

The History of Edgewater from 1911

(author not identified on original document)

On November 1, 1907, the United States Steel Corporation completed the purchase of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. The Alabama operation of U. S. Steel would be called the T. C. I. Division of U. S. Steel.

Eight years earlier in 1899, the Ensley works was put into production. Since the production of steel requires vast amounts of coal, coal mining came into the picture.

“Edgewater” is located about three miles from Wylam in a slow rolling hollow. Work was begun on the T.C.I. Coal Mine #13 in 1910. This coal mine would be called “Edgewater”. At about this time, work was begun on the Industrial Water System. A water system is a mandatory requirement if steel making is successful. Two tons of water would produce one ton of steel. At this time a reservoir was created on Village Creek near the shaft of “Edgewater Coal Mine” by the construction of Bayview Dam. This was done to provide the necessary industrial water supply. The lake covers an area of 530 acres which provided three and one half billion gallons of water. A giant pumping station was constructed near the shaft of the “Edgewater Coal Mine”. To deliver the water to the pumping station, an intake tunnel was cut through approximately one and one half mile of rock, and was concrete lined five and one half feet wide and six feet high.

One of the greatest problems facing officials of T.C.I. was securing and maintaining an adequate work force. Living conditions were such that good workers were often reluctant to bring their families into new areas. So in order to keep good workers, T.C.I. built communities around its mines. Accepted practices of plant communities were for the Company to build on its properties, homes, a company store, a school, and a church. The houses were rented to the employees, but the property and its upkeep remained the Company's. The rent back “when” was about eight dollars a month which included lights and water.

Most of the wooden frame houses usually consisted of four rooms with a center pointed roof, with one chimney at the center point. Each room had a fireplace, but all used one common chimney. The houses were heated by coal, which was sold and delivered by the Company for two dollars and seventy-five cents a ton. There wasn't any plumbing in the houses for a great number of years. Most of the houses had a hydrant at the end of the back porch. Being on the outside and exposed to the weather, they had to leave the hydrant running lightly to keep it from freezing in the winter. Each house had two front doors with a porch across the front, two back doors and two back porches - so two families could live in each house if need be.

Most families had a garden, chickens and a cow to help sustain their family. “Edgewater” had electricity generated and supplied by the Company, although it was said to be only twenty-five cycle “juice”. In each room an electric cord hung from the center of the ceiling with a naked light bulb, that was turned on and off by reaching up and turning a switch on the fixture. At first there were no screens on the windows or doors.

From the back door of each house a path led to a smaller house on the back of each lot - that held bucket containers, to be used, then hauled off by the Company at regular intervals on a horse drawn wagon called the “Toilet Wagon” that was lovingly dubbed the “Honey Wagon”. This was the best in sanitation in those days. At first, the out-houses were built of wood, but later they were built of tin. There was another small house next to this one called the “Coal Bin” and it held the family's coal supply.

Although a sanitation ditch ran through the camp to catch all the household water, the Company had a sanitation department. A horse drawn wagon driven by a colored man, collected the garbage from each house twice a week; carried it to the sanitation dump, separated it into burning and non-burning trash. Burning what would burn and burying what wouldn't burn.

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Also, there was a section known as "Village Maintenance". These Company employees had the responsibility for the maintenance of all houses, buildings, streets and alleys. There were carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers, grass cutters and one man who operated the road scraping machine. He would keep the roads in passable condition. There was a very well equipped carpenter shop, a paint supply building, and a lumber supply building.

The Company hired a sheriff to keep law and order in the camp. Some remembered were Patterson, Robbins, Parsons, Thomas, Bailey and Vanderford.

The miners sent their children to a school built, owned, equipped, maintained and staffed by the Company.

Built by the Company to house the teachers was a beautiful two-story house which was cater-cornered to the school, lovingly called the "Teachers' Cottage". The teachers, all female, took great pride in their house and yard. Probably if a vote had been taken, the whole community would easily have said the "Teachers' Cottage" and yard was, by far, the prettiest in the camp.

Schooling for Edgewater children began with kindergarten - before kindergarten was so widespread. The "Kindergarten" was a separate building to the side of the "Edgewater Grammar School". It had a lot of lattice work on the outside, and consisted of one large room inside with paneled walls, hardwood floors, and a huge fireplace. It easily ran a close second to the "Teachers' Cottage" as the prettiest place in the camp.

Edgewater Grammar School was constructed in 1913, at a cost of \$20,000. It had six classrooms, a library, an auditorium, a home economics room and a manual training room. It started with seven grades, later eight, and then it had nine grades for only three years. It was built on three and one-half acres. It had plenty of playground space.

At this school, the students were taught the three "R's". However, much more was taught. There was shop for boys, home economics for the girls, plus drama. Included in the curriculum was hygiene that consisted of finger nail, head, ears, teeth and eye checks. In fact, a toothbrush drill was conducted by the whole school daily; and kept at the school for each student was a tin cup and toothbrush - much the same as a shaving brush and mug was kept at a barber shop for the regular customers.

In front of the school there was a flag pole and two water fountains. Every morning, the whole school gathered grade by grade - to say the pledge of allegiance to the Flag, while the Star Spangled Banner played on the victrola. Then came the toothbrush drill as well as some exercises.

Each Spring different events were held at a May Fete at the T.C.I. Stadium in Fairfield. Trophies, ribbons, and prizes were awarded to winners of each event. The favorite and most colorful was the May Pole Dance. At other times, the May Fete was either held on the school grounds or at the Baseball Diamond.

In the basement of the school was an area called the "Community Room", in which a "Game Hour", supervised by the community social worker, was held on Thursday nights, from seven until nine. There the young people could go to play ping-pong, dominoes, shoot pool and even dance.

In the spring the school had a garden growing contest. The older students were assigned a small plot and taught gardening. Prizes were awarded in the form of ribbons for first, second, and third place winners - along with a letter of congratulations from the Company.

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At Thanksgiving each year the students were encouraged to bring food items to be given to some family in need - and each class was required to learn a Psalm for the Thanksgiving program at the Guild Hall.

The Company school buildings were usually built and equipped better than the other schools. The Company also employed a truant officer to see that everyone attended school regularly. Some of the former students of Edgewater Grammar School now say that they feel as though they had attended a private school.

The Camp had a good all round social program. There were Campfire Girls, Brownies, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and drama groups that actually put on community "Plays" that were enjoyed by all. There was a Parent Teacher Association at the school, also.

Like any community, Edgewater had different social levels. There was the white camp and the colored camp. In the white camp a railroad track ran through the community, cutting it almost in half. The track was built up high and the trains ran on a trestle with a road under it for cars and pedestrians to travel on. This separated the Camp into lower, sometimes called "The Old Camp" from the upper, sometimes called "The New Camp". There was also a portion of the camp called "Silk Stocking Row". Then there were the homes on the top of a hill overlooking the Camp where the Mine Superintendent and the Doctors and their families lived.

A fire plug was on the corner of each street, and there were several hose reel houses which held a large rolling wheel that had a fire hose wound on it. When the need arose to use one of them, volunteers would man the fire hose to put out the fire.

Also, on the corner of each street was an electric pole with a light bulb covered over the top with a round metal shade that stayed lit both night and day.

Recreation facilities were provided by the Company. Edgewater had a basketball court and a tennis court on the school ground. In the upper camp there was a park that had good swings, slides and a go-round that was pushed around and around by foot power. Also, a small ball diamond was in this park; and many good times were had there. In the lower camp there was a nine hole golf course, as well as a large ball diamond where the T.C.I. league teams played baseball. These players were T.C.I. employees. Each camp had a team and these teams competed against each other. This ball diamond had real umpires for these games. Although there were no bleachers for spectators to sit on; many attended the games. "The Ball Diamond" was enclosed by a big steel cable run through railroad crossties coming out of the ground about three feet high. These made popular seats for some; while others sat on the grass to watch. Peddlers sold popsicles, ice cream cones, candy, roasted peanuts, and cold soft drinks. Some of those remembered as players on the Edgewater team are Otis Bibb, Millard Hayes, Toots Coe, Flag Carlisle, Wince Tunello, Mason Caldwell, Carmel Messina, Paul Pugh, Bob Tidwell and Cat Crump.

A very popular place erected by the Company - across the street from the school ground was called the "Guild Hall". It was here that both the Methodists and the Baptists met for worship; each being responsible for services on alternating Sundays. But in this building community events such as plays, stage shows, movies, and boxing matches were held; also at Christmas time a community Christmas tree and a visit from Santa Claus who gave each child in the camp a brown paper sack with fruit, nuts, and candy in it. A much looked forward to event.

Another great event that took place at this festive time of year was when the Company decorated a tall pine tree at the "Ball Diamond" with beautiful Christmas lights; and gave each student at school a box of candy for Christmas in the early years.

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In 1910, the Catholics of the camp organized the “Sacred Heart Mission Chapel” in one of the Company houses which was across the street from the “Teachers’ Cottage”. A brick building was built behind this one; which was name “Saint Alice Mission”, in 1954. Both buildings are still standing, but are not in use.

The only recreational facility that the Company did not supply was a swimming pool. But Edgewater was fortunate in that it had two places for swimming; one known as the “Baby Hole” and the other as the “Burgin Hole”. Not only were many good times had at both these, but many baptizings were held here also.

In the Camp, another important building to the whole family was the Company store, known as the “Edgewater Store” but most folks called it the “Commissary”. It was the first in shopping malls for the miner and his family. Here they could buy every need under one roof; fruits, vegetables, meat, clothing, shoes, sewing needs, animal feed, hardware, household goods, kerosene, and some have said that you could buy fresh chickens - killed while you wait. The Commissary even made deliveries to the homes on certain days of the week.

Adjacent to the Commissary was an equally important place called the “Dope Stand”. Popular items like soft drinks, candy, gum, cigarettes, ice cream cones and other such goodies - plus meals were cooked and served here.

The Commissary served another important service to the community. For a period of time a Post Mistress, Zaida Patterson, handed out mail over the counter. At a later date, mail boxes were installed in clusters on Front Street, at each house going up Church Avenue to Third Street where the clusters of boxes were for all the upper camp. That way each family had a mailbox to receive their mail. Later and even now, each family has their own mailbox at the curb in front of their home.

Next to the Commissary, there was a “Shoe Repair Shop” owned and operated by Joseph Tunello. At a much later date, there was even a “Filling Station” across from the “Dope Stand”.

Also in the camp, a brick building called the “Doctors’ Office”, staffed by three doctors who attended the sick of both white and colored camps - sending those whose needs warranted it to the T.C.I. Hospital in Fairfield, now known as Lloyd Nolan Hospital. The Doctors held a “Baby Clinic” once a month in the school’s Community Room. Close by this doctor’s office was a “Dentist Office” for the dental needs of the camp. At one time, the Dentist Office was in the house at the corner of Front Street and Clark Avenue. Even though there was a Dentist in the camp- other dentists from the T.C.I. Hospital came to the school once a year to check the school students’ teeth.

Edgewater had an “Ice House” close to the Commissary, where ice was stored and sold in five and ten cents blocks. There was an iceman who sold and delivered ice in the camp on Tuesdays and Fridays. He would go through the camp on a mule drawn wagon, ringing an old cowbell and calling out ICE MAN! ICE MAN! This would not only bring out those who wished to buy ice, but the camp children also, in hopes of getting a hand-out of small pieces of ice to pop into their mouths to melt and to cool their tongues.

Transportation out of the camp was either - to have your own, walk, ride the train, or take a taxi. The “Taxi” was run by a man called Cap Reeves, and later by his wife, Dinah. Although he had a regular run, he would wait in the camp until he had a load before leaving for Wylam, and visa versa. The cost of the Taxi from Edgewater to Wylam was five cents.

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For each change of shifts at the mine, a train ran from Edgewater to Wylam on which a regular passenger would ride for five cents. Sometime a great treat for the children of the camp was a train ride from Edgewater to the big T.C.I. Stadium in Fairfield.

In December 1951, the Company decided to sell the houses to the public, offering first choice to the residents living in them. Many folks chose to buy their homes and still live in the community; and some of these families' children chose to buy in Edgewater and raise their families there.

The Methodist and Baptist Churches separated, and the Baptists moved their church to the building known as the "Bath House"; which was later torn down to the ground after they had built an educational building. They have a pastorium, and also a beautiful sanctuary.

During the school year 1966-1967, there were only sixty-three pupils attending Edgewater Grammar School. During the years along the way the Edgewater Grammar School operation was turned over to the Jefferson County Board of Education. Since the enrollment had dropped so low, it was decided to close the school, and still later to tear it down. Another landmark gone.

The Teachers' Cottage became private property and in the summer of 1980, it burned so badly it was torn down, and a mobile home now sits where that stately house once stood.

In 1935, the Kindergarten burned down and this property became the building ground where the Edgewater Baptist Church now stands.

What a sad day for the Edgewater Community when one by one the landmarks disappeared. No longer is there a Mine, a Commissary, a Dope Stand, a Doctor's Office, a Dentist Office, a Kindergarten, a School, nor a Teachers' Cottage. Only memories of the Tennis Court, Golf Course, Park and Ball Diamond remain.

But the Guild Hall still stands to welcome all back to a touch of the past - Although the sign out front now reads Edgewater Methodist Church.