

MAHLON SISTIE KEMMERER

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Few men have influenced Wise County, Virginia more than M. S. Kemmerer, and have been more forgotten. Indeed, he is of national significance. This essay will tell that story. It begins in Pennsylvania, where there were both tens of thousands of people of German extraction with a cultural tradition of working with iron and steel, large stands of hardwood forests, anthracite coal, and a developing railroad industry. The railroads required massive amounts of iron and steel, but their

manufacture was severely limited because of the need of huge amounts of hard wood charcoal to smelt and refine these metals. Just as the forests of hardwood were being exhausted it was discovered that anthracite could be used in place of the charcoal. Then, the Civil War hit, generating great demands for steel and iron. The anthracite industry boomed as never before. Many fortunes were made, and mostly by people of Pennsylvania German extraction. During that war the South, being cut off from Northern anthracite, had discovered how to use coke derived from soft coal, which it had in abundance.⁽¹⁾ As the anthracite deposits were being rapidly exhausted, the newly minted millionaires of the



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Pennsylvanian military industrial complex moved South to exploit the untapped soft coal veins of the Cumberland Plateau.^(2, 3)

The families involved were intensely intermarried. John L. Leisenring, Jr. (commonly referenced as 'Judge')⁽⁴⁾ was born in Philadelphia in 1819. He was an engineer, and designed routes for railroads and developed coal mines. He was active politically and was elected as an 'associate law judge', a circumstance that did not require a law degree.⁽⁵⁾ His sister, Annie, married a Wentz, as did his daughter Mary, whose husband was Dr. John Wentz. His daughter Anna married Mahlon Sistie Kemmerer, a commoner.^(6, 7) M. S. worked his way up the ladder within the engineering departments of the companies with which Judge was employed, and after his marriage Judge got him started in businesses, and gave Anna significant cash. These surnames are heavily interwoven in the history of the development of

the coal industry in Wise County, Virginia.^(2,3) Judge died in 1884 after a protracted illness with Bright's Disease, just as his family was getting started in Wise Co.

The best way to conceptualize the development of the coal industry in western Wise Co. is to view all developments as they related to the Virginia Coal and Iron Co. (VCI). After all, it and its related companies became the largest independent coal operation in the world. Its short lived parent was the Tinsalia Co., which was incorporated in 1880, but soon flew apart over differing views on its spending their capital on related railroad construction. Its owners found fellow Pennsylvanian industrialists to sell to, the extended Leisenring family. The fall of 1881 saw a comic opera cavalcade exiting the furthest reach of the national rail system at Bristol, Virginia. They had come as a family to personally inspect their proposed purchase in Wise Co. The party consisted of Hon. John Leisenring (son of Judge and future Member of the House of Representatives), his brother-in-law Daniel Bertsch (husband of Mary Douglas Leisenring Bertsch⁽⁸⁾), Edward "Ned" Barnes Leisenring, M. S. Kemmerer and wife Annie Leisenring (who had all the money), Dr. John S. Wentz and wife Mary Ann Douglas Leisenring (daughter of Judge⁽³⁾). In Bristol they joined owners of Tinsalia E. K. Hyndman, General John Daniel Imboden, and John C. Oliphant, who was Superintendent of Tinsalia and of the Bristol Coal and Iron Narrow Gauge Railroad.⁽¹⁸⁾ They travelled to Wise County in hacks and on horseback.⁽²⁾ The deal was made, and VCI incorporated in 1881, and by so doing acquired massive acreage on Black Mountain north and northwest of Big Stone Gap, Va., and in Lee and Scott Counties. They aggressively pursued acquiring adjoining land to the east of these holdings, which was geologically and legally very complex, and had been acquired through the Powell's River Coal and Iron Co. It included the headwaters of Roaring Fork of Powell River, the North Fork of the Powell to its east, the South Fork of the Pound River, and the head of Guest's River. Land titles were complicated by surveying errors, and by many overlapping tracts potentially claimed by adverse possession (squatter's rights). The components with the best titles were owned by Andrew Sturgill and by Patrick Hagan. VCI had its chief surveyor, J. P. Wolfe, survey these tracts starting in 1889.

The Powell River Company was not a subsidiary of VCI, but was a parallel corporation owned by pretty much the same people. It was organized in 1889, and was owned by A. W. Leisenring, John S. Wentz, Samuel Thomas, Daniel Bertsch, M. S. Kemmerer, and E. B. Leisenring.⁽⁸⁾

At this point, the endeavors of the extended family began to diverge. Dr. John and his wife privately bought the northern slope of Black Mountain, which is in Kentucky and is contiguous to the VCI holdings, and later sold it to United States Steel Corp. and to International Harvester. The main VCI holdings evolved into the twin corporations of VCI (the holding company), and Stonega Coke and Coal Co., (the operating company). In the midtwentieth century Stonega bought the family's old anthracite and bituminous coal company in Pennsylvania, the Westmoreland Co., with the latter being the surviving name.

Our narrative will now leave VCI and follow Kemmerer and his endeavors with the Powell River Company. The trail is strewn with a plethora of corporate names, whose relationships today are hard to define. M. S. Kemmerer was the special driving force in the development of the major coal camp on the North Fork of the Powell River adjacent to what was to become the City of Norton, Virginia. John C. Haskell, acting as Kemmerer's land agent, bought 10,000 acres around what was to become Dorchester, and signed them over to Kemmerer. In 1899 the Colonial Coal and Coke Co. was founded, and started the first commercial coal operations in Dorchester. Mahlon's son, John L. Kemmerer, Sr. was president. Mahlon bought out Colonial in 1905. Wise Coal and Coke Co., and the Sutherland Coal and Coke Co. were also founded at Dorchester, and then all these corporations were merged into the Wise Coal and Coke Co., with John L. Kemmerer, Sr. as president, and then Jr. took over. Esserville was founded by John A. Esser of Connellsville, Pa., in cooperation with the Kemmerers. The Interstate Railroad, owned by VCI, built track to Dorchester, and hauled the Kemmerer interest's coal and coke. D. Terpstra of Holland, an electrical engineer, came to Dorchester in 1914 and built a power plant there. Terpstra then founded Clinch Haven Dairy in Powell Valley.⁽¹⁰⁾



GOOGLE IMAGES

DORCHESTER, IN THE EARLY DAYS



KEMMERER
BLDG. 2019

PARK AVE. &
9TH ST.
NORTON, VA.

By: the author



BLDG. NAME
OVER
ENTRANCE
ON 9TH ST.

By: the author



OFFICE BUILDING OF THE WISE COKE AND COAL COMPANY
BUILT IN DORCHESTER IN 1944 BY THE KEMMERER FAMILY
TODAY IT IS THE HEADQUARTERS OF HUMPHREY'S ENTERPRISES, THE CURRENT OWNER
IT IS THE LAST TANGIBLE VESTIGE OF THE KEMMERER EMPIRE IN WISE COUNTY

In 1889 the N&W RR named their depot at the site of the future juncture of the L&N RR with the N&W RR to occur the next year at Prince's Flats 'Norton' in honor of the head of the L&N. That occurred in 1891, and the community of Norton named itself after the depot.⁽¹⁹⁾ In 1902 M. S. Kemmerer founded the First National Bank of Norton. This was just twelve years after Norton as an incorporated entity, itself, was founded. Patrick Hagan and Rufus Ayers were on the board of the bank. John Esser was the President. This grouping pretty well summarizes who was responsible for founding that community. That bank evolved into the Wise County National Bank, and later into the Bank of America. The Kemmerers had other corporations with offices in that bank building, such as Whitney-Kemmerer Co, which functioned as a coal and coke broker, and as a sales agent for several other smaller coal companies. The Kemmerers were active in the Norton Presbyterian Church, and in the founding of the Lonesome Pine Country Club of Big Stone Gap^(10, 11,12).

In 1862 the Federal Government authorized the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, with the Union Pacific being the eastern part of it. It was completed in 1868. Crossing the desolate plains of southern Wyoming presented a

set of problems, which included poor availability of water and fuel for the steam engines of that day. The population was sparse, and offered little potential local freight to justify the costs of construction. Therefore, the government gave the railroad a land grant of ten miles on either side of the tracks, which they could use to raise money for construction. Ham's Fork of the Green River in southwestern Wyoming offered a solution to these problems.⁽¹³⁾ Explorer John C. Fremont had discovered coal in the area during his second expedition in 1843. The site where the Union Pacific Railroad crossed the river offered both water and coal, and the UP opened the first underground coal mine there in 1881. Sometime prior to 1897 M. S. Kemmerer became interested in the potential for the coal mine here. He joined forces with Patrick J. Quealy and founded the Kemmerer Coal Co.. Kemmerer was President, and Quealy was Vice President. Quealy founded the Town of Kemmerer, Wyoming in 1897.⁽¹⁴⁾



WIKIPEDIA

THE CURRENT COAL FIRED ELECTRICITY GENERATING PLANT AT KEMMERER, WYOMING

AFTER COAL WAS NO LONGER USED TO POWER LOCOMOTIVES, THE COMPANY BUILT THIS PLANT

NOTE THE 'SNOW FENCE', WHICH IS COMMONLY USED IN THE HIGH PLAINS OF THE WEST
TO PREVENT SNOW DRIFTS ALONG THE RAILROAD TRACKS AND HIGHWAYS.
IN THIS INSTANCE IT PROTECTS THE ENTRANCE ROAD TO THE POWER PLANT



WIKIPEDIA

THE WESTMORELAND COAL CO. STRIP MINE AT KEMMERER, WYOMING

It seems likely that the Kemmerer Coal Co. of Wyoming was run, at least partially, out of the Norton Bank building during the early twentieth century. John Kemmerer, Sr. – son of Mahlon, and grandson of Judge John Leisenring, took charge of his father's business interests in Wise Co. and the Kemmerer Coal Co. of Wyoming.^(3, pg. 268) Mahlon had a catastrophic stroke in 1923, and died from it two years later.⁽¹⁵⁾ John Kemmerer, Jr. took over management of the family businesses, and his son, John L. "Jay" Kemmerer III managed them until recent times. In 1971 the deep mines converted to a strip mine. Kemmerer Coal Co. was acquired by Pittsburg & Midway Coal Mining Company (a subsidiary of Gulf Oil at the time) July 31, 1981. Prior to that the Kemmerer Mine was operated by a contractor, Morrison-Knudson, for Kemmerer Coal Co. P&M (Gulf) operated the Kemmerer Mine as P&M and later Chevron Mining until Dec 2011 when Westmoreland purchased the mine from Chevron Mining.^(14, 16, 17) The story of the corporate interests of the greater Leisenring family had gone full circle. As of this writing, The former Kemmerer mines in Wyoming are up for sale by the bankruptcy court.⁽¹⁷⁾

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