**THE LAST REMAINING ARTIFACTS OF THE ORIGINAL MINING OPERATION AT OSAKA, VIRGINIA**

**THE WELL / COMPRESSOR HOUSE & CR SHOP**


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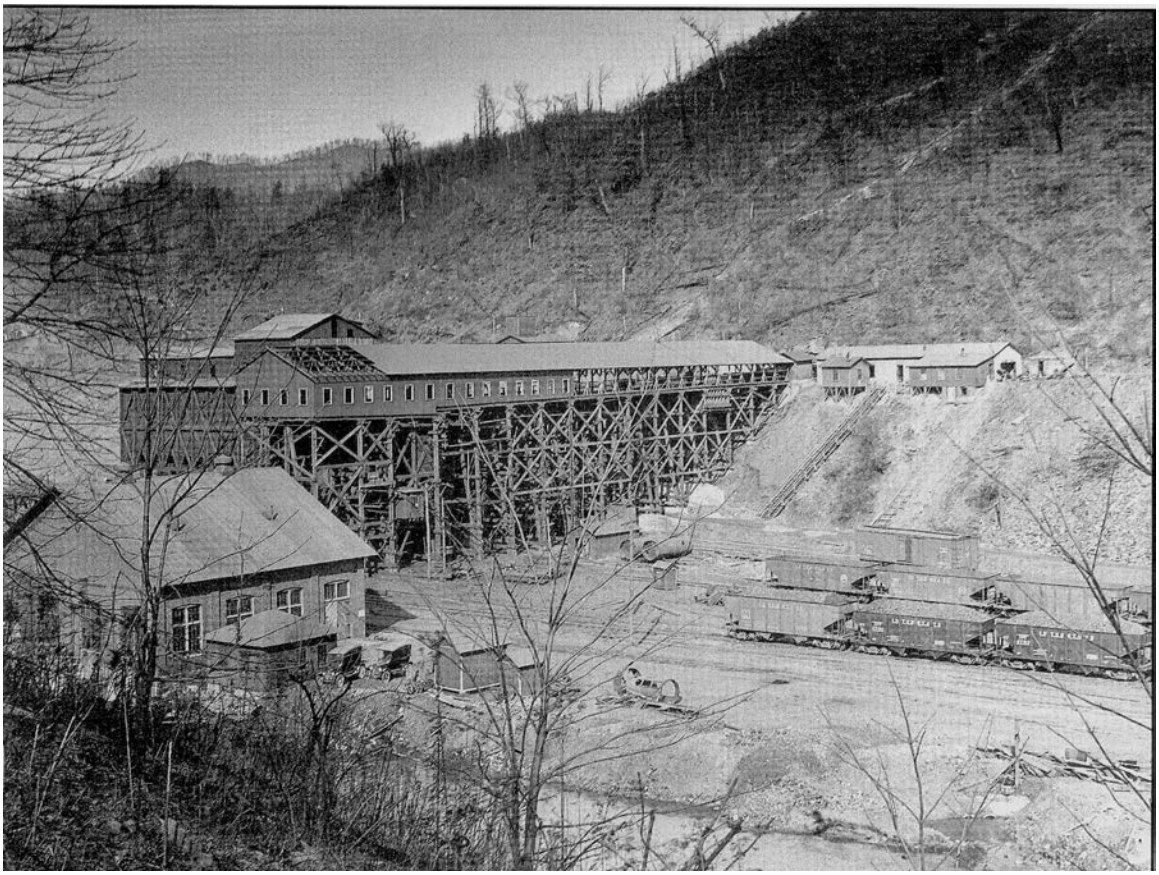
In 1890 Virginia Coal and Iron Company began its development of what turned out to be the largest independent coal company in the world with its construction of an experimental coke oven at a place it was to call "Pioneer", or alternately referred to in its early correspondence as "Mudlick". The creek that flows down the hollow later occupied by the coal camps of Roda and Osaka bears that name.(1, 2) The precise location of this site on Mudlick Creek is undocumented, but most likely it was near the place where the Imboden seam of coal first outcrops at ground level. This site is at the current Prescott mines located at the southern end of the old housing section of Osaka.

Based on the outstanding report that E. J. Prescott, the superintendent, got from the laboratory that analyzed the coke, in 1895 he started construction of a large mining and coke oven complex near the mouth of Possum Trot Hollow on Callahan Creek. Initially this site was also called "Pioneer", but soon the two above mentioned sites became named as separate coal camps.(2) The Possum Trot Hollow complex became known as "Stonega", probably taking its name from the creek which was renamed "Callahan Creek". (3) The site on Mudlick Creek was named Osaka. There is no documentation, but it was likely named after that great industrial city in Japan.

The construction of Osaka began in 1902.(2, 4, 5) In order to get the height needed to drift the mine coal cars onto the tipple, the Imboden seam was opened a little downstream from current Prescott Mine. 400 coke ovens were constructed and fed by a single drift mouth. Coal was also loaded into Interstate Railroad gondolas. The mine was closed in 1927 in the business slow down that came with the end of World War I, foreshadowing the coming Great Depression of 1929.



(6)

The Osaka Tipple, with the structures to be discussed in greater detail, which are: 1 – at the right end of the tipple is a small shed with a small highwall in its rear. This is the mine mouth. 2 – The building in the left foreground is the Central Repair (CR) Shop, later renamed the Central Maintenance (CM) Shop. 3 – With only its chimney top showing above the ridge line of the tipple one can see the Well / Air Compressor House. The current chimney or vent is a replacement.

The drift mouth of the Osaka Mine, as it appears in 2017

The last remaining buildings of the industrial core of the original Osaka Coal Camp are the CR shop and the Well / Air Compressor House.

This is the original building of what can be seen today as the central core of an expanded structure. It originally contained the steam electric generator that was used to power Osaka and in 1903, Roda. In the days before the company enterprises hooked onto Old Dominion Power this generator supplied the electricity for both the mines and houses in Roda and Osaka. The electricity was turned on for the housing only for two hours a day, giving the women time to cook, wash, and iron. One suspects that it also supplied Stonega initially, but it is undocumented. (7) In its later days, it served the entire Stonega Co. / Westmoreland Corp. as a machine shop where repair and maintenance

The well / air compressor house still stands today. In the beginning it stood hard to the northeast rear of the tipple. It enclosed the wellhead of the well that supplied water for both Osaka and Roda, and probably Stonega. It was not until 1920 that the water main from Appalachia arrived, and was attached to the existing water system at the well house. This system was first known as the Cumberland Water Company, later the Clear Creek Water Company, and lastly just the Town of Appalachia.(1)

The water well is located in the inside front right corner of the building. The connection to the Appalachia water system lies underground just to the right of this corner.(9) In the preceding picture of the tipple, one can see two water lines running up the hill behind this building. The one to the right runs to Midway in Stonega, and the one from the left runs to the houses up the hollow. There is a concrete water cistern to the right rear of this building. The location of the connection to the water tank on the top of the hill to the northeast of the well house is not obvious. The original main road lies between the railroad track and the well / compressor house.(8)

This is the cistern looking at the northwest corner, nearest the pump and connection to Appalachia's water line. Half of the open mouth of the filler pipe can be seen behind the tree limb, and the drain hole located behind the iron plate grill in the northern wall. What role it played between the well and the water tank on the hill to the right is unknown.

This cypress water tank sits on top of the hill northeast of the Well / Air Compressor House. It is the original, and is still in use to store water from the Appalachia Reservoir for the use of the camps of Osaka and of Roda. The metal top is a newly added feature. There used to be a similar one on the ridge dividing Happy Hollow and Hunk Hill. Most water tanks used by the railroad steam engines were similarly constructed.

Below is a single water pipe support that still stands between the pump house and the back of the tipple. The diameter of the supporting semicircle is that of the water pipes, and not the air pipes. The tipple stood where the corrugated sheet metal building sits in this photo, between the support and the CR Shop.

Osaka used a novel system for breaking up the coal at its face. The customary method in this era was to take a pick and cut out an 18" space under the rest of the

face. Then the miner would use a breast auger and drill a series of deep holes in the coal. Black powder was tamped into the holes, and was ignited with a fuse. This method produced large lumps of coal, rather than powder. However, black powder was likely to ignite the omnipresent methane gas, and produce a deadly explosion. In the early 1900's compressed air 'machines' were sometimes used to break up the coal, instead of using black powder. There were several such systems tried, but the most popular was the use of the patented 'Airdox Torpedo'. This reinforced rubberized elongated balloon was inserted into the drilled holes, and compressed air produced by a compressor located outside the mine was fed into the Torpedo. (10)


(8)

Airdox Torpedo in Use in Poland in mid Twentieth Century

There were two large electrically driven air compressors located in the Well / Air Compressor Building. The electricity came from the CR Shop. They generated 10,000 pounds of air pressure(8), and in large volumes. The problem with this system is that it required placement of heavy iron piping from the compressor, and within the mines.

The front doors of the building have been 'jimmied' open, and the two air compressors that were mounted on these two concrete foundations have been stolen. Their flywheels were about four feet in diameter.

The Airdox system was dropped for a number of reasons. Better 'permissable' explosives were developed and replaced black powder (10). Moving the piping to keep up with the expanision of the mine was a problem. And, finally, the claim about its safety was called into question when it was implicated in the explosion of a mine at West Frankfort, Illinois. (11)

A scar on the surface of the current Google Earth satellite image of this area of Bluff Spur superimposes on the fresh ditch seen on the photograph of the Osaka tipple, and which seems to contain a water main connected to the left rear of the well / air compressor building. The Google Earth ditch line crosses Bluff Spur and ends in Midway, the lower end of the Stonega Camp. The 1922 topo map shows that the dams and artificial ponds north of "The Park" associated with the more modern water system for Stonega did not exist at that time. Therefore, it would seem that the well and pump system in Osaka also supplied the camp of Stonega with water in the early years. Below the scar on Bluff Spur is highlighted by a black line.


A similar situation seems to have existed concerning electricity. Outside electric power did not come to the Big Stone Gap coal fields until Old Dominion Power Company came in about 1917(14). Before 1914 the Electric Transmission Co. had built a steam electric plant at The Pocket in Lower Crab Orchard on the North Fork of the Powell River in Lee County. They supplied electricity to the mines near St. Charles. They reported in 1914 that they planned "future transmission lines to Wise Co., Virginia." They sold out to Old Dominion Power Co., who were in turn bought out by Kentucky Utilities. KU chose to operate in Virginia under the name of Old Dominion Power. It is not known if Stonega had electricity before the coming of Old Dominion. However, the possibility exists that the generator at Osaka could have supplied that mine starting in 1902 and until 1917. That would have been a parallel circumstance to the water situation, and reinforces the understanding that the use of the term "Pioneer" included both Possum Trot Hollow and Mudlick. Examination of the photo of the Osaka tipple and CR Shop on page 2 shows that there were neither a smoke stack nor electric distribution lines coming from the shop when the picture was taken. Based on the style of the coal gondolas seen in the picture, that date was likely to have been close to 1927.

Examination of the back outside of the building is rewarding. Much of the original cast iron water and compressed air piping is still in place. The following are several photographs of this piping. The first photograph shows the water line hanging from iron supports that were built into the masonry, showing that building was designed for the specific purposes of compressing air and producing potable water to be distributed beyond its walls. The tree growing around the 'T' in the air

line shows the antiquity of the assembly.  Both lines avoid the bluff directly behind the building.

The large caliber water main has come loose from its attachment to the line seen suspended on the back of the building in the photograph before last. The 45 degree angle in the line would position it to run up the hill to Midway in Stonega. After bypassing the bluff, the airline proceeded up the hill to the mine drift mouth.

In summary, artifacts remain in place in the old industrial heart of Osaka. They document the antiquity of the operation, and show how the coal company had to supply itself with basic infrastructure, such as potable water and electricity, before the availability of these basic needs were met by Old Dominion Electric Company and Clear Creek Water Company. Even the two hours of electric power supplied to the houses was a luxury unavailable to most of their contemporaries in the surrounding area.

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14 – Skeen, Tom, Sr. to Bob Hartley to the author – Mr. Skeen was born and raised in Appalachia, and was head of the Appalachia Office of Old Dominion Power Co. for his entire adult life, which included the peak of VCI's presence in Wise Co.