The Year in Review

2009 has been a busy year as new projects are started and continuing projects move forward toward completion. A major milestone was achieved with the approval of the National Coal Heritage Area Management Action Plan by the Secretary of Interior. The approval, coming in early January of 2009, has moved us to a different funding level and in FY 2010 the National Coal Heritage Area will receive over $300,000 from our National Park Service partner to continue the work of implementing our approved plan. Another milestone was achieved with one of our federal partners with the designation of the northern portion of the Coal Heritage Trail—stretching from Beckley to Ansted—as a National Scenic Byway. A designation ceremony in Washington, DC was held in October where the designation plaque was presented to representatives of the Coal Heritage Trail and the WV Scenic Byways program (see photograph).

Other projects during the past year have included the installation of four interpretive kiosks, located along the Coal Heritage Trail (see page 3) and assistance to the Paint Creek Scenic Byway in moving forward with their designation and development. AmeriCorps*VISTA Ronn Raszetnik has been of tremendous assistance to the Paint Creek Scenic Trail steering committee by developing their website, creating a rack card promoting the PCST, assisting with the development of interpretive kiosks, and organizing a volunteer clean up day along Paint Creek.

A photography exhibit, Coal Camps, Coal Miners and Molasses Making, featuring the work of Marion Post Wolcott and Ben Shahn, recently debuted at the Wyoming Campus of Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College and is now traveling throughout the region for others to view. The images in this exhibit were part of a series of photographs from across the nation commissioned by the Farm Security Administration in the early 1930s and were designed to show ordinary people involved in their everyday life. This exhibit was curated by WV photographer Betty Rivard and was funded with a grant from the WV Humanities Council.

Other important projects have included the redesign and reprinting of the Coal Heritage Trail brochure, joint sponsorship of an academic class focusing on coal heritage with Concord University, and development of a coal history calendar for 2010.

We enjoyed another successful year operating the Nick J. Rahall Coal Heritage Interpretive Center in Bramwell. Visitation for the year was greatly enhanced by the publication of an article about Bramwell that first appeared in the Washington Post and was then carried in approximately 15 other newspapers in the mid-Atlantic region. Gift shop sales continue to rise with sales for this year nearly doubling.

Plans for the coming year include the awarding of educational mini-grants to schools and other youth serving organizations, continued planning for restoration of a historic structure donated to the NCHA for use as a headquarters and interpretive center, the restoration and interpretation of a series of historic coke ovens, and the development of an interpretive center in partnership with the Country Roads Scenic Byway. Through these and other projects, and with the continued support of our Congressional delegation and our state legislative representatives, the NCHA/CHHA and its partners continue the work of preserving elements of this uniquely American story and sharing that story with the world.
Play Ball: A Celebration of Coalfield Baseball

In the early years of the West Virginia coal fields, the game of baseball played an important role in the social fabric of the coal camps. In the coalfields, baseball was truly America's game. Baseball games created a community spirit, bringing together black and white, immigrant and native born. It was on the playing fields that the immigrants, who came to mine coal, truly became a part of America. Initially, the owners supported the teams in order to instill a sense of pride in the miners and the coal camp community. It was a social outlet for many in the coal mining communities. Some historians have said the owners sponsored the games to keep the men occupied and prevented the men from having idle time to think about their lot in life and to keep them from organizing and joining the unions. But the majority of the coal miners played ball for the sense of competition, camaraderie and community spirit. Many of the owners enjoyed having a team they could be proud of and that gave them bragging rights when their teams were victorious, some even going as far as hiring men who were good ball players, giving them comfortable jobs above ground.

To honor this tradition and collect information about coalfield baseball players the Coal Heritage Highway Authority and National Coal Heritage Area sponsored a one day event celebrating the traditions of coalfield baseball. Speakers for the event included Dr. William Akin, author of West Virginia Baseball: A History; Lynn Sutter, author of Bat, Ball and Bitumen: Baseball in the Southern Appalachians, and a panel of local scholars including Dr. Stuart McGehee, Paul Nyden and Gene Worthington.

Over 100 people, including the real stars of the day-former coalfield baseball player, attended the event. Special thanks to students from Concord University who assisted with registration and collecting oral histories, George Bragg of GEM Photography who provided a display of historic baseball photographs and Axe, mascot of the WV Power baseball team.

National Service: Getting Things Done in the National Coal Heritage Area

AmeriCorps programs continue to be an asset to the work of developing the Coal Heritage Trail and National Coal Heritage Area. Our AmeriCorps*VISTA project continues to be strong with twenty-one AmeriCorps*VISTA members serving with non-profits and governmental agencies throughout the region helping to build capacity and strengthen programs and projects. Fifteen summer associate VISTA members served with organizations and governmental agencies.

Through these two programs, approximately $115,000 in education awards will be provided to assist these members in furthering their post-secondary education.

In October we were also awarded funding from the WV Commission for National and Community Service to implement an "Education Award Only" AmeriCorps program to provide education awards to local college students who provide service as interns to local groups and projects. The Southern West Virginia Internship program provides real-world experiences to college students allowing them to apply their academic learning while also providing valuable services to organizations and communities within the region. Students from Southern WV Community and Technical College, Marshall University, and Concord University are participating in the program.

We were also pleased this year to be selected as service sites for a team from the Southern Campus of the National Civilian Community Corps, a campus based AmeriCorps program. This ten person team known as Delta 2 worked with community members at Wolf Creek Park in Fayette County to construct 400 feet of boardwalk across fragile wetlands which expands the hiking/biking trails currently being developed there. In the Summers County community of Talcott, Delta 2 assisted in the clearing of almost a mile of new trail at the John Henry Historic Park and worked with community volunteers to remove tons of trash and debris from the site. We offer a special thank you to Delta 2 for their assistance in moving these projects forward.
Coal Heritage Projects Recognized as Outstanding Heritage Tourism Projects

The Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine and the Winding Gulf Restoration Organization, also known as W.e.G.R.O.w., were honored by the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia with the 2009 awards for outstanding Heritage Tourism projects. The Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine, since opening for underground tours over 40 years ago, has introduced thousands of visitors and local school children to the important story of how coal built West Virginia and helped industrialize the United States. The City of Beckley has been committed to partnering with the Coal Heritage Trail and National Coal Heritage Area to preserve history and make coal themed heritage tourism a success for southern West Virginia. The centerpiece of the master plan for development at the mine complex, the 15,000 square foot visitor and interpretive center, themed as a company store, was opened to the public on June 30, 2008. This new center tells the coal heritage story in a thoughtful and compelling manner and complements the recreated coal camp community that is there.

The development of the new interpretive center is identified as a priority project in the Coal Heritage Trail Corridor Management Plan and in the National Coal Heritage Area Management Plan. This 3.5 million dollar project was completed with $250,000 of National Coal Heritage Area funding as well as $1,000,000 in Coal Heritage Trail funding. Others contributing funds to the project included the C.W. Benedum Foundation, the Beckley Area Foundation, the Carter Family Foundation, the City of Beckley, the West Virginia Division of Highways, and the Federal Highways Administration. The strong and continued support of Congressman Nick J. Rahall II was critical to the success of the project resulting in the dedication of the facility as the Rahall Company Store.

In 2003 a group of community members came together to form the Winding Gulf Restoration Organization (W.e.G.R.O.w.) and began to work on projects to benefit the community. As one of the most intact coal camps remaining in the region, and very proud of their history, W.Grow began to look for ways to preserve their history and share it with others. Working with the Coal Heritage Highway Authority and Karen Vuranch of WV Enterprises, WeGrow developed a “Journey Through the Coalfields” a guided bus tour of the Winding Gulf coalfield along a portion of the Coal Heritage Trail. Scripts were written, step-on guides were trained, authentic coal camp lunches were planned and in July of 2009 the first tour was held when 30 visitors from Pennsylvania toured the Winding Gulf Coalfields, enjoying lunch and traditional gospel music at the Stotesbury Community Church and shopping in the Sophia Historic District. Through these tours the story of Helen and the other coal camps of the Winding Gulf region, and the story of generations of West Virginia coal miners and their families, has come to life and is being shared with heritage tourists from across the country. Traci Lewis, President of W.e.G.R.O.w., and husband John accepted the award on behalf of the organization.

Four Interpretive Kiosks to Guide Travelers on the Coal Heritage Trail

In September the Coal Heritage Highway Authority completed installation of four sets of interpretive signs at key sites along the Coal Heritage Trail. This signage is designed to provide visitors to the Coal Heritage Trail with historical information on the development of the region and the coal industry. Each site discusses a specific interpretive theme, but also provides information about the site where it is located. Sites include Bramwell, Ashland in McDowell County, Twin Falls State Park and Mt. Hope. In Bramwell the signs are located on the grounds of the Coal Heritage Trail interpretive center where the early development of the Pocahontas coalfields is discussed along with information about Bramwell and the surrounding coal camps. In Ashland, the development of coal camps and company towns is the focus with the signage located directly across from the restored Ashland Company Store. At Twin Falls State Park, the technology of mining coal is the theme with a discussion of improvements in technology and safety. The Mt. Hope kiosk is located at the newly restored Graney Park and focuses on development in the New River field and the growth of Mt. Hope and the New River Company. An additional kiosk focusing on development in the Winding Gulf coalfield is scheduled for installation in the town of Sophia.

Similar signage is being installed by the City of Bluefield and the Paint Creek Scenic Trail committee to interpret those areas. The Walkabout Company of Wheeling and PB Americas assisted with historical research, design and site planning on the project. Glen Company was responsible for site development and installation of the signage. The project was funded with a Scenic Byways grant from the Federal Highway Administration and administered by the WV Department of Transportation.

Congressman Nick Rahall and Mayor Lou Stoker unveil interpretive signs located at the Nick J. Rahall Coal Heritage Interpretive Center in Bramwell.
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Coal Heritage Highway Authority
National Coal Heritage Area Authority
PO Box 5176
Beckley, WV 25801
Phone: 304-256-6941
Fax: 304.256.6994
E-mail: info@coalheritage.org
www.coalheritage.org

...preserving, interpreting and promoting the rich coal heritage of southern West Virginia.

National Heritage Areas
Telling the Story of America

National Heritage Areas are designated by the United States Congress as places of national significance and work in partnership with the National Park Service. They represent a part of the growing effort by the National Park Service to develop resource protection initiatives for areas of national importance that rely on partnerships and private ownership rather than the traditional methods of Federally owned parks.

As one of 49 national heritage areas, the mission of the National Coal Heritage Area is to preserve, protect, and interpret lands, structures, and communities associated with the coal mining heritage of West Virginia.

The National Coal Heritage Area (NCHA) encompasses hundreds of square miles in southern West Virginia where thousands of miners labored to produce the coal which created modern America. In the NCHA’s rugged industrial landscapes, hard-working miners of many races and ethnicities labored to extract and transport the coal that helped to fuel the rise of American industrial might, from steel production in Pittsburgh and Chicago to shipbuilding in Baltimore and Norfolk. While the coal mining history of southern West Virginia shaped the nation it also shaped the communities and people of the region as well.

The designation of the National Coal Heritage Area, an initiative of Congressman Nick Rahall, in 1996 came about as a result of the concern of citizens that the essential elements of this nationally significant story were being lost through neglect. Since that designation, the West Virginia legislature created the National Coal Heritage Area Authority as the entity responsible for the development of the National Coal Heritage Area and for the preservation, interpretation and promotion of the NCHA. The NCHA Authority depends on partnerships with other organization and communities to accomplish its mission.

Grants to local organizations have resulted in the development of new exhibits at existing museums, planning for the development of an interpretive trail linking two coal communities, restoration of an historic train depot, and the restoration of an historic downtown park. A key project involved the creation of a new interpretive center at the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine, where visitors may now gain an understanding of the coal culture as well as experience the underground mine tour led by former coal miners.

The NCHA Authority, in partnership with the Coal Heritage Trail, a national scenic byway, operates an interpretive center in a reconstructed train depot in the small community of Bramwell. Bramwell, a well-preserved Victorian community, was home to many of the early coal barons and retains its historic commercial district, many of the coal baron homes and is surrounded by the towns and “coal camps” where the miners lived. These projects and many others like them are critical in fulfilling the resource protection mission of the NCHA Authority. They also result in important tourism projects that draw visitors to our area and help to diversify the economy. To learn more about national heritage areas visit on line at www.nps.gov or at www.nationalheritageareas.com.