Today

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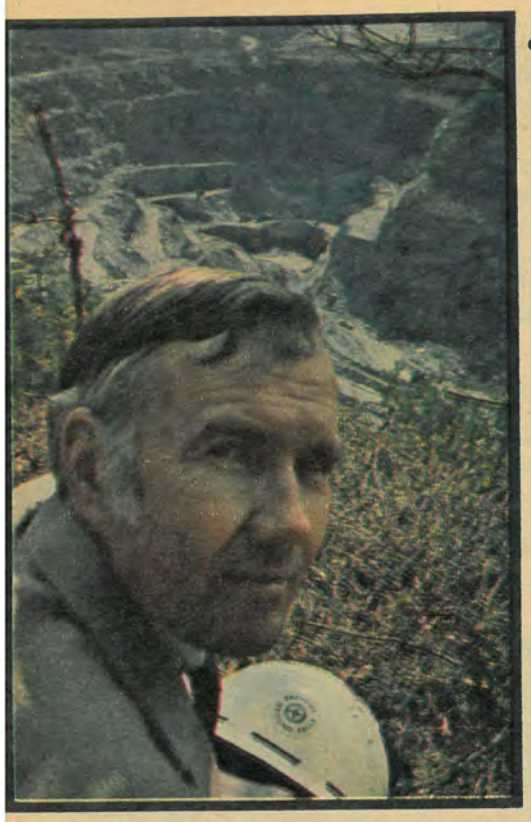
The iron from the Cornwall mine went into guns that won the American Revolution, rails that spanned the west, girders that helped cities grow tall. Now it's all gone and these men are making a last descent into America's most historic mine. And you're invited, too.

Requiem For a Hole In the Ground

The iron has all been torn from the earth and the men who removed it are growing old. Now, before it drowns, a look at America's most important, most historic mine. **By WILLARD RANDALL**

Top: A 1921 picture shows Arthur F. Peterson as a young mining engineer. He became superintendent of the mines during the Twenties, Thirties and Forties. Bottom: During the 1880's iron men used picks, shovels and horsecarts to extract the ore.



Warren Kreiser and Ike Edwards spoke sparsely, sadly as the 10-ton open ore car plummeted down inclined tracks into the bowels of the earth, to the 500-foot level, then 700, then 760. In the cloying, eerie darkness, droplets of water fell past the feeble flicker from their helmet lamps as they descended to check the pumps.

These lifegiving pumps, explained Kreiser, would go out next Friday, allowing the shaft to fill with water, suffocating it. Like an old heart failing, the mine would expire then, abruptly, quietly, irrevocably. With it, the heart of a way of life as old, older than America, would stop beating. It would be the death of Cornwall Mines, oldest and richest single ore mass in North America.

In the official obituary prepared by the mine's latest owner, Bethlehem Steel, the cause of death would be listed as exhaustion. After 241 years of boundless generosity, the three old hills that gave up their treasure on the rim of the Welsh Mountains in Lebanon County were simply spent, depleted.

There should be no cause for tears, company officials assure: no one will be very badly hurt. The end comes as no surprise, predicted precisely 30 years ago. Other jobs, in other Bethlehem Steel mines, foundries and quarries, have been found for nearly every one of the 1,200 miners who once rode the ore skips and harvested the open pits in the heyday of Cornwall a few years ago.

Only a few miners will be temporarily out of work; they will reap enriched unemployment benefits.

True. But, like most truths, only on the surface.

The full truth about the death of America's most historic iron mine—producer of 110 million tons of high-grade iron worth billions of dollars, of 477,000 tons of copper now selling for 69 cents *a pound,* of tens of thousands of ounces of gold and silver, of the only cobalt east of the Mississippi, of nearly one hundred other minerals, some found nowhere else —the full truth about this incredible payload that powered America's industry through three centuries and 10 wars, will be forever interred.

And if any of the families who have begun to scatter, their traditions shattered, from the small clutch of company towns that meted out and manipulated their lives through generations of comfort mixed with random tragedy, of toil tempered by alternating joy and anguish, through promise and hopelessness, if any carry away the full truth, it will no longer matter.

The cause of death, just beneath the surface for those who care to ask, will be a freak power failure that crippled the pumps and inundated the mine shafts, shortcircuiting their source of life during the

Top: Charlie Taylor, manager of Cornwall, Grace and Marmora mines, surveys the open pit operation which took 100 years of carving to create. Cornwall is where his career started.

MINE *continued*

disastrous June floods a year ago.

It simply wasn't worthwhile to pump out those shafts again, according to Bethlehem Steel, to keep the mines alive any longer. In the absence of government subsidies, it would have been a marginal affair at best, benefitting only the workers.

Only a few skeptics can be found, in tense groups murmuring that the floodwaters merely provided a convenient excuse to extinguish an archaic, anachronistic way of life, to leave it buried, deep and forgotten.

It is for this ruined memory, this artifact of the early American dream, now crushed and cast up on the slagheap of modern industry, that they mourn.

For it was Cornwall, its cluster of small hamlets which many will soon have to leave, that drew them and kept them and nurtured them, more precious to them than all the metals they bullied from the earth.

Someday, when foreign ore no longer proves cheaper, when America's natural resources are drained, the pumps may begin to turn once again at Cornwall, to resuscitate, reopen, revive the old, drowned pits and tunnels, to exhume the low-grade ore that reaches down to the earth's core itself.

But never again, at least not in Cornwall, will there be such men as these Cornwall miners.

With the casual spitting of a thin red tracer of chewing tobacco, stubby Warren Kreiser intimates this as he checks those pumps.

Beside him, tall and doleful Ike Edwards, who also poured all his working life into this weeping hole in the ground, tugs the bell cord, signalling an unseen hoistman above ground to haul them back up again.

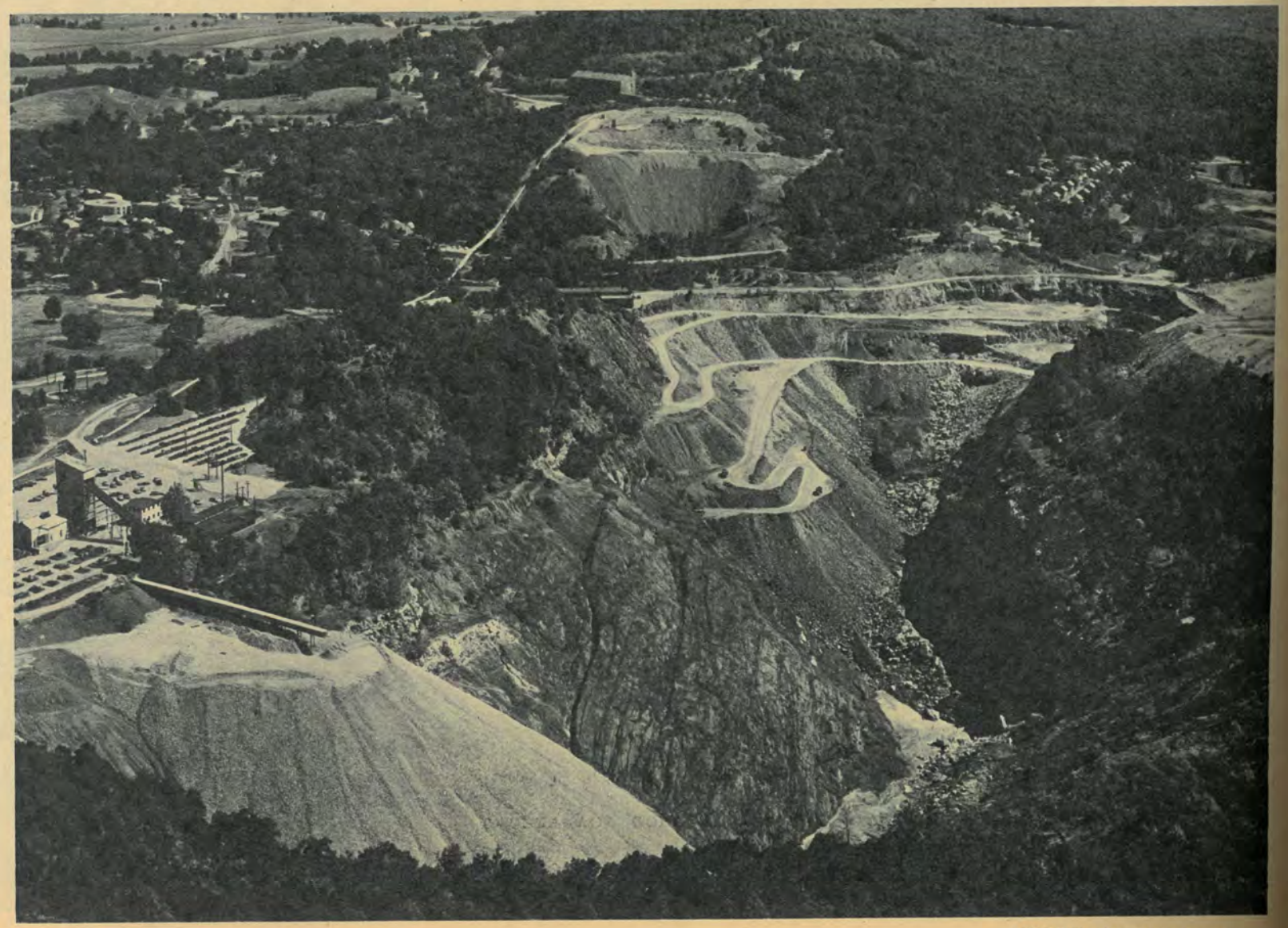
In Edwards' haunting, soot-stained face, those oversized nocturnal eyes silently challenge, daring you to find out what once lived and thrived here and is now being allowed to die in the drowned dream of Cornwall; and why.

* * *

The magnet that drew men to Cornwall was what brought them to America—a dream, partly built on fact, but mostly on aspiration. Dreams come good and bad, some-

History Told in Iron

America's history is written in the carved earth of the sprawling Cornwall mines (right). Arms-producing ore from the mines helped win the Revolutionary and Civil Wars for the young nation. The mines then fed the emerging industrial nation, providing for its railroads and automobile industry. Discovery of a deeper vein of ore in 1917 thrust the mines back into prominence and gave them a major role in supplying steel for ships and armaments during World War II. Last summer's floods from Hurricane Agnes signalled the death knell for the mines.



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times only the most bizarre moments being remembered.

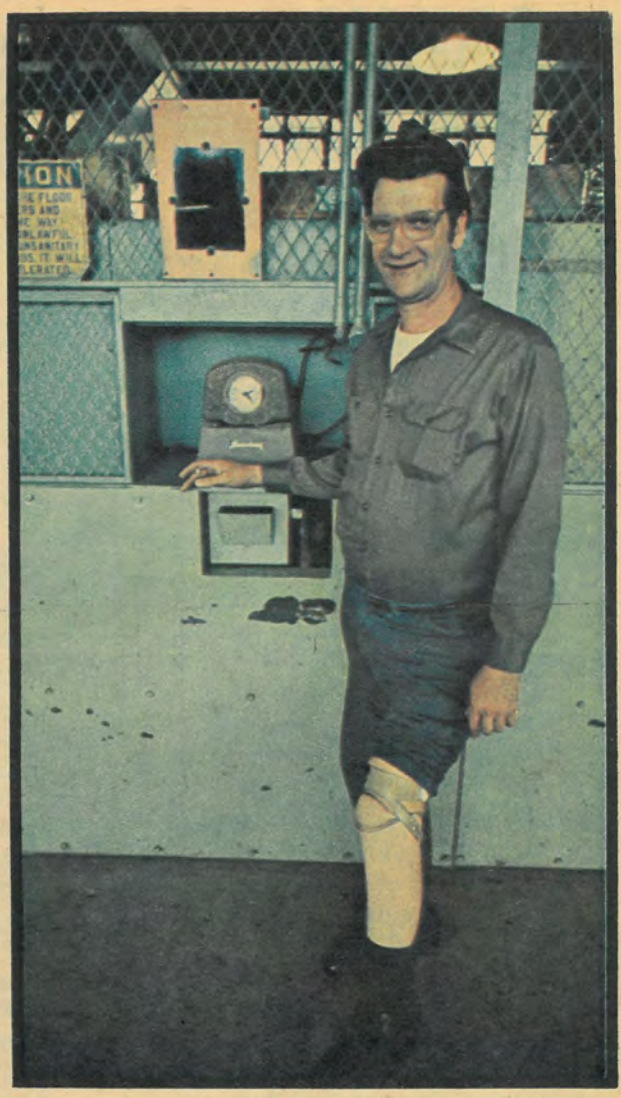
Indeed, Cornwall's first owners overlooked its potential, daunted perhaps by its distance, then, from the hub of commerce in Philadelphia.

Joseph Turner, a Philadelphian who acquired the area from the Penns in 1732, and was a prosperous stockholder in a thriving iron foundry at Durham, Bucks County, failed to grasp his good fortune. Turner quickly sold his land to William Allen, founder of Allentown.

In turn, Allen let the treasure slip

Those eyes challenge you to find out what once was here and now is allowed to die.

Photos by Susan Castellano



Top: Ken Carpenter proudly displays his pink plastic leg. When he lost his leg below the knee six months ago, Carpenter never lost consciousness as the other miners worked to free him from the grip of a backhoe. On the wall a mirror warns, "This person is responsible for your safety."

Left: Howard Klinger and Tete Ponessa pack 45-foot holes each with 350 pounds of high explosives. Tete and Klinger have packed 16 to 20 holes for the daily blast since the underground mines were flooded by Hurricane Agnes.

Bottom: Tete and Gloria Ponessa entertain Tete's brother, Joseph and his wife, Georgette, in their $29-per-month home. The Ponessas are one of the seven families renting from Bethlehem Steel out of 75 families in Miner's Village.

MINE *continued*

through his fingers, selling out to Peter Grubb, of Chester, Pa., an established ironmaster who paid the equivalent of $10,000 for the three ore-rich mountains: Big Hill, Middle Hill and Grassy Hill.

By 1742, Grubb had built a furnace, named Cornwall after the English mining town where his father was born; was importing miners, colliers, foundrymen, furnacemen, and wagons of beef and whiskey and began exporting wagons loaded with pigs of iron richer than any his father had known.

Far-seeing enough to buy 9,669 acres in all, enough to feed the insatiable demand for charcoal . fuel for his furnaces, he avoided the fate of most Pennsylvania ironmasters, who burned themselves out of business.

To make charcoal, bullnecked Irish woodsmen each hacked down and split three cords of tough hardwood each day, every day. Every day, another acre of hickory, white oak and ash was stacked on the mounds to char up to 10 days.

With limestone, chiselled loose from nearby hillsides, the charcoal was poured into the furnace with equal parts of iron ore. Picked and shovelled from the outcroppings by men and boys, the ore was sweated and pushed and cursed and dragged to the furnace in one-man wooden wheelbarrows, each holding 400 to 500 pounds.

Life at colonial Cornwall was harsh.

The hours, nine months a year when the furnace was in full blast, were brutally long. In the hot, humid summer, everything shut down.

On the average, a hard worker in a good month could make about today's equivalent of $250. Pretty good for colonial times, but not quite enough, somehow, by the time the clerks deducted for purchases of meat, flour, shoes, soap, candles, utensils, thread, liquor, plus rent.

Living at first in log cabins, the common workers eventually built themselves small limestone houses, with two rooms downstairs, a loft above. The walls were whitewashed, the floors sanded, the cooking and laundry done in great iron cauldrons in the walk-in fireplaces. Plates, spoons, bowls and pitchers were local pewter, forks and knives were of local iron, bowls were carved from local wood. Life was secure, tightly self-contained.

A successful family was built on the foundation of a sturdy, thrifty, selfless mother, expected to provide fresh garden vegetables, poultry, homespun cloth and linen, hearty meals and many income-producing children.

When Swedish historian Acrelius visited Cornwall in 1756, he proclaimed, "Iron ore in Pennsylvania is more abundant than the people will ever make use of," also noting that, "The laborers are composed partly of Negroes (slaves), partly of servants from Germany and Ireland bought for a term of years." At the time, only six miners were needed to feed the furnaces. There were 20 slaves, many employed as domestics in the great-house of the ironmaker, Peter Grubb.

What Acrelius failed to record was the strict caste system taking root, to prevail for another 200 years. Managers lived in comfortable houses of locally-quarried sandstone and limestone; foremen in smaller, whitewashed stone houses set apart from the laborers.

The principal diversions of owners and managers were fox-hunting, dancing, drinking, wenching and worshipping God, all of which combined evilly in the personality of founder Peter Grubb, who lived in feudal splendor like an imitation English country squire.

So cruel was Grubb that he became a legend, principally because of his unbridled vanity and his passion for riding to hounds.

Grubb often boasted of his superior dogs, especially his white bitch, Flora. In 1754, he invited some bloods from Philadelphia to impress them with his sportsmanship.

On this one day the hounds performed poorly. Embarrassed, the irascible Grubb ordered his huntsman, at risk of a severe flogging, to chase the hounds into the mouth of the furnace, where he whipped them into the flames. Legend has it that his favorite, Flora, paused, licked Grubb on the face and brushed against his boot. Almost relenting, Grubb nonetheless seized her and heaved her into the fire.

He never hunted again, brooding and drinking away his remaining days of increasing madness.

One morning, after the servants were kept awake all night by what they insisted was the hallooing and baying of hounds, they found their master, sitting bolt upright in his bedchamber with his riding whip clenched in his fist, staring off in horror—and quite dead. To this day, there are reports of the unearthly moaning of the hounds on cold, windy winter nights.

* * *

If the agricultural aristocracy of the South was rooted in tobacco, the industrial might of the North was built on the keystone of Pennsylvania iron.

Iron fashioned the long Pennsylvania rifles invented in nearby Lancaster. Iron shaped the wheels of Conestoga wagons that opened the western wilderness.

So vital was its production to the cause of American independence that British commander Sir William Howe forsook his comrade, Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne, on the Hudson River to march against Pennsylvania in an attempt to destroy its war machinery.

Bypassing the Delaware River in September, 1777, Howe took dead aim at the 50 iron plantations west of Philadelphia. Intercepting him at Brandywine, Washington and the Americans paid with 1,000 casualties to shield the furnaces and forges from destruction, forcing Howe to

winter in Philadelphia. Only one forge was lost, the Valley Forge.

From the others, Washington pleaded for and received arms—including 20 heavy cannon from Cornwall, plus scores of cooking pots and vital salt pans: so precious was salt to preserve rare captures of meat that Washington sent New Jersey militia to the Atlantic to use the Cornwall pans to gather it.

With peace came a growing prosperity for the men of Cornwall. Many Hessians, once forced laborers at the mines, stayed on, and Englishmen, especially from Cornwall and Wales, emigrated to make their fortunes.

One shrewd immigrant, an Irishman named Robert Colemen, worked his way up from clerk eventually to buy half the forges and settle in the great-house.

His descendants presided over Cornwall until 1926, overseeing the

mines' expansion into five towns with five furnaces: Miners Village, Burd Coleman, Cornwall, North Cornwall, Anthracite.

Not until the discovery, in 1840, of anthracite coal 25 miles to the north, however, and the opening of the Union Canal from Lebanon to the Susquehanna River did Cornwall expand into the predominant American iron center it was destined to remain for generations.

Its production, jumping from 10,000 tons a year in 1848 to 100,000 tons by 1864, forged the rails and locomotives and iron bridges that unlocked the North American continent. During the Civil War, the mine's capacity outstripped that of the entire Confederacy.

In the Iron Age that filled the 50-year peace between the Civil War and the First World War, a new product was forged in the open pits and furnaces of Cornwall: the iron man, a tough, boisterous, hard-working, hard-loving, hard-drinking man.

The owner lived in feudal splendor.

Invention of the hydraulic drill helped speed mining in the late 19th Century.

At one point, around the turn of the 20th Century, there were 16 nationalities at work in Cornwall.

Foremost for more than a century were the Cornish miners from England, who transplanted intact their peculiar speech, their sports, food, clothing and work habits.

For centuries, they had fished the tempestuous North Atlantic. When the fishing grew poor, they turned to the mines, still considering themselves men of the sea. They called their leaders "mine captains" then and measured the mine's depths in fathoms.

They imported with them the British sport of soccer, and they sang hymns as they descended to work in the mines. Eschewing random violence, they preferred "grudge" fights by Marquis of Queensbury rules before the whole town on Saturday nights.

Defying danger, they scoffed at the dust that filled the mines and lungs and died, uncomplaining, of respiratory diseases. If they came up at the day's end without every inch of their bodies covered with soot and grime, they considered it a poor day's work.

Yet they were clever men, who soon learned to pass off to more newly arrived immigrants more arduous tasks of mucking the shattered ore from the mine floors and dumping the heavy hand carts.

In their places came Mexicans, blacks from the South, Hungarians, Slovaks, Italians, who kept the old ways but added new clannishness and camaraderie.

The old towns took on new names: the village of Burd Coleman was divided into Dutchtown and Hunkytown; Anthracite was dubbed Goosetown (for the flocks of fowl kept in its backyards). When Bethlehem Steel built a new settlement called Cornwall Centre, the wags renamed it Toytown, to suit the smallness of the houses the company built for its workers.

While there was rivalry between one neighborhood and another at softball, it never took on ethnic undertones. Miners intermarried, good naturedly called each other hunkies, wops, harps. In truth, they worked much too closely, depending too much on each other, to tolerate petty animosities.

While Cornwall was considered a "safe" mine, there were still accidents: in the past 50 years, despite reinforced concrete and steel mine shafts, 33 men have been killed at Cornwall, another 873 disabled.

Whenever tragedy struck one man's family, it touched the lives of scores of relatives. Work would stop sometimes for days at a time to accommodate long funeral processions and longer periods of mourning.

But the risks were matched by the rewards. Every miner's son was assured first crack at a job. It was his birthright. Traditionally on the last day of senior year at Cornwall High School, the mine superintendent addressed the class and asked every graduate who wanted a job to follow him.

There were plenty of gold coins in the cookie jars on payday, and few ways to spend them. The rents on the company houses were low, and the miners early learned the prestige of driving a new car the few hundred yards to work.

If Pennsylvania was the keystone

of a heady industrial empire, Cornwall was the bedrock nestling cozily in a small valley with incredible good fortune.

In 1917, Bethlehem Steel began buying up the disparate shares of the old ironmasters' heirs. Almost immediately the giant firm fell into a fortune in unsuspected ore deposits 100 feet deeper in the earth than anyone had thought to probe.

Sinking the shaft for its Number Three Mine, Bethlehem scoured the continent for skilled engineers and miners to tap the rich new lode, destined to produce some 20 million tons of high-grade magnetite ore.

From Ironton in Minnesota came Peter Rossini, a top mine foreman, in a 1918 Dodge crowded with his children and their belongings.

After emmigrating from northern Italy, Rossini had scrambled for a living in the independent iron mines of the outer Mesabi Range. The going was rough, the mines unsafe, the work erratic. The Rossinis moved often, wherever there was work.

Eclipsed for 30 years by the huge Range ore strikes in Michigan and Minnesota, Cornwall's windfall at Number Three again drew miners to the Lebanon Valley.

The new underground shafts required a special breed of man: unafraid of working in the cold, dank depths, immune to loneliness, willing to take risks with explosive charges, cave-ins and rockfalls in the ant-like workings fanning out under the hillsides.

Men died quickly, when a chunk of ore, hung up and out of sight, broke loose and crashed; when an ore car hurtled down the inclined tracks and rolled over them, when dynamite used to blast loose the ore went off prematurely.

But everyone knew everybody, the summers were cool and the pay was the best around. If a man finished his drilling and blasting in three hours, he was done for the day. He could go off and play poker at Rexmont Firehouse and drink beer while swapping stories.

The rich new strike of magnetite attracted scores of families like the Rossinis, who moved into Miner's Village. Peter Rossini Jr., one of five members of the clan to work out their years at Cornwall, still lives there.

Mine captain Elso Rossini sat behind his little desk the other day and remembered his arrival, wide-eyed and wondrous, in Cornwall at age seven.

The dusty Dodge had pulled up in front of a typical company house,

The Great Depression ruined Elso Rossini's dreams of college. But he fared well at Cornwall, rising to mine captain. Today he drives a Cadillac.

with a deep backyard for a garden, two ample rooms downstairs, three small rooms up, and plumbing outside. The rent was about $7 a month, deducted from the weekly pay envelope.

Elso, named for a Finn who befriended his father in the boy's birthplace of Ironton, Minn., was sturdy, hardworking, a standout athlete at Cornwall High, a 175-pound varsity baseball, soccer and basketball star who dreamed of becoming an architect.

His dream was snuffed out six months after Rossini graduated from high school in 1929. For a time at least, Cornwall's luck had run out; for a decade, during the Depression, how grim was this valley.

"There was little work, and for one long year, no production at all," recalls Elso, 62 and ready to retire.

"Nobody starved, but nobody went off to college. I worked when I could in the mine, starting at the bottom, as a mucker.

"We grew most of our food, walked a mile and a half to milk cows, picked fruit and berries and sold them in Lebanon. Some people gave up and left. But no one took a penny of welfare."

When production resumed in 1940, Elso decided on a life in the mines. "But I was determined to move up, to go as high as I could."

With the third highest position at Cornwall, Rossini is a figure of respect, more highly regarded by the men than the engineers with their college degrees. He is The Law in the mines.

When Cornwall closes down, Elso Rossini will drive the six miles in his gold-colored Cadillac to his pleasant home in Shaeffertown. Occasionally, he will travel to New York to visit his only son—a college graduate and partner in a large accounting firm.

The men worked closely, died quickly.

A highly successful insurance broker on the side and a leader in the Lions International, Elso Rossini has done well at Cornwall.

When Hurricane Agnes sent a 40-foot wall of muddy water rushing into the great open pit and underground tunnels last June, the incredible last chapter of Cornwall's 231-year history began.

Warren Kreiser, trying to find a road out of Lebanon to get to work, knew then it was over, knew that the water had knocked out the life-giving pumps.

"Many of us stayed at the mine for three days, unable to get home. There was some talk that everything would return to normal, that the company wouldn't abandon the equipment and the ore that remained. But we somehow knew this was the end."

For three months, the bulk of the 650-man work force was idle. Many were transferred to Bethlehem plants in Lebanon and Steelton, to the huge new underground mine at Morgantown, 25 miles to the east.

It was then that Elso Rossini and his men worked their little miracle, pumping out the open pit, blasting new roads, stripping away the overburden of trap rock for a last major assault on the high grade ore.

Inside three months, 45-ton Euclid trucks driven by men who'd never worked above ground before roared over the rough rock roads into the chasm to bring up their cargoes of iron, copper, gold and silver.

What was miraculous was their morale. Every man knew it was only a matter of months before the last truck rolled. Yet they outdid each other, breaking production records, drilling and blasting and hauling out 5,000, 6,000, 6,500 tons of ore a day.

Everywhere he went in the last months, Milan Lipensky, the stocky, backslapping mine superintendent, greeted his men with production talk: "We'll make 100,000 this month, pretty good, eh?" And the men, proud to be a part of the last big push, basked in his praise.

With all his pep talks, his joshing with the men he has worked with for the past 20 years, Lipensky is uncertain where he will land after Cornwall closes.

It was Lipensky who had to make the fateful recommendation that the underground shafts be abandoned, who provided the hard dollar-and-

cents analysis that the mine no longer could pay. The men know this, and they respect his decision.

"It is a shame, a great shame," says Lipensky. "There never will be another crew like this, never again such esprit de corps. Cornwall is the last place I know where the men and the management are so close together, where there is no ivory tower. It was Camelot here: it only rained at night."

Sensing the drama of the last game of a great team, the men who took transfers to other plants began asking for a last crack at their jobs, just to play in the final inning.

High on a tower overlooking the valley, hulking George Yocklovich, a veteran of 20 years underground, stood hosing down a load of ore, turning to point to the house where he was born and has lived all his 45 years, to the woods where he shot his first deer.

Sent to Steelton to work in a labor pool after the flood, Yocklovich was miserable. He missed the underground, the camaraderie of the 14-man crew he had come to regard as his family.

"Every day, at the mill in Steelton, I had a different job. It wasn't like here, where we always got along pretty good. So when a job opened up here for the last two months, I asked to come back. I went to my wife and we talked it over, how it might affect my chances in the future. 'Go ahead,' she said, 'That's 60 miles. I won't worry about you.' And, ya know, she's right, it's more dangerous on the road than it ever was here."

Down in the pit, Constantine Panessa, a tough, wiry little man with friendly eyes and a sunbaked face, was happily dumping 7,000 pounds of high explosives in holes in the ground, getting ready for the day's ore shot.

Tete, they call him, and he relishes the name and his job as Cornwall's number one blaster. Twice a day he strings the fuses and sounds the alarm that tenses the townsfolk, before he touches off the shock that rips loose 10,000 tons of ore to make the next day's payload.

With only two years left until retirement, the 46-year-old veteran of 28 years in the mines doesn't like to look beyond the end of this month.

Tete, one of five Panessas to work Cornwall, went underground at 18 after high school for 70 cents an hour. He now makes six times that and $100 a week in overtime and

"I had to go into the mine. But I hated it."

doubletime. He will lose that when the mine shuts down.

Still, he is grateful for the good things the company has done for him. He rents a lovely stone company house in Miner's Village for $29 a month, and he will have a chance to buy it soon when Bethlehem Steel sells its property.

He has lived in the house with its garden and lawns and shade trees since he married Gloria Chernich, daughter of a 45-year Cornwall miner. Tete and Gloria love the house and the town and the picturesque valley and will not leave it.

Taking a long pull on a cold beer, Tete Panessa leans back from the kitchen table. He stares out over his lawn toward the moon-like mountain of slag that overshadows the village, toward the open pit where he learned to love the sunlight.

One day soon, the pit will become a lake, and there will be carp and sunfish and maybe even trout in it, gliding through the shadows that hide an ancient way of life.

"When I grew up here," says Tete, unsmiling now, "I was poor. We didn't have any money. There was no opportunity. You went to work or got out.

"I had to go into the mine. But I hated it, always. I wanted better for our son. I wouldn't hear of him following me into the mine.

"The company has been good to us, I can't complain. They always kept the house painted and papered, and they didn't bother us for the rent when we struck them for 16 weeks. I have no gripe coming. But I'd never do it again." □

WILLARD RANDALL is a freelance writer who is currently working on a book about the American Revolutionary War—"from the soldiers' point of view."