



**PORTSMOUTH COAL MINE**—This is view of big breaker building near the shore's edge, as it stood years ago when a determined attempt was made to mine usable coal in the area. The plant, which was used to crush the fuel, has long since been demolished.

## Coal Mines On Portsmouth's Leas? Not Now, But Once Was The Day --

When Portsmouth lost the opportunity last year of having one of the larger oil companies locate its East coast refinery there, did former Portsmouth Coal Mine workers shift uneasily in their graves?

Did the expressed fears of bringing outside labor into the town and of spoiling its residential exclusiveness cause the spirits of these ancient miners to wonder at their old farming and mining community?

Few realize the extent of the workings of the old Portsmouth Coal Mines, the Portsmouth Copper Company and the Atlantic Oil Company plant. They were all situated in what would have been the heart of the last year's proposed refinery plant holdings. Yet the descendants of this old Portsmouth colony, including the inhabitants of "The Grove" to the south, are numerous today in Newport and Fall River.

### 75 Years of Mining

Many who view the abandoned coal mine buildings today believe them a ghostly reminder of an unsuccessful venture. Not so. The Portsmouth mines were operated for three quarters of a century, from 1808 to 1883. It was a self sustaining community with its homes, schools and church.

Fall River and Newport both have many families descended from the McDonalds, Harringtons, Fitzgeralds, Driscolls, Costellos, Connollys, Caseys, Corcorans, Cahills, Dunns, Sheehans and others who came to America to work in the Portsmouth mines. More than one generation of a family worked and lived at the Portsmouth plant.

Most of the miners came from the Allihies copper mines of Ireland and were highly skilled in their occupations. Others came from the Cornwall mines in England, Yankees, too, were mingled with the workers. Many of the children of the mining community married into the old Yankee Portsmouth families.

### Vast Underground Borings

The underground borings of the mine tunnelled for long distances in the years of taking out coal. Some of the workings extended under Narragansett Bay. Donkeys hauling coal cars underground for long stretches of time would be stricken blind upon being brought to the bright sunshine of the surface. This may give some idea of the extent of the underground workings. As far as the donkeys were concerned, however, their sight would gradually be restored as they grazed on the green meadows of Portsmouth in their off-duty periods.

This sturdy mining stock enjoyed their daily labors and their evening pleasures. They were happy when mining was a going proposition.

Granted many a miner worked for \$1.25 a day, from 6.30 a. m. to 4 p. m. But the average rent of a tenement was \$4 a month. Eggs averaged 12 cents a dozen, milk five cents a quart, and meat was plentiful and inexpensive. They raised their own vegetables and had a bay full of fish at their doorstep. Most of these miners were born sailorsmen too.

### Simple Pleasures

They had their social gatherings, kitchen dances and athletic contests of running and jumping and the Irish game of "trap" or hurling. A community dance was held regularly at the boarding house of the Atlantic Oil Works. Liquor was banned at these dances, but the girls brought their homemade cakes, pies and pastry.

Before a church was built, some families on special occasions walked to Fall River to attend mass. Frequently, mass would be held in private homes.

Finally they built their own church, Portsmouth's first Roman Catholic Church.

When it was blown down in a storm, a Yankee architect drew plans & supervised the building by the mines

themselves, of a new stone and plaster church. Never a crack appeared in its walls until the ancient building totally collapsed in a storm during the 1920's.

The character of these old residents is best exemplified by a statement that "There never was a miner's family that did not pay the last nickel of their bills."

### High Standards

Furthermore, in the long history of the mines, not one deliberate crime was ever committed nor an act of immorality ever reported. They were religious and hard-working, but home-loving, proud and unusually neighborly families.

They gave their tenement houses typical names. "Red Row" consisted of four 4-tenement houses, occupied by 16 families, its name coming from the red trimmings of the houses. "The Poorhouse," so-called by its resemblance to the barracks built for the famine victim families of Ireland's 1840s, was another row of corporation tenements housing 16 families. "Castle Daley" received its proud name from a popular occupant and also was a four-tenement block. A boarding house provided the housing for unmarried miners.

An adjoining community established to the south at "The Grove," now Melville, where a hospital for Union soldiers and a prison for Confederate soldiers were maintained during the Civil War. Residents of "The Grove" were practically part of the mining community, and other Newport families of Irish extraction trace their family trees back to the railroad workers' community at "The Grove."

### Mines Close In 1880

At the closing of the mines, in the 1880s, many of these families moved into Fall River, to take employment in the mills. Others came to Newport. Their children headed prominent families in both places. Still others went on to the mining communities of the west where their descendants hold positions of prominence today.

The old buildings of the colony have disappeared over the years—a few homes and a few mine buildings still marking the ghost town of years ago. But in many a family, memories of the Portsmouth Coal Mines still stand out.

If you know a Sullivan, a Corcoran or a Harrington, ask him if his folks come from the Portsmouth west side island community. They will be quick to tell you. They are mighty proud of that neighborly hard-working community and of the sturdy and ambitious stock from across the sea which worked there during the 75 years of its existence.

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