

# Bluefield wv essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Bluefield is located in southern West Virginia along the foothills of one of the most beautiful mountain valley settings to be found anywhere. The city stands at 2,612 feet above sea level in the East River Mountain, making it West Virginia's loftiest incorporated community. (Greater Bluefield Area Community Profile) With the average temperature in January at 35° F and July at only 71° F, Bluefield is nicknamed Nature's Air Conditioned City. In fact, a tradition of the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce is to serve free lemonade to the residents and visitors when the temperature reaches an official 90° F. It's so seldom when the 90° F reading occurs that when the magic number is reached, the promotion often receives national publicity, particularly in the sweltering cities of the south. (Bluefield, West Virginia and Virginia, 2)

Bluefield belongs to Mercer County, named in honor of General Hugh Mercer of the Revolution and is considered to be the Gateway to Southern Hospitality and Black Gold. Bluefield's neighboring towns include Bluefield, VA, Virginia's Tallest Town; Princeton, the county seat; and Bramwell, The Millionaires Town. According to the 1995 census, its population reaches almost 12,600, making it West Virginia's seventh largest city. (Southern West Virginia's Visitors Guide)

The city's early history dates back to 1780 when two Revolutionary soldiers, Andrew Davidson and Richard Bailey, built the Davidson-Bailey Fort to protect their families from hostile Indians. It is said that soon afterwards, however, a band of Indians captured Mrs. Davidson and her two daughters. Along the way, she gave birth to a child, which the Indians drowned, and her daughters were tied to a tree and shot in her presence. After searching for

many months, Mr. Davidson found his wife in Canada living with some farmers. (Rankin, 2)

As late as 1880, only four families resided in the present site of Bluefield the Baileys, the Davidsons, the Higginbothams, and the Wilsons. It was named Higginbotham Summit. (History of Bluefield, West Virginia) These families allowed the Norfolk and Western Railway to lay an 80-foot track through their village. A few years later, when the railroad continued through the valuable Pocahontas Coal Field, some five hundred people settled into Summit. In 1885, when a post office was being established, some local women named it (not realizing they were naming a future city) Bluefields after the chicory flowers in bloom.

On November 16, 1889, after many businesses had begun to flock to the growing town, the question of incorporating Bluefield was placed before the public. When the polls were closed, the commissioner reported that 177 votes were cast in favor of incorporation. (Rankin, 7) Soon after, the first bank, appropriately named the First National Bank, and the first standing newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, were organized.

Coal was the key to Bluefields success. The area of Mercer, McDowell, Wayne, and Mingo Counties in West Virginia, and Tazewell, Buchanan, and Wise Counties in Virginia was known throughout the United States as the Great Pocahontas Coal Field. (Bluefield, West Virginia and Virginia, 13) Bluefield was the headquarters of the Pocahontas Operators Association. Mining for this all-purpose fuel provided jobs for hundreds of people. In fact, in 1932, West Virginia took the lead from Pennsylvania as the largest coal

producing state and has held that honor since. In 1940, more than one-third of the states population was directly dependent on the coal industry for food and shelter. (Nelson, Interview)

Despite the seemingly roseate picture painted here of the prosperity of the coal mining industry in southern West Virginia, there is the seamier side. The area has had its share of labor difficulties, stemming primarily from the fine disregard of the owners for the safety, health, social and economic welfare of its workers. (Rankin, 19) Many outraged employees went on strike. Then in July, 1935, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, guaranteeing for all time the right of industry to collective bargaining and forbidding employers to interfere with labors exercise of these rights or to discriminate against union members. (Rankin, 20)

Another serious problem with mining was the maintenance of law and order. The organization of the West Virginia Coal Police during the 1920s was prompted by the need for protection of the property of the coal operators as well as the rights of the innocent citizen. (Rankin, 20) One example of this is the Glen Alum payroll robbery of 1914, in which eleven people were killed.

Also, there was always the danger of sudden death. Mine explosions were very common in the industry. The death of one hundred fifty miners in the explosion of the East Mine owned by the Southwest Improvement Company in March, 1886, is the first on record. The death of fifty men at the Pocahontas Colliery Company in 1906 and of 67 persons three months laterpoint to the safety in coal fields of the Bluefield area. (Rankin, 21)

During this time, Bluefields economy was soaring. As a physical symbol of the citys position of leadership, the West Virginia Hotel was constructed downtown in 1923. At twelve stories high, it is still the tallest building in southern West Virginia. The magnificent hotel, a showpiece of the region, boasted superb service, a barbershop, newsstand, huge ballroom for civic functions and dances (West Virginias Historic Downtown Bluefield) The inside resembled the Titanicand it had a shoeshine stand called You Are Nex. (Not next, but nex.) It held a whole row of seats where black employees not only shined shoes, but also cleaned and blocked felt hats. They played music and drummed out the beat with their rags. (Nelson, Interview)

In 1929, when the Depression hit, suicide was rampant in Bluefield. The homeless came door to door to beg. They would stow away on the railroad cars traveling to different towns looking for work or food. Kids would run down to the train tracks and insult the drivers. The drivers would pretend to be angry and throw coal at them, and the kids would pick it up and carry it home. (Law, Interview) The neighboring town of Bramwell, with as many as nineteen millionaires, was per capita the richest town in America. (Historic Bramwell)

After the city recovered from its downward spiral, Bluefield once again became the center of commerce. Shops and tourists flocked the area. It was a special treat every year when my family would go to Bluefield. We would spend all day shopping downtown; it really was the highlight of the year. (Brooks, Interview) Bluefield was the hub of the whole area for industry. At Christmas time all the stores were decoratedand people came from all over to eat at Jimmys Restaurant. (Nelson, Interview)

On December 7, 1941, World War II brought Bluefield to a standstill. Food was rationed and everything was canned, dried, or preserved. You couldn't buy tires or gas. People had to be put on a waiting list to buy a car. Women couldn't get nylon hose so they painted their legs with makeup and drew a line down the back of their legs with eye brow pencil. (Nelson, Interview) Air raid drills began and bomb shelters sprung up in people's homes and downtown.

When the war finally ended, Bluefield turned back to coal to rebuild itself. Prices began to rise. Catholic schools became popular and the quality of education increased. In the early 1980s, Mercer Mall was built. Parking had always been a problem for downtown shoppers. This combined with the convenience of mall shopping led to the extinction of downtown as a shopping area. (Nelson, Interview) When the tunnel was constructed through the East River Mountain, travelers no longer had to drive through the town and go over the mountain. The economy once again dropped off.

The 1980s also saw the decline of the coal industry. Much of the coal was being shipped out of the state with nothing in return and union greed continued to grow. There were numerous union strikes led by John L. Lewis. Many jobs were replaced by equipment and automation. Highway 77 became known as hillbilly highway due to the numerous people leaving the area. (Nelson, Interview) It seemed like when the roads came in, the people went out. (Law, Interview)

Today Bluefield is a quiet city that takes pride in its medical and educational standards. The newest hospital is the Bluefield Regional Medical Center that

offers a level of care that's unmatched at any facility within 100 miles.

(Bluefield Regional Medical Center) Quality education at all levels is also top priority. The Bluefield area is proud to offer quality facilities and curricula that prepare the young and older citizens for the future. (Bluefield, West Virginia and Virginia, 4) A prime example of the city's educational system is John F. Nash. Born and raised in Bluefield, he received the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economic Science. He now has a boulevard named in his honor and a permanent exhibit in the Bluefield Arts and Science Center.

Although the city promotes itself as an ideal retirement community, Bluefield has its share of entertainment and festivities for young and old alike. Every year in December it has a Festival of Lights display featuring fifty decorated Christmas trees. The city is also home to the Country Craft and Guild Show, Bluefield Coal Show, and Bluefield Comcast Mountain Festival. (West Virginia's Southern Gateway) These exciting events can be found in Yakkity Yak, the newly remodeled city park. A modern playground (built completely by volunteers), a softball field, lighted tennis courts, exercise and bike trails, an auditorium, youth center, and the Ridge Runner Railroad can be enjoyed by all throughout the year.

Also located in the city park, Mitchell Stadium is the home football stadium for both high schools and Bowen Field, the home baseball field for the area high schools and the annual Coppinger Tournament. (Bluefield, West Virginia and Virginia, 13) Local schools have always been in fierce competition and are regularly breaking school records. Bowen Field is also the home of the Bluefield Orioles. The team has the distinction of having the longest affiliation (over forty years) in Minor League Baseball with their parent club,

the Baltimore Orioles. Another interesting fact is that Cal Ripkin started his career with the Bluefield Os. (Law, Interview)

To experience a scenic view of Bluefield and the East River Valley at 3500 feet above sea level, visit the East River Mountain Overlook. First opened on September 2, 1960, it was made possible by hundreds of volunteers and organizations who donated time, effort, and funds to the project. In the first two months of operation, the overlook was visited by a record 7,700 people coming from 42 states and 26 foreign countries. (East River Mountain Overlook Park) Now, newly renovated, it features an observation deck with binoculars, restrooms, hiking trails, and picnic shelters with tables and grills.

In an effort to expand for the future, Bluefield is in the process of constructing Bluefield Intermediate, a new school that will hold all of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students in the area. Upon its completion, the smaller Cumberland Heights Elementary School will be closed. It is planned to be operational for the 2000-2001 school year. (Crockett, Interview)

Through nearby major highways, Bluefield is easily accessible to the surrounding areas. Interstate 77, which runs from the Great Lakes to Florida, and U. S. Route 460 are just minutes away connecting the Greater Bluefield area with major routes for tourism and shipping. (Southern West Virginia Visitors Guide) Giving the area better access for new business development, Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act in 1991 that include corridor I-73/74 which will run from Detroit to Charleston, S. C. through Bluefield, W. V. (Bluefield, West Virginia and Virginia, 7) With the



addition of the new highway, Bluefield will have the opportunity to once again grow and prosper as a tourist area.

Bibliography:

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bluefield, West Virginia and Virginia. West Virginia: Professional Advertising, Inc., 1998.

Brooks, Diane. Personal Interview. 20 Feb. 1999.

Crockett, Rhonda. Personal Interview. 22 Apr. 1999.

Historic Bramwell. West Virginia: Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau, n. d.

East River Mountain Overlook Park. West Virginia: Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, n. d.

Greater Bluefield Area Community Profile. West Virginia: n. p., n. d.

Law, Ollie. Personal Interview. 20 Feb. 1999.

Nelson, James. Personal Interview. 21 Feb. 1999.

Rankin, John R. The Early History and Development of Bluefield, West Virginia. Virginia: Commonwealth Press, Inc., 1976.

Southern West Virginias Visitors Guide. West Virginia: Southern West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureau, n. d.

West Virginias Historic Downtown Bluefield. West Virginia: Bluestone Convention and Visitors Bureau, n. d.

West Virginias Southern Gateway. West Virginia: Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau, n. d.