

# A GUIDE TO WYOMING COUNTY

By Mary Catherine Brooks

**C**radled in the southern tip of West Virginia, Wyoming County is rich in both history and natural beauty. Rushing brooks; mighty mountains; and wild, wooded areas make up its rugged topography, with small communities and three diminutive municipalities—Mullens, Oceana, and Pineville—dotting the landscape. Named for a Native American word meaning “large plain,” Wyoming County was created from Logan County in 1850.

Much of the county’s history is tied to once-abundant natural resource. At the turn of the last century, King Coal dominated the land and ruled how and where most of its inhabitants worked and lived. Despite the eventual demise of coal as the county’s chief industry, the region is still a showcase of earlier coal company heydays. Remains of coal tipples, miners’ camps, and old mines now draw tourists.

Coal history buffs can visit the vestiges of once-bustling coal camps at Kopperston, Glen Rogers, Itmann, and Coal Mountain, among others. Some of the camps’ historic buildings have even been pressed into modern service. In Itmann, for example, a three-story, cut-stone edifice, constructed in the mid-1920s and used as a company store and offices, now serves as a homeless shelter.

The county also boasts an extensive railroading history. The Caboose Museum, located in Virginian Railway Company Caboose 307 in Mullens, houses a collection of railroad memorabilia gathered from local residents. In addition, murals depicting local history adorn several city buildings in Mullens.

Historic land has also been transformed near Oceana, where the Clearfork Valley Golf Club occupies 120 acres of gently rolling land once roamed by Native Americans and early White settlers. The land was eventually



farmed as the McDonald Plantation in the 1800s, but Union forces burned the ill-fated plantation to the ground during the Civil War. Today, Clearfork Valley's 18-hole golf course is open to the public and draws players from all over West Virginia as well as from Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky. In addition to its beautiful setting, the course's clubhouse is quickly gaining a reputation for serving tasty, old-fashioned cheeseburgers.

The Wyoming county seat, Pineville, is home to both manmade and natural historic markers. The county courthouse, built in 1916, and the adjoining jail, constructed in 1929, are on the National Register of Historic Places. Built of native stone by Italian stonemasons, the courthouse has been recently renovated to its original elegance. Chandeliers once again illuminate the lobby, and the restored trim on the lobby ceiling reflects the workmanship and attention to architectural detail of the building's first craftsmen.

The property surrounding the courthouse features a statue of Rev. W. H. Cook, a soldier, statesman, and minister who was one of the area's first European settlers, and monuments honoring area veterans, including Kenny Shadrick, a native son

who was the first casualty of the Korean War.

Pineville is also home to Castle Rock, a 165-foot sandstone cliff that towers over the mouth of Rockcastle Creek. Native Americans, scouts, and early settlers used the impressive formation as a natural landmark.

According to many historians, the town of Pineville stands at what was once the convergence of seven Native American trails. In the late 1890s, the town bore the name of its most defining natural characteristic—Castle Rock—but its post office went by the moniker Pineville. (Former resident John W. Cline is credited with naming the post office in honor of a nearby forest of pine trees.) In 1907, the town officially adopted the name Pineville.

Though most of the region's recorded history chronicles the past few centuries, traces of its ancient history survive in Wyoming County. *Petroglyphs*, or rock carvings, on rock outcrops south of Oceana, have fascinated archaeologists, scholars, and the public. Some experts claim that the carvings were done in the sixth, seventh, or eighth centuries AD, while others estimate that they were created much later, in the 1300s to

Along with coal, timber was once a booming industry in Wyoming County. This 1929 photograph shows a logging team with their horses at Otsego, as well as the town's sawmill and part of the lumber yard.

Photo courtesy of Mike Goode



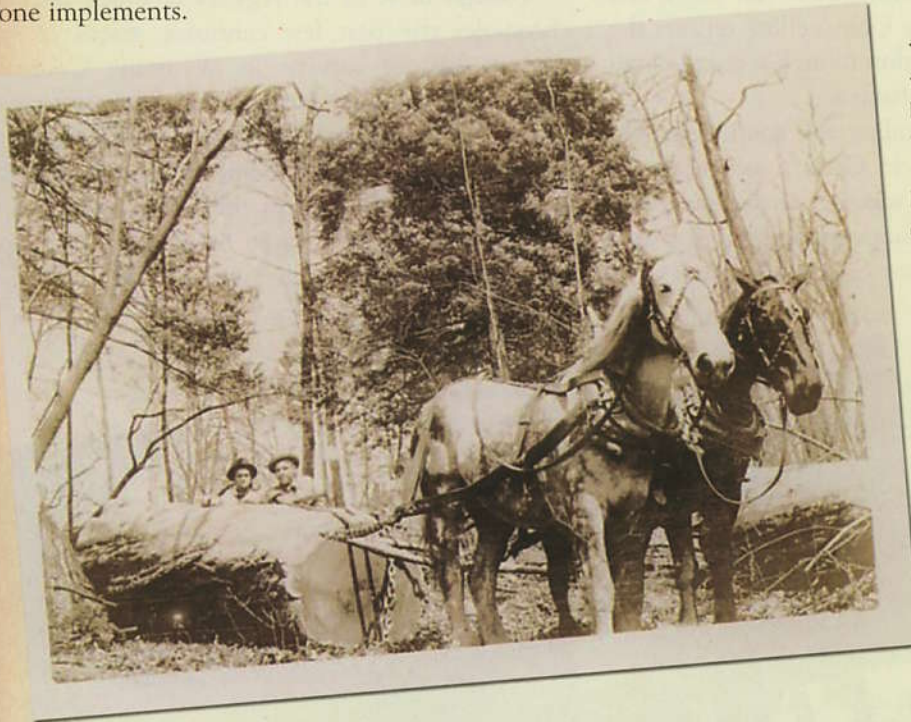


1500s. A subject of fierce disagreement in the 1980s, the origin and meaning of the petroglyphs remain up for debate. Some researchers—including the late Dr. Barry Fell, an often-controversial former Harvard professor—hypothesized that the markings are from an ancient Celtic alphabet called *ogham*. Fell thought that the markings on one of the petroglyphs spell out a Christmas message carved by Irish missionaries, whose arrival in the New World predated Christopher Columbus by several centuries. Others think that a sunburst glyph located on the left side of one of the wall carvings depicts a supernova that is known to have lit up the night sky sometime during the eleventh century. Still other observers have dismissed the carvings as the result of early natives sharpening stone implements.

to the trail system already established through Logan, Boone, and Mingo counties.

Twin Falls Resort State Park, off WV 97 near Pineville, combines unspoiled scenic beauty with a variety of accommodations ranging from plush to rustic. Visitors can enjoy the comfort of the park's 20-room lodge, opt for the serenity of a secluded cabin, or set up camp in one of 50 campsites.

One of Twin Falls' most popular assets is its thriving deer population, which roams the park's 4,000 wooded acres. In the evening, visitors line the park's roadsides to watch the animals from their cars. Another draw is the Pioneer Farm, a restored homestead on Bowers Ridge. The living history farm appears much like area farms



Two men clear land in Pineville in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Goode

In addition to its historic landmarks, Wyoming County offers plenty of modern-day, outdoor fun. The newest recreational attraction is the Hatfield-McCoy Trails' Castle Rock Trailhead in the Pinnacle Creek area near Pineville. The trail is open from sunrise to sunset to those riding ATVs, dirtbikes, horses, and mountain bikes, as well as to hikers (user permits are available at the trailhead). The Wyoming County loop of the Hatfield-McCoy Trails added nearly 120 miles

would have looked in the 1830s and provides a glimpse into the lives of the pioneers who settled the Twin Falls area. Additionally, the park features an 18-hole golf course, driving range, swimming pool, museum, year-round nature programs, and trails.

At the other end of the county, near Hanover, lies R. D. Bailey Lake, which boasts 17 miles of shoreline and excellent fishing. Open to boaters year-round, the lake is home to largemouth bass, hybrid striped bass, walleye, tiger muskie, catfish, crappie, bluegill, and panfish. While two record-





(Above) The Wyoming County Courthouse in Pineville was built in 1916. Photo courtesy of Mike Goode



(Left) R. D. Bailey Lake  
Steve Shaluta

size bass have been caught in the lake, the area is fast becoming known throughout the country for the trophy bucks that inhabit the surrounding forest. Seasonal picnic facilities, boat rentals at the local marina, and a 168-site campground that stretches along six miles of the Guyandotte River are also available.

Built by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers as part of a flood control project for the Guyandotte River, R. D. Bailey Dam features an unusual, random rockfill design that has drawn visitors from as far away as China. Most dams have a clay core, but R. D. Bailey's is a carefully designed mound of closely compacted rock. The dam is also the first concrete-faced dam built by the Corps.

Constructed in 1974, the dam includes 5.7 million cubic yards of rock, 6.4 million pounds of steel, and 240,000 bags of cement. Tourists can get a bird's-eye-view of the structure from the visitor's center, which sits 365 feet above the lake. The center also has exhibits and photos of the dam project and its flood control mission.

From fascinating history to outdoor fun, Wyoming County is one of West Virginia's wonderful out-of-the-way gems. 🍷

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