

# The Coles Valley (Joller) Branch

by Rich Keller, d., and Vagel Keller

The following is based on an article, co-authored by the late Rich Keller and me, that originally appeared in the Winter 1992 issue of the *Timber Transfer*, the quarterly publication of Friends of the East Broad, Inc. Since its publication, the archaeology of the coal mining operations at Joller were obliterated by environmental reclamation activities ca. 1996 – 98. So, what follows is a sort of historical and archaeological report. Photos are from the camera of Vagel Keller, except where noted.

One of the most enjoyable and amazing things about the East Broad Top Railroad used to be that nearly the entire right-of-way, including branches, had survived. Folks interested in the East Broad Top Railroad had the opportunity that few other groups interested in narrow gauge railroading in the eastern United States had. Not only were several books and many photos covering the EBT available; we could also go out and examine most of the line in person. In those days, the area surrounding the Joller area, at the end of the railroad's Coles Valley Branch, was still somewhat of a mystery, and Rich Keller (no relation) and I set out to try and answer the unanswered questions.

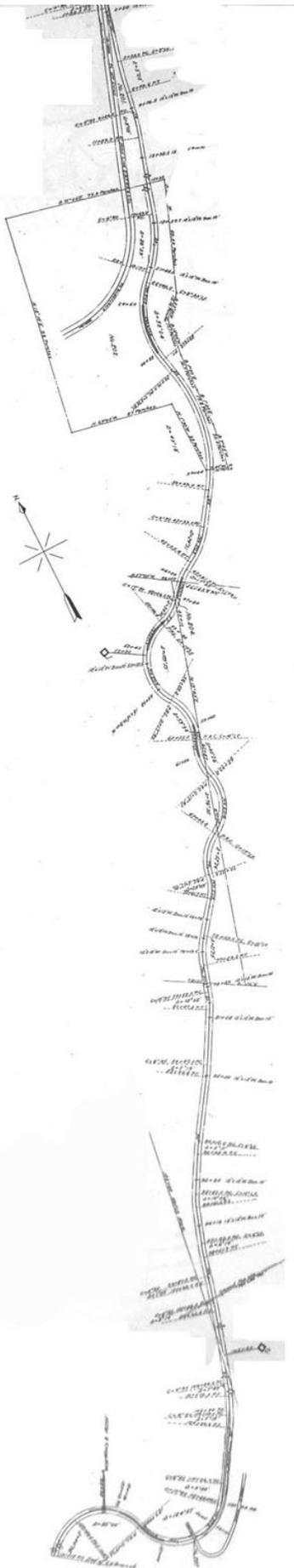
The Midvalley, or Joller, Branch, is shown in its entirety in the map from the EBT's 1917 Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) valuation map at left. It diverged from the mainline north of the Rocky Ridge tunnel and climbed south for slightly more than 2-1/2 miles on a 2.7% grade to reach the independently owned mine of the John H. Miller Company at the village of Midvalley, opened in 1915.

The EBT built the branch under contract with the Miller Co., and, according to the railroad's annual report to the State Auditor General for 1916, grading of the line consumed almost 1,700 tons of ash and slag, the latter from the huge piles of furnace slag left by the defunct blast furnaces at the railroad's operating hub in Rockhill. Close examination of the map, at left, also shows that four trestles were needed to cross the numerous draws at the northern end of the branch, as well as a long S-curve trestle near the mine at the end of the branch.

**Unanswered Questions.** In the mid-1980s, a couple of FEBT members raised some questions in an exchange of letters to the editor of the *Timber Transfer*. Evan Stauffer found there was more to this remote spot than met the eye, observing that there is a railroad grade at Joller that approached on a lower level than the familiar grade high on the mountain. This lower grade is similar to the upper one in that its final approach goes through a rock cut and over a large fill. Mike Swinnerton responded with a bit of oral history that the lower grade may have been the older of the two and was possibly related to a dump for mine tailings.

By 1991 we knew that there were two separate mine openings at Joller, both served by the Coles Valley Branch. The original mine was called "Midvalley," and later a new mine was opened and named "Joller." Contemporary published literature indicated that the Joller Mine superseded the older Midvalley opening, but other evidence suggested that there may have been some overlapping of their operation. For example, we knew that the rails to the Midvalley Mine were not permanently removed until the EBT's later years, and a photograph in the Smithsonian Collection shows a 1940 railfan excursion train on that track - with a loaded hopper car in front of it.

This article describes our theory of how the Midvalley-Joller mining operation and the tracks to serve it developed over the years. We arrived at this theory after studies of the published literature, maps pertinent to the operation, and site visits. In presenting our hypothesis we'll first take you through a brief map study and then guide you through a visit to the actual sites.





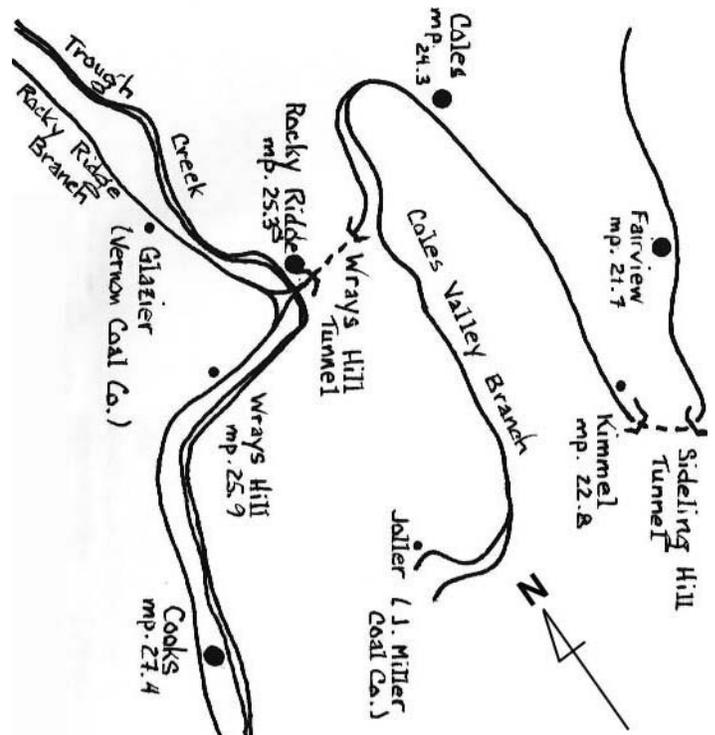
The approach to the Midvalley Mine, at left in 1940 and below in 1991, viewed from the north end of the cut just before the grade crosses the “Public Road,” present-day State Highway 994 at the far end of the cut. The 1940 photo is by a railfan on the excursion mentioned in the text.



**Map Study.** The ICC Valuation Map of 1917 (SEE Page 1) shows a single track into the Midvalley Mine. This line crosses the “public road” at the hairpin curve heading down the mountain toward Coles Valley. Therefore, it would pass through the higher cut on the mountain. If the lower grade and cut were the older of the two the mine opened well before the date of 1916 recorded in Rainey and Kyper’s definitive *East Broad Top* (Golden West Books, 1984, out of print), which is highly unlikely.

But a detail of the East Broad Top System Map of 1921, at right, shows two separate tracks going into the mines. By then the area had been renamed Joller, rather than Midvalley, apparently to avoid confusion with another post office of the same name in eastern Pennsylvania. (“Joller” is a contraction of the first two letters of Miller’s given name and the last four of his surname.) Both of the spur tracks to the mines appear to be about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile in length and, at some point, are at least  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile apart. The map of the coalfields in *East Broad Top*, p. 15, shows two tracks serving separate openings; the upper one being Midvalley and the lower the Joller Mine. Later both of these mines were served by a shaft house and tipple on the upper grade at the site of the old Midvalley tipple.

**Visiting the Joller Town and Mine Sites.** The site of the Joller and Midvalley mines is on Pennsylvania Route 994, atop Wrays (or Rays) Hill within State Game Land No. 121, about  $1\frac{3}{4}$  miles east of the crossroads village of Coles. Although the archaeological remains of the coal mining operations there are now gone, some foundations of the adjacent company town survived



the extensive re-landscaping during reclamation in the late-1990s. This was once the town of Joller that was systematically dismantled – board, brick, and stone – to make way for strip mining operations.

The best way to enter the site of the coalmines is over the S-curve on the grade to the original (upper) Midvalley Mine tipple. The grade crossed the highway on the uphill side of the hairpin curve in the highway. As you come off the fill, the foundation of the Miller & Knepp store was

immediately on the right. Ahead, a pond marked the approximate spot where the tippie stood when I last visited in the early-2000s; it was fed by an underground stream emerging from where the mine opening once was.

In 1992, the remains of the vertical shaft mine, sunk at the site of the original Midvalley tippie that replaced the Joller slope mine after the 1937 fire, were directly ahead. Back into the hillside from the tippie stood the remains of a blacksmith shop and hoist house, as well as the approach to the Midvalley Mine opening. Although it had long since collapsed in 1991, you could still see where the portal was; it was marked by rotting prop timbers and an underground stream gushing from the tunnel. Further south, along the road up the hillside, was the mule barn foundation - complete with leather mule collars (they are now in the collection of the FEBT at it's museum in Robertsdale, PA). Farther still up the hillside to the west was another portal (possibly the Martin Mine), which apparently was only served by wagons or trucks brought in on the road below.

On the lower grade, the approach to the Joller Mine opening was also visible at a right angle to the railroad grade. Part of it had been bulldozed during strip mining operations in the 1980s, but you could still see a stone retaining wall. Reddish discoloration of the boney used in its construction bore witness to the heat generated by a fire that destroyed the tippie in 1937. The mine opening itself was buried under tons of strip mining rubble. Across the grade from where the Joller Mine tippie would have been was a large pile of boney, the top of which was rounded and tapered down in a way that indicates the dumping was done from above. It seems that the tailings, from the Joller Mine, at least, simply were passed over the loading track and dumped on the other side. The railbed ended at the foot of a steep bank.

**The Lower Cut and Fill.** Approaching the lower, Joller, mine, the railroad grade goes through a more massive rock cut than does the upper line; it is nearly three times as long and much deeper. In 1991 it was in very good shape, with a minimum of fallen rock, and you could walk its full length if you were determined.

Leaving the cut, the grade approached the tippie over a large fill that may have been a trestle at one time. This fill contained material that we believed provided a clue to what became of the Rockhill Furnace structures, because it consisted of brick chunks, some of which were



Abpve. this view of the S-curve fill at Midvalley (Joller) looks north from the location of the Miller Company store toward the highway crossing. The curve, and the trestle it replaced, was a complex structure, having both horizontal and vertical curvature. The grade descends to a low point at the middle of the reverse curve, then slopes back up to the tippie, which was behind me in this view.



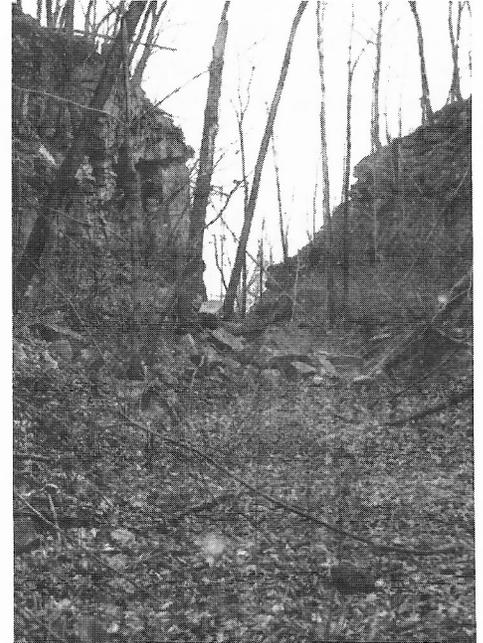
The approach to the original Miller & Knepp, or Midvalley, Mine was marked by a stone and mortar retaining wall. The caved-in entrance to the mine was left-center in this view. The timbers marking the opening to the old Martin truck mine, below, were also still visible in 1991.



partially melted, and furnace slag. The roots of a tree that sprouted, grew to old age, and fell over after the grade was abandoned, was packed with slag, not mine tailings. It's possible that there's a connection between the dismantling of the Rockhill blast furnaces and the construction of this lower fill. We can be fairly certain that the furnaces were dismantled and the machinery removed between 1911 and 1922, because of the following circumstantial evidence:

The Sanborn insurance map of Rockhill in 1911 shows the furnaces with the notation that they were closed, indicating that they were intact at that time. The furnace machinery was sold to a firm in Tennessee, requiring its removal without damage. The McKelvey Brothers lumber operation came to Rockhill in 1922 and occupied part of the furnace site for its yard and mill. Reportedly, they put a metal roof over a part of the furnace buildings (by then in various stages of ruin) and made an engine house. This suggests that the machinery had been removed by then.

Because the blast furnace machinery had been put into place first and the buildings erected around it, removing the machinery almost certainly would have required extensive demolition of the surrounding structures. Was some of the rubble from the furnaces used for fill at Joller or other parts of the line? The reported condition of the furnace site at the time of its occupation by the McKelvey's and the material in the fill approaching the opening or the new mine at Joller - opened three years later - supports the theory that this, in fact, was the case.



The lower cut lies over a steep drop east of and below the PA 994 hairpin curve and is longer and deeper than the older cut higher up the hillside. In this view from the south (tipple) end, above, the highway is above, left, while the grade crossing, obliterated by later road work, is beyond the far end.

At left, the grade for the tram from the Joller slope mine to the tipple is marked by a dry masonry stone retaining wall. The tipple, destroyed by fire in 1937, was in the distance.

**The Joller Turnout.** As you walk along the highway going north from the top of the upper cut at the highway's hairpin curve, you can see the lower grade below to the right. It is quite distinct up to a point near the highway, where it seems to disappear into the road below the current pavement level, suggesting a grade crossing once was there. Going further down the road and looking up to your left you can see where the lower grade joined the upper one.

This point was confusing for two reasons. First, the upper grade seemed to overlay the lower, suggesting that it replaced the lower one, although Rainey and Kyper recorded that the upper - Midvalley - mine preceded the Joller Mine by three years. Second, the lower grade ended abnormally high above the highway pavement, after diverging from the main stem of the branch, and then appeared on the other side well below the current pavement level.

After careful review of the area and referring to topographical and ICC Valuation Maps, we concluded that improvements to the highway accounted for the interruption in the lower grade. The highway was cut wider and closer into the mountainside after the lower route was abandoned, obliterating that part of the grade.

## Joller Chronology

1915: Miller & Knepp slope mine opened on Fulton Seam. Mine and company named Midvalley. EBT contracts with John H. Miller to build the branch and transport coal

1916: Operations begin between Coles and Midvalley, 2.56 mi; 1,691 cu ft of slag and ashes used for fill

1917: Miller & Knepp mine and tipple appeared in ICC Valuation Map. Mine had been served since 1916 by Coles Valley Branch of the EBTRR, with final approach over a compound curve trestle that later would be filled in.

1919: New slope mine opened on the Barnett Seam, east of and below the earlier Midvalley opening. (Miller family history published later revealed that this action was taken by Miller's son, who did so against the advice of his father while his father was on a lengthy overseas vacation.) Construction of siding to new opening, using Rockhill blast furnace demolition debris for fill.

1920: "Midvalley" changed to "Joller" in EBT Annual Report

1937: Wooden tipples of the two slope mines were destroyed by fire and replaced by a steel and concrete structure at the original (upper) tipple site, including a cleaning plant, with two-hopper tipple and vertical shaft to the Barnett Seam. The slope mine on the Fulton Seam probably continued in operation. The lower spur was dismantled. The original grade crossing leading to the lower cut soon would be obliterated by road widening and paving in the state-wide highway improvement program undertaken by Gov. Gifford Pinchot during the Great Depression.

1955: EBT dismantled the Coles Valley Branch, ending rail service to Joller. Mines continued to produce, using truck transportation as a link with markets.

1966: Deep mines close. Strip mining continues in the immediate vicinity. As miners' families move away, residences and public structures gradually are dismantled. By 1979 four residences are all that remain.

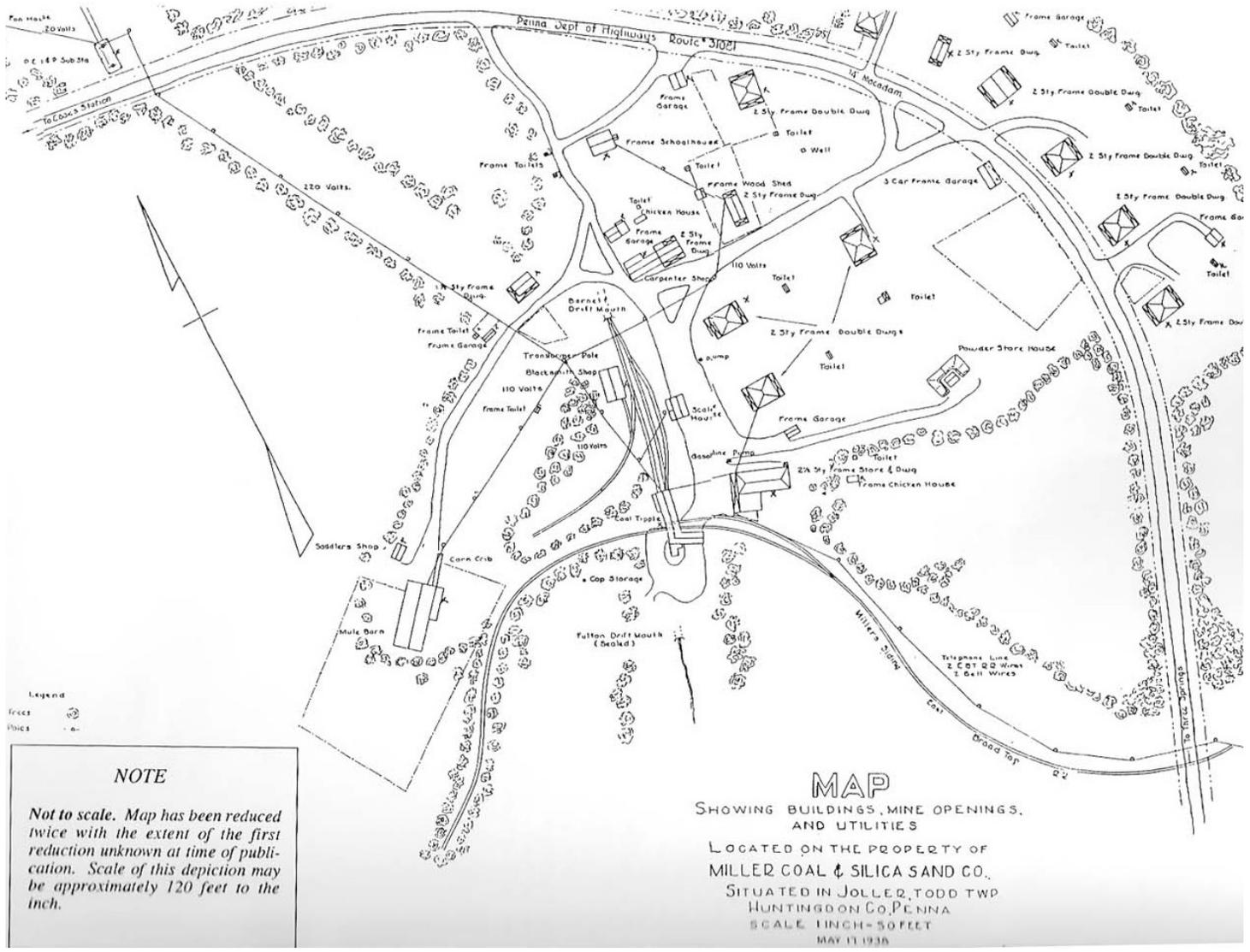
1979: Miller Company gave notice to remaining residents to relocate by January 1, 1980. By November 9, 1979, the last family had vacated its home, and the buildings were torn down to make way for expanded strip mining operations. The village limits signs were removed, ending a community that had existed for 63 years.

**Hidden Secrets?** In 1992 we wrote, "There's a lot more to the Joller story. You can stand out there and feel it in your bones. Let us know what you find. We won't be far behind you; that's both the work of recording the history and the enjoyment of exploring the East Broad Top of today ... and yesterday."

Sadly, the only way to explore the town and mines at Joller today is in the history books.



In 1991 we found the remains of the mule stable on the hillside southeast of the 1937 tipple site. Among the rotting timbers leather mule collars could still be seen. The author retrieved them, and they now reside in the FEBT's collection in Robertsdale ... saved from destruction by later environmental reclamation of the area.



This map from the collection of the Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Society shows the surface mining facilities and commercial and residential structures at Joller as they were in 1938. The tipples and store are at center; the mule barn is to the left of them.

**Epilogue.** As of this writing, much of the EBT mainline and the grades of some of the branchlines are still more or less intact. However, the visible remains of the facilities that the railroad and branchlines were built to serve have, in fact, disappeared since the mid-1990s, when Rich and I did most of our field work for this article. Jacobs, on the Rocky Ridge Branch, and Joller are two other examples, and at Shade Gap, the last surviving example of an EBT section shed outside Rockhill was demolished by a historically ignorant land owner who refused to believe that it was, in fact, a historical railroad structure even after being shown an ICC valuation map with the building clearly labeled.

With the tourist operation between Rockhill/Orbisonia and Colgate Grove moribund since 2012, only the ongoing restoration and preservation work by FEBT at

Rockhill and Robertsdale stand between survival and a slow decline into rot and collapse of the remaining surface structures of one of the most important pieces of the industrial heritage of Pennsylvania, if not the entire country.

**Sic Transit Gloria Mundi**

