

Widen Revisited

Since the Widen Human Development Project ended in 1981, the coal company has removed all of its junk, and all of its buildings and the State has spent millions to reclaim and landscape all of the gob heaps (mine tailings). Thus, Widen has recovered much of the natural beauty of former centuries. The ICA's former white house still stands on Clay St., but it now overlooks scenic rolling hills on top of which the State has built a new road to Summersville. A new road is being built through where the tipples used to stand so that two bridges (the one behind the gym and the one nearest Clay St.) will be bypassed. Now all of the smell from the perpetually burning coal has also been eliminated.

In 1978, the community regained use of the gym and painted a mural on the wall of a vacant company store. Only the front steps and a memorial stone remain, but the grass is mowed. The company's offices have been removed and the entire area up the hollow to the original mine opening has also been landscaped to prevent erosion. Thus, with most of the reminders of the past gone, the old messes cleaned up, the community has, on its own, decided to affirm its present and move into its future.

Not once during the 31 visits that we made during our two days in Widen did anyone say either that the past was better than the future or that the present was undesirable -- quite a change from 10 years ago.

The sign at the top of the Widen hill has been recently repainted and remains the symbol of hospitality and resolve of the people who live at the bottom of the hill. When Garland Craft died, his wife left Widen; his house was bought by Punk Young, a nephew of Sherman Nettles. The house has been remodeled, and a new stone structure encloses an indoor swimming pool. A satellite dish TV antenna, one of three in Widen, can be seen near the tree in the front yard. A second satellite dish stands in the High's yard, along with their kids' skateboard ramp.

Elmer Groves became Widen's fire chief in 1978 and reopened the firehouse. Since the Groves' retired to Florida, David Petosnick has become the fire chief and a kitchen has been added to the fire house for use during the annual Back to Widen Days which the fire department sponsors. (Nearby Birch River has also picked up on the homecoming theme.) The old post office, repainted during the 1978 consult, has been replaced by a stunning white mobile home.

The third satellite dish is across the street from Ronnie Tinney's house on Nicholas St., which is now paved. Ronnie preaches for the Baptist Church in Birch River, the two busses in front of his house symbolize his commitment. Bobby Summers has also been called into the ministry and preaches whenever he gets the opportunity whether at the Widen church or elsewhere.

Randy Tinney remains his cautious, caring self. I talked briefly with him while he put a new window in his truck. He wanted to know if I had ever met any Russians on my travels; I told him that some friends of mine had and found them to be caring folks like the people of Widen. We agreed that if more local people could meet and talk, with less political interference, the world would be a more peaceful place.

The playground equipment was painted in 1979 and someone still mows the grass.

Sherman {age 91} and Hattie {age 87} Nettles remain optimistic. During our visit Sherman, who continues to keep himself aware of the world, enquired about the people of India, what kind of food they eat and how the weather is there. They told me that the Widen Baptist Church hasn't gotten many more people but they did manage to get a new roof put on this year. Jack Canter had an operation at the VA hospital to have his voice box removed but he has recovered well and, like most of the people we met, his spirits are high.

The most transformed person we met was Carol Woods. After her husband, Ledford, settled his long standing workers' compensation claim -- for a sizeable amount -- and started living with another woman, Carol divorced him. She is working at the shoe factory in Summersville, taking care of herself and considering new options for her own life now that all of her children are established on their own. Sue Woods, who's pregnant again, and her son visited us one evening at Connie's house. Terry married the owner of the Country Short Stop in Harrison and now spends much of her time tending shop. Harvey Woods owns a nice car and runs Wood's Drywall Company, which has more business than it can handle. Harvey's brother, Alvie, is married and lives in Birch River. He works on the cable TV which serves Widen and the surrounding area.

The way that the houses are cared for indicates the overall pride of the people of Widen. Like many of the residents, the Petosnick's have added a side porch to their house. Other people, like Charlie and Lois Belt, have paneled their walls and expanded the second floor of their houses. Much of the success of the Widen Human Development Project (1978 -- 1981) can be attributed to the work of the Starcher Family. The highlight of the recent visit to Widen was the

time we got to spend with the Starchers. Woody is working at a strip mine in Dundon. Connie, had gone to considerable effort to prepare for our visit and remains her spirit filled self. Ginney is having a hard time getting through school because of a severe reading disability but shows promising artistic skills. Patsy has graduated from high school and is looking for a job. Woody takes pride in the big Mercury which he now drives. Of course he still has a truck, too.

People were eager to see us, to tell of their successes of the past eight years and to thank us for having been a part of their lives. We enjoyed the beauty of the mountains and the people who live there. Maybe, just maybe, The Widen Human Development Project did bring the spirit of hope which opened people's eyes to the possibility of living affirmatively in the present with hearts and minds open to the possibilities of the future.

Widen, West Virginia
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