

THE BIRTH OF REGIONAL PLANNING PRIDC & LENOWISCO

(“To Hell with them, we’ll do it ourselves.”)

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By: Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.
Big Stone Gap, Va.

Background

The coal industry was the life’s blood of Southwest Virginia at mid 20th Century. But King Coal was in trouble. The major uses of coal had been for home heating and to power the steam locomotives of the nation’s railroads. Its mining had been labor intensive. But in the late 1940’s a sudden shift to oil for heating, and the dieselization of the railroads, had come close to shutting the coal industry down. This dieselization of the railroads caused the lay off of a large percentage of the railroad workers. This, together with the mechanization of mining that had occurred at the same time, severely threatened the local economies which were based upon the coal industry. Southwest Virginia suffered an economic collapse as profound as that during the Great Depression.

The small towns of the coal mining region were much different then than now. Instead of large absentee owned chain stores that sell everything from soup to nuts under one roof, there were a multitude of family owned small businesses. These small merchants were inherently community boosters.

The Powell River Industrial Development Corporation

In 1954 the merchants and professional people of the Towns of Appalachia and of Big Stone Gap began a discussion to see if they could pull themselves out of this economic morass by their own boot straps. There seems to have been significant discussion and ground work done before records began to be kept. The first mention of this effort is in the August 12, 1954 Big Stone Gap “Post”. A combined meeting of the Appalachia and Big Stone Gap Lion’s Clubs was addressed by an official of the Virginia State Chamber of Commerce, who was not encouraging. He stated, “A rough and uncertain road through a highly competitive field must be traveled by citizens of the Richmond District (an old voting district that coincided with the Powell River water shed of Wise County) if they are to obtain industries.”

The beloved W. C. Schott, General Manager of the Stonega Coke and Coal Co. (later Westmoreland) had preceded the main address by giving statistics on mechanization. He stated that in 1952 his company had employed 3,200 men in 17

mines, and as of the current date they employed only 900. The statistics were actually even more extreme, as during World War II the company had employed in the neighborhood of 5,000 men, and before another five years were to pass, their employment would be down to 300 some men at only one mine, Cross Brook. He stated that the economic hope of the region lay in research to develop more uses for coal, and not in recruiting other industries.

The community boosters of the two towns were not to be discouraged, and Sept. 2nd found “many Wise – Lee citizens” attending a meeting at the Big Stone Gap High School auditorium, where Gordon Reckard, Consultant to the Area Development Division of the Virginia State Department of Commerce, told them that they “must work together.”

The “Post” of Sept. 16, 1954 records that the interested people of Appalachia and of Big Stone Gap were well along in organizing their efforts. Even though this “regionalism” involved only two small towns, separated by only three miles, it was a ground shaking change in relationships and attitudes. If there is a date that should be lionized as the birth of regionalism, it is this one. They had already chosen a name, The Powell River Industrial Development Corporation. Stock was being sold at \$1,000 a share. This was a significant amount of money at a time when a soft drink cost six cents, and a small loaf of bread nineteen cents. This donation of a \$1,000 was money that these small merchants did not really have. Most were facing economic ruin. PRIDC met this date, and adopted bylaws, and elected J. N. Donaldson, owner of an insurance company in Appalachia, as its president.

In October PRIDC was addressed by R. E. Bisha, the industrial agent of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. In expressing interest in the new industries to be developed in the Powell River area, he opined that “People are the main resource of the area.”

The November 18th “Post” listed the stockholders. I will add some identifying information in so far as I know it.

Gap Broadcasting	WLSB owned by W. H. Wren of Big Stone Gap
McCorkle Lumber Co.	owned by M. R. McCorkle of Big Stone Gap
Powell Valley Drive-In Theater	owned by M. K. Murphy of East Stone Gap
James B. Kelly	owner of the Plymouth, Dodge, Chrysler agency in Big Stone Gap
Clinch Haven Farms	dairy owned by D. Terpstra of Powell Valley
Fleenor Motor Company	Studebaker Agency owned by Lawrence Fleenor, Sr. of Appalachia

Blake Motor Company	Ford agency owned by Mr. Blakemore of Appalachia
C & D Reality Co.	owned by H. L. Culbertson and J. N. Donaldson of Appalachia
J. A. Gardner	owner of Gardner Insurance Co. of Appalachia, and County Clerk
Fullers	a department store owned by David Fraley of Appalachia
Henry S. Stout	owner of the wholesale Coland Candy Company of Big Stone Gap
J. N. Donaldson	owner of Donaldson Ins. Co. of Appalachia
Powell Furniture Co.	Ray Gardner of Big Stone Gap
Coughlin's Garage	the International, Nash, and Jeep dealership owned by Paul Coughlin of Big Stone Gap
J. G. Newsom	owner of Newsom's Furniture of Appalachia
Glessee Martin	postmistress of Big Stone Gap and owner of the Touraine Apts. of Big Stone Gap
Kelly Television	owned by C. O. Thomas of Appalachia
Thomas Dry Cleaners	operated Wise Concrete in Big Stone Gap
B. S. Gillespie	administrator of the local VA office
J. O. Youell	
E. E. Thompson	
General Supply Co.	auto parts store in Big Stone Gap owned by Roland Rose & Emerson Salyer
K. & M. Dry Cleaning	owned by Tommy Masters of Big Stone Gap
Big Stone Esso Station	owned by Paul Quillen
Wm. Black Construction Co.	located in Big Stone Gap, but owned by Ralph Black of Appalachia
William Botts, Jr.	owner of Bott's Pharmacy of Big Stone Gap
Holding Funeral Home Office	owner by W. I. Holding of Big Stone Gap
Jack Weiss	
Stone and Maddox	the Gulf Oil Distributorship in Big Stone Gap owned by Bill Stone of BSG and Eugene Maddox of Appalachia
C. G. Robinette	owner of Robinette Steel in Big Stone Gap
Dr. Frank Handy	physician in Appalachia
H. D. Mooneyhan	owner of Mooney's Autoparts in Big Stone Gap
Wise Concrete Co.	owned by Dr. Handy, Dr. W. H. Hankins, & Carl Johnson; located in Big Stone Gap
Kelly Chevrolet Sales	owned by Earl Kelly of Big Stone Gap
Southwest Insurance Co.	owned by A. L. Witt of Big Stone Gap
Gibson Lumber Co.	owned by John Gibson of Appalachia
Wolfe Transfer and Storage Co.	owned by Hershel Wolfe of Appalachia

J. C. Boston	manager of Old Dominion Power in Big Stone Gap
Royal Laundry Co.	owned by Mr. Claude Dixon of Big Stone Gap
Powell Valley Oil Co.	Shell distributorship in Big Stone Gap owned by Joe Smiddy
Wise Printing Co.	“The Post”, owned by Carl Knight of Big Stone Gap
D. C. Prescott	part owner of the Stonega Coke and Coal Co.
Stanley Botts	attorney of Big Stone Gap
C. G. Deter	(may refer to C. G. Jeter, manager of the Virginia Employment Commission in Appalachia)
W. R. Young	owner of the Hurt – Young Hardware of Appalachia
Bob Carter	
S. Boslow	owner of the Novelty Clothing Store in Appalachia
L. A. Pierce	owner of Pierce’s Grocery in Big Stone Gap
C. O. Thomas	owner of Thomas’s Dry Cleaners in Appalachia, who bought stock in both his private and corporate accounts
L & M Service Station	Texico Station in Big Stone Gap owned by Walter Marrs

Equally remarkable is the list of businesses not represented in PRIDC. Among these are the largest businesses, and especially those with absentee ownership, and those affiliated with the coal industry. This list includes: The Stonega Coke and Coal Company (present Westmoreland Coal Co.), the Virginia Coal and Iron Company (present Penn Virginia Corp.), and their wholly owned subsidiaries; the Interstate Railroad, the First National Bank of Appalachia, the Virginia Wholesale, the Central Supply, the Clear Creek Water Co.; and the independent Southern Railroad and the Pet Dairy, and the Southern Maid Dairy, and the First National Bank of Big Stone Gap. In fairness, it should be noted that Mr. D. C. Prescott, one of several owners of Stonega Coke and Coal Co. and of the Virginia Coal and Iron Co., did subscribe in his own behalf.

In December PRIDC published the findings of a survey they had conducted which showed that there were 8,096 persons available for employment from within a thirty mile radius of Appalachia.

In January 1955 PRIDC had its first annual meeting, and elected twenty directors,

but in February the number was reduced to five each from Appalachia and Big Stone Gap. The President, J. N. Donaldson, reported that several hundred pieces of literature had been sent to various firms and railroad companies plugging the area's resources and industrial advantages". The treasurer's report showed \$26,150 on hand.

The April 14th issue of the "Post" stated that "An eight page advertisement featuring the PRIDC of Appalachia and Big Stone Gap will be included in the "Manufacture's Record", a national magazine of business. The advertisement will appear in the May issue, which will feature "The Virginia Story" in cooperation with the Department of Conservation and Development."

The May 5th issue revealed that PRIDC was exploring the possibilities of a fishing lake at the head of Roaring Branch. By the 12th a "Lake Group" had been named, which included members of PRIDC and "additional members". By June 30th, however, the site of the proposed lake had been changed to John's Bottom near the community of Keokee.

The only industry that PRIDC succeeded in getting to locate in the Richmond District was a sewing factory that operated for a couple of years in the second floor of the Appalachia Hardware building. It then went out of business, taking all of PRIDC's money with it.

This was the last gasp for air for most of the businesses who had participated in this historic and tragic effort. Most were out of business before the decade was out. Today, there are only five of the businesses that participated in PRIDC still open. However, these tenacious people were not defeated. They licked their wounds, and tried to draw lessons from their failure. They decided that regional planning was a sound concept, but that the region had to be larger; that local governments rather than merchants should be the constituents; and that taxes rather than donations should fund the project. This last move would have the practical effect of recruiting those businesses that had boycotted PRIDC. The two tangible lasting legacies of PRIDC are, therefore, the belief in regionalism in industrial and economic development, and the plans for Lake Keokee that were left to others to bring to fruition.

Tri-County Industrial Authority

Riley's Coffee Shop was a locally well known restaurant in Big Stone Gap. In 1959 some of the survivors of PRIDC called an informal meeting of citizens of the Counties of Lee, Scott, Wise, Dickenson, Buchanan, Tazewell, and Russell Counties, which was held in the back room of Riley's. They discussed their lessons learned by their PRIDC experience, and bought into the principles of planning on a larger regional basis, and of the governmental bodies with their power of taxation being the constituents. They formed the Region One Development Corporation, which functioned for two years. However, the size of the region thus represented was too large to be manageable. One

Buchanan County official summarized the situation by saying, “You just can’t get from Grundy to Big Stone Gap without going somewhere else to start.” In 1961 the northeastern four counties broke off and formed the Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission, while the Counties of Lee, Wise, Scott and the City of Norton formed the Tri-County Industrial Authority.

The Tri-County Industrial Authority had no professional staff, and was largely the same old group of public spirited citizens that had been promoting diversification of the region’s industrial base. Their understanding of what was needed began to expand, however, as they soon found themselves planning for water and sewer, and flood control projects, which were needed before there was any hope of attracting industry. This growth of vision, together with their monograph entitled “Summary of Resources”, compiled with the help of the Tennessee Valley Authority, was this group’s greatest lasting contribution.

Lenowisco

In the meantime, the State of Virginia was slowly awakening to the need for regional planning, and had passed facilitating legislation. LENOWISCO (Lee, Norton, Wise, and Scott) was formally born March 11, 1965 in Riley’s Coffee Shop. Its original board of directors is as follows:

C. F. Jester	manager of the City of Norton
Clyde Cridlin	attorney from Lee County
B. W. Frazier	petroleum distributor from Scott County
H. J Rhodes	highway engineer from Wise County
C. F. Smith	farmer from Lee County
Ralph Miner	manager of the Powell Valley Electric Coop
Burley Sloan	farmer and businessman from Scott County
L. B. Bright	farmer and realtor from Scott County
H. S. Stout	candy wholesaler from Wise County
J. Earl Hilton	lumber and supply dealer of Wise County
W. L. Mainous	banker from Wise County

Another slightly different list adds W. P. Kanto, auto dealer from Norton.

The State of Virginia forwarded an invoice on the State Treasury for \$5,000, a sum that was never received. A member of the board of LENOWISCO angrily observed, “To Hell with them, we’ll do it ourselves.” The author of this statement was Henry S. Stout, who had become chairman of the board, and whom you will recognize from the list of PRIDC boosters. LENOWISCO set up its office on Wood Ave. in what is now a vacant lot roughly across the street from Miner’s Park. Its first director was by

profession an Industrial Development specialist. Its mission was to attract new industry in order to create jobs. Two more sewing factories and a third industry were attracted, but a greater understanding was gained that infrastructure that would be appealing to industries would have to be built before there was any hope of attracting much industry.

This same year Congress created the Appalachian Regional Commission, whose mission was to provide for the economic and social development of this entire part of the United States. They had large resources of both funds and of personnel, and were anxious to pour both into projects within the Appalachian Region. All that they needed were local planning groups to use to do the spade work in smaller divisions of the larger Region. And by either good fortune, or by dumb luck, here was LENOWISCO, already up and running. The ARC soon came to consider this agency as the foremost regional planning group in the entire Appalachian Region, and they poured funds and expertise into the three county area through its auspices. Perhaps the three most significant of its early victories were the modern US 23, Lonesome Pine Hospital, and Mountain Empire Community College. But they soon launched themselves into a multitude of water projects, sewer systems, and even bought a street washing truck, which they rented to the local governments.

The Duffield Industrial Park

Having vigorously developed regional infrastructure, LENOWISCO returned to its original mission, the creation of jobs in a diversified industrial base. In order to accomplish this, an industrial park was needed. The requirements for such a park were a large expanse of flat land, ready access to both a highway and to a railroad, available water and sewer, and a central location within the region. Duffield was the only location that came close to qualifying, and in 1969 LENOWISCO bought a 92.8 acre portion of the Alcie Nickels farm, along with several other small tracts. In 1978 the 400 acre farm of Gregory Thomas was added.

The History and Pedigree of the Thomas and Nickels Lands

Since frontier days Duffield (known originally as Little Flat Lick) had been recognized by speculators as a site of potential growth and development. In 1855 Samuel Duff, from across Powell Mountain at the head of Wallen's Creek, bought 2000 acres (Virginia Land Office 9-210) that included the Nickels land plus some of the Thomas land. When the railroad came in 1890 the depot was named Duffield after the estate of either Samuel, or of his father, William P. Duff, from across the mountain on Wallen's Creek. The Nickels and Duff families were intermarried.

The Nickels land now contains the water tanks of the industrial park water

system, but the Thomas land is where most of the industrial development is located, plus the entirety of Thomas Village. This tract has quite a heritage.

John Guntner was an employee of the Interstate Railroad in the early days of the Town of Appalachia. He was a speculator by temperament, and bought a farm in a bend in the river in Appalachia and sold it off as lots. This section became the “New Bottom” section of town, and Guntner made enough money to build himself a mansion high on a hill above town. In 1925 he and a mining inspector, Creed Kelly, from Big Stone Gap bought 400 acres in Duffield as a speculation. The land bordered the intersection of the two highways in the community, as well as the railroad. In 1939 Guntner became ill, and could not pay the mortgage on the land, and it was auctioned off by the State in front of Goble’s Hotel at Duffield. The buyer was his brother-in-law, Gregory Thomas, also of Appalachia. Thomas was the local Plymouth, DeSoto, REO, and Indian Motorcycle dealer, but also had a strong penchant for real estate speculation. Thomas had his land tenant farmed for forty years before his vision of development came to fruition after his death.

Duffield Development Authority The Industrial Park

LENOWISCO set up a separate subdivision to function specifically as the overseer of the Duffield Industrial Park. It has a separate Board of Directors, and separate position as administrator, though for most of its existence, the position of head of LENOWISCO and the head of the Authority were occupied by the same person, Bruce K. Robinette. Mr. Robinette became Executive Director of LENOWISCO in 1968, and went into semiretirement three decades later, retaining the administrative role in the Development Authority. It is interesting to note that Mr. Robinette, though having grown up in East Stone Gap in Wise County, was born and spent his early years at Pattonville, a stone’s throw from Duffield. Similarly, Henry Stout, though being thought of as being from Big Stone Gap, was born and raised across Powell’s Mountain from Pattonville at Sticklebyville.

The first phase of the park was flood control work done under the auspices of the Tennessee Valley Authority. This was done in 1970. Water and sewer construction was completed a year later. The first plant to locate within the park was Virginia Birmingham Bolt, which made roof support bolts for the coal mining industry. It employed 45 men. The second plant was PAK-Mor, a manufacturer of refuse bodies for garbage trucks. It opened in 1973 with 125 employees. Both of these plants are now gone, but others have come. Duffield is destined to be the new home for a regional jail, which will serve the jurisdictions that owned the Industrial Park. The Duffield Industrial Park is one of the largest industrial parks in the southeastern United States.

The industrial park is now full, and the Development Authority scheduled to turn

its remaining management functions over to the government of Scott County, and to eventually disband itself.

Regional Planning

LENOWISCO itself focused on planning, and the channeling of Federal funds to regional projects, such as water, sewer, waste management, and highways; and the gathering of statistics necessary for such efforts. It assisted local jurisdictions apply for law enforcement grants, recreational grants, and to do local planning.

Most fittingly, LENOWISCO actually implemented the dreams of PRIDC and got Lake Keokee constructed at the John's Bottom site.

Thomas Village

The shortage of housing in the region has been a major impediment to its industrial development. As a more specific problem, the Town of Clinchport, Va., had been ruined by flood in 1977. The Tennessee Valley Authority purchased 68 homes in the Town of Clinchport, through the Scott Co. Redevelopment Authority, and sought a site for "The New Clinchport". In order to address these related needs, the Duffield Development Authority created a new residential development arm, the Southwest Development Corporation, which took the hilly northern 103.6 acre portion of the old Thomas farm, and laid out the streets and utilities for a major housing development. Additional funding was obtained from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Farmer's Home Administration. The project included 4.6 acres for commercial development, 1.5 acres for two churches, 1.6 acres for a community center, 18.8 acres for multifamily units, and 60.2 acres for 129 conventional single family homes, and the remainder for open space and for streets. Its streets were named after significant local community leaders, but the development, itself, was named 'Thomas Village' in honor of Gregory Thomas. In so doing, LENOWISCO demonstrated its soul, in that it honored its heritage, even while sculpting the future.

Legacy

"LENOWISCO made Regionalism a household word throughout the coalfields and Virginia". – Bruce K. Robinette

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- 6) The Big Stone Gap "Post", issues of 8-12-54, 9-2-54, 9-16-54, 10-7-54, 10-28-54, 11-18-54, 12-16-54, 1-27-55, 2-3-55, 4-14-55, 5-5-55, 5-12-55, 6-30-55
- 7) The author's recollections of conversations with his father, Lawrence J. Fleenor, Sr., and of the author's own knowledge
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