



# Anatomy of a ghost town

## Wilder was the scene of violent depression-era strike

Once you clear away the four-foot weeds, you can see the tombstone in the corner of the neglected cemetery. Barney Graham, it says, is “gone but not forgotten.”

Seventy-four years after his murder and the emotional funeral that followed it, I fear he has been forgotten — along with the coal-mining town synonymous with his name.

That town is called Wilder; it remains a spot on the map. But if you’ve driven through this corner of Fentress County lately, you will attest to the fact that there isn’t much to Wilder anymore except for a tiny post office and a couple of houses that have seen better days. You don’t see any evidence of the incredible series of events that occurred here during the Great Depression — a saga that may have had a major impact on American history. Sadly, there isn’t even a plaque to memorialize the most famous murder in the history of organized labor in Tennessee.



Wilder used to be coal country. In the early part of the 20th century, people mined coal by hand here and transported it to Nashville by train on what was then called the Tennessee Central Railroad. It was there, in the state capital, that the owners of the Fentress Coal and Coke Co. lived. And among the assets of the Fentress Coal and Coke Co. was the entire town of Wilder — every house, every store. It was a classic

coal-mining town where people were paid with “scrip” and everything they bought was owned by the company. Towns like Wilder produced lines such as “I owe my soul to the company store” from the classic song “Sixteen Tons.” By the outbreak of the Great Depression, about 700 people lived in Wilder. Practically all of them lived in tiny shacks with no running water.

When the Great Depression hit, the Fentress Coal and Coke Co. lowered wages again and again. After the third time, in July 1932,



Coal-miners in the town of Wilder went on strike in July 1932, setting off a violent chain of events that included bombings and murder. Above is a group of miners, including Arley Morgan, standing at far right. Morgan continued to deliver coal from his small independent mine to Rockwood High School during the strike. Photographs courtesy of his grandson, Kendall Morgan.



workers organized a local chapter of the United Mine Workers and went on strike, protesting low pay and what they called “inhuman” living and working conditions. In an era before unions were common in Tennessee, the owners of the Fentress Coal and Coke Co. were determined to break the strike, sending in replacement workers, or “scabs,” to keep the mines producing and the trains moving. Some of these workers were from other parts of Fentress County or from nearby counties such as Morgan and Overton. Mountain culture being what it was, it wasn’t uncommon for a striker to recognize his brother or cousin among the scabs.

Things got violent. Perry Cotham, who wrote a book called “Toil, Turmoil and Triumph,” interviewed a retired worker named Joe Welch:

“There was a lot of shooting and a lot of explosions. Scabs and strikers were being shot at. Several killed and a lot of them got wounded ... I can remember a lot of times walking into town and seeing 50-75 men carrying pistols ... I have been riding in cars that were shot at as we went by some dark corner.”

On three occasions in November 1932, railroad bridges leading to Wilder were blown up. Governor Henry Horton sent armed troops to guard railroad and company property.

By this time several newspapers had reporters in Wilder, and most of the reporters were sympathetic to labor. When news spread across the county that people in Wilder were literally starving, people began donating money, food and medicine to their cause.

Barney Graham was the leader of the strikers, and by the spring of 1933 there were rumors that his life was in danger. Among the people who heard these rumors was Myles Horton, a union organizer who had founded the Highlander Folk School in Grundy County less than a year earlier. According to Horton’s autobiography, he told Graham that there were people out to get him and advised him to lay low. Graham refused to do so.

On April 30, 1933, people in the town of Wilder heard a series of gunshots at close range. When they came out of their homes, they saw Barney Graham lying on the ground in front of the company store, blood pouring out of bullet wounds all over his body. Jack “Shorty” Green was among the company guards with weapons pointed at him.

News of Barney Graham’s murder was broadcast in newspapers across the country. The Nashville Tennessean had a front-page story about the funeral:

“Behind the hearse and a half dozen cars, strikers from all parts of ‘the hollow’ formed in column of twos. There were 600 men, women and children in the column. Two flagbearers carrying American flags ... led the column.”

One of the men who spoke beside his grave vowed that “the strike did not end when Barney Graham was murdered by company thugs.”

The legal debacle that followed will not go down in Tennessee history as a victory for justice. No one was ever convicted for



**“Gone but not forgotten,” reads the tombstone of Barney Graham, the strike leader murdered in 1933 during the coal-miners’ strike in Wilder.**

Graham’s murder. Green, who is assumed by historians to have been the murderer, claimed he killed Graham in self-defense. But according to an examining physician, four of Graham’s 10 bullet wounds were in his back.

After the excitement of Graham’s murder passed, the strike appears to have lost strength. The scabs soon became permanent, and many of the striking workers decided to go back to work in spite of the low pay. Others simply left the mountains.

Some level of coal-mining remained in Wilder through the 1960s. But since that time it has simply vanished. The mines have been shut down for years. The railroad track no longer comes through here. When engineers came through and rebuilt Highway 85, they moved it uphill a ways, bypassing what some refer to as “Old Wilder.” The closest thing to

a main street that Wilder used to have is now covered over by trees, as are the foundations of its old shacks.

But who knows? Barney Graham may not have died in vain. In Horton’s biography, he says that Graham’s brutal murder and the way it was covered up by local authorities made him all the more certain that his Highlander Folk School would be a radical institution. That it was, promoting organized labor in the 1930s and 1940s and shifting its focus to civil rights matters in the 1950s. Among the people who attended training at Highlander, and who were therefore inspired by Horton, were Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.

Graham’s funeral also had a small impact on song and literature. A few months after the murder, Graham’s daughter wrote a song about her father. Called “The Ballad of Barney Graham,” it remains one of the most famous labor ballads in American history. And during World War II, author Robert Penn Warren published “At Heaven’s Gate.” Though one of his lesser-known novels, the fictionalized account of a coal-mining town and a local war hero sent in to stop the fighting sounds suspiciously like Wilder and Sgt. Alvin C. York (Fentress County’s best-known native).

Nevertheless, when I recently went to the place where Wilder the coal-mining town used to be, I felt tremendous sadness at the disappearance a place where such human drama played out. I did, however, vow that as long as I had something to say about it, Graham would not entirely be forgotten. ☺



## Tennessee History for Kids

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