

I stopped at a couple of other houses in both Century No. 1 and Century No. 2, but no one was home. I continued north, toward my motel room, where I turned to the Internet to shed light on this mystery.

Through an article on the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History website, I learned that the Century Coal Company of Pittsburgh. Century began producing coal from a shaft mine at Century No. 1 in 1901. Century No. 2 was a slope mine that came later.

At 4:30 p.m., March 22, 1906, an explosion in No. 1's shaft mine resulted in 23 deaths. According to a state report issued later that year, 11 of the men were killed by direct force of the explosion, the other 12 perished in the mine's poisonous gases. The 12 men were rescued but died from "fright or acute insanity," most likely from the carbon monoxide, the report noted. "This subject had the delusion that the roof was about to fall upon him and constantly pleaded to be removed from this imaginary danger," the report stated.

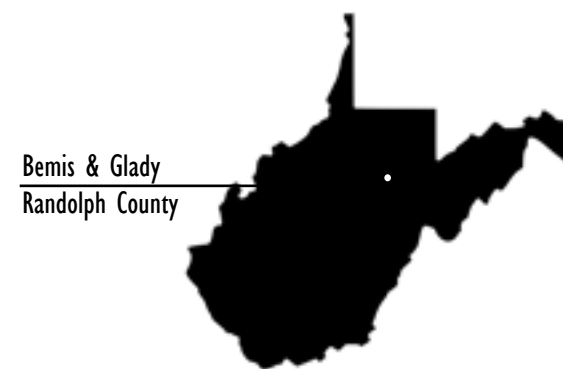
Another man retrieved from the mine died from the shock of having his crushed legs amputated. The motorman, unaware of the explosion, ran the trip of 16 loaded cars into the affected section, plowing into and running over miners trying to escape the inferno.

I thought of the wailing that must have echoed through Century No. 1 that night. I thought of the wives and children who soon would be forced to move out of the company housing because more miners and their families would be moving in to replace the deceased husbands and fathers.

The echoes are long gone; folks who lived around there didn't know about the deceased miners, their widows, or Century's dark fame. To them, Century No. 1 and No. 2 were but tombstones resting on a rich seam of coal in which 23 lives were snuffed more than a century ago.

Chapter 7

Mail Call in Glady



The weekday highlight for most residents of Glady came at 2 p.m. That's when Calvin Hansbrough Shifflett hollered "MAIL'S UP" from behind a wall of brass mailboxes that had served the hamlet since September 14, 1886, when this Randolph County community received postal recognition.

Officially, Calvin was assistant postmaster of Glady; his wife, Frances was postmaster. But it was generally Calvin whom the postal patrons of 26268 saw and dealt with when they stopped at the post office/general store. Ten miles south of Route 33, the dual-function building stood a few hundred yards beyond the crossroads of Bemis and Glady roads.

Serving as assistant postmaster was just one of Calvin's interests. He also was proprietor of the general store that shared space with the post office, and he and his wife ran a little store in Bemis that mirrored the Glady store's product line, except the Bemis store sold beer.

"I can't sell beer here in the post office," Calvin told me when I wandered into his domain in September 2006. "I get people who ask for it, and I got a ready answer: 'Did you ever see any post office that sold beer?'"

Calvin was all for selling and consuming beer in the right place and



Calvin Shifflett, assistant postmaster at the Glady Post Office, catches up on the news while awaiting the mail to arrive from the Clarksburg distribution center. September 2006.

time. On Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, he worked as bartender of his 50-seat bar known to patrons as “Calvin’s.” He also was known to pick up his guitar and entertain those guests on Saturday nights.

“I’m on the job seven days a week, I don’t have no days off,” said Calvin, who was 72 when I spent the day with him in Glady.

A former lumber town that had three sawmills in its heyday, Glady is a crossroads hamlet whose residents include a mix of elderly life-long residents, younger people who drive to Elkins to work, and seasonal visitors with summer cottages and general delivery post office boxes. A Columbia Gas compressor station a short distance from the hamlet provided a steady stream of workers, vehicular traffic, and business for Calvin’s store. The hamlet and Calvin’s enterprises also benefited from the town being a crossroads for hiking trails.

Calvin also sold gasoline until 2003, but mandated upgrades to his pumps would have cost him \$7,000, and he decided it was more profitable not to sell gas than invest in more infrastructure.

The Glady store and post office maintained the same hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday, closed on Sundays. Six hours a day sufficed for taking care of whatever business had to be done in Glady.

The Glady Post Office and Calvin’s store were housed in an 18-by-18-foot frame building. The division of function was well defined; as one entered the front and only door, Calvin’s store was to the left and consisted of a small freezer for ice, beverage cooler, a candy case topped by a sales counter, and a wall covered with shelves for canned goods, convenience foods, medicinal needs, and canning supplies (home gardening and canning were major pastimes in Glady).

Postal business was conducted on the right-hand side of the building. The post office consisted of a long counter whereupon rested a fax machine, desktop computer, and row of dual-combination postal boxes with two tiny clerk windows, one of them with bars. The one-piece unit still bore the original “Sadler Company” gold-letter logo.

A brown kerosene stove stood at the room’s rear and was flanked by wooden chairs. The oak one directly right of the heater came from the old Bemis schoolhouse. A stack of newspapers on a bar stool next to the chair provided Calvin with updates from Elkins and Harrisonburg, which Calvin consumed as he tipped his chair against the wall. An adjacent brown recliner had been Calvin’s seat of choice until a bum hip and arthritis made it difficult for him to exit the thing. He abdicated his sitting rights to patrons who wanted to wait for their mail or shoot the breeze in upholstered comfort.

The dichotomy of this building, which Calvin leased to the United



Calvin Shifflett stands outside his general store/post office in the Randolph County crossroads of Glady, September 2006.

States Postal System, is something postal inspectors frowned upon, as were the chairs, which might encourage loitering. Calvin said loitering in the post office was as much a tradition as periodic postal-rate increases.

“Yeah, they don’t like it too well,” he said. “When we took over here, the guy called me over and told me, ‘You shouldn’t allow them to sit around here.’ So I got my sign up.”

Thus, on the front of his building Calvin posted a hand-lettered “no loitering” sign next to the Pepsi thermometer and “Report Deer and Bear Kills Here” notice. Loitering wasn’t the only issue that his D.C. bosses had with how Calvin executed his agreement.

“They complained on a couple of visits about having a store in here,” he said. “They let me know one time that they weren’t happy about it. And I said, ‘I’ll just lease half of (the building) to you,’ and they said, ‘No you won’t!’” Calvin simply “borrowed” the store’s half, just as he borrowed the telephone land line that was for official business only. However, with Calvin’s place being the center of Glady commerce, all manner of inquiries came through this line. “Is the mail up?” “What’s the weather like there?” “Any deer being checked in?”

When the phone was installed, postal authorities directed him to answer it, “Glady Post Office.”



When he was not sorting mail, checking in deer, or answering the phone, Calvin Shifflett took care of the general store that shared the building with the post office. He was the landlord and the assistant postmaster.

“I told them whenever you start telling me how to answer the phone, you can start paying the bill,” Calvin said.

A telephone and Internet connection—Glady went online in 2004—were essential to running a post office, no matter how small, because of the many reports that must be generated and filed daily. Information about scanned items, such as certified and mail sent with delivery confirmation, also required electronic tracking.

“I do every report that Elkins does,” Calvin said. “You would think that they would have different rules for us small offices, but they don’t.”

The post office had the capacity for 30 box patrons, but only 22 boxes were rented the week I was there. There were several general delivery accounts and 23 Bemis postal patrons who received their mail through Glady. A contract mail carrier delivered mail three times a week on a two-mile run out of Glady. Gene Cave drove the route that had just 10 patrons, two of them commercial accounts that justified the excursion.

“The route used to go 15 miles to the Sinks of Gandy,” Calvin said. “That’s the way it was 100 years ago when they delivered it by mule. Old-man Andrew Tingler carried mail on a mule and horseback.”



Calvin Shifflett calls a Glady postal patron to the window for his mail.

Getting established

Calvin became a post office landlord in 1961. His mother-in-law, Susie Hedrick, was postmaster at Bemis when that office and Glady merged. She had the opportunity to go to Glady, but a new building was needed. Calvin built it from recycled lumber.

“She had a whole basement full of used lumber, so this was built with used lumber,” he said. “A fellow up the road, Delbert Strawder, built it for them. He was a retired railroader.”

The structure was simple, with a rough floor of unfinished boards preserved by years of dirt ground into their fiber. It lacked indoor plumbing, but Calvin also owned an adjacent house with the amenity. But visitors who asked to use a restroom were directed to an outhouse behind the house.

When his mother-in-law died in 1976, Calvin and his wife decided to take on the postal duties out of their concern that the system would pull the plug on this rural outpost if they had to find new personnel. The job wasn't particularly strenuous, the hours decent, and stress minimal except in hunting season. That's when the store and deer-check station hopped with business to the point Calvin struggled to get the mail up on time.



Glady postal patrons gather around the heating stove on a September day in 2007 as they wait for Calvin Shifflett to put up the mail. The post office was on the right side of the building, his general store on the left.

Most of the mail that came through Glady was the prosaic stuff that ends up in a landfill, but occasionally something addressed to Israel arrived because Glady's ZIP code and that of an Israeli town were identical. Even parcels addressed to Israel got misrouted to Glady.

“The carrier brought it this one package and she was complaining how bad it smelled,” he said. It contained very ripe fish.

“I took it out and put it in an outbuilding until the next morning, then I sent it back with a big mark around (the code). That fish took the long route. It should have gone to Israel and it went to Glady,” he said.

The Glady Post Office delivered 100 pieces of mail on an average day, but rarely took in more than a dozen pieces of outgoing. Glady mail came through Clarksburg by way of Bowden. Wilmoth Lambert, a contract carrier, brought the mail to Glady. Calvin could set his watch by Wilmoth, whose white vehicle generally crested the hill at 1:40 p.m. each weekday.

About 10 minutes before the big event, Roy Rhodes parked across the street from the post office and waited for Wilmoth's arrival. Roy followed Wilmoth into the post office, where he took up his post against the general

store counter while Wilmoth and Calvin sorted the mail. Earl Bonnell, another postal patron, took a seat next to the brown kerosene stove and beneath the back window. Gene Cave was next to arrive. The men chatted about the weather, happenings around the area, and the status of their gardens while they waited for Calvin to announce “MAIL’S UP!”

Earl made a beeline for box 112, Roy for box 83. Gene headed out the door with the mail for his 10-patron route. Earl and Roy flipped through their stacks of mail, bade farewell to Calvin, and headed home.

Throughout the afternoon, another eight to 10 patrons wandered in to check their boxes and perhaps drop off a letter or parcel. Calvin closed the post office at 4 p.m. and headed to his home across the mountain in Bemis.

Bemis was where Calvin got his first sense of just how significant the arrival of mail is to an individual—that daily dose of anticipation that perhaps one’s ship has finally come in via that mythical check that’s been in the mail for years or that Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes notice. Or perhaps it was an entitlement check or letter from a grandchild. Whatever he delivered, the mailman was the common man’s most dependable ray of hope against mediocrity’s banal skies.

“That’s the only excitement there is here, mail time,” Calvin said. “That’s the way it was when I was a kid. The train would come into Bemis at 12:15 (p.m.). There would be 30 to 40 people down there waiting for the train to come in.”

Boys gathered at the station to lug the mail bags from the train to the post office. Sacks stuffed with Sears Roebuck catalogs were especially heavy. Calvin opted for carrying the bags containing letters.

Calvin’s memory of the Western Maryland train’s arrival at Bemis is one of wartime, when 50 of the community’s young men were serving their country. It seemed as if the train was always either taking a young man to war or delivering a disabled veteran or his remains.

Calvin’s family, from Virginia, settled in Glady in 1925. “My Dad came over in 1916 and worked for the Western Maryland Railroad, all his brothers were section foremen on the railroad,” Calvin said. His father went back to Virginia in 1918, but later returned to West Virginia.

By then Joseph and Rosa Shifflett had three boys—Medford, Ronald, and Maynard. Three more—Orville, Clarence, and Calvin—were born in West Virginia.



Mail arrived in Bemis by train and the natural resources of the heavily forested region left by the same. Logging was the main industry. *West Virginia and Regional History Center at WVU.*

If there existed a common thread in this family, it was the members’ ability to play just about any stringed instrument. “All of us played except my one brother,” he said. “My father played, and my uncle who played with us played the banjo, fiddle, and guitar. It just came natural to us.”

Anything that entered or left Bemis did so on a train back then. The school, which offered grades one through 10, was the center of recreation and social life. His mother, who had only an eighth-grade education, taught Calvin his ABCs and how to read. She convinced the principal that Calvin was sufficiently prepared to enter school a year early, and the time he was 14, Calvin was in high school.

“Things were pretty tough,” Calvin said. “My dad had an accident and broke his leg, and things were pretty tough when I was going to high school.” Hungry and inspired by his older brothers who served in the Navy during World War II, Calvin conspired to enter the Army at the age of 15. All he needed was a birth certificate that proved a birth year of 1930.

“I doctored up my birth certificate,” he said. “I took bleach and took the ‘3’ out. A railroad agent at Bemis, Brooks Good, was the station agent



Calvin Shifflett at his sales counter in Glady. Hikers passing through the cross-roads relied upon the small store to replenish their supplies.

there, and he showed me how to do it. He lined up the certificate in the old typewriter and showed me how to make that a zero.”

Calvin then made a photocopy of the doctored birth certificate, which the Army accepted without question. Assigned to the infantry, Calvin spent three years in the Army and completed his high school education during that time.

He came back to Randolph County after the service and, in 1953, married Frances Hedrick, a childhood friend from Bemis. They had seven children.

Calvin's Place

Calvin got a job at Metal Lab in Beverly, where he advanced to finishing supervisor. But the work took him all over the country, and he got tired of the travel.

In 1961, he built a little tavern in Bemis to supplement his factory income. The community had died in the early 1950s, when the last of the mines closed. Property was selling at bargain prices, and Calvin purchased one of the row houses, as well as the school. Many of the old buildings were being torn down, and there was a large supply of used lumber.

It was from this lumber that Calvin built the first room of his bar. “I



Calvin Shifflett was shopkeeper and bartender at his place in Bemis.

had the lot and a basement full of used lumber,” he said. “I traded a heifer calf to a guy for a load of ¾-inch sheathing. The sides and roof of my first building, that’s what I sheathed it with.”

Calvin originally planned to build a venue for playing country music, but people started bringing in beer and he realized he’d soon find himself in trouble with the law if he didn’t get a license. He was licensed in 1962 and never sold anything but beer because a liquor license required food service. Business boomed, and he put on two additions to serve the dozens of people who crowded into the bar on weekend evenings.

Calvin’s Place served a mostly seasonal clientele, folks who owned seasonal cottages and campers in Bemis. He also had patrons who drove across Cheat Mountain from Beverly on a narrow gravel road to congregate in this homey pub. A wood-burning stove heated the space, and patrons contributed to their comfort by carrying in a log or two as needed. Grocery items were stocked behind the bar.

The most striking feature of this establishment were the 3,500 or so dollar bills taped to its ceiling and walls. Each bill was autographed by the person or party who contributed to this tradition. It dated to 1975, when



Calvin Shifflett's Place in Bemis. Nothing fancy, just a watering hole and store, but folks drove long distances over narrow, rutted roads to get there.

a couple of men from Charleston affixed their souvenir currency on the ceiling. Hundreds of patrons followed suit and left their mark on Bemis one buck at a time.

The donations include a bill signed by U.S. Representative Alan Mollohan and his wife on June 26, 1987. "Mollohan used to stop here quite



Hundreds of Calvin's bar patrons signed and attached to the ceiling and walls a dollar bill. Calvin never worried about someone stealing them because none of the bills cost him a dime.

a bit when he went bear hunting in these parts," Calvin said. Currency from several foreign countries and some bills larger than a greenback were mixed in with the prosaic bucks. "I had a \$100-bill," Calvin said. "This guy wanted to beat his brother, so he put up a \$100 bill. It took about two weeks before somebody stole it."

Well, kind of. They replaced it with a fifty.

Calvin didn't worry about patrons stealing the money or a fire claiming it all.

"I ain't cost me nothing," he said.

The Gladly Post Office closed May 14, 2011. Even as Calvin's health failed, he continued to return to his store at Bemis to reconnect with his retail, bar, and postal patrons. His last visit was Memorial Day 2019; he died August 13.