

on site is expected to be completed “within two months”. The 14 mile power line from Colgate has been completed. Some 75 houses have been built with large yards for gardens and to prevent spread of fires. Streets are provided with houses on both sides. The images below are from the Alabama Coal Institute 1922-23 report, Smithsonian Museum. (author’s collection).

It is interesting to note that the report points out that the camp is near the river and upstream of the water intake for the City of Birmingham. The AF&I Co went to “considerable expense in caring for the sanitation of the town, all of which will meet with the approval of the Water Works Company.”

In closing the report for 1921, management expects Overton to be “one of the most attractive camps in the Birmingham District”, producing the cheapest coal in the company’s operations.

It is planned that Overton will become “headquarters” for the General Superintendent and Chief Electrician, as well as the relay station for a new telephone system connecting all of the operations with the offices in downtown Birmingham.

It is also noted that a piped water supply supplied by an artesian well will be installed to protect against contaminated wells at multiple sites.

The Shareholders Report for **1922** [Hoole] notes that both slopes are operating and coal has been shipping by rail since June (1922). Total capacity is noted at 1700 tons per day.

The report states “We have at this operation one of the most up-to-date mining camps, including mine equipment, of any mine I know of in the Birmingham District, and its accessibility to Birmingham, together with the good work, has given us an abundance of labor, which his a great factor in favor of this operation.”

“I anticipate that this operation will be the largest revenue producer this year of any we have, and notwithstanding we have spent a great deal more money in developing and equipping these mines than any other plants we have, the money has been well expended and will bring a very handsome return.”

1922 marked the death of Jesse Maxwell Overton, as noted at the beginning of this article. With his death, Charles F. DeBardeleben became the President and General Manager of AF&I Co.

The Shareholders Report for **1923** is somewhat abbreviated,



without the typical summary of operations by location in narrative. It is noted that Overton provided a profit of \$153,000 (rounded) out of a total of \$580,000 for all operations for a contribution of 26% of total. Of the \$580,000 total profit, 71% was from sale of coal, 18% from commissary sales, 4% from rents and 7% from other sources.

The Report to Shareholders for the year **1924** indicated that the market slump reported for the second half of 1923 continued into the first half of 1924, and total profits were reduced to \$430,000, consisting of coal at 61%, commissary at 19%, rents at 9% and other sources 11%.

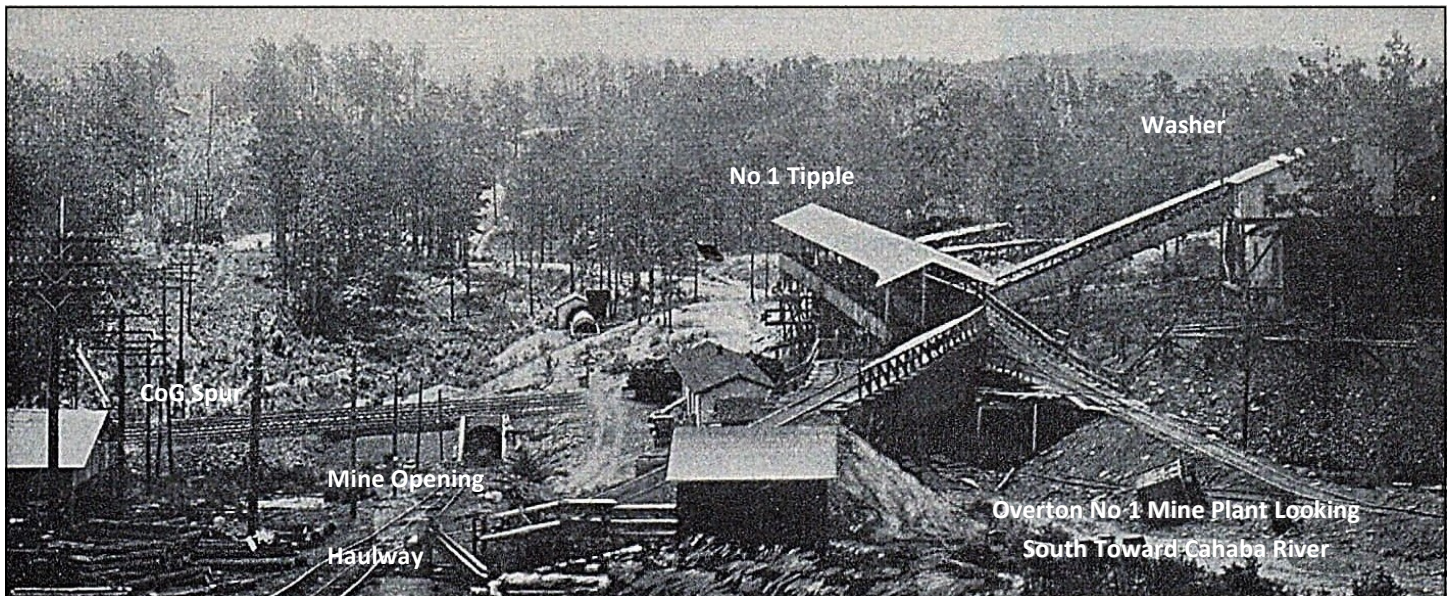
The report indicates that the slump in shipments bottomed out in April and then improved to maximum contract amounts being called for by customers before year’s end. Total shipments for the year amounted to 979,000 tons (rounded).

At Overton, it is reported that new “Deister Vibrating Tables” are being installed in order to wash minus 1/4” coal and improve the quality by reducing ash content. It states that if this is successful it will be added at other plants.

A charge of \$5,200 is noted for the cost of installation of “Electric Cap Lamps” at Overton No 1 mine. Electric lights eliminated open flame lamps to reduce the risk of explosion after the Acton disaster. Mules were subsequently provided lamps as well.

The Shareholder’s Report for the year **1925** notes that the total coal production was 1,262,358 tons, the largest production [to date] in the history of the company. Profits were somewhat larger than previous years results at \$450,000, based





Overton No 1 Mine Plant Looking South Toward Cahaba River

on coal (61%), commissary (27%), rents (8%) and other items (4%).

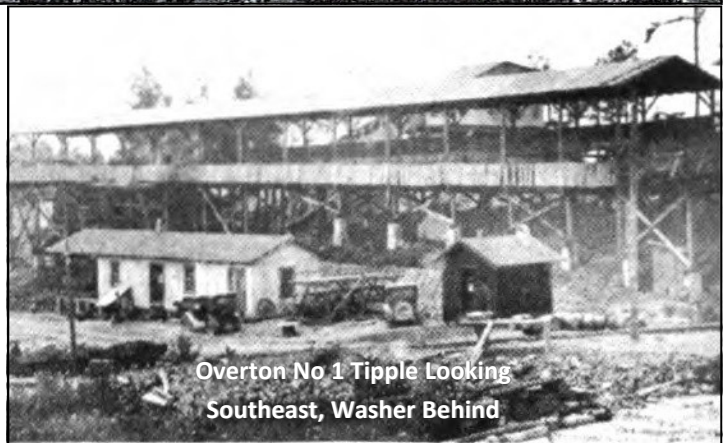
Perhaps the most significant event for **1925** was the mine explosion at Overton No 2. The total loss of life was 53, and the cause was suggested as a “windy shot” or a possible lighting of a match by a careless employee, although it was stated that the cause would likely never be known. News accounts at the time indicate that the Overton mines were considered to be among the best equipped in the state in terms of safety. The official explosion report (Denney) indicates that miners may not have followed all the safety procedures.

Among the new efforts to improve safety noted in the shareholders report was the use of rock dusting equipment and installation of rock dust barriers in the mines, intended to limit and localize explosions.

Steps were also taken to allow only designated employees (“shot firers”) to prepare and shoot explosives in the mining operations. This would be done when only minimal numbers of miners were in the mine to limit potential injuries and loss of life by explosions.

The Report of **1926** refers back to the effects of the explosion at Overton No 2 mine, stating that it had a “demoralizing effect” which effected production, as well as being reflected in additional focus on safety:

“Every effort has been put forth during the year 1926 in the prevention of accidents, sparing no expense in perfecting all safety measures. This necessitated additional expense for the year amounting to at least \$25,000 in the matter of rock dusting the mines, buying the necessary equipment to apply this dust, and additional men in the way of inspectors, shot firers and gas examiners. We changed entirely our method of shooting the coal, and now instead of allowing each individual miner to do his own shooting we have what we term shot firers to do the shooting after all the men have left the mines; so in the event there is any trouble in reference to any particular shot a very extreme minimum of lives will be subjected in place of hav-

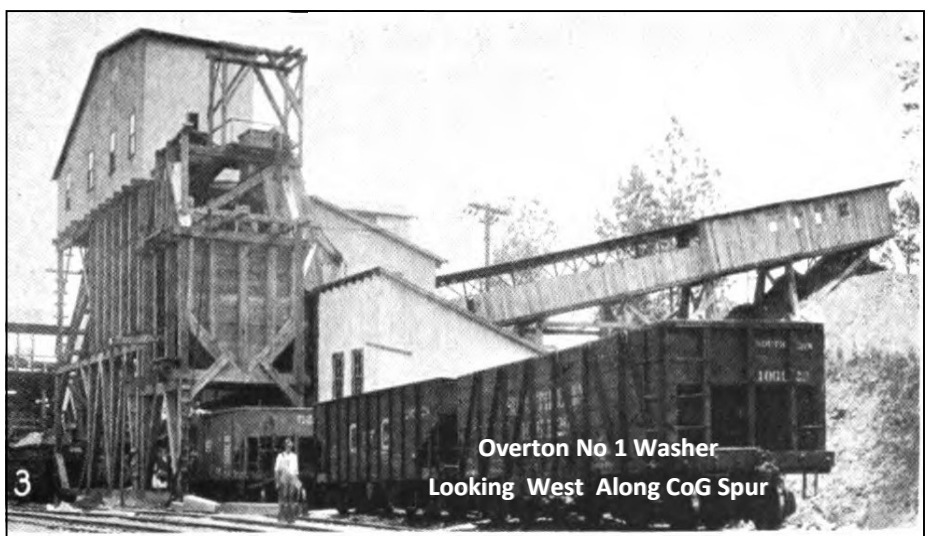


Overton No 1 Tipple Looking Southeast, Washer Behind

ing the entire force.”

In addition, the company implemented accident and death insurance for all employees. It is noted that this was well received by the employees and that several had already benefited from it.

In **1926**, an adjacent mining operation northeast of Overton, **County Coal Company**, was purchased in bankruptcy court for \$70,000, in order to avoid the “nuisance value” of an “unscrupulous operator”. This property is located NW of Overton and coal would be mined through the Overton No 1 mines. Equipment acquired was moved to other loca-



Overton No 1 Washer Looking West Along CoG Spur

tions and some houses were able to be used for Overton employees.

The report notes that the year finished with a strong market, expected to continue into 1927, and that the relationships with primary railroad customers are very strong, especially the Central of Georgia.

The Shareholder Report for **1927** indicates it was not a good year, after the first two months. Mines were on partial time much of the year and total shipments were 1.1 million tons (1927) vs. 1.2 million (1926).

It is noted that the company added the Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast to its list of major railroad clients which included Central of Georgia, Ocean Steamship, Wrightsville & Tennille, Atlantic Coast Line, Seaboard, Western Railway of Alabama, and the Savannah & Statesboro. All of these companies are noted as operating east of the Birmingham District and that AF&I Co doesn't serve any railroads operating west of the District. Thus it is clear that the company's operations in the Cahaba Field did tend to give it a very strong position east of Birmingham.

It was noted earlier that Overton Mines was served by a transmission line from the company power plant at Colgate, 14 miles away. This report indicates that Colgate's capacity had been reached so that an arrangement was made with Alabama Power to buy additional electricity when the company's generating capacity is reached. The contract with Alabama Power calls for a minimum of \$400 per month purchased and additional at prevailing rates as needed.

Another operation, southwest of Overton, **Shades Valley Mine**, was purchased for \$35,000 in **1927**. Like County Coal, equipment was relocated to be used at other locations. Shades Valley coal was mined and hauled through the Overton No 1 mine underground with an electric locomotive using No 1 heading 5 right. This eliminated another competitor and also opened access through the Shades Valley workings to a section of Company property blocked by Shades Valley property.

In closing the year, it is noted that Charles F DeBardeleben, Jr., VP, (the president's son) has resigned from AF&I Co to pursue development of a mine of his own. The arrangement was made that AF&I Co would sell any coal mined at a set price to eliminate any competition.

The President's Report to Shareholders for **1928** indicates business was in a continued slump. Competition was strong, and the company lost two railroad customers, Atlanta, Birmingham and Coast and the Atlantic Coast line. The competition was willing to sell coal to these railroads at prices below what AF&I Co was willing to meet. All mine operations were run at less than capacity, and several mines were idled. Total coal shipments were below 1.1 million tons. Nonetheless, all efforts were made to maintain mines and plant in the best shape.

During this year, the Company wired and lighted all company housing as well as providing street lights in all the camps. Employees are charged for this "below the standard charge throughout the district".

This report continues the trend of focusing on safety and the company's efforts in this regard. The company employs its own mine inspector, as well as fire bosses and safety men. No miner is allowed to enter a mine where gas is present until it has been cleared.

Regular safety and welfare society meetings are held throughout the camps which include miners and management. In addition, monthly

staff meetings are held, rotating between the camps so that company matters may be discussed by senior management and supervisors so that they are informed and able to carry the information to the miners and other employees.

The overall company experienced five fatal accidents in **1928**, although the cause was attributed to the carelessness of the miners. It appears in this report that the company has become self insured in terms of routine claims, based on the costs previously charged by an outside carrier. Catastrophic insurance is still held with an outside insurer.

Finally it is noted that a new VP of Sales, H. M. Brooks has been hired. The president notes that "it is my hope that I can now become the official loafer of the Company, and I am going to be careful that no one intrudes on my rights in this connection."

The Report for **1929** starts with a statement that the Coal Industry had a very bad year. A fundamental problem is said to be over-production across the state, without thought of adjusting production to market and price. This led to the loss of another railroad coal contract. It is noted that the sales department responded with an increase in smaller customers. It is also noted that domestic markets were improved by price adjustments that were enabled by the practices of competitors.

The Company also focused operations on the best producing mines and idling others. This enabled employees to have higher working time rather than having a larger number of mines on partial production.

Taken together the company shipped less than 1.0 million tons, versus less than 1.1 million the previous year. Overton amounted to 24% of this production against Acmar, Margaret and New Acton.

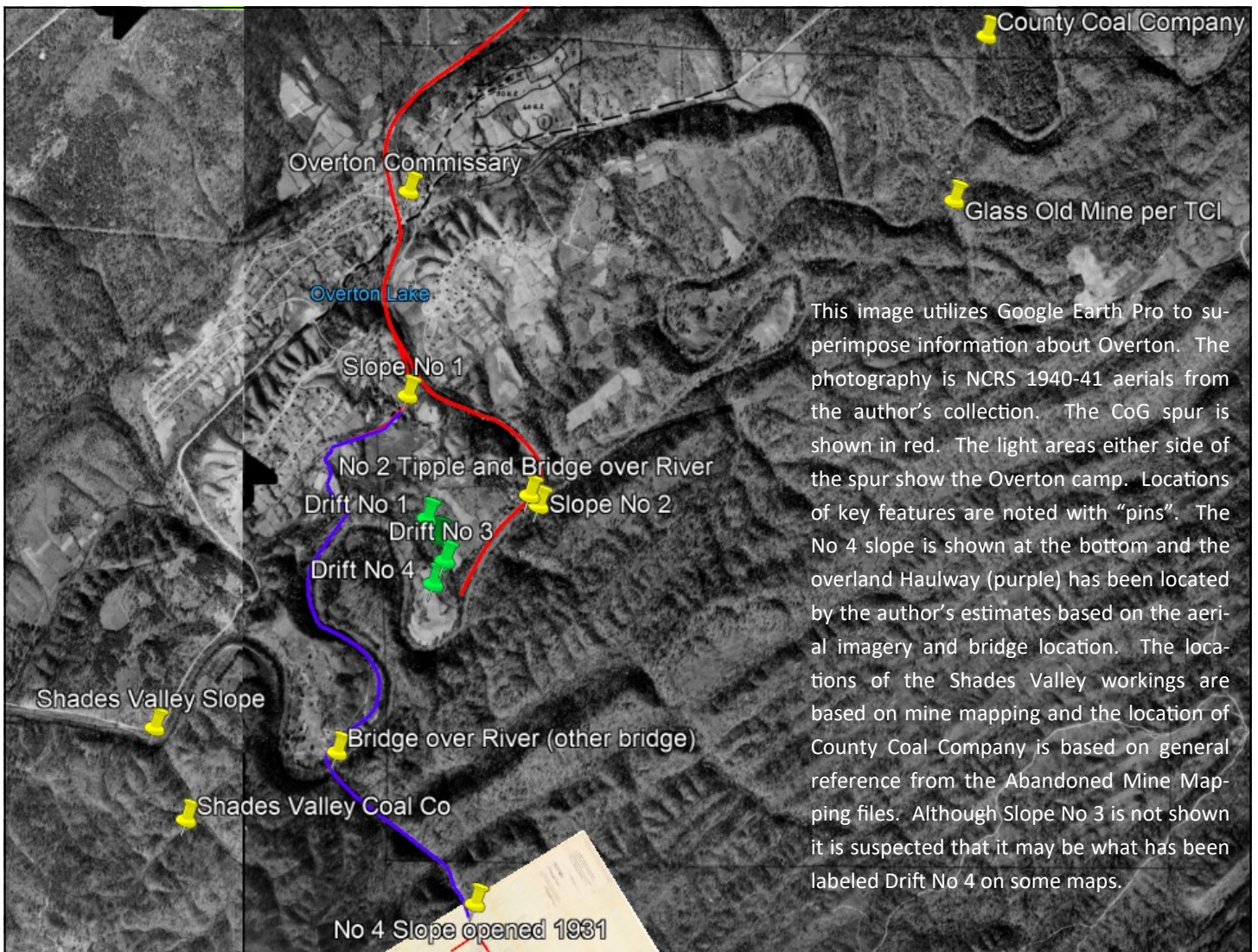
It is noted that only Overton No 1 is active with No 2 and No 3 being idled to focus production at the most productive mines. The report notes that management believes that the workforce is both satisfied and loyal, notwithstanding an expectation of organizing efforts elsewhere in the district. [Note: No 3 slope is part of No 2 mine.]

Housing is being maintained in good condition, employees are encouraged to garden and farm for their own benefit to save money as well as to have pride in "their" property. Safety, welfare and communication are stressed in ongoing monthly meetings.

1930 was the first year of the Depression and the report to shareholders reflects that condition. As the overall business climate declined, the coal business went with it, driven by declining rail and industrial activity in general. Bank failures occurred and unemployment increased.

AF&I Co was able to maintain wages, although many in the Birmingham District began to reduce wages. The President notes "Labor is having a hard time living now on the short time work, and a [wage] reduction will not increase the working time or create any additional tonnage of coal consumed. On the other hand, it will convince labor that their helplessness is being taken advantage of and as soon as they are in a position to defend themselves they will certainly do so." In other words, wage reductions wouldn't benefit the company or labor under the overall depression conditions.

At Overton, only No 1 mine is active while No's 2 & 3 are idle, as was the case in the previous year. Production at Overton decreased from



1929 to 1930, as was the case at New Acton and Margaret; the exception being Acmar.

Comparing income of the three active Divisions (New Acton being considered part of Acmar), Overton contributed only 16%, Margaret 26% and Acmar/New Acton 48% and miscellaneous income being the remaining 10%. Total coal production for 1930 was 900,000 tons, down 90,000 from 1929. At this point, it seems significant to note that Overton No 1 represents one of eight mines operating. Yet the Company's financial position was still sound, but the worst was yet to come.

The Report for **1931** reflects the worsening of the national business situation in the Great Depression. Not only was demand for coal decreasing but market prices were still going down. Commercial contract quantities were not being required and domestic coal prices were hammered as small operators opened wagon mines and sold coal at "ridiculously low prices".

A review of production figures reflected a comparison of Alabama State production decreases vs. AF&I Co production decreases. This comparison began in 1930 and would be repeated each year. AF&I Co production was lowest since 1919 while the state's was lowest since 1908. Nevertheless, AF&I Co produced 853,000 tons, down 5% from 1930; state production was down 27%.

The Company reduced wages 10% starting in August 1930. Wage reductions didn't significantly help the bottom line as demand and production fell which was offset by increasing the cost of production.

A comparison of prices vs. cost for 1931 back to 1925 showed that Overton had been losing money since 1928, and by 1931, the loss was 5 cents per ton; New Acton and Margaret, by comparison were earning over 30 cents profit per ton on coal produced.

Again, a presentation was made by the three main divisions of earnings less depreciation, which showed that Overton contributed 7%, Margaret 41%, Acmar 44% and miscellaneous income 8%. Realize that although Overton lost money on coal, it made money on income from commissary, rent and electric service, showing a net positive amount.

A new development occurred at Overton in **1931** which was the development of Mine No 4. It is reported that the No 1 slope had reached a fault that limited the extent of the mine to the south. For this reason a new No 4 slope was opened on the same seam at an outcrop south of the fault. In order to reach the No 1 tippie an outside electric rail line was built overland from No 4 slope to the No 1 tippie, a distance of 1 3/4 miles.

In addition a rock tunnel was extended from the No 1 workings up to a

point along the new electric haulage from No 4 to No 1 tippie. It is not clear how this tunnel was to be used, but it appears that it would have provided a potential for coal from No 1 right heading(s) to be moved to the overland haulage without going through the No 1 mine.

It is stated that no significant new equipment was purchased for the No 4 development. There was an existing 125 foot steel bridge over the river (not the No 2 tippie structure) and an 8 ton electric locomotive and 200 tons of rail were acquired from existing idle developments.

It was noted that there were 6 fatalities at Overton in 1931, with five coming from one incident involving a gas explosion/fire caused by an incompetent fire boss.

A final note of interest is that the Company hired an "expert Agriculturist" to assist miners and their families in growing gardens for raising food. This program would develop in significant fashion as the Depression deepened. The Company anticipated that mine families were likely to need assistance in the near future and they wanted to provide means for the employees to help themselves.

In hindsight we know that 1932 was worse than 1931. Imagine how it looked to a company who was experiencing the unfolding Depression day by day in business. Again the tabulations were presented comparing the Company's decline to the State's. AF&I Co production decreased from 865,000 tons in 1931 to 632,000 tons in 1932 (-27%) while the State's went from 12.1 million tons to 8.0 million (-34%).

Counting back to 1929, the State output decreased 56% while AF&I Co decreased 34%. And it was shown that the Company's portion of the state's total production actually improved from 5% in 1929 to 8% in 1932.

Those company mines which were active worked about one third time, 112 days of the year. Wages were reduced 20% starting in May.

Overton coal production showed another loss which this year was not offset by lights, commissary and rents. Thus total earnings by the three main divisions were shown to be Overton (-2%), Acmar (7%), Margaret (74%) and miscellaneous (21%).

The effort to help the employees "help themselves" increased. The president notes "It would have been impossible for our employees to have sustained themselves on the limited working time given them at the reduced wage scale had they not been forced by the Company to engage in agricultural endeavors during their idle time."

"As a result of our forcing them into this agricultural work there was under intensive cultivation practically 1,000 acres of the surface lands adjoining the camp of each operation, a large part of which was cleared of trees by the employees."

The report shows the "astonishing results" of nearly 40,000 bushels of produce grown, 165,000 pounds of hog meat produced and 100,000 quarts of canned vegetables and fruit produced.

The company built a grist mill and provided materials for home corn cribs. The company advanced the employees the pigs, seed, fertilizer and canning supplies with nearly all of it paid back.

Although this approach on the part of the company has been criticized

in the years since the Depression as plantation paternalism, it would seem that these employees were better off than others elsewhere.

The company continued its focus on safety and noted that the production of 1932 was achieved without a single fatality whereas the state averaged one death per 444,000 tons produced.

On the national scene, 1933 saw the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Among other things, the NIRA established wage scales which were higher than the prevailing wage scales, certainly in Alabama. Alabama's operators lobbied hard in Washington, first to have an Alabama Code adopted, which failed, and then to have an Alabama wage scale adopted. The idea was that Alabama had unique conditions which warranted a lower wage scale than other areas, particularly the northern coal fields.

The other outcome of this was the Company held a mass meeting to enable the employees to elect two representatives from each operating unit (one white and one colored) to meet with management and work out a contract to adopt hours of work and rates of pay in accordance with the new Federal regulations. This effectively formalized an AF&I Co "company union", based on the ongoing welfare societies.

In addition the Company gave miners a 30% pay increase and dropped an 11th hour "donation" by the miners so that they officially would work a 10 hour day. This was done before the code became effective, and another 8% increase came with implementation in October, 1933.

After the Code became effective, the employees called another meeting to elect new representatives, and all but one (white) miner were re-elected. Then a formal gathering was held at the downtown offices and a new contract was formalized. This established that the employees had elected to be represented through their "Welfare Societies" rather than the United Mine Workers union. The Company believed it had "as bona fide [a] contract with our employees as can possibly be made."

Although there were work stoppages in the Birmingham District during the subsequent months, AF&I Co had none due to labor. It was noted "we have had some deflections at all of our places, the majority of these deflections being at Acmar, but those who were dissatisfied have moved and we now have a unanimous affiliation with our Welfare Societies by the employees... [who will] withstand any effort that may be made by labor delegates and agitators to have them desert their present relationship with the company."

From a sales side, nearly all of the AF&I Co commercial contracts carried annual prices with wage clauses, allowing the Company to recoup increases in wages. It may be imagined that the customer companies had as much reluctance to government mandated wage increases as did the Company. It took months to negotiate these wage based price increases with commercial customers, although most of them were eventually successful, with losses incurred by the Company in the meantime.

Finally it was noted that the implementation of the NIRA did have the benefit of ending "the cut-throat competition... and business we are now securing is on a livable basis." The company was optimistic that commercial steam coal contracts business would improve and that business lost by "cut-pricing" would be regained.

From the local operations side, the year 1933 saw the completion of the No 4 mine at Overton. It is interesting to note that this mine would utilize "long wall mining" equipment. Basically this means that a long wall of coal is removed (say, left to right) with roof shielding protecting the operation. When the end of the "wall" is reached, the equipment reverses, now right to left and moves forward incrementally. The shielding is also advanced incrementally (forward) and the roof is allowed to collapse behind the advancing mining. It is implied this was the first use of this technology by AF&I Co in their operations.

Based on the production figures noted in recent years it is no surprise that "this operation [No 4] will in a short time produce all the tonnage at Overton and replace the tonnage now coming from No 1 and Shades Valley." The coal from No 4 would be hauled 1 3/4 miles overland and washed and loaded at the No 1 tipple. It was noted that No 1 and Shades Valley were nearly depleted.

It is noted that the Company's offices were moved from the Liberty National Building to the Webb Crawford Building in downtown Birmingham. This provided more room [for meetings, it was noted]] at virtually no increase in rent due to the market.

Safety was addressed with a statement that 1.2 million tons of coal had been mined in two years ('32 & '33) with only one fatality, which occurred at Overton. The Company continued to self insure accident and death claims and maintained a reserve for this based on the previous annual payments to private insurers. It is noted that the State of Alabama produced 436,000 tons per fatality in 1933.

In summarizing 1933 production the company mined 621,000 tons in 1933 vs. 632,000 tons in 1932. Contribution to net earnings were Overton (-10%), Acmar (-16%), Margaret/Markeeta (78%) and miscellaneous (50%). Thus Overton showed a loss for another year running.

It is noted that the Company operates schools for the miner's children, charging a small fee and making up the deficit from company funds. Commissary operation was noted as being quite good for the year, and producing \$49,000 profit. And it is stated that the compulsory farming program didn't hurt the commissary sales. It was believed that the

farming program produced staples for families giving them more income to spend on "clothing and luxuries". (View in 1923 and 2006.)

The Shareholders Report for the year **1934** reports more on the efforts to gain a more favorable position with the NIRA; a compromise was achieved. As a result Alabama went to a 7 hour work day and a new wage scale starting April 1., 1934.

There was a miners strike "in the early spring" although the hope of increased sales

by AF&I Co due to other company's shutdown was short lived and only a brief spike in sales occurred. In addition the Western Ry of Alabama, a twenty year customer, was lost due to price.

It is stated that the federal authorities mounted investigations against AF&I Co for violations of the NIRA. These didn't amount to anything at this time, but they would resurface in future years.

The Company hired "300 negroes from South Alabama, who had never seen coal mines, and have converted them into first class coal producers, and I am glad to say they have followed the influence of the older men and are thoroughly inoculated with our policies and system."

The report reiterates the financial losses at Overton for several years and "our only incentive for continuance... was our desire to provide employment for those men who had been there for many years. The reward they gave for this effort... to take care of them was to join the United Mine Workers. After doing so, I saw no reason for our Company to continue this operation ... on August 11, 1934, we closed the mine for an indefinite period."

It goes on to say that equipment was moved where it made sense and that although housing was offered to former employees, there was trouble and so many eviction proceedings were begun.

The Operations Report by the General Manager for **1935** noted that the mines at Overton are all idle "due to poor market conditions and no prospects looking to opening these mines again soon seem possible." The priority for reopening appears to be No 1 and Shades Valley, by pumping to maintain water levels below the workable levels. The other mines have been allowed to fill up with water to avoid pumping cost.

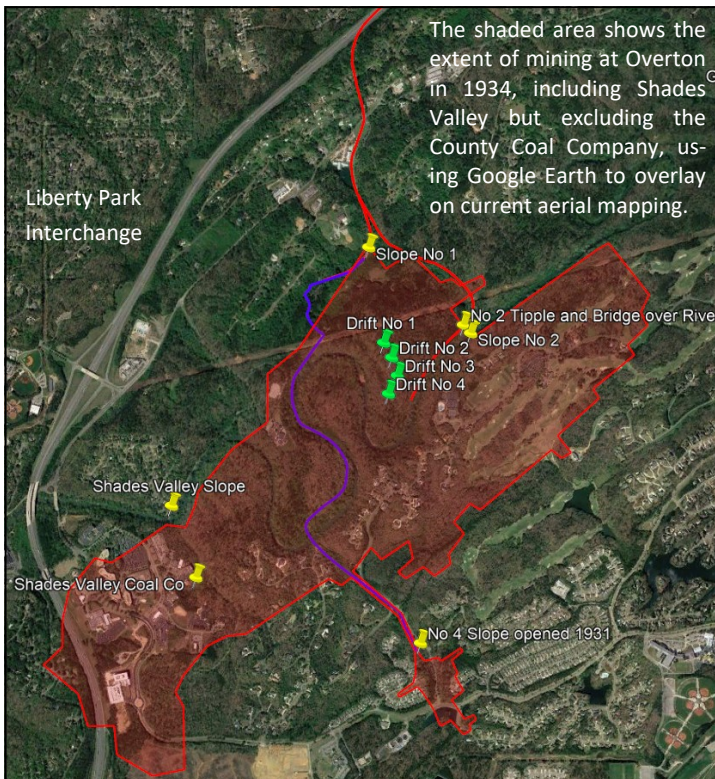
About half the housing at Overton is being used by miners from Acmar and Margaret, which have a shortage of housing. The company used trucks to carry these employees to and from work without charge. Houses not being used were boarded up for security.

This report indicates that the welfare society meetings and farming programs are being continued, although the farming program was not as active since work time was up somewhat apparently due to closing at Overton and other idled mines.

A mention is made of Union interference and two incidents of "**violence**" [bold face] at two locations, where "the crowd was driven out by the employees voluntarily through physical force." [This is a separate story and has been debated by others. Violence culminated October 28, 1935 in a shooting incident near Acmar, AL reported in the Anniston Star, Dec. 4, 1935 as well as numerous others. Indictments followed, including DeBardeleben, but all were acquitted by 1936.]

The President's Report for **1935** starts with what has become an annual look back on State vs. Company production. In this case the base line is 1926, which was the maximum production of 21 million tons of coal statewide. Production since 1926 has trended downward to 1935 when state production was 8.4 million tons. However, in 1926 the Company produced over 8% of statewide production, and by 1935 the Company produced nearly 17% of statewide production, better than doubling its position. In 1935, the Company was the largest commercial producer in Alabama.





The Shareholders report mentions there was a coal strike in 1934 and another in 1935. As noted above there were several attempts made by the Unions to organize AF&I Co.

The strikes, which didn't impact the [non-union] Company with loss of production, did help drive business toward the Company from some former and some new commercial customers, generally the railroads.

The settlement of these strikes by the State of Alabama did have an impact of an increase in pay for AF&I Co miners due to the marketplace. This in turn did increase cost of production at the active mines.

Several items of note in the President's Report are the installation of telephone service between all the mines and the city office -- Southern Bell didn't serve the mines.

The Company schools, now only operating in St Clair County [Overton closed] "rank at the head of the St. Clair County [schools], but we are given absolute supervision of the schools."

The Welfare Societies at each mine are touted, with the officers elected each year by the employees, consisting of a President, Secretary and Committeeman from each mine. A separate organization for white and colored miners was maintained for each mine. The meetings were held monthly, in the evening and were attended by DeBardeleben, families and children with entertainment being provide by the children. "All matters of interest are discussed freely and all complaints and grievanc-es are handled at each of these meetings." Image below from Alabama News Magazine, 1939 shows DeBardeleben (left), his secretary and a guest at one of these meetings. DeBardeleben died August 31, 1941.

The annual outside audits by independent accountants was glowing in noting that the Company was in better financial shape at the end of 1935 then it was at the end of 1931.

As in previous years the contributions to earnings were tallied by divi-

sion. All active divisions were profitable overall and by component earnings of coal, commissaries, rents, lights - Overton was not included.

A separate listing of cost for Overton is given as depreciation and maintenance amount of \$77,000, against grand total earnings without depreciation of \$324,000 -- which is certainly a significant amount at some 24%. Thus, Overton had been and continued to be a drain on operations income.

As to the future of Overton, the President's report states that "the lease we had with the Acton Mining Company covering the acreage at Old Acton and Overton expired the first of January, 1936. [Shareholders reports are dated March, 1936, for the previous year.]

"This lease carried a heavy minimum royalty, which minimum we had not earned for several years... I have closed trade with the owners of this property on the basis of leasing for one [more] year only the acre-age at Overton carrying a number of our houses and the land adjacent to the mines carrying coal, totaling approximately 900 acres... At the expiration of this year [1936] we will then have to come to some deci-sion as to our plans for the future operations of Overton."

The Central of Georgia mine spur from Lovick to Overton was removed in 1940. The 1940 ICC filing states "in support of the proposal to abandon the line, the applicant states that the mines now are closed and there is no probability that they will be reopened; the line serves no other industries...it has not operated for 6 years and is not needed..."

There were a couple of attempts to resurrect operations at Overton by others, included a proposal to rebuild the rail line, that didn't occur. A stripping operation by Birmingham Slag Company adjacent to No 2 was somewhat successful but didn't last. AF&I Co did maintain Overton camp as housing for workers at Margaret/Acmar through WW II. Transportation was provided by truck free of charge to miners.

The final installment of this series will focus on the operations at Acmar, Overton and Margaret, the most extensive and longest lived mines and facilities operated by the AF&I Co.

