

THE ESSERS OF NORTON

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A most remarkable connection exists between Wise County, Virginia and Mauck Chunk of Pennsylvania. The latter is the Delaware Indian term for 'bear paw', and is the name for a mountain above the town formerly of that name, and which is located in Pennsylvania anthracite country. The site is a convenient association of a deep river handy for barge transport of bulk materials, and hard coal seams in the hills, railroads on the river bank, and proximity to the iron and steel foundries of Pennsylvania. Before the Civil War a small group of families, formerly of Germany, moved there and involved themselves in the coal business and its associated endeavors. They became wealthy during the Civil War, and intermarried to a surprising extent. After the war anthracite seams were becoming exhausted, forcing the industrialists to seek other resources need for the smelting of iron and steel. They located large deposits of soft coal in Wise County, which they soon bought up. These interrelated families formed corporations, and sent relatives to Wise County to manage these interests. An incomplete list of these families would include Wentz, Mouser, Leisenring, Kemmerer, and Esser. I have written several other essays most of these families and their endeavors, and will now cover the one remaining – the Esser family.

Edward K. Hyndman was a member of the engineering corporation Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company of Pennsylvania. Other members of were Edward Barnes Leisenring, and his brother-in-law Mahlon S. Kemmer. Leisenring was President of Virginia Coal and Iron. Hyndman was among the incorporators of VCI, and was its vice president.⁽¹⁾

John K. Taggart, the Leisenring family's superintendent of their coal interests in Connellsville, Pennsylvania was sent to manage the Virginia Coal and Iron Co. He was soon killed by a dynamite explosion and John Alfred Esser, who had been with the Connellsville operations for 23 years was brought in as superintendent.⁽²⁾ Esser's wife was the daughter of Mark Hyndman.⁽⁴⁾

Perhaps feeling his desire to be independent of his in-laws, M. S. Kemmer branched off from them, and developed Dorchester, west of Norton. He enticed Esser to join him in his Colonial Coke and Coal Company.

Esser, desiring to be his own boss, left Colonial and in association with John L. Kemmer, W. C. Kent, and D. B. Wentz worked in concert in an operation somewhere in the Norton area. The date is uncertain, but there was a post office opened in Esserville in 1903.⁽⁷⁾ There is no evidence that they incorporated. In 1923 Esser bought the others out, and formed the Esser Coke Company at Esserville.⁽⁷⁾ Another corporate name referenced in histories is the Esser Coal Company, which was located where Guest's River crosses the old US 23. It is unknown if these

were two separate companies, or just later confusion in the names. The town was named by his employees after their boss.⁽³⁾

Esser was a natural 'Boomer'. He always saw only possibilities, and never problems. He built a row of coke ovens running in a horse shoe shape from the present Wise County industrial park and on up the east side of Guest's River. He rode the World War I coal boom to prosperity. He built a mansion in Norton, located at 1033 Virginia Ave. His son, George Hyndman Esser, had been born in 1880. Following the advice of C. Bascom Slemp, he was educated at VMI. He later worked at Esserville with his father. He built a 'bungalow' behind his parent's house. It was of the same architectural style as the big house, but much more modest. Today it is called "The Annex".^(4&5)

The elder Esser was too much of an optimist to see the coming collapse of the coal industry following the end of World War I. He sought to increase coal production at Esserville. He borrowed money and built a massive tipple that crossed from the west side of the hollow over the Guest River Road, the main Interstate track, and two side tracks.⁽¹⁾ The coal market crashed in 1926, and Esser went bankrupt.⁽⁴⁾ He died in 1932, and is buried in the Highland Cemetery in Norton.⁽⁶⁾ The family lost Esserville, as well as their two homes. George moved to Charleston, West Virginia, where he managed a mine for someone else.⁽⁴⁾

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