



The Washburn Lignite Coal Company: A History of Mining at Wilton, North Dakota

By Frances Wold

To the early white settlers in North Dakota, fuel ranked equally with food and shelter as an absolute necessity, and on the windswept, treeless plains it was usually in very short supply. Any community that had access to coal was counted among the favored. Settlers drove their teams and wagons for miles to haul the coal home before winter and then hoarded the precious lumps jealously, ever mindful of the difficulty of acquiring more.¹

The homesteaders who came into what would later be northern Burleigh County in the late 1870s and early 1880s discovered almost immediately that much of their land was underlain by **lignite coal** deposits, but not until 1892 was any real attempt made to mine it. That year Ole Anderson, assisted by Albin Hedstrom, opened in the north-west quarter of Section 34 in present-day Ecklund Township what was later asserted to have been the first coal mine in Burleigh County.

Pioneer reminiscences state that more than 3,000 tons of coal were hauled from the mine into Bismarck that year in addition to what was used in the immediate neighborhood. As an indication of the demand, one winter night when the temperature stood at nearly thirty-eight degrees below zero, thirty-eight teams and drivers spent the night at the mine, waiting to load in the morning; ten of the teams were forced to stand out in the bitter weather.²

Other small mines soon opened in the vicinity, but it remained for **General William D. Washburn** to realize the potential of the area's lignite deposits and to use his financial and organizational talents to develop them. A native of Maine, Washburn belonged to an old and politically active family. Two brothers became state governors, and three simultaneously represented different states in Congress.³ One of them was Governor Cadwallader Coldin Washburn of Wisconsin, the man for whom the

McLean County town of Washburn was named.⁴ W.D. Washburn received his title when he was commissioned surveyor-general of Minnesota by President Abraham Lincoln in 1861. He became a wealthy Minneapolis industrialist with large holdings in the lumber, railroad, and milling industries, served three terms in Congress from Minnesota and was elected to the Senate from that state in 1880; he was defeated in his re-election bid.⁵

In February 1898, Washburn purchased almost 114,000 acres of land in northern Burleigh and southwestern McLean counties from the Northern Pacific Railway for one dollar per acre. While he expected to open the lands for settlement, he was also very much aware of the lignite and from the beginning planned its development. Realizing that settlement and opening of coal trade were both impossible without access to markets, Washburn quickly organized his own railroad company. Early in 1899, he incorporated the **Bismarck, Washburn & Fort Buford Railroad** and soon began construction north from Bismarck. The next year the railroad was renamed the Bismarck, Washburn & Great Falls Railroad, by which it was known until 1904 when it was sold to the Soo Line.

To manage the Washburn Land Co., and to investigate the lignite possibilities, Washburn chose **Walter Perkins Macomber**, and in May 1899, the two men selected a townsite that Washburn named Wilton after a town near his boyhood home. In

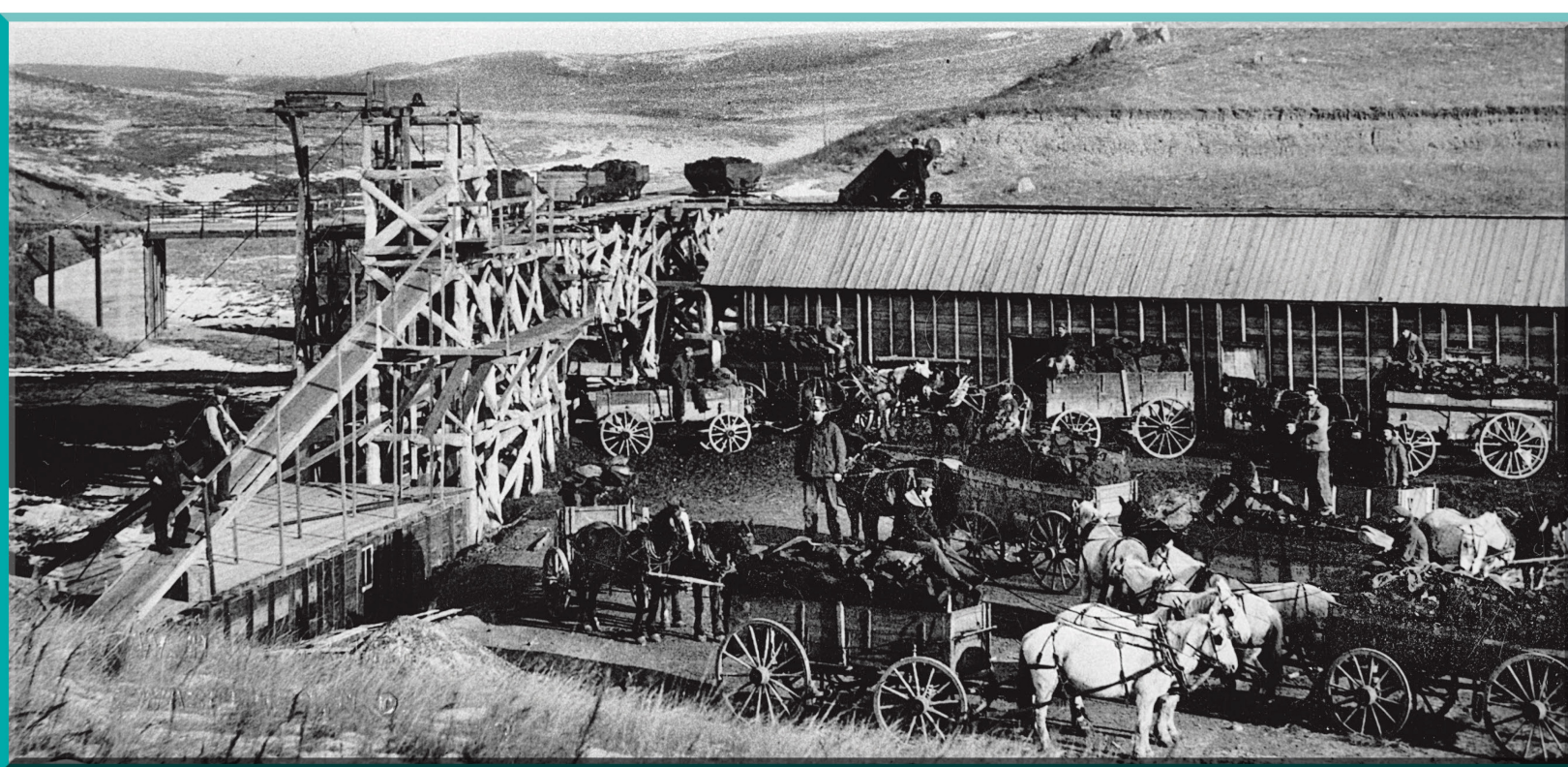


Figure 1. The Washburn Lignite Coal Company mining operation near Wilton quickly became a substantial business, selling coal to local users and as far away as St. Paul, Minnesota. Here, purchasers fill wagons with coal at one of the mine tipples. (SHSND 0655-02)

October he filed the plat of the townsite at the McLean County seat at Washburn because fifteen blocks of the location lay in that county. However, four blocks were in Burleigh County, and the fact that Wilton lies in two different counties still causes many problems for its residents.⁶

Washburn hoped to have his new railroad built as far as Wilton in 1899, but difficulties with land acquisition delayed its arrival until July of the next year.⁷ He and Macomber actively promoted the new town, both as a market center for farm products and as an inducement to workers and businessmen to serve the mine.

In May 1900, the promoters reported the discovery of “**fine quality lignite coal**” at a depth of fifty feet near Wilton.⁸ Washburn ordered work begun immediately at the location, and on July 12 made a triumphant entry into Wilton with a trainload of dignitaries to celebrate the opening of his new railroad. He also inspected the mine site where machinery was arriving daily.⁹

Washburn had previously engaged eastern coal expert R.M. Hazletine, chief mine and coal inspector from Columbus, Ohio, to survey the lignite beds.

His tests produced coal “of excellent quality and in practically unlimited quantities,” and he declared that, “The coal in the Ecklund mine is hard and firm and the best I saw in that section. Contiguous to this territory the Washburns have drilled up several hundred acres that appear to be of the same excellent quality.” Hazletine also reported that the crude coal was susceptible to the elements and suggested that **briquetting** be considered, even though excellent results could be obtained by the use of proper firing methods.¹⁰ Although General Washburn did experiment with briquetting in the early years of the mine, the process was never generally adopted.¹¹

Hazletine’s report gave Washburn the encouragement he wanted, and work began on the mine shaft on August 27.¹² In the meantime the coal was tested at the Fargo Edison Company; more than seven tons were fired, and not a clinker resulted, nor was there any black smoke. The heating value of a ton of lignite was estimated to equal 65 percent of a ton of eastern coal, but lignite sold for \$2.75 a ton in Fargo and hard coal for \$6.00.¹³

By September 1, 1900, two crews were mining as work proceeded on the shaft, and by the middle of the month fifty tons a day were being brought

out, an amount inadequate to the demand.¹⁴ The production led to immediate construction of two coal chutes and a large boarding and bunk house to accommodate the miners.¹⁵ The boarding house, almost immediately dubbed “**the Beanery**,” was built to shelter seventy-five miners. Originally fifty by ninety feet, with two stories and twenty rooms, it was enlarged many times.¹⁶

After its construction, local girls were employed in the kitchen and dining room at the Beanery, and it soon became known as “good husband-hunting ground.” Many additional Wilton women were employed each spring for the annual housecleaning, and Mrs. H.O. Larson, who had a power washer, always laundered hundreds of woolen blankets used by the miners. Wilton residents grew accustomed to seeing her clotheslines filled with blankets all summer long. Along with its economic importance to the community, the large dining room at the Beanery soon became a favorite activity center for miners and their families. Dances, home talent plays, card parties, school programs, Christmas entertainments and other social events were often held there.¹⁷

From the beginning Washburn was determined that his mine be modern in every respect. When

the Hughes Electric Light Co., of Bismarck bought a new generating plant, he purchased the old one for the mine to make it possible to employ electrically-powered machinery on the pyrite-free lignite seams.¹⁸ The mining company also strung an electric line into Wilton to provide electricity for the town; the arrangement, which continued for many years, distinguished the community as one of the first of its size in the state to have electric power.¹⁹

The first months of development resulted in an almost fully operational mining enterprise. In addition to the 150-foot main shaft, a second tunnel had been extended eighty feet, rooms were being turned off the main entry, two air shafts and a well had been dug, and the first electric mining machine and cutter were waiting to be installed. The local *Wilton News* carried constant reports of vacancies for miners and carpenters and bragged that the company had “more orders than the mine can supply with double crews.”²⁰ When the company purchased the entire fall production of the J.B. Taylor lumber mill at Painted Woods (30,000 feet), the transaction emphasized how major an industry had been added to the area’s economy.²¹

At the end of 1900, several three and four hundred-foot tunnels stretched seventy feet underground from the mine entries, and two hundred tons of coal a day were brought out. The mine was electrically-lighted, and a trolley system to draw the coal out with cables along an inclined shaft and automatically dump it into cars was planned.²² Some of the cars were built in the shops of Washburn’s railroad line in Bismarck.²³

At Christmastime Washburn arranged for holiday dinners for the mine employees and their families with “all the delicacies of the season.”²⁴ This paternal benevolence set a precedent that was followed for many years at holiday times. At Thanksgiving, for example, each family man received a turkey, and turkey dinners were provided for the single men at the Beanery. Children received Christmas treats, and holiday entertainment was often provided.²⁵

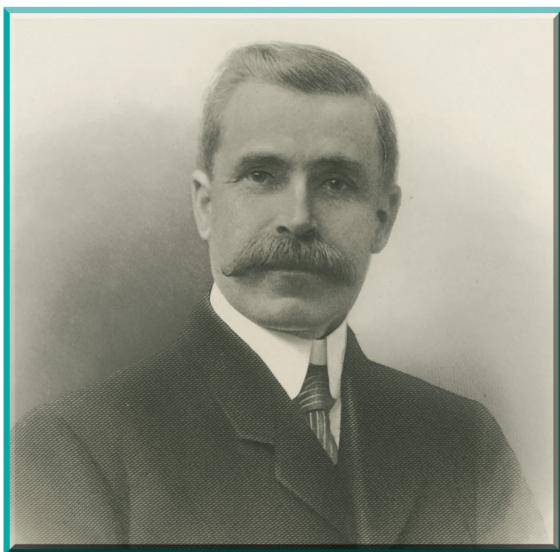


Figure 2. Walter Perkins Macomber, “the father of Wilton,” served as the general manager of the WLCC for many years. (SHSND 113-174)

In the winter, ice was cut and stored in company buildings for summer distribution to employees. Washburn's major paternal gesture, however, involved medical facilities for the miners and their dependents. A "vaccination bee" was held at the mine during North Dakota's smallpox scare of January 1901, and Washburn brought the attending physicians by special train from Bismarck to serve his employees. Later that year, Dr. R.C. Thompson settled in Wilton after completing medical school and agreed to serve the company employees for a flat fee of one dollar a month that was deducted from each pay envelope. The arrangement continued as long as the mine existed, and Dr. Thompson remained in Wilton until his death in 1944.²⁶

Initially, housing was almost non-existent, but in May 1901, Washburn began constructing eight dwellings at a settlement he platted near the Beanery. Named "**Chapin**" for the owner's son who was mine manager, Edward Chapin Washburn, it originally had eight houses; it eventually included nearly thirty dwellings.²⁷ While the homes were small and crude, they provided shelter and rented for a small charge. One later writer called them "hovels," but the yellow bungalows were not considered such by the people who lived in them.²⁸ Also at Chapin were the mine tippie, the loading siding for railroad cars and teams, bathhouses, offices, and the mine manager's home.²⁹

That first winter, demand for coal was so great that mining went on twenty hours a day, seven days a week, and operations were shut down only on Christmas Day. Most of the coal went to Bismarck and Fargo, and lavish advertising campaigns were begun in South Dakota and Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. The lignite sold for four dollars a ton at St. Paul.³⁰

The best contemporary description of the mine was published in *The Record*, a North Dakota publicity magazine, in 1900. Author W.P. Davies recounted the following impressions:

We were led to what looked like the front door to a root cellar, and found ourselves looking down an incline 280 feet long, ter-

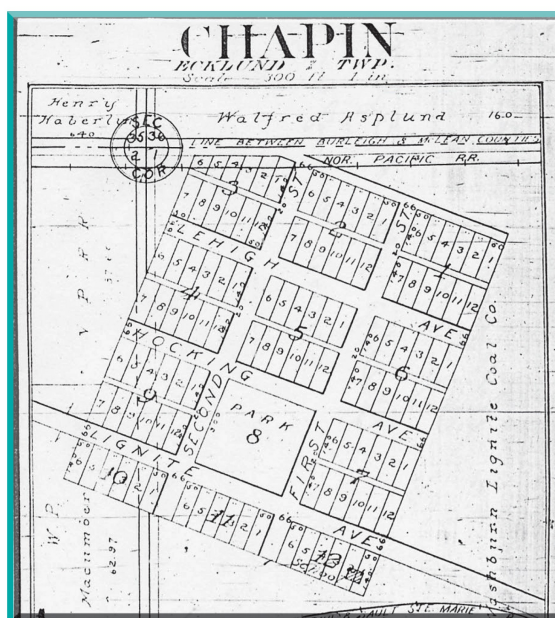


Figure 3. The town of Chapin was constructed in 1901 to provide homes for WLCB miners and their families. This map from an early Burleigh County plat book shows the street layout of Chapin. (unknown source)

minating on a level 70 feet below us. This is walled with plank and heavy timbers and lit by means of electric light. A track almost fills its width, and up and down the track travel the loaded and unloaded coal cars, drawn by wire cables each having a capacity about equal to that of a big wagon box . . . At the bottom a scene met the eye which was entirely new to the visitors, and which is seldom associated in the minds of anyone with the thought of North Dakota. Forward for an apparently interminable distance stretched a wide gallery with walls of solid black coal. To right and left, at short intervals, branched other galleries, and from these were side chambers, all hewn from what appeared like solid black rock. Overhead from the ceiling which is from six to seven feet high, hung electric lights, and here and there could be seen the workmen with miners' lamps attached to their caps, giving a weird and somewhat uncanny aspect to the scene. The bed of coal which is now being worked is 11 to

15 feet in thickness. Under this is a vein of splendid fire clay about three feet thick, and then comes about two feet more of coal. The lower strata are not yet being disturbed.

Long galleries 19 feet wide are made at intervals of 14 feet, and from these side chambers are cut. Eventually the entire area will be undermined with the exception of these 14 foot pillars; the ceiling, which is left about four feet thick for safety, being still further supported by timber posts. Then, beginning at the further end, ceiling and pillars will be removed, and the earth will be permitted to drop.

All the work is done by electricity. In attacking the wall of coal a machine is used which, by means of strong teeth fixed to an endless chain, makes a cutting at the lower level four inches high, four feet wide, and seven feet in a forward line. The machine is then set over four feet, and another cutting is made until the entire wall is undermined. Electric drills are then used, and holes are bored at intervals. There are three cutters and two drills at work. When all is ready, dynamite is placed in the holes, a wire is attached, the men retire, the current is

turned on, and with a muffled roar several car loads of coal fall shattered to the floor. The sides and ceilings are trimmed with picks . . . ventilation is provided by means of two powerful electric fans, which draw fresh air down the entrance tunnel and expel it through a large air shaft. A second shaft at the extremity of the mine is now being sunk.

The coal, when loosened by the blast, is loaded into the little cars, drawn by mule power to the main track, attached to the cable, hoisted, emptied and returned. The coal is hard, heavy and dry . . . It is sold at \$1.10 per ton loaded on the cars, and brings \$2.10 in Bismarck where it is the only fuel used. The daily output of the mine is about 240 tons, and this is being increased every month. Seventy men are employed, working in two shifts, night and day. Two car loads of the coal go to Minneapolis every day, where it is being used for domestic purposes.

Clement A. Lounsberry, the *Record's* editor, added a personal endorsement. During the winter of 1900–01 he had used **Wilton lignite** and some wood in his home and claimed a total expense for heating a ten-room house of \$37.50. He concluded: “The coal is appreciated by every one who has patience to become accustomed to its use, especially where the stove is adapted to it. There is little smoke and soot, where the drafts are right, and a fire can be built with it as readily as with wood. It blazes like wood and burns without a clinker.”²³¹

As evident from the long story in the *Record*, General Washburn was aware of the value of good public relations, and he lost no opportunity to keep the public informed about his new enterprise. When the mine was only five months old, he invited those present at the State Press Association’s annual meeting to visit. The journalists were brought to Wilton on the General’s railroad, received a guided tour of the mine and were served lunch at the Wilton Hotel before returning to

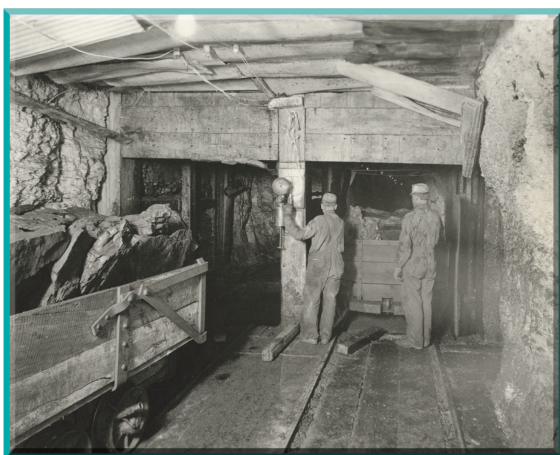


Figure 4. This undated photo is probably from the WLCC mine #2. It shows the danger and dark that underground miners faced daily. (SHSND A1562b)

Bismarck. State legislators learned to look forward to the trips to the mine and to the lavish entertainment provided afterward at the Beanery. The General often was accompanied by eastern newspaper correspondents and distinguished guests on his frequent inspection trips and travelled from his Minneapolis, Minnesota, home in his richly-appointed private railroad car.³²

By the first of December, 1901, over one hundred men were working in the mine, and by year's end the number was nearly two hundred.³³ That summer, the mine shaft had been deepened to eighty-one feet, the powerhouse enlarged and the Beanery remodeled to include waterworks and sewage facilities.³⁴

Washburn sought to expand the market for lignite as he increased the mine's size. When his first attempt to fuel railroad locomotives with the coal ended in a large prairie fire, he ordered construction of an especially adapted engine. An official test of the new engine occurred on February, 19, 1902. Only 18½ tons of lignite were consumed on the 105-mile run between Mandan and Jamestown, and the five and one-half hour run averaged twenty miles per hour. The engine pulled forty-three loaded freight cars, and a saving of over 40 percent in fuel costs was reported. Although further tests were ordered, the finding very much impressed the railroad officials present. Both the Soo Line and the Northern Pacific Railway eventually became large consumers of lignite.³⁵

An impromptu test of lignite occurred in September, 1902, when Captain Grant Marsh's steamer *Expansion* ran out of wood between Washburn and Mannhaven. Lignite from the Wilton mine costing \$3.50 was substituted, and the coal provided the power for both a return trip to Bismarck and another run back to Mannhaven—a distance of seventy-five miles. Wood for a similar trip would have cost between thirty and forty dollars.³⁶

Washburn incorporated **“The Washburn Lignite Coal Co.”** a name that was to become famous in its time, on December 24, 1902, and secured his

charter the following January 6. Capital stock was \$500,000.³⁷ By then, the output of the mine was 475 tons per day; in August 180 tons per day were brought out. The next winter the daily output rose to one thousand tons. The mines were fully mechanized; six Jeffrey undercutting machines and an Ottumwa boxcar loader aided the miners.³⁸

For shooting, picking down and trimming rooms, miners received thirty cents a ton, and thirty-five cents for the same work in entries. This was somewhat higher than in older mining centers due to the uncertainty of labor supply. Even so, the high wages offered by farmers during the wheat harvest resulted in the virtual desertion of many mines. This situation occurred annually at the Wilton mine and was another reason for the introduction of as much electrically-powered, labor-saving machinery as possible.³⁹ Since demand for coal peaked during the winter, however, an adequate labor force was then readily available.

The miners themselves were often local farmers who worked during the winter and returned to their farms in the spring. Others were immigrants who had left their families in the Old Country until they could be sent for. Many miners usually hired out to local farmers during the summer months, or worked for the extensive Washburn farming interests. Although some had been miners previously, a large number learned their trade for the first time at Wilton.⁴⁰

By 1903 the Wilton mine was hiring experienced help from the Mesaba and Vermillion iron mines in Minnesota. In some cases the mine management paid the transportation for men from eastern points in return for a signed contract to work for a certain length of time. Occasionally these men would “jump their contract,” and the law would be employed to bring them back to fulfill their obligation.⁴¹

In the late 1890s groups of Ukrainians from Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Russia came to the area north of Wilton and homesteaded. After the mine opened, a great number were employed

during the winter and in later years some moved permanently into Wilton or to the mine towns to take advantage of the mine employment whenever it was offered. Their sons, too, often became miners. These people brought native customs and religious observances that were often quite different from those of their neighbors, and sometimes the “culture shock” was severe on both sides. Working side by side in the mines, however, the men learned to depend upon one another, and the experience no doubt did much to ease often strained community relations. Ukrainians, Swedes, Germans, Norwegians, as well as “Yankees” from eastern states, all were glad to receive a cash wage in a land where opportunities for work were usually rare, even if the work was hard and often dangerous.⁴² While a crew of maintenance men, carpenters and electricians were kept all year, it was necessary to reorganize the entire mining work force each fall. This was different from most eastern mines where the roster did not change materially in the course of a year.⁴³

In 1906 a **brick plant** utilizing clay from the mine floor was opened to employ men during the slack summer season. The clay lay beneath the coal in veins eight to ten feet thick and was mined in much the same manner as the coal; it was dug by electric machines, hauled to the shaft by mules, and hoisted to the surface to be dumped near the crushing machine. After being dried for three or four days it was crushed in a dry pan, elevated and screened, and then sent to the brickmaking machines. The stiff-mud, sidecut bricks were dried in open yards and then fired in kilns fueled by lignite. The plant had four down-draft kilns

with a capacity of 20,000 bricks a day. According to the *Wilton News*, the first pressed bricks were, “the finest construction material that it is possible to obtain anywhere.” Demand for the bricks developed quickly, and they were used to build the Wilton Mercantile Company’s new store (“the first brick building in Wilton, built by home labor out of a home manufactured product”), the new wing of the Burleigh County Courthouse, the Bismarck armory and a Gamble-Robinson Company warehouse in the capitol city.⁴⁴

However, despite its auspicious beginning, the brick plant was short-lived. Its early demise was caused by an alkali content in the bricks that resulted in a “**chalking**” or streaking that somewhat spoiled their appearance. This was not evident until after they had been exposed to rain or dampness. Local legend has it that the bricks were used to build a school at Minot and became heavily streaked after a hard rain; a lawsuit ensued and resulted in the end of brickmaking at Wilton even though there was never any question about the durability of the bricks.⁴⁵ The brick plant probably closed in 1908, but stockpiled bricks continued to be used locally as late as 1915.⁴⁶

Two events in 1907 evidenced continued growth of the mine. In September, excavations began for a score of homes to be the nucleus of a second settlement just south of the mine; this town was named “**Langhorn**” by Washburn in honor of his daughter-in-law, a member of the famous Virginia family of that name. The houses at Langhorn were larger and more modern than those at Chapin and were painted white rather than yellow. Too, a new

Figure 5. This photo shows the brick buildings and tippel of mine #2 at the Washburn Lignite Coal Company, probably about 1919. Notice the coal cars at the far right. (SHSND 0410-117)



schoolhouse was opened in November at Chapin. It had been necessitated by the overcrowding in the Wilton School caused by an influx of children whose fathers worked in the mine.⁴⁷

The year 1907 apparently saw some labor troubles at the mine, and contained some incidents which demonstrate the dangers of working in a coal mine.⁴⁸ For instance, in February funeral expenses and a cash settlement were given a Mrs. George Brown after her husband fell down the mineshaft to his death. The following July, a new miner named Gust Erickson lost his leg in a cutting machine accident; his “considerable nerve” saved his own life, but he did not belong to any fraternal organization that could help support his family while he convalesced. And in December, a miner suffocated in his bed at the Chapin Hotel after becoming intoxicated.⁴⁹

One of the more tragic events in the mine’s history happened in 1908; a fourteen-year-old boy fell under the wheels of a coal train engine and was dragged for several hundred feet. Serious internal injuries caused his death. Since his parents lived in Chapin, he was undoubtedly the son of a miner who was following his father’s footsteps.⁵⁰

In September 1910 the *Wilton News* began to publish an expanded number of mine articles as a result of a change in editors that saw G.W. Stewart become the paper’s guiding hand. Stewart, the son-in-law of mine manager Macomber, naturally reflected the company’s viewpoint and played up the modern mine operation and the paternal benefits provided company employees. Innovations such as the installation of a large changing and shower room with hot and cold running water for the miners received appropriate publicity, but the comparatively good wages paid to mine employees rated a special article. According to the editor, eighty-five miners worked fulltime for WLCC during the month of October. Ten of them received between \$125 and \$150 per month, thirty earned between \$100 and \$125, ten earned between \$90 and \$100, fourteen earned between \$80 and \$90, twelve earned between \$70 and

\$80, two earned between \$65 and \$70, and seven earned less than \$60.⁵¹

The demand for coal was so great that year that the mine did not take the usual lay-off for Thanksgiving Day.⁵² Men were hired from all parts of the state, as well as from Pennsylvania and West Virginia. The *Wilton News* advertised many weeks for “miners and laborers wanted at WLCC.” At that time, the population of Wilton proper was approximately 450, exclusive of Chapin, Langhorn, and the Burleigh County section. It was estimated that fully eight hundred people lived in the town and immediate vicinity.⁵³

A picture of mine work during that era emerges from the memory of former miner Nick Sologuk. A Ukrainian who immigrated from Austria via Canada, Nick came to Wilton in 1911 at age nineteen and eventually spent eighteen years in the mines. For his first ten years, he loaded cars with loose coal, picked coal from the walls and trimmed the ceiling and walls in rooms off the main mine corridor. Twenty or twenty-five empty coal cars were brought at once by wire cables to a central area—what Nick calls a “parting”—and a “driver” was responsible for seeing that the cars were always there. The miners then pushed the cars to the rooms by brute force. If the floor was level, Nick says, “it wasn’t bad,” but any incline made the job hard, difficult work. Mules drew the loaded cars from the rooms to the entry.

In 1921 Sologuk graduated to a cutting machine and became responsible for cutting for eight to ten men. The pressure was great not to fall behind. Often he did not take time for lunch, but ate his sandwich on the run.⁵⁴

Miners of Sologuk’s day were required to buy their own tools, dynamite and caps, and carbide for their lamps from company supplies; the price was deducted from their pay. Work shifts operated ten hours a day (sometimes twelve), six days a week. They didn’t work Sundays except in emergencies or wartime. Miners like Nick received about two dollars a day—twenty cents an hour—and thought

it good pay. Unlike most, though, Nick roomed with a family in Wilton; he bought meat and flour, and paid six dollars a month for the rest of his board, a bed, and laundry. Many bachelor miners would often buy flour and yeast and pay a local housewife a few dollars a month to bake their bread.⁵⁵

Sologuk recalls many nationalities among the miners, but remembers only one African American; everyone liked him, but he took “a lot of hard razzing.”

The miners who lived in Wilton got to work as best they could. In winter, most walked through snowdrifts, bitter cold and darkness in the morning and evening. Some of the farmer-miners rode horseback or drove teams from their homes; one rode eight miles to get to work. Sometimes a farmer would cover a sled with canvas and run a sort of bus, picking up others on his way to the mine. Later, the company made arrangements with the Soo Line for a special train to transport workers between town and the mine, and the men happily paid five dollars a month for the ride.

Sologuk became known as a good, dependable worker and earned a permanent job though he often worked only half-days, or three days a week. “We got paid for what we did,” he says. “Some didn’t load much, so got small checks. I was a very strong man and a hard worker, so I got a pretty big check for the times.”

In February 1912 the mine broke all previous production records by hoisting 1,125 tons of coal in ten hours, but a shortage of railroad cars plagued the management.⁵⁶ This perennial difficulty often necessitated laying off men just when the demand for coal was the highest.⁵⁷

However, rails on the **Wilton-Pingree branch** of the Northern Pacific Railway were laid into Wilton that summer and partially solved the problem. Another problem had earlier been met by the addition of a new 150-kilowatt generator driven by a 200-hp engine that doubled the coal plant’s power output.⁵⁸

An era in the history of the WLCC ended on August 2, 1912, with the death of General Washburn at age eighty-one at his home in Minneapolis. On the date of his funeral the mine shut down for the day and all Wilton business houses were closed for the hour that the services were held.⁵⁹

Washburn’s death, however, did not disrupt mining. That fall, mine superintendent Pat Cahill claimed that the works “comprise the largest lignite mine in the world.” And by the end of the year the company was hoisting coal twenty hours out of twenty-four. In previous years day and night shifts had worked during the busy season, but this year a different policy was used with better results:

A force of men works at night with powder and cutting machine getting out enough coal to fill up all empty cars. When the day shift comes on duty there is enough lignite at the bottom of the shaft to begin hoisting at once. Coal is being brought to the surface just as fast as the cages can operate, continuously from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. More coal can be put out than by two shifts. The average output is now 1500 tons a day.⁶⁰

By fall 1915 four hundred men worked in the mine, and the yearly payroll totalled \$200,000. The company had contracts to supply fuel for the state capitol and almost all state institutions, as well as many public schools, power houses, mills and railroads. Both the Soo and Northern Pacific were running special coal trains.⁶¹ However, the easily available coal in the original location had begun to run short, and plans were made to move the entire mining operation a mile-and-a-half east to property that had been purchased by the company in 1913. Buildings at mine #2 were constructed in 1915 to 1916 of brick and included an office, power house, wash room, storage room, and powder house. Huge steam pipes were laid deep in the ground between the buildings for heat and power. One of the largest and finest wooden tipples in the Northwest was erected. Mammoth machinery in the powerhouse included four big



Figure 6. The brick buildings indicate that this street scene was taken at the WLCC mine #2, about 1919. Note the houses at the end of the street and the automobiles parked along the street. (SHSND A2778)

electrical generators. Mine #2 opened in 1916, but both mines were kept in operation for about a year.⁶²

The first months in the new mine were not easy due to the water that ran into the working areas from springs. The men worked in water as high as their knees at times and finally refused to work at all until the problem was remedied. The company then agreed to pay a four cents a ton “water price” to get them back on the job. Those first months the washroom was not completed, and the men came out of the mine wet with sweat and had to run in the below zero cold to a temporary washroom set up in the power house. Initially, there were no showers, but Nick Sologuk recalls,

the new washroom was very nice. We came right up into it from the mine. There was room for hot showers for sixteen men at a time, and if the water wasn't right, we'd holler, “John? More hot water!”—one man was set just to look after the shower water. We each had a locker for our clothes—we'd leave our dirty clothes at the mine and go home clean.⁶³

Mrs. Sologuk remembers that the men sometimes came home wearing white shirts. The special miner's train began operation in November, 1917,

and soon became a firm part of local folklore. As early Wilton resident Mrs. C.V. Danielson wrote:

At 4:30 a.m. Wilton was up and getting ready to go to the Soo depot to board one of these cars. This train was called the “Garlic Special.” We will leave it to you to guess why it got this name. At 4:30 p.m. the whistle blew at the mine. We all knew what this meant—200 to 400 men would be coming back to buy meat and groceries and then go home for their big evening meal. In the spring when the work slacked up the sidewalks in Wilton would be so crowded with men who were out sunning themselves one could hardly get through the crowd.⁶⁴

Wilton housewives always tried to do their shopping before the mine train returned to avoid the rush. Since the fifteenth of each month was payday, that was always a busy one for Wilton merchants. Even the shy immigrant women who rarely ventured downtown accompanied their husbands to the grocery stores to buy a good stock of provisions, dress material, and shoes.⁶⁵ That night, the local constables were busy breaking up poker games and hauling men who had imbibed too freely off to the jail. Though North Dakota was a “dry” state, there was never a shortage of liquor, much of it home-

brewed. The *Wilton News* made periodic pleas for “cleaning up the town,” but men who worked as hard as the miners did felt they deserved to relax in their own way; the pleas usually had little effect.⁶⁶

Nick Sologuk considers the Wilton mine a fairly safe operation for its time. He remembers that a few men were killed, usually when pulling pillar or roof coal, but his general feeling is borne out by reports of state agencies. Safety measures included standard rules about storing powder in locked boxes, keeping clear of explosion areas, maintaining shaft and hoist equipment, using the elevator, and so on. State engineers and inspectors repeatedly gave the mine high marks and found reasons to comment approvingly about the ventilation and water removal facilities.



Figure 7. Miners digging coal with a pick ax and shovel in a WLCC mine near Wilton, North Dakota. (SHSND 0410-181a)



Figure 8. Miners used motorized trains in the tunnels of the WLCC mines. (SHSND A1562a)

Nevertheless, accidents did occur. In fact, so many more accidents were listed for WLCC than for other mines that the *1913–14 State Engineers Report* added an explanation:

The table of non-fatal accidents shows that the larger number of the accidents recorded occurred at the Wilton Coal Mine No. 1. In order that the table may not be misleading, the state engineer wishes to say that the Washburn Coal Company keeps a very accurate record of every accident, no matter how slight and faithfully reports the same to this department, while a large proportion of the operators of other mines keep no record and make no reports of mine non-fatal accidents . . . The non-fatal accidents . . . are not sub-classified, the serious and minor accidents being listed together.

Men were killed in the mine in 1913 and 1917, and 101 non-fatal accidents were recorded between 1912 and 1917.

The non-fatal accidents varied as much as the work of the men who were hurt. A falling roof resulted in an injured big toe; a broken steam pipe scalded a man’s ankles; a man was trapped between a railcar and the rib coal and broke both arms and several ribs; one man’s right ankle was cut to the bone when his adze (ax-like tool) struck a knot while he was trimming a piece of timber. Another miner “probably lost the sight in his right eye” when, as the foreman was breaking a new mule, the end of the whip flew off. A machine jack fell from a cutting machine and broke the cutter’s toe. Carelessness with a candle and an exploder cost one man the thumb and two fingers on his left hand. Many, many injuries resulted from being struck or run over by coal cars, or from being hit when cars jumped the track. Many others were caused by pushing coal cars (and one from pushing a car of manure out of the barn). A short circuit caused electrical burns and an eye was injured by a piece of hot steel or babbitt. Steam pipes and engines resulted in a large number of scaldings, and bruises and cuts sometimes ended in blood poisoning.⁶⁷

Dr. Thompson was often called to the mine to treat injuries and sometimes took patients to the small hospital he operated with the help of a local nurse. Often, they were taken home to recuperate, but badly injured miners were rushed by train to a Bismarck hospital. During the 1920s and 1930s, the patients were delivered by car. Peter Leif, a long-time Wilton merchant, often used his delivery van as an ambulance and recalls one time when he made three trips in three days. “Of course the men were terribly dirty from working in the coal,” he says, “and we took them just as they were. We took the first two to the Bismarck Hospital, and headed there with the third one, too. The head nurse met us at the door and said, ‘Take him over to St. Alexius and let the Sisters clean this one up!’”⁶⁸

Wages for North Dakota miners increased markedly between 1916 and 1917, and no doubt resulted at least partly from the influence of the **United Mine Workers of America**. WLCC miners apparently joined in 1917, and Nick Sologuk recalls that **John L. Lewis**, the noted union official, paid several two- and three-day visits to Wilton to help organize the miners.⁶⁹ At that time Lewis was traveling throughout the United States for that purpose, and in June 1917 was elected a vice-president of the United Mine Workers; he became president in 1920.⁷⁰ In Wilton, the organizational process took time because the company threatened to lay off anyone who signed up. When many did eventually sign, the company had to give in to **unionization**. The shortage of miners resulting from the United States entering World War I probably hurried the company’s capitulation. The union did a great deal for the miners. Before unionization, the men were paid thirty-eight cents a ton for the coal they sent out; thereafter, they received seventy-five cents for room coal and eighty-five cents for pillar and roof coal. Maintenance men (Sologuk refers to them as **“company men”**) were paid fifty to sixty cents per hour before the union came in and a dollar an hour afterward. The company had steadfastly refused to pay “water price” (except for the four cents per ton mentioned earlier), but after unionization the men received an additional eighteen cents for working

in water. Probably the biggest gain was the inauguration of the eight hour day. **Wilton Local No. 3803** of the United Mine Workers of America held annual **“Eight Hour Day”** celebrations and also sponsored rallies, speeches, dances and, of course, celebrated Labor Day in appropriate fashion. By 1919 the local reportedly had a membership of over three hundred.⁷¹

During the war, demand for coal increased sharply and a labor shortage occurred. To combat the problems, the WLCC kept many night shifts working. Nick Sologuk says that the men “gave all they had for the war effort.” The mine was divided into two parts, and he remembers the foremen egging on the “north side” against the “south side” to see who could load the most.⁷² Labor troubles were avoided during this troubled time, but the stage was set for a post-war eruption that shook the community. On November 1, 1919, John L. Lewis called his first industry-wide coal strike and rebuffed all attempts at conciliation despite a court restraining order.⁷³ At first it seemed that the Wilton mine would be spared the strike; Local 3803’s contract did not expire until September 30, 1920, and the majority of the members were reported willing to abide by that agreement. However, the quiet did not last long, and state politics began to play a part in events. On November 6, UMW district president Harry Drennan of Billings, Montana, demanded a 60 percent raise on behalf of the miners, and North Dakota’s Nonpartisan League **Governor Lynn J. Frazier** sided with them in the dispute. Two days later, 278 men struck the Wilton mine in response to an order by Drennan as winter moved into the state with severe cold and snow.⁷⁴

Despite press reports that the Wilton miners had voted to return to work, Frazier issued a proclamation on November 12 declaring martial law in order to get the coal mines back into operation to provide fuel for state residents. The next day he ordered the **North Dakota National Guard** to take possession of mining properties; in some quarters this was viewed as an attempt to put the mines under state or national ownership.⁷⁵

The WLCC management turned their property over to the state on November 13 with a “vigorous protest.” In their eyes, the proclamation exceeded the governor’s constitutional authority to suppress actual or threatened disorders. The same day, newspapers reported a six-inch snowfall whipped by high winds that halted all travel, including that by rail, and badly damaged telegraph lines. Many schools and public institutions were suffering from lack of fuel.⁷⁶

When the state seized the mine, the WLCC management returned its mine train to the Soo Line. However, the miners refused to go to work under military supervision unless transportation was provided. Governor Frazier was therefore forced to ask the company to resume its contract with the Soo. The management complied under protest, and the miners did report for work again on November 14.⁷⁷

The operators of WLCC, whose property was valued at \$1,550,000, and several other affected mines immediately took the state’s action into the courts, and it received prompt attention. District Judge W.L. Nuessle ordered the state officials to return the North Dakota lignite mines to their owners. His decision was immediately challenged by Governor Frazier in the North Dakota Supreme Court through his attorney, William Lemke, vice-president of the Nonpartisan League.⁷⁸

The whole affair came to a head on November 21 when UMW Local 3803 voted to end their strike.



Figure 9. The machine shop at WLCC mine #2. Note the car wheels being repaired. (SHSND A2776)

The terms under which they went back to the company were the same as those which preceded the state’s takeover, but the company agreed to pay wage increases decided by the industry-union negotiations. Since Governor Frazier’s proclamation had provided that “whenever the operators and mines shall come to an agreement and demonstrate their willingness and ability to mine coal, the mines shall be relinquished to the owners,” the state gave back the operation of the mine immediately. At the same time, the state supreme court ruled against the legality of Frazier’s proclamation and undercut the constitutional grounds on which he had acted.⁷⁹

Trouble was not over at the mine, however. When a late November fire destroyed the WLCC mine tipple, the immediate suspects were “radical reds who favored Frazier’s Strike.” The *Bismarck Tribune* paid tribute to local miners’ efforts to fight the blaze:

Miners dared death by entering the mine through a manway and worked desperately to close the mouth of the shaft some distance below the blazing mass above them, this preventing the huge beds of lignite and forest of timber below from catching fire. They succeeded in completely closing the shaft and the mine was saved from a fire, which, if it had gained a start, might have burned for years, consuming hundreds of tons of coal.

The loss was estimated at \$75,000. Besides idling nearly three hundred miners, the daily production of 1,500 tons of coal was stopped.⁸⁰

The fire, which appeared to have started in the screen room, spread rapidly to the top of the immense shaft, leveling it in less than an hour. Though the night was bitterly cold, large numbers of Wilton people made the trip to the mine to offer their help in any manner possible.

While the fire was still burning, Macomber was telegraphing distant points to secure materials and

designs for rebuilding. Both the Soo Line and Northern Pacific lent material and men to help with the reconstruction, but almost immediately men began bringing coal to the surface. Within days ten railroad gondolas had been loaded, and by the middle of December two eight-hour shifts of miners were bringing out 1,500 tons of coal daily. The *Wilton News* reported “Much rivalry exists among the men of the two shifts, and they are working their heads off to outdo each other.” Meanwhile work went forward on a temporary tipple to be used until a new steel structure could be built.⁸¹

The derogatory rumors about “radicals” having ignited the tipple fire led officers of the Wilton UMW local to give a statement to the press: “The miners employed by the WLCC at Wilton were always in the best relations with that company, and their recent vote favoring returning to work for the company . . . was purely on whether such action would outlaw them from the organization of the UMWA.” “As far as we know,” said local President Adam Kraft,

we have no radicals or agitators in the Wilton local. We do not believe that any member of our organization had any part in the burning of the tipple at the Wilton mine last week in fact we are cooperating with the company in determining the cause, and if it is ever brought out that a member of our organization started the fire, the miners themselves will take the initiative in seeing that that man is prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Kraft went on to say that members of his local were “not the least bit interested in any state or national ownership of the mines,” did not favor “Bolshevism, radicalism, or direct actionists,” and were “100 percent Americans . . . [who] would not permit an IWW or any other type of radical to become a member of our organization.” That same day that Kraft’s statements were printed, the local received a wire from John L. Lewis noting that the miners had accepted President Woodrow Wilson’s proposal of a 14 percent pay increase until such

time as an agreement would be made by a commission which had been appointed.⁸²

Thus ended a strange chapter in the history of the Wilton mine. No one was ever brought to account for the fire at the tipple. The following years were prosperous for both the mine management and the miners. By 1920 so many WLCC miners possessed automobiles that the mine train was reported to have been discontinued; it did continue to operate during the winters, however.⁸³

Activity at the mine caused a “boom” for Wilton. Every hotel room was filled with miners and salesmen, and men were sleeping in chicken houses, back sheds, and wherever they could spread a blanket. Peter Leif, former merchant, recalls the busy days in his store, especially payday, when the miners came to settle their accounts and to buy for the days ahead. The McLean County Bank was located in one corner of the store, which was convenient because many of the miners insisted on paying cash for everything. As an example of the increased business, Fred McFadden and Bob Mitchell, who operated a slaughterhouse near town, brought a hayrack full of dressed meat to the local butcher each day.⁸⁴ By 1921 the price of coal at the mine had reached an all-time high of three dollars per ton.⁸⁵

These halcyon days were reflected in other ways, as well. In September 1922 eighty carloads of coal per day were billed from the yards of the Northern Pacific at Wilton alone. The NP also built a spur track to connect directly with the mine that had one side-track for full cars and one for empties.⁸⁶

Although a strike idled the miners for over four months in 1922, by September the operators were advertising for two hundred miners and in October double shifts were employed; hoisting was going on sixteen hours a day, and four hundred men were on the payroll. This seems to have been the largest employment in the mine’s history. Production levels reached 3,500 tons daily and shipments were made to Minnesota and South Dakota in addition to the entire state of North Dakota.⁸⁷

This state of affairs did not last; general unrest in the coal industry plus a lessened demand for lignite led to reduced work forces, slashed wages and a spurt of union activity across the state of North Dakota in 1923 and 1924.⁸⁸ The labor press circulated many rumors of an impending confrontation and reported that Edmond A. Hughes, millionaire Bismarck business magnate and former state Senator, was urging the **North Dakota Coal Operators Association** to “pool their resources for a year, kiss dividends goodbye, and put the UMW out of business in the state.”⁸⁹

When exceedingly mild weather all through the winter of 1923-24 drastically cut the demand for coal, several North Dakota mines practically suspended operations; Wilton miners worked less than half time, and non-union mine companies cut wages. Miners at Burlington went on strike to protest a 10 percent reduction in pay, and a UMW strike against the Beulah Coal Company that had begun in August 1923, highlighted what developed into a tumultuous era in North Dakota labor history.⁹⁰

These developments set the stage for trouble at WLCC where the union contract expired on March 31, 1924. Although the mine management may have felt that it could not accede to the union demands, Nick Sologuk believes the company may not have wanted to renew the union contract because, “the coal was getting poorer—some was being shipped back for poor quality. That never happened before.”⁹¹

The month of March was busy as both miners and management prepared for the showdown. George Coles, president of Wilton UMW Local 3803, and A. Waddington, secretary, represented the local at coal hearings in Bismarck. From there they went to Billings, Montana, for the convention of the 27th District of the UMWA. Mine official Macomber and editor Stewart also attended the Billings meeting, and Major Stanley Washburn of Lakewood, N.J., vice-president of WLCC, spent a week in Wilton about the middle of the month, apparently to review the situation there.⁹²

On March 27 Joseph Bosone, president of District 27, announced that the miners would ask for a three-year contract under the same wage scale and working conditions as were provided in the old contract. He stated that he expected no problems, but declared it would mean a general strike in the state if they occurred. Bosone also announced that he planned to go to Wilton.⁹³

The mine management averted a confrontation by shutting down operations for the summer months, giving a lack of orders as the reason. However, they did not sign a new contract before doing so. It soon became apparent that they did not intend to sign one. Negotiations continued through the summer, but the company remained adamant, and the union reiterated its intention to strike if no contract was forthcoming. Company directors maintained that only reduced wages would enable the WLCC to meet the competition of smaller, non-union mines, and threatened to close the mine if the union did not accept reductions. On the other hand, the miners felt that their wages were being cut to subsidize lower coal costs to consumers.⁹⁴

On August 5 the WLCC opened for the season on a non-union basis, offering what it said was the wage scale being paid by many bituminous mines in the east; it also offered to hire any former employees who wanted to return to work without a contract. The union promptly called a strike and set up pickets around the mine. The local's officers claimed that union recognition was the main issue, but the 25 percent reduction in wages offered by the company was also considerably important. Along with the picketing, the union tried to implement a boycott of Wilton and the WLCC to strengthen its bargaining position.⁹⁵

At first there were hopes of an agreement being reached, and UMW officials Bosone and David McKee met with Major Washburn in Wilton. The negotiations failed, and the WLCC immediately prepared to hire outside workers. Temporary living quarters for new employees were set up on the mine property, and calls went out all over the country for miners.⁹⁶

Fifty years later it is hard to tell just what did occur during those troubled weeks of 1924. Anyone reading the WLCC-controlled *Wilton News* for that summer and fall would not be aware that anything unusual was happening; the paper totally ignored the situation. That there was some violence is certain, but the amount or intensity is difficult to ascertain. Each side blamed the other for the incidents. The company was sufficiently disturbed by the picketing to ask for protection from the McLean County sheriff, but he at first ignored the request, evidently feeling the action to be unnecessary. However, when **Governor Rangvald A. Nestos** threatened to call out the state militia, men were sent from both the McLean and Burleigh County sheriffs' offices. The governor's action embittered the miners; they claimed they had done nothing to provoke it.⁹⁷ While it is probable that the presence of the officers did more to inflame conditions than to calm them, older residents of Wilton remember the day that two factions, armed with rifles and shotguns, faced each other across the town's main street until a cool-headed young deputy talked both sides into a more reasonable frame of mind.⁹⁸

The company's use of imported strikebreakers created the most violence and hard feeling. These men were brought from other states to Wilton, sometimes in special trains and often at night. The mine train transported them to the mine and protected them from retaliation by the union members. Some former miners still resent the fact that their own train (for so they considered it) was used to haul strikebreakers. Some of these "**scabs,**" as the miners called them, were simply out-of-work men looking for a job, but local people insist that many were thugs and brawlers hired to create trouble.

Interestingly, one recruit, John Bell, filed suit against the company and claimed that he had been induced to come to Wilton from St. Louis, Missouri, by fraudulent means. He had been assured that there was no labor trouble at the mine, but he and fellow-strikebreakers had been taken to Wilton at night under armed guard and kept from communicating with outsiders. He further claimed

that machine guns were installed in the mine and on the tipples, and that at least twelve "gunmen" patrolled the area. When he discovered the true situation at the mine, he quit immediately.⁹⁹

Action against the importation of workers included an incident recalled by Frank Rogowski, Wilton farmer and former miner. He was one of thirteen strikers who were dispatched to Baldwin one day in a fan truck to intercept some men from Bismarck who were supposed to report for work at the mine. "It was good for them that they found out about us and didn't come that day," Frank remembers.¹⁰⁰

The local paper noted without comment a number of other incidents that were apparently related to the strike. A fire of undetermined origin destroyed the big barn at the mine and some animals and feed. In September, two men were arrested for throwing rocks at the car of Mine Superintendent Quigley, and another car was dumped in a coulee and mauled with an axe.¹⁰¹ Street fights between strikers and scabs were common.

As the weeks wore on, some strikers began to weaken. Many felt that they were not getting the support they should have from the national UMW, despite protests to the contrary by their local officers. Many of them had never really wanted to strike, but had gone along with their union. First a few, then more and more of them returned to work. This was bitterly resented by those who wanted a contract at any cost, and those who reported for work were berated as scabs.¹⁰²

Nick Krush was one of those who felt that the needs of his family were more important than waiting out the management. A strong union man, he had introduced John L. Lewis during one of his visits to Wilton and had interpreted for the Ukrainian miners. When Nick ran out of money and went back to work, his children received much abuse from schoolmates whose fathers remained on strike. They still remember that year as a "scary" time. The Krushes lived near a well-traveled road, and many of their mother's

large flock of turkeys were deliberately run over and smashed so that they could not be salvaged for food. Their dog disappeared, and was later found shot to death.¹⁰³

The company management broke the strike by wearing the miners down. In the end, the men received the same wages as the year before, but without a union contract. A few of the strongest union men were not re-hired, but the best workers were retained. Even so, some men would have no part of the WLCC from that day forward. As for the strike-breakers, “they didn’t stick around long because they weren’t used to working so hard,” Nick Sologuk recalls, “Some of them didn’t even make expenses.”¹⁰⁴

The 1924 strike probably lasted only two or three months; the “Keep Away from Wilton” ad last

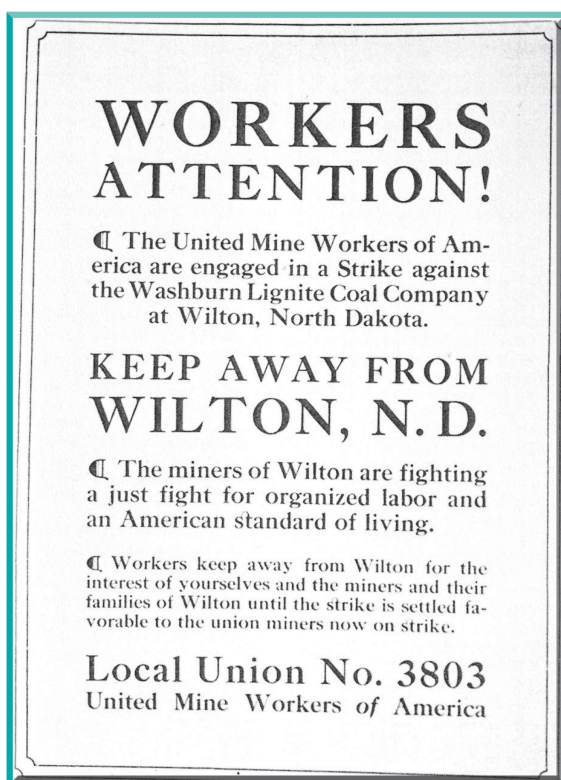


Figure 10. This poster indicates the bitterness aroused by the 1924 United Mine Workers strike against the Washburn Lignite Coal Company. This call for a boycott of the town was issued in the August 7, 1924, issue of the *Farmer-Labor State Record*. (Courtesy of the SHSND)

appeared in the *Farmer-Labor State Record* on September 11, and most Wilton oldtimers agree that the strike was short. However, it had far-reaching consequences. One modern writer says that it “was to break the back of the Company, the town of Wilton and many unfortunate people.” In modern Wilton one often hears the remark, “Things were never the same after the strike.” Certainly, there never again existed the amicable relationship between miners and company management that had been evident before the strike.¹⁰⁵

For a time it seemed that things were back to normal. Miner John Oshanyk’s carefully preserved worksheets from 1922 to 1926 cast considerable light on the life of a worker. For example, in February, 1926, his ticket for thirteen days of work showed gross earnings of \$65.00; deductions left a take-home wage of only \$45.41 and included: stores (supplies), \$2.10 (dynamite, carbide, tools, etc.); doctor, \$1.00; fuel (for his home) \$6.64; shop fees, \$7.25 ; and train, \$2.60.¹⁰⁶

On April 9, 1925, mine manager Macomber died unexpectedly and plunged the town into mourning for the man who was often called “**the Father of Wilton.**” During his funeral at Minneapolis, the citizens of Wilton stopped work for five minutes and stood silent in his memory. All work at the WLCC was suspended, and the steam whistle blew for five minutes to honor the memory of the company president. Evidently, the strike animosity did not extend to Macomber personally. At a meeting of stockholders and directors of the WLCC in Minneapolis the next month, Major Stanley Washburn, son of the founder of the Company, was elected to replace Macomber.¹⁰⁷

Other changes followed. By 1927 the buildings from Langhorn had been moved to Mine No. 2 to join those from Chapin, which had been moved earlier. The settlement was renamed “**Macomber**” in honor of the man who had done so much for the company. By November the mine was working at full capacity again.¹⁰⁸

In 1928, after nearly thirty years under the management of the Washburn family, the mines were sold to the Otter Tail Power Co., of Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Although the company maintained that it wanted to assure a coal supply for its generating plant at Washburn and the name was changed to “The Washburn Lignite Company,” persistent rumors circulated that the outfit was to be sold and converted to a **strip-mining** operation. Nevertheless, in March 1930, 290 men were employed in what was still called “**the largest lignite mine in the world,**” and the yearly payroll was \$350,000.¹⁰⁹

Then the blow fell. The property was leased by the **Truax-Traer Company** of Minot and converted to a large strip mine. The new owners immediately started remodeling the tibble and had stripping operations in full swing by August 1930. Because only seventy men were employed in the stripping operations, over two hundred miners were out of work that fall. The closing of the underground operations and resultant loss of jobs, coupled with the Great Depression that was tightening its grip upon the country, was nothing short of catastrophic for Wilton. Feeling in the community was strong against the mine management and some of the workers sent to supervise the switch to stripping were waylaid and beaten in the alleys of the town.¹¹⁰

Some of the unemployed miners who had previously been farmers rented land and tried to get started again. Others stayed with the only work they knew and tried to make a living at the small mines in the area. Between 1932 and 1936, there were more than a dozen such underground operations near Wilton.¹¹¹

Several individual stories give a picture of life in the depressed community. David McGinnis had come to Wilton in 1925, became a bookkeeper for the WLCC, and then retained his position during the changes of management. In 1930 a salary cut forced him to move to the company headquarters at Macomber. “We rented a company house for \$10 a month,” remembers his widow, “and that

was one of the better houses—the others rented for even less.” Long-time Wilton barber Martin BJORKE bought his shop in the mining town in 1931; even though haircuts cost thirty-five cents and shaves fifteen cents, business was so bad that he said, “If I could have gotten my money back, I’d have left in a minute, but as it was I had to stick it out and make the best of it.”¹¹² That year the retail price of coal fell to \$1.50 per ton at the mine.¹¹³

Crop failures in the local area made work hard to find, and as a result many people left Wilton permanently. The surplus of workers made it possible for the coal company to secure labor at extremely low wages. In 1934, after working several years in a machine shop, John Oshanyk went back to the mine as a machinist. Three years later he was earning only seventy-five cents an hour for skilled labor. Nick Sologuk began farming when underground work was suspended; “I was glad to quit,” he says, “Things weren’t the way they used to be.”¹¹⁴

The desperation of the unemployed miners led to a resolution presented to the Wilton City Commission on February 15, 1937; declaring that “a modest prosperity” had been enjoyed in Wilton until “our mining industry was taken over by big business,” the miners requested the state legislature to enact a tax of fifty cents per ton on all future output of strip- or machine-mined coal. The city commission promised to forward the resolution to the legislature, but that was the last ever heard of it.¹¹⁵

Stripping continued for over ten years and the long, wedge-shaped ridges of earth that cover many acres north of old County Highway 36 testify to the thoroughness of operation. In time, however, the insatiable shovel uncovered all the coal that was economically feasible. In an effort to continue in business the company began a limited underground operation, erecting a tibble near the Ecklund mine property. This venture was not very successful and was plagued by accidents.

Meanwhile, new sources of energy were making huge inroads on the coal industry. Oil and natural gas were found to be more efficient, cheaper, and cleaner than coal. Considering those factors, local residents were not too surprised in 1946 to learn that the mine was closing. Within a short time, the property stood vacant; the frame buildings, machinery and equipment were moved to the new Truax-Traer mine near Garrison.¹¹⁶ By this time, however, Wilton's economy rested firmly on a sound agricultural base, and the mine's demise had little effect on the town.

By 1976 the old powderhouse that held the dynamite and caps for blasting operations was the only remaining building at the mine site. Broken foundations, crumbled walls, twisted pipes, scattered bricks and abandoned tunnels are all that remain of what was once called the "largest lignite mine in the world." The other buildings were torn down by buyers who paid two cents each for bricks, and the large tipple blew down one windy night. The land now belongs to the Kzmarzick family and the original minesite has been farmed by the family of Nick Krush since 1927. All that remain are depressions from cave-ins, cellar holes, foundation stones, and the mine's railroad grade. Krush family members live in what was once the mine superintendent's house.

The past is not forgotten in Wilton; the town is still often referred to as "**Lignite City**," the high school basketball team is the "**The Miners**," and a display of miner's tools hangs in the Memorial Hall. When Wilton celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1974, seven men, veterans of service at mine #1, posed for a picture for the anniversary book, and five women, widows of miners from that mine, were also photographed.

Over fifty years ago, F.L. Anders, an engineer and mine manager, predicted, "a series of great power plants will be scattered over the valley of the Missouri River, linked together by a circuit of high tension wires and sending energy to many cities and railroad systems of the northwest."¹¹⁷ Today that prediction is becoming a reality, and once again King Lignite is making its mark on Wilton's history.

About the Author

Frances Wold (1915–1995) was an award-winning journalist with a special interest in writing about her native state, North Dakota. Her popular column, "Then and Now" reached readers in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota, and was the impetus for the publication of two collec-

Figure 11. This view of the WLCC tipple shows railroad cars being filled with coal. (SHSND 0410-098-2)



tions of her writings. She published several articles in *North Dakota History* and was honored by the American Association for State and Local History

in 1978 for her writing on North Dakota. In 1988 the State Historical Board awarded her its Excellence in Local History award.

Originally published in *North Dakota History*, Vol. 43.4:4–20 (1976).

1. Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 160.
2. Victor L. Anderson, untitled reminiscences written for Historical Data Project (unpublished manuscript, State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1938); among the drivers were Captain John Belk, John P. French, William Breen and James McGarvey, all of whom are familiar to students of the history of Bismarck.
3. Rev. J.C. Wingerling, "Early History of Wilton and Vicinity," *Wilton News*, April 3, 1936.
4. Mary Ann Barnes Williams, *Origins of North Dakota Place Names* (Bismarck: *Bismarck Tribune*, 1966), 185.
5. *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967), 361. Frank E. Vyzralek, H. Roger Grant and Charles Bohi, "North Dakota's Railroad Depots: Standardization on the Soo Line," *North Dakota History* 42-1 (Winter, 1975), 12.
6. *Ibid.*; Wingerling, "Early History of Wilton and Vicinity," *Wilton News*, March 20 and April 3, 1936.
7. *Wilton News*, December 22, 1899; *Washburn Leader*, July 14, 1900.
8. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, May 25, 1900.
9. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, July 12, 1900.
10. *Ibid.*, July 16, 27, 1900; *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, July 27, 1900.
11. State Geological Survey, *Second Biennial Report* (Bismarck: State Printer, 1902), 188–189. Briquetting was never implemented at the mine.
12. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, December 28, 1900.
13. *Ibid.*, August 31, September 7, 1900.
14. *Ibid.*, September 7, 21, 1900.
15. *Wilton News*, September 28, 1900.
16. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, October 2, 15, November 16, 1900; Mrs. C.V. Danielson, "Coal Mines Had A Big Part in History of Wilton," *Washburn Leader*, Diamond Jubilee Issue, June 20, 1957, 5-C3. The Beanery was enlarged and remodeled in subsequent years. Wingerling writes about "A large 80-room hotel" in the *Wilton News*, April 10, 1936.
17. See both Danielson and Wingerling articles noted in ff. 17; in addition, the *Wilton News* carried many stories about weddings of miners and women who worked at the hotel.
18. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, October 12, 1900. State Geological Survey, *Second Biennial Report*, 165.
19. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, November 23, 1900.
20. *Wilton News*, November 2, 1900.
21. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, October 19, 1900; the article is reprinted from the *Wilton News*.
22. *Ibid.*, December 28, 1900.
23. *Ibid.*, December 14, 1900.
24. *Ibid.*, December 28, 1900.
25. *Wilton News*, November 28, 1913; January 2, February 6, 1914; June 20, 1974, Diamond Jubilee Edition, B-10.
26. *Bismarck Tribune*, January 4, 1901; Danielson, *Washburn Leader*, June 20, 1957, C-6. All old miners remember the company's medical care provisions when they talk about the mine.
27. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, May 10, 1901; June 14, 1913.
28. Wingerling, *Wilton News*, April 10, 1936.
29. Danielson, *Washburn Leader*, June 20, 1957, C-4.
30. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, January 18, March 15, 29, 1901.
31. "Lignite Coal," *The Record* (Fargo), 7-2 (April, May, June, 1901), 40–41.
32. *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, January 25, September 13, 1901, March 4, 1913.
33. *Ibid.*, December 6, 27, 1901.
34. *Ibid.*, August 30, 1901.
35. Wingerling, *Wilton News*, April 10, 1936; State Geological Survey, *Second Biennial Report*, 180–183; *Wilton News*, July 14, 1916.
36. *Wilton News*, September, 1902.
37. Clement A. Lounsbury, *North Dakota: History and People*, III (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1917), 804. Corporation officers were President B.W. Stephenson, Vice-President Stanley Washburn, Secretary-Treasurer W.H. Keller, and General Manager Walter P. Macomber. Macomber remained active in the operation of the company until his death in 1925.
38. State Geological Survey, *Second Biennial Report*, 62.
39. *Ibid.*, 62, 165.
40. Interviews with former miners Nick Sologuk, John Oshanyk and Frank Rogowski, all of Wilton. See also *Wilton News*, April 25, 1913.
41. *Wilton News*, October 2, 1903; August 30, 1907.
42. Danielson, *Washburn Leader*, June 20, 1957, C4; Sologuk and Oshanyk.
43. *Wilton News*, September 16, 1910.
44. State Geological Survey, *Fourth Biennial Report* (Bismarck: State Geological Survey, 1906), 302; *Wilton News*, June 7, September 27, 1907.
45. *Bismarck Tribune*, June 14, 1912; Wingerling, *Wilton News*, April 10, 1936.
46. State Engineer, *Fourth Biennial Report* (Bismarck: State Engineer, 1910), 87; Wingerling, *Wilton News*, April 10, 1936, says that the Wilton Grand Theatre and Garage, built in 1915, was partly constructed from bricks from the mine kilns.
47. *Wilton News*, September 6, November 8, 1907; Danielson, *Washburn Leader*, June 20, 1957, C-4; personal recollection.
48. *Wilton News*, September 20, 1907; this story about a labor dispute at the mine ends, "thus closes another chapter of our recent mine difficulties."
49. *Ibid.*, February 22, July 26, December 27, 1907.
50. *Ibid.*, May 8, 1908.
51. *Ibid.*, September 2, 9, 16, November 18, 1910.
52. *Ibid.*, November 25, 1910.
53. *Ibid.*, September 9, October 21, December 30, 1910; the advertisement for laborers, which was first run in October, continued for many successive weeks.

54. Mr. Sologuk, a very articulate man, spoke with me several times about life in the Washburn mines; the bulk of the information used in this article came from an interview on August 26, 1974. Nick was 82 years old at that time.
55. Mrs. Nick (Anastasia) Krush of Wilton, the widow of a miner, was one who did such baking. Her children remember that her huge dough pan was usually empty only long enough to be washed.
56. *Wilton News*, February 2, 1912.
57. *Ibid.*, December 21, 1906; November 1, 1912; many articles in the *Wilton News* during the mine's history report this problem.
58. *Ibid.*, July 19, August 16, October 25, 1912.
59. *Ibid.*, August 2, 1912.
60. *Ibid.*, October 25, December 20, 1912.
61. *Ibid.*, July 9, September 17, November 19, 1915.
62. *Ibid.*, January 3, 1913; July 14, 1916; Sologuk interview.
63. Sologuk interview.
64. *Wilton News*, November 2, 1917; Danielson, *Washburn Leader*, June 20, 1957, C-4.
65. *Wilton News*, October 20, 1916; interviews with Sologuk, Oshanyk and retired Wilton merchant Peter Leif.
66. *Wilton News*, October 16, November 13, 1908; January 21, 1910. These articles are typical of many printed through the years. Editor Stewart was also a Presbyterian clergyman, and he wrote many commentaries against the "blind pigs" and gambling parlors after he took control of the paper in 1910.
67. See the *Biennial Reports of the State Engineer* (Various cities: State Printer, 1909–1918); the quotation from the 1913–1914 *Report* appears on page 53.
68. See *Wilton News*, October 31, 1924; Sologuk and Leif interviews. Less severely injured patients were put on the cabooses of coal trains headed for Bismarck.
69. State Engineer, *Eighth Biennial Report* (Fargo: State Printer, 1918), 51. *Wilton News*, August 30, 1918; this article reports plans for a Wilton observance of Labor Day by the union and notes, "This was their second year as an organization."
70. General biographical information about this pivotal labor union figure in American history can be found in Thomas Robson Hay, "John L. Lewis," *Collier's Encyclopedia*, XIV (New York: Crowell, Collier and MacMillan, Inc., 1967), 530.
71. Sologuk interview; *Wilton News*, March 29, August 30, 1918, March 28, 1919, September 2, 1921.
72. Sologuk interview.
73. Hay, 530.
74. *Wilton News*, November 7, 1919.
75. *Ibid.*, November 14, December 12, 1919.
76. *Ibid.*, November 14, 1919.
77. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, November 13, 1919.
78. *Ibid.*, November 17, 1918; *Wilton News*, November 21, 1919.
79. *Wilton News*, November 28, 1919.
80. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, November 26, 1919.
81. *Wilton News*, November 28, December 5, 19, 1919.
82. *Ibid.*, December 12, 1919.
83. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1920; the article declares that "miners are among the highest paid workmen in North Dakota."
84. Interviews with Peter Leif and Glen Skinner, *Wilton News*, Diamond Jubilee Edition, June 20, 1974; interview with Mrs. Nick Krush, *Wilton News*, April 12, 1973.
85. State Mine Inspector, *Third Biennial Report* (Bismarck: np, 1921), 15.
86. Skinner interview, *Wilton News*, June 20, 1974, C-24; *Wilton News*, September 29, 1922.
87. *Wilton News*, April 7, August 25, September 1, October 6, 1922.
88. Henry R. Martinson, *History of North Dakota Labor* (NP: np, 1970). See also: *Wilton News*, February 16, 1923, and issues for March, 1924.
89. *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, October 18, 1923.
90. *Wilton News*, December 20, 1923, and February 21, 1924; Martinson, *History of North Dakota Labor*; the *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record* carried weekly advertisements placed by the UMW local at Beulah which warned against trading in that Mercer County city from August 2, 1923, until February 7, 1924.
91. Sologuk interview.
92. *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, March 6, 20, 1924.
93. *Ibid.*, March 27, 1924.
94. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1924; *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, August 7, 1924.
95. *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, August 21, 26, 1924; the call for a boycott of Wilton and the WLCC appears in the August 7, 1924, edition of this paper. See also: *Bismarck Tribune*, August 11, 1924; *Bismarck North Dakota Nonpartisan*, August 27, 1924.
96. *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, August 21, 1924; *Bismarck Tribune*, August 11, 1924.
97. Although frequently recounted by those who lived in Wilton at that time, this story cannot be documented; those who recall the incident also refuse to name any of the participants.
98. *Bismarck North Dakota Nonpartisan*, September 17, 1924.
99. Rogowski interview.
100. *Wilton News*, August 29, September 5, 19, 1924.
101. *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, August 14, 1924; Rogowski and Sologuk interviews.
102. *Ibid.*
103. Interview with Mrs. Nick Krush, *Wilton News*, April 12, 1973.
104. Sologuk interview.
105. John A. Gjevre, *Saga of the Soo: West From Shoreham* (Lacrosse, Wisconsin; privately printed, 1973), 52. The *Bismarck Farmer-Labor State Record*, August 7, 1924, notes that the WLCC was maintaining friendly relations with the miners, but Sologuk, Rogowski and other former miners declare that animosity replaced all cordial feelings after the strike ended.
106. The pay slips belonging to former WLCC miner John Oshanyk show union dues deducted in 1924, but not in 1925.
107. *Wilton News*, May 1, June 19, 1925.
108. *Ibid.*, September 30, November 28, 1927; Krush interview, April 12, 1973.
109. *Ibid.*, March 20, June 30, 1930.
110. *Ibid.*, June 13, 20, October 3, 1930. Reports of the beatings were not published in the local press, but the events were (and are) common knowledge.
111. A list of mines operating in the area during the Depression was supplied to the author by L.W. Asplund of Wilton; he and his father owned and worked one of the small mines.
112. Interviews with Mrs. David McGinnis and Martin Bjorke, *Wilton News*, June 20, 1974.
113. *Ibid.*, November 13, 1931.
114. Interview with John Oshanyk, *Ibid.*, June 20, 1974; Sologuk interview.
115. Minutes of the Wilton City Council, February, 1937.
116. *Wilton News*, August 8, 1946.
117. *Ibid.*, February 17, 1919.

