

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

*M*useum Review—*The No. 9 Mine and Wash Shanty Museum, Lansford, Pennsylvania.* 9 Dock Street, Lansford, Carbon County, Pennsylvania. Operating hours: Friday through Sunday from 10AM to 4 PM. Mine tours: Saturday and Sunday, May to October, at 11:15AM, 1:15, 2:15, and 3:00PM. Admission fees: \$3 for museum and \$7 for combined mine tour and museum visit. Telephone 570-645-7074.

“The opening of Lansford’s No. 9 Wash House Museum and Mine had been a dream of many community members over the years” said Dave Kuchta, President of the Panther Creek Valley Foundation, at a public meeting held on June 4, 2005, at Eckley Miners’ Village (a historic site managed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, or PHMC, that interprets the history of anthracite coal mining culture). “We worked real hard to make that dream come true,” Kuchta concluded before the packed auditorium at Eckley. “Come and see it. You won’t be disappointed.”

The public meeting had been called by the PHMC to gather input to plan the future of Eckley as an interpretive site. Like the

audience, administrators from PHMC and this author (who facilitated the public dialogue) were very surprised by the overwhelming turn-out. The public interest in Eckley's future revealed that there is a renewed curiosity about the heritage of the lives of ordinary Pennsylvanians and the preservation of their communities and ways of life.

Among the best examples of this renewed interest is the No. 9 wash house museum and mine, located not far from Eckley in Lansford PA—the heart of Panther Creek Valley in Carbon County. Indeed, the surrounding area offers numerous historic sites which illustrate Pennsylvania's entrepreneurial, ethnic and worker-centered past, a past that is now prevalently embraced and promoted as heritage tourism. Eckley, the Anthracite Heritage Museum, Cornwall Iron Furnace, and towns like Jim Thorpe, Pottsville and Tamaqua are just a few examples, and all offer a taste of what life was like in the Anthracite region of Pennsylvania.

Don't look for high-tech interactive exhibits at the No. 9 Museum. Nor will the visitor find the latest in museum technology. Rather, what one will discover are the every day artifacts, images, objects, and documents that tell the story of people who lived and worked in the anthracite region and its coal mines. Visitors will also find the opportunity to tour an authentic anthracite mine guided by a mineworker or one of their descendants. That's what makes this museum unique. Much to its credit, the mine provides the visitor with an authentic experience.

The No. 9 mine operated from 1855 to 1972, thus establishing itself in American coal mining annals as the longest operating anthracite deep mine. The last load of coal was extracted in June 1972. Well known anthracite photographer George Harvan was there to capture that event; he photographed long-time miner Mike Sabron riding a coal car on its final voyage out of the mine. Visitors will see this image, along with many others by Harvan, the masterful and well respected chronicler of anthracite's industrial visuals. Following the last extraction of coal, the mine was closed off with a concrete barrier. Subsequent internal caving and rock falls presumably sealed its eternal fate.

In 1989, growing community interest spawned a plan to reopen the mine as a tourist and educational site, and to convert the adjacent and abandoned wash house to a museum. The Panther Creek Valley Foundation and its numerous volunteers, including former mineworkers, set out to unseal the mine, removed tons of rock and debris, secured its safety and, in 2002 commenced operating underground tours. Meanwhile, the wash house was

re-adapted to house artifacts and other objects. It was opened to the public as a museum in 1992.

In the heartland of American deindustrialization, the No. 9 Museum is precisely as its advertising literature says: an anthracite mine "wash shanty" or wash house where mineworkers would change from street to work clothes at the beginning of a shift and return to change out of their blackened garments into those more publicly acceptable. Some referred to it as the "shiftin' shanty," or where the change of the work shift occurred.

Professional museum aficionados and curators may find that the museum's artifacts and images are short on interpretation; some, in fact, are not much more than unadorned displays. Yet there is a certain significance in seeing them as they are key to understanding this area's history, such as the kitchen in the home of a typical mineworker, various mine safety equipment, mine drills, props, tools, scale model coal breakers, 'drag-line' or heavy equipment excavators utilized for strip mining; high school yearbooks from various locales in the Panther Creek Valley, coal mine signage in various languages, and many, many images of life long since past. Visitors cannot help but be educated by what they see. There are many items of interest here, such as a death certificate for two mules that died in 1913. Their value was placed at \$200 a mule.

Visiting a once operating anthracite mine deep into the earth, adjacent to a wonderful museum, is a true immersive experience and the authenticity of this tour is striking. Visitors ride into the mine on a passenger friendly coal car powered by an electric locomotive. Inside it is cold and damp and water is everywhere. One feels a hint of danger, but is reassured by the guide of the mine's safety. The depth of interpretation during the nearly one-hour-long tour is hard to match as the guide describes the equipment, processes, and ever-present dangers of extracting hard coal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mining was not an easy way to make a living. Thirty-five thousand mineworkers lost their lives in Pennsylvania's hard coal mines alone in the last one-hundred fifty years. That does not count the bituminous mine fatalities or the countless who died from the dreaded black lung disease that slowly suffocated its victims.

The No. 9 Museum and Mine resembles a folk museum that one might find traveling in Europe or Appalachia. This is where everyday people tell their story to those who might have an interest. It is also where ordinary people have worked hard to preserve what remains of their past with little public funding,

virtually all volunteer assistance, and a lot of commitment and enthusiasm coupled with a higher-than-usual sense of passion and pride.

The No. 9 Wash House Museum and Mine are located just off Route 209 in Lansford. Signs are easily visible. To gain a better understanding of the Panther Creek Valley's history and culture visitors may want to read *When the Mines Closed* by Thomas Dublin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998) and *Coalcracker Culture* by Harold Aurand (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2003). For other titles and anthracite coal region information see [www.minecountry.com](http://www.minecountry.com) (a regional website), [www.anthracitemuseum.org](http://www.anthracitemuseum.org) (PHMC's Anthracite Heritage Museum) and [www.eckleyminers.org](http://www.eckleyminers.org) (PHMC's Eckley Miners' Village).

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