

A LESSON IN RESOURCEFULNESS

THOMAS, WEST VIRGINIA

The People of Thomas

THE HISTORY books of Thomas are full of fascinating stories of the people who built these buildings and lived their lives here. Hundreds of people from around the world came to Thomas to seek their fortunes, succeeding through hard work and determination. Today's residents of Thomas have fond memories of colorful citizens, kind shopkeepers always ready to slip a piece of candy to a child, beloved teachers and a multitude of other Thomasonians of the past. Here are just a few of those many stories.

Salvatore and Venanzio DiBacco

Brothers Salvatore and Venanzio were born in Italy, the sons of sheep-herder Carmen DiBacco and his wife. Salvatore's autobiography, handwritten in 1960, recounts a difficult early life in Italy, but even in spite of times of hunger and poverty, the family took care of each other. Venanzio, finding his own options limited by illiteracy, insisted that his younger brother Salvatore be sent to school. Their sister Gaitana was married to Rocco Benedetto; in 1897 Rocco sent for Venanzio to come to Thomas, and Salvatore followed shortly after in 1898. The brothers worked long, hard hours at the coke ovens, all the while planning a more prosperous future. They went into business with Benedetto in 1901 but eventually fell into disagreement and parted ways with him, moving to a new location in 1915 (No. 3). Salvatore operated a grocery on the right side of the building and Venanzio ran a hardware store on the left side. Both families lived in the apartments above their stores. Salvatore's autobiography is full of colorful accounts of financial difficulties, extortion schemes, lawsuits, bouts with illness and even death threats, yet it also describes the happy occasions of births and marriages, the growth of business and prosperity, the establishment of a "Society for Mutual Help" to assist neighbors in difficult times and the achievement of Salvatore's fondest wish - to give all his children the opportunity for an education.



Dr. Olin Huntley Hoffman (Buildings 13 and 14) came to Thomas in 1887 as the physician and surgeon to the Davis Coal and Coke Company. He lived with his family on East Avenue (No. 14) and built a building next door for his offices and drugstore (No. 13). Dr. Hoffman was very active in the community, and was the first mayor of Thomas. He was instrumental in setting up the local school system and was a leader of the Anti-Saloon League, which supported Prohibition. Dr. Hoffman relocated to Baltimore in 1917.



Phoebe Thayer, local businesswoman, built Tour Building No. 37 and lived in No. 28. (Source: Thomas WV 1906 by T. Nutter, Courtesy Miners and Merchants Bank)



Mary Geisberger, founder of the Metropolitan Hotel. (Source: Thomas WV 1906 by T. Nutter, Courtesy Miners and Merchants Bank)

Mary Geisberger & Phoebe Thayer

In his 1906 history of Thomas, T. Nutter gave high praise to Mary Geisberger (Tour No. 7) and Phoebe Thayer (Tour Nos. 28 and 37), who achieved considerable success before women even gained the right to vote. Nutter wrote the following biographical sketches of the two women:

"A more business-like woman is not to be met than the subject of this sketch, Mrs. Mary (Iberg) Geisberger, who was born in Switzerland, Nov. 20, 1856. She was united in marriage with Mr. Robert Geisberger at the age of twenty-one.

"In 1879, she, with her husband, emigrated from Switzerland to Alpena, then a new settlement in Randolph County, West Virginia, where for a time Mr. Geisberger engaged in farming. From Alpena they moved to Lonaconing, Maryland, where they engaged in the boarding house business, and followed a like business for the West Virginia Central and Pittsburg Railway Company along its line of construction. That road was completed to Thomas in August of 1884, when the Geisbergers opened a hotel here.

"...Mrs. Geisberger owns considerable property and is, perhaps, the heaviest individual tax payer in Thomas. She retired from active business in 1900, and now lives in private apartments at the Hotel Metropolitan, which building she owns."

"No woman in Thomas deserves more credit than does Mrs. P.E. (Hoover) Thayer, who was born in Pendleton county, West Virginia, in 1862. She married at the age of nineteen to Mr. Richard H. Thayer of Oakland, Maryland. After a short residence in Oakland, they moved to Winona, Logan county, Kansas, where they conducted a hotel. In June, 1887, they came to Thomas, where Mr. Thayer now mines coal for the Davis Coal and Coke Company. Wholly through Mrs. Thayer's labors, economy and business ability, she has accumulated considerable property. In the great fire of 1901 she lost four buildings. Not to be daunted by this loss, she only built greater, and now not only owns good property in Thomas, but property of much value in Winona, Kansas."



Mike Ferruso, an Italian immigrant who operated his butcher shop in the Benedetto Building (Tour No. 4), was a well-loved local with a colorful personality. (Courtesy Russell L. Cooper)

Jim Cooper

Jim Cooper, Jr. was a fixture on East Avenue for almost 70 years. He lived at 114 East Avenue (No. 14) and owned a men's clothing store at the Cooper Building (No. 9). His father Jim Cooper, Sr. got into the clothing business in nearby Davis when a local man who was being drafted talked Jim Sr. into "temporarily" buying his clothing store. Although they later discovered the man had actually been trying to sell the business for 6 months, the Coopers had a number of good years before the economy in Davis took a downturn around 1919. A number of factors forced the Coopers to close the store in Davis, but Jim, Jr., who had assisted his father from an early age, believed there was a market for finer "weekend" clothing for the miners in nearby Thomas. He rented a shop in the Opera House building (No. 1) and began selling suits. He later moved the business to the Cooper Building, and eventually bought that property around 1948. Jim became known for his excellent fitting and measuring abilities, and sold fine brands and the latest fashionable styles. He was also known for his punctuality; neighbors could set their clocks by Jim's morning, lunch break and evening walks between his home and shop. His shop remained open until his death in 1993, a reminder of the days when going out on the town called for a tailored suit, shined shoes and a fine hat.



This elevation drawing of the Cooper (originally O'Connor) building (No. 9) shows a fine structure with ornate features such as corner pilasters, classical cornices and a parapet wall with scrolled nameplate and spire. The form of the building, though obscured and altered, can still be seen today. (Source: Thomas WV 1906 by T. Nutter, Courtesy Miners and Merchants Bank)



The Hotel Imperial (originally Metropolitan Hotel) was simple in design, yet commanding in its size and mass. The façades of the building were classically proportioned with base, middle and top sections, delineated by wood trim. (Source: Thomas WV 1906 by T. Nutter, Courtesy Miners and Merchants Bank)

