded by Napoleon’s army for grenadiers’ hats, were floated downstream where they were gathered into boats on the Ohio and transshipped to Pittsburgh and points east. Solomon DeRosset established fur-collecting headquarters at Prestonsburg until his emperor’s defeat at Waterloo. With the bearskin business at an end, DeRosset abandoned
his French citizenship and later became a Floyd County justice of the peace. The gathering of bear pelts served to initiate further trading ventures; soon large shipments of beaver fur, corn, livestock, and tobacco were moving out of the valley. As there was always a demand for salt and goods unavailable in the Big Sandy Valley, the returning boats brought these items upstream from Catlettsburg. Trade now flowed in both directions upon the Big Sandy and the two forks.

In 1819 the Kentucky General Assembly declared the Big Sandy River navigable “from its junction with the Ohio up as high as the forks, and the Louisa [sic] from its mouth up as high as the mouth of Russell’s Fork.”10 “Navigable,” however, was a loose term which meant only that the river was capable of carrying goods downstream during high water periods. The legislature’s first act for improvement did not come until 1834, and it provided only $6,000 for the removal of navigation hazards. A subsequent act the next year added $25,000 more to the project. While the work was never completed, the improvements did give the river a face-lift.

The early pioneers were but slightly aware of the great mineral wealth along the banks of the Sandy. Although natural gas had been discovered from rock fracture seepages, nothing had been done with it. The immense deposits of natural gas which have since been developed were not even dreamed of by the pioneers. Petroleum became known through its accumulation in a number of pools, but its value and many uses went unrealized. Although coal could be seen, its vast quantity and excellent quality were not appreciated so long as there were trees to burn. The silver mine legends still lingered in the mountains. But the early settler of the Big Sandy was for the most part concerned more with clearing new ground and hunting game than with searching for deposits of mineral resources.

After settling in the valley the pioneers had little contact with the outside world. Mountain roads, if they could be called roads, were bad, and means of travel were slow. Two
thoroughfares entered the upper Big Sandy from Virginia. One, the Virginia Road, came through Pound Gap and crossed the southern tip of the region, extending westward to the Kentucky River watershed, while the other entered Kentucky at the Breaks and stretched northward to the Forks at Louisa.

In December 1802 the Kentucky legislature provided for a section of road to be laid out from Mount Sterling, on the edge of the Bluegrass, to the Virginia Road. Commissioners were appointed to oversee the work, but little was actually done. Some fifteen years later the general assembly passed an act to establish a road by way of Prestonsburg from Mount Sterling to Pound Gap. State interest in this project was minimal, and county concern was dependent upon the whims of local officials. John Graham, the justice of the peace at Prestonsburg, for example, had all roads lead to his store. In two decades, 1837-1857, only a little over $6,000 was spent on the road to Pound Gap. It never became anything more than a wagon-rutted trail, a veritable quagmire during the rainy season. The roads of the Big Sandy continued to be an unfinished patchwork of state and local projects even after the Civil War.

Since limited transportation facilities kept the Big Sandian contained within his valley, contacts were by necessity largely local, and the area's population tended to be homogeneous. New settlers came to the valley from the same places as the original immigrants. Strong ties of local tradition developed and were held together by the pioneer's isolation in his river valley. There were few towns or schools and no newspapers. Although the general assembly created Floyd County with its extensive territory in 1799, as late as 1830 only three of the twelve counties now drained by the Big Sandy had been chartered. In that year the largest town in the valley, Prestonsburg, had a population of 81; Piketon (as Pikeville was known until the 1870s) had 49; and Louisa 27. Paintsville and Catlettsburg were but obscure pinpoints on a few maps. As for schools, Prestonsburg had an academy in 1820, but the first Pike County school, a rough log struc-
ture, was not built until 1834; and Johnson County, formed in 1843, saw its first educational facility erected in 1851. There was no newspaper in the Big Sandy until after the middle of the nineteenth century; all legal notices required by law to be published had to be printed outside the valley in Mount Sterling. The first newspaper, the *Big Sandy News* of Catlettsburg, began publication in 1852 or shortly thereafter and continued for a few years. In 1859 the *Sandy Valley Advocate* was started in Catlettsburg, but its publication ceased when the Civil War came and its editor, James J. Miller, exchanged his pen for a gun.

The early Big Sandy pioneer did not worry about his isolation. He could do without some of the traditional trappings of civilization or better still adapt them to fit his own needs. The emergence of religion in the Big Sandy provides an excellent example of this process. While many of the settlers were of Scotch-Irish Presbyterian background, the Presbyterian church, which insisted upon an educated clergy, did not follow the people to the mountains. The Big Sandy pioneers developed their own pattern of religion influenced by the spirit of the Great Revival period of the nineteenth century. They formed Baptist, Methodist, and Holiness congregations along a Calvinistic line as opposed to a Puritan pattern. There were few actual church structures; Snively Chapel, one of the oldest, was not built until 1855. Yet as early as 1809 Methodist circuit riders came to the Big Sandy. The pioneers’ spiritual needs were satisfied in their log cabins or in the open air.

The Big Sandian prided himself on his self-sufficiency. With his own hands he made most of the things he used. For at least fifteen years after the establishment of Harman’s Station there were no stores in the Big Sandy. The first was built by John Graham in 1805. His old ledgers, still preserved by his descendants, give present-day eastern Kentuckians a good idea of the scope and importance of his business. When the pioneer had to have “store boughts,” he traded hides, furs, and ginseng for goods. Graham had no competition in the whole valley until 1815 when Moore
went into business at the Forks. Some three years later in
Prestonsburg a Methodist lay preacher, David Cooley, held
the first cut-rate sale in the valley after a pet bear turned
over a barrel of sugar.

When it came to politics, the right of suffrage for the Big
Sandian was a civic chore performed after a long, arduous
trip. Few of the 468 inhabitants of early Floyd could vote
without being away from home one to three days. The
Floyd County Court of March 1816 provided for fifteen pre­
cincts in the whole of the Sandy Valley. Some of them were
as large as the smaller Kentucky counties of today. Typical
was Harrison precinct, where the boundary line began at
the mouth of Pond Creek, in present Pike County, “followed
a direct line to Johns Creek, crossed the stream above Rob­
ert Lesly’s place, then to the head of Ivy Creek, then down
Ivy to its mouth,” crossing the Big Sandy so as to include
Prater’s Creek, encompassing an area of more than fifty
square miles.11

Politics in the Big Sandy was often characterized by a de­
sire to be independent of the Bluegrass—the political, eco­
nomic, and cultural center of the state. Both the Bluegrass
and the Big Sandy voted for the Jeffersonian Republicans in
the early years of the nineteenth century, but when the par­
ty of Jefferson split, the Sandy Valley followed Andrew
Jackson into the new Democratic party. The Bluegrass, by
contrast, supported Lexington’s Henry Clay and his Whig
party. With only a few exceptions, the Big Sandy remained
Democratic until the Civil War. The Big Sandy’s role in
state politics is harder to establish because courthouses
burned with alarming frequency, but its voters almost in­
variably opposed the policies and politicians of the Blue­
grass.

Many derogatory theories have been proposed to explain
why this group of pioneers remained in the rugged moun­
tains of eastern Kentucky instead of seeking the gently roll­
ing land to the west. The mountain settler has been depicted
as a person marked by one or any combination of the follow­
ing: a lack of appreciation for the fertile soil only two days away; a desire to get away from the slave-holding regions; a tendency to become discouraged easily as strength and resources were exhausted. The classic example of the pioneer who stopped where the cow died or the wagon broke down has been too often repeated.

For one thing it is doubtful that many of the mountain settlers could have brought wagons through the tortuous mountain gaps and winding trails. As late as the Civil War, Union General Julius White estimated that there were not ten wagons to be found between Louisa and the Cumberland Mountains. Furthermore, a man who brought his family and belongings, no matter how meager, across the Appalachian Mountains could not be characterized as easily discouraged. Nor was there a complete absence of slaves in the mountains. Slaveholders might be few in number and own comparatively few slaves, but they were present in the Big Sandy. John Graham brought slaves with him to Emma in 1805, and at his death in 1835 he owned fourteen. The early merchant Moore owned slaves at Louisa.

The Big Sandy pioneer should not be condemned for settling in eastern Kentucky as opposed to central Kentucky. Fertile land, as rich as that in the Bluegrass, was plentiful when the population was only six to eighteen people per square mile. The pioneer had access to springs of fresh water and salt licks. He had a river for transportation and to grind his corn. He had cane and peavine for his cattle. He had good hunting. Not until rapidly changing economic conditions and transportation modes left the mountain farmer isolated in his river valley and increasing population forced him to till the unproductive V-shaped valleys and steep mountainsides was he at a marked disadvantage when compared to other Kentuckians.

The middle of the nineteenth century closed the romantic period in the settlement of the Big Sandy River Valley. The Indian question had been settled, and independence from the British had been won. The mountain had been opened to peaceful settlement through the perseverance and hero-
ism of the early explorers, hunters, and settlers. Since the settlement of much of Kentucky predated by about twenty years that of its easternmost region, the Big Sandy Valley experienced its pioneer period for a correspondingly longer period of time. The steamboat whistle could be heard, although its heyday was still around the bend. Labyrinthlike coal mines beneath the hills and countless oil and gas wells piercing the earth to its very depth had hardly been proposed. Only the faintest rumblings of fratricidal strife penetrated this secluded spot, the Big Sandy River Valley, Kentucky’s last frontier.
The mountainside was blue with puffs of smoke and not an enemy to be seen.

General William Nelson,
United States Army,
Official Records

As the sectional conflict that dominated national politics for more than half a century erupted into the Civil War, Kentucky found herself in an unenviable position. The commonwealth as a border state was bound socially, politically, and economically to both the Union and the Confederacy—“not east, west, north, or south but . . . pulsing with a little bit of everything.” Unrealistically hoping to avoid being “dark and bloody ground” again, her leaders declared neutrality, but armed conflict was inevitable. Kentucky-born writer Robert Penn Warren called the Civil War America’s only “felt” history, and at no other place was the personal fact of a nation facing crisis more clearly revealed than in neutral Kentucky. Scarcely a community escaped some kind of clash by combatants or the heartless raids of guerrilla bands. All of Kentucky flamed with animosities, and as historian Thomas D. Clark has asserted, no hatreds were “more embittered than those along the Big Sandy River.”

On the eve of the Civil War, Big Sandians, like other Kentuckians, found themselves painfully at odds in their attitudes toward the problems of the sectional dispute. While
the prevailing sentiment was Unionist, Confederate pickets were scattered throughout the Big Sandy. Families divided and neighbors quarreled over the questions of the day. Kentucky Militia General Daniel Hager of Johnson County had one son in the Confederate army and another in the Union army, and the Strattons of Floyd County had relatives in each camp. In a recent interview Alice Slone, founder of Lotts Creek Settlement School, related that according to family stories, "Quite often one member of the family would come in one door while the other one left by the other door. They didn't want to meet because as opposing soldiers they just didn't want to have to face each other in battle."²

War makes strange enemies; at least this one did. The reasons for allegiance were hard to pinpoint, and there were frequent deviations from expected patterns. One reason why many Big Sandians were skeptical of secession was the relative unimportance of slavery in the area. The rugged mountain terrain made plantation agriculture impossible; so a system of small farm subsistence agriculture developed. Thus a powerful planter class did not appear, and the slave population remained very small. While slaves had been present in the Big Sandy Valley since pioneer days and an auction market had been erected at Betsy Layne, slaves were not important to regional prosperity. In 1860 out of a total white population of 31,989, Boyd, Floyd, Johnson, Lawrence, and Pike counties had only 160 slave owners, and they in turn had comparatively few slaves—a total of only 573 (Boyd, 156; Floyd, 147; Johnson, 27; Lawrence, 146; and Pike, 97). Since the prospect of emancipation posed little threat to their economy or social order, Big Sandians had little reason to leave the Union to join a nation dominated by slaveholders.³

Perhaps another factor causing the mountaineers to enter the army, regardless of the side to which they gave fealty, was the influence exerted by local political leaders. James A. Garfield, while commanding Union troops in the Big Sandy, astutely observed, "The people in the valley are, in
the main . . . completely under the control of their party leaders.” In this light, Paintsville was held for the Union by the politically prominent Auxier family, and local politicians Andrew Jackson May and John Elliott influenced Prestonsburg in its Confederate stand.4

The question of allegiance in 1861 was complicated by the changing national political structure of the previous decade. Between the 1852 and 1856 presidential elections, the Whig party was supplanted by the new Republican party, which was founded in 1854. By 1856 the majority of Kentucky’s alienated Whig voters had become Democrats; some voted Native American or Know-Nothing; only a few joined the Republican ranks. As the nation approached the 1860 election, Kentucky’s Republican ranks remained slim. The two major political groups in the Commonwealth were the Democrats, who were the majority party, and the Constitutional Unionists, whose simple platform called for the unconditional preservation of the Union. As if the three-way choice were not difficult enough, the Democrats split along sectional lines and provided a Northern Democratic and a Southern Democratic candidate. When the 1860 election ballots were counted in Kentucky, native son Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party had been repudiated, receiving only 1,364 votes. The state was carried by Constitutional Unionist John Bell of Tennessee, with Southern Democrat and Bluegrass scion John C. Breckinridge second.

In the Big Sandy the voters turned out overwhelmingly for Breckinridge with Bell getting some votes in Boyd and Lawrence counties. Lincoln received few votes. In Pike County he got a solitary vote, and in the Laynesville precinct of Floyd County he could count two votes. Tradition has it that both Lindsey Layne and his son Moses dared their neighbors’ guns, saying, “Mark down one for Old Abe.” While the Southern Democratic votes might be interpreted as support for secession, it would seem more likely that Big Sandians, remaining true to their Democratic voting patterns, simply gave their allegiance to the politically well

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known Breckinridge name. It should also be noted that during the 1860 campaign Breckinridge took special pains to disclaim any support for disunion.

The months between the 1860 election and Lincoln’s inauguration passed uneasily. In the Big Sandy, as elsewhere, men debated the issues. In Paintsville, Nathaniel Auxier had seen as early as 1858 that civil war was inevitable, and he spoke eloquently and frequently about the necessity of preserving the Union. On the other hand, in Prestonsburg when a Union man announced, “I’m a pillar of the Constitution,” his Confederate neighbor William Porter seized a hatchet and threw it, declaring, “I’ll hew one of the pillars down too.” In December, South Carolina seceded and was followed by a number of states. The burden of decision now weighed heavily on Kentucky. Late in December 1860, concerned citizens from Kentucky, Ohio, and Virginia gathered at Catlettsburg to discuss measures designed to avert war. Former Big Sandian Alonzo Cushing of Ohio chaired the session, but he “adroitly avoided the main issue . . . and denounced secession and coercion alike.” After much oratory the group drifted away to prepare themselves for whatever the future held.  

Many Kentuckians undoubtedly hoped that the conflict could be resolved short of war, but the firing on Fort Sumter dashed such hopes. In order to substantiate his faith in the national rather than the regional scope of the Union, Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 troops from the country at large. Trying to delay a decision even further, Kentucky declared her neutrality in May 1861. While such a move was constitutionally questionable, it had the positive effect of keeping troops out of the state for an additional four months. An uneasy neutrality existed, but all during the summer of 1861, Kentucky youths volunteered for service, and preparations were made for war.

Prestonsburg served as the Sandy center for secessionists who joined the ranks with native son Andrew Jackson May. At first there was no Union rallying point, and the enlistees stole away to Ohio to join the Union cause. In October,
however, Lawrence countian Laban T. Moore, a former United States congressman, organized the Fourteenth Kentucky Infantry for the Union. All around the perimeter of the Big Sandy, men gathered under different banners. Despite his huge size, Naval Lieutenant, later General, William “Bull” Nelson acted as a secret agent for Lincoln in the Crab Orchard area. Letcher countian Colonel Benjamin Caudill, the Grey Ghost of eastern Kentucky, enlisted his family and friends for the Confederacy, and on Tug Fork Captain Anderson Hatfield, later “Devil Anse” the feudist, organized the Logan Wildcats for the South. His political enemies, the McCoys, adhered to the Union. On Big Creek, in Pike County, John B. Goff formed a troop called Goff’s Pine Knots—the only weapons needed, he said, to drive the Unionists from the Big Sandy. To the south Ben Blankenship organized the Harlan Battalion for the Union.

Tensions in Kentucky mounted as fighting continued in Virginia and as the commonwealth faced imminent armed conflict. In early September Confederates from Tennessee invaded western Kentucky and occupied Columbus and Hickman, and Federal troops took over Paducah. While neutrality had failed, the delay had been of value, for it allowed Kentucky’s dominant Union opinion to organize. When the Civil War came to Kentucky the prevailing sentiment was Unionist, but Confederate pockets could be found everywhere, including the Big Sandy Valley.

As the war quickened in the western part of the state, there were those in the eastern mountains who had not lost all hope of avoiding conflict. The fiscal court of Johnson County declared that anyone who dared to fly either a Confederate or United States flag from the courthouse would be fined fifty dollars. Despite such well-intentioned efforts, neither Paintsville nor the rest of the state could avoid the inevitable conflict.

The Big Sandy River Valley had the potential of being strategically important to both the North and the South. The Union needed to hold it as a necessary route into East Tennessee; the Confederates desired it to block an invasion
of Tennessee; and neither wanted the other to control the valley with its Ohio River access. Yet, despite its promise as a divisive wedge and despite its Ohio River connection, the ruggedness of the Sandy Valley terrain prevented either army from affording the valley a high military priority in overall war strategy. Garfield complained, "It is the worst country to get around in I ever saw. There is not room to form a regiment in line, for want of level ground." His views were echoed by Ham Davidson, an enlisted man in the Thirty-ninth Kentucky, who agreed that the Sandy Valley, "is one with which strangers are not likely to fall in love, especially in the winter season."

The Union soon developed a twofold strategy for the Big Sandy. First, they sent in relatively large numbers of troops to drive the Confederates back to Virginia whenever they appeared in strength in the valley. Once the menace was removed, the large contingents were evacuated. Secondly, the Federals organized local Union regiments, such as the Fourteenth Kentucky and the Thirty-ninth Kentucky, to protect the region from ruthless guerrillas and small regular army units.

On their part, the Confederates never invested a large number of men or much matériel in the Big Sandy. The number of troops deployed in eastern Kentucky probably never rose above 3,000 at any one time. Having limited manpower, the Confederacy chose to concentrate its resources on capturing the central part of Kentucky with its access to Ohio and Mississippi waters. Occasionally Confederate troops in the Big Sandy posed a sufficient threat to draw Union soldiers into the valley and away from the defense of the central area. Kentucky native General Humphrey Marshall alone advocated the use of Sandy-based Confederate troops to strike at the Union heartland of Ohio. He overlooked the geographical disadvantages of moving large numbers of troops and supplies along the poor roads of the Kentucky-Virginia border. Attractive as invasion may have been to Marshall, the Confederacy's overall strategy was essentially defensive, and its offensives were infrequent.
and ineffective. Thus, because of the lack of strong strategic interests for both sides, military actions in the Sandy Valley were relatively inconsequential.

By October 1861 some 1,000 Confederate sympathizers gathered at Prestonsburg and formed the Fifth Kentucky Infantry, often called the Ragamuffin Brigade. Andrew Jackson May became a captain in the regiment, and his immediate successors were Colonel John Williams and General Humphrey Marshall, both of whom were headquartered across the mountains in southwest Virginia. About the same time, a group of Union sympathizers led by Laban T. Moore formed the Thirty-ninth Kentucky Infantry which was mustered in December at Louisa.

As early as September 15, 1861, the Union command had ordered Nelson to organize a force to drive May’s Confederate recruits out of eastern Kentucky. Although May’s forces were not yet mustered, reports of his activities and potential enlistment had caused the Union concern. Nelson’s and May’s troops first met in a brief skirmish on October 23, at West Liberty, some thirty-five miles from Prestonsburg. May’s force, some of whom had not even been sworn in, were too inexperienced to cope with Nelson’s crack troops of the Twenty-first and Fifty-ninth Ohio Regiments, and they soon withdrew.

With Nelson in pursuit, May retreated to Prestonsburg and then continued some fifteen miles further upriver before taking a stand. On November 5 the armies clashed in the Battle of Ivy Mountain, and the Confederates were once again routed. May’s men panicked. Some plunged immediately into rising Ivy Creek, and others clogged the bridge, pushing the less stalwart into the muddy waters on top of their wading companions who scrambled on across the stream. According to local stories, one Confederate soldier in homespun escaped capture by running into a cornfield and beginning to pull fodder. He went undetected as pursuing Federalists believed him to be a local farmer.

Ivy Mountain was a Union victory, but a twist of history produced the inaccurate “Ballad of Ivy Narrows”:
You ought to have heard
Them Yankee shin bones rattle
When at the Ivy Narrows
They were stricken with the horrors.7

While the outcome of the battle could not have made “Yankee shin bones rattle,” perhaps the steep mountainsides and narrow valleys could have been frightening to the Ohioans who made up Nelson’s force.

After Ivy Mountain, Nelson withdrew his forces to central Kentucky, leaving a cavalry troop of about 400 men under General William Rosecrans at Louisa. Meanwhile the Confederates of the Fifth Kentucky continued upriver to Pound Gap, Virginia, where they established a winter camp. Their retreat had been arduous. Lacking supplies, they devoured everything they came across. Herbs from the woods, birds brought down with last rounds of ammunition, and the contents of Sandy smokehouses along the way did not satiate their hunger. One of the regiment’s officers, obviously a master of brevity, summed up the unit’s condition as he penned a single word in his report—“bad.”

In the face of declining Confederate fortunes in eastern Kentucky, General Albert Sidney Johnston ordered Humphrey Marshall to retake the Sandy Valley. A less likely physical specimen than Marshall for field service in eastern Kentucky would be hard to find. General Marshall weighed over 300 pounds, and he must have found it difficult to move along the steep passes and narrow roads of the area. The Ragamuffin Brigade idolized him, at least at first, singing a lively ditty about him: “Humphrey Marshall, he’s our boss. Big as Hell, brave as a hoss.”

Marshall moved the Fifth Kentucky downriver, retaking Piketon, Prestonsburg, and Paintsville without resistance, and he finally established his camp at Hager Gap. On December 22, he wrote Johnston reporting his position to be thirty-three miles above Louisa and his troop strength at 1,100 men. Some six days later, Marshall’s scouts informed him of the appointment of Colonel James A. Garfield to
head a new Union drive in the Big Sandy Valley, and they reported that Union troops would move from Catlettsburg and from Mount Sterling. Knowing now the thrust of the Federal attack, Marshall waited.

Garfield, a former Ohio educator and legislator, arrived in Catlettsburg on December 21 to command the Union Eighteenth Brigade. While militarily untried, Garfield had impressed his superior, General Don Carlos Buell, by his intelligent grasp of the topographical situation he would face in eastern Kentucky. Shrewdly Garfield designated Pike County as the objective of his campaign. A Union-held Piketon would force Marshall into the sparsely settled, poorly provisioned countryside on the route to Virginia. Possession of Piketon, at the head of Sandy River navigation, would also ensure steamboat-borne supplies for Garfield’s troops.

It took four days for Garfield to march to Louisa from Catlettsburg with a 25-unit wagon train and 150 unbroken mules. In Louisa the Ohio colonel learned of the massing of more Confederates in the Whitesburg area. Ary Begley, a twenty-year-old Perry County girl, had ridden over a hundred miles through the wilderness and past Confederate lines to deliver the message hidden in her shoe. Garfield now hastened southward.

The opposing forces came into contact for the first time near Paintsville on January 5, 1862. Garfield succeeded in outmaneuvering Marshall who quickly withdrew to seek a more advantageous position from which to meet the approaching Union force. Garfield then occupied Paintsville on January 6 without incident. The following day a brief skirmish on Jennys Creek caused the retreating Confederates to leave a good part of their meager supplies behind.

On January 10 at Middle Creek, some two miles outside of Prestonsburg, the armies met again. Garfield’s wet, weary troops numbering about 1,000 first engaged Marshall’s force about 8:00 A.M., with the main battle beginning at noon. Marshall, with slightly fewer than 2,000 men, had chosen an ideal defensive position along Middle Creek where the stream made a natural S. He placed his artillery
(three howitzers) in a gorge at the forks of Middle Creek and protected it with foot soldiers. Other infantrymen occupied the crests of the surrounding hills, and two companies of cavalry dismounted for battle and waited for the Union forces on the floor of the narrow valley.

Garfield advanced his troops over the open terrain of the Middle Creek bottomland and between the Confederate-held wooded hills. Drawing fire, Garfield forded the stream and deployed some of his men at the bases of the ridges to return the Confederate bullets. Again and again Garfield's forces waded Middle Creek and assaulted the battery but did not take it. All this maneuvering resulted in one Confederate casualty—an artillery horse. Realizing that he labored under a handicap as long as the Confederates held the hilltops, Garfield sent a detachment from the Fourteenth and Twenty-second Kentucky regiments to dislodge them. His parting command was remembered as, “Men, give them Hail Columbia.”

The Union troops climbed the hills inch by inch, and Marshall’s men retreated slowly. The firing increased in intensity as the struggle lengthened. The Federal troops moved from tree to tree, firing systematically as they continued the onslaught against the larger Confederate force. The raw Confederate recruits, armed with small-caliber rifles, fired erratically, mostly over the heads of the Union forces as the scarred trees later revealed. Federal reinforcements from Paintsville arrived about 4:00 P.M. and joined the fray. As dusk approached, Marshall found the tide of battle turning against him. He later called his men “frightened hares” who ran away when the situation became tough, but the Confederates never really had a chance against Garfield’s disciplined, well-trained Eighteenth Brigade. With no information on the size of the Union relieving force, Marshall decided to retreat. Orange-yellow flames soon lighted the skies as the Confederates burned their stores and fell back to Martin’s Mill on Right Beaver Creek.

The Middle Creek campaign was clearly not on the same scale as the major battles of the Civil War and not of great
significance in the overall view of the national struggle, but it was the most significant battle fought in the Big Sandy Valley. Garfield did drive the Confederates from the valley, thereby establishing Union control in the area. The importance of Middle Creek lay in the fact that it came at a time when Union victories were scarce and advantages, no matter how small, were appreciated to the point that Garfield was promoted to brigadier general for services rendered.

The day after the Middle Creek encounter, Garfield established his headquarters in Prestonsburg. The Floyd County town had been stripped of anything that might be of value to an invading army, and Garfield could not find enough “forage for my horses for more than one day.” Supplies had to come from Paintsville, Louisa, and Catlettsburg.

Lack of food was not confined to the Union forces. Marshall later maintained that he could have renewed the battle against Garfield, but starvation—"an enemy greater than Lincolnites"—prevented such action. The local inhabitants offered no help to the Confederates, "nor will they let us have the use of their horses, or anything that is theirs—nothing either for love or money." Unable to supply his forces, Marshall retreated to Pound Gap in late January.

Orlando Bowles, a young lieutenant of the Fortieth Ohio and later a prominent Big Sandian, could not have enjoyed the Middle Creek campaign and his first days in the Big Sandy. It was raining and had been for several weeks. The ground was soaked, and mud covered the infantrymen from head to toe as they slogged along. The Big Sandy River, swollen by rain and melting snow, had risen sixty feet from its lowest watermark and was flooding. Yellow torrents of water seemed to be everywhere. Paintsville was under water; Piketon had steamboats on Main Street; and at Camp Buell, Bowles’s tent and equipment were swept away by the raging river. The record flood of January-February 1862 played havoc with the countryside, and supplies from downriver were cut off. In Piketon most of Garfield’s stores and the only grinding mill in the county were swept away.
Soon-to-be-starving soldiers and equally destitute Big Sandians propelled Garfield into action. Accompanied by a single aide, the colonel traveled to Catlettsburg by skiff on January 19 and ordered Judge Archibald Borders’s steamboat, the *Sandy Valley*, to be loaded with supplies for an upriver trip. The boat’s captain, Hi Davis, objected; he feared the steamboat could not survive the current and the obstacles along the way. The Big Sandy was completely out of its banks and in some places covered the landscape to a depth of fifty feet. The true course of the river was hard to discern, and the interlocking branches of trees, now not far above the water, made passage both difficult and dangerous. Undeterred, Garfield, having been a canalboat boy and river pilot in Ohio, took the helm and maneuvered the boat into the roaring river. Despite impending disaster at every twist and turn, he avoided the trees, logs, and other floating debris and took the *Sandy Valley* to Prestonsburg, personally handling the wheel for forty of the forty-eight hours of the trip. After relieving Prestonsburg, Garfield continued upriver to Piketon with supplies. His heroic efforts earned for him the respect of Confederate and Union sympathizers alike who had been left without provisions by the flood.

Despite high-water conditions, Garfield moved his staff from Prestonsburg to Piketon, establishing his headquarters at the Ratliff Tavern. Days passed, and flooded tributary streams continued to release more water into the Big Sandy. Garfield must have wondered if the river would ever recede. In a letter, he wrote, “The house where I am now staying, which is 50 feet above the usual level of the river, is now surrounded. A wild river roars around it on all sides.”

While his commander worried, young Lieutenant Bowles did not let the foul weather deter his courtship efforts. In the Ratliffs’ home he met pretty Pauline Cecil, the daughter of the late Judge William Cecil and a relative of the Ratliffs, and they became inseparable companions. In later years this house on Main Street became known as the Bowles House.
because of the longtime occupancy of the family of Pauline and Orlando Bowles.

Flooding and courtship conditions became further complicated by Confederate raids from across the Virginia border. In late February Colonel May came out of Left Beaver Creek to the head of Big Mud Creek where he fought a brief skirmish with an irregular force of Union partisans. The results were indecisive and May quickly withdrew; but for Garfield the threat of continued raids remained. In order to complete the conquest of the Sandy Valley, Garfield knew that he must dislodge Marshall's force of about 500 on the Kentucky-Virginia border.

He moved out of Piketon on March 14 with a force of about 800 men. Deep snow covered the ground, and the icy hillsides were hard to climb. On reaching Pound Gap, Garfield used the cavalry to make a feint through the gap while the infantry scaled the mountainside and struck the Confederates in the flank. Marshall's men broke in confusion and fled down the mountain into Virginia. After spending the night at Pound Gap, Garfield fired the buildings and stores and began the march back to Piketon.

The Battle of Middle Creek had driven the Confederates from the Big Sandy, and the Battle of Pound Gap removed for months any threat of reoccupation. Returning to Piketon, Garfield learned of his promotion and took his oath as brigadier general at the Ratliff Tavern. Soon afterwards the Union command ordered Garfield to Louisville in anticipation of a Confederate offensive. Many of his troops were transferred with him, but a sizable detachment of the Fortieth Ohio under Colonel Jonathan Cranor remained to guard the Big Sandy Valley.

The next military maneuver in eastern Kentucky came in late summer 1862. At that time the Confederates under Generals Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith occupied much of central Kentucky. In the hope of uniting with these forces Humphrey Marshall with several thousand men moved into the Big Sandy once again. Cranor's pleas for help went un-
heeded as the Union command concentrated on the Bluegrass. Encountering little resistance, Marshall occupied Piketon and Prestonsburg and went as far north as Paintsville before heading west to Mount Sterling, which he reached by the third week of September. Awaiting further orders from his camp at the edge of the mountains, Marshall learned of the Confederate defeat at Perryville on October 8, and of the main Confederate withdrawal toward Tennessee. Marshall's own orders called for retreat back to Pound Gap along the route which so short a time before had been a victory trail.

Marshall fell back to Salyersville and then moved toward Prestonsburg, which had now changed hands for the seventh time since the war began. On this occasion his trip did not prove uneventful. Pike countian Colonel John Dils, Jr., who had organized the Thirty-ninth Kentucky Infantry in September at Catlettsburg, dogged Marshall's retreat. Arriving in Piketon on November 17, Dils reported the removal of Marshall's force from the valley and added in tribute to the Thirty-ninth, "I have some of the best men in the service and best marksmen the government can boast of."  

While most of the Union's attention during the summer of 1862 was directed toward central Kentucky, the Confederacy may well have missed a golden opportunity to impede the Federal war effort in eastern Kentucky. Since the Big Sandy Valley offered little in the way of provisions for Federal troops upriver, the Union established a supply depot at Catlettsburg and sent goods by steamboat and pushboat to camps along the Sandy. Unknown to Confederate Colonel John N. Clarkson and his force of 800 camped across the river at Guyandotte (near the present site of Huntington), the Federal base was unguarded and could have been taken easily.

Late in October, Levi Hampton, quartermaster of the Thirty-ninth Kentucky, took 200 men to Peach Orchard to secure coal boats to be used for transporting supplies. The soldiers and a few Lawrence County civilians hired for their river expertise drifted the boats down to the mouth of the
Sandy. The trip downriver and the loading at Catlettsburg proved time consuming, and most of November was gone before the trip up the Big Sandy began. By that time Clarkson had received information about the heavily laden convoy. Never realizing the other opportunity missed, he decided to capture the boats.

On December 3, the flotilla reached Wireman’s Shoals, near Prestonsburg, where the crew secured the loaded vessels to the shore for the night. As the men rested and prepared the evening meal, a Union detachment brought news that Clarkson’s force had been seen in the area. Fearing for the safety of the nine supply boats, Hampton hurriedly passed out arms. The Confederates appeared, and the Battle of Wireman’s Shoals or the Boat Fight began. The Confederates quickly won the day; Hampton was killed, and many of the Union soldiers and civilian boatmen surrendered. A few escaped to the woodland and then took the road to Piketon to report to Dils. Those who were captured were marched to Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia, a trip of 400 miles which took eighteen weeks in the winter snow.

The captured boats contained 500 Enfield rifles and accouterments for about 1,000 men. Clarkson estimated the booty to be worth $250,000. So great was the amount of confiscated goods that many valuable items were destroyed for lack of transportation to carry them away. One officer reported, “A train of 100 pack mules would have brought away a very large amount of extremely valuable stores which were committed to the fire and river.”

The Confederates then moved on to Piketon, destroying the Union stores there. On December 7, while camped at the mouth of Pond Creek and before returning to Virginia, Clarkson wrote, “The enemy has been for the time destroyed and the route for our friends to come to us is left open and unimpeded by the foe.”

For the next three months the Big Sandy was free of armed conflict, but in February 1863, General Marshall once again emerged from Virginia and swept through the valley; his force included men commanded by Colonels May
and Caudill. The Confederates occupied Piketon and left it under the command of Major James French. In early April Marshall left the Sandy, turned toward the west, and retreated up the Kentucky River and back to Virginia. After Marshall's withdrawal, Colonel George Gallup sent Colonel Dils to retake Piketon. In a brief, brisk encounter on April 15, Dils not only took the town but also captured Major French, 16 other officers, and 70 men.

By the summer of 1863 the Union command had grown tired of the ceaseless Confederate raids into eastern Kentucky, and they decided to destroy the enemy force stationed at Gladeville, Virginia (now Wise). Two companies of the Fortieth Ohio and two from the Tenth Kentucky set out from Louisa in late June. They rested at the mouth of Beaver Creek (Allen) for almost a week before beginning the march to Gladeville. Leaving Beaver Creek on July 2, they reached Gladeville three days later. At dawn on July 7, the Battle of Gladeville began and ended within a few minutes, according to one participant who further reported the capture of 123 Confederate prisoners. P. M. Redding of Ashland, Ohio, the last survivor of the battle, later recalled that on the return trip one soldier jubilantly yelled, "Who ever heard of Colonel Caudell [sic]?" The cry was taken up by others and was shouted back and forth all the way to Louisa and for a long time afterward.14

Despite the Gladeville success, the rest of 1863 saw several Confederate forays into the Big Sandy. Fighting over the Big Sandy terrain was an arduous task. But for one enlisted man defense of the Sandy had its honor. Ham Davidson of Lawrence County wrote, "To the soldier whose home is on the Sandy or its tributaries, its mountains and valleys are dear. . . . Twas there he first heard the music of the waters and listened to storm winds roaring amid the everlasting hills." He concluded that the Thirty-ninth Kentucky fought with great daring and perseverance in the Sandy because they defended "memories of their childhood."15

The year 1864 brought no relief from constant skirmishing. In late May, John Hunt Morgan's Confederate raiders
arrived in another of their sweeps to the Bluegrass; they returned six weeks later in their retreat. The Thirty-ninth Kentucky engaged a few Confederates on Pond Creek in mid-May, but things were so peaceful by the end of the year that George Gallup wrote on December 9, “No Confederate force this side of the mountains.” The last Civil War skirmish in the Big Sandy occurred at Piketon on February 25, 1865.16

Despite the bloodshed and bitterness of the years 1861-1865 in the Sandy Valley, a number of humorous tales emerged from the war years. One of Colonel George Gallup’s officers often entertained the mess with a story of how the colonel and three of his junior officers thought they had been poisoned by drinking “Wine of Antimony” foraged from a rebel home, only to find the potent elixir to be a laxative. Lawrence countian Samuel Pack of the Kentucky State Guards drew his first blood when he peppered a cow with birdshot after she ate his straw pallet on a pushboat trip upriver. In later years Orlando Bowles enjoyed speaking of his “hair-breadth escapes in the deadly breach,” and he even wrote to a friend, “We were in a mess from the blood thirsty rebels. When we sat down to dinner I held a sword in both hands and a pistol in the other.” One can only wonder how he managed to eat his meal.17

While the encounters of Union and Confederate soldiers in various battles and skirmishes produced no major campaigns in the Big Sandy Valley, the Civil War brought lasting grief to the valley’s inhabitants. Within a short time there grew up in the confines of the valley a miniature house divided as noncombatant neighbors fought one another. Injuries to loved ones on faraway battlefields were answered with assaults on people of the opposite camp at home. Sometimes the immediate cause might be of trivial importance. A dead hog or a missing hunting dog brought forward the conclusion that a former friend across the ridge was guilty. In an atmosphere of ever-deepening hatred, violence was inevitable. Men were killed in ambush when they stepped outside their homes or while they rode through
the towering trees. Flames often lighted the skies as cabins burned to the ground. Neighbors killed one another with the same brutality and lack of mercy shown by their grandparents to the Shawnee.

There was an almost complete lack of local law. No grand jury met in Floyd County for the four war years, and local officials often fled in advance of the Confederate and Union armies. Trying to make good such an escape, Judge William Cecil of Piketon was killed on the banks of the Levisa outside town. A longing for local peace led Confederate Dr. Robert Jackson of Johns Creek to write his old foe, Peyton Blackburn, “This is a rich man’s war and poor men will fight it, let us be friends.” Blackburn’s unsigned answer read, “Nothing but your heart’s blood will satisfy me.”

The failure of local authority allowed soldiers and guerrillas alike to rob and kill at will. Among the regular troops there appears to have been less of this activity, and in the Union army, particularly, discipline was enforced to a reasonable degree. Determined not to alienate civilians, Colonel Garfield kept his soldiers in line. After the Middle Creek campaign, he mustered his troops only to find that some of the men had quite a cache of Masonic jewelry in their possession. When investigation revealed the articles had been stolen from the Masonic lodge in Paintsville, Garfield ordered the return of the jewelry and disciplined his soldiers. The colonel fully realized the extent of mixed wartime sentiment in the Big Sandy, and he tried to allay the fears of the population as to the intentions of the Union army.

On January 16, 1862, Garfield issued a message to the “Citizens of the Sandy Valley” in which he offered the full protection of the United States government to those who did not actively aid the Confederacy and promised, “The Army of the Union wages no war of plunder but comes to bring back the prosperity of peace.” He further invited those who felt they had been wronged by Union soldiers to bring their complaints to him. They did. On one occasion Garfield found a Floyd County family’s quilt and restored it to its rightful owners, and on another he personally paid a farmer
for the theft of a pig by a Union soldier. As Garfield prepared to leave the Big Sandy, he instructed his successor to be ever-mindful of attacks upon civilians and to punish offenders.\textsuperscript{19}

The Confederates were not so strict in matters of discipline. Some of Humphrey Marshall’s popularity with his troops came about because of his laxness along this line. Confederate offenses against the populace seem in general to have been greater than Union affronts—almost undoubtedly because Johnny Reb faced considerably more difficulty in obtaining supplies than did Billy Yank. The Federals received provisions by way of the Big Sandy River; the Confederates resorted to foraging whenever they were in eastern Kentucky. In a recent interview Margaret Slone of Knott County remembered stories of soldiers taking food from her family’s trunks and from under their straw bed. The sight of unruly soldiers removing a family’s meager stores embittered the people and hurt the Confederate cause among the populace.

During Marshall’s 1862 campaign in the valley, he spent long hours instructing Big Sandians of their moral obligations to the Confederacy. On one long summer evening Marshall stopped near Paintsville and visited Henry Conley, a less than active Confederate sympathizer, to urge him toward open support. While the two men sat and talked, Marshall’s soldiers pilfered the contents of Conley’s barn. On discovering what had occurred, Conley made an about-face and became a Union supporter; one of his sons joined the Federal army. The Union cause greatly benefited in the Sandy Valley by its better treatment of civilians and by its ability to hold the valley long enough for the influence of the Confederate leaders to fade during their absence.

Big Sandians more often fell prey to bands of guerrillas than to soldiers. A nineteenth-century Kentucky mountaineer, himself once a guerrilla, remembered, “The land swarmed with cutthroats, robbers, thieves, firebugs, and malefactors of every degree and kind, who committed thousands of brutal and heinous crimes—in the name of the
Union or the Southern Confederacy.” Big Sandians called these scoundrels “bushwhackers,” and the memories of their victims have perpetuated the names of Confederates “Rebel Bill” Smith and Randall McCoy, and pro-Unionists Old Clabe Jones and Devil Anse Hatfield. These men roamed the countryside seizing what they wanted—livestock, personal property, and even clothes from their victims’ backs. Perhaps Melvina Huff of Kite summed up the situation best when she said, “They’d come and take your stuff. Take your meat and cows and everything away from you. Your corn, your eggs, they take it. Just haul it off.”

Night raids became the bane of mountain families. The guerrillas traveled in large enough groups so that the scattered farmers could do little to prevent their attacks. Sometimes the men of the household slipped into the forest and let the guerrillas carry off what they pleased, only hoping that the women and children would be left unharmed. Adult males who remained inside the house were butchered in cold blood. So great was the disorder that beginning early in 1864 Captain Orlando Bowles made various fruitless petitions to Frankfort for permission to raise another regiment or a battalion for the defense of the mountain counties of eastern Kentucky. Military occupation would have been preferable to the disorder and chaos of the times.

Before the war ended, conditions in the mountains defied description. Murder, robbery, pillage, plunder, and starvation plagued the Big Sandy, and both civil and military authorities were helpless to restore order. From the tragic background of the Civil War grew some of the most famous Kentucky feuds; of them Harry Caudill in Night Comes to the Cumberlands justifiably declared, “in savagery and stark horror they dwarf the cattle wars of the Great Plains and by contrast, make the vendettas of Sicily look like children’s parlor games.” The Big Sandy experienced the French-Eversole feud, the Blackburn-Peyton feud, the Hayes-Jones feud, and when Old Clabe Jones, renowned in song as a “booger,” was not fighting the supporters of “Cap” Hayes, he warred with Bad John Wright of Letcher County.
Undoubtedly the most famous struggle was the Hatfield-McCoy feud. This conflict ultimately involved, directly or indirectly, every person in Pike County, Kentucky, and Logan County, West Virginia, and by implication it affected every Big Sandian as it added to the creation of the feuding mountaineer stereotype held by many Americans. Civil War allegiances caused unfriendly relations between the two families, and voting frauds, the ownership of a razorback hog, and a mountain Romeo-and-Juliet story added fuel to the already ignited flames. Many murderous raids back and forth across the Tug took place with promises of continued fighting until a particular Hatfield or McCoy had been killed and a “slice of meat had been cut from his body, broiled, and eaten.” This epic seventy-year clan war resulted in a number of deaths, and the respective state militias tried to intervene time after time. The feud was supposedly laid to rest in 1976 when descendants of the two families erected a stone monument on the banks of the Sandy in memory of the slain.

Although the Civil War ended in the spring of 1865, families and neighbors in the Big Sandy Valley were divided for generations. Sink Fugitt of Lawrence County remembered that for years, “you could still see the effects, farms destroyed, barns burned, and orchards chopped down. . . . an armless sleeve or empty pant leg.” As late as 1976 a Caney Creek woman would not “even have a five dollar bill ’cause it’s got Abraham Lincoln’s picture on it.”

The Civil War divisions continued in the form of the virulent mountain feuds which neither local law enforcement officials nor the state government was able to quell. Only when the business-oriented entrepreneurs of the late nineteenth century demanded the restoration of law and order did this bitter extension of the 1861-1865 strife come to an end. The contest for the Sandy River Valley did prove to be “felt” history, and blazing emotional powder kegs made a battlefield of the mountains as tragic as the ones at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Atlanta.
ALONG SANDY SHORES

The Big Sandy is the only outlet for a very productive country rich in both agricultural and mineral wealth; yet it presents serious obstacles to the transportation of these productions to market.

Major William E. Merrill,
Annual Report of Corps of Engineers

The steamboat splashing up and down the Sandy River ushered in a colorful, romantic period in the history of the Big Sandy Valley. From the third decade of the nineteenth century to the eve of World War I, the clear call of the steamboat whistle, the melodious notes of the calliope, the curses of deckhands, and the halloos of packet travelers joined the chorus of voices of the river. Yet the wild, unimproved Big Sandy River contained many perils that made for uncertain and only periodic navigation. In most places the top of the river was extremely near the bottom. Sandbars built up overnight after an up-country rain; snags, sawyers, and caved-in banks lurked just beneath the surface of the water. When state and federal agencies tardily set about to improve conditions, their task did not prove easy. Nevertheless, as long as the axiom remained in force that, as Jesse Stuart wryly wrote, "the only way out is to follow a stream," the valley's great agricultural and mineral wealth compelled a fluvial face-lift along the shores of the Big Sandy.

While early Big Sandy pioneers used birch canoes, poplar
dugouts, and flatboats for travel and transportation, their riverside sons replaced these early modes with the pushboat. Loaded with furs, pelts, herbs, corn, sorghum, chickens, eggs, and passengers with their livestock, the pushboats floated easily downstream but had to be poled or dragged upstream by sheer muscle power. It was no wonder that these men sang,

Pushing mighty hard boys
Sand bar's in the way;
Working like a son-of-a-gun
For mighty scanty pay.¹

Because of navigational difficulties the pushboat remained a frequent Sandy sight long after it disappeared from other Kentucky rivers.

Sometime in the 1830s the first steamboat belching fire and smoke moved up the Big Sandy River to Louisa. While this vessel’s name remains disputed, tradition does list the Mountain Girl, Pillsbury, and Red Buck as early Sandy steamboats. Perhaps the distinction should lie with the Mountain Girl with its mockingbird whistle, reported to sound like the scream of a wild animal. Hearing its high notes, many a Big Sandian wending his lonely way home on a quiet evening swore that the “grandpappy of all painters” prowled the riverbank. In 1842, skirting Hell’s Gate Shoal and other similar hazards, Allen Hatton piloted the first steamboat above Louisa to the great consternation of the onlookers. Hearing the hiss of escaping steam, mothers left laundry tubs and brought their offspring to the sycamore-lined shore to see the wonder of their lives. In later years Hatton recalled that on the boat’s arrival, “Chickens and geese ran from the barnyards on the banks in great affright. Horses and cattle were seized with fear and dashed away to the hills to escape the awful calamity that seemed to threaten them.”²

The arrival of the steamboat brought many changes to the river. Crews chopped the thick cane to clear the banks.
Many tall elms and sturdy sycamores fell to the axe to provide fuel for the steamers, or at least lost their lower limbs to allow the safe passage of the steamers' stacks. New wharfs were built, and old pushboat landings were replanked and received fresh coats of paint. Shoals, sharp bends, and snags considered little more than a vexation to pushboat traffic took on a far more serious character in the steamboat trade. Such obstacles had to be removed.

Some twenty years of state expenditures on other Kentucky rivers did not pass unnoticed by Sandians, who began a quest for similar improvements. In 1834 the legislature provided an initial $6,000 grant for development, but improvements were negligible. In 1835 the general assembly gave $25,000 to the newly created Internal Board of Improvement for work on the Sandy. However, no money could be expended until a survey was made and a plan of improvement submitted to the board. State engineers made a partial survey in 1835 followed by a more complete examination in the summer months of 1836. The reports stressed the need for Big Sandy navigational improvements, and the importance of river traffic becomes clear when one considers that no practicable road existed from Pikeville and Prestonsburg to the mouth of the Big Sandy. 

Despite the need, the deepening financial depression of 1837 canceled any hope of immediate improvement. Eastern Kentucky engineers were instructed not to proceed any further until additional orders were received from the Board of Internal Improvement. None ever came. During the 1840s and 1850s the board, pressured by politically prominent local residents, devoted its attention to the continued improvement of the quarter-century-old navigation systems of the Green-Barren and Kentucky rivers. The state auditor's reports listed no appropriations for the Big Sandy River for these years, but somehow traffic continued to grow. In 1852 Captain Daniel Vaughan of Catlettsburg regularly ran the Tom Scott from the Sandy's mouth to Louisa. Business became so good that he added the Ada to the trade
and shortly thereafter, the *Major O'Drain*. Steamboats became a frequent sight, but their zenith still lay in the future.

Realizing the needs of the eastern part of the state but lacking funds for improvement, the Kentucky legislature in 1858 chartered the Big Sandy River Navigation Company, granting it exclusive right to provide locks and dams for slack-water navigation of the river from its mouth to Peach Orchard in Lawrence County. The investors included Lawrence countians Laban T. Moore and Archibald Border, and Peach Orchard Coal Company superintendent William P. Mellen. The company had the power "to charge, collect, and receive freight tolls for the passing of locks and dams, the charge being 2¢ per hundred pounds freight; 10¢ each for passengers over twelve, cows, horses, jacks, and jennets; and 5¢ each for children, servants, and cows under two years of age." In addition, steamboats would be charged $1 at each lock with smaller craft paying a lesser sum. All navigational improvement and all property of the company were to be forever free of taxation. However, the Big Sandy Navigation Company had to begin river improvements within five years and complete them within thirteen years or its monopoly would be forfeit.³

The month after receiving their charter, the stockholders learned that some four years earlier the Virginia General Assembly had incorporated the Virginia and Kentucky Navigation Company to improve the Big Sandy from the mouth to the forks and up the Tug to Wolf Creek. The Kentucky and Virginia legislatures now passed supplemental acts which provided for the consolidation of the two companies to improve the Big Sandy from the mouth to Louisa. The Virginia-based company was to carry on improvements on Tug Fork, and the Big Sandy Navigation Company maintained its exclusive rights on the Levisa.

The next year, 1859, at the behest of Peach Orchard Coal Company officials interested businessmen and government officials from western Virginia and eastern Kentucky met in Catlettsburg to discuss a proposal to slack-water both forks
of the Big Sandy River. Engineers recommended the project as feasible, and the group scheduled further meetings, but the Civil War ended these schemes.

The war compounded Big Sandy navigation problems and began a decade when nothing would be done toward river improvement. The Union controlled the waterways as the principal means of getting supplies from Catlettsburg to troops upriver, and they officially closed the river to all traffic except their own. The steamboat *Sandy Valley* built by Judge Borders in 1860 saw little service except for its spectacular trip upriver with Garfield at the helm. Sycamores and elms continued to fall into the water, and debris was caught in their bleached skeletal branches. Boulders plummeted from steep ridges into the river; huge drift logs hung in treetops fifty feet overhead; and shoals spread toward the Sandy shore.

When the war ended, steamboat travel and transportation gradually resumed, but the four years of neglect were followed by as many more of further indifference. Annually the rivermen's complaints of obstructions grew, and cries for river improvement echoed through the Big Sandy Valley. In time Big Sandians once again took their complaints to Frankfort and the general assembly.

During the period of readjustment, Civil War veteran Orlando Bowles emerged as a successful, and flamboyant, business and political leader in the Big Sandy Valley. Beginning in 1867 he represented Letcher and Pike counties in the Kentucky House of Representatives for two successive terms, and in 1869 he became the chairman of a commission to investigate the navigation possibilities of the Big Sandy River. After several intensive and colorful investigative trips to eastern Kentucky, the Bowles Commission recommended that the state spend $75,000 to make the Big Sandy safely navigable from its mouth at Catlettsburg to a point above Piketon on the Levisa Fork.

House and senate approval came in early February 1870, and on February 10 Governor Preston Leslie signed the first implemented state appropriations bill for the safe naviga-
tion of the Big Sandy. On that occasion another Big Sandy entrepreneur and state legislator, Colonel Jay H. Northrup of Louisa, declared, “The Sandy Region will, ere long, equal in wealth any other portion of this Commonwealth, and return into the Treasury by way of increased revenue, in a few years, a sum sufficient to repay the bounty so justly appropriated.”

The legislature’s appropriations commission, including William J. May and Colonel Northrup, met in Pikeville on March 1, 1870, and awarded contracts for the 165 miles of projected river improvement. Contractors removed snags, rocks, and timber; cleaned shoals of large loose rocks; eliminated an island near the river’s mouth; and built chutes and wing dams for a total cost of about $62,000.

As this project neared completion, the Bowles Commission requested another $20,000 to finish the work and advised construction of twelve locks and dams to realize the full potential of Sandy navigation. To add weight to their slack-water argument, the commissioners included a civil engineering report which stated that the building of locks and dams on the Big Sandy was “not an impossibility, but simply a question of cost,” and estimated the expense at about $570,000. For the benefit of would-be railroad magnates, the report added that a railroad would cost six to ten times as much, would accommodate only one side of the river, and that service to one side would not be as effective or cheap as slack-water navigation. A statistical table showed Big Sandy’s exports for the year ending July 1, 1870, to be $1,219,000, and a second tabulation estimated that if tolls had been charged on a par with Ohio River canal charges, they would have netted a yearly income of over $63,000.

The appeals proved persuasive in Frankfort, and in 1871 some $32,000 in state funds was allocated to the Big Sandy. Much of the work fell into the hands of Harris & Harris Contractors, but no less an opportunist than Orlando Bowles had work crews on three sections of the project. The financial depression of 1873 soon brought the state improvement project to a virtual standstill; in that year the amount
expended was $1,345.95, of which almost $1,000 went for commissioners’ salaries. Old rivermen justly complained that the state’s money did more to protect banks than to improve navigation.

As state aid for the improvement of the Big Sandy River declined, the national River and Harbor Act of 1874 called for a federal survey of the Big Sandy River. In February 1875 Major William Merrill of the United States Army Corps of Engineers presented his findings to the secretary of war. Merrill’s extensive report included his personal observations and official recommendations, excerpts from Kentucky state geological reports, estimates on the total value of exports and on the number of passengers transported yearly on the Big Sandy, and a long tally of the number of tree (13,730) and snag (5,594) obstructions to be found on the Sandy and its forks. Merrill noted that the only feasible way to obtain a sufficient supply of water for navigation was “to canalize the river by locks and dams,” and he envisioned a slack-water system reaching all the way to the then-untapped coalfields. Merrill planned three dams between Catlettsburg and Louisa, thirteen up the Levisa to Pikeville, and six on the Tug between Louisa and Warfield. Personally preferring the French method of movable dams for the silt-laden Sandy, Merrill realized that considering the relatively small amount of total Sandy navigation, the less expensively constructed and maintained permanent dams were financially more advisable. While recommending the series of twenty-two locks and dams at a total cost of almost $2,000,000, Merrill asked for only $15,000 for further snag and rock clearing to allow for easier movement of rafted logs.

Three years later, in 1878, on the basis of Merrill’s findings the federal government undertook the improvement of the Big Sandy River—or perhaps more correctly the maintenance of the river, for the money appropriated for a number of years was insufficient for the proposed lock and dam construction. As funds became available, the Corps of Engineers cleared channel obstructions, removed rocks from
bends, and cut overhanging trees. Ugly government snagboats, commonly called “Uncle Sam’s toothpullers,” removed snags and sawyers. Wing dams were repaired, and a few new walls were constructed with the rocks removed from the ripples. While these improvements benefited navigation to a certain extent, they were only temporary measures and did not provide satisfactory depths for continuous navigation.

In 1880 the Corps once again proposed to initiate slackwater navigation by building an experimental lock and dam just below Louisa. Big Sandians applauded this action and breathed a sigh of relief that after forty years of waiting, their river’s importance had at last been recognized. Construction of what became Lock and Dam Number 3, under the direction of Major B. F. Thomas, did not begin until 1883 and was not completed for thirteen years. Work was delayed by the yearly necessity of removing logs, trees, and rocks, and by extreme low water in 1884, heavy ice in 1885, unusually great rainfall in 1889, and the presence of a sandbar at the river’s mouth preventing the arrival of the government dredge at Louisa in 1891. Furthermore, in 1891, because of protests against fixed dams by the timber interests, the Corps substituted a movable needle dam for the fixed dam and thereby added five years to construction time.

Developed in France and Belgium by Henri Poirée, the movable needle dam offered the advantage of speedier open-channel navigation without lockage in times of normal or rising water levels, as a “navigation pass” was left between a fixed dam or weir extending from one side of the river and the lock on the other. However, during low-water periods when the river was usually unnavigable, the dam’s movable section could be erected across the navigation pass to form a navigable pool behind the dam. The accumulated water allowed river traffic to navigate the river by locking past the shoal water. The mobile aspect of the movable needle dam was accomplished through the use of hinged metal trestles fixed in the dredged riverbed. Fifteen feet tall and
weighing a thousand pounds each, the triangular trestles could either lie flat on the river bottom in time of normal water levels or be raised upright when the additional navigation pool was required. The raised trestles formed a framework against which flat tapered timbers called needles were placed on the upstream side, filling the gap between the permanent weir and the lock. Some 13 feet in length and weighing 265 pounds each when wet, the white-pine needles measured 8.5 feet in thickness at the bottom and tapered to 4.5 feet at the top. The Poirée needles that formed the Louisa dam could be maneuvered into position at the rate of one per minute by a boat-borne derrick. While not in use, the needles were stacked on the needle boat.

Heralded as “America’s First Needle Dam,” Lock and Dam Number 3 began operation on January 1, 1897. On viewing the dam, Major William H. Bixby of the Corps’s Cincinnati office declared, “The fact that a movable dam can be made so tight that it leaks less than two gallons is remarkable, if not wonderful.”

The completion of the Louisa lock and dam engendered a great deal of public interest in further slack-water improvement of the Big Sandy. The Big Sandy News included a weekly column called “Dam News,” and the Louisa weekly often declared that the slack-water plans were not the visionary idea of capitalists and sharks, but had the support of the populace. Outside the valley, the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce pledged itself to support lock and dam construction in the Big Sandy. At home, navigation and commercial interests formed the Big Sandy Valley Improvement Association (BSVIA), which was modeled after the Ohio Valley Improvement Association. With auxiliary chapters in each of the Kentucky and West Virginia counties bordering the Sandy River, the BSVIA dedicated itself to correcting congressional “neglect” of the river. Jay H. Northrup served as the president of the BSVIA for the lifetime of the organization, and its list of auxiliary vice-presidents read like a “Who’s Who” of the Big Sandy Valley: timberman Ben Williamson of Catlettsburg; coal magnate John C. C. Mayo of
Paintsville; land agent and attorney Walter S. Harkins of Prestonsburg; banker M. S. Burns of Louisa; businessman Lewis Dempsey of Inez; and coal man James Hatcher of Pikeville. Northrup and others made yearly trips to Washington to lobby on behalf of the region.

In January 1898, the BSVIA put out a ten-page pamphlet detailing the resources of the Big Sandy Valley. It stressed the importance of the valley’s coal deposits and used as its watchword, “Nearer Coal, Better Coal, and Cheaper Coal.” Captain J. S. Rittenhouse of Paintsville sent a barrel of coal to Washington, and a small block of the “black gold,” glistening ebony to the eye, was placed on the desk of each member of the House to prove to skeptics the presence of coal in the Big Sandy. Without prodding, A. S. Berry, the Kentucky member of the Rivers and Harbors Committee, promised his support in the Fifty-fifth Congress and added, “We got the Kentucky River under the continuous contract system—Why not Big Sandy.” The Ohio Valley Improvement Association also made public its backing of extensive Big Sandy improvements. 6

Despite this support and the good intentions of the BSVIA, the Big Sandy’s bid for congressional slack-water support came, as usual, at the wrong time—with the Spanish-American War in progress, the pleas of Big Sandians fell upon deaf ears. But the war was soon over, and the Corps, in its 1898 Annual Report, advocated the revitalization of Merrill’s dormant plan and the construction of the remaining twenty-one proposed dams. In 1899 Congress, moving more cautiously, authorized the building of only two locks and movable dams on the Big Sandy, and they were to be constructed on the main channel below Louisa. Despite the natural disappointment with the emaciated improvement plan, slack-water adherents could content themselves with the thought that at least some progress toward their goal had been achieved.

When the BSVIA met in December 1899, the urgent need for slack-water navigation was emphasized when several of the delegates arrived late because of the uncertainties of
water travel. At this meeting, "the enterprising, original and only" W. A. Patton, the BSVIA's treasurer, handed out badges that expressed the organization's sentiment—perhaps in more than one way. They read, "Dam Big Sandy." The importance of river traffic and the need for slack-water navigation were stressed in the *Big Sandy News* during the winter of 1900. On February 15 the steamer *Thealka* established a time record on the river by completing the round trip between Catlettsburg and Pikeville, a distance of 240 miles, in twenty-four hours. (This boat was named for Alka Meeks, later Mrs. John C. C. Mayo; the one-word form was coined by an itinerant sign-painter.) The much heavier *Argand* made the trip in thirty hours. With the completion of the slack-water system, Big Sandy River interests contemplated that such trips would not be unusual.

To the casual critic the state and federal improvements on the Big Sandy River must appear anachronistic. In the early 1870s Mark Twain, a former riverboat pilot himself, announced the funeral of river transportation, but in the Sandy Valley his eulogy came at least forty years too early. State and federal river projects dating from the seventies and eighties inaugurated a colorful age of Sandy River history.

As commercial traffic slowly returned to the valley in the post-Civil War years, the great need for materials to rebuild the nation produced a logging boom in the Big Sandy. An 1878 statewide survey on resources conducted by Winston J. Davie found the Sandy Valley "more than any other valley especially fitted for continued production of timber . . . [with] unbroken forests of pine, hemlock, all kinds of oaks, walnut, hickory, butternut, elm, ash, cherry, chestnut, maple, sugar-tree, larch, locust, hornbeam . . . and etc." In tune with the time, Orlando Bowles, M. B. Goble, Jay H. Northrup, Robert Pritchard, Samuel Vinson, Wallace J. Williamson, and numerous others established timber businesses at Catlettsburg and up the Levisa and Tug forks. Northrup came to Louisa from New York to investigate oil possibilities and stayed to buy timber. Williamson
operated on the Tug and gave his name to two towns, William­son, West Virginia, and South Williamson, Kentucky. Bowles the Ohioan, according to Scalf, "laid down tram roads and used the first 'dinkeys,' little steam and wood burning locomotives to transport logs to the river's edge."7

The seventies and eighties opened a timber boom period which stretched to the eve of World War I. Logging usually started after the fall harvest and continued until spring planting. While some Big Sandians rafted their own logs to market, others sold their trees to large timbermen or even larger lumber companies. Bowles purchased untold numbers of logs and sent many a fleet of twenty rafts each to Catlettsburg and down the Ohio River to Connell's Sawmill in Louisville. The Thomas Lumber Company came to Floyd County in 1888, and the next year the Chicago Lumber Company started buying timber in the Sandy Valley. In 1891 the Illinois concern sold its holdings to the Yellow Pop­lar Lumber Company. Its representative, Captain John Fin­layson, settled at Haw's Ford which he renamed Dwale for his native town in Scotland.

After the trees were felled, they were dragged by either men or oxen to the riverbank where they were pushed with cant hooks into the water. Since everyone used the same streams, logs were branded on their ends with an individual's initials or with the mark of the purchasing lumber company. In small streams where low water levels did not move the timber along naturally, the logs were prodded downstream until they reached a splash dam. When thousands of logs accumulated behind the timber and stone splash dam, a key wedge would be removed and the timber spewed forth.

Loose logs could be as much of a problem as shallow water. "Taker-ups" and booms offered two types of remedy for this situation. The taker-ups were free-lance agents who caught and held unrafted logs until the owners appeared. When their charge for this service proved excessive, the Kentucky legislature standardized fees. Other times loose logs that escaped in the sudden floods of the season were
stopped by a boom, a dam of huge poplar logs reinforced by a giant chain stretched across the stream.

When the streams and the river rose, an event aptly called a timber tide by steamboat men, Big Sandy loggers prepared for the treacherous journey downstream. At the mouth of the main streams the logs that survived the often violent passage from the forests were tied in rafts. Working in water that was often waist deep, Big Sandians fought the swift currents and bound twenty-five to fifty, or even as many as eighty, logs together into a raft using long poles known as tie-poles and iron wedges called chain-dogs. Two raftsmen usually accompanied each raft—a bowhand in the front and a steersman in the rear. They maneuvered the floating platform by using oars attached to the logs by pins. With several rafts floating together on the same stretch of river, there was always a likelihood of the rafts crashing together, and sometimes at the narrow bends of the river the strings of timber piled up on the shore and had to be rafted together again. Often as they moved the heavy logs to market, the raftsmen sang “Jonse Hatfield’s Loggin’ Song,”

We’re floatin’ down Big Sandy
We’re floatin’ with the tide
A hundred yaller poplar logs
Oh lordy, how they ride.8

The best timber runs were made when there was a six-to-twelve-foot stage of water at Pikeville. When all went well, the rafts moved down the Big Sandy in thronging fleets which tied up each night at dusk and set forth again at dawn. A big timber run would crowd the river from Louisa down to Catlettsburg, and the steamboats had to pick their way carefully. Log runs were smoothly completed when there was at least a thirty-foot stage in the Ohio at the mouth of the Sandy, for the high water which was passing Catlettsburg threw the smaller river in pool for some miles. But when the Ohio was low with a great deal of current in its tributary, there was a danger of rafts being carried out
into the big river. Raftsmen dreaded this situation; and when it occurred, they often chose to abandon their rafts at the last turn above Catlettsburg and swim ashore, leaving the logs to be rounded up by others. On one occasion a rampaging raft lodged under the Tug Fork steamer Natchez, and the little boat made quite a picture, riding a log barge into the full stream of the Ohio River.

Concurrently with the logging boom, Big Sandians were stricken by an epidemic of steamboat fever. A local poet, Bessie Wolford, recalling the era vividly, wrote,

I’m just a-thinkin’ of the time when boats
was at their best
And steamboatin’ was the rage way out here
in the West.⁹

One of the first to succumb to the steamboat mania was the versatile Orlando Bowles. In 1870 Cap’ Bowles, undoubtedly convinced of the profits to be made in river commerce by his legislative investigations, built his first steamboat, and personally operated the vessel as it plied the trade route from Catlettsburg to Pikeville. Bowles christened the craft the Tom Hackney, naming it for the “ugliest man in Pike County.” Ely described the boat as a monster, and added, “As it came plowing through the water toward you, you instinctively felt like getting away, so hideous did it appear.” Bowles soon tired of this ungainly craft and tied it to the shore, but he quickly constructed another boat which proved the antithesis of his first effort. He named this one the Jerry Osborn, and it became known as one of the Sandy’s finest steamboats.¹⁰

Big Sandy steamboats included stern-wheelers and side-wheelers, varying from the pocket-size side-wheeler the Edward C. Kirker to the mighty Argand, nicknamed “Big Mandy,” a stern-wheeler as large as a Mississippi River showboat. The Kirker was only 8 feet wide and 75 feet long with two small cylinders the size of teacups, while the Big Mandy measured 24 by 132.6 feet. A photograph of the
heavily loaded Argand landing at Paintsville hangs today in the River Museum at Marietta, Ohio.

Many Sandy steamboats were dingy little packets, like the J. H. McConnell, towing strings of barges. Others like the VanMeter were as graceful and clean of line as swans. Unique to the Big Sandy were small side-wheelers known as batwings, which could run on thirty inches of water or "a good dew." Little more than flatboats with small steam engines, they had no wheelhouses, and the paddle buckets splashed in full sight on both sides of the boat. The batwings, affectionately called the mosquito fleet by old-time Big Sandy rivermen, ran only in winter and spring and included such boats as the Guyandotte, Thealka, Virgie Ratcliffe, and Favorite.

In order to avoid ruinous competition a number of independent steamboat owners and operators formed loosely organized packet lines. Often individually owned and operated, the packet-line boats carried the mail and passengers, making reasonably frequent departures at scheduled hours. The Cincinnati, Portsmouth, Big Sandy and Pomeroy Packet Company, commonly called the White Collar Line, became one of eastern Kentucky's more prominent packet lines after the Civil War. It received its popular name from the white bands painted on the boats' smokestacks. The White Collar Line proved of great benefit to Sandy River merchants who wanted to purchase freight from Cincinnati wholesalers. One of the principal factors in the White Collar Line's twenty years of successful operation was a contract with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway to exchange passengers and freight at its Huntington, West Virginia, terminus after 1872. Since no railroad closely paralleled the Sandy River at this time, the steamboat line enjoyed strong business connections with riverside industries.

Able management accounted equally for the achievements of the White Collar Line. Captain Washington Honshell of Catlettsburg served as president of the packet company from 1866 to 1883, as well as president of the line's subsidiary, the Cincinnati and Ironton Barge Line Com-
Pushboat on the Sandy, ca. 1900. Courtesy of Henry P. Scalf Collection, Photographic Archives, Alice Lloyd College
The Andy Hatcher, ca. 1894. Courtesy of Henry P. Scalf Collection, Photographic Archives, Alice Lloyd College
Telia Vaughan Hughes at the Cricket's calliope. Courtesy of Waterways Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio.
Maneuvering needles at Dam Number 3. Courtesy of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Huntington District.
Hand labor in a coal mine. Courtesy of Photographic Archives, Alice Lloyd College
Teach Slone and son

Courtesy of Photographic Archives
Alice Lloyd College
Hard times in the coalfields. Courtesy of Photographic Archives, Alice Lloyd College
Mining camp at West Van Lear. Courtesy of Photographic Archives, Alice Lloyd College
pany, whose towboats were painted bright red with scarlet stripes on their stacks. A native of Tennessee and a self-made man, Honshell had lived at the mouth of the Big Sandy since 1850 and had concerned himself with every aspect of Catlettsburg and Sandy River life. Recognized as a prosperous businessman, a civic-minded individual, a patron of Moore’s Opera House, and even a supporter of female schools, Captain “Wash” seems to have inspired implicit confidence in everyone who met him. Tradition has it that his more naïve admirers even believed that the Ohio River between the mouth of the Sandy and Cincinnati belonged to him, and on more than one occasion raftsmen and washwomen asked his permission to use its waters.

But the success of the White Collar Line proved to be exceptional; most Sandy packet lines could not match its longevity or economic prosperity. Short-lived lines included the Paintsville and Catlettsburg Packet Company, the Ashland and Big Sandy Packet Company, the Sandy Valley Transportation Company, the Big Sandy Valley Packet Company, and a succession of companies, bearing no discernible connection with one another, but all called the Big Sandy Navigation Company. Orlando Bowles, M. B. Goble, and others formed one Big Sandy Navigation Company in 1871, and at the turn of the century another Big Sandy Navigation Company, whose stockholders had railroad interests, operated the Cando and the Donca. The name “Cando” stood for the C & O Railway, as did the anagram, “Donca.”

Not many of the loosely organized packet lines remained in service for more than a few years. In 1888 when the sternwheeler Tom Spurlock entered the trade, a newspaper advertisement promised regular daily service between Ironton and Louisa at a price as “low as the lowest” with the further assurance that “The boat is a fixture in the trade. We have come to stay.” But failure became so common during times of economic upheaval or low water that some lines did not last the season. In 1892 the Big Sandy News announced the formation of the Ashland and Big Sandy Packet Company and reported that its stockholders awaited sufficient water
to send out their first boat. Unfortunately it was a dry year.

Dry spells and low water accounted for only part of the uncertainties of Sandy steamboating. Shifting sandbars, floating timber, and new shoals were constant hazards during navigable seasons as well. High water and rapid runouts were equally dangerous and often tried the nerve of Big Sandy pilots. Captain Ellis Mace recalled, “I have seen these boats coming down the river like they were shot out of a cannon, turning these short bends, missing great limbs hanging over the stream from huge trees, and finally shooting out of the Big Sandy into the Ohio so fast that often they would be nearly a mile below the wharfboat before they could be stopped.”

As a rule Big Sandy steamboats lasted less than five years. They blew up, burned, were snagged, sank in collision, ran aground on sandbars, were knocked out by lightning bolts, bogged down in cornfields during fog or high water, or just naturally wore out. The Jennie George foundered in the rough water of Buffalo Shoals, and heavy ice smashed a hole in the Thealka near Whitehouse. The Favorite rammed a tree and sank at the mouth of Georges Creek, while the Champion burned near the mouth of Johns Creek.

The steamboats splashing up and down the river carried on a brisk passenger trade. A veteran riverman reminisced, “I have gone out on a boat that had cabin accommodations for 12 or 15 passengers with more than a hundred names on the cabin register. . . . I have seen as high as four boats pull out at Catlettsburg in one evening, all loaded to capacity and having to refuse both passengers and freight.” Big Sandians visiting relatives or shopping in other towns, drummers, prospectors, entrepreneurs, timbermen, coal and oil speculators, raftsmen, circus entertainers, and evangelists booked passage aboard the packets. Sandy steamboat travelers were such a diverse group that Captain Ellis Mace’s ditty contained an element of truth when it stated,

And Ella Bell came tripping aboard
all dressed in diamonds and silk,
Whilst Granny Burns came limping along with a jug of buttermilk.14

The *Jerry Osborn*’s most famous passenger may well have been George O. Barnes, the “Mountain Evangelist.” In 1880 during a protracted revival meeting, he boarded Orlando Bowles’s *Osborn* in Prestonsburg en route to Pikeville. On the fourteen-hour trip Barnes used the deck of the boat to hold a preaching service. The weight of the congregation cracked the flooring and threatened to break through to the boiler, but the preacher did glean the confessions of “two roughly clad but good countenanced men from Pike.” Barnes recorded this success in his diary and further noted, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, that while the rain poured, the *Jerry Osborn* “bowled along by the light of a pine torch.” A few weeks later in Catlettsburg the Mountain Evangelist recorded the conversion of John Hopkins, “our handsome Captain of the ‘Jerry,’ ” and added his fervent desire, “Oh, to have all these Sandy steamboats officered by Christians.”15

Catlettsburg emerged as the busiest steamboat town on the Big Sandy, especially with the arrival of the log rafts. Timber brokers, agents, and buyers from Cincinnati, Louisville, the eastern seaboard, and as far away as England met the rafts at the mouth of the Sandy. The running of logs to Catlettsburg reached a huge volume by the 1880s. The Corps of Engineers’ commercial statistics for 1885 recorded over 87,000 tons of poplar plus 7,260 walnut logs. The next year the total grew to 176,000 tons of poplar and 15,532 walnut logs. By 1895 walnut was also reported in tons, and the combined figures of poplar and walnut now accelerated to over 425,000 tons. The volume continued to boom. Early in March 1900, log rafts completely blocked the mouth of the river, and the steamboat *Big Sandy* could not move its regular passengers and freight upstream. On May 9, 1903, the *Big Sandy News* reported hundreds of rafts floating along on the Tug and Levisa forks, and by Tuesday, May 11, over 1,000 rafts docked at Catlettsburg. In 1909 loggers
of the upper Sandy alone put about one million tons of poplar in the Big Sandy River.

A wealth of matchless hardwood came down the river to Catlettsburg, making the waters at the mouth a virtual sea of logs. Much of it went into the building of steamboats at Ironton, Portsmouth, Cincinnati, Madison, Jeffersonville, and New Albany. The fame of Sandy timber was such that when Captain T. P. Leathers built the seventh Natchez to replace the sixth Natchez, the famous racer, he specified that the engine timber for the great side-wheeler be brought from the virgin forest of the Big Sandy Valley.

As soon as sales were completed, the raft boats began their tasks of pulling timber to Cincinnati and Louisville. The Catherine Davis, J. C. Cole, M. B. Goble, Buckeye Boy, Sea Lion, and others left Catlettsburg many times with twelve and thirteen strings of timber that could each be 300 feet wide and 800 to 900 feet long. In 1905 Captain Carl Mace and the Sea Lion took a fleet of forty rafts of Big Sandy timber all the way to the sawmills at Louisville.

While some raft crews would occasionally accompany their fleets down the Ohio to see the bright city lights, the greater number by far sold their timber or collected their wages in Catlettsburg. At leisure after the five- or six-day trip downstream, the timbermen usually washed the river mud from their throats on Front Street. The Catlettsburg saloons and gambling houses, all within one square and facing the river, welcomed the hardy, often reckless hillmen. Leaving their chain-dogs on the sidewalk, the men entered the opulent pleasure houses. Tenth District Congressman John W. Langley, who began rafting at age thirteen, remembered a tale of one raftsman's first visit to the Alger House. Never having seen a mirror-covered wall, the unshaven, sweat-stained man gazed intently. At length he said, addressing his own reflection, "Pardner, you is purty nigh in as bad a fix as I is." In all the saloons whiskey flowed freely and fists often flew. A Big Sandian recalled both this toast, "Hold this whiskey between finger and thumb, if I leave any, you have some," and the fight that followed.16
In the timber-boom years the raftsmen became regular packet passengers. Any vessel, side-wheeler or stern-wheeler, that happened to be at the wharf could easily take on a hundred or more men. The *Favorite* had no accommodations for passengers, but raftsmen sat on barrels or boxes of freight, crowding the stern and bow for the upriver trip. “Many a night,” said a former mud clerk (so called because he stood in the river to supervise the loading of freight), “We pulled out from Catlettsburg with a hundred drunken raft-hands fighting among themselves and with the crew as well and raced a rival boat all night.” A Sandy River race might be for sheer enjoyment or for high stakes. Seventh District Congressman Andrew Jackson May recalled $1,000 bets and remembered how he “would frequently go down to the boiler room and pitch in a side of bacon into the firebox to increase the flame and the heat.” Once the steam pressure rose, the two boats would run side by side until one could pass the other. The *Ingomar*, considered the fastest boat that ever ran on the Big Sandy, actually made speeds up the winding Sandy which were considered good time on the wider, deeper Ohio. If few stops were made, passengers aboard the *Ingomar* could eat supper at Catlettsburg as the boat left the wharf and then have breakfast in Pikeville approximately 120 miles away. 17

While not as fast as the *Ingomar*, the *Cricket*, a batwing, transported its share of raftsmen up the Sandy River. The raftsmen usually came aboard the little boat like a flock of sheep. Indifferent to accommodations, they only wanted some food and to get home. Not having eaten regularly for several days, the raftsmen had tremendous appetites. Huge caldrons of beans, large skillets of eggs, thick pieces of bread, slabs of bacon, and buckets of black coffee disappeared as if by magic. As each man ate, a member of the crew marked his back with white chalk to prevent any return for a second meal.

The *Cricket*’s captain was Jesse Hughes, and he ran the boat in the Big Sandy trade for the White Collar’s famous successor, the Greene Line of Cincinnati. Hughes, who
lived until 1965, often talked of the highlights of his four
years on the Sandy. His upriver load usually consisted of
passengers, groceries, and supplies, and he recalled how on
numerous occasions he filled the Cricket to capacity from a
single wholesale business, such as Pattons of Catlettsburg.
On the way downriver the boat regularly carried pas-
segers, sorghum, chickens, eggs, geese, turkeys, and timber.
At an upper Sandy landing one spring morning, Hughes
loaded his sturdy batwing completely with hickory spokes
and oak hubs for a single wagonmaster at Portsmouth,
Ohio. In 1902, the Cricket carried a full cargo of ice in 300-
pound cakes stacked atop each other on the deck. A severe
freeze occurred on the upriver trip; and when the boat ar-
vived in Pikeville, the blocks of ice were frozen together.
Deckhands spent six hours chopping the ice cakes apart
before they could be unloaded and transported to C. C.
“Biggie” Bowles’s icehouse.

The Cricket had two unusual features: an electric light
plant and a steam calliope. Lighted throughout with incan-
descent lights, Hughes’s boat also had electric signals and a
large searchlight. But the Cricket’s calliope, pronounced
“cal-lee-ope” by many Big Sandians, created a sensation in
the valley. With the exception of occasional dockings at
Catlettsburg, the Sandy River towns did not experience the
showboat phenomenon of the steamboat age, but the
Cricket helped to fill the entertainment void. In a day when
music was a luxury, the thirty-seven whistles of the Cricket’s
calliope produced the melodious tones of “My Old Kentucky
Home,” as well as the popular Gay Nineties airs of “Annie
Rooney,” “Sidewalks of New York,” and “In the Good Old
Summer Time.” As for the musician in charge, he was none
other than Captain Jesse himself. Hughes declared that
often while he played, “the crowd was so great around me I
could scarcely move my elbows to play.”

Not all of Hughes’s admirers were aboard. Telia
Vaughan, a pretty young woman of a Catlettsburg steam-
boating family, often waved to the debonair captain as the
Cricket passed her home. One day he raced to the upper
deck and played a jaunty tune for her. In his autobiography, Hughes bragged that he was the only man on the Big Sandy River who won his wife with a calliope. In later years, “Aunt Telia” willingly posed in front of the Cricket’s calliope for her husband, who extended his artistic activities to include steamboat photography and painting watercolor river scenes.

River work did not pay high wages. Most Big Sandy river crews received no regular monthly salaries; they hired on only for the trip’s duration. For example, in 1900 the wages on the Cricket were $2.00 per day for the master and $2.50 for the pilot. Aboard the mighty Argand, the two cabin maids, a Sandy rarity, received $.75 per day, the cook and deckhands earned $1.00 a day, and the firemen slightly more. The rivermen’s salaries, however, were nearly clear profit with boat owners providing food, housing, entertainment, and insurance.

With steamboats like the busy Cricket and the large Argand plying Big Sandy waters and slack-water improvement proceeding apace, the natural reaction might have been for the general public’s interest in river improvement to moderate and for the activities of the Big Sandy Valley Improvement Association to be curbed. The Big Sandy News of September 26, 1903, warned against such complacency when it declared, “If we simply wait until the dam comes to us, old age and death will probably overtake the present generation before the much needed improvement reaches us.” The Louisa editor need not have worried. Colonel Northrup made his yearly appearance before the Rivers and Harbors Committee and did not vary the dynamics of his appeal.

Slack-water work continued throughout most of 1904 at Catlettsburg, and in November, Lock Number 1 opened “amid oratory, booming of cannon, and the blowing of steamboat whistles.” A group estimated to have been between 3,000 and 5,000 attended the festivities. A sumptuous banquet followed, which included: “New York counts [oysters], wafer crackers, celery, turkey, cranberry jelly, escal-
loped oysters, park city rolls, chicken salad, olives, pickles, cheese straws, beaten biscuits, Monticello claret, peach ice cream, assorted cake, coffee, doughnuts, Saratoga chips—and cigars.” High spirits prevailed, and the optimistic toasts included “Ohio Valley Seaports” and the oft-repeated “Dam It.”

Lock and Dam Number 2 were completed May 7, 1905, and the Corps could brag that the work had been finished three and a half days ahead of schedule. During the same month the national Rivers and Harbors Committee stopped in Catlettsburg during an inspection trip through the Ohio River Valley. BSVIA members were present in force, and Patton outdid himself by placing a huge banner, some twenty-five by forty feet, on the riverbank. It declared, “Big Sandy River, gateway to the largest deposit of undeveloped coal in the United States, equal to the shipping of the Pittsburgh district for 200 years. The kind the U.S. Navy uses. Completed slackwater in this river will bring the most extensive deposits of rich magnetic iron ore in the world in close proximity to water transportation. Also cliffs of marble 300 feet thick. In this valley is the most extensive deposits of high grade fire clay in the country. Give us slackwater and we will build for you one of the largest manufacturing cities in the world.” While something of an overstatement, Patton’s sign did publicize the scope of the Big Sandy’s mineral wealth and the river transportation potential.

In addition to improving the Big Sandy navigation system for travel and shipping, the Corps’s slack-water activities expanded employment opportunities for many Big Sandians. Men of navigational ability and some mechanical savvy like Tom Vaughan could get a variety of experience on the river. The son of a pre-Civil War steamboat captain, Vaughan was one of the first men hired by the Corps of Engineers to work on the new lock and dam system. During his lifetime Captain Tom owned several boats, the last one being the gasoline-powered Eclipse with which he did harbor work, and he may well have been the last pilot qualified to steer the whole length of the Big Sandy. Equally as well
known for his savory hamburgers as for his skillful piloting, Vaughan often joined the tall-tale tellers assembled around the potbellied stove at Lock Number 1. From childhood memories, *Ashland Independent* feature writer Bob Kennedy recorded these stories in his “River Roundup” articles, and he further remembered Captain Vaughan’s famous byword, “Dad ban my hide, she’s a good boat but she won’t back.”\(^2\)\(^1\) The Corps hired workers to maintain the Big Sandy River system, and the *Big Sandy News* often carried announcements of employment opportunities. Evans & Justice of Louisa built pushboats and needleboats for the Corps, J. C. Thomas of Louisa raised the crest of Dam Number 3, and Augustus Snyder built the homes of the lockkeepers. Using local crews, Fred McHenry and Charles Barber directed snagging activities on the river, and Big Sandians ran the *Pioneer, Louisa Number 1, Survey Number 1*, and other government boats on the river.

By 1905 with the completion of the three locks and dams on the main channel, the Big Sandy River navigation system was in better shape than ever before. But by that same year the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway had laid tracks up the Levisa to Pikeville, and the Norfolk and Western had begun construction along the Tug Fork. With the railroads cutting into the trade, navigation improvements did not spark riverboat commerce. Commercial statistics gathered from the period 1890 to 1905 show the gravity of the situation. The number of passengers traveling on the Big Sandy in 1890 was approximately 21,000; in 1900 the figure rose to 28,750, but by 1905 the number had fallen to just over 1,000. Timber tonnage rose from over 208,000 tons in 1890 to 425,000 in 1895, then dropped to 200,000 in 1900, and 123,000 in 1905. Total shipping grew from 268,582 tons in 1890 to over 414,000 in 1897, then decreased to 300,000 in 1900, and plummeted to 148,623 tons in 1905.

The completion of a lock and dam on each of the forks by January 1, 1910, did not improve the overall statistics. For the year ending June 30, 1910, the *Thealka, Enquirer*, and *Geraldine* were the only packets operating on the river. The
total tonnage of all Big Sandy freight was not quite 148,000 tons, with an estimated value of $2,500,000. Since 1870 the value of river-borne goods had increased a mere 104 percent.

As commerce decreased, so did the Corps of Engineers' interests in continued Big Sandy improvement. On December 30, 1912, the Corps held a public hearing at Catlettsburg. Colonel Dan Kingman underlined the seriousness of the situation when he declared, "The improvement of the Big Sandy River and its tributaries may be said to be to some extent on trial." Colonel Northrup served as chairman of the delegation favoring improvement. Having made careful preparation, he and the BSVIA had collected a group who made passionate pleas on behalf of the Sandy slack-water system.22

Clifton Crane of Crane & Cole of Cincinnati argued, "We might as well stop the Ohio River improvements as it is absolutely worthless without the improvements on Big Sandy." Congressman James Hughes of West Virginia insisted that the end of the Corps's support would "cause a setback in the development of the Big Sandy Valley from which it will take us years to recover if we ever do." Fred Vinson of Louisa, future chief justice of the Supreme Court, posed the question of whether it would be sound business practice to abandon a project after five locks and dams had been built; then he added, "All we want, gentlemen, is an outlet and with the outlet we can make black our rivers loaded with barges of this coal." Big Sandy Congressman John W. Langley in his usual bombastic style swore, "If you don't help us to dam Big Sandy, we will be damned if it will be dammed."23

While no one spoke directly for the railroad interests, two letters were presented, one from the C & O, and the second from the N & W. Without casting aspersions upon steamboat transportation in the valley, both railroad lines promised the inhabitants of the Big Sandy Valley expanded, reliable rail facilities. These promises were made more attractive when steamboat veteran Captain Bill Smiley, in the
course of his testimony, admitted that the completed slack-water system was of little value since the five dams still did not provide a year-round continuous navigable depth of six feet.

While no decision was reached at Catlettsburg in 1912, the handwriting appeared on the wall to the observant. The Big Sandy News of December 22, 1912, carried the headline "Big Sandy Receives Black Eye." River transportation was no longer the valley's only outlet; the railroad was an omnipresent competitor for business. Two more futile years passed, and in 1914 the Corps of Engineers announced its conclusions. From their investigations the Corps ascertained that the Big Sandy River's unfavorable physical conditions would prevent the development of any large commercial growth after the completion of the proposed improvements. In addition the cost of improvements would be excessive when compared with resulting benefits. Therefore, the decision was to discontinue further slack-water improvements upon the Tug and Levisa forks of the Big Sandy. At the time of slack-water termination, only five of the proposed twenty-one dams had been completed, and the total expenditures amounted to $1,625,000 for construction and $265,000 for operation and maintenance.

While the railroad is usually cast in the role of villain, in the Big Sandy the real foe was tardiness and delay. Interest in Big Sandy improvements lagged behind that of other Kentucky river basins from the very beginning. The steamboat's arrival was over twenty years behind that of the Kentucky, Green-Barren, and Cumberland river systems. State appropriations came late and were usually niggardly in comparison to those for other systems. Federal improvements on the Big Sandy predated those on the Green River, but they, too, were small in actual scope. Although the strongest argument in favor of slack-water improvements was that larger quantities of coal could be transported by the river, no barges had been shipped under the slack-water system by 1914, since by the time the dams were finished, the railroads were carrying the coal. In fact, it would not be
until 1935 that Big Sandy slack-water sent its first tow of coal to market. Then Captain John Dials of Louisa and the Fairmont towed three barges of coal from the Torchlight Mine, six miles south of Louisa, to the mouth of the river. Little coal would be shipped by water thereafter.

Slowly but surely the heyday of the Big Sandy River came to a close in the second decade of the twentieth century. One by one the various phases of river life drew to an end. The rafting of logs declined after 1910. Individuals continued to market timber, but highway and railway transportation and local sawmills with diversified products such as railroad and mining crossties, barrel staves, shingles, and axe handles became features of the industry. Steamboat transportation services declined. Deficiencies in river improvement and the long delay in providing slack water permitted the railroad to provide adequate shipping facilities.

Sandy River traffic fell victim to progress as the changing national economic pattern placed increasing dependence upon overland transportation at the expense of inland waterways. The packets left the river until only the Thealka and Enquirer continued in the trade. Soon the steam-powered towboats departed, leaving only a few tows at the mouth of the river. One by one the boats disappeared until the steamboat era was nothing but a vivid memory to those who experienced it. There was nostalgia for the vanishing packet, but it was apparent that no one was going to continue long in the unprofitable business.
COAL COUNTRY

For the wife may sigh an’ the children cry,
But the Mine—the Mine can’t stop.

Berton Bailey,
“Song of the Coal Miner”

The history of the Big Sandy River Valley and that of Kentucky’s bituminous coal industry are irrevocably intertwined. Dirty, dusty coal has both cursed and blessed the commonwealth’s easternmost river basin. While the Big Sandy River itself did not play a major role in the transportation of the “black gold,” the railroad, the river’s successor in moving the coal to market, traversed the region only by following the course of the Sandy and its tributaries. The years 1845-1945, coal’s centennial in the Big Sandy Valley, saw periods of prosperity and adversity—the booms and busts of the industry. After 1910 coal and its complexities played an important part in the lives of nearly all Big Sandians and governed the economic health of the region.

The Indians and early explorers knew there was coal in eastern Kentucky; both Dr. Thomas Walker and Christopher Gist mentioned its presence in their journals. Walker in 1750 even pinpointed outcroppings on the stream he called Paint Creek. Almost half a century later, Gilbert Imlay in his Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America (1793) wrote authoritatively about the mineral deposits of Kentucky and the beds of coal to be found along the larger eastern rivers. While their writings
delineated the extent of Kentucky’s Appalachian coalfields, neither Imlay nor Walker had any conception of the great industry they so casually opened.

Nor did the black mineral hold any attraction for the early pioneers. Although well aware of the coalfields adjacent to their streams, they had no need to dig in the earth for fuel. As far as the eye could see were virgin forests to supply the settlers’ need. In the early years of Kentucky statehood, coal lands did not have much value. They were difficult to dispose of and commonly traded for tobacco, flour, meat, or whiskey. Some coal was mined, however, and shipped in flatboats or hauled in wagons to the mouth of the Big Sandy, where it was shipped down the Ohio River and sold in eighty-pound bushels in Cincinnati and Frankfort. But as late as 1805, Frankfort used only 200 tons of coal annually, and nearby Lexington only about 500. Much of this consumption came not from the state’s own resources, but from the Pennsylvania fields.

Little information is available on Kentucky’s eastern coalfields in the early days of development, but coal production began in the commonwealth’s western fields in 1820, with the opening of the state’s first commercial mine in Muhlenberg County on the Green River. The 1830s saw a notable increase in mining in that region, and in 1838 Governor James Clark selected William W. Mather, a New York geologist, to make a reconnaissance of the mineral and agricultural resources of the state at large. Mather’s forty-page study outlined the extent of the two Kentucky coalfields. He supplied a great deal of information on conditions in the central and western portions of the commonwealth, but paid little attention to the eastern section. Mather did suggest a more complete examination of the coal lands of eastern Kentucky, but the survey did not materialize for a number of years.

In 1854 Governor Lazarus Powell appointed Dr. David Dale Owen of Indiana as state geologist. Organizing the first Kentucky Geological Survey, he made a thorough in-
vestigation of the state's resources. While admitting to having more knowledge of the western coalfields, Owen did describe various coal seams in the Big Sandy Valley. He found coal in four-foot strata in Lawrence, Johnson, Floyd, and Pike counties, and on Three Mile Creek he discovered a 5.5-to-6-foot seam. On the basis of his investigation, Owen concluded, "The best of the Big Sandy coals contain several percent less ashes, and more fixed carbon than the Youghiogheny [Pennsylvania] coal. . . . many of these coals of the eastern coal field are of superior quality—equal or superior to the best Pittsburg."¹

Big Sandians had not waited for the 1854 survey, and the 1840s had already seen a series of unsuccessful mining ventures. As early as 1842 an Ohio company sent steamboat captain Milton Freeze and others to open a mine a few miles above Prestonsburg. Richard Deering of Pennsylvania soon started an operation at Abbott, and another venture began at Hurricane. In addition there were numerous neighborhood coal banks worked to furnish the local trade and to supply fuel for the steamboats. Such endeavors included McHenry's bank above Louisa, Wheeler's operation near Paintsville, and Layne's opening at Betsy Layne.

The mining operations in Lawrence County proved to be much more extensive, and the activities of the Peach Orchard Coal Company, later called the Great Western Mining and Manufacturing Company, dwarfed the efforts of other early Sandy operations. The company had its beginning in the mid-1840s when a group of Ohio capitalists bought several large tracts of land in the vicinity of Louisa. William B. Mellen of Cincinnati directed the venture, and under his able leadership the undertaking flourished. In 1851 the Kentucky legislature approved the incorporation of the Peach Orchard Coal Company, and in 1852 Mellen boasted, "Everything is in complete order for loading 6,000 to 8,000 bushels of coal per day."²

The operation at Peach Orchard, earlier called Mellensburg, was extensive for its day. A store, gristmill, sawmill,
and forty cottages lined the Big Sandy riverbank and stretched up the hollow. Mellen's own residence, according to Ely, rivaled the mansions of Cincinnati, and a deer park supplied venison for his table. Near the mine's actual opening a mile-long tunnel reached into the hill, creating a drift mine, with over one-half mile of entries for rooms cut into the coal bed.

To extract coal, the Peach Orchard mine used the room-and-pillar system, which with modern mechanical modifications is still common. With picks the miners undercut the seam and then lighted black powder charges, nicknamed "Money bells," which broke the coal from the working face. They left pillars of coal standing to support the roof of the mine. In the early days the miners carried the coal in baskets or pulled it in tubs to the portal, or mine entrance. Later, pack animals did the hauling, and they in turn would eventually be replaced by mechanical coal carriers. Once mined the coal was tipped into barges to await a rise in the river before beginning the trip to the Ohio River markets.

Uncertain periods of high water and insufficient river improvements made for difficult transportation of the heavily loaded barges. Even so, the Peach Orchard Coal Company prospered and in 1859 promoted a plan to slack-water the Big Sandy River. The Civil War intervened, however, and ended almost all mining operations at Peach Orchard. The cost of replacing barges lost on snags and rocks or to bushwhackers' bullets proved too high. The last load of coal went downriver from the mine to Catlettsburg in late spring, 1861.

The idle works of Peach Orchard Coal Company came to life again after the war when George S. Richardson of Massachusetts took charge. The company again prospered, and production increased under his management. Growing numbers of barges moved down the Big Sandy, but water transportation remained uncertain, slow, and costly. Undaunted, the Peach Orchard stockholders dreamed of operating a great coal mine, and Richardson's imagination had been fired by the completion of America's first trans-
continental railway. Why not then construct a railroad from the Lawrence County coalfields to the Ohio River? Richardson soon talked of nothing else as he rode up and down the proposed line, convincing the local farmers of the wisdom of a more rapid means of transportation for their farm products as well as his coal.

Other capitalists also visualized iron rails that would speed the connection to big city markets. Even before Richardson could appeal to the legislature for a charter, another group arrived in Frankfort and incorporated the Cumberland and Big Sandy Railroad Company. They planned to build a railroad from Cumberland Gap to Louisa and then tie on to the Elizabethtown, Lexington, and Big Sandy Railroad whenever it reached the Sandy Valley. This venture, however, languished and died when the expected completion of the line from Lexington never materialized.

Meanwhile, Richardson continued to develop his scheme, receiving support from John Carlisle, an Ohio capitalist. Finally in March 1873 Richardson received a charter from the legislature to incorporate the Chatteroi Railway Company. With a capital stock of $2,000,000, the Chatteroi had eight commissioners, including not only Richardson but also the steamboat and timber entrepreneur Orlando Bowles. In addition to building the railroad, the Chatteroi was empowered "to open and operate mines of coal and iron ore and to build and operate furnaces and mills, and to construct branch railways to any coal, iron or other mineral or timber." 3

With the assurance that the railroad was to be a reality, Richardson redoubled his efforts to get local cooperation. After seven years of cajoling, he secured a right-of-way and turned the first shovel of dirt at Ashland on April 1, 1880. Work progressed rapidly, and by January 6, 1881, crews laid the rails into Louisa. An excited populace dressed in "Sunday meeting clothes" thronged the streets to catch a glimpse of the first train to reach the town. At last a whistle blew, followed by the bellow of an engine, the clanking of cars, and the screeching of brakes, and a new day of im-
proved transportation facilities dawned in the Sandy Valley.

To Richardson and the other company officials the completion of this section represented a triumph after eight long years of discouragement and disappointment. But for the engineers the job was only half-finished. Some twenty-seven miles of track had been laid, but the route ahead proved arduous. The railroad crews crossed the Levisa Fork, traversed creek valleys, and went through gaps. They built a tunnel almost a mile in length and costing $100,000 to reach the Peach Orchard site, and then constructed a $40,000 series of switchback rails to bring the tracks down to the level of the mine. It was no wonder that many Big Sandians called the Chatteroi, “the stump dodging line.” Mined coal awaited the arrival of the railroad. As soon as the train cars arrived in late 1882, the miners tipped the coal into them, and a reliable route to market was opened. The following spring the Chatteroi extended its tracks to Richardson, a small mining village named in honor of the Peach Orchard and Chatteroi Railway official.

The financial success of the Chatteroi depended upon the coalfield at Peach Orchard and there things boomed. In 1881 the company, now called the Great Western Mining and Manufacturing Company, opened a new mine on nearby Nat’s Creek. Some two hundred feet above the stream’s bank two entries were made into the hill. At first called North and South mines, the openings later became known as Annie and Elizabeth. In time a second town grew up; like its precursor, it was known as Peach Orchard.

With improved transportation facilities becoming a reality, the commonwealth resumed its geological surveys of the eastern coalfields under the direction of Albert R. Crandall. In the summer of 1881 he discovered a very thick seam of coal of great purity on Elkhorn Creek in Pike County. Laboratory tests indicated that it was a coking coal of superior quality. The coal came to be called Elkhorn Coking Coal for convenience of reference. Crandall spent the summers of 1882 and 1883 tracing the Elkhorn vein, determining its
thickness and location, and making more tests for its coking properties. The coal proved to be lower in ash and sulfur content than those of the Pennsylvania fields and those from the Upper Cumberland and Kentucky rivers. Working independently of the state survey, Richard M. Broas, an engineer from New York, searched the Big Sandy Valley for superior coking coals. In September 1883, on Joes Branch of lower Elkhorn Creek, he found the coal he sought in amazingly large veins. Over the next few years, Broas prospected the region and determined with surprising accuracy the boundary of the Elkhorn coal. These coal lands he purchased but did not develop.

The members of the Geological Cabinet at Frankfort were so impressed by the discoveries in the Big Sandy Valley that they sent specimens for exhibition at the Southern Exposition held in Louisville in 1883. The most interesting feature of the entire exposition, according to the Courier-Journal, was an 8.5-foot pillar of Elkhorn coking coal from the Broas holdings in Pike County. The 1884 report of the Kentucky Geological Survey declared, "The column . . . showing the entire thickness of the stratum, was taken from the bed, boxed and shipped to Louisville free from a single fracture—a most difficult undertaking owing to the nature of the coal, the roughness of the roads, and distance from railway." Many of the other displayed coals also received awards for excellence, and the whole geological exhibit brought attention to the untouched resources of the state's coalfields.

With the increasing recognition being given to Kentucky's natural resources and the increased production of her fledgling coal industry, the Great Western Mining and Manufacturing Company took the lead as the area's largest producer. Because of the increased output the Chatteroi added a night coal train from Peach Orchard to Ashland in December 1887. By 1888 Great Western's output for the first half-year reached over 11,000,000 bushels (137,500 tons), and shipments went as far away as Chicago.

The Chatteroi, and its immediate successor, the Ohio &
Big Sandy, pioneered the laying of twin bands of steel over the valley. For the next four decades railway engineers followed each other in rapid succession over the Big Sandy region, searching for the best routes through the hills. Group after group planned railroads to pierce the coalfields. Future railway giants—the Chesapeake & Ohio, the Norfolk & Western, the Baltimore & Ohio, the Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio—laid tracks, along with numerous short-lived railroad companies. The latter, aptly called “Streaks of Rust” by Elmer G. Sulzer in *Ghost Railroads of Kentucky*, included: the Eastern Kentucky; the Ohio, Kentucky & Virginia; the Carolina, Cumberland Gap & Chicago; the Ohio & Norfolk; the Elkhorn & Beaver Valley; the Millers Creek; and the Long Fork.

Striving to finish competitive lines, contractors speeded up roadbed construction despite difficult terrain and primitive building methods. Many of the contractors came from the Deep South, and they employed thousands of Negroes from the cotton fields as well as white Big Sandians. Practically every line had to be dynamited through the mountains. Sweat-stained men used sledgehammers to force iron chisels into rocks to prepare a surface for the heavy rails. Legends developed about these steel-driving railroad men, and the American folk hero, John Henry, became a workman on the Big Sandy railroad tunnels. In the telling of these tales, John Henry changed his color from black to white and became a stalwart mountain man, the champion wielder of the sledgehammer. Ballads were written about his feats, and Big Sandians who sang the verses vowed they knew John Henry well. “He was born on Big Sandy, follered workin’ on a pushboat till them new contrapshums ’ticed him off,” they declared.5

With or without John Henry, work progressed. In 1902 railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington of the C & O announced plans to extend the line from Whitehouse to the Breaks. His decision did not come too soon. Government-sponsored slack-water projects of the Big Sandy were incomplete, and the region’s coalfields still lacked a reliable
avenue of transit. The need for rail transportation became even more apparent in early 1904 when a huge landslide near Dwale almost completely blocked the river's channel and cut off steamboat and barge travel. Dredging proved a long task, and railroad construction continued.

In late 1904 the first trains arrived at Prestonsburg and Paintsville, and in 1905 Pikeville was reached. The next decade saw tracks connecting the Breaks with the rest of the Big Sandy Valley. In time numerous spurs along the length and breadth of the valley connected mushrooming coal camps with the main rail lines. Railway retrenchment in the 1920s led to the abandonment of many unprofitable tracks and the consolidation of short lines. The C & O soon gained control of practically all trackage in the Levisa Valley and on the Kentucky side of the Big Sandy, while the N & W dominated the Tug Fork and West Virginia valleys.

Closely following and sometimes outdistancing the railway builders came the coal prospectors and, eventually, the eastern capitalists. In the 1890s John Caldwell Calhoun Mayo, "for good or ill . . . a titan among pigmies," according to coal company critic Harry Caudill, began the large-scale commercialization of the Big Sandy's coalfields. Probably no other man has had as profound an effect upon the economic circumstances of his region or Kentucky as a whole as did Mayo, and the forces he put into operation still dominate its very lifeblood. Barely able at the beginning of his career to advance earnest money for title options, he built a vast fortune before his death, just short of his fiftieth birthday, in 1914. In a recent interview, Harry Laviers, Sr., of Southeast Coal Company remembered John C. C. Mayo as a very persuasive, forthright person with shoes untied, smoking a cigar. "He could turn those bright eyes and you would believe everything he was telling you was just like it was," Laviers recalled.

Born in Pike County near the end of the Civil War, Mayo moved with his family to Paintsville, the future headquarters of his multiple financial concerns. While attending Kentucky Wesleyan College in Millersburg, according to
family tradition, he became acquainted with an instructor who advised him not to close his eyes to the great potential of coal. He may well have enrolled in Wesleyan's one course in mineral geology, too. Returning to Paintsville, Mayo read law, taught school in Johnson and Pike counties, and married the daughter of a steamboat captain. Succumbing to his dreams of fortune, Mayo tramped the hills, locating valuable coal lands. Without funds and against immeasurable odds, he began to put together the Big Sandy's first industrial and financial empire. He introduced into eastern Kentucky the broad form mineral deed, sometimes referred to in legal circles as the "Mayo deed," which allowed the severance of mineral rights within the land from the surface rights. Tirelessly traveling untold miles in an eight-county area, Mayo secured title to thousands of acres of land. Alice ("Alka") Meek Mayo frequently accompanied her husband on his trips. Wearing a specially designed dress from Pogue's Department Store in Cincinnati, with hidden pockets for carrying money, Mrs. Mayo often counted twenty-dollar gold pieces into sellers' hands.

Early in 1890 Mayo made a trip to the boom towns of Middlesboro, Pineville, and Big Stone Gap, and on his return the Big Sandy News carried his prediction for a similar expansion in the Big Sandy River Valley. True to his own prophecy, he continued to accumulate mineral rights, including those of Richard Broas on Elkhorn Creek. Several years later Mayo sold the Merritt brothers of the Mesabi iron ore range thousands of acres of coal and timber land in Johnson and Pike counties. He received $100,000 in cash and took notes for another $100,000. Shortly after Mayo completed the deal, the Panic of 1893 struck, and John D. Rockefeller, Sr., bankrupted the Merritts. The notes proved worthless, but the Big Sandy's youngest capitalist managed to recoup after a few years and returned to buying mineral rights.

In 1900 Mayo commissioned a Winchester firm to distribute a pamphlet entitled, A Description of Certain Coal Lands in the Big Sandy Valley of Eastern Kentucky, which
described his holdings. In it, he promised the “clearest titles” to the “best lands” at the “lowest prices.” The next year, in Baltimore, Maryland, Mayo effected the organization of the Northern Coal and Coke Company, which planned to develop the coal lands to which he held mineral rights. For his share, he received $250,000 in cash and a fourth interest in the company. With a quarter of a million dollars in his pocket, Mayo returned to Kentucky to pay his debts and buy more mineral rights. By 1902 he had supposedly made his first million dollars. Realizing the importance of railroad transportation to the Big Sandy region, Mayo gave to the C & O Railway some 20,000 acres of coal land to entice it to lay tracks up the valley.

To accomplish his goals, Mayo worked long hours, courted eastern capitalists and railway magnates, and played politics. Buckingham Palace, the three-story family home in Paintsville, became the scene of many sumptuous dinner parties as Mayo sought to influence potential investors. The state newspapers and the Cincinnati Enquirer frequently carried accounts of what Mrs. Mayo wore and detailed the menus served at her ten-course dinners. In 1910, putting together a caravan of buckboards and covered wagons, Mayo gave a group of interested capitalists a grand tour of the Big Sandy Valley between Catlettsburg and Jenkins. The entourage made at least ten to fifteen miles per day, stopping often to spy out the rugged, but beautiful land and to see the thick seams of Elkhorn coal. At night the tired travelers usually camped under the stars, their dietary needs supplied by a superb chef—Oscar of the Waldorf-Astoria.

Mayo made frequent trips to Kentucky’s capital to further his and his region’s interests. His prominence soon became recognized and his Democratic party affiliation was appreciated. J. C. C. Mayo, Jr., recalled, “Not a year went by from 1907 that my father was not asked by the Democratic Party to be either a candidate for governor, or senator, or congressman.”

While Mayo cared nothing for officeholding, he knew his way around closed-door caucuses. The Land Forfeiture Act
of 1906, a revision of Kentucky’s tax structure, came about through high-level lobbying by Mayo. Old Virginia land claims were invalidated, and titles were vested in those who had held the land for five years and had paid the taxes. This measure assured the validity of many of the deeds already held by Mayo as well as others he would acquire.

Mayo was no stranger in the Big Sandy’s other capital, Charleston, West Virginia. Almost every session of the West Virginia General Assembly could count on a visit from the Kentucky coal king. Until 1913 and the Seventeenth Amendment, Kentucky and West Virginia state legislators elected United States senators, and Mayo and his cohorts aided in the senatorial election of Clarence Watson, Consolidated Coal Company president. One West Virginian sniffed, “It beats hell that a coal miner from Kentucky can come over here in West Virginia and elect a Maryland citizen as senator from West Virginia.”

Mayo bought very little surface land, and he never owned a large mass-production coal mine. But he collected untold acres of mineral rights under the umbrella of land-holding companies—such as Elkhorn Fuel Coal, William Coal and Coke, Tom’s Creek Coal, and Slemp Consolidated Coal—and then sold these concerns to speculators from outside the valley or to firms that would do the mining. In a 1976 interview, John C. C. Mayo, Jr., said that his father may well have set up some thirty such holding companies. In two and a half decades the properties acquired by Mayo became the basis for building the coal towns of Jenkins, Fleming, Wheelwright, McRoberts, Weeksbury, and Wayland.

Much has been written about the prices paid Big Sandians for coal lands. In reply to the frequent accusations of exploitive practices, John C. C. Mayo, Jr., declares, “It would be very interesting if those people knew what a small percentage of those acres had any coal at all under them.” A common complaint in the Big Sandy Valley is that grandsire received only fifty cents or perhaps a dollar an acre for the
mineral rights worth thousands of dollars, and many of these stories are undoubtedly true. But some sellers did get more. The letters and papers of Prestonsburg lawyer and coal man Walter S. Harkins are filled with references to coal sales. Along with the dollar-an-acre contracts are those for two, five, ten, and twenty dollars. A 1912 issue of Coal Age also contains a long-forgotten story. In that year Consolidated Coal purchased seventy-six acres of coal land near Jenkins for $19,700. The trade magazine speculated that the more than $250 per acre was "perhaps the largest ever paid for coal lands."

Scarcely had the coal prospectors cleared the next ridge, when the coal company agents arrived on the scene and prepared to convert an isolated, sparsely settled countryside into a community of mines, tipples, stores, and dwellings. They faced a formidable task, for their towns, like the imaginary Jumpup in James Still's On Troublesome Creek, were often "so far backside o' nowhere folks have to use possums for yard dogs and owls for roosters." For example, the Consolidated Coal camp of Jenkins, located in the heart of virgin forest, was reached by traveling thirty miles over almost impassable roads from Elkhorn City.

Big Sandy coal towns received a variety of names. Some companies named their camps for respected officials, like George Jenkins, Pat Fleming, Samuel McRoberts, Van Lear Black, and Jere Wheelwright. Others chose to remember wives or lady friends, selecting names such as Elsie, Alma, and Mary's Luck. Some camps bore romantic names like Beauty, Lovely, Majestic, Royal, Princess, Topmost, and Bonanza. Henry Laviers of Southeast Coal used the company's initials to name Seco, and the Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia Coal Company took poetic license and created Kewanee.

Duly named, the Big Sandy coal towns varied in size and quality of construction from community to community and from company to company. If mining operations were to be of short duration, the company limited expenditures to the
barest minimum. In one early camp of floorless houses, a man awakening during a torrential downpour got out of his bunk to close a window, only to find himself knee-deep in icy, muddy water. At Whitehouse, both the Whitehouse Cannel Coal Company and the Sandy River Cannel Coal Company drove their entries into the same hill to mine small, quickly exhausted pockets of cannel coal. Faced with a limited operation, both companies crowded workers into canvas-walled hovels where chimneys were deemed luxuries. Abandonment of the whole town at any time would have been of little financial loss to either company. In fact seldom has a town had a more inappropriate name than Whitehouse. Coal dust from the two mines, smoke from the trains, and dust from the unpaved country roads filled the air and settled in ever thickening coats over the town. In the winter the howling wind rattled the ill-fitting windows and whistled through the cracks in the walls and floors.

The larger, more heavily capitalized corporations, such as Consolidated Coal, Elkhorn Coal, and later Inland Steel, with extensive rich seams to mine, did a better job of constructing their camps. At Jenkins tipples, offices, stores, power stations, warehouses, and four-room cottages nestled around the hills created a renowned “model coal town,” and the homes of the officials on “Silk Stocking Row” rivaled Mellen’s long-ago mansion at Peach Orchard. In a recent interview, Frances Addis Turner, daughter of a company superintendent, recalled, “Our home in Weaksbury had cost in 1916 nearly a hundred thousand dollars. . . . [It had] a full length attic [75 feet] which was destined as a ballroom. There were six bedrooms and three bathrooms and a beautiful conservatory where my mother kept her flowers.” At Wheelwright a company store, hotel, theater, soda fountain, hospital, and frame dwellings with running water dotted the landscape. In 1930 Inland Steel purchased Wheelwright from Elkhorn, added a miners’ bathhouse, and spent $150,000 on a sanitation project.

Without a doubt the first towns built by the large corpo-
rations were the best constructed. Others erected later by
get-rich-quick companies often proved to be only shoddy
imitations. Dwellings built of green unseasoned wood soon
sagged, and the proximity of wells and privies created
health hazards. These factors seldom concerned the oppor­
tunists who wanted only to realize quick profits. Yet while
there were differences from one camp to another, one char­
acteristic was common to all—a monotonous sameness, ex­
cept for color, among the buildings of each camp.

Once the towns were completed, people were needed to
fill them. Thousands of strong, hard-working men had to be
found to do the backbreaking work of coal mining. Native
Big Sandians flocked to the coal camps whose facilities at
first glance seemed palatial compared to their old family
cabins. Workers also came from the mining camps of Penn­
sylvania, Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virgini­
ia. Others arrived from the worn-out cotton fields of the
Deep South. Many of the Negroes who had worked for the
railroad remained behind to mine coal. A separate section of
each camp, usually called “Nigger Town,” housed these
people.

Yet these multitudes were not enough, and the coal com­
panies sought immigrant labor as well. As early as 1893
Peach Orchard mines employed some 100 Hungarians, and
in 1894 an Italian work crew arrived. In the early twentieth
century many coal companies employed transportation
agents to go to New York, Philadelphia, or Norfolk and hire
immigrant laborers to work in the coalfields. A large num­
ber of Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Austrians, and Italians,
many of whom spoke no English, came to the Big Sandy
Valley. A trainload of these smiling dazed people arrived at
least once, and occasionally three times, a week at Elkhorn’s
Wheelwright. At first the various nationalities maintained
separate subcultures within the coal camps; before the melt­
ing-pot theory could begin to operate efficiently, the bust of
the twenties drove the majority of the ethnic miners to seek
employment elsewhere. As the “Hunky Towns” and “Wop
"Towns" became a part of many coal camps, a frequently heard coal camp ditty declared,

Dago an’ Slovak, Bulgarian, Russ,
Austrian, Servian, Pole
Just a big polyglot sort of muss
Minin’ an’ shovelin’ coal.\textsuperscript{12}

Once the companies built the towns, obtained the workers, and developed the operational facilities, the business of mining coal began in earnest. Coal production in the Big Sandy Valley in the first half of the twentieth century saw periods of high peaks and of rapid retrenchments. Johnson, Pike, and Floyd counties had joined Lawrence and Boyd in the ranks of commercial coal producers by 1907, and the vast Jenkins field opened in 1912. The second decade of the century through the war years was boom time for the valley. Trade flourished, wages rose, prices soared, and the railroads carried an enormous amount of coal to market. By early 1920 there were some 200 successful mining corporations in the Big Sandy Valley.

The economic prosperity soon declined. By the end of 1920, wages and prices began the up-and-down spirals which came to characterize the coal industry, the classic sick industry in an otherwise booming economy. Simply stated, the problem was that too much coal was being produced while new sources of power, like gas and oil, were developing rapidly. Throughout the twenties and down almost to World War II, coal sales fluctuated. The high point of the postwar boom came in 1923 and was followed by a decline in 1924 and 1925. Another peak occurred in 1926 to be followed by the very bad years of 1927 and 1928.

By October 1928 some 108 of the 180 Sandy Valley coal companies in operation at the first of the year had gone into receivership or bankruptcy, had discontinued entirely, or had suspended operations indefinitely. The John C. Hatcher Company at Pikeville posted a notice which read, "Boys the coal market is too low for us to run our mine. We have to
close. We cannot think of asking you to work for less than your present wages. Go somewhere and find a job until we resume work.” More often the crudely lettered sign said simply, “No work today.”

During this period one of the mining ventures that failed was the Himler Coal Company in Martin County, the valley’s only cooperative coal concern. In 1917 the Himler Coal Company, composed of some 1,500 stockholders, had established Himlerville on Tug Fork. Martin Himler, a naturalized Hungarian-American journalist, philanthropist, and owner and publisher of the New York-based Magyar Banyaszlap, saw the venture as one in which to test the ideal of cooperation between labor and capital in industry while providing for the Americanization of fellow Hungarians. At Himlerville all resources and every activity from the shooting of coal to the running of city hall were the cooperative undertaking of each and every miner.

With a capital investment of $500,000 from savings and loans, the Himler Coal Company erected an electrical power house and a tipple constructed in such a way that mine cars could be turned and emptied without being uncoupled. The mine’s capacity was 2,000 tons daily, but transportation proved a problem. The N & W had rail lines on the Tug’s West Virginia bank, but no tracks followed the Kentucky shore. As a result, the Kermit-Warfield Bridge Company, in which Himler Coal held controlling interest, built a steel and concrete bridge across the river. When it was completed in May 1921, tracks were laid across its span to the Himler mine.

In the first few years after its creation, Himlerville took on the appearance of a permanent coal town. The company’s five-room cottages had two windows per room, tubs and showers, electric lights, and gas and electric heating. The town had its own printing press where Magyar Banyaszlap continued to be published weekly. In July 1923, the stockholders voted unanimously to expand their capital investment from $500,000 to $2,000,000, to open two new mines, and to lease an additional 7,000 acres.
Prosperity, however, was fleeting. Some two years later, in 1925, the company passed into receivership. Himler and his associates had seriously underestimated the cost of establishing the town. All machinery and building materials had been purchased at inflated postwar prices. The Tug Fork bridge had cost $1.5 million, much of which had been borrowed. When creditors began to demand their money, none was available. Despite four years of earnest effort the company's condition did not improve, and on January 10, 1929, the Himler Coal Company's assets were sold at public auction to a West Virginia firm for a mere $65,000. The demise of Himler Coal marked the end of the only cooperative mining venture in the Big Sandy Valley.

The early 1930s saw further deflation, retrenchment, and unemployment as the national depression hit the Sandy Valley. The Marrowbone coalfield, which had been under development since 1905, lay prostrate. Mines at Lookout, Edgewater, and Hellier closed. In Pike County in 1932 the number of operations was reduced from thirty-three to twenty-six, and in Floyd, from twenty-five to twenty-one. The Consolidated Coal Company's mine at Van Lear employed 551 in 1931; the following year only 323 men were at work.

The booms and busts of the coal industry had a profound effect upon the lives of all Big Sandians. The contemporary playwright Lee Pennington aptly stated in Coal Mine, "Soul and Coal, they sound alike you know." During periods of prosperity, the valley's coal company owners, operators, and stockholders enjoyed the fruits of their investments. Winters in Florida and summers at Saratoga Springs became the custom of the leisured. Tennis clubs, literary societies, and debate groups provided amusement for the interested. The area's farmers, too, benefited from the booms as they sold their foodstuffs to the coal company commissaries or peddled them door to door in the camps.

As for the Big Sandy miner, he advertised his prosperity by wearing silk shirts and even silk drawers under his denim overalls as he worked in the mines. His wife acquired a coal-
burning stove, iron bedsteads, and overstuffed plush furniture—all from the company store. Gaudily colored linoleum covered the floor, and imitation lace curtains hung at the windows. Her clothing came from the company store, too. Money was plentiful, and there was little thought of saving. The ever-present specter of death greatly influenced the life of the coal miner; like the soldier destined for a combat zone, he saw very little reason to save money for the tomorrow that might never come.

Spendthrift, wastrel, realist, or whatever, the miner spent his money as soon as he was paid if not before. His needs were provided by the company which introduced the scrip system to keep wages within the coal camp. "Uncle" Elkhorn and his brother companies clothed, fed, and sheltered the miner, lighted his house, and provided his family with medical treatment, fuel, and water. The miner willingly gave up much of his traditional independence for the fleeting security of regular wages, deemed handsome by the fifty-cents-a-day standard of mountain farmers.

In recent interviews, contemporary eastern Kentuckians recalled their reactions to life in the coal camps. During the early boom days most Big Sandy miners, their wives, and daughters expressed little discontent and seemed pleased with the system. Marvin Gullet remembered, "Most people thought they were going to paradise when they moved to the coal camp. . . . They had socials and they'd visit one another a whole lot." Describing the excitement of being a coal camp child after the isolation of farm life, Draxie Wright said, "We played ball, we played horseshoes, oh we had all kinds of games . . . we had just a wonderful time." Much praise was accorded to E. R. "Jack" Price, the general manager at Wheelwright. Dewey Osborne declared, "He just made all the improvements on earth. He had gas and water put in the houses and he had bathrooms put in. He fixed everything." From a wealth of Kentucky memories, "Miss June" Buchanan of Pippa Passes recalled the enthusiastic audiences that saw the Caney Creek (now Alice Lloyd College) students perform Shakespeare's plays in various
Floyd County coal camps. On one such occasion an over­zealous spectator, still wearing his miner's hat, jumped to the stage to defend the heroine from the villain.¹⁵

When the busts occurred, disenchantment with coal camp life became more vocal. Cries of lack of privacy, fear for children’s safety as trains passed near the houses, and displeasure at drastically changed family structure were heard. Mae Allen of Floyd County remembered, “I was afraid some men would break in on me while my husband was working at nights.” Children seldom saw their fathers from one Sunday to the next, and the oft-repeated story of the child who referred to his father as “the man that comes here Sunday morning” had a ring of truth. Much criticism was given to the dilapidated houses in which some miners lived. Burt Crisp stated, “We’d have plaster falling off the top of some of the rooms, maybe holes big enough you could run a dog through in the walls.” But the greatest complaint centered on the dirty conditions of coal camp life.¹⁶

From the beginning the struggle to keep the camps clean and orderly had been monumental. Pervasive and inescapable, coal dust settled over everything. According to a coal camp doggerel,

There is coal dust on the winders an' there's
   coal dust in the air,
It's stickin' to the timbers an' it's settlin'
   everywhere,
It's clingin' to our eyelids an' our
   whiskers an' our hair.¹⁷

“I was born with coal dust in my blood” became a frequent expression in the Big Sandy Valley. Adding to the actual production dust, refuse piles of slate and low-grade coal frequently burst into flames from spontaneous combustion. Giving off an oily black smoke, the so-called red dog burned day and night without interruption. Rain did not quench the fire which each day received new loads of fuel. The smoke caused scratchy throats, watery eyes, and peeling
paint, and imparted the smell of sulfur fumes to clothes, bed linens, and furniture.

No matter how hard she worked, the housewife made little progress against the filth, and the communities took on a coal-camp gray color. A local poet summed up the situation,

Whenever I pass up the coalfield way
It seems so empty of all but gray;
Sky and streets and women’s gowns—
No other color in miners’ towns.18

Many women simply gave up in the face of inexhaustible clouds of dirt and allowed their homes and their families to become squalid.

With the hard times of the 1920s and 1930s came the first symptoms, according to Harry Caudill, of spreading demoralization, resignation, and passivity among eastern Kentuckians. To the rural Big Sandians of earlier times, accumulations of trash, disorder, and “nastiness” had always been indications of “sorriness.” Before the days of coal camps the relatively few bottles and cans which were acquired were saved and put to good use. In the camps a multitude of bottles, cans, and paper bags accumulated as supplies were bought at the company store. During the boom period, coal company employees hauled away the trash, but as the Depression continued, most companies dropped the service and left the task of garbage disposal to each family. Trash piles soon grew up in backyards, and increasingly people turned to the creeks and streams as a dumping area. The social demoralization of the miners and their families became a shameful, but undeniable, aspect of coal country life during the Depression and for many years to come.

As the economic decline quickened, less work meant less money for the miner. Times grew harder, and hours underground increased. The companies soon abandoned the pretense of paying their employees a daily wage, and straight piecework became the rule. The work day stretched to ten, twelve, and even sixteen hours. Retired miner James F. Col-
lins recalled, “You did what they told you if it took all day and all night to do it. You did that or you didn’t come out the next day with a job.” Increased effort swelled the glut and forced wages still lower. Injury and fatality rates mounted as safety precautions were ignored and safety foremen were discharged.

In the midst of reduced production and wage cuts came the most devastating flood the region had suffered in years. During the night of May 30, 1927, rain fell for twelve hours, and the Big Sandy River and its tributaries flooded their banks with unprecedented vehemence. A wall of water thirty feet high inundated the valley’s log cabins and frame dwellings, and close to a hundred people died. Automobiles vanished, and livestock drowned. The mines filled with water which drained from the driftmouths like huge black rivers. Tipples were destroyed, and commissary stock ruined. But the land itself received the greatest blow. The recently plowed and hoed fields lost inches of topsoil; the landscape became dotted with infertile, denuded hillsides. The flood caused the permanent disruption of the old system of agriculture, and few persons ever again had the choice of leaving the mines to return to their Sandy Valley farms.

With mining cutbacks and land spoliation, many eastern Kentuckians chose another—and illegal—avenue to survival. Whiskey making or stilling was a fundamental part as well as an economic prop of many Big Sandians’ lives. It was no wicked, social evil but a means of supporting one’s family. Stilling flourished throughout the Prohibition era. When corn crops proved insufficient for the trade, the stillers turned to sugar and made sugar-top whiskey. Big Sandians manufactured whiskey for the national underground market as well as the local fruit jar trade. Many barrels of “white lightning” were unknowingly carried out of the valley under loads of coal by the C & O and N & W railroads.

Local and federal law officers traveled over the hills in a ceaseless campaign to destroy the stills and to arrest the operators. The moonshine wars that shook the mountains dur-
ing this period rivaled the magnitude and violence of the “troubles” of post-Civil War period. On the first day of federal court it was not uncommon to see several hundred men and women lined up in front of the Catlettsburg courthouse, waiting to have their cases called. The Volstead Act found its victims among the politically prominent, too, as Pike County Congressman John W. Langley spent two years in the penitentiary at Atlanta for its violation. His constituents, however, did not hold this against the Langley family. John’s appeal to the Supreme Court having failed, his wife, Katherine, was sent to Washington as Kentucky’s first congresswoman. When Langley returned to Pikeville, he was welcomed by a blaring brass band and reelected to Congress.

The twenties and early thirties in the Big Sandy coalfields were an era of futility and desperation. A sympathetic observer noted, “The miners entered the great lean years of the depression already underfed and forlorn.” A miner of the period gave an apt description of his fellow workers and himself: “Our shoulders are bent, hunched forward as if trying to fend a blow. When we walk our long arms dangle down ’most to the knee. We are not as good to look [at] as we used to be. We mine coal. Miles back in the bowels of the mountains we burrow, like a wild animal clawing its hole for hibernation.”

Fortunately by 1935 there was some evidence of returning prosperity as a number of mines reopened. In 1936 approximately 1.5 million tons of coal were shipped from the Big Sandy Valley. Slight reductions came in 1938 and 1939, but 1940 showed substantial increases as war orders came pouring in from Canada. American industry made increasingly heavy demands on coal as the economy geared up to meet national defense needs. After the United States entered World War II, coal production in the Sandy Valley became a flourishing business just as in World War I days. In 1943 a new aspect of coal mining arose as motor trucks started transporting coal to the tipple sites from spur ridges long abandoned by a railroad-conscious industry which had seen
their recovery as economically unfeasible. Often run on a shoestring, trucking soon became a permanent part of the industry and rivaled the rail pits in production figures.

In the winter of 1944-1945, the Allied armies suffered reverses in Europe, and severely cold weather gripped the United States. To meet the alarming situation, the federal Solid Fuel Administration requested that mine production be increased. In response Big Sandy miners broke all previous weekly records and shipped 328,280 tons of coal for the week ending January 25, 1945. The total production for the Big Sandy field for the last year of the war set a new record of 15,186,090 tons.

Although increased employment and higher wages accompanied the heavy demand for greater coal production during the war years, coal mining, even under the most favorable conditions, remained a hazardous occupation. As early as 1884, twenty-six years before the creation of the United States Bureau of Mines, Kentucky recognized the importance of the coal industry as well as its inherent dangers. In that year the Kentucky legislature created the Office of the State Inspector of Mines, and shortly thereafter Governor J. Proctor Knott selected Charles J. Norwood to head the embryotic agency, which became the Department of Mines and Minerals.

Norwood's appointment came none too soon. As the fledgling coal industry began to feel its own strength, the lowest priority was safety. In 1886 the Second Annual Report of the Inspector of Mines listed major causes of deaths and accidents in Kentucky mines. They included: roof falls, outburst of excessive accumulation of explosive and suffocating gases, fires, and premature discharge of shots. The black powder used in the mines tended to be a great killer of men. Fuses were not always reliable and often smoldered slowly. Thinking the shot had failed, many a miner arrived at the working face just as the charge ignited. The force of the explosion threw tons of coal at him, killing him or reducing the once strong man to a lifelong cripple.

Finely powdered, highly volatile coal dust could explode,
too, when conditions were right. A spark from a lamp or a mining machine could ignite the particles, and then anything loose, including human bodies, was thrown through the tunnels. Not infrequently fires started in the coal seams, and sulfurous fumes contaminated the area. Fortunately most eastern Kentucky mines contained little carbonic acid ("black damp") or carbonic oxide ("white damp"), but the waste called "gob" gave off noxious gases known as "fire damp."

The largest number of accidents and deaths resulted from coal bumps and roof falls. A coal bump occurred when miscalculation allowed too much coal to be mined from a room, or if inadequate roof support pillars were left. The weight of the whole hill or mountain might shatter the layered minerals and hurl sandstone, slate, and coal into adjacent tunnels, burying the miner under the rubble. One bit of folklore has it that the Appalachian coalfields' roof falls and coal bumps are caused by Old Joe, the Paul Bunyan of miners. Old Joe, an ill-tempered giant, walks the mountain ridges, and the earth shudders beneath his weight. When he stomps his feet, mines cave in.

Most of the coal in the Big Sandy Valley lies beneath layers of slate and sandstone. Once the coal is cut away, the soft slate only weakly adheres to the sandstone and has to be held in place by timber, or in later use, iron props. Far too frequently huge slabs of slate broke loose and crashed to the floor, and constant inspection and close propping were necessary to prevent such roof falls. However, since these activities were not included in the pay scale and took time away from the actual mining of coal, they were often neglected with disastrous results. Some miners laughingly reassured one another, "Why you know that slate wouldn't fall on a good Republican" (or "a good Democrat"). Yet roofs were no respecter of persons. Coal executive Henry Laviers suffered a broken pelvis from a slate fall in 1909, and two mine inspectors were killed in a similar accident at the Himler mine during the twenties.

In the annual reports of his office, Norwood left an inter-
esting picture of boom-time coal mining. In 1911 at a meet-
ing of the Kentucky Mining Institute, he complained that
some coal operators marked all accidents as “not serious.”
Norwood admitted that he often had to change their re-
ports, and he urged a more careful accounting by industry.
On another occasion he observed, “I actually saw a man
making a survey for tunnels and rooms with . . . an oyster
can with two vertical slits in it, the whole thing mounted on
a pointed stick.”

In spite of state regulation and inspections, many miners
of the depression years complained that they rarely saw an
inspector; if one did come, his investigative tour stopped at
the general manager’s office. The mine inspectors did turn
in yearly reports on conditions in their districts, but often
complained of the need for more personnel and a larger
salary. In the Pikeville area, state inspector M. L. Wells,
whose annual salary was $600, stated, “I represent 4,118
miners and over 2,000,000 tons of coal. . . . I use a consid-
erable amount of the money I am allowed on the railroad.
This district has seventy-three operations, eighty-one mines,
which requires two hundred and forty-three visits according
to law.” Without adequate personnel for inspections and
no pay for safety measures, it should not be surprising that a
frequently heard ballad declared,

Working in the mines, boys,
Mighty hard to stand;
Lordy, lordy, these old mines
Has killed a many a man.

With danger and hardship a part of his daily life, the Big
Sandy miner saw the Depression as an age of vulnerability
and uselessness. In consenting to the paternalistic methods
of the coal companies, the miner had become a captive and
often helpless part of a system he resented. At first, believing
the economic reverses to be of limited duration, some com-
panies allowed the miners to remain in the camps and to
charge at the commissaries. When the anticipated business
upswing did not materialize, the companies changed their attitude toward the idle miners who became parasites, adding to the company's distress. As the Depression lengthened, patience wore thin on both sides. Forgetting old friendships, operators and miners became adversaries, with much of the animosity that still characterizes their relationship today.

The deterioration of the bond between employers and employees culminated in struggles for union recognition. Sporadic attempts to organize the Big Sandy had occurred since the 1880s, but they had lacked cohesiveness and had limited effect. The early movement toward unionization has not been well documented. Local newspapers tended to gloss over such events, and only brief accounts are recorded in the *Annual Reports of the Department of Mines and Minerals*. Notice was made of such activity and its short duration in 1885 and 1888. Then in May-June 1894 there were strikes at Annie and Elizabeth mines in Lawrence County in reaction to the firing of an employee called "troublesome and obnoxious" by the *Big Sandy News* of June 15, 1894. The 1894 *Annual Report* stated that the local union, "believed to be possibly an affiliate of the American Knights of Labor," demanded the reinstatement of the worker, while the company wanted disbandment of the union. After about thirty days of only partial work stoppage, the union surrendered its charter, and the workers returned to the mines. The *Annual Report* for 1896 recorded "no serious prolonged strikes or unionization efforts" in the Big Sandy Valley, and the 1900 edition stated, "The northeast district escaped entirely from organized labor's campaigns and is to be much congratulated on its good fortune."

Despite these early barren results, recruiters for the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) appeared in the Sandy Valley before the beginning of World War I and remained on the scene for a number of years. Few Big Sandy miners had any real experience with the union movement, and the field representatives' persuasive efforts proved premature. But in the minds of the coal operators, union organizers were advocates of anarchy, national and international
revolution, and the end of private property. An Elkhorn Coal Company document stated that a 1921 attempt of the “United Mine Workers branch of the American Federation of Labor to unionize brought some serious disturbances.”

The validity of this statement is somewhat questionable since only three Big Sandy mines had unions in 1922. In the early 1920s, two (UMWA) field workers, Sam Caddy (later the first president of District 30) and Sam Pasquale attempted to organize at Garrett. While they were holding a mass meeting at a nearby mine, their hotel room was dynamited, and the two men quickly returned to West Virginia.

There were several attempts at unionization at Jenkins, Wheelwright, Weeksbury, and on Pond Creek. Secret meetings were held in darkened houses with quilts over the windows as a further precaution. The miners signed a petition which had to be delivered secretly to Washington for fear of company reprisals. If the coal operators found out about the activities, the petition would be destroyed, and the person carrying it would be arrested and put in jail. Jenkins native Flora Rife recalled, “One man laid down in a wagon and they covered him over with hay and they hauled him to Shelby Gap and he went to Washington to get his charter. He got the charter . . . and got off at Shelby Gap and they hauled him back in the wagon under the hay.”

The exact longevity of this union cannot be determined, but there is some indication that union men from Jenkins were at Evarts in 1931. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, an old-timer stated, “Why some men became charter members of the union before they ever had a local.” No evidence can be found that “Mother” Mary Harris Jones ever visited the Big Sandy coalfields, but the “Angel of the Miners” did take part in unionization efforts in nearby West Virginia in 1902, 1912-1913, and 1921. Tales of her courage may well have contributed to the Big Sandy miners’ determination to organize to improve their conditions.

Wishing to help remedy the plight of labor and industry, President Franklin D. Roosevelt in June 1933 signed the Na-
tional Industrial Recovery Act, called by the *UMWA Journal* of June 16, 1933, "the greatest document in the history of labor." The NIRA provided an eight-hour workday and minimum wage provisions; Section 7(a) also guaranteed labor the right to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing. It likewise outlawed the so-called yellow-dog contract by which a miner agreed not to join the union. John L. Lewis, fiery president of the UMWA since 1920, quickly took advantage of the spirit of the Blue Eagle and paraphrased the act into the compelling statement, "The President wants you to join the union."

While UMWA efforts in the Big Sandy Valley remained relatively dormant in the 1920s, by the 1930s continued economic hardships produced a climate and a clientele for unionization. A local writer remarked, "It [the union] was formed by pure human misery." A retired miner recalled, "In 1933 they organized all over the river. Even farmers from the heads of creeks came out to join the United Mine Workers Union. Then later if they ever worked in the mines, they were already union members." As each of the Big Sandy Valley's local unions received its charter, it became a part of UMWA District 30 with headquarters at Pikeville. Today, some forty years later, there are thirty-six locals and an approximate membership of 10,000. However, the exact membership figures, like the password for admittance to union meetings, remain confidential. At present even the serious scholar cannot gain access to UMWA archives in Washington. 27

Unionization in the Sandy Valley had no recorded parallel with the bloody events in Harlan and Bell counties. No single reason for this difference can be discerned. Sam Johnson, the present assistant commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Mines and Minerals, believes that since the Big Sandy Valley lagged behind southeastern Kentucky as a coal producer in the 1930s, the issue was not as critical or explosive. With a twinkle in his eye Harry Campbell, president of the Big Sandy-Elkhorn Coal Operators Associa-
tion, declared that the absence of violence was due to the enlightened attitude of the Big Sandy coal operators of the period. 28

In a particularly informative interview, B. F. Reed, the Floyd County owner of the Turner-Elkhorn Coal Company who played a part in the proceedings of the 1930s, took a more practical view of the Sandy Valley situation. He maintained that the peaceful acceptance of unionization was due to the economic depression, asserting, “We all recognized at that time we needed a change from what we had been doing.” Reed further declared, “We hoped it would bring a stabilizing influence to the price of coal and it would stabilize wages.” 29

Whatever the case, the union was organized in 1933, as was the Big Sandy-Elkhorn Coal Operators Association. In the fall of that year the coal operators and the miners carried on their negotiations at UMWA district headquarters. The leaders in the proceedings were the Elkhorn and Consol coal companies, the region’s largest producers, with the smaller operators following their direction. At this first meeting, as well as at other pre-1945 negotiations, safety conditions or the questions of operators’ supplying tools and powder were not the issue. The problem of wages was the primary concern, and the final disposition of this question always brought the most distress.

The miners were paid $.22 per ton on the average or at most $1.76 per day for long hours of underground labor. Because of the part-time operating schedules of the mines, individual salaries rarely amounted to more than $5 per week—which was already owed to the company store. Often a pay voucher would amount to zero take-home pay or only a few cents at most. Justifiably, the miners sought pay increases commensurate with the cost of living and the hazards of their employment. From the coal operators’ standpoint, B. F. Reed recalled that he had thin paper profit margins; he maintained, “When you are having a hard time staying in the coal business at the old rate of wages you resist increases because you are never sure that you can get your

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customer to accept that increase. And if he doesn’t, you are out of business.”

The 1933 Big Sandy agreement, once reached, became a part of the Appalachian Agreement negotiated by the UMWA. It provided daily wages of $4.20 for southern Appalachian miners with the exception of the Alabama division, which had only recently begun reorganization. There was a $ .40 differential for southern Appalachian coal miners in comparison to those north of the Ohio River and northern West Virginia. This difference was expected to help southern coal operators, including those in the Big Sandy Valley, to compete successfully with northern Appalachian coal operators who had access to cheaper freight rates. There were slight changes the next year with a $.40 increase for both northern and southern Appalachian miners, but the action was almost immediately nullified as the NIRA was declared unconstitutional.

With the collapse of the NIRA and the associated National Recovery Administration (NRA), Congress quickly passed the Guffey-Snyder Coal Conservation Act of 1935, which in effect established a “little NRA” for coal. But the Guffey Act became inoperative, as the Supreme Court in 1936 struck it down, too. The Guffey-Vinson Coal Conservation Act of 1937 established a Bituminous Coal Commission which enforced compliance with minimum prices and fair marketing rules. During these years in the Big Sandy Valley, B. F. Reed concluded, “Generally the new contracts were arrived at without too much trouble.”

A flood tide of union activity materialized during these years. Soon the UMWA became the badge of promise in the Big Sandy coalfields. Pre-union days were often called “slavery times,” and verses of “Whose Side Are You On” echoed through the coal towns. A few miners opposed the cause of unionization, and their refusal to take the oath of brotherhood branded them traitors to their own kind. Called “scabs” and “Yaller dogs,” hesitant joiners were often baptized in the name of John L. Lewis in nearby muddy creeks. Union miners usually proved as intolerant of non-
union miners as the coal operators had been to the field workers in the 1920s.

With the UMWA gaining strength in the Sandy Valley, its members dared to focus attention on the coal industry in unprecedented fashion. In the summer of 1935, mining conditions in Johnson County received statewide and even national notice, as the *New York Times* picked up the story. John Mollett, secretary of the UMWA local at Van Lear, brought a charge of murder due to negligence against John F. Daniel, chief of the Kentucky State Department of Mines and Minerals. The accusation arose out of an explosion which took the lives of nine miners at Van Lear Number 5. Daniel spent some twenty-two hours in the town jail before his bond was set at $10,000. Calling the incident "a plot to embarrass me," the Kentucky chief of mines saw the proceeding as a political gambit by Mollett, who was seeking election to the state legislature, and as an attempt to gain recognition of UMWA power. Pardoned by Governor Ruby Laffoon, Daniel never stood trial, and Mollett went to Frankfort as the frequent spokesman for his fellow miners and the UMWA.32

Inseparable from the UMWA as a symbol of hope was its leader, John L. Lewis. "Old Eyebrows," as he was called in some Sandy locals, visited Pikeville in October 1935. There, before a cheering crowd of 20,000, Lewis spoke on the improved mining conditions in eastern Kentucky and pointed out that miners had a "new and increased buying power" thanks to the recently implemented UMWA wage scale. In recalling those early union days, a retired miner observed, "The average miner thought as much of John L. Lewis as they did the Lord"; and his cohort added, "He and Franklin D. Roosevelt are, in my judgement, two of the greatest men who was ever on earth, 'side of our Savior and the Apostles."33

So great was the Big Sandy miners' allegiance to Lewis that 12,000 of them followed his direction and struck four times during 1943. With portal-to-portal pay the question that year, the union leader declared, "American miners are
the only miners in any civilized country who do not receive compensation for travel time at each end of the shift.” When the coal operators refused to compromise, Lewis, to the great consternation of the country, repeatedly called out the miners. In response to the fury of a nation at war, a McRoberts miner reasoned, “We regret the strike but it looks like our only chance to get what we want.” A few days later representatives of 20,000 eastern Kentucky coal miners met in Ashland and adopted a resolution defending John L. Lewis. They pledged themselves to follow Lewis “wherever he may lead” and condemned all acts of the press in its “disgraceful attempt to slur this great American.” So powerful was Lewis that the national president’s command to the miners to return to work was ignored until word could be received from the UMWA president.34

Without question, the Big Sandy River Valley is Coal Country, and coal’s ascendancy there cannot be ignored nor denied. Long ago old mother nature must have laughed merrily at the fortune-seeking settlers who madly rushed through the mountains, ignoring the great mineral wealth under their very feet. However, by the mid-nineteenth century Big Sandians had discovered the importance of their coal treasure, and thereafter the black mineral’s hypnotic attraction held sway. Both a blessing and a bane, coal controlled the economic existence of the region and shaped the lives of the people.
6

KENTUCKY'S LAND OF PROMISE?

O the times they are a-changin, they are blowin in the wind, but the more things change the more they stay the same.

J. W. Miller, "The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same"

The Annals of the Big Sandy River Valley since 1945 are in many ways a brief synopsis of the area's past history. Once again the valley's natural resources have attracted national attention as the cycle of booms and busts in the coal industry is repeated. The recurring moral concern for Appalachia appeared again in the early 1960s in the form of the New Frontier-Great Society legislation and then faded by the end of the decade.

In 1973 the country's interest was revitalized when the Arab oil embargo prompted a strong national emphasis on the development of coal resources. But in opposition to energy demands, the newly discovered voice of environmentalists cried out against the ruthless exploitation of the land by surface mining and advocated the preservation of the mountains and streams. The current wave of prosperity, which bears both the seeds of its own destruction and the hope of self-sustenance, has not yet crested, but the judicious devel-
opment of the eastern Kentucky coal industry has the potential to make the Big Sandy River Valley a land of promise for all Kentuckians.

By 1948 the prosperity which had followed World War II collapsed, and postwar recession set in. In the increasingly complex coal industry, mechanization led to expanded production while pushing unemployment rates to new highs. Such devices as the continuous miner which could extract twelve tons of coal in one minute, the endless conveyer belt for mineral transportation, the trackless shuttle buggy, and the mechanical roof bolter drastically reduced the number of workmen needed in the mining process. Gone were the timber cutters, haulers, and setters; the track layers; the cutting machine operators; the blasting crews; the loaders; and a host of others. Automation in the large mines permitted a lesser degree of modernization in the smaller operations, as the truck mines quickly purchased their larger competitors' cast-off equipment. Increased production from a smaller work force coupled with a growing shift of customers from coal to gas and oil created a glut in the market and brought hard times back to eastern Kentucky.

Many Big Sandians of the late 1940s and the 1950s faced what contemporary authors Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg in Our Appalachia called the “cruel choice.” They could stay in the region and eke out a living at below subsistence standards, or they could leave the area and find work elsewhere. “I’m going to Dee-troyt” was heard again and again as Big Sandians migrated to urban centers in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and elsewhere. In Pike County between 1950 and 1970 the population declined from over 81,000 to 61,000. The lines of the song “Blue Ridge Mountain Refugee” tell of this exodus;

In Cincinnati, Baltimore, Chicago and Detroit
You will find us by the thousands with our husbands
and wives
If you wonder what we’re doing here so far from
our mountain homes,
We’re Blue Ridge refugees, fighting for our lives.¹

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In scores of "Uptowns" and "Over the Rhines," the mountain émigrés found themselves derisively called "Briars," "SAMs" (Southern Appalachian mountaineers), and hillbillies. Some remembered too well the unemployment and despair of eastern Kentucky and were determined to succeed, while others never really accepted the new environment and continued to yearn for former surroundings. "I wanna go home. Ooooh Lord, I wanna go home" became a familiar lament in "Little Kentucky" ghettos. Although salary considerations kept the displaced mountaineers in the urban areas during the week, their old rattletrap cars frequently carried the homesick to the Sandy Valley for weekend visits. Often a generation would pass before the migrants developed ties with their new residences and even then "back home" was still Kentucky. In Ohio a group of transplanted Kentuckians formed a loosely knit social organization called the O'Tucks, who often hold square dances and country music festivals.

For those Big Sandians who remained in their beloved valley, life went on—at an uneven pace. Although there was still some employment in the underground mines and at the new surface mining sites, the supply of labor far exceeded the demand. This disparity brought about the near collapse of the UMWA in eastern Kentucky in the postwar years. Miners left the highly mechanized union works to seek employment in the small, unorganized mines. Wages were lower, and safety conditions were often neglected. Yet a job was a job, and "Little Harry's [Harry Laviers, Jr., of Southeast Coal] good to us." In many instances the miner's standard of living returned to its "Hoover days" level. For the nonmining segment of the population, things were not much better. Merchants, farmers, public servants, and professional people continued to follow their daily pursuits. But since their livelihood was often tied to the coal economy, their salaries, too, fell below national norms.

For the unemployed, public assistance became a way of life. Highly coveted checks for dependent children, the aged, the blind, and the disabled poured into the region.
Such programs gave the recipient just enough money to survive until the next monthly check came. They undermined ambition since the taking of a job decreased or ended the assistance. Yet the payment was never enough to take adequate care of an individual’s needs. In recent years the assistance check has been joined by food stamps, Medicare, Medicaid, and legal aid. These contributions have created little work incentive and have done nothing to instill civic responsibility in the recipients.

The 1960s brought a rediscovery of Appalachia, eastern Kentucky, and the Big Sandy River Valley. As the media focused national attention on the area, Harry Caudill became the angry, but eloquent, spokesman of eastern Kentucky. In magazine articles published in the late fifties and early sixties, and especially in Night Comes to the Cumberlands (1963), he told a poignant, rarely objective story of poverty, exploitation, and despair in the coalfields. Pollsters quickly ascertained that poverty-plagued Appalachia rose like a specter to haunt affluent Americans. Sensing the national sympathy, Congress passed the Area Development Act of 1961, the 1962 Federal Highway Act, the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965, the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965, and the Model Cities Program of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1966. In toto, the New Frontier-Great Society decade generated more policies designed to lessen regional problems than any since the New Deal.

Soon millions in federal funds flowed into the Sandy Valley with all the force of a rampaging river at flood stage. A fresh spate of national agencies with “alphabet soup names,” like OEO, ARC, VISTA, HUD, and CCA, inundated every county. Surveys were authorized, commissions and committees established, and programs begun. Unemployed men—“Happy Pappies” or “Johnson boys”—went to work sweeping streets and clearing roadsides; in Prestonsburg they built a city park. Head Start programs materialized, and teenagers received jobs after school and for the summer. Sewing and child-care classes began for mothers.
The Big Sandy River Valley had never before experienced anything quite like it. Appalachia was the “in thing” for many Americans. University professors, college dropouts, unemployed teachers, former debutantes, missionaries, and ex-civil rightists arrived on the scene to get in on the action. “This conglomeration came on us like a mass of jelly the size of Mt. Everest,” wrote Kentucky humorist and former eastern Kentucky newspaper editor, Alan Trout. Another observer quipped that during the sixties the average Appalachian family consisted of “one mother, one father, a brood of children, and a resident sociologist.”²

The mid-1960s were heady days. The war on poverty was still more important than the one in Vietnam. Arriving in Paintsville on April 24, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared, “We are not going to be satisfied until we have driven poverty underground and until we have found jobs for all our people.” The optimistic impact of this visit on many Big Sandians was aptly stated by a Martin County youth who proudly proclaimed, “Mr. President, you’re the first [important] person who’s ever been to Inez.” A few days later Hugh Haynie, Courier-Journal cartoonist, caricatured LBJ as “The Man on Horseback.” The cartoon showed the cowboy Johnson tenderly lifting a ragged child, who bore a sack labeled “Appalachian Poverty,” to ride on the horse with him.³

While it could be argued that some of the New Frontier-Great Society poverty programs contributed to the “culture of dependency,” such ideas were easily overlooked. Bulldozers were cutting the Mountain Parkway through the rugged terrain of eastern Kentucky. Every month there was an announcement that some agency or another in almost every county had received a new grant for $25,000, $50,000, or $100,000. One-room schoolhouses became a thing of the past, and the University of Kentucky established a community college at Prestonsburg. Civic leaders met weekly to plan how new industries and the tourist trade could be lured to the Sandy Valley. Paintsville, Prestonsburg, and Pikeville worked together and through the Big Sandy Area Develop-
ment District (BSADD) to plan the future growth of the river valley. In 1967 Pikeville, America’s smallest model city, began the Peach Mountain open-cut project which involved no less than changing the course of the Levisa Fork and relocating major transportation arteries. Materials removed from the cut are being used to fill portions of the existing river channel and will give the city more than 150 acres of badly needed land for growth.

Community action groups talked about how to make welfare departments and school boards more responsive to the needs of the poor, how to get better local roads, and how to stop strip miners. A number of effective leaders, who were often familiar with union-style organizing techniques, emerged from these grass-roots assemblies. In Prestonsburg a hundred mothers, members of the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization (EKWRO), obtained free and reduced-price lunches for poor school children by picketing the Floyd County Board of Education office. A few years later Eula Hall and the EKWRO founded the self-supporting Mud Creek Clinic to provide better health care for the indigent. In 1967 a community action organization called the Appalachian Group to Save the Land exerted enough pressure to stop strip miners from mining the hillsides above their Pike County homes. The Floyd County Save Our Kentucky organization made similar efforts, with Eula Hall declaring, “I’ve been working on this for years, and I can’t come up with anything but people to stop a strip mine.”

Toward the end of the sixties the Sandy Valley’s Appalachian recovery programs waned as the Vietnam war intensified and the Republican party recaptured the White House. Budgets for domestic projects dwindled as defense spending accelerated. The Asian war siphoned off much of the poverty funds and the nation’s interest. Even among the “poverty warriors” the drama, idealism, and hope that characterized the early stages of the movement lessened. On taking office Richard Nixon began dismantling the war on poverty and removed most of the structure of the Great Society. Although many of the poverty agencies ceased to exist, a some-

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what emasculated ARC continued to function as a clearing-house for regional problems. In the Big Sandy River Valley itself, a popular ballad commanded, “Go tell Sargent Shriver . . . the poverty war is dead.”

The success of the war on poverty is difficult to gauge. Indeed to the casual observer, very little was achieved. Always an impatient and often a romantic people, few Americans understood that the problems of Appalachia could not be rectified quickly, and few seemed interested in long-term goals. As a consequence, the nation’s financial and moral commitment had been inadequate. In the words of Harry Caudill, “It was like pouring mercurochrome on cancer.” “The antipoverty programs,” a Big Sandian told Robert Kennedy during his 1968 visit to Prestonsburg, “have only made the state of poverty more livable.”

During the early seventies few changes occurred in the social and economic development of the Big Sandy River Valley. The coal industry, the area’s one exploited source of wealth, languished under the influence of cheap foreign petroleum, and the UMWA remained ineffectual. Then in late 1973 the Arab oil embargo created a national energy crisis, and the nation immediately began to emphasize the development of its coal resources as a major priority. Bombarded by the news of the need for energy independence and by reminders that Kentucky ranked third in national coal reserves, the commonwealth produced more than 136 million tons of coal in 1974, with Big Sandians mining 31 percent of this total. On the short-term or no-contract spot market, the fuel sold for as much as ninety dollars per ton.

Prosperity returned to the Sandy Valley coalfields which humorists called “Little Arabia,” and Pikeville, with its banks’ total assets soaring to near $300,000,000, suddenly recaptured its boom-town status. Soon the general trend of out-migration reversed, and population figures began to climb. Between 1970 and 1975 the migration into the Big Sandy Valley was over 10,000 people, increasing the population by almost 8 percent, and per capita personal income accelerated about 66 percent.
Employment rose, but not UMWA membership. The tonnage figures of 1974-1976 made Kentucky the nation’s largest coal-producing state, outdistancing West Virginia, the former leader, by over 30 million tons. The end of the embargo did not curtail the commitment to coal; and while coal prices declined from their bonanza heights, they did not return to the pre-1974 level. The 1975-1977 spot-market prices for Big Sandy coal ranged from eighteen to forty-two dollars a ton.

With the nation’s need for energy doubling every fourteen years and the demand for electricity doubling every ten years, coal, because of the extensive reserves, became the logical source of additional fuel. However, the Federal Energy Administration’s goal of energy independence by 1980 was soon at loggerheads with environmental concerns. The desire for maximum profits in coal production caused less-expensive surface mining to become the major extraction method, and many energy producers largely ignored the impact of this mining method on surrounding land and water, and on the residents of a mined area.

Although dating from the early part of the century, surface mining accelerated in the Big Sandy Valley after World War II when the Tennessee Valley Authority switched from hydroelectric turbines to coal-fired steam generators to produce electricity. Since TVA’s furnaces could efficiently burn surface-mined coal, the fledgling industry was assured of a nearly infinite market. As other power producers followed TVA’s lead, the demand for cheap coal increased dramati-
cally. Hundreds of so-called “worked-out” ridges, containing bands of outcrop coal which neither conventional tunnel-and-pillar methods nor the recently introduced German longwall miner could extract, waited to be mined, as did virgin seams long inaccessible by underground procedures.

Surface mining in the Sandy Valley came to be divided into two types: auger mining and contour stripping. In the auger process, a giant drill, ranging in diameter from eighteen inches to seven feet, bores straight back into the mountainside, bringing out quantities of coal with each revolu-
tion of the screw. Contour stripping is also relatively simple; the overburden, everything above the coal, is blasted and bulldozed away in successive cuts to expose the seam. The process creates a bench (a flat horizontal surface or shelf) and a highwall (the perpendicular surface or face). Trees, soil, stone, shale, and slate, now known as spoil, are piled on the bench or pushed down the mountainside. The coal is easily broken loose with light charges and loaded by heavy equipment directly into trucks.

At first the expansion of the surface mining industry seemed to serve the national interest as well as the desire for individual profits, and compared with underground mining, it possessed a number of inherent advantages. New operations could be started with a limited work force and with relatively small investment, and maximum daily production, which is greater per man than in underground mining, could be achieved in a few months. Workers required minimum training, and safety was not a major problem. The perils of slate and roof falls, gas explosions, fires, and black lung did not affect the surface labor force.

Despite the economic advantages of surface mining, opponents point out that the process plays havoc with the environment. The removal of the overburden leaves ugly scars on the face of the mountain; the benches are eyesores and present the danger of mudslides in rainy periods. The eroding silt from the bench can also cause pollution of waterways, damage to recreational areas, and the likelihood of flooding. Furthermore, after the easily removed coal is taken away, a thin layer of dust and mineral fragments is left exposed to the elements. Rainfall and standing water react with the residual coal to form toxic sulfuric acid which seeps into the creeks, killing vegetation and destroying fish and wildlife. A native folksinger, Jean Ritchie, aptly laments,

Sad scenes of destruction on every hand;
Black waters, black waters run down through
the land. 6

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The Army Corps of Engineers’ flood control reservoirs at Dewey Lake in Floyd County and at Fishtrap in Pike County have been affected by strip-mining activities in their respective watersheds. The Corps estimates that “507 acre feet [a depth of one foot over an area of 507 acres] is deposited annually” in Fishtrap Reservoir.7

As the surface mining industry grew, the old broad form mineral deed severing the mineral rights from the surface rights made some Big Sandians rich and cost others their homes. Obviously the coal could not be mined without disturbing the surface, and the clash of interests had to be settled by the judiciary. In 1956 in the landmark case of Buchanan v. Watson, 290 S.W.2d 40 (Ky., 1956), the Kentucky Supreme Court upheld the broad form deed, reducing the property rights of the surface owner to a mere license to occupy the surface until such time as the mineral owner elects to disturb the surface in order to remove the coal.

Most eastern Kentuckians yielded without resistance to this ruling, but a few did not. In 1965 in Knott County, frail sixty-one-year-old “Widow” Ollie Combs and crippled octogenarian “Uncle” Dan Gibson gained national prominence as they, in separate instances, were jailed for trying to protect their farms from strip miners. Some two years later Pike Countian Jink Ray lay down in front of bulldozers that were about to start stripping his land. In the noisy publicity that followed, Governor Edward Breathitt intervened and revoked the strip operator’s permit. The “Ballad of Jink Ray,” written two years later, asks some probing and still unanswered questions about the equity of the broad form deed:

Does the broad-form deed they’re holding
In any way justify
Killing fields with acid run-off
Washed down in a tide?

Does it justify their sending
Tons of stinking rock and mud
Washed down in the valley
In a reeking, poison flood?
Does it justify their forcing
Jink to leave the land he owns
That he's farmed and tended faithful
Since nineteen twenty one?

Despite the gravity of these issues, the commonwealth of Kentucky has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to balance the needs of national energy and the interests of the environmentalists through legislative procedures. In 1954 the Kentucky General Assembly enacted its first Strip Mining and Regulation Act, which is considered a landmark in that it was passed in response to increasing public pressure. Although the act required posting of a bond, receipt of a permit to operate, and preparation of a reclamation plan, it was so riddled with ambiguities that little reclamation actually occurred. The requirements included: covering the residual coal and toxic material “where practicable,” sealing of breakthroughs to underground mines “when hazardous,” and grading and revegetation “when practicable.” Unfortunately thousands of acres of abandoned, stripped “orphan lands” stand in mute testimony that reclamation was not very “practicable” at the time.

Moreover, the average operator’s attitude toward the initial Kentucky law was revealed by the fact that when former Prestonsburg lawyer Bert Combs took office as governor in 1960, he discovered that only a handful of eastern Kentucky strippers had even bothered to obtain the permits required by law. Although legal actions were instituted against unlicensed operators, such proceedings were often so lengthy that by the time they were concluded, irrevocable damage had been done. Administrative hearings and litigation gradually resulted in all operators being placed under the permit and bonding procedure.

Subsequent amendments to the law in 1960, 1962, and 1964 included augering as a method of surface mining, required additional material to be placed over the coal seams and auger holes, and added certain graded standards which in practice applied only to the flat areas of western Ken-
tucky. In truth, there was no control on removing coal by the contour method used in eastern Kentucky. The size of the cut into the mountain along the contour and the resulting highwall and bench were limited only by the laws of economics and the machinery available. Fifty- to one-hundred-foot-highwalls and five-hundred-foot benches were not uncommon, and much of the overburden was simply pushed down the side of the mountain. Landslides became commonplace, and sediment from erosion choked mountain streams.

In 1966, at the behest of Governor Breathitt, the legislature adopted a comprehensive new strip mining bill, which limited the depth of the first cut into the mountain and required either "complete backfilling" (on sites where operational methods did not produce a bench) or "terrace backfilling" (on lands where a bench was produced). The grading standard called for "approximate original contour" of the land with no depressions to accumulate water. For the first time a return of vegetation cover within a definite period and reconditioning of the soil with fertilizers became specific requirements. The 1966 legislation, with minor modifications, provides the basis for the statutory regulation of surface mining in Kentucky today. In 1968 Life hailed this strip mine law as "probably the strongest reclamation plan in the nation," while environmentalists likened it to "lipstick on a corpse."

Since 1974 the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection has enforced the commonwealth’s strip mining law. It promulgates regulations, issues permits for strip and auger mining, collects and holds bonds until reclamation procedures have been approved, inspects proposed mining areas, and conducts on-site inspections during the actual mining process. Furthermore, an operator seeking a permit can expect to have his record of operation and reclamation at former mining sites scrutinized by the department to help determine whether a permit should be issued for his new mine. While the legislature, with the full support of Governor Julian Carroll, has given the depart-
ment the teeth to enforce the protective legislation through the *Kentucky Revised Statutes*, chapter 350, budgetary limitations and the shortage of adequately trained personnel has handicapped the effective enforcement of reclamation regulations. However, during the first six months of 1975, the staff found 472 noncompliances, suspended 163 permits, and made 82 out-of-court settlements which amounted to over $350,000. In June 1976 Secretary Robert Bell declared, "What we are going to achieve in this state is reclamation. If you are going to strip mine coal, you are going to reclaim the land."  

Environmentalists view Kentucky’s surface mining regulations as barely adequate. Lack of topsoil segregation to prevent its contamination with acid, weak enforcement of bench width limits, continued stream pollution, and failure to assure complete restoration of soil fertility remain as major problems. Conservationists question reforestation with black locust instead of a return to the flora and fauna which existed prior to mining, and they warn of the great Strip Mine Flood to come. Will the April flood of 1977 be a mere rehearsal for even greater and more costly deluges? Contemporary Big Sandian Lewis Burke queries: "Have you looked over Floyd County, and Knott, and Pike County, and Letcher County and seen the damage that strip mining is doing? What are we going to live on when the coal is gone? What are they going to farm on? Where am I going to raise my garden? What’s in the future for my kids?" To a Martin County resident the answer is bleak: "They’ll do whatever is necessary to get the coal out of here, and when they’re through . . . it’ll be a no-man’s-land, an energy reservation."  

Environmentalists point out that the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection is understaffed to the point that reclamation plans seldom are sufficiently reviewed. They complain of the lack of adequately trained field inspectors and insufficient numbers of inspections, and even hint at corruption in individual inspectors who ignore infractions for a price. Obviously the only way
to guarantee complete protection of the land is to prohibit surface mining altogether, but it is equally obvious that such a solution is unrealistic. Even the most adamant environmentalists recognize the nation’s need for an economical, abundant, and domestically produced energy supply notwithstanding some attendant disruption of the environment. One strip mining foe aptly noted, “We probably don’t need more statewide laws—we merely need to enforce the ones we have.”

Coal operators also recognize the need for regulations and reclamation. Before his recent retirement, Dave Zegeer of Beth-Elkhorn often took visitors to see the reclamation efforts of his company in the Jenkins area where lespedeza and vetch for grazing cattle and blackberries for jellymaking grow on a former surface mine site. The Falcon Coal Company points with equal pride to the vineyard that has been planted on a reclaimed strip mine. However, elements within the industry express considerable dissatisfaction and disagreement with various aspects of certain 1977 regulations. Spokesmen maintain that the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection regulations do not reflect the needs and interests of energy producers, but give unjustified priorities to environmentalists. They particularly object to the thirty-day waiting period required in getting a mining permit; it proves expensive when equipment often costing more than $1 million remains idle. Coal producers also complain that because of the latitudes in interpretation of criteria used by individual inspectors, a site may be approved on Tuesday by one inspector and then cited for infractions on Thursday by another. Small operators assert that the bond required prior to the issuance of a mining permit sidetracks needed capital. All operators maintain that the two years required for full release of the bond is too long.

In the past operators have been quick to point out that the increased expenses they incur in complying with Kentucky regulations, if too great, will decrease the competitiveness of their product on the national market. Any decrease in the
demand for coal which produces revenue of well over $1 billion annually will have a vast impact on the commonwealth’s economy. The cost of compliance, however, was equalized among the states when the Federal Strip Mine Law signed by President Jimmy Carter in August 1977 went into effect in 1978. Yet no matter what level of government regulates coal production, disagreements between energy producers and environmentalists will continue. Resolution of the conflict requires a balancing of each group’s views, along with due consideration of the nation’s need for fuel.

The present boom has sparked speculation that the Big Sandy River may again become an avenue for coal transportation. While railroads and heavy trucks provide the primary forms of haulage in eastern Kentucky, the lack of needed railroad spurs, a shortage of railway cars, and the destruction of the highway system by the coal trucks make the alternative of river transportation an important consideration. Authorities recognize that water provides the cheapest method of transporting coal since it expends the least energy of any haulage method, but the Big Sandy’s shallowness and its obsolete system of locks and dams, dating from the turn of the century and stopping far short of the major coalfields, present serious problems.

Some thirty years ago the Army Corps of Engineers recommended that a nine-foot channel be constructed from the mouth of the Big Sandy to the Russell Fork of the Levisa and to Sprigg, West Virginia, on the Tug Fork. They proposed the construction of a system of ten new locks and dams, two for the main channel and four each for the forks, to supplement the existing system. The channel width was to have been 200 feet on the Big Sandy and some 150 feet on each of the forks, and was to have permitted the safe navigation of four barges, two abreast and two deep, 50 by 350 feet in size. The total project-cost, estimated at prewar price levels, was $83 million. The plan had the full support of the Big Sandy Valley Association, with a purported membership of 50,000, but it was opposed by the area’s railroads, the UMWA, and various politicians in West Virginia and Vir-
ginia. Postwar prices made cost-estimates for the project rise dramatically, and with the continued resistance from strong pressure groups Congress did not approve the new project. In 1952 the Corps suspended the existing navigation system because of the lack of commercial traffic.

Today the Big Sandy is navigable in a nine-foot channel for six miles upstream from its junction with the Ohio at Catlettsburg and in a six-foot channel for an additional nine miles. In the mid-1970s over 412,000 tons annually moved along this limited route. Questions on potential haulage feasibility along the total river system, after necessary improvements, soon came from area coal operators and from Congress. In early 1978 the Corps of Engineers conducted public hearings on possible navigation improvements for the Big Sandy, but as late as October its findings had not been released. Even if these hearings and subsequent Corps investigations prove favorable and congressional approval is given, implementation of improvement plans will take years.

As the Big Sandy River Valley and its residents approach the twenty-first century, many contradictions present themselves. The area and its people have been praised, damned, and lamented, as economists, dialectologists, journalists, sociologists, and historians have microscopically examined them. Who are the Big Sandians? Are they the happy barefoot family singing medieval ballads, the hard-core dullards of James Dickey’s Deliverance, the mountaineers who “fish, fiddle, fuss, and fight,” the Pikeville millionaires with their three-story homes in the Bowles Addition and year-round Florida tans, the stoop-shouldered black lung victims, the damn-the-dam group, the courthouse gang, the welfare mothers, the energetic young miners, or the dedicated professionals? Is Kentucky’s easternmost river valley a place of problems, poverty, and peculiar people? Is it the last bastion which preserves all the virtues that are or should be at the core of national life? Does the Sandy Valley have to be either a “national disgrace” or a “bit of heaven”?

In 1925 the Appalachian observer Olive Dame Campbell declared, “There is no real fundamental reason for separat-
Ining mountain people from lowland people, nor indeed are mountain problems so different at bottom from those of other rural areas in the United States." Expressing a similar attitude some fifty years later, contemporary writer Jim Wayne Miller maintained that Appalachians are not a distinct group with distinguishing physical characteristics and concerns. Rather, he asserted, "Everything that sets them apart from other Americans—language, religion, political ideology, general attitudes, and value orientation—is a matter of nuance and emphasis, a difference in degree not in kind." The whole country, not just the Sandy Valley, faces the challenge of revamping the national economic system to provide full employment, acceptable incomes, health care, adequate educational opportunity, decent housing, fair taxation, and environmental protection.14

The national context of eastern Kentucky's problems has been recognized—if not by academicians and project planners, at least at the grass roots level. The Black Lung Association and the Miners for Democracy within the UMWA, two of the strongest social movements in Appalachia during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, did not limit their activities to the region, but directed attention toward the coal industry as a whole. In both cases support came not from local sources alone, but from miners in the interior and western coalfields as well. Recently an alliance based upon a common pneumoconiosis interest has been forged between the black lung organizations of the coalfields and the brown lung associations of the textile mills.

On March 3, 1960, the Courier-Journal, in a prophetic editorial, declared, "All of Kentucky has a stake in the future of the people who live along . . . the Big Sandy River." This statement of statewide unity of purpose implied that Kentucky's traditional sectionalism was no longer viable in the modern evolution of the commonwealth. Kentuckians could no longer be oblivious to developments and problems in the eastern part of the state. With modern transportation and communication, the Big Sandy River Valley is not as far
as it once was from Louisville, Owensboro, or Bowling Green.

For better or worse, as the record-setting 110-day coal strike of 1978 revealed, coal has become one of the keys to the future, and the Sandy Valley produces almost one-third of the state's total output and one-half of the preferred low-sulfur, high-carbon "black gold" of eastern Kentucky. The 1972 severance tax, proposed some fifty years earlier by the future "Veep," Alben Barkley, brings about $100 million into the state coffers yearly, making possible elimination of the sales tax on food. The modern energy crisis and its environmental consequences affect every citizen of the commonwealth, for Kentucky's hopes of tomorrow rest in an interdependence among the Purchase, Pennyrile, Bluegrass, and Mountains. From "South Mills Point to the Mouth of the Big Sandy," as the Louisville Times feature section was once entitled, Kentuckians must face the approaching twenty-first century together, and the Big Sandy River Valley and its residents are an integral part of this future.
Notes

Chapter 1


Chapter 2

2. Ibid., p. 69.
5. Quoted in Scalf, Last Frontier, p. 49.
9. Notes from a deposition by Harry Stratton, July 24, 1817, Henry Preston Scalf Collection, Stanville, Ky.
Chapter 3


5. Scalf, Last Frontier, p. 281.


7. Scalf, Last Frontier, p. 512.


10. Garfield to Fry, Feb. 4, 1862, ibid., p. 663.


17. Fragment, n.d., Orlando C. Bowles Collection, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.


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Chapter 4

6. Ibid., Jan. 21, 1898.

Chapter 5

7. Weinberg interview with Mayo and Laviers, Aug. 15, 1975, ALOHP.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.; *Coal Age*, April 27, 1912.
11. Luther Frazier interview with Frances Turner, Nov. 13, 1975, ALOHP.
16. Ron Daley interview with Mae Allen, Nov. 10, 1975,
25. Rex Wilson interview with Flora Rife, [1972], ALOHP.
26. Timothy Morris interview with Marvin Gullett, Aug. 15, 1974, ALOHP.
29. Ron Daley interview with B. F. Reed, Nov. 20, 1975, ALOHP.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
33. Timothy Morris interviews with Charlie Campbell, Aug. 1, and with Charlie Crawford, Aug. 5, 1974, ALOHP.

Chapter 6


9. *Kentucky Acts* (1954), ch. 8, sec. 1; ibid., sec. 9 (1)-(5).


A Note to the Reader

While many Kentuckians have compiled Big Sandy River Valley history, only a limited amount of this material has been available to the general public. Perhaps the most comprehensive effort to preserve manuscript materials on the area has been made by Nora and Henry Scalf of Stanville. The Scalfs’ private collection of primary materials and secondary works, plus “Buck’s” extensive knowledge of the Big Sandy Valley, makes Bedstead Farm up Mare Creek near Prestonsburg a mandatory stop for any dedicated researcher.

The University of Kentucky has several manuscript collections, such as the Walter S. Harkins and the Frederick M. Vinson papers, dealing with the Big Sandy River Valley, and the Kentucky Library at Western Kentucky University houses the Orlando C. Bowles manuscripts. Also, the Waterways Museum of the Cincinnati Public Library has a small collection of Sandy steamboat memorabilia.

The archives and the oral history program at Alice Lloyd College contain much invaluable material. The staff of the oral history project is attempting to preserve the unwritten history of the area through interviews with older citizens and reproductions of photographs from family albums. Some of this material provided the basis for Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg’s Our Appalachia (New York, 1977). However, a wealth of information remains to be tapped.

In the area of published works, Henry Scalf’s Kentucky’s Last Frontier (Pikeville, 1966), while incomplete on the contemporary period, is an authoritative work on the Sandy Valley from frontier days through the 1960s. An early refer-
ence work, William Ely's *The Big Sandy Valley* (Catlettsburg, 1887), contains excellent essays on Big Sandy residents and towns in the nineteenth century, and Willard Rouse Jillson's *The Big Sandy Valley* (Louisville, 1923), gives comprehensive coverage of the period prior to 1850. A useful study of eastern Kentucky as a whole is Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (Boston, 1963).

No serious researcher of Big Sandy River Valley history can ignore the wealth of materials to be found in government documents. The United States Census provides decennial statistics of population, transportation, and economics in the valley, and the *Kentucky Deskbook of Economic Statistics* of the Kentucky Department of Commerce provides much of the same information on an annual basis. Legislation relative to the Big Sandy can be found in the annual *Acts of Kentucky*, *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth*, and *Journal of the Kentucky House of Representatives*. *Kentucky Documents* is another important source. The reports of the Kentucky Geological Surveys and of the Department of Mines and Minerals provide pertinent information on the coal industry. In 1878 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took over the Big Sandy River, recording its activities in the *War Department, Annual Reports: Reports of the Chief of Engineers*; in the *United States House of Representatives Documents*; and in the *United States Senate Documents*.

Journals are vital to the study of the valley. Some useful journals are the *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, *Filson Club History Quarterly*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Mountain Life and Work*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Waterways Journal*, and the *S & D Reflector*.

Newspapers are an endless source. The *Courier-Journal* has long functioned as the state newspaper and carries much useful information on the Big Sandy Valley. Within the region, the *Big Sandy News*, which has been published in Louisa under various mastheads since 1885, is an indispensable source. Also, the *Ashland Daily Independent*, *Floyd
County Times, Mountain Eagle, Paintsville Herald, Pike County News, and Salyersville Herald provide much information.

County histories should not be overlooked by the researcher, for they often contain pertinent materials. Of particular interest are: C. Mitchell Hall, Johnson County Kentucky, 2 vols. (Louisville, 1928) and Jenny Wiley Country, 2 vols. (Kingsport, Tenn., 1972); Pike County Historical Society, 150 Years Pike County Kentucky (Pikeville, 1972); Henry Scalf, Historic Floyd, 1800-1950 (Prestonsburg, 1950); J. K. Wells, A Short History of Paintsville and Johnson County (Paintsville, 1962); and George Wolfford, Lawrence County: A Pictorial History (Ashland, 1972).