

CORPORATE HISTORY
OF JOSEPHINE, VIRGINIA
AND THE BIG STONE GAP IRON FURNACE

Copyright and all rights reserved
Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.
Big Stone Gap Virginia
June 5, 2017

Josephine, an unincorporated neighborhood west of Norton, Virginia was at one point in Wise County's history the focal point of two industries. The first was that it was the railhead for the Tug River Lumber Company, which was logging the Big Cherry Water Shed on Powell Mountain for the Town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia. A narrow gauge track ran from their logging camp at Grassy Spring, and from their center of operations under the oldest portion of Big Cherry Reservoir. The narrow gauge line ran along the top of the cliff line in upper Powell Valley past the present rock quarry at 'The Sinks' and on into Carding Machine Branch (Hoot Owl Hollow), and down Tug Hill to the Interstate Railroad at Josephine. ⁽¹⁾

In October 1912 the Intermont Coal and Iron Co. was preparing to fire up its coke ovens at Josephine.⁽²⁾ This corporation is documented to have owned iron mines near Big Stone Gap, Va. at Irondale and at Harvey ⁽³⁾ and a coal mine at Dooley, Virginia (above Dorchester) ⁽⁴⁾.

Tracing the corporate history we find that their offices were in Big Stone Gap on Wood Ave. above the offices of Powell Valley Power and Light Co., which were located to the west of the Monte Vista Hotel ⁽⁵⁾. We further find that in Jan. 1911 H. G. Gilmer was treasurer of the corporation, and that Mr. Marvin Kelly was Superintendent at their Josephine operation ⁽⁶⁾. The last documentation of the corporation's existence is that a coal miner was injured at their operation in Josephine in 1927.

Let us proceed to explore these circumstances further, and to review numerous intertwining relationships – both corporate and personal.

"The Chancery Court of Wise County Records Index of 1910" documents the bankruptcy of the Iron Furnace in Big Stone Gap, which was sold to the firms "Bullitt, Kelly, & Irvin" and to "Kelly & Irvin"⁽⁸⁾. This firm (or firms) had themselves bought the iron furnace at bankruptcy, and had already owned the Intermont Coal and Iron Company. This corporation was presented by the "Big Stone Gap Post" of June 14, 1911 as owing "large and valuable iron ore interests in the section, and also the coal mining and coking plant of the Intermont Coal and Iron Co., located near Norton, and it is said that the reorganization will include these enterprises along with the furnace property ..." ⁽⁹⁾ In 1916 Kelly and Irvin sold the Intermont Coal and Iron Company and all its assets, which were listed as including the iron furnace, the Josephine coal and coke facilities (which consisted of 80 coke ovens), the company camp of Josephine, and iron

ore facilities “known as the Wild Cat Valley Ores” and the Lee County “Poor Valley Ores”. The Josephine facilities mined coal leased from Patrick Hagan and from Virginia Coal and Iron Company.(10)

Joshua Fry Bullitt, Jr. was an attorney and businessman of Big Stone Gap, Virginia. He had organized the “Home Guard” volunteer police force, and was a law partner of Joseph L. Kelly, who later served on the Virginia Supreme Court. Bullitt was the attorney for the Virginia Coal and Iron Co., and was related by marriage to one of its owner families, the Taggarts.(11)

The ‘Kelly’ of Kelly and Irvin was James William Kelly, best known as the owner of the Kelly Drug Store(17). This institution was located on the corner of the main intersection in the Town of Big Stone Gap, and was the centerpiece of the building of the Monte Vista Hotel(12). Kelly had been involved in the economic boom of the community since at least 1906, when the ‘Cumberland Traction Company’ of Big Stone Gap was formed with the intent of building a railroad from Big Stone Gap to Norton via Appalachia and Blackwood(13, 19). In 1910 J. W. Kelly was listed as President of the Cumberland Traction Company, and G. H. Gilmer as its Treasurer(20). In 1909 ‘Home Builders Corp’ was formed by J. W. Kelly, C. S. Carter, and R. T. Irvine, and this company built the Monte Vista Hotel(14). In 1921 the Black Mountain Coal Co. of Big Stone Gap had as officers J. W. Kelly as President and General Manager, R. T. Irvine as Vice President, and C. P. Kelly of St. Charles as General Secretary(15). C. P. was the son of J. W. Kelly(12).



THE MONTE VISTA HOTEL ON THE CORNER OF E. 5TH STREET AND WOOD AVE. IN THE CENTER OF BIG STONE GAP, VA. – KELLY DRUG OCCUPIED THE PROMINENT FIRST FLOOR CORNER – THE SEVERAL LAW OFFICES MENTIONED WERE IN THE SAME BLOCK TO THE RIGHT

R. T. Irvin was an attorney in Big Stone Gap⁽¹⁶⁾. In 1894 he had a law office on Wood Ave. with Rufus Ayers⁽¹⁸⁾.

Guy H. Gilmer was the son of Dr. George C. Gilmer of Big Stone Gap, and the brother of Dr. John A. Gilmer also of Big Stone Gap. In addition to having been Treasurer of the Cumberland Traction Company, he was Superintendent of the Interstate Railroad⁽²¹⁾. The Gilmers had been neighbors in Lee County of the Slemps, Reasors, and Kellys.

The reasons for the economic failure of the combined coal & coke operations at Josephine and the iron furnace at Big Stone Gap are multiple. They were all assets of the same corporation, and their financial health was tied to the combined venture. The iron furnace was second hand. It had been bought at a bankruptcy sale, and reassembled. It was of an old design, and required several modifications through the years in order to stay economically competitive. Not long after having been reconstructed, the firebrick had to be replaced. This was not only a considerable cost for replacement, but required the furnace to be shut down for a protracted period of time. The method of mining the iron ore was not economical. It consisted of strip mining, done by hand with crowbars, and picks and shovels. The ore was transported down the mountain to the railroad in wheelbarrows. The veins of ore were thin. Concerning the coal at Josephine, it was mostly from the Dorchester seam. The coal from this seam near Dorchester and Josephine is of metallurgical quality, but as it runs to the west it becomes of poorer quality⁽²²⁾. During the boom days of railroad construction, and the superheated demand for iron and steel during the First World War, the coke and iron produced were salable. However, in the post war era the massive overcapacity of iron production caused a great shaking out of the poorer quality and less efficient operations. At this very point in time, the great Mesabi Range iron ore deposits in northern Minnesota became productive. Massive deposits of high-grade iron ore lay on the ground, and could be scooped up by the steam shovel full. The Mesabi ore lay right next to the Great Lakes, and could be cheaply transported by ships to the great steel mills of Gary and Hammond, Indiana, and at Hamilton, Ontario. The economics of the free market soon shut down most of the smaller iron furnaces not associated with the Mesabi paradigm. Locally, the metallurgical grade coal from the Imboden and Taggart seams continued to be used for coke production until after World War II. Pocahontas coal from Buchanan County, Virginia was still being coked in 2015.

Bibliography:

1 – Fleenor, Lawrence J., Jr. – The Bear Grass, a History

2 - Josephine coke ovens were fired for the first time Oct. 1912

<http://virginiachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=BSGP19121009.1.3#>

3 - Owned mines at Irondale and Harvey

https://books.google.com/books?id=XbtOWKLEofYC&pg=PA81&lpg=PA81&dq=Intermont+Coal+and+Iron+Company&source=bl&ots=2y7zKYyg07&sig=DHs5abfs85p_v13mE_lpu8l1FxQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiVt--C2p3UAhUsCcAKHRyVCP4Q6AEIKTAB#v=onepage&q=Intermont%20Coal%20and%20Iron%20Company&f=false

4 - Owned a mine at Dooley, Va.

<http://www.genealogy.com/forum/surnames/topics/snodgrass/2286/>

5 - Location of office of Interstate Coal and Iron Co. – Wood Ave. BSG

http://www.thecoalfieldprogress.com/the_post/on_the_trail/fire-destroyed-many-structures/article_f1e0a733-f1f9-54ed-89cd-9d65b8032cdf.html

6 - Corp. Officers in Jan.1911, including superintendent at Josephine

<http://virginiachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=BSGP19110125.1.3#>

7 - Feb. 1927 Josephine was owned and operated by the Intermont Coal and Iron Company

Lonesome Pine Office on Youth – Life in the Coal Camps of Wise County

8 - Chancery Court of Wise County Records Index of 1910 document a bankruptcy case involving the BSG Iron Furnace operators including firms “Bullitt, Kelly, & Irvine” as well as “Kelly and Irvine”

http://www.lva.virginia.gov/chancery/case_detail.asp?CFN=195-1910-104

9 - published originally in the “Big Stone Gap Post” of June 14, 1911; republished in Iron and the Gap by Norman H. Scott

10 – Scott, Norman H. - Iron and the Gap pg. 151 and following

11 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_Fry_Bullitt,_Jr.

12 - genealogy of Creed Paxton Kelly – wife was Clara Lou Kelly, and his father was James William Kelly BD 1861 in Lee Co.

https://www.myheritage.com/names/creed_kelly

13 - "Annual Report of the State Corporation Commission of Virginia" of Aug. 14, 1906 reported that the 'Cumberland Traction Co.' of BSG had W. T. Goodloe as President and J. W. Kelly as Vice President and that the corp. purpose was to build a railroad from BSG to Norton via Appalachia and Blackwood

<https://books.google.com/books?id=8ts2AQAAQAAJ&pg=PA1239&lpg=PA1239&dq=J.+W.+Kelly+Big+Stone+Gap&source=bl&ots=sE8Rk4XR5r&sig=jn0WBLqnmCDUVrDyoH0dnZsIgVk&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjCqfrCgaXUAhUC94MKHSNdDz0Q6AEILzAE#v=onepage&q=J.%20W.%20Kelly%20Big%20Stone%20Gap&f=false>

14 - "BSG Post" of Sept. 8, 2010 states that a company named 'Home Builders Corporation' was formed by J.W. Kelly, C.S. Carter and R.T. Irvine, and they built the Monte Vista Hotel which opened in 1909.

15 - "Coal Field Directory of 1921" pg. 926
officers of the Black Mountain Coal Co. of Big Stone Gap are listed as having been J. W. Kelly of BSG as President and General Manager, and R. T. Irvine as Vice President, and C. P. Kelly of St. Charles as General Secretary

<https://books.google.com/books?id=XDY8AQAAQAAJ&pg=PA926&lpg=PA926&dq=Kelly+26+Irvine+Big+Stone+Gap&source=bl&ots=LQKGcX8kFk&sig=f5mNuU4r0j957ZghRYAQ8JCYvGY&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwigw0vN4qHUAhVC8IMKHZG7B7UQ6AEIOjAG#v=onepage&q=Kelly%20%26%20Irvine%20Big%20Stone%20Gap&f=false>

16 - "Proceedings of the Midwinter Meeting and Annual Meeting of the Virginia State Bar Assn. of 1908" lists R. T. Irvine as an attorney

<https://books.google.com/books?id=XDY8AQAAQAAJ&pg=PA926&lpg=PA926&dq=Kelly+26+Irvine+Big+Stone+Gap&source=bl&ots=LQKGcX8kFk&sig=f5mNuU4r0j957ZghRYAQ8JCYvGY&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwigw0vN4qHUAhVC8IMKHZG7B7UQ6AEIOjAG#v=onepage&q=Kelly%20%26%20Irvine%20Big%20Stone%20Gap&f=false>

17 - "BSG Post" of Aug. 25, 1898 lists "J. W. Kelly" as a "druggist"

<http://virginiachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=BSGP18980825.1.3>

18 - "BSG Post" of Oct. 4, 1894 lists J. F. Bullett, Jr. as an attorney in BSG; R. T. Irvin as an attorney with office on Wood Ave BSG; and a law firm of "Kelly and Ayers"

19 - G. H. Gilmer listed as Treasurer and J. W. Kelly as President of the Cumberland Traction Railroad Corp. Dec. 1910

https://books.google.com/books?id=HitJAQAAQAAJ&pg=PA1467&lpg=PA1467&dq=Cumberland+Traction+Company+Big+Stone+Gap&source=bl&ots=_7GYgb0pkJ&sig=JRu20IqWhtv-Et-K_DhjtOUTdug&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj-zqr9k6XUAhWB24MKHeiaDQwQ6AEIMDAE#v=onepage&q=Cumberland%20Tractio n%20Company%20Big%20Stone%20Gap&f=false

20 - G. H. Gilmer listed as Treasurer and J. W. Kelly as President of the Cumberland Traction Railroad Corp. Dec. 1910

https://books.google.com/books?id=HitJAQAAQAAJ&pg=PA1467&lpg=PA1467&dq=Cumberland+Traction+Company+Big+Stone+Gap&source=bl&ots=_7GYgb0pkJ&sig=JRu20IqWhtv-Et-K_DhjtOUTdug&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj-zqr9k6XUAhWB24MKHeiaDQwQ6AEIMDAE#v=onepage&q=Cumberland%20Tractio n%20Company%20Big%20Stone%20Gap&f=false

21 - genealogy of Guy H. Gilmer

<http://www.bigstonegappublishing.com/THE%20KERR%20CREEK%20MASSACRES.pdf>

22 – Harry Meador III to the author