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Copper Mining in Greene County



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COPPER MINING IN GREENE COUNTY ^c

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At the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread interest among the citizenry of Greene County, and also among miners and investors from distant areas, in discerning the quantity of natural mineral deposits which lay beneath the surface of the placid Blue Ridge Mountains and the adjacent foothills. Even productive farmland was explored for oil, natural gas, coal and other minerals as farmers signed mineral leases and royalty agreements.¹ Speculation turned to search when an oil well was drilled in Stanardsville to a depth of 1150 feet during the year 1902.² While the hole was dry, the county was found to have traces of iron, titanium, soapstone, sand, gravel, and granitic rock.³ But it was the discovery of copper deposits at Hightop Mountain which gave Greene County one of its earliest industries.

Surveys made by the federal government early in this century identified a "mineral belt" which linearly extended a distance of approximately twenty miles, obliquely crossing Hightop Mountain in a southwest to northeast direction and terminating at the foothills near the Conway River.⁴ Without the benefit of more sophisticated geological studies, such as would only become available in later years, expectations were initially very high that the Hightop copper deposits would promise a lucrative investment potential. These later investigations have shown that the copper mineralization is deposited in the lower part of a hard greenstone which rests on the underlying granitoid rock of the Virginia Blue Ridge complex.⁵

* Mesdames Marie Durrer and Blanche Parrott provided valuable background documentation for this article.

Exploitation of this mineral on Hightop started in the very first years of the twentieth century under a charter issued to the Hightop Mining Company by the State of New Jersey. The major owner and organizer of the company was Mr. Sylvanus D. Brown. Four other directors were also named in the charter, all residents of the States of New York or New Jersey. Two of these directors were sons of Sylvanus D. Brown, Prentice W. and Morris D. Brown.⁶

Morris D. Brown, a mining engineer by profession,⁷ was clearly the major "on the scene" worker. Through the years 1901-1904 the land records show numerous acquisitions of parcels of land on the mountain by Morris D. and Oline Lejune Brown with subsequent transfer of the land or mineral rights to the land over to the Hightop Copper Mining Company.⁸

Along with the procurement of land and mineral rights work progressed on the mine and necessary structures. By the spring of 1905 a hotel, a saloon, a sawmill and a number of residences had been built. All progress came to an abrupt halt at 4:00 a.m. on the 6th of March, 1905 with an explosion that was felt as far away as Charlottesville. A quantity of dynamite stored in one of the buildings not only destroyed several buildings but also snuffed out the lives of three employees of the company: Edward Collier, the night watchman, his brother John Collier, and John Morris.⁹

The newspapers of the day gave the unfortunate occurrence spectacular play. Numerous theories as to the cause of the explosion were presented by local residents who favored the operation, and another set of theories were presented by people who resented the intrusion of the mine in their area. While the mine offered an unusual opportunity for employment, it also

brought problems which any industrial neighbor is apt to foster. For example, some residents felt that a fire which destroyed their fences was caused by the mining activity.¹⁰

On the one hand, the theory was presented that the explosion was a malicious act directed toward killing the owners. On the other hand, it was postulated that the dynamite had detonated as a result of a simple house fire.¹¹ However, normal legal procedures were instigated to establish the true facts as far as possible. A coroner's jury was impaneled two days after the explosion. The jury, made up of six well known residents of Stanardsville and headed by Dr. E. D. Davis, not only interviewed appropriate people at the county seat but also studied the evidence at the mine.¹² While the inquest was reported to be proceeding in a deliberate and professional manner, the papers continued to report the more flamboyant speculations oscillating between revenge and accident.

The coroner's jury was apparently impressed by the information that the dynamite was stored in a loft that was over a room used by the watchman. It was reported that the loft had ignited once before from an overheated stove pipe that traversed the loft on its way from a stove below to the roof. In that case the fire had been extinguished before any damage was done. It was also reported that the watchman had a fire in the stove the night before the explosion. It was his custom to awake very early each morning and replenish his fire. While dynamite will burn rather than explode when exposed to flame, it was suggested that caps could well have been stored in the same container.¹³

At any rate, the coroner's jury concluded that the cause of the

explosion was unknown.¹⁴ The Commonwealth Attorneys for both Greene and Rockingham counties who attended the hearings apparently agreed with the findings inasmuch as they did not instigate any further action.¹⁵

The newspapers continued to report the observations of the dissident element who asked why no one could find a single scrap of burned board which should be present if the building had caught fire. Also they asked why there was not a single report from the wide valley below of a fire on the mountain if indeed there had been a fire.¹⁶ Other speculators suggested a gunshot into the loft might have detonated the explosive.¹⁷ However, the almost complete destruction of the men and their possessions destroyed the possible proof of such theories.

Sylvanus D. Brown himself added to the uncertainty as to the cause by conceding that the operation had its friends as well as its enemies. From his New York base, where he was at the time of the explosion, he expressed profound regret at the loss of life.¹⁸ The explosion marked the end of actual mining operations.

The tragic death of the men was the basis for at least one suit brought by one of the families against the company in civil court. A judgment was awarded to the family.¹⁹ In the same time frame there was a rash of liens placed against Morris D. Brown and the company for small sums that appeared to be for unpaid wages.²⁰ These problems augmented by the fact that the charter of the company was withdrawn by the State of New Jersey for non-payment of taxes on the 2nd day of January 1906²¹ lend credence to the theory that finances may have been a very serious problem for the company during this period. A year and a half later (September 1907) Sylvanus D.

Brown died whereupon his son, Morris D. Brown became the driving force in the company until its conclusion in 1943.

The company was rechartered under the laws of the Territory of Arizona on the 17th of May, 1909. This charter had a 25 year term and authorized issuance of \$10,000,000 of capital stock.²² All of the assets of the now moribund New Jersey company were transferred to the newly chartered Hightop Mining Corporation.²³ The holdings of this corporation embraced 650 acres and mineral rights to an additional 350 acres.²⁴ The main shaft of the mine was reported to be 80 feet deep in 1911.²⁵ In addition, a half dozen test holes about 10 feet in diameter and up to 30 feet in length were cut into the mountain. These holes are still open, being maintained by the present owner of the property.

The new charter was apparently the signal for an energetic stock selling effort. At least 81 stockholders could still be identified over 30 years later (1943).²⁶ Finances must have remained the major hurdle since Morris D. Brown, who was now general manager of the mine as well as a director, never drew his agreed to compensation of \$5000 per year for all of the years that he served in that capacity.²⁷

Unsuccessful financial ventures seem to have a natural tendency to produce litigation and the failure of the Hightop Mining Corporation was no exception. In a Bill of Complaint dated February 22, 1918, James Logie, a stockholder from New York City, swore that false claims had been made concerning the corporation's holdings and the potential of the mine. He also claimed that machinery purchased with the money that he had invested had actually been used at another mine in Madison County.²⁸ The case never was

resolved in the courts and Mr. Logie sold his interest in the corporation on July 2, 1930.²⁹ Records generated in response to the Logie case indicate that the mine's machinery was well preserved at the site or in buildings in Elkton at the foot of the mountains.³⁰

In August, 1943 Morris D. Brown filed suite against the Hightop Mining Corporation in an effort to collect the sum of \$150,000, which sum represented the aggregate of Brown's annual salary which he had deferred in accepting through the years.³¹ While the courts ruled that Brown was not entitled to the money, it noted that the corporation's charter had expired and that activity had been non-existent for many years. Therefore it was ordered that any resources of the corporation be liquidated and the proceeds be distributed to the stockholders.³²

The land owned by the corporation and the mineral rights to ten other properties were sold at public auction on October 13, 1943 (Fig. 1). Ironically, the purchaser of the corporate assets was none other than Morris D. Brown who acquired sole ownership for the sum of \$400.00. Attorney fees, commissioners fees, publication, and other expenses associated with the sale came to more than the \$400 realized from the sale.³³ Consequently the stockholders received no return from their investment. Morris D. Brown fared only slightly better. One might say that he was able to purchase land worth \$400.00 in return for 40 years of devotion to a dream.

The area of the Hightop copper mine may be reached via the Roaches Gap fire road which crosses Skyline Drive about 0.3 miles north of milepost 69. The mine site lies about 2 miles south of the Roaches Gap fire road on a private drive which traverses property now owned by Mr. William Thomas.

The Roaches Gap fire road extends to State Route 626 which in turn intersects with Route 810. A chain blocks vehicular traffic at the park boundary so that a person approaching the mine from the Skyline Drive must be on foot. However, vehicular travel to the mine is possible from the east if caution is exercised and permission is obtained from Mr. Thomas.

The ravages of time have destroyed the man-made structures at the mine site. No machinery remains and only the concrete base of the draw works mark the site.³⁴ All of the buildings have completely vanished and the site of these structures is now a beautiful park-like setting on the mountain.

The bold venture of mining copper at Hightop Mountain may have failed to enrich the stockholders of the company and the corporation, but the endeavor has not failed to provide one of the most colorful tapestries in the mosaic of our local history.

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¹ Galenski and Archer of Richmond, Virginia were actively exploring Greene County farms for minerals in the 1890's. An example of their mineral lease and royalty agreement may be found in Greene County Deed Book 9 at pages 285-287, wherein Nathaniel E. Early of Celt leased his farm, "Buffalo Farm," on September 29, 1891.

² Krebs, Robert Gordon. "Geography of Greene County." Unpublished Masters dissertation, p. 29, University of Virginia, 1949.

³ Virginia Division of Mineral Resources, Geology and Mineral Resources of Greene and Madison Counties Bulletin 78, 1963, p. 73.

⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁶ Virginia, In the Circuit Court of Greene County, Depositions of Morris D. Brown and others, 9 August 1943, Question 21.

⁷ Ibid., Question 1.

⁸ Greene County Deed Book No. 15, pp. 341-345.

⁹ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 7, 1905, p. 1.

¹⁰ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 9, 1905, p. 1.

¹¹ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 14, 1905, p. 1.

¹² The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 9, 1905, p. 1.

¹³ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 14, 1905, p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 16, 1905, p. 1.

¹⁶ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 17, 1905, p. 1.

¹⁷ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 14, 1905, p. 1.

¹⁸ The Daily Progress (Charlottesville, Va.) March 9, 1905, p. 1.

¹⁹ Greene County Court Minute Law Book No. 6, p. 289.

²⁰ Greene County Court Judgement Lien Book No. 2, pp. 32-41.

- 21 Greene County Deed Book No. 15, p. 372.
- 22 Territory of Arizona Articles of Incorporation of Hightop Mining Corporation, May 17, 1909.
- 23 Deed Book No. 15, op. cit., p. 372.
- 24 Deposition, op. cit., Question 30.
- 25 Bulletin 78, op. cit., p. 82.
- 26 Circuit Court of Greene County, Affidavit of Morris D. Brown, 19 May 1943.
- 27 Brown Deposition, op. cit.
- 28 Circuit Court of Greene County, Bill of Complaint filed by James Logie, 22 Feb. 1918, p. 2.
- 29 Deposition of A.Z. Deane, Rockingham County, 5 July 1918.
- 30 Circuit Court of Greene County, Affidavit of L. H. Bruce, 5 July 1918.
- 31 Brown Deposition, op. cit.
- 32 Circuit Court of Greene County, Master's Report, Commissioner's Office, Aug. 16, 1943.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Bulletin 78, op. cit., p. 82.