

The Saturday Evening

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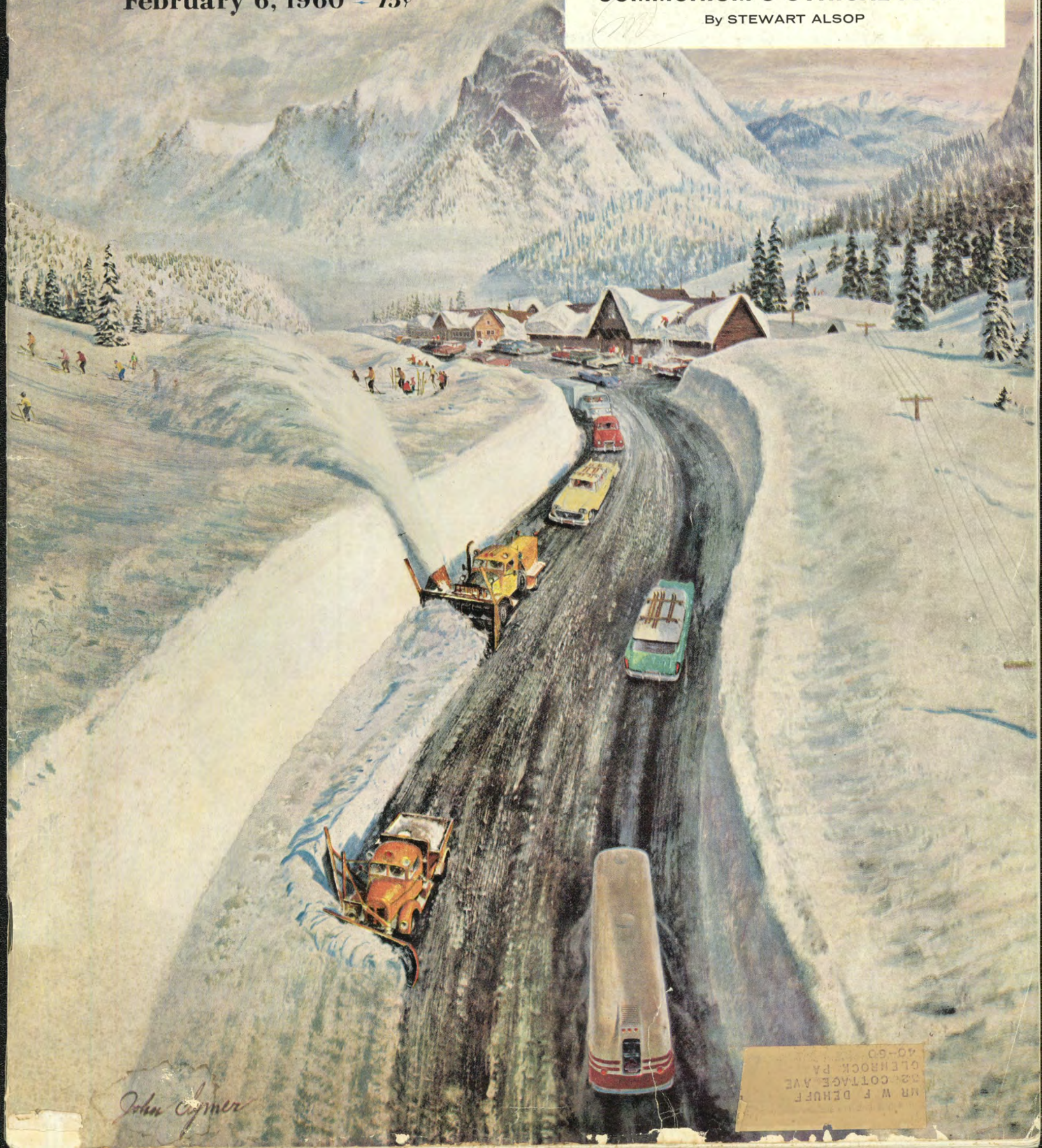
POST

February 6, 1960 - 15¢

WEST VIRGINIA:
Poverty Amid Splendor

COMMUNISM'S CYNICAL YOUTH

By STEWART ALSOP



John Cymer

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The Saturday
Evening

POST

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Benjamin Franklin



"In view of the natural warmth of most West Virginians, the paradox of want and plenty living side by side is all the more baffling." Here, at Shady Spring, are truck driver Bob Wright and six of his seven children.

The Strange Case of

Although rich in resources and natural beauty, the Mountain State suffers from chronic, grinding poverty. A report on an American paradox.

By Roul Tunley

West Virginia

Below: The Greenbrier at White Sulphur Springs is one of the nation's most famous resorts. Not many miles away, in the hills of the Alleghenies, mountaineer families live in squalor, with little hope of bettering their lot.



West Virginia, a scenically radiant mountain state which likes to call itself the Switzerland of America, received a blow across the face not long ago when one of its native sons declared, "Switzerland, nothing! It's more like Afghanistan!"

This young man, who was writing to his home-town paper from Akron, Ohio—a city to which he and 40,000 other West Virginians have fled since World War II in search of work—said he was shocked when he compared his former surroundings with what he saw elsewhere. Pointing to his native state's unemployment—consistently the highest in the nation—its second-rate roads, its ugly auto dumps, its polluted streams, and its dearth of good restaurants and hotels, he called West Virginia "remote, backward and dangerously provincial."

"West Virginia," he wrote, "rocks on a sagging front porch while her neighbors drive by in shiny new cars."

He was not alone. A growing list of people, young and old, have been pointing accusing



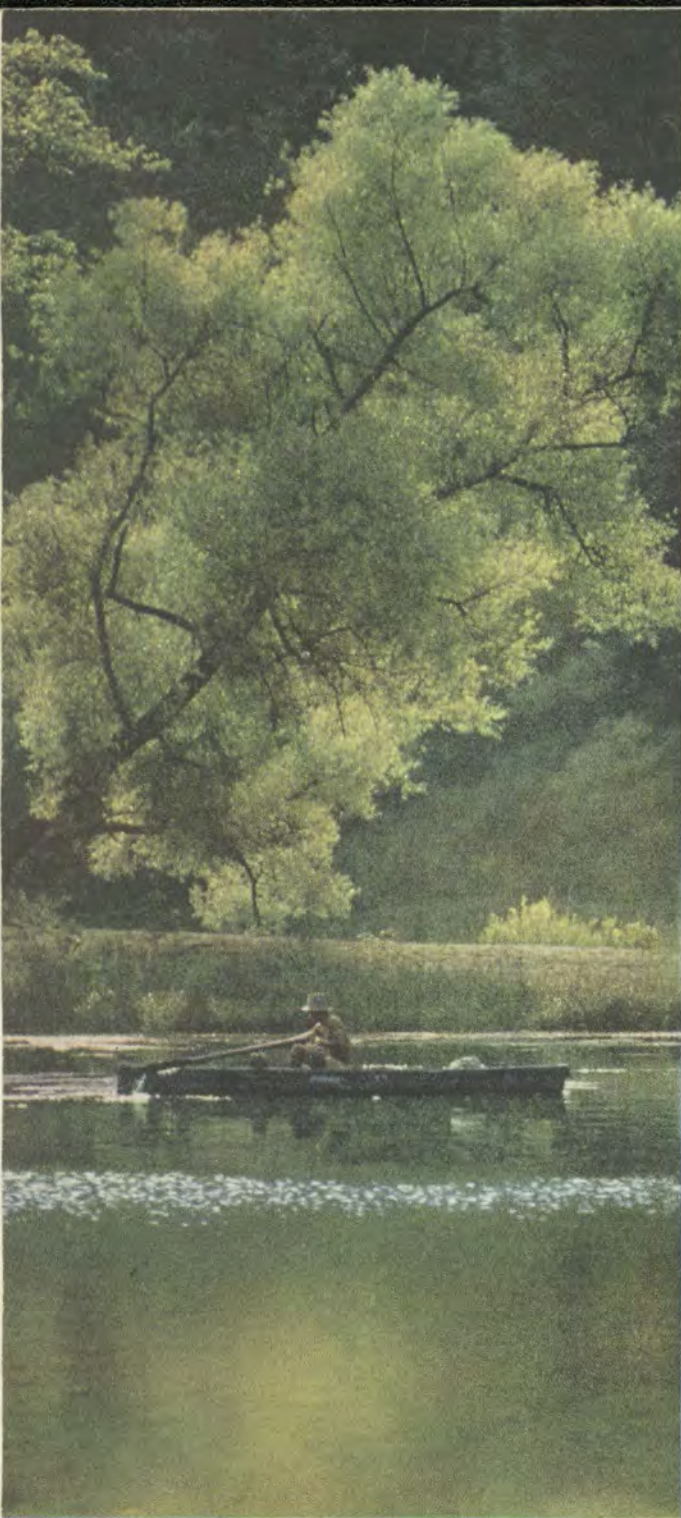
The swimming club at the Greenbrier. Except for such rare oases of luxury, West Virginia looks depressed, Tunley says. There are few of the modern buildings—including new schools—which have sprung up in other states since World War II.



Blake Raines, shown above with 14-year-old Eddie Atkins, calls himself a gardener rather than a farmer because his holdings are so small.



Romance in a ghost town. Beyond rise the hills that isolate West Virginians from one another.



The New River at Hinton. "Every corner of the state has stunning scenery," the author says, "but there are few of the facilities the average tourist expects."

fingers at the state during the last few years. Citizens of the big Midwestern cities, where West Virginia's destitute workers have streamed hoping to find jobs, have had some particularly harsh things to say about the "hillbillies" who have become the mid-century's Okies. One paper called the Mountain State's migrants "shoeless, shiftless, beer-swilling clods who wouldn't go to a church that didn't use rattlesnakes in the service." And at least one national foundation has accorded these people the doubtful compliment of undertaking a major study of their "problems."

But perhaps the worst blow to the ego of a state that has produced both Gen. Stonewall Jackson, the Civil War genius, and Maj. Charles Yeager, the first man to break the sonic barrier, came from the heart of the land itself. Not long ago West Virginia's largest newspaper, the *Charleston Gazette*, unleashed a series of articles labeled *What's Wrong With West Virginia?* In it a string of native sons revealed scandalous things about the state's economic, social and cultural condition that would have been tolerated from no outsider. And before the first article had been on the streets ten minutes, the newspaper's switchboard lit up, in the words of an editor, "like a Roman candle." It stayed that way for two weeks. Everybody got into the act, pro and con, and the state hadn't seen such a controversy since it seceded from Virginia during the Civil War and became a state of its own.

When all the sound and the fury had died down, however, West Virginians were aware of a few unpleasant but unassailable facts:

1. Although it's the fourth-richest state in natural-resources production, it has the highest unemployment in the country, three times the national average.
2. Its illiteracy is enormous, and its schools rank among the lowest in the nation.
3. Its annual farm income is at the bottom of the heap.
4. It has a higher ratio of illegitimate white babies than any other state.

5. Its young people, the hope of any state, are deserting the ship in alarming numbers. While most states have seen their populations zoom in the last decade, West Virginia has found itself with an actual population loss of almost 3 per cent—the highest in the nation.

With statistics like this, it would be easy for any outsider to get the impression that West Virginia is all poverty, ignorance and hopelessness. Or that it is not only sick but ready for the *coup de grâce*. But after spending several weeks there recently and covering 2500 miles of its roller-coaster roads that took me to almost every corner of the state, I have come away convinced that West Virginia is far from moribund. It is merely suffering from an acute case of schizophrenia.

Take Charleston, for example, the brighter side of the state's split personality. This bustling city of more than 100,000 is studded with modern industry. Gleaming new offices and factories adorn its river front, and bank deposits are at an all-time high. Its airport, ingeniously and expensively embossed on three mountains by lopping off the tops and filling in the valleys, is busy all day long bringing prosperous people to and from the city.

But then consider what's going on just across the hills. Not very many miles away is a county where 41 per cent of the people—most of whom have exhausted their unemployment benefits—are being kept alive by handouts of surplus Government food. West Virginians call it "mollygrub."

Or consider another county where the athletic director of a high school recently estimated that 117 young students had to go without lunch regularly because they didn't have the necessary twenty-five cents to purchase it. Or still another county where a hospital head told a congressional committee that his institution was actually treating cases of starvation, and that at least one man had died of it.

"It is horrifying," this doctor said, "to think of a social order that has so many people in need of public assistance." (Continued on Page 64)

Photographs by Farrell Grehan



Idle mine at Stotesbury. Many small mines, the sole supports of whole towns, have been shut down by competition from machine-dug coal.



Unemployment has turned Stotesbury into "an unbelievably dismal ghost town," says the author. Some of the decaying company houses above are still occupied, others deserted.

The Strange Case of West Virginia

(Continued from Page 20)

Even coal, that staple of industry which has been the backbone of the state's economy for so long, has developed a schizoid nature. Although West Virginia is still the nation's biggest producer of soft coal, it has remained so only at the cost of a gigantic, state-wide headache. In the last ten years, mechanization of the mines, carried out with the approval of both the operators and the union, has toppled the

working force from 117,000 to less than 40,000 men. Scores of ghost towns have sprung up like mushrooms across the state, and thousands of men, especially those over forty, have no further prospects of re-employment in the industry.

And yet more coal is being produced and sold than ever before. Furthermore, those who produce it are receiving the highest wages of any industrial workers

in the country—approximately twenty-five dollars a day. Incredible as it seems, some miners are actually working overtime!

To a casual visitor many of West Virginia's towns look depressed. In general, there are few of the modern buildings one sees in other cities—the new motels, restaurants, shopping centers, schools and public buildings that have sprung up since World War II.

In testimony before the congressional committee mentioned earlier, the head of the state's Industrial and Publicity Com-

mission, Don Crislip, declared, "We have failed to attract diversified industry because we have let our roads, our schools, our communities and our homes slip both in efficiency and appearance."

Although the natural beauty of West Virginia has far from slipped—every corner of the state has stunning scenery—there are few of the facilities which the average American tourist has come to expect when on vacation.

In beautifully situated Bluefield, for example, a mountain city with high unemployment, but one of the finest climates in the East, I suggested to one of the town's leading citizens that tourism might be a good industry to take up the slack. "What are you going to do with people when you get them here?" he asked with a shrug. "There's not a first-class restaurant in town, and you can't buy a drink at a bar."

It is one of the prime paradoxes of this paradoxical state, of course, that not many miles from Bluefield lies one of the most famous tourist resorts in all America—the Greenbrier at White Sulphur Springs.

Possibly from a sense of guilt that the state should produce such startling contrasts, as well as from the flood of criticism recently encountered, West Virginians have acquired a high degree of sensitivity. And one of the things they dislike most is being called a hillbilly, rather than a mountaineer. The former is a fighting word, except, of course, when used by close friends. A student tried to explain the difference to me and then gave up. "Let's put it this way," he said. "A hillbilly lies under a tree, and a mountaineer sits on the porch. It's all very touchy."

Another highly articulate observer of the local scene, West Virginia University's young librarian, Bob Munn, summed up what he called the state's "tremendous defense mechanism" by saying, "We either take the tack that we're no good and that there's no use trying, or that we have the best state in the union."

The seat of this excellent university, incidentally, is in Morgantown, the first town I hit when I drove into the state. I found it still smarting under the impact of a national telecast which focused on Morgantown as one of America's most depressed cities.

"Of course there's unemployment," said Jim McCartney, genial director of its chamber of commerce, "but there are also lots of people working." He pointed to the new \$30,000,000 hospital and medical center being built at the university. "Things aren't so bad when they can do that," he said.

From the point of view of Jim McCartney and other town boosters, insult was added to injury when, after viewing the telecast, a Maryland high-school class took up a collection and sent fourteen dollars to the "stricken city." The gesture may have been unappreciated by some, but Lt. Marshall Clary of the Salvation Army, to whom the money was turned over, was happy to get it.

Shortly after the controversial television program, for example, Lieutenant Clary was called to Grafton late one night, where he found a mother and ten children living in one room. The mother was ill with influenza, and all the children had chicken pox. The father, an ex-miner, was away in New Jersey looking for work. Food, clothing and medicine were needed in the Grafton household fast, and Lieutenant Clary was grateful for the Maryland school children's gift. It helped him provide the necessary relief.

Unlike the mother in Grafton, other impoverished West Virginia mothers, caught up in what Dr. Leo Fishman, the university's leading economist, calls



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"conditions approximating the worst years of the depression," have connived with their husbands to set up desertion proceedings. Under state law, no family is eligible for assistance if there is an employable male in the household, no matter how impossible it is for him to find work.

Mrs. Elsie Baber, a worker in the state's Department of Public Assistance, gave me an example of how this works. Recently a family—man, wife and six children—came to her office in Morgantown looking for help. Fifty years old, the father had been let out of the mines a year ago and found it impossible at his age to get any other kind of work. After exhausting his unemployment security, as well as his other resources, he had turned to the state. Mrs. Baber found it necessary to explain to him that as long as he was technically employable, she could not help him.

A few weeks later the mother returned—without her husband. He had, she said hesitantly, "deserted" her. When told that she could not qualify for relief unless she swore out a warrant for his arrest, tears came to her eyes. She said nothing, looked at her children and then at Mrs. Baber. Finally, with what was obviously an inner struggle, she agreed to do it.

Mrs. Baber, a motherly person who herself has five children and was once

The small foreign car is a threat to American romance—it takes so long for it to run out of gas.

G. NORMAN COLLIE

chosen West Virginia's Mother of the Year, confessed that she was so upset by the capricious quirks of the state's relief laws that she had decided to quit her job. She was particularly distressed by what she called "West Virginia's encouragement of illegitimacy." Under state law the more children a mother has, the more money she can get—provided, of course, there's no husband around to support her. With six illegitimate children, a woman can draw up to \$165 a month in state funds. "Some women," she said, "make a career of it!"

This unhappy state of affairs, of course, is far from the complete picture of Morgantown. Those who like to believe that there's nothing wrong with the town that a "little gumption" won't fix, point to a remarkable man from Ohio by the name of J. Wesley Ruby. At the beginning of World War II Mr. Ruby rode into Morgantown and, with fifteen other men, started making plumbing fixtures in an old factory. Today he has 2000 people working for him and is far and away the largest employer in the area. A living example of what can be done in diversification and in getting away from the tyranny of a single industry—coal—Mr. Ruby insists people must get into other fields.

"There's nothing wrong with the people," he says. "They're intelligent and conscientious and want to give a day's work for a day's pay."

Any unbiased observer must agree that Mr. Ruby is right about the people. Largely native-born, Anglo-Saxon stock, they strike the visitor as gentle, proud, polite and full of kindness to strangers. I heard of a touching example of this in Charleston during the height of the nation's integration violence.

A few days before Christmas an elderly Negro had come to town to buy a Christmas gift during the evening shopping hours. He was driving down one of the main streets in his old model car, making

scant progress in the bumper-to-bumper traffic. Suddenly his tire blew out. He managed to draw to the side and park in front of a locksmith's shop. Agitated because he was unable to fix the tire himself, he went off in search of a repairman.

The locksmith, standing in front of his shop with a friend, took in the incident and decided to do something about it. Using a skeleton key, he opened the trunk of the car, found a spare tire and replaced the damaged one. He locked the trunk up again and returned to his position in front of the shop. When the elderly Negro came back, he was more distressed than ever. He'd been unable to find any garage open to help him. Then he saw his tire had been changed and couldn't believe his eyes. "Lord," he said, "there must be a guardian angel!" As he drove off, the two men in front of the shop bid him a Merry Christmas.

In view of the warmth of most West Virginians, the paradox of want and plenty living side by side seems all the more baffling. But the fact is that West Virginia's problems are too big and too deep-seated to be solved by individual generosity.

One of West Virginia's monumental problems, for example, is her topography, something that few individuals care to tackle singlehanded. Except for a narrow strip along the Ohio and Kanawha rivers, almost every inch of the state is mountainous. As one wit remarked, "West Virginia is a wonderful place to work. When you get tired, you can lean up against it."

Large-scale agriculture, except in the Eastern Panhandle and the Greenbrier Valley, where slopes are gentler, is impossible. And in the opinion of Doctor Fishman, "farming is being done on marginal land where it shouldn't be done." It is perhaps for this reason that, in the present era of large-scale farming, West Virginia's average farm income recently hit a national low of \$897. The national average was \$2269.

Moreover, in view of modern industry's demands for large, flat parking areas, the state's topography poses an even stiffer problem. And her valleys, steep and narrow, have little water for industrial use. Complicating the problem is the need for good, fast roads to carry products to markets. But as everybody pointed out to me, including the state's handsome, ex-schoolteacher governor, Cecil H. Underwood, roads in West Virginia cost about two and a half times as much to build as they do in flatter states. It is partly for this reason that the state's highway system is several decades behind that of its neighbors.

If West Virginia's hilly terrain has kept its people isolated from one another, its geography has played a part too. In the extreme Northern Panhandle, for example, Wheeling, the steel city, is more geared to Pittsburgh's economy than to the rest of the state. In the west, Huntington looks toward Cincinnati rather than to Charleston. And in the south, Bluefield and the other cities in the area are economically tied to Richmond and Norfolk. As for the distant Eastern Panhandle, the famous town of Harpers Ferry, where John Brown made his bid to free the slaves a hundred years ago, lies only fifty-five miles from Washington, D.C. West Virginians like to give a toast which sums up the curious contours of their rugged land. "To West Virginia," they say, "a damn good state for the shape it's in!"

Another problem that cannot be solved by individual enterprise is taxation. At the moment West Virginia is forty-seventh among the states in per-capita income from taxes. To a certain extent this is because in past years the state's resources were largely owned and exploited by outsiders, who were interested in keeping

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taxes as low as possible. It is also generally admitted that, in the past at least, these men controlled the legislatures which passed the tax laws. In short, the citizens allowed others to carry away coal, timber and natural-gas resources without plowing any of the profits back.

"The trouble with that sturdy mountaineer who's a symbol of the state," said a West Virginian angrily, "is that he's been an ignorant fool. He's allowed others to plunder his state and he hasn't insisted on the kind of taxes and political leadership which would put things right."

Tax rates today are still low by comparison with other states. Recently, when a severance tax of ten cents was proposed on every ton of coal taken out of the state—a measure taken by some other states—it was promptly defeated. There is no state income tax, and necessary revenues have been raised by piecemeal measures—a tax on soft drinks, a consumers' sales tax, a gross sales tax on business, another on cigarettes, and so on. Property taxes are still low. One man I talked to in Bluefield had a new \$11,000 house. His yearly property taxes were only thirty-six dollars, and in his frank words, "The community looks like it."

Without an overhaul of the basic tax structure, most people believe that the state will continue to have inferior roads, libraries, hospitals, social services and, of course, schools. However, a number of the educators I talked to felt that one thing tax money would not improve was apathy on the part of many West Virginians toward better education.

"Even if better schools were built," a teacher told me, "there's a good chance youngsters would not attend. The overwhelming goal of our youth is to be sixteen, quit school and buy a car. Mothers and fathers seem to encourage this, and many of them don't even go to graduation ceremonies. Possibly because parents have so little education themselves, there's very little drive for it."

This particular teacher, in pointing out how sensitive parents can be when their children are better educated than they are, told me of a college-educated girl who admitted she was careful to use "haint" when around her mother and father.

It is easier to understand such attitudes when one considers the life and traditions that have existed for generations in coal communities. Consider what this sociologist, for example, had to offer on the subject.

"The general shabbiness of mining camps is due to a long tradition," he said. "You worked in an area until it was mined out, and your children did the same. Then you moved on. You looked upon your community as a temporary one, and education did not seem too important. Why bother to fix up schools or anything else when the company owned your house, the store, the doctor and even you?"

Since coal is West Virginia's most important natural resource and the one to which the prosperity of the state is still reluctantly hinged, I wanted to visit a mining community. But the business leaders to whom I suggested it looked pained. Their point of view, I found, was not unusual. Understandably eager to put their best foot forward, they wish outsiders would forget about the miners. They'd like to sweep them under the rug. Perhaps, they feel, if no one mentions the miners, they will go away.

I did, of course, visit a number of coal towns, and two of the most interesting were Stotesbury and McAlpin. They were lying side by side in a remote pocket of the hills, not far from Beckley, "the smokeless coal capital of the world."

Stotesbury, formerly the home town of West Virginia's ambitious United States

senator, Robert C. Byrd, is an unbelievably dismal ghost town. I found rows of empty, decaying, grimy houses. Here and there a family still occupied an unpainted shack, surrounded by rubbish, weeds and soot. Overstuffed couches, their entrails bursting through the rags that covered them, sat sadly on the porches. Several children, their faces dirty, played silently in the empty streets. There was little activity anywhere, and less hope.

One house showed some signs of life, and I stopped to investigate. There were five persons living in it—an elderly woman and her four grandchildren. The oldest child was a pretty blond girl of fifteen. She was the head of the family. She explained that the mine hadn't operated in two years, but since her parents had bought the house from the company for \$1700, they had continued to live in it.

With no money to repair it, the house, like all the others, was rotting away. It had four rooms, outdoor plumbing and few conveniences. The father had tried to get work elsewhere and had managed to do so for a time. But finally his luck ran out. He had taken his last relief check, put some gas in the family jalopy and, with his wife, gone to Cleveland to look for work.

"As soon as daddy gets a job," said the girl, "we're all going to Cleveland."

McAlpin, Stotesbury's neighbor, presents the other side of the bituminous coin. The mine is still operating, and although the community is far from attractive by even the loosest standards, it is still alive.

The Testermans, whom I visited, are typical of a working-miner's family. They live in a company-owned frame house—"five rooms and path" is the way Mrs. Testerman put it—for which they pay only \$15.20 a month. They have four children, and Fred Testerman, who is thirty-three, has never been unemployed. At present he works on a conveyor belt.

Despite full employment for people like Fred Testerman, however, McAlpin is not a happy place. Too many people see the handwriting on the wall. They do not know when increasing mechanization of the mine will take their jobs away or when the mine will be found obsolete and closed down. They've seen it happen in Stotesbury and they know it can happen in McAlpin.

And if the Testermans have any doubts, they have only to look at their neighbor, big, husky, sandy-haired Hustie McDaniel. Hustie is Fred's age, and he has a wife and four fine sons. After a long period in which he worked part-time and the family income got smaller and smaller, he was finally laid off last November. Now, with his unemployment benefits exhausted, he is desperate.

The day I called on Hustie, he'd just returned from seeking work in a "gopher-hole" mine—a growing phenomenon in coal communities. These small opera-

tions, which go on outside the union, usually consist of four or five men who band together to buy a secondhand truck and go into business for themselves. They dig into a hillside—almost any hillside will yield coal in West Virginia—or work an abandoned mine that is no longer profitable to operate by machines with union labor. There seems to be a steady market for their cut-rate product. But the "gopher" mine which Hustie visited had offered him only two dollars a day. He might have taken it, but the gasoline necessary to get him back and forth to the mine made the offer impossible. Consequently, as soon as he can scrape up enough money, he plans to leave his family and look for work in the shipyards of Newport News, Virginia.

In essence, his story has been repeated—with variations—tens of thousands of times since World War II.

"The trouble with people like Hustie," said an official back in the capital, Charleston, "is that he's not trained to do anything but mining. If he's young enough and has the time, he can learn something else. But if he's over forty, about the only job he can get is as a janitor or watchman. That's the real tragedy."

At the moment, a bill is pending before Congress which will provide Federal funds to rehabilitate depressed areas. Part of the money will be spent to retrain people like Hustie. But as critics of the bill have protested: "Train them for what? First you have to get the industry."

Many people in West Virginia, including its two senators, Robert Byrd and Jennings Randolph, feel that one solution to the depressed coal areas would be small, light industries that would be "finishers" of such raw materials as the aluminum produced in the vast, new Kaiser plant along the Ohio River at Ravenswood. They would not require much flat land or water.

Another solution offered for West Virginia's ailing No. 1 industry has been research. A Bluefield newspaper editor, Jerry McDevitt, declared that in one year recently the chemicals industry spent \$361,000,000 in research while coal spent a mere \$17,000,000. "If you don't spend money on research, you're licked," he said.

A current development, which is causing hope to flutter in the hearts of Governor Underwood and others, is a new type of road using soft coal as a binder—2200 tons per mile of highway. If it catches on, it will be a big boon to the industry.

Some of the other suggestions made to aid coal communities have been more bizarre. One expert insisted recently that the state's abandoned mines would make ideal places in which to start growing mushrooms.

Everybody I talked to in West Virginia and in Washington, where I later interviewed its Congressmen, had his own pet solution to the state's problems. For some, it was massive Federal aid, some-

thing akin to a native Point Four program, which would do for one of our own states what we have been doing abroad. For others it was a subsidy on coal. "We should buy up surplus coal the way we buy up food," argued one man. "In that way we can keep miners on tap if there's a national emergency and we need them." Some even thought a few of the state's problems might be solved by a change in the drinking laws. At present, liquor can be bought in most West Virginia counties, but it is impossible to buy a drink in a restaurant or bar. This, it was argued, is the reason there are so few tourists and such a dearth of good restaurants.

But the more the doctors look at the proffered remedies, the more they are apt to feel that no single one will do the trick. Probably it will take a combination of several, if not all, to cure West Virginia's strange malady in which want and plenty, ignorance and knowledge, squalor and beauty live side by side to a degree unknown in other states.

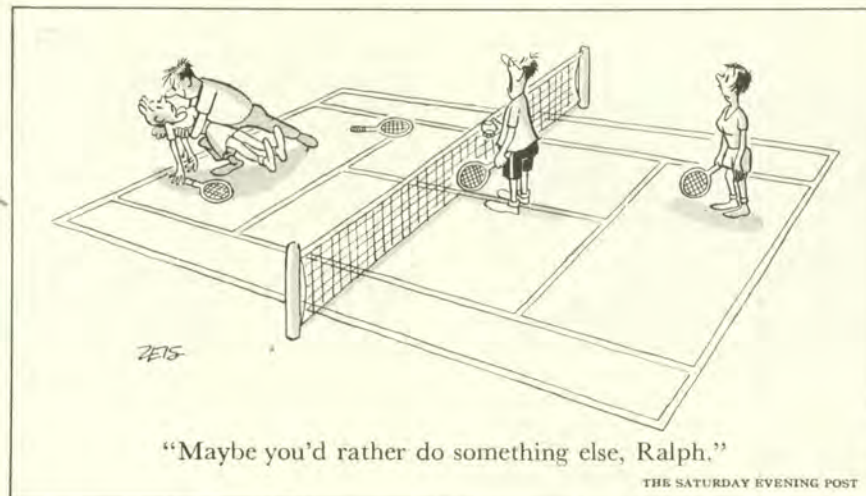
Curiously enough, as I drove through the state, I found few people, even in the coal camps, who felt that West Virginia's problems were insoluble. Most people thought their basically rich state, long plundered by absentee landlords and later plagued by all the woes of a one-industry area trying to convert to a multi-industry one, was only just beginning to catch a glimpse of its potential. Such people as Charley Hodges, director of Charleston's chamber of commerce, for example, like to point out what has been accomplished in the Kanawha River basin. At the moment this area has created what is perhaps the greatest concentration of basic chemical production in the country. It has given the world nylon and other valuable synthetic materials. And in so doing it has boosted the Charleston average family income to about \$6000—one of the highest in the East.

Another encouraging sign, of course, is the growing capacity for self-criticism—the basis for any reform. "I think people should point out West Virginia's faults," says Harry Ernst, *Gazette* education editor and one of the state's angry young men. "We've glamorized the ignorant hillbilly—complete with bare feet and moonshine—too long. Illiteracy isn't cute in the atom age!"

In the past, West Virginians have been famous for their inquiry and their ingenuity. It was a West Virginian, James Rumsey, who had a steamboat operating on the Potomac at Shepherdstown twenty years before Robert Fulton's. It was another, Andrew S. Rowan, who carried the "message to Garcia," and another, William L. Wilson, who originated the rural-free-delivery postal system. It was Henry Gassaway Davis, a West Virginian by adoption, who first worked out a plan for running railway trains at night, and still another, Archibald W. Campbell, of Wheeling, who laid the groundwork for West Virginia's independence and persuaded Lincoln to recognize it as a separate state.

There is still plenty of ingenuity in the West Virginia hills, in communities with such fine, blunt names as Cyclone, Cucumber, Shock, Frozen, Left Hand, Gip, Pinch, Quick and Red Jacket. But the ingenuity is hampered at present by what might best be described as a bit of coal dust in the eyes. When all the dust has settled, the going should be clearer.

"You must remember," warned a native at lovely White Sulphur Springs, where I took my leave of the state, "that we're going through a violent industrial revolution—with few of the things other states have to cushion the shock. It'll be all right eventually, but it sure is a hell of a rough ride along the way." THE END



"Maybe you'd rather do something else, Ralph."

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