



LESSON PLAN

WEST VIRGINIA MINE WARS MUSEUM

wvminewars.org

401 Mate Street Matewan, West Virginia 25678

Lesson 1: Coal Company Towns

Objectives:

- Introduce students to the realities of company town living, which was one of the primary causes of labor resentment.
- Students will learn about important aspects of company town life, such as the company store and the role of scrip, company owned housing, schools, and churches, the role of the company spies and mine guards.
- Students will be able to summarize the difference between company towns and incorporated towns in the early 20th century.

Materials Needed:

- Photographs (Digital or printed)
- Paper or Computer
- [Student handout #1 -- photo questions](#)

Historical Context/Background Resources on Coal Camp Life:

1. (Video:) Have students watch a short (2 ½ minutes), introductory video on Coal Towns: [American Experience | Coal Towns, from The Mine Wars | Season 28 | Episode 2](#)
2. (Reading) Have students read [this background \(2 ½ pages\) on coal camp life in West Virginia](#), from the WV Mine Wars Museum's resources.
3. (Poetry) Students may read Carl Sandburg's poem, [Company Town](#), to acquaint themselves with company town life.
4. (Geography/Maps) Students might not know what towns were originally coal camps, and remnants of these camps are still found in WV today. There is a series of maps showing West Virginia camps broken up by region at the Coal Camps USA website: <http://coalcampusa.com/sowv/index.htm>
5. (Song) Life in coal camps inspired many songs and folklore, such as [16 Tons by Tennessee Ernie Ford](#).
6. (Online Exhibit) An online exhibit by the West Virginia Humanities Council: [Coal Miners and Coal Camps](#)

Activity 1:

(Synchronous) Facilitate a class or small group discussion using [photos 1.1-1.8](#) and guiding questions

(Asynchronous) Instruct students to view [photos 1.1-1.8](#), and journal their answers to present them to the class or submit them to the teacher .

“We are going to look at some pictures of life in company towns also called “coal camps” in southern West Virginia, what can they tell us about what life was like for people living in them?”

[Click here to access a folder containing Photos 1.1 - 1.8.](#)

Guiding Questions:

Show [the photographs](#) to students and ask students to describe what they see and what it can tell them about life in a company town.

Based on photos 1.1 - 1.2 (Miner & their Family)

1. What are some assumptions you can make about the lives of coal miners?
2. Based on these two pictures, do you think there was a difference between the lives of black & white miners? Why or why not?

Possible Themes: Not wealthy, not very clean, proud?, garden, house is small, why are they poor, were miners well paid, or poorly paid?

Based on photos 1.3 - 1.4 (Early Logan, Ethel Postcard: Houses were owned by the company and they could evict you if you did not work or caused trouble. What would that mean for the family we saw in the first picture?)

3. What can you tell by looking at the images of the company towns?
4. Based on the photos, who do you think lived where? Why?

Possible Themes: Railroad, dirty, all same houses, transportation out of town difficult, isolated, poor. Private detectives, typically the Baldwin-Felts detectives hired by the companies, would “guard” the camp and carry out evictions.

Based on photos 1.5 - 1.6 (Itmann Company Store in Wyoming County)

5. Identify the company store in each photo. What do you notice about how it is located in the town?
6. What effect do you think the company store had on the miners and their families?

7. Consider the fact that the company owned the schools and churches in the area, how do you think it would have impacted miners and their families' lives?

Possible Themes: Company stores dominated life in a company town, it was owned by the companies. It's an opportunity to discuss the fact that schools and churches were owned by the company and those employees were hired or fired by the owners.

Based on photo 1.7

8. What could people buy at the company store?
9. Who decided how much an item cost?
10. What were other options to purchase goods other than the company store?

Based on photos 1.8 - 1.9

11. How did people purchase items from the company store?
12. Did miners have access to other forms of money?
13. How was scrip another way to control the daily lives of miners and their families?

Activity 2:

Based on the discussions from Activity 1 and the historical context documents, have students compare company towns with incorporated towns. How would life differ in a company town from a life in an incorporated town? Would they share the same occupation? What would they do for fun? Where would they shop?

(Synchronous) Have the students breakup into 2 groups and spend 5 minutes on listing qualities (good & bad) of living in a company town or incorporated town. Be sure to assign a "presenter" in each group to tell the class what they come up with.

(Asynchronous) Have students create a venn diagram or table, outlining the distinct differences between life in a company town and life in an incorporated town.

Company Town Life	Incorporated Town Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governed privately by the company through private detectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected officials + accountability (i.e. Mayor or sheriff) American currency (cash)

WV 8th Grade Curriculum Standards:

SS.8.25: Demonstrate an understanding of West Virginia's development during the mid-twentieth century.

SS.8.8: Analyze the impact of absentee ownership, renewable and nonrenewable natural resources, labor unionization and the development of infrastructure on the economic growth of West Virginia

SS.8.9: Research and cite industries and products that are vital to the economy of the four regions of West Virginia, both past and present, and categorize the related occupations (i.e. coal)

For more resources on Coal Company Towns, please visit our website at www.wvminewars.com

Student Handout #1

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