

# *The Reluctant Railroad*

## The East Broad Top's Rocky Ridge Branch

by Vagel Keller

NOTE: The information and images that follow originally appeared in the Spring and Winter 2002 issues of the *Timber Transfer*, a quarterly publication of the Friends of the East Broad Top, Inc., a 501.c.3 nonprofit historical society dedicated to the restoration and preservation of the East Broad Top RR National Historical Landmark.

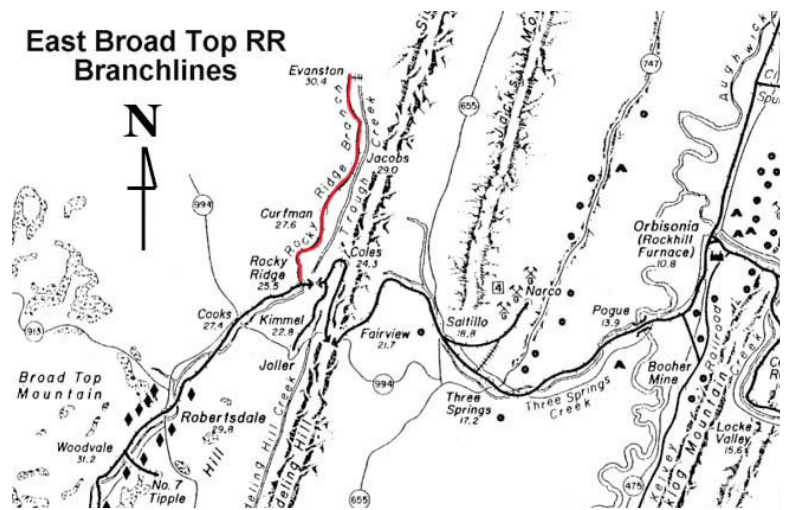
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The idea for this article came from the late Richard B. Keller, a former president of FEBT and a great friend. Rich and I were not related, but we were kindred spirits when it comes to exploring the East Broad Top's long abandoned branch lines. Rich's insights from exploring this fascinating corner of the EBT "empire" got me started on this project several years ago, and his frequent cajoling kept it alive. I am also indebted to the Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Society and to FEBT member and gifted coal mine modeler Ron Pearson for assistance with photographs. Finally, former FEBT president Hank Inman provided information from Interstate Commerce Commission valuation records.



**INTRODUCTION.** Today the Rocky Ridge area of southern Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania features some of the most beautiful, remote mountain scenery in the state. Drained by swift, clear Trough Creek plunging through rocky, hemlock-lined gorges, it is accessible only by unpaved roads, jeep trails, and the grade of the EBT. The quiet solitude – punctuated only by the sound of the creek and occasional hunters' gunshots – belies the fact that the steep surrounding ridges once echoed to the sounds of chuffing steam locomotives, squeaking axles, and underground explosions as Nature yielded to man. Only a winding trail, the abandoned grade of the railroad that once tapped the mineral resources under Rocky Ridge and Rays Hill, remain in mute testimony to the men, women, and children who lived there because there was coal and there were markets for it. Scattered homes and hunting cabins dot the hillsides where the thriving town of Jacobs once stood.

The East Broad Top Railroad & Coal Company entered the Rocky Ridge coal field reluctantly, and its experience probably justified that hesitance. In

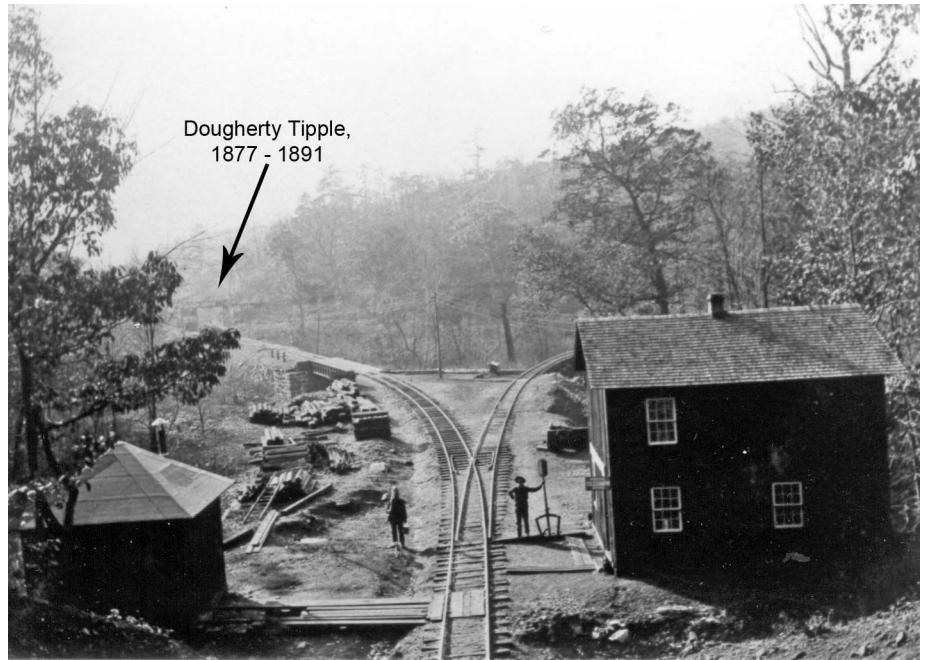
contrast to the independent Joller mines on the other side of Rays Hill, the independent mines in the Rocky Ridge area had a short, sporadic history. Conflict with one particularly fractious independent operator made life



The Rocky Ridge Branch, shown in red on this map, ran north from a junction with the EBT mainline at the south portal of a tunnel under Rays Hill.

difficult for EBT management and, in one instance, for commuting coal miners along the EBT's mainline. After a relatively short period of prosperity and heavy coal traffic, the Rocky Ridge branch languished as an occasional source of coal traffic until, suffering from flood damage and neglect, it was dismantled in the mid-1940s.

**EARLY ATTEMPTS TO ATTRACT THE EBT.** Coal mining in the Rocky Ridge area around the south portal of the EBT's Rays Hill tunnel (SEE photo, page1) dated from the earliest years of the EBT's construction. John Dougherty, an early and ardent promoter of the EBT, opened a mine in the Fulton seam on the east slope of Rocky Ridge about a mile north of the EBT's main line in



1876. Dougherty apparently requested the EBT to build a branch to connect to his mine, but the railroad's directors turned him down. Undaunted, Dougherty took matters into his own hands and, by the following year, his tramway delivered about 25 tons a day to a tipple on the EBT mainline west of Ray's Hill tunnel. Eventually, the Dougherty mine's output led the Rockhill Iron & Coal Co. to lease the tramway from 1884 through 1891, after which production apparently ceased.

A few miles northeast of Dougherty's mine the EBT's reluctance, or inability, to build the proposed Rocky Ridge branch prevented the railroad from earning significant coal-hauling revenue. George Sleeman, a resident of Saltillo on the EBT's main line, began mining the Fulton seam on Shirley's Knob in 1881. That operation led to premature speculation in local newspapers. But Sleeman did eventually discover a rich vein averaging six feet thick.

Sleeman was the only Rocky Ridge coal operator to approach the size of the EBT's corporate sister, the Rockhill Iron & Coal Company, during the 19th Century, but the EBT did not gain the potential traffic. The Sleeman mines yielded 19,000 tons in 1890 alone, but most of the coal was hauled away in wagons or sleds to customers as far away as the Tuscarora Valley beyond the eastern fringes of the EBT's territory. In 1902, Sleeman opened another mine on his Rocky Ridge tract and contracted with the Pittsburg [sic] White Sand Company for hauling the coal to the latter's works at Mapleton, on the Pennsylvania Railroad between Huntingdon and Mt. Union. At the same time rumors surfaced in Huntingdon County's "Lower End" that a standard gauge railroad would tap the Sleeman mines. The proposed line, chartered by New York investors as the Hare's Valley

In this view, looking west (RR South) from atop the south portal of Rays Hill Tunnel, the Rocky Ridge Branch diverges to the right. Note the use of a stub switch on the mainline.

Railroad, was to run from Mapleton via Saltillo and Cassville to Hancock, MD, but that project never came to fruition.

In the meantime the Baltimore-based Rocky Ridge Coal Mining Company reopened the derelict Dougherty mine in June 1903 and refurbished the old Dougherty tramway; the EBT rebuilt the Dougherty Siding to handle the traffic, which amounted to about 12,000 tons annually. RRCM operated the old Dougherty mine through 1907, and it continued under the name "Jacobs & Glazier" in 1909. But production that year totaled less than 6000 tons and it was apparently closed for good after that. This small operation, alone, was not enough to induce the EBT to build a branch.

**"BIG BUSINESS" ATTRACTS THE EBT.** The main problem faced by independent coal operators in the upper Trough Creek Valley as the 20th Century began was the lack of reliable, all-weather transportation to market. Without a railroad they were dependent on the cost prohibitive wagon and sled trade. The EBT, controlled as it was by the RI&C, was not in a position to encourage the development of competing coal operations in the Broad Top region by offering free access to rail transportation. In 1876 -- and again in 1884 -- the railroad's directors denied requests to build a branch into the Rocky Ridge coal field, insisting that independent operators develop their own connections to the EBT mainline as the Dougherty's and the RRCM had done. Individually no one could induce the EBT to build a branch, but R. W. Jacobs, a Huntingdon merchant, solved that problem by consolidating

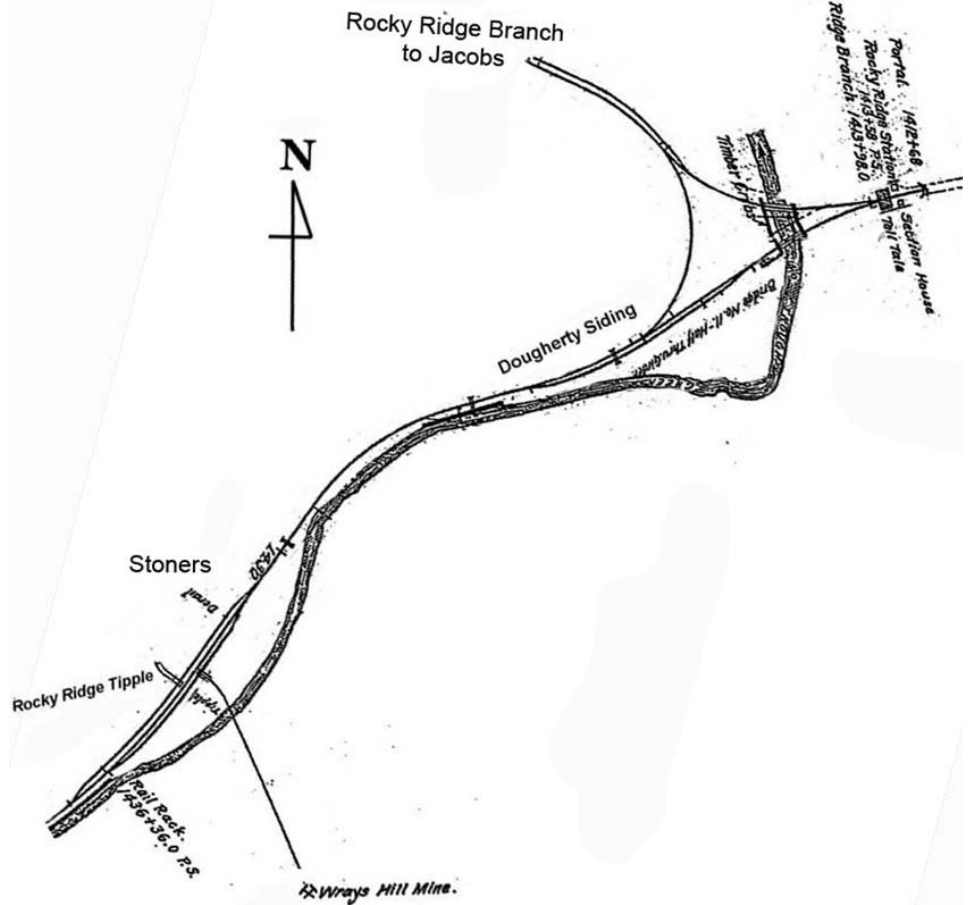
all of the independent coal properties in the area.

R. W. Jacobs chartered the Broad Top Coal & Mineral Company on August 21, 1903, merging the Sleeman holdings with other coal properties that constituted a respectable coal field under Rocky Ridge about midway between the Rays Hill Tunnel and the village of Cassville. Jacobs coordinated these moves with the EBT; in July 1903 the new EBT general manager (and soon-to-be president) Robert S. Seibert presented a survey plan and profile to the EBT board of directors for a proposed branch railroad from Rocky Ridge Siding to Shirleys Knob [near Evanston]. The line ran 4.93 miles from EBT milepost 25.6 (the point-of-frog of the switch at survey point 1413.99, just west of the Rocky Ridge station). Based on Seibert's report, the board decided to procure a charter for a railroad from Dougherty Siding to Cassville conditional on the coal operators furnishing timber and cross-ties and a \$5000 deposit. In addition to coal traffic, the EBT expected the branch to generate a profitable traffic in lumber and fire clay.

With a firm commitment from BTC&M, the EBT moved forward and, on June 28, 1904, the directors authorized Seibert to construct the line as far as Cassville at a cost not to exceed \$20,000. In a further indication of close cooperation between Jacobs and Seibert, Jacobs got the contract to grade the line. Other locals benefited as well; Charles Whitsel, of Hill Valley, got the contract for clearing the right of way and Amos Evans, of Shirley's Knob, was to furnish the ties. EBT agreed to lay the track and build the necessary bridges. These organizational details were completed by late December 1904, and all parties expected the Rocky Ridge Branch to be in operation by early Spring 1905.

Despite a geologist's report that coal and clay deposits in the area did not justify construction of a railroad the EBT went ahead with its plans, and at the December 1904 board of directors meeting Seibert said the Rockhill car shops would have thirty to forty new coal cars ready by the time the branch was ready for operations. These cars were wooden 22,400 lb.-capacity copies of the original Billmeyer & Smalls design that formed the mainstay of the EBT coal car fleet until the advent of steel hoppers

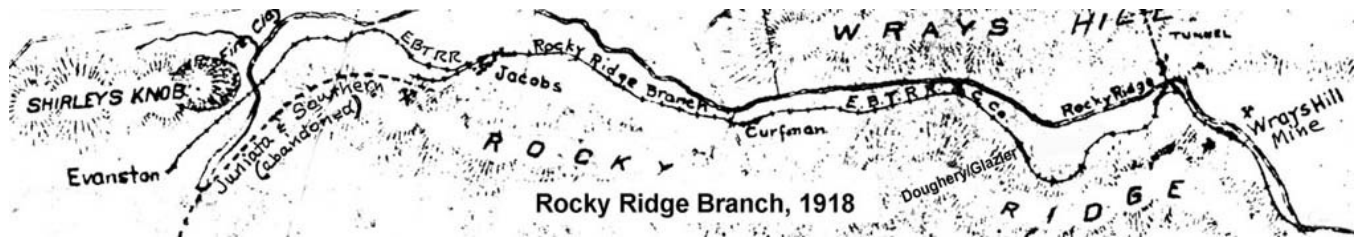
## Rocky Ridge & vicinity ca. 1917



in 1913.

The pace of construction on the Rocky Ridge branch lagged well behind the ambitious Spring 1905 deadline. Work did not begin until January 1905, and then with an initial work force of only forty men. By May construction gangs had increased to seventy-five men, but the EBT had only just begun to erect the bridge over Trough Creek at the south portal of Rays Hill tunnel to provide the essential link with the main line. Track laying finally started in late June, but only three miles of track were down when work was suspended due to lack of ties. The tie shortage persisted into September, and the line was completed only as far as the new town of Jacobs by the 28th of that month.

BTC&M began shipping coal from Jacobs even before the rails had reached that place. Shipments averaging 100 tons per day began as early as September 15, 1905, and in Rockhill the recently expanded car shops were busy building the new coal cars needed to handle the traffic. Five cars were turned out in August, and production of cars of all types to satisfy the needs of numerous clients on the line continued for months. Lumber shipments in particular, were expected to be heavy due



This detail of a much larger map of the entire EBT system made in 1918 shows the Rocky Ridge Branch essentially as approved by the Board of Directors in 1904.

to a number of saw mills that were now served by the branch. Six cars built by the Rockhill shops in March, 1906 brought the total for the past twelve months to forty-four.

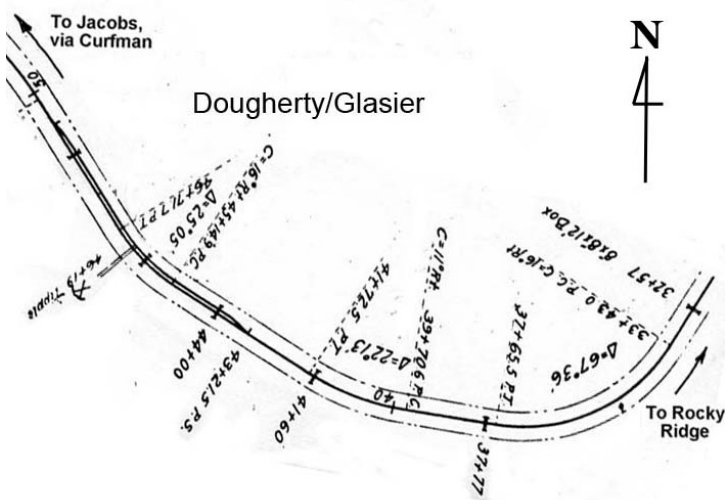
The Rocky Ridge branch was finally completed to Evanston on November 10, 1905 at a cost of just over \$28,000. In 1906 BTC&M opened two drifts at the new town of Jacobs and production topped 60,000 tons per year. The company also loaded coal from a new tipple at Dougherty (later called Glazier), between Rocky Ridge and Jacobs, about a mile northwest of the junction.

Fire clay shipments from the pits on Shirley's Knob continued until at least 1909, but that traffic fizzled when the clay was found to contain too much iron. The mines at Jacobs marked the northern extent of productivity on the Rocky Ridge branch, and it was never extended beyond Evanston to Cassville.

One final question -- that of corporate status -- had to be decided before the paper work was completed. In December 1906 the EBT's directors decided to organize the Rocky Ridge Branch as a separate company, and the Rocky Ridge Railroad, with Seibert as president, was formed on April 18, 1908; of course, the EBT immediately

leased new railroad.

Coal was the mainstay of the traffic on the Rocky Ridge branch, and there was a lot of it for about fifteen years. The Rockhill shops continued to build five to six coal cars per month partly to handle increasing Rocky Ridge production. In February 1906 the EBT announced it had built a new tipple at Rocky Ridge to facilitate coal loading from the old Dougherty mine now owned by the Rocky Ridge Coal Mining Co. (SEE Photo, page 1) At the same time the railroad also installed a wye at Rocky Ridge junction to "enable the trainmen to handle the business from the new branch to a better advantage." At the beginning of 1907 Seibert reported that the Rocky Ridge branch was yielding 225 tons of coal per day. Also, that year RRCM shifted operations to a new, more productive Rays Hill mine east of the Rays Hill Tunnel and a few hundred yards south of Rocky Ridge station. In October, the EBT built a new siding to serve the Rays Hill mine tipple; its location, known as Stoner's, was near M.P. 26. RRC&M would eventually



The photo at right is officially unidentified, but it bears a striking resemblance to the arrangement at Dougherty/Glazier on the ICC valuation map, above. Photo: Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Society collection.

ship 289,601 tons over the EBT. (SEE map, page 3)

Wood was also an important, if secondary, commodity on the Rocky Ridge branch. In February 1906 the EBT announced it would install a siding at Jacobs for tie, pulpwood and lumber loading. Lumber shipments from the branch continued for at least three years.

The best years for the Rocky Ridge coal field fell between 1910 and 1914. Output from the BTC&M's Jacobs mine passed 300 tons a day in 1910; in its peak year, 1912, it produced 82,500 tons. At Rocky Ridge RRCM's annual coal shipments peaked at 36,664 tons in 1914.

In 1910, the Jacobs concern (owners of BTC&M), which had taken over the Dougherty mine from RRCM in 1909, moved from there to Stair No. 1, closer to the EBT mainline, and operated it under the almost-too-quiet name, "Possum Hollow Coal & Coke Co." A small producer, Stair No. 1 passed to RRCM control after 1912. Stair No. 1 loaded cars at on a siding opposite the Rays Hill tippie at Stoner's.

**COMPANY TOWNS IN THE ROCKY RIDGE COAL FIELD.** As with the RI&C, the mines at Jacobs and Rocky Ridge attracted miners and laborers who commuted from farms and villages throughout the "Lower End." But the need for a large, year-round work force led to the creation of towns specifically for housing coal miners and their families from outside the region. The first such town took shape near the south portal of the EBT's Rays Hill tunnel. Little is known about the structure and make-up of the village of Rocky Ridge. But by August 1903, as plans for the Rocky Ridge Branch were maturing, there was enough activity at the site that the EBT had abandoned its station at Cole's, near the north portal of the Rays Hill tunnel, and announced plans to build a new one at Rocky Ridge. A two-story board-and-batten structure, the Rocky Ridge station outlived its namesake town by many years. An increasingly derelict reminder of a once-bustling community, it finally succumbed to the forces of nature in the early 1990s. (SEE photo, page 8)

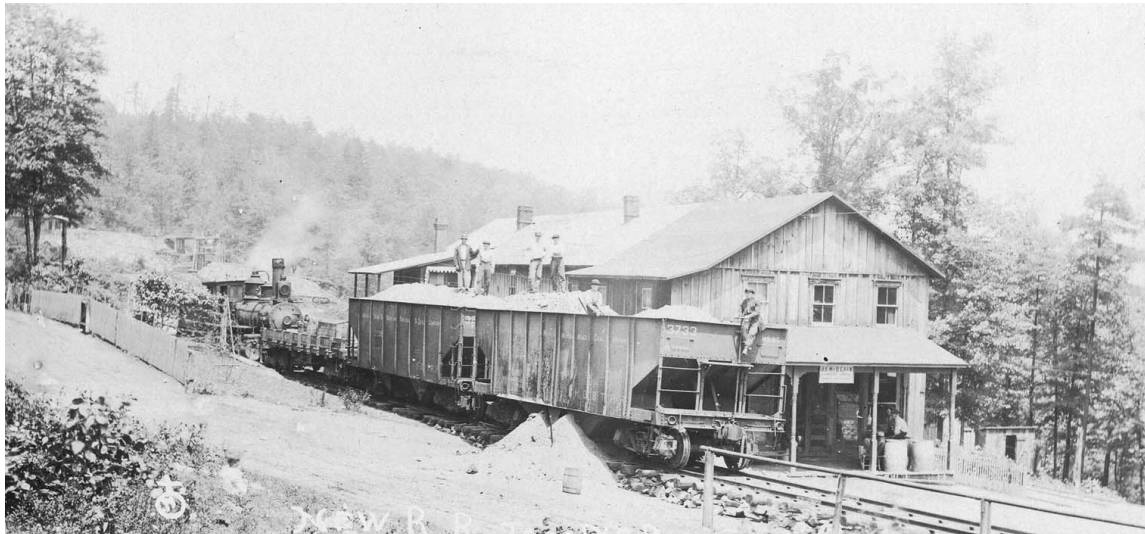
The town of Jacobs originated as a classic coal company town. Located about one mile east of the main road from Robertsdale to Cassville, the town was almost totally dependent on the railroad for its connection to the



This photograph taken at Stoners, looking northeast, shows RRCM's new tippie for the Rays Hill Mine (right) and the tippie for Possum Hollow Coal & Coke's Stair No. 1, formerly RRCM's Rocky Ridge Mine (left). Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Societ.

outside world. Built in 1905 on land owned by the BTC&M, Jacobs originally consisted of sixteen 20 x 40-ft houses and a large store, all built by Wilson & Carothers, of Orbisonia. In July 1906, with the new drift mines set to open, a "correspondent writing from Jacobs" reported that two new families had recently moved in, "and improvements [were] being made in and about the town under the direction of the mine superintendent." He pronounced Jacobs "an ideal place to live in - pure water, plenty of fresh air, and one of the most prosperous towns to be found along the East Broad Top railroad." This was high praise, indeed, for a little coal patch in the middle of nowhere. But the town did grow to quite a respectable size; by October 1909 a church and school had been built there, and the number of miners' houses had grown to twenty-five. At its high point on the eve of World War I Jacobs held sixty houses, which BTC&M rented to its employees.

As with most coal company towns, labor problems were intertwined with community life. Rocky Ridge and Jacobs developed at a time when coal mining was growing everywhere in the Broad Top region. The expanding operations of the RI&C, BTC&M, and RRCM exceeded the capacity of the local labor pool, with the result that immigrants from Eastern Europe and Italy were recruited to fill the need. Such was the case at Rocky Ridge, where a labor dispute in March 1906 led RRC&M to evict eleven immigrant families from the company's houses. (Standard leases in the Broad Top coal fields in those days



McClain's Store, Jacobs, ca. 1915. The tracks in the foreground are the standard gauge Juniata & Southern, a short-lived interloper in the EBT's territory. The cars, probably from the Huntingdon & Broad Top Mountain RR, are being used in ballasting the tracks that have just been laid to the relocated BTC&M mine during the dispute with the EBT discussed below. Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Society collection.

were conditional on working for the company.)

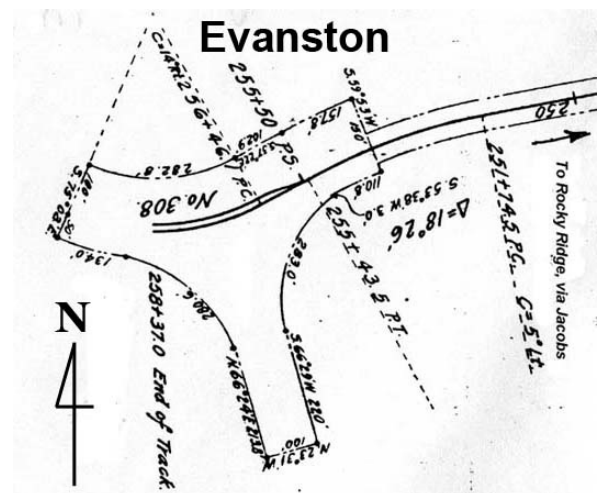
When the miners and their families refused to leave, the company called on Huntingdon County's Sheriff Port to remove them. Having made their point, but not wishing to risk confrontation with the law, the immigrants left before Port's arrival. Nevertheless, Sheriff Port formed a posse and remained in the area for several days to guard against possible violence from the evicted tenants, who, according to reports, "were in a threatening humor." By April 5th, the incident was over. Sheriff Port returned to Huntingdon, where he reported, "everything is serene" at Rocky Ridge.

Today, the towns of Jacobs and Rocky Ridge have vanished without a trace.

**LEGAL CONFLICT AND THE JUNIATA & SOUTHERN INTERLUDE.** Within a few years of the branch's opening, R.W. Jacobs quarreled with the EBT over the latter's failure to repay the \$5,000 deposit. EBT was to repay it in the form of rebates on coal shipments, but Jacobs was not satisfied that the EBT was honoring the agreement. The dispute landed the two parties in court in 1909, and EBT was ordered to pay Jacobs \$3122.75. Round one to R. W. Jacobs.

Another dispute between Jacobs and the EBT that year over train service on the Rocky Ridge branch led to some rather heavy handed maneuvering, with the coal miners as pawns. From the time the branch opened, Jacobs pressed the EBT for regularly scheduled passenger and express service, in part for the benefit of commuting coal miners. But the EBT insisted that the potential revenues were insufficient to cover the expense, and the

railroad continued to operate only irregular extra trains on the branch. Jacobs finally took his case to the state railroad commission, and in mid-November 1910 the commissioners ordered the EBT to provide regular passenger service to Jacobs. The EBT responded by abolishing its daily roundtrip miners' commuter service between Orbisonia and Robertsdale. Suddenly, the bickering between Jacobs and the EBT had spilled over into households all along the railroad.



The EBT's termination of the Orbisonia - Robertsdale miners' train created an uproar in the Lower End. The Miners' Train was an important part of the regional economy; work in the RI&C mines was an important source of cash for families living on subsistence farms or on the earnings from seasonal "casual" labor. Tickets were sold at a discount price of only ten cents per round trip, and



the Miners' Train allowed these workers, many of whom owned homes in villages or worked small farms along the EBT, to commute to and from the mines at Robertsdale and Woodvale. The railroad's summary action threatened the livelihoods of at least 100 of these men, just as winter -- the hardest part of the year for what was then very much a subsistence agricultural economy in the Lower End -- was approaching, which, in turn, worried local businessmen and politicians.

This crisis led to a hearing before the commission in Harrisburg during mid-December, in which both sides of the argument were presented. Not surprisingly, the commissioners agreed with the EBT's position and rescinded their earlier order. The EBT immediately restored the miner's train between Orbisonia and Robertsdale. Round two to the EBT.

Frustration with the EBT finally pushed Jacobs to seek a new outlet for his coal, which he found in the form of a standard gauge logging railroad, the Juniata and Southern, which that penetrated the lower Trough Creek valley from a connection with the Huntingdon & Broad Top Railroad at Marklesburg. In 1912 the J&S extended its line eight miles from its terminus at Paradise Furnace to reach Jacobs.

Jacobs unfortunately did not live to see his hopes realized. Although grading on the J&S extension was completed by the end of 1914, track laying was delayed when the BTC&M went bankrupt that March, and Jacobs died soon thereafter.

The J&S's eventual arrival at Jacobs in 1915 breathed new life for a short time into the BTC&M, which opened a new mine on the Barnett seam and built a new tipple overlooking the EBT's Rocky Ridge branch. The H&BT's president enthusiastically

Above: Post-J&S Track arrangement at Jacobs. The road crossing the branch just south of the switch is the Coles Valley Road, which crosses the EBT mainline at Coles Curve and passes the former Coles station.

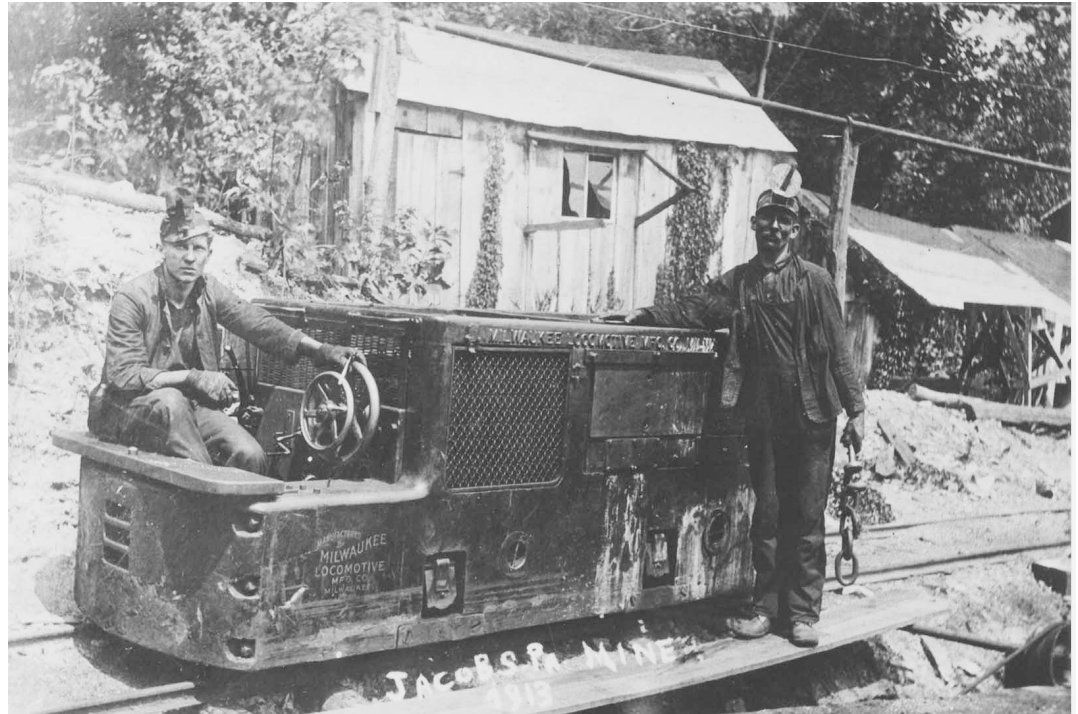
Below: In-service view of the new tipple served by the J&S at Jacobs between 1916 and 1917. When the J&S was torn up in 1917 the EBT re-gauged the spur and connected it to the Rocky Ridge Branch just south of McClain's store, off-scene to the right. Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Society collection.



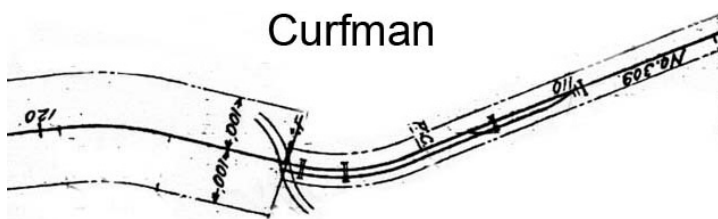
reported that the coal traffic from the J&S extension exceeded his expectations. But the J&S was a financial basket case from its inception, and it failed for good in 1917.

The EBT soon built a spur on the J&S grade to the new tipple and the J&S was sold for scrap. For the Rocky Ridge coal operators, it would be the EBT or nothing.

**RAPID DECLINE AND SLOW DEATH.** The good times were short lived in the Rocky Ridge coalfield. RRCM did not survive the economic downturn at the close of World War I and ceased operations permanently in 1918. BTC&M, having survived bankruptcy in 1914, could not weather the strikes and depression of 1920, when coal prices plunged from \$9.50 to \$3.00 per ton, and declared final bankruptcy on March 14, 1922.



Broad Top Coal & Mineral Co. workers at Jacobs, 1913. If the caption on the photo is accurate this is the only known image relating to the Jacobs mines while they were served by the EBT. Broad Top Area Coal Miners Historical Society collection.



**POSTSCRIPT.** In 2002, when this was originally written, there were few remains of the Rocky Ridge branch and the coal mines and towns that it once served. The grade is still relatively open from Rocky Ridge Junction to the site of Jacob, and the locations of the tipples at Dougherty/Glazier is clearly evident. But today (2015) the grades of the Rocky Ridge branch and the mine spur at Jacobs, intact it then, are obscured or obliterated by recent residential development. The foundation of McClain's store at Jacobs that marked the long-gone center of economic and social life the company town, is no longer as evident as it was. The Rocky Ridge station, near the south portal of the EBT's Rays Hill Tunnel, stood derelict until 1993, when it collapsed under the weight of winter snow, leaving only a pile of rotten timbers and a stark brick chimney as witness that, for a brief moment in time, this was a busy spot on a bustling railroad.



The author took this picture of the Rocky Ridge station, missing its southwest wall, in late-Autumn 1991 shortly before it collapsed.