

The Pleasant Valley “Coal Fever” of 1902

By Larry Kidder

In early October, 1902 Pleasant Valley farmer John Parkhill decided that he needed a new well drilled on his farm. John was a 42 year old immigrant, born in Ireland of an English father and Scottish mother, who had come to Pennsylvania in 1880 and then to Pleasant Valley about 1888 where he purchased his 104 acre farm. About 1883 he married his wife, Martha, also born in Ireland, but of Irish parents. She had immigrated in 1881 and was two years older than John. The farm provided a good living for their growing family of five boys, 17 year old Hugh, 14 year old Samuel, 13 year old James, 9 year old John, and 4 year old Thomas. The 1900 US Census also shows two adult male boarders who worked at the nearby stone quarry.

By October, the year of 1902 had been pretty normal for life in the Valley. John's cows provided the milk that he sold to the nearby county prison farm, disease was common and Martha had survived pneumonia the previous February, and Hugh was reappointed to a term as librarian for the Union Sunday School in May. 1902 was also a pretty typical year in the county and from September 29 to October 3 the annual Inter-State Fair was held at Trenton. The fair was described in the *Hopewell Herald* as “not only the greatest agricultural, industrial and domestic exposition in the East, but also the biggest out-door amusement carnival in this part of the country.” School children were given the day off on Friday, October 3 so they could attend and it is likely John and Martha took their three school age boys to it since John planned to drill his well on Saturday. Other local news in late September included descriptions of planting winter wheat and the tomato crop providing produce for the canning factory in Titusville.

John and the other farmers of Pleasant Valley did have one big worry in the fall of 1902, though. There was an ongoing four month old strike in the Pennsylvania coal mines where the anthracite coal that fueled their stoves was dug out of the ground. The farmers relied on this coal that was brought down the Delaware and Raritan Canal and by railroad to dealers in Lambertville and Titusville who then sold it to the farmers of Pleasant Valley. The looming shortage of coal and the rising costs that would accompany it were undoubtedly on everyone's mind.

In the midst of this preoccupation with coal, on Saturday, October 4, 1902, Pleasant Valley farmer John Parkhill was having his new artesian well drilled on his farm. The *Trenton Times* reported on page 1 the following Monday that, “when a depth of nearly a hundred feet had been attained by the drill, masses of a black, coal like substance was brought to the surface. The material was critically examined by several people in the vicinity and they all agreed that it was a good, honest twenty dollars a ton anthracite.”

The paper went on to report that, “News spread rapidly in Pleasant Valley and news of a coal mine in the locality went the rounds at a record breaking clip. It was not until yesterday [Sunday], however, that the land owners began the actual operations of searching for the treasure. Undaunted by the driving rain they plied the shovel and spade, digging half matured fall crops out of the ground and trampling upon soil that they had spent many hard hours in seeding.”

“They had the ‘fever’ as bad as any Wall Street broker ever suffered from and the chill October blasts that blew over the valley seemed only to make them work the harder. Some of the ‘wimin folks,’ it is said, went even so far as to compose letters to Governor Murphy asking for troops as soon as the ‘mines’ were ready for working, and arranged all sorts of air castles for the way they were to live as millionaire coal barons.”

In the Monday article, the *Times* observed that, “The fever has abated a trifle today but many of the farmers are still at work searching for traces of the coal mine.”

The excitement from finding coal is understandable. The October 8 *Hopewell Herald* not only repeated part of the story from the *Trenton Times* but the piece was preceded by two short items that must have added to the farmers' hopes of finding coal. The first item stated, “The

weather man predicts an early winter. Snow in October and no signs of the coal strike being settled. This is a sad state of affairs, and if his predictions be true we are afraid some of the poor of this country will freeze to death before the blue birds sing again." The second item recorded, "People are beginning to worry about the winter supply of coal, and still there are no signs of the strike being settled." The report from Titusville that day noted, "Owing to the lack of coal, the trustees of the Presbyterian church have decided to hold the services in the Sunday school room for the present." And, the advertisement for F.S. Katzenbach & Co. in Trenton headlined, "The Heating Problem Owing to the Coal Famine is the Real Problem of Life to Most People. Don't you find it so? Ask Us About Your Heating. We Do All Kinds. We'll Advise You Right." With stories like these abounding who could blame the farmers for getting the "coal fever?"

On October 15 the *Hopewell Herald* reporter for Ringoes noted that, "Coal is the all absorbing topic of conversation, and wood stoves are being dragged from their long seclusion into active service once more." The writer noted however that, "Farmers have an advantage, they being always able to find some wood to burn, if not trees, old fences, corn cobs, etc." In nearby Linvale, the coal strike was noted as the topic of the recent Sunday sermon. Most everyone was worried about coal.

It is no wonder the Pleasant Valley farmers found it so easy to get the "fever" when coal was discovered on John Parkhill's land in their Valley. But, alas, the riches the farmers and their wives envisioned quickly proved to be elusive. The October 15 *Hopewell Herald* also reported both that some progress was being made in settling the coal mine strike and that, "the mineral substance found on the farm of John Parkhill, of Pleasant Valley, above Titusville, has been pronounced coal by a New York mining expert, but, it is also alleged that he said that it was a grave question if the deposit would pay for working." That pretty much put an end to the fever and it is not mentioned again in the papers.

The hopes of riches may have vanished, but there was still worry about even basic supplies of coal being available, at any price. The same day it reported on the demise of the coal fever, the *Herald* also reported, "The coal barons are to furnish almshouses and hospitals with coal at list prices. Which is encouraging to the rest of us, because if the strike continues we may all have to go either to the almshouse or hospital." The mounting desperation of the local people was indicated by the remark that, "A carload of anthracite coal passed through here on Sunday in a train of soft coal. All who saw it cast a wishful eye and if the train had halted a short time we are not sure but that it might have been made lighter."

By the next week, though, the paper reported that the five month strike had been ended and supplies of coal would be available, although the next week it noted, "Coal dealers advise their customers to get along with as little coal as possible for two or three weeks, until the price comes down." It was now apparent that the relative comforts of coal fired stoves would be available to the Pleasant Valley farmers even if their dreams of riches had been dashed.

By October 22 life was getting back to normal routines according to Rachel Williamson's column in the *Hopewell Herald*. The three items included, "Apple picking is in order. The apple crop is very good in this vicinity this year. The corn crop is very late, but few farmers have their entire crop in shock as yet. If cold weather should set in early there will be cold fingers before the husking is done. The Union Sunday school will hold its closing exercises on the first Sunday in November at 3 p.m. We hope there will be a good turn out, as there will be some special exercises by the children and we expect Rev. B.H. Everitt of Titusville to be present and make an address."

Life was certainly a see-saw of emotions for John Parkhill in 1902. We don't know how John's new well turned out, but the month after his dreams of wealth were raised he suffered a true financial setback in November when his dairy herd got into his corn field, also containing some apple trees, leading to the deaths of seven of his cows.