



Stull (1891-1906)

The town of Stull had its origin in the early land speculation of Col. R. Bruce Ricketts, the vast land baron of North Mountain, and Albert Lewis, the energetic lumber king of Luzerne County. Both were aware that the North Mountain and Bowman's Creek tracts could make them wealthy if exploited for their virgin timber.

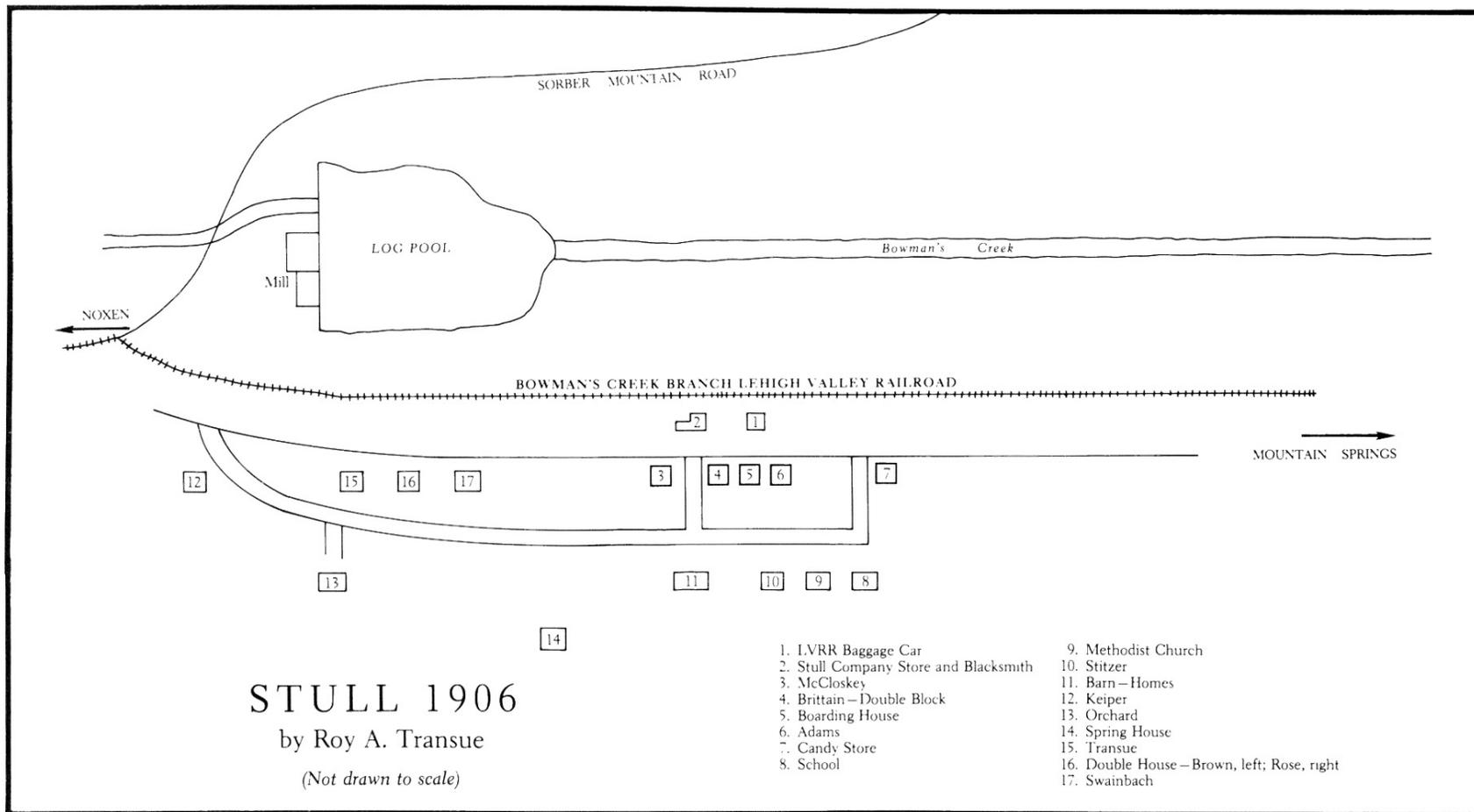
Lewis may have been aware of the potential of the Bowman's Creek area from his childhood when his father settled at Beaumont, a village along the wild mountain stream. Ricketts, too, wanted to capitalize on his extensive land holdings and also to attract a railroad to the North Mountain. Lewis, of course, had the necessary connections with the Lehigh Valley Railroad, a coal and transportation empire.

On August 5, 1874, Ricketts agreed to sell 13,032 acres of prime Ricketts timberlands along Bowman's Creek in Luzerne and Wyoming counties to the 34-year-old ambitious Albert Lewis and six other Lehigh Valley Railroad associates. He retained a one-thirteenth interest in the lands hoping to use it as leverage in closing the final deal. Ricketts tried to entice the Lehigh Valley Railroad to purchase additional lands, including his Lake Ganoga property and the waterfalls which now grace Ricketts Glen State Park, in a proposed financial package, if the company would immediately build a railroad through North Mountain. But the railroad partners may have felt such a commitment was premature, or were not inclined to become too indebted to

Ricketts. But Ricketts was in debt from his land purchases and he needed cash. The sale was finally closed on January 14, 1876, and the land deeded to the Lewis group for \$120,000, approximately \$10 an acre. Ricketts also relinquished his one-thirteenth interest in the tracts.

Without a railroad to the Bowman's Creek lands, however, the tracts lay dormant for a decade. Lewis was extremely active at this time along the Lehigh River and would soon enter the Bear Creek area, with the Bowman's Creek lands a reserve for future development. Meanwhile, Ricketts was trying to become a millionaire by selling his much larger remaining lands in Sullivan and Wyoming counties.

In 1885 Wilkes-Barre interests began construction of a railroad to Harvey's Lake; a railroad line to tap the Bowman's Creek lands was within view, which Lewis quickly seized to complete for the Lehigh Valley Railroad. At the same time, Lewis and his investors formed the Bowman's Creek Land and Lumber Company, Ltd., a partnership for certain tax advantages, to control the 13,000 acres purchased in 1876. Some recapitalization may have occurred when the company sold the lands in November 1886 for \$260,000 to a corporation similarly named the Bowman's Creek Lumber Company. There also may have been some change in the investors at this time but Lewis was clearly still in control. The Bowman's Creek Lumber Company leased the lands to Lewis who would form the Albert Lewis Lumber and Manufacturing





Company in August 1890 to exploit the timberlands. The lumber company was capitalized at \$400,000 by Lewis and ten much smaller investors.

Following the sale by Albert Lewis of the twelve-mile Wilkes-Barre and Harvey's Lake Railroad to the Lehigh Valley Railroad in August 1887, Lewis completed construction of a ten-mile winding log train railroad to reach the village of Lewis, a hamlet on Bowman's Creek a few miles north of the lake, which would be renamed Noxen the following year. Lewis's log train line to Noxen was largely in place by January 1890. His line was used by Noxen manufacturers to reach the Lehigh Valley line in Alderson until late 1892, when a more direct alternate Lehigh Valley line from Alderson to Noxen was opened. Substantial new construction was underway at Noxen and it was evident that a new boom town on Bowman's Creek, about two miles above Noxen, was also under construction. Lewis had previously attempted to purchase a new sawmill under construction at Noxen by R.A. Whiteman, former Wilkes-Barre city treasurer, but Whiteman refused to sell. Consequently, Lewis may have created Stull in response to Whiteman's rebuff. A post office designation for Noxen was made in September 1888, and the new town above Noxen was named Stull, after Adam Stull, in March 1890 when a post office there was authorized.

The name Noxen did not honor a person or site but was adopted because it was short and may have been suggested by the federal postal authority. Another story holds that during a town meeting a child saw a passing team of oxen and said, "Mommy, there goes a team of Noxen," and the townspeople adopted her misstatement as the town name.

During the winter of 1890-1891, the Albert Lewis firm built a sawmill at Stull. The area was formerly known for its trout fishing and hunting, but was now alive with the buzz of sawmills, the shriek of the locomotive, and the clapping of the woodcutter's axe. The Lewis mill was operating in May 1891. It was 130-feet long and 60-feet wide, with a reported daily capacity of 100,000 board feet of lumber. Stull was built along the narrow creek valley about a quarter of a mile upstream from a little village once known as Stonetown or Stone's Mills and named after Ben Stone, a local millwright and early settler who also became Stull's postmaster. He had been the principal local timberer in the area since 1872. Homes were now in the process of construction at Stull for the mill workers, wood choppers, and bark peelers.

By August 1891, the Whiteman mill at Noxen was also in operation along with the substantial Mosser tannery, which would be Noxen's principal industry for seventy years. George K. Mosser was a son of James K. Mosser of Trexlertown. The father had developed one of the major tanning firms in the mid-Atlantic region. The Mosser Tanning Company was chartered on June 17, 1890. Among the principals were members of the Mosser family and Albert Lewis. Lewis sold the company 72 acres for the tannery complex. Lewis also entered into an exclusive agreement to sell all the bark from the 13,000 acres he controlled to the Noxen tannery.

Within a year, the creek valley had grown from one dozen farm families to a lively 500, who were mostly employed in the Noxen and Stull industries. A.D. Kresge built a hotel at Noxen and was erecting a tin store, harness shop, and a barber shop. The Lewis mill in Stull was in full operation. Lewis also purchased the John J. Shonk mill in Ruggles



which Shonk lost in a February 1888 fire. By March 1889, Lewis constructed a branch line of his log railroad from Alderson to Ruggles where he rebuilt the mill. At this time, Lewis also acquired timberlands in Maryland and Crellin, West Virginia. Crellin was named after R.P. Crellin, one of Lewis's principal assistants and financial partners, and the brother of Lewis's first wife.

During the winter months, the Lewis crews were extraordinarily busy at both the Harvey's Lake and Stull mills. By March 1892, one million feet of logs were loaded in honeycomb fashion on the ice at Harvey's Lake and a log boom to contain them in the lake was under construction. Work began at 7:00 a.m. in the woods along Bowman's Creek, and all along the creek there were railroad ties to lay spur log lines to reach into the opening forests, while timber and cord wood were cut and hauled to the log railroad for shipment to the mills and Noxen tannery.

By December 1892, passenger trains ran twice daily between Wilkes-Barre and the Bowman's Creek communities. At Noxen, Ziba Sickler had a lock on the choice level land near the tannery, but the high price of his building lots were driving new mechanics and laborers to cheaper lots among the hills. Kresge's hotel was usually filled with traveling salesmen or boarders, and the enterprising hotel owner was now building a blacksmith and wheelwright shop. Near Whiteman's mill, a log slide was constructed to bring the fallen timber to the mill pond. A log slide is a trough made of timbers and could be a mile or more in length if needed. The cut timber was hauled to the slide by mules. Loaded on the slide, the timber would fall by gravity down the mountain log slide to a creek or mill site. Where the logs might run too rapidly, spikes

could be driven up through the slide bottom to scratch the timber and slow down its descent.

Adam Stull was the general manager of the Albert Lewis Lumbering and Manufacturing Company, with his son, Arthur L. Stull, as the principal assistant at the Stull mill. William Austin was foreman at the mill. Other key personnel were Charles Mitchell, saw filer; Charles Deubler, gang edger; James Newell, carriage sitter; Charles Dereamer, mill engineer; Archer Weiss, setter; Charles Thomas, night watchman and owner of a small store at Noxen; Frank Brittain, sawyer; Thomas Stout, log sorter; Joseph Bullock, shipper; and Al Lauderbaugh, fireman. Austin was formerly with Shonk's lumber mill in Ruggles and was brought to Stull when Lewis bought the Ruggles operation.

There was also a lath mill at Stull managed by Edward Transue, who came to Stull with three sons from Lewis's operations at Bear Creek. At the Stull mill, Ed Transue, Jr., became a saw filer, and Frank Transue was a sawyer, an important position supervising the sawing of lumber. In the woods, Noah McCloskey and Johnny Adams were notable "woods bosses." McCloskey was also associated for some time with the ice operations at Mountain Springs.

Stull also had a company store managed by S.S. Johnson and Fred Stull, a son of Adam Stull. They had formerly operated the Harvey's Lake Supply Company at Alderson.

The Stull mill and Noxen tannery operations increasingly drew additional laborers, mechanics, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and other enterprises to the area. There were also smaller finishing mills owned by Ben Stone, E.H. Elston, and others, with additional Noxen hotels run by Thomas Dolan and Serfernis Hawk. Other retailers included Grant



Van Campen, a coal dealer, and W.F. Brown, who had a store opposite the Kresge Hotel. At Stull, Hattie Thomas kept a boarding house for the mill workers.

In March 1896, fifty men worked at the mill itself. In the mill pond, workers sorted the logs; a circular chain from the pond drew the logs into the mill where the circular saw “squared” the logs, after which the squared log passed through a set of gang saws which could cut the log into 500 board feet at one time. The typical output for Stull was 65,000 board feet daily, despite the mill’s larger capacity.

Accidents and illness were common in the Bowman’s Creek mill towns, keeping Noxen’s Dr. Tibbins busy. William Wilson, for example, had a leg broken in March 1896 while hauling logs. A horse was killed in the same accident. In the same month, Llewelyn Thomas suffered a crushed leg which had to be amputated. In June 1897, a Mr. Smith, on his first day of employment, caught his foot in the endless chain at the Stull mill pond and amputation initially seemed necessary, but Dr. Tibbins saved it. Another mishap occurred in November 1899, when the Lewis log train jumped the track at Bean Run. John Hartly, an eight-year employee, jumped from the car to escape injury, but the car landed on him, severing one leg and almost the second; he also broke his hip. He died late in the evening at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital. Unsanitary conditions prevailed at some farms and homes, and deadly typhoid fever from poor water regularly occurred. Indeed, William T. Austin, the Stull mill foreman, died of typhoid fever in October 1899. He was also a school director at Stull and was largely responsible for erection of the Stull church.

Churches and schools were the most important institutions in rural areas. There was a rude school building at Stone’s Mills in the early 1870s-it had no paint or plaster and the seats were hemlock benches. Rev. James Phoenix, a local farmer and Methodist-Episcopal preacher from Noxen, presided at services held at the school. When Phoenix became disabled from old age, Protestant-Methodists, under Rev. Joseph Anderson of Harvey’s Lake, offered services at the old school and at the “white schoolhouse” which replaced it. In 1892, as Stull was developing, Mrs. B.M. Stone arranged for Centermoreland pastors to regularly provide services at the school. She also founded the Ladies Aid Society to raise funds for a church. They deposited \$100 in the Rockafellow Bank of Wilkes-Barre, but lost it when the bank failed-a now forgotten, but then notorious, episode in local commercial history. The society was discouraged for a time, but subsequently raised funds for an organ and a pulpit bible. Rev. C.D. Skinner, a Wyoming Seminary student, was the pastor in 1893-1894, receiving \$100 in salary.

The Noxen community had a similar, although earlier, church history. A church group was formed around the year 1840 on Bowman’s Creek which met at an old log schoolhouse and later at a more distant red schoolhouse. Local pastors were Oliver Lewis, Abraham Frear, and James Phoenix. In 1883, services were relocated to a “white schoolhouse” in Noxen with a new church dedicated in December 1886 at a cost of \$1,000.

In June 1896, Fred Stull organized a Sunday School at Bean Run, the ice-cutting town further up the rail line, later known as Mountain Springs. The Sunday School was presumably held at the Bean Run



school. Since there was not a regular church as yet at Stull, the Bean Run Sunday School was served by a pastor from Noxen.

Sentiment for a Stull church grew through the last years of the 1890s, and on Sunday, October 29, 1899, a new Methodist-Episcopal church was dedicated. The church lot was donated by the Lewis lumber company and built by men from the mill. The church was heated by a steam line connected to the mill boiler. The church trustees were Ed Transue, Jr., Frank Brittain, Charles Deubler, and William Austin. Unfortunately, the robust and well-liked Austin died immediately before the dedication.

The 24 by 32-foot Stull church cost \$850, but was controversial because an earlier community committee apparently could have built a larger church for \$750. Because of the dispute, some church members boycotted the dedication and did not contribute towards the last \$80 needed to pay for its construction. Nevertheless, the church was full for a religious rally by the Epworth League. Prayer meetings were held on Wednesday evenings and a Sunday School was organized.

In Noxen, there were three churches serving the community. It was a local joke that Noxen needed three churches to keep the Noxen crowd in line. The growing Noxen and Stull area was originally part of Monroe Township in Wyoming County. However, on petition of the local residents, the Wyoming County Court approved the creation of Noxen Township on February 21, 1895, with township officials elected on April 13, 1895. A Noxen Township School Board was formed on June 3, 1895. Noxen was always the larger community. It had three schools in 1895, and a new fourroom school opened in September 1897 with four teachers.

In July 1895, a new two-room, graded school at Stull opened with Professor Beal and Nellie Baker in charge, but in September 1899 Professor E.B. Beishline replaced Beal. Lillian Gordner would later replace Baker. Not all the Stull children who enrolled in school attended on a regular basis. The Stull school was crowded with 80 to 90 pupils in the late 1890s, shared by the two teachers. A degree of absenteeism apparently was common, however, which provided some relief to the teachers. Still, a significant number of students did not miss a day of school. By 1903, a three-year high school program was available at Noxen to area students, which older Stull students could attend.

In addition to the Stull mill, the immediate area also supported other mills. In the late 1890s, Trexler and Turrell, which had the second largest mill in the region at Ricketts, also had a smaller mill on South Mountain, north of Stull near Kasson Brook. Trexler and Turrell also had a mill at Noxen. The Trexler firm shipped its hemlock bark from Ricketts and South Mountain to the Noxen tannery and its men could easily switch work between Ricketts, South Mountain, and Noxen as available work required.

The community life of Stull was typical of a small, rural town. There were frequent, although simple, social gatherings such as ice cream socials and chicken suppers. Readings, recitations, and temperance lectures at the local schools drew a crowd, as would regular revival services. In February 1900, William Reinhart of Noxen had six students for mandolin classes which were held on Tuesday evenings at the Stull school. Most lumber towns also had a baseball team and a local band. A ladies aid society held sewing bees to repair or make clothes for destitute or ill households. Handmade quilts were also raffled to raise char-



itable funds. For the men, hunting season provided a recreational outlet, with bear hunting a particular favorite. The woods surrounding Stull, then as today, were a haven for rattlesnakes, and there was some talk when Adam Stull killed a snake with fourteen rattles in midAugust 1899. In the winter, ice skating at Harvey's Lake was popular among the youth. The pool at the Stull dam was apparently not used for skating. Exhaust steam from the mill was diverted into the pool to partially clear the ice so work on the mill pond could continue in the winter.

Farming in the flat acres along the creek or in mountain patches was widespread. Oats and corn seemed to be the most common crops, along with hay. These crops fed the horse teams which worked in the woods. The hay was loaded loose in the summer on flat rail cars and taken to horse stables in Bean Run, South Run, and Alderson. There were also plum, cherry, and apple trees which freely served the community. Huckleberries and blackberries were in abundance and picked by the villagers.

Stull was regularly visited by traveling salesmen, better known as "drummers," such as James L. Vose of Tunkhannock, an insurance salesman, or Joseph Maltz of Towanda, who sold jewelry. Butcher and vegetable wagons regularly stopped in the town. Local farmers with excess produce took wagons as far as Wilkes-Barre to sell it. For a time, Noxen had its own newspaper, *The Weekly Vidette*, and correspondents from the farm and mill towns, Stull, Noxen, Beaumont, Centermoreland, and Harvey's Lake had their own columns in the weekly *Dallas Post*. These columns were mostly filled with innocent social news, such as weddings, births, family visits, guests, and trips. Indeed, visiting elsewhere, and entertaining friends at home, seemed

the most common social activities—little different from rural community news columns ninety years later.

Saw mills were prone to disaster. The boilers were fired by sawdust and waste wood. A fire in the boiler room of the Alderson mill was discovered by Louis Frank, the night watchman one Saturday night in late April 1898. Frank fastened down the whistle valve; a bucket brigade responded and prevented the fire from spreading to the mill itself, only thirty feet away. In March 1902, the Preston Lumber and Coal Company, in which Albert Lewis had an interest, lost a mill in Crellin, Maryland, in a fire.

On April 7, 1902, a fire began in the Stull boiler room and destroyed the sawmill. The flames had spread rapidly and the workmen who worked heroically were unable to save the mill. The Lewis firm built another mill at the same site. The second mill was substantially different in its construction, but news accounts do not appear to accurately describe it. One account stated that Lewis replaced the burned mill by relocating to Stull a mill that he owned in Mehoopany.

The second mill at Stull was rebuilt with a bandsaw, but the mill only lasted four years. On November 22, 1906, at 10:30 p.m., the night watchman discovered a fire in the mill's interior. The mill whistle was sounded and the workmen rushed to the mill. By midnight, it was obvious the mill could not be saved. The workmen directed their hoses to saving the lumber stock in the adjoining lumber yards. It was initially planned to rebuild the Stull mill again. However, the tracts were within a few years of depletion and the mill was not rebuilt. Rather, timber cut from the remaining tracts was hauled by railroad to the Lewis mill in Alderson. The Stull community would only last a few more years. The



remaining timber stands were few, and by 1911-1912, even the Alderson mill was within view of closing. The Stull school closed in 1912. Within months, Albert Lewis was no longer active in lumbering at Bowman's Creek or Harvey's Lake. He was making a fortune ice-cutting at Bear Creek, while the brothers Arthur and Albert Stull were concentrating on ice-cutting at Mountain Springs.

The Stull mill ruins remained in place until 1918 when the remains were salvaged for iron scrap for the World War I effort, as was the Alderson mill. The town of Stull disintegrated and reverted largely to its pre-boom farming days. Today a few homes dot the hillside in old Stonetown, and Bowman's Creek quietly flows past the few mill foundations and memories where a generation once flourished.