

## Portal 31

Mine Portal 31 is an example of preservation at work. As one of the most productive mining operations in the United States, Portal 31 has been renovated into an underground tour for all interested in experiencing not only a trip back in a mine – but also a trip back in time. U.S. Steel built Portal 31 along with all the buildings and homes of Lynch in 1917.

Frances Johnson was born at the Lynch hospital in 1927. Her father came to Lynch as an engineer and was promoted to general superintendent. (Her childhood home is seen in this photo.) She graduated from Lynch High School where she was a cheerleader and drum majorette. She returned after graduating from Nazarene College to teach for three years before she left for WHAS in Louisville where she met her husband, Cawood Ledford. Mrs. Ledford told me, “When I was growing up, women couldn’t go in the mines because they thought it was bad luck.” Today, Portal 31 is featured as one of the top ten tourist destinations in Kentucky by Southern Living Magazine.

Liseo Marsili, third-generation coal miner, wrote me a six page letter describing the different mining methods over the years. In the time of his grandfather (1920s), mining was done by the post and beam method. Miners would drill holes in the face of the coal with a breast auger six foot long, fill with black powder, and shoot down. Rail road track was then laid up to the edge and a mule would pull the loaded coal car out. Lighting was by carbide light. In his father’s time (1940s), coal was no longer being loaded by hand but by a mechanical coal loader into electric shuttle cars. Portal 31 was the first mine in the nation to be totally electric. Roof bolting was started and made the

mines much safer. Carbide lights were replaced by battery lights. In Mr. Marsili's time, the coal loader was replaced with a continuous miner and conveyor belts. Gone were the motormen, brakemen, trackmen, shot forers, coal drillers, and cutting machine operators. By the time Portal 31 ended in 1963 it extended 13 miles from Benham Coal Properties to the Virginia State line. It worked over 33 different nationalities. Mr. Marsili's grandfather could speak English, Italian, French, and German, so the company made him a foreman. He saved up money to bring his brother over from Italy to work the mine. Mr. Marsili wrote, "Portal 31 helped win two World Wars – without coal you have no steel to make weapons."

Ed Harris, Project Manager for the Portal 31 Project, told me that 5,000 miners worked Portal 31 in the 1920s. Historic record loads of coal were shipped out. Today, Lynch is a long avenue of buildings banked in a narrow hollow with the lamp house (seen in this photo), train depot, commissary, bathhouse, and the schools and churches left by the Italian masons. He said, "Lynch is a very unique and well preserved coal camp. ... it (Portal 31 Mine Exhibit) is the best of its kind in the world....we expect to draw up to 40,000 tourists per year. But beyond its anticipated catalyst for a new tourism industry - it is a memorial to the miners." Outside Portal 31 stands a monument in tribute to long time president of the United Mine Workers John L. Lewis and a memorial to U.S. Steel District #1 miners who died in mining accidents.

Dr. Bruce Ayers, President of Southeast Kentucky and Technical College, shared with me the original feasibility study grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission back in 1978 for the planning of an exhibition mine. Engineering Consulting Services,

Inc. of Lexington is a finalist this year for the prestigious Engineering Excellence Awards – known industry wide as the “Academy Awards” of the engineering industry. ECSI worked with museum and exhibit designers to transform this deactivated mine into a high-tech museum that showcases Kentucky’s coal mining heritage, from the days of picks and shovels to modern equipment. Dr. Ayers spoke of the Kentucky Coal Academy’s recent sponsorship and discussed the innovative training of students in the use of computers and robotics in preparing the next generation of miners.

Portal 31 Mine Tour gives a firsthand view of one of Kentucky’s core industries. This historical coal mine takes visitors by railcar on a 30-minute tour that makes you feel as if you are visiting a mine in 1919, when the coal was carried out by mules and canaries warned of dangerous air, up to today’s modern mining advancements. Portal 31 continues to work for the city of Lynch, the county of Harlan, and the state of Kentucky. It speaks with the collective voices of generations of miners. Its preservation is providing jobs for our local people and it illuminates the community’s rich history in coal.